

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN AND PARTY MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT IN ESTONIA

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Abstract: Political party membership is generally considered to be a declining phenomenon in western democracies, and is expected to remain low in central and east Europe.¹ The explanation for this state of affairs has centred on the legacy of communism, and the availability of mass media and state funding from the early days of democratization. Yet in some post-communist party systems, membership has risen since 2000. In this article, the reasons for this counterintuitive finding are examined in the case of Estonia. Using elite surveys and interviews, I argue that electoral institutions have influenced the value of members to political parties. Estonia's small district open-list electoral system and small municipal districts create a demand for members as candidates, grassroots campaigners and "ambassadors in the community." Furthermore, state subsidies are insufficient to fund expensive modern campaigns. Thus, members play an important role in Estonian political parties.

Since the 1960s, scholars have noted the declining role of members in political parties.² In the modern world of mass media communications

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¹ Ingrid van Biezen. 2003. *Political Parties in New Democracies: Party Organization in Southern and East-Central Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan; Petr Kopecký. 2007. *Political Parties and the State in Post-Communist Europe*, London: Routledge.

² Otto Kirchheimer. 1969. "The Transformation of the Western European Party System," in

and state subsidies, it is often argued that the role of party members has been reduced to a “vestigial function,”³ with their drawbacks outweighing any advantages that they might bring. Members may expect parties to provide “purposeful incentives” in exchange for their involvement, often including a role in the policy-making process.⁴ This type of exchange risks imposing vote-losing commitments on parties,⁵ and reduces the ability of political elites to respond quickly to the demands of the modern mass media.⁶ It is not thought to be in parties’ interests to make these concessions to members, or spend time and effort on recruitment and retention, since members have little to offer modern political parties.

In the late 1980s, Angelo Panebianco noted that campaigns were increasingly run by electoral-professionals,⁷ paid employees or contractors who used modern communications techniques to “sell” the party to the electorate, much like a business sells to consumers. By the 1990s, Katz and Mair argued that parties had become increasingly detached from society, and had turned to the state in search of resources.⁸ Obtaining financial subsidies from the state and communicating with voters primarily through the mass media, Katz and Mair’s “cartel parties” would value members for their “legitimising function” only, making the role of members largely decorative.⁹

With the role of members already downgraded in Western Europe, political parties in the new democracies of central and east Europe were expected to follow “electoral professional” modes of organization, using communications specialists to “market” the party to voters.¹⁰ Ingrid van

F. S. Burin and S. L. Shell, Eds, *Politics, Law and Social Change: Selected Essays of Otto Kirchheimer*, New York: Columbia University Press; Angelo Panebianco. 1988, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Peter Mair and Richard S. Katz. 1997. “Party Organization, Party Democracy and the Emergence of the Cartel Party,” in Peter Mair, Ed. *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

³ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen. 2001. “Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies,” *Party Politics*, 7(1): 5-21; Herbert Kitschelt. 2001. “Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies,” in Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther. Eds. *Political Parties and Democracy*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴ Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson. 1961. “Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 6: 129-166.

⁵ J. May. 1973. “Opinion Structure of Political Parties: The Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity,” *Political Studies*, 21(2): 135-151.

⁶ Angelo Panebianco. 1988. *Political Parties: Organization and Power*; Peter Mair and Richard S. Katz. 1997. “Party Organization, Party Democracy and the Emergence of the Cartel Party,” in Peter Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁷ Angelo Panebianco. *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, p. 266.

⁸ Mair and Katz. “Party Organization...” p. 96.

⁹ Mair and Katz. “Party Organization...” pp. 110-111.

¹⁰ van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies*; Kopecký. 2007, *Political Parties and*

Biezen suggested that low levels of party membership were likely to persist in the new democracies of central and east Europe for three reasons. First, the sequencing of organisational development meant that parties acquired parliamentary representation immediately after their creation and, as such, were “internally created.” The emphasis on institution building in the early stages of transition would further encourage an orientation towards the state.¹¹ Second, the lack of social differentiation after decades of communism would push parties further towards the “electoral” model, with the communist past a “thwarting experience for the structural consolidation of both political and civil society.”¹² Third, van Biezen argued that the availability of state funding created an institutional disincentive for political parties to invest in membership recruitment, a point that was later developed by Petr Kopecký.¹³

More recently, however, case studies from central and east Europe have questioned the “end of membership” thesis. In Bulgaria, Maria Spirova found that party elites believed that members were essential for long-term electoral success in turbulent party systems.¹⁴ Raimondas Ibenskas found that party membership was an important predictor of “electoral persistence” in Lithuanian political parties.¹⁵ Using quantitative data from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, and Poland, Margit Tavits found that strong organisations helped parties to improve their vote share over time.¹⁶ Taken together, these studies indicate that members may still have something to offer, even in these modern times, and even in new democracies.

One new democracy where the rate of membership recruitment has been particularly noteworthy is Estonia. In 2003, Allan Sikk reported that Estonian parties engaged in a public battle to recruit the most members. Since then, the upwards trend in membership levels of the four main parliamentary parties has been constant (Table 1).¹⁷ Therefore, Estonia provides an interesting case through which to explore the circumstances in which parties recruit members in a new democracy, and the tasks that members perform in modern times.

the State.

¹¹ van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies*, pp. 31-33.

¹² van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies*, p. 38.

¹³ Kopecký. 2007, *Political Parties and the State*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Maria Spirova. 2005. “Political Parties in Bulgaria: Organizational Trends in Comparative Perspective,” *Party Politics*, 11(5): 601-622.

¹⁵ Raimondas Ibenskas. 2012. “Activists of Money? Explaining the Electoral Success and Persistence of Political Parties in Lithuania,” *Party Politics*, published online 9th October 2012.

¹⁶ Margit Tavits. 2012. “Organizing for Success: Party Organizational Strength and Electoral Performance in Postcommunist Europe,” *The Journal of Politics*, 74(1): 83-97.

¹⁷ Allan Sikk. 2003. “A Cartel Party System in a Post-Communist Country? The Case of Estonia,” Paper Presented for the ECPR General Conference, Marburg, September 18-21, 2003.

Table 1: Party Membership in Estonia

	ER Eesti Reformi- erakond	IRL Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit	K Eesti Keskerakond	SDE Sotsiaal- demokraatlik Erakond
1999	1,207	-	2,925	1,200
2004	3,695	4,525	7,600	2,871
2011	7,000	9,009	12,000	3,766
2013	13,416	9,764	13,410	6,069

Source: Membership data provided by political party central offices.

This article is exploratory in nature, examining how two parties in Estonia view the importance of party membership, and the role of party members. It examines the possibility that Estonia's institutional design (small electoral districts and restrictive party funding regulations) creates an important role for members in party life. In doing so, it tests the following potential explanations for membership recruitment in Estonia.

1. Estonia's small national electoral districts, where candidates compete against their own co-partisans, will mean that members are valued as "ambassadors in the community."
2. Estonia's tiny municipal districts, which are increasingly partisan battlegrounds, will create considerable demand for candidates.
3. Small electoral districts at both the national and local levels will encourage parties to make contact with voters as individuals via grassroots campaigning, rather than relying entirely on the electoral professional model.
4. The ban on business funding, in conjunction with ever tighter enforcement, will encourage parties to look to members as a source of free labor and, potentially, additional funds.

This article concludes that a combination of small electoral districts (at both the municipal and national levels) and strictly enforced business funding regulations creates an environment where membership recruitment is a practical choice for Estonian political parties. The proximity between parties and voters means that members are useful as "ambassadors in the community" and grassroots campaigners. Furthermore, parties must invest in building links in communities nationwide if they are to be competitive in municipal elections. This article also sheds light on important variations at the party level, finding that Estonian parties' attitudes towards the

functions of members are also shaped by strategic factors. Members can be used to overcome relative disadvantages, for example communicating directly with voters where the media is hostile, and raising money or providing free labor where a party suffers from a financial disadvantage.

Institutional Design and Party Membership

Although dominant theories of party organization have emphasized the relative decline of membership since the days of the “mass party,” dissenting voices have long argued that party members continue to play a role in party life in western democracies, albeit in smaller numbers.¹⁸ Karina Pedersen found that, far from using members as window dressing, Danish parties had upgraded the benefits that they offered to members in the hope of increasing their grassroots base.¹⁹ Susan Scarrow’s detailed investigation of British and German parties found that members continued to carry out a number of functions: they acted as “ambassadors within the community;” they provided a socializing mechanism for future elites, offering a pool from which candidates can be selected; they participated in apolitical grass-roots activities, building links between their party and society; they provided a source of loyal and reliable voters; they offered parties “legitimacy benefits” since voters find the image of elite-based parties unattractive; they provided useful additional income; and they made positive contributions to policy-making processes.²⁰

It is notable that Scarrow’s research compared two countries with small electoral districts. Britain elects its parliamentarians through an entirely majoritarian system, while Germany’s electoral system is mixed. A significant body of research has since asserted that electoral systems influence how parties communicate with voters, and therefore how they use their members. While proportional electoral systems incentivize party-driven, centralized campaign strategies,²¹ single member district electoral systems encourage local campaigning, often with a heavy concentration of resources in marginal constituencies.²² Scholars of electoral behavior in the

¹⁸ Susan E. Scarrow. 1995. *Political Parties and their Members: Organizing for Victory in Britain and Germany*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Paul F. Whiteley and Patrick Seyd. 2002. *High-Intensity Participation: The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britain*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press; Karina Pedersen. 2004. “From Aggregation to Cartel? The Danish Case,” in Kay Lawson and Thomas Poguntke. Eds, *How Political Parties Respond: Interest Aggregation Revisited*, London: Routledge.

¹⁹ Pedersen. “From Aggregation to Cartel?...”

²⁰ Scarrow. *Political Parties and their Members*.

²¹ David L. Swanson and Paolo Mancini. Eds. 1996, *Politics, Media and Modern Democracy: An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and their Consequences*, London: Praeger.

²² Gary W. Cox. 1990. “Electoral Rules and the Calculus of Mobilization,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 24(3): 387-419; David Denver, Gordon Hands, Justin Fisher, and Iain MacAllister.

United Kingdom find that constituency campaigns are, by and large, effective in their aim of increasing the vote shares of political parties. German parties (operating in a mixed electoral system) combine “electoral-professional” strategies (communication through the mass media, political advertisements and large-scale rallies) with campaigning at the local level through stalls on market squares, social events and knocking on voters’ front doors.²³ In mixed electoral systems, candidates in single-member districts are more likely than their list colleagues to adopt localized face-to-face approaches.²⁴

Small multi-member constituencies (as found in Estonia) encourage individual candidates to invest in face-to-face communication in order to avoid public conflict with their own co-partisans.²⁵ Conversely, under large district proportional systems members play less of a role in party campaigning. When parties must communicate with millions of voters simultaneously, they are much more reliant on the mass media (and, more recently, social media) to spread their message. Any face-to-face contact occurs through organized interest groups, since attempts to contact individual voters are not efficient.

Although there is little comparative research on the effects of electoral systems on party organization in central and east Europe, case studies suggest that extant theories from western Europe might also have some application to the central and east European context. In Slovakia, Marek Rybař posited that declining membership numbers and levels of activity from the late 1990s onwards could be attributed, at least partially, to the adoption of a purely proportional electoral system.²⁶ After the electoral system changed, the number and activity levels of local branches declined sharply. In Lithuania, where the electoral system is mixed, a statistical analysis by Raimondas Ibenskas found that grassroots activists were just as important for electoral success as money.²⁷ Thus, it is quite possible that the practical role of members is influenced in central and east Europe by

2003. “Constituency Campaigning in Britain 1992-2001, Centralization and Modernisation,” *Party Politics*, 9(5): 541-559; Charles J. Pattie and Ron J. Johnston. 2004. “Party Knowledge and Candidate Knowledge: Constituency Campaigning in Voting and the 1997 General Elections,” *Electoral Studies*, 23(4): 795-819.

²³ Thomas Zittel and Thomas Gschwend. 2008. “Individualised Constituency Campaigns in Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: Candidates in the 2005 German Elections,” *West European Politics*, 31(5): 978-1003.

²⁴ Kathleen Bawn and Michael F. Thies. 2003. “A Comparative Theory of Electoral Incentives: Representing the Unorganised Under PR, Plurality and Mixed-Member Electoral Systems,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 15(1): 5-32.

²⁵ Matthew S. Shugart. 2001. “Electoral ‘Efficiency’ and the Move to Mixed Member Systems,” *Electoral Studies*, 20(2): 173-193.

²⁶ Marek Rybař. 2006. “Powered by the State: The Role of Public Resources in Party Building in Slovakia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 22(3): 320-340.

²⁷ Ibenskas. “Activists or Money?” pp. 13-14.

the national electoral system.

Municipal elections are often neglected in analyses of the roles of party members in modern democracies. Steven Wolinetz argued that a “classic Downsian” vote seeking party would be organized to compete to win office at “all or almost all levels (local, regional or provincial, national) but is likely to maintain only the minimum degree of organization required to do so.”²⁸ This task is likely to be more challenging than Wolinetz suggests. Scarrow pointed out that, even in the days of mass parties, British and German political parties had to make active efforts to recruit and socialize municipal candidates.²⁹ In the post-communist context, Hermann Smith-Sivertsen argued that one of the reasons why Lithuanian parties had many more members than Latvian parties was the enforced politicization of local government,³⁰ which creates a requirement for candidates and activists at the local level. If Estonian parties take municipal elections seriously, they must nominate lists of electorally attractive candidates, who should ideally have at least a minimal degree of partisan loyalty, in 227 municipalities. Establishing a nationwide organization capable of achieving this aim is a significant undertaking.

Therefore, Estonia’s electoral institutions could create a significant demand for party members. Although independent candidates are legally permitted to participate, the only new party to gain representation in the last decade, *Res Publica*, was a well-established debating club before it emerged as a formal political force.³¹ This suggests that parties without members struggle to compete in Estonia. Every four years, 101 members are elected to the parliament (*Riigikogu*). Mandates are distributed using an open-list proportional representation system. The country is divided into twelve electoral districts, each allocating between seven and thirteen seats. Electoral districts are small, and candidates must compete against their own co-partisans, making members potentially valuable as “ambassadors in the community.”

There are 227 municipalities in Estonia, and these are divided into two types, urban (*linnad*) and rural (*vallad*). Two-thirds of Estonia’s municipalities have a population of less than 3,000 people. In the early years of democratization, the major parties focussed primarily on national elections. However, in 2002 a proposal to ban civic electoral alliances

²⁸ Steven B. Wolinetz. 2002. “Beyond the Catch-All Party: Approaches to the Study of Parties and Party Organization in Contemporary Democracies.” in R. Gunther et al. eds., *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 151.

²⁹ Susan E. Scarrow. 1994. “The Paradox of Enrollment: Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Party Memberships,” *European Journal of Political Research*, 25(1): 41-60.

³⁰ Hermann Smith-Sivertsen. 2004. “Why Bigger Party Membership Organisations in Lithuania than in Latvia, 1995-2000,” *East-European Quarterly*, 38(2): 215-259.

³¹ Rein Taagepera. 2006. “Meteoric Trajectory: The Res Publica Party in Estonia,” *Democratization*, 13(1): 78-94.

from local elections was debated. Although the law ultimately remained unchanged after the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to ban independent candidates, the influence of civic lists had weakened by the 2005 local election. Over time, the main parliamentary parties have significantly increased their penetration in the regions, potentially creating a considerable additional demand for candidates.

Based on extant theories about the effects of electoral systems, Estonia's electoral institutions may expose the limitations of modern electoral professional strategies. At the national level, small multi-member constituencies will encourage candidates to invest in face-to-face communications, rather than fighting their own co-partisans via the mass media. It is difficult to imagine how an organizationally lean, highly centralised party could communicate localized messages across twelve parliamentary districts and 227 municipalities. Furthermore, partisan competition for local government creates a large demand for candidates. The argument that state funding removes the need for members (made primarily by Ingrid van Biezen and Petr Kopecký) is not entirely convincing, since, the constant upwards pressure on campaign budgets, combined with restrictive fundraising rules and the desire to avoid scandals, could make members a valuable source of voluntary labor, if not hard cash. We might instead find that Michael Pinto-Duschinsky's prediction is more accurate: that parties look for money from every available source.³²

Data

This exploratory analysis of party membership in Estonia is based on three types of data: an electronic survey distributed amongst branch chairs; interviews conducted amongst the same groups; and party rules, as set out in parties' official statutes. The surveys and interviews were carried out in April, May, and June 2012, with the focus on the Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond*, ER, a classical liberal party that has governed for all but three years since it was founded in 1994) and the Social Democrats (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond*, SDE), traditionally Estonia's fourth party, but riding high in recent opinion polls. Both SDE and ER have high degrees of programmatic coherence and ideological consistency. The main party of the center-left and the main party of the center-right in Estonia were selected because traditional scholarship suggests that center-right parties tend to be more elite-based, while center-left parties more likely to see party members membership as normatively desirable.³³

The surveys, which asked ten questions about the role of party

³² Michael Pinto-Duschinsky. 2002. "Financing Politics: A Global View," *Journal of Democracy*, 13(4): 69-86.

³³ Maurice Duverger. 1954. *Political Parties*, Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd.

members, were translated into Estonian and sent by email to all of the local branch chairs from both the SDE and ER. The questions, which were adapted from Scarrow's analysis of the role of party members in Britain and Germany,³⁴ are included in the main body of this article, along with the response categories and results for each question. The response was healthy by internet survey standards (SDE 38 respondents from 110 surveys sent, 34.5%; ER 42 responses from 160 surveys sent, 26.3%). In order to assuage respondents' reservations about participating in the survey, the responses to the online survey were anonymous. Unfortunately, this means that the precise demographics of survey respondents are unknown. Since the potential for selection bias is unavoidable, the data are interpreted with care, in conjunction with interviews, press reports and party statutes.

Interviews took place in Tallinn in April and May 2012. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling: the subgroups of potential interviewees were defined (MPs, councilors, party staff, party activists), and potential participants were referred through networking. In a closed environment like a political party, where trust of outsiders is low, participants are not accessible through any other sampling strategy. This represents a further methodological constraint, since the sample is again skewed towards those who are inclined to cooperate. Interviews were recorded, and informed consent was obtained in advance. All interviews were given on the basis of anonymity, which meant that interviewees were able to be frank about sensitive issues, including party financing.

From the Reform Party, one MP, one council candidate and one "electoral professional" were interviewed. From SDE, one MP, one councilor, two party staff and an activist participated in the research. For background, interviews were also conducted with members of the other two main parties, *Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit* (IRL) and the Center Party (*Eesti Keskerakond - K*), in order to gain a rounded picture of the role of party members in Estonian political parties. Interviewees were asked a number of open, semi-structured questions about party organization and the role of members. Again, these were based on the roles of members identified by Scarrow. The results of the surveys and interviews, combined with information from party statutes, are used to explore the impact of institutional structure on party membership in Estonia.³⁵

The Role of Party Members in Estonia

Ambassadors in the Community: With Estonia's relatively small electoral districts, and multi-member constituencies, the extant literature suggests

³⁴ Scarrow. *Political Parties and their Members*.

³⁵ Further information about the wider study, including a breakdown to responses of all ten survey questions and anonymized interview transcripts, are available from the author at alison.smith@sant.ox.ac.uk.

that individualized, face-to-face campaigning might be an effective means of political communication. Estonia is one of Europe's smallest countries. Its communities are tight-knit, particularly in rural areas. One ER MP remarked that the help of members is essential because, "Estonia is small, but not so small that you can meet everybody. You can't go everywhere yourself."³⁶

Table 2: What is the most effective way of spreading your party's message (percent)?

	Very effective		Moderately Effective		Somewhat Effective		Not Effective	
	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE
ER n=34 SDE n=32								
National TV and Radio	15.2	53	30.3	18.7	33.3	18.7	21.2	9.4
Local TV and Radio	6.3	21.9	37.5	34.4	21.9	25	34.4	15.6
Print Media	6.3	28.1	68.8	59.4	21.9	12.5	3.1	0
Social Media	18.8	25	40.6	28.1	25.0	31.3	16.6	0
Discussions with friends, family and neighbors	78.1	71.8	15.6	21.9	0	6.3	6.3	0

Source: Author Survey

Survey respondents from both parties believe that discussions with friends, family, and neighbors are the most effective way of spreading their party's message (Table 2). Almost four-fifths of respondents from both parties thought that word of mouth was a "very effective" means of spreading the party's message, and most of the rest thought that it was at least a "moderately effective" means of communication.

Neither party, however, was entirely convinced of the effectiveness of traditional mass media or new social media. More than half of all ER respondents categorized communication through television and radio as only "somewhat effective" or "not effective." This response points to a significant limitation of the "electoral professional" approach. While neither party would ever consider dispensing with "spin doctors" and other electoral professionals, the mass media can be problematic for parties if

³⁶ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP.

it is critical. The Reform Party's political capital, already waning after a long period in government and a series of minor scandals, plummeted after Prime Minister Andrus Ansip vocally supported the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement in February 2012.³⁷ Political opponents and the media seized on this position as evidence that the Reform Party was out of touch with public opinion. Subsequently, the negative headlines were relentless. SDE, on the other hand, was riding a wave of popularity, and were much more comfortable with the mass media as a result. Both parties, however, were evenly matched in valuing members as "ambassadors in the community."

As expected, parliamentary candidates also used party members to boost their own personal profile without publicly confronting their co-partisans. A Reform Party MP explained how he organized a "network campaign," asking members in his constituency to contact their neighbors on his behalf.³⁸ The purpose of these calls was to introduce the candidate, explain his values and policies, offer a personalized invitation to a meeting, and pass on the candidate's cell phone number if they had any questions. The MP explained that, "My team member can reach his parents better than I can, and if the parents have any additional questions, I can meet them." He estimated that through these party members, he had made contact with 900 people in total, a significant number in an electoral district of 5,000 voters. This is a classic example of how candidates standing in an open-list electoral system use members as ambassadors, both to promote their party's platform, and to distinguish themselves from their co-partisans.

Estonians are proud of their high-tech economy. All of the MPs, councilors and candidates interviewed used social media. Many also maintained blogs. Interviewees agreed that even elderly Estonians use Facebook and Twitter, with one Reform Party municipal candidate commenting that, "In Estonia, using the internet is the same as eating bread."³⁹ It is therefore notable that parties were reluctant to rely on this new media. As shown in Table 2, only 18.1 percent of ER respondents and 25 percent of SDE respondents thought it was a "very effective" means of communication.

Exploring these results through interviews, it emerged that internet communication was viewed as suffering from the same deficiency of trust as traditional mass media. Furthermore, there was a perception that voters switch off if they are bombarded via social media at election time. One ER MP, an assiduous blogger, pointed out that blogging was only effective if maintained between elections, building up a loyal following over time.

³⁷ "PM's ACTA Remarks Foil Reform Party Popularity Rating," ERR News, February 27, 2012, <http://news.err.ee/Politics/ad536af3-0492-419c-8e53-41f4e11758c0>. Accessed June 16, 2013.

³⁸ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP.

³⁹ Interview 3. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. ER Municipal Candidate.

“If we have elections and seventy people start writing at once,” he said, “people don’t pay attention anymore.”⁴⁰ In addition, some interviewees were wary of the power of social media, since bad news can spread as quickly as good news. A Reform Party campaign manager pointed out that, “A negative message can be spread to thousands in seconds.”⁴¹

Naturally, both parties employ professional staff. The Reform Party, the wealthier of the two, even hired Estonia’s top marketing agency to work on its branding. Central office staff members are unapologetically fastidious about insisting that activists use the yellow and blue background colors and the party’s distinctive squirrel logo.⁴² Their glossy members’ magazine would not look out of place on a commercial newsstand. However, parties were wary of the limitations of “electoral-professional” campaigns. Where trust in politicians and political parties is low, parties may find that it is beneficial to increase their face-to-face interaction with society. This approach is most practical where electoral districts are small and campaigns are decentralized. In small electoral districts, candidates and activists campaign in close proximity to voters. Furthermore, decentralization gives individual candidates an incentive to build up the party’s membership base. In multi-member districts, local members double as a personal network for individual candidates, vouching for their integrity and helping them to stand out from a crowded field of co-partisans.

A Recruiting Pool for Candidates: Estonia’s small local government districts, where competition increasingly takes place between established political parties (rather than independent candidates), potentially generates a significant demand for council candidates. In a country with 227 municipalities, each requiring between 7 and 63 candidates, even the largest parties struggle to find enough good candidates for all local government districts. Interviewees from both parties often joked that any party member who showed more than a passing interest in policy-making would instantly be invited to stand for the local council. One of the Social Democrats’ primary aims for the October 2013 municipal election was to field at least one candidate in each municipality, a task that required considerable recruitment efforts.⁴³

Both parties were likely to consider nominating good candidates for local government even if they were not a party member, but were much less likely to extend the same flexibility to the national list (Table 3). This suggests that parties do not yet have the luxury of restricting local nominations to candidates already socialized into the party’s values. There was a

⁴⁰ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP.

⁴¹ Interview 1. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, April 5. ER Staff.

⁴² Interview 1. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, April 5. ER Staff.

⁴³ Interview 4. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. SDE Staff.

notable difference between the Social Democratic Party and the Reform Party in terms of their willingness to nominate non-members to party lists. As Table 3 demonstrates, the vast majority (87.5) of SDE respondents believed that local government candidates need not be party members at all, while only half of the Reform Party respondents would accept local candidates who were not members. At the national level, Reform Party respondents were far more likely than their SDE counterparts to insist that prospective candidates should have been party members for a year or more.

Table 3: How long do potential candidates need to be members before standing for election on your party’s list (percent)?

	Local Elections		National Elections	
	ER	SDE	ER	SDE
ER n=34 SDE n=32				
Suitable candidates do not need to be party members	56.3	87.5	9.4	21.9
Candidates need to join the party before standing on the party ticket	28.1	9.3	50	53.1
Candidates need to have been members for several months before becoming candidates	3.1	3.1	6.3	12.5
Candidates should be members for a year before becoming candidates	12.5	0	18.8	12.5
Candidates should be members for three years before becoming candidates	0	0	15.6	0

Source: Author survey

E. Spencer Wellhofer posited that there are three stages of organizational development and elite socialization in political parties. During the first stage, the boundary between supporters and members is typically blurred. At stage two, prior affiliation is required for elite positions. As stage three, parties begin to extend the required period of prior affiliation, increasing loyalty to the organization.⁴⁴ SDE is clearly still at the first stage, although developing rapidly, while ER is moving towards the second stage. It is likely that the higher level of elite socialization found in ER than SDE is the consequence of the organizational history of the two

⁴⁴ E. Spencer Wellhofer. 1972. "Dimensions of Party Development." *The Journal of Politics*, 34, p158.

parties. Although both parties were founded in the early 1990s, left-wing ideas struggled to find an audience in Estonia until recently. As a result, the Social Democrats remain Estonia's smallest parliamentary party, although they are now expanding quickly.

In order to take advantage of their recent surge in the opinion polls, SDE now seeks to compete in the municipal elections nationwide, but this is a big step up and they struggle to find sufficient candidates. In 2011, they launched a membership recruitment campaign with the express intention of increasing their regional penetration. As one party organizer said:

“When we started the members campaign last year, we had 4,500 people. The other parties have three times more, so we felt we had to make it bigger. Of course, we had to develop policies, but we also had to develop our membership. In many places, we didn't have anybody to bring our ideas.”⁴⁵

Having taken the decision to invest significantly in expanding their membership a decade earlier than SDE, ER has much wider regional penetration, and therefore is more likely to have the opportunity to nominate municipal candidates who are already party members. Particularly at the *Riigikogu* level, ER is able to place a much higher premium on length of membership and ideological loyalty (Table 4). While there was agreement across both parties that name-recognition was a crucial attribute for a parliamentary candidate, and that ability to contribute financially was not very important, the Reform Party also prioritized hard work at the local level and loyalty. This, again, is likely to be a result of the current relative resources of the two parties. With a much larger membership base, the Reform Party can juggle multiple priorities simultaneously.

The importance attached to name recognition has become problematic in local government elections, particularly in elections for Tallinn City Council, where well-known personalities (often musicians or sports personalities in the case of the Center Party, government ministers in the case of the Reform Party, and senior MPs in the case of SDE) top party lists even though they have no intention of taking seats on the Council. One Social Democrat MP acknowledged that the use of “vote magnets” (as they are described in Estonia) “creates some problems in terms of voters' trust in politicians,” but expressed frustration that, “I don't see a way out of it either.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Interview 4. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. SDE Staff.

⁴⁶ Interview 6. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 15. SDE MP.

Table 4: What qualities are important in choosing candidates for the Riigikogu (percent)?

	Very important		Somewhat important		Not very important		Not important at all	
	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE
ER n=34 SDE n=32								
Ability to contribute financially	0	0	9.4	3.1	53.1	34.4	37.5	59.4
Well-known in the local community	65.6	56.4	28.1	40.6	6.3	0	0	0
Ideologically loyal	53.1	34.4	40.6	56.3	6.3	6.2	0	0
Strong leadership	32.3	21.9	41.9	46.9	6.5	18.8	0	12.5
Works hard for local people	58.1	37.5	35.5	59.4	0	3.1	0	0
Charismatic	33.3	37.5	53.3	34.4	6.7	25	6.7	0

Source: Author survey.

Both parties view their youth wings as recruiting grounds, not just for members but also for the next generation of Estonian politicians. The Reform Party’s Youth website explicitly states that “the aim of the Youth Council is to guarantee the emergence of new exemplary members and politicians of the Reform Party.”⁴⁷ However, the emergence of the next generation is not always wholly without problems for the current elite, who may resent competition for prized spots on the national list. Some also expressed dismay at the growing dominance of “career politicians.” One SDE veteran of the transition noted that being a politician:

“...is now a career which one can start in youth organizations and continue at the municipality, then in the government or parliament if you are clever enough. I am representing a generation that says if you want success in politics then you have to show you can be successful in another part of life. You must *gain* something before you become a ‘broiler’ in the political system.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ <http://www.reform.ee/en/About-us/Organisation/Estonian-Reform-Party-Youth-Council>. Accessed June 7, 2013.

⁴⁸ Interview 7. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 17. SDE Councillor.

In summary, Estonia's small, decentralized municipalities encourage parties to expand their regional penetration, and this involves membership recruitment. While neither party is yet in a position to demand a long period of prior affiliation from their municipal candidates, they are working towards fielding a full slate of candidates in municipal elections, and slowly nurturing a recruiting pool. Selecting candidates from a membership pool improves loyalty and reduces the possibility of embarrassing public disagreements, but is a long-term undertaking for political parties in new democracies. As the more organizationally advanced party, ER is now taking formal steps to nurture the next generation of its elite. SDE, with its smaller membership, invests significant resources in expanding its base, which it hopes will lead to a good result in the October 2013 local elections.

The difference between SDE and ER's current priorities for municipal candidates, taking into account the latter party's much larger membership, suggest that, as the supply of members increases over time, party loyalty will become a bigger consideration for candidate selection for the SDE in the future. In light of theories about the expected dominance of "electoral professional" parties in central and east European politics, it is interesting to note that SDE does not take its recent strong opinion poll results, or sympathetic media coverage, for granted. Rather, it is taking advantage of the current favorable environment to recruit members with a view to improving its regional penetration.

Members as a Grassroots Campaigning Resource: Ingrid van Biezen predicted that "internally created" political parties would rely on the "electoral model," eschewing the arduous and time-consuming business of electoral mobilization.⁴⁹ The Reform Party is a classic "internally created" party, having been formed from within the government. It has led coalitions for all but three years since it was founded. However, both the ER and the SDE have invested in grassroots-style campaigning to a surprising degree.

Surveys and interviews indicate that both parties utilize old-fashioned pavement politics: distributing handbills, going door-to-door, setting up street stalls and organizing meetings and attending rallies. Activity between elections takes the form of apolitical campaigns about local issues, for example moving a bus stop, opening a local kindergarten or fixing potholes. One council candidate told of a long-standing and successful campaign against a new golf course in Tallinn.⁵⁰ Open political competition breaks out in the months immediately prior to elections.

⁴⁹ van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies*. pp. 31-33.

⁵⁰ Interview 3. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. ER Municipal Candidate.

Table 5: Participation of members in grassroots activities (local elections) (percent)

	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE
ER n=34 SDE n=32								
Contact voters by telephone	27.3	3.1	45.5	40.6	24.2	28.1	3.0	15.6
Contact voters door-to-door	25.0	6.2	46.9	40.6	12.5	25.0	15.6	25.0
Distribute handbills door-to-door	18.2	21.9	45.5	34.8	30.3	28.1	6.1	6.2
Hand out leaflets in the street	48.4	46.9	32.3	28.1	16.1	21.9	3.2	0
Organize and attend meetings	59.4	59.4	37.5	21.9	3.1	0	0	0
Participate in rallies and events	65.6	56.3	28.1	37.5	6.3	3.1	0	0
Persuade friends, family and neighbors to vote for the party	78.1	65.6	18.8	28.1	3.1	3.1	0	0

Source: Author survey.

Tables 5 and 6 summarize the frequency with which parties engage in grassroots activities. Perhaps surprisingly, the “internally created” ER makes more use of direct voter contacting than the “externally created” SDE, most likely because they have the resources to do so. Three quarters of ER respondents indicated that activists “often” or “sometimes” contacted voters by telephone or going door-to-door during national election campaigns, while this figure was less than half for SDE respondents. Both parties used activists to distribute handbills on the street, to organize or attend meetings, and to participate in rallies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that members also engage in arguably less ethical (though not currently illegal) activities like “helping” elderly people to vote using the internet.

Table 6: Participation of members in grassroots activities (national elections) (percent)

	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE	ER	SDE
ER n=34 SDE n=32								
Contact voters by telephone	25	9.3	40.6	25	28.1	53.1	6.3	15.6
Contact voters door-to-door	15.6	6.2	43.8	37.5	28.1	28.1	12.5	28.1
Distribute handbills door-to-door	21.2	21.7	48.5	46.9	30.3	25	3	3.1
Hand out leaflets in the street	42.4	50	39.4	43.8	15.2	9.3	3	0
Organize and attend meetings	43.8	46.9	43.8	50	12.5	3.1	0	0
Participate in rallies and events	46.7	56.3	46.7	37.5	6.7	3.1	0	0
Persuade friends, family and neighbors to vote for the party	77.4	59.4	19.4	34.8	3.2	6.2	0	0

Source: Author survey.

There were subtle differences in tactics between national elections (Table 6) and local elections (Table 5). Both parties were more likely to ask members to contact voters in their own homes (by telephone and door-to-door) during local campaigns than national campaigns. Members were also more likely to attend or organize rallies and meetings during local campaigns than national campaigns. This suggests that parties are slightly more likely to use individual voter contacting in local campaigns than national campaigns, supporting the theory that grassroots campaigning is more effective where electoral districts are small.

Grassroots tactics are used in national campaigns for several reasons. First, as discussed below, all parties find it difficult to raise sufficient funds to cover the high cost of parliamentary campaigns. SDE is the smallest and poorest of Estonia's parliamentary parties, and interviewees spoke of using volunteer labor to reduce the cost of campaigns. "If you have the

members,” said one SDE Tallinn councilor, “then you can use them in the course of the campaign, distributing materials and organizing or doing technical works.”⁵¹

Second, as discussed above, Estonian members of parliament are elected using an open list system. This means that candidates must establish a “unique personal reputation to stand out in a crowded field of co-partisans,” in addition to competing against other parties’ candidates.⁵² Therefore, most Estonian parliamentary candidates run their own local campaign in parallel to the party’s main election campaign. Relatively unknown newcomers must rely on grassroots campaigns to win votes on the regional list, while well-established figures (for example, government ministers) are better able to attract votes on the back of their name recognition, often standing on the central list. In small electoral districts, the best way to gain votes while avoiding conflict with co-partisans is to contact voters individually.

Third, as already demonstrated by Table 2, party elites are dubious about the efficacy of mass media campaigns. Interviews suggest that parties seek to maximize their chances of success by simultaneously engaging in both a “ground war” and an “air war.” A Social Democrat MP summed up the general consensus:

“There are basically two different strategies that are nearly universal. One is presence in the media and the other is face-to-face contact. I don’t know which one of them is more efficient. I’ve had mixed results from that, so usually everyone does both of them.”⁵³

Members and Money: It is often argued that the provision of state funding deters parties from investing in membership.⁵⁴ It is therefore worth exploring the relationship between members and money. Although Estonian electoral law places few limitations on how money can be spent, the laws on how money can be raised are strict. Business donations are banned. Political parties currently receive an annual payment of €1,000 from the state for each mandate they received in the *Riigikogu*. They are also allocated free airtime through public broadcasting prior to elections. Both parties agreed that does not begin to cover the costs of campaigns.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Interview 7. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 17. SDE Councilor.

⁵² Shugart. “Electoral ‘Efficiency’ and the Move to Mixed Member Systems.” p. 183.

⁵³ Interview 6. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 15. SDE MP.

⁵⁴ van Biezen. 2003. *Political Parties in New Democracies*; Petr Kopecký. *Political Parties and the State*. p. 3.

⁵⁵ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP; Interview 6. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 15. SDE MP.

Attempts by political parties to circumvent the ban on business donations have led to frequent funding scandals in recent years. For example, in May 2012, both the Reform Party and the Center Party were accused of “funneling” money of undeclared origin into their parties’ budgets.⁵⁶

However, parties were concerned that asking members for money might be an unacceptable imposition, and appeared to be more comfortable with the idea of using members as voluntary labor. Neither party holds small-scale fundraisers, nor do they ask their members for money at congresses, meetings or social events. They prefer to keep these events exclusively for party business or socializing. Indeed, interviewees expressed some distaste for what they perceived as American-style fundraising, described by one Reform Party organizer as “holding dinners where they pump people for money.”⁵⁷

Interviewees from both parties spoke of the difficulty of funding election campaigns, expressing views like “democracy is expensive.” It is commonplace for candidates from both parties to make significant financial contributions to their own campaigns. The SDE requires parliamentarians to donate a portion of their salary to the party. ER makes no such demand formally, but parliamentarians must usually raise money for their own regional election campaigns.⁵⁸ Business donations are technically illegal, but in kind donations are common: for example, a supportive business might pay the bill for printing a leaflet. A 2009 investigation by the *Äripäev* newspaper accused three Reform Party politicians of allowing businessmen to pick up the tab for campaign expenses.⁵⁹ Some interviewees couched discussions of business funding in terms of “donations from friends who are entrepreneurs,” but others acknowledged that, “Each party has a few companies that have their back.”⁶⁰

Although membership fees make up only a small portion of overall party funding in Estonia, both parties allocate the money raised to local branches, where it is used to cover the cost of meetings and social events. Thus, membership fees play an important role in sustaining the local branch network. The SDE central office also gives one extra euro to local organizations for every euro that is raised from membership fees. Local organizations therefore have an incentive to recruit more members, and to ensure that members pay their fees.⁶¹

⁵⁶ “Financing Scandal Expands to Centre Party,” ERR News, May 25, 2012, <http://news.err.ee/politics/c6ed9839-f136-4e13-a498-0c3d1d48203c>. accessed June 7, 2013.

⁵⁷ Interview 1. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, April 5. ER Staff.

⁵⁸ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP.

⁵⁹ “Dodgy Party Financing No Surprise, Say Commentators,” ERR News, May 22, 2012, <http://news.err.ee/politics/b6f5c156-7822-40c0-892a-aa007bb2f38d>. Accessed June 7, 2013

⁶⁰ Interview 3. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. ER Municipal Candidate.

⁶¹ Interview 5. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. SDE Staff.

However, both parties were ultimately more comfortable asking rank-and-file members for their time than their money. As the poorest of the main four parties, SDE interviewees talked of their reliance on members as a source of voluntary labor. A central office campaign manager said:

“A lot of people in the party work for free. We are thinking very strongly about how to hold these people. We are open to them. We are next to them. We want them to feel good here. We want to thank them always that they have this mission to be a Social Democrat.”⁶²

The SDE was preparing to ask members to make a greater financial contribution, but interviewees expressed uncertainty about how this would be received, since such a request was without precedent in Estonian political culture. One SDE MP wondered aloud if members would be “willing to chip in when it comes to financing all the activities that are necessary for the party to be successful.”⁶³

In summary, there is no evidence that state subsidies discourage investment in party-building in Estonia. The sums involved are insufficient. The proportion of party funding contributed by unreported business donations (which are illegal) is likely to be considerable. It is also relevant to consider the different choices made by individual parties when considering matters of members and money. Katz and Mair’s “cartel party” theory assumes that smaller parties will accept their position in the party system’s pecking order, even though they will always receive a lower share of state funding than their rivals. However, the SDE has bigger ambitions. In the words of one SDE councilor, “Campaigns need a lot of money. Now, to make it a little bit cheaper, if you have the members you can use them in the course of the campaign.”⁶⁴

Discussion

This article adds to a growing number of case studies suggesting that some central and east European parties recruit members because they believe that members help them to win elections. There is no doubt that membership recruitment, retention and organization is a time-consuming and arduous process. Yet Estonian party elites are prepared to make this effort. One Reform Party MP described how he and his fellow activists

⁶² Interview 4. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 10. SDE Staff.

⁶³ Interview 6. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 15. SDE MP.

⁶⁴ Interview 7. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 17. SDE Councilor.

organize street stalls, and are happy with their day's work if three in every fifty conversations yields a potential member.⁶⁵

In Estonia, members are particularly valued as “ambassadors in the community.” This finding is consistent with the extant literature on campaigning tactics in small district multi-member wards. One ER MP spoke of the “network campaign” that he organized with the help of party members, which yielded nine hundred positive contacts, a pivotal number in an electoral district of five thousand voters. Such campaigns allow candidates to compete against their own co-partisans through private individual voter contact, as previously described by Matthew S. Shugart.⁶⁶ A centralized “electoral-professional” campaign would be ill suited to this specific task.

Estonia's 227 municipal districts, which became increasingly politicized in the last decade, also need candidates. Given the option, parties usually prefer to nominate candidates from a recruiting pool already socialized into their values. However, neither ER nor the SDE had a recruiting pool large enough to nominate a full slate of candidates in all regions. SDE is eager to catch up with the other major parties in terms of local government coverage. Therefore, it is investing significant energies into meeting its target of nominating candidates in every municipality for the October 2013 election.

As previously described in small electoral districts in western democracies, parties attempt to contact voters individually through street stalls and door-to-door campaigning. While seemingly old-fashioned, parties believe that this is an effective means of campaigning that complements the “electoral professional” approach. Parties perceive that communication through mass media alone is unlikely to achieve electoral success in Estonia. In such a small country, further divided into tiny municipalities and parliamentary electoral districts, voters *expect* a degree of personal contact.

No evidence was found that the availability of state funding influenced Estonian political parties attitudes towards members. State funding covers only the most basic costs. In the past, business funding dominated, but this source of funds has become progressively harder to access, as laws became both tighter and more strictly enforced. Although “under the table” funding undoubtedly still exists, Estonia's rules on business funding are now among the strictest in Europe, and this drives parties to become more creative about legitimate fundraising. Parties were reluctant to ask members for money, since such requests are not an established practice in Estonia. However, both parties utilize members as a source of free labor, and the poorer of the two parties, the SDE, also hopes to raise money from

⁶⁵ Interview 2. 2012. Interviewed by Alison Smith, Tallinn, May 7. ER MP.

⁶⁶ Shugart. “Electoral ‘Efficiency’ and the Move to Mixed Member Systems.” p. 183.

members in the future.

While the role of members within the SDE and ER was influenced in observable ways by a pragmatic adaptation to electoral rules, the precise function of members within individual parties was calibrated to the specific circumstances of each party. ER is wealthier than SDE, but suffered from negative media coverage over the period of this research (2012-13). Therefore, while SDE sees grassroots campaigning as a means of stretching limited finances a bit further, ER sees the potential to circumvent negative media coverage by communicating directly with voters. These different concerns raise two questions about the literature positing the prominence of state funded “electoral” parties in central and east Europe. The electoral-professional approach to political communications is no panacea for parties, especially those that find themselves out of favor with the mass media. Furthermore, theories that parties will be comfortable relying on state funding assume that smaller parties will accept being at a permanent financial disadvantage, and that parties will not seek to outmaneuver each other by any means possible. Neither of those assumptions holds in the Estonian case.

Therefore, Estonia’s failure to conform, as a new democracy, to expectations of low party membership appears to be explained at least partially by the extant literature on electoral system effects. However, the precise role that members play within each party is also influenced by competitive dynamics, as party elites will seek to make the most efficient possible use of their own party’s resources. Context is also important: SDE is less organizationally advanced than ER primarily because Estonian politics was dominated by free-market liberal ideologies in the first two decades after democratization. This article focused on the Estonian case, and comparative research is now required to establish whether electoral institutions have a systematic effect on membership recruitment.