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Memberless parties: Beyond the business-firm party model?

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that political parties need to have members in order to fulfil their functions in a representative democracy (drawing up platforms, candidate nomination and electoral mobilization) and in terms of their legitimacy. However, the theoretical literature on party models – the evolution from the mass party to the catch-all party, the electoral-professional party and/or the cartel party – suggests an increasing marginalization of members within the party organization. In the business-firm party model, members no longer have any role whatsoever. The next phase in this development seems to be a party without members. This article analyses the contextual (societal, communicational and institutional) factors favouring the rise and endurance of the memberless party as well as the strategic conditions for doing without formal membership (such as maximizing the centralization of internal decision-making, promoting party unity and enhancing electoral effectiveness). The functioning of two no-member parties – the Freedom Party in the Netherlands and the Lega dei Ticinesi in Switzerland – will be discussed in the empirical part of this article.

Keywords

business-firm party, competitive democracy, memberless party, party members, presidentialization

Introduction

According to Western European traditional wisdom, parties act as intermediaries between society and the state. They recruit candidates, draw up platforms and mobilize voters. For this linkage function, they need members – at least, that has been the standard practice since the emergence of the mass party at the end of the 19th century (e.g. Pettitt, 2014: 94–97). From a normative perspective, members may be considered the archetype of a participative model of democracy (e.g. Barber, 1984), especially in that they hold leaders accountable.

Members can be distinguished from donors or supporters by the fact that they have a formalized organizational affiliation to a party, based on obligations, such as paying a membership fee, and privileges, such as the right to participate in a party's internal decision-making process (Heidar, 2006: 301). They perform several functions in political parties. Integrating various interests and demands within society into a more or less coherent party platform, grassroots members might play a role as the party leadership's antennas on the ground, informing it about voters' opinions (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 362). Moreover, parties recruit and select from their membership candidates for public office (Katz and Mair, 2014), and members can participate as local campaigners, helping to get the vote out. In addition, members can act as a party's loyal 'ambassadors', contributing to the legitimacy of the party (Scarrow, 2000: 84). They can also play a role in disseminating the party message and are of great importance because of the funds they provide through their membership fees. Lastly, they add to the party's organizational continuity (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 360).

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In recent decades, however, political scientists have increasingly emphasized the decline in membership, the increasing empowerment of leadership and the rising importance of capital-intensive electoral campaigning – pointing out a shift towards new party models: catch-all, electoralist, cartel, and lastly, business-firm parties (Krouwel, 2006). Despite their different features, these party models challenge any forms of participatory or deliberative democracy, enhancing instead a competitive or Schumpeterian conception of democracy (Schumpeter, 2003), combining elitist and plebiscitary features in a presidentialization of political power (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The focus on electoral competition between leaders in these models seems to give party members only an ancillary or marginal role rather than a participatory one: 'Democracy is not to be found *in* the parties, but *between* the parties' (Schattschneider, 1942: 60).

Nevertheless, the literature rarely pushes the line of reasoning to a logical conclusion, posing the following questions: Do parties still have to rely on members in order to play their intermediary role? Do they need a party on the ground? These questions indirectly represent a challenge to Duverger's legacy. They also resonate with an alternative definition of political parties, provided by the American scholar Leon D Epstein, which is based on a very light structure with no members except one:

> any group, however loosely organized, seeking to elect governmental office-holders under a given label. Having a label (which may or may not be on the ballot) rather than an organization is the crucial defining element. [...] Conceivably, even one man seeking office could similarly adopt a label and also qualify as a party. (Epstein, 1967: 9)

In this perspective, a party without formal grass-roots members would have the character of a network of activities (Monroe, 2001), in which 'informal members' – such as (candidate) representatives, volunteers, paid staff and sponsors – invest time, money or their social reputation (if the party is controversial), but without having a voice in party affairs, in the way that formal party members do (Voerman and Lucardie, 2015).

It is not only that parties can do without members in practice but that they might also perceive compelling reasons to go without them. Members can be an asset, as they make it easier and more effective for a party to fulfil the above-mentioned tasks, but they can also be a liability (Pettitt, 2014: 94), which encourages political entrepreneurs to do without them. In our perspective, focusing on Western European democracies, we assume that conditions for the emergence and endurance of a memberless party have improved in recent decades, creating new settings for party development.[1]

This article is organized in the following way: first, we will focus on recent trends in party politics relating to declining membership and we will frame the conditions for memberless parties in Western European democracies; second, we will compare two successful political parties that were founded in the 1990s and early 2000s and are characterized by an enduring absence of formal grass-roots membership; finally, we will try to highlight the theoretical and normative implications of this phenomenon.

From mass party to business-firm party: The membership issue

One of the main changes in Western European party politics in recent decades has been the decline in party membership (Mair and Van Biezen, 2000; Poguntke, 2002; Van Biezen et al., 2011). Although the notion of party membership may vary conceptually between countries and parties, making a comparison somewhat complicated (e.g. Scarrow, 1996, 2014), political scientists seem to agree about the decline of *formal* party membership. Different factors have been suggested, such as citizen disenchantment (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), the emergence of new social movements, the increasing strength of non-partisan political communication and the rising flow of financial resources other than members' fees (Bartolini and Mair, 2001). The literature also points out the consequences of this membership decline, such as fading organizational capacity and electoral party strength (Tavits, 2012).

Accordingly, the decline of membership seems connected with the weakening of the mass party legacy. Whilst catch-all electoralist settings offer fewer opportunities for members' commitment, as the party organization becomes increasingly capital intensive and professionalized (Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988: 264–266), the cartel party model (Katz and Mair, 1995), which implies an integration within the state, conveys an acceptance of membership marginalization. Although the relationship between cartelization and membership retrenchment is neither linear nor simple (Sandri and Pauwels, 2010), it seems clear that 'the distinction between party members and non-members becomes blurred' as 'the parties invite all of their supporters, members or not, to participate in party organizational activities and candidate selection' (Katz and Mair, 2009: 755; see also Scarrow, 2014). This goes a step further when members are 'exclusively perceived as a reservoir of votes and a ready-made electoral machine, rather than as a participating grassroots movement' (Paolucci, 1996: 13). This is the approach adopted by the business-firm party, created through individual entrepreneurial leadership and, in contrast to the cartel party, mainly supported by private sector resources (Hopkins and Paolucci, 1999; Krouwel, 2006). Lacking precise ideological orientation and strongly shaped by personalistic leadership, this party prioritizes electoral arenas and electoral-professional techniques of campaigning, whilst considering bureaucratic party organization as secondary. For aggregating and integrating

societal demands, business-firm parties utilize opinion polls and adopt a media-driven strategy, presenting candidates through the media. Although in many respects this model seems an alternative to the cartel party and a renewal of the old elite party, the business-firm party does not exclude formal grass-roots membership: 'Grassroots membership is [. . .] limited, with a high proportion of party members being officeholders' (Hopkins and Paolucci, 1999: 333).

In what sense can a party be 'memberless' – and why would it choose to do so?

The question arises as to whether the memberless party represents a radicalization of the business-firm party in terms of the ongoing widespread marginalization of grass-roots membership. In principle, we have to acknowledge that completely memberless parties do not exist in practice. Assuming a party is somehow an association, there should always be at least one member – the leader – to establish or run a party competing in democratic elections. What is original about the memberless party seems to be that such a party also provides membership but only what we here call 'informal membership', that is, volunteers who are necessary as campaign volunteers, for financial resources and candidate selection (Lucardie and Voerman, 2012: 164). Since it is reasonable to expect that parties that can endure without widespread formal membership and only one formal member are rare, the question arises as to the conditions under which durable memberless parties of this type are possible in contemporary Western European democracies.

Despite some disagreements on party definitions and development paths, the literature on party membership recognizes that the increasing diversity of party affiliation is dependent on contextual features and party strategies (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; Van Biezen et al., 2011). Accordingly, one may also distinguish contextual factors and strategic conditions that favour the rise and endurance of a memberless party.

Contextual conditions

Firstly, dominant social norms affect the possibility of memberless political parties. Individualization and differentiation of party affiliation, as well as the weakening power of grass-roots members within mainstream organizations, undermine the significance and incentives of traditional formal membership. Therefore, whilst formal and more durable membership becomes a constraint, being free to join or not to join a party is an expression of a true personal choice. Given the changing nature and diversification of party affiliations, the existence of party membership is no longer taken for granted: 'Subject to any overriding requirements imposed by the state, political parties do not necessarily need to have party members, and certainly not mass memberships' (Gauja, 2015: 9).

Secondly, communication technologies and the increasing mediatization of democratic politics in recent decades have enhanced opportunities to reach individuals beyond local, territorial and face-to-face politics. Increasing media coverage on elections influences political issues and agendas, favouring leader-centred and/or candidate-centred campaigning (Farrell, 2006; Farrell and Webb, 2000). Easy access to large media systems – both traditional and new – enhances a leader's opportunities to reach citizens, bypassing the party organization. The media offer crucial opportunities by which politicians can speak personally to a larger audience than a small number of party members (Lowi, 1985).

Thirdly, the possibility of memberless parties is contextually dependent on state regulation. Since the 1960s in Western Europe, and since the 1990s in Eastern Europe, political parties have often become subject to external regulation (Van Biezen and Piccio, 2013). The fact that parties need to have members is apparently so self-evident that such a requirement is not generally included in so many words within these regulations. State regulation does of course limit the freedom of association; it affects the party 'as a voluntary and private association' (Van Biezen and Piccio, 2013: 48), restricting the organizational options open to them. For that reason, in at least a third of European democracies (and very likely in more countries, since the party's internal functioning may also be regulated by other, general laws), the model of a memberless party would be formally impossible.

Fourthly, the possibility of a memberless party also depends on electoral rules. In a proportional system where elections run in a single constituency, the focus is on the party leader or first candidate and much less on candidates lower down the list. The latter are elected in the slipstream of the first candidate, so they do not really need to be popular, get a lot of media attention or have volunteers campaigning for them. In majority systems, on the other hand, the candidates themselves do have to campaign in their own districts in order to get elected. Effective electoral campaigning is more labour-intensive and requires organization on the ground (Young, 2013: 71).

Strategic conditions

As is also the case with parties with declining grass-roots membership, a party without members tends to be strongly dependent on the leadership. As in the business-firm party, the founding leader represents the true 'owner' of the party label and is able to shape a political grouping that is more a network of activities or functions than a formally structured party (Monroe, 2001: 17). One might wonder why a party leader would be motivated to permanently avoid formal membership and what are the challenges that he or she would have to consider.

Perhaps the main reason is that formal membership is perceived as an unacceptable constraint, especially in candidate selection and campaigning, but also in legislative behaviour and party agenda setting (Young, 2013). Formal members, especially if combined with internal democracy, limit the party leadership's radius of action and its responsiveness, precisely at a time when it needs more scope to respond because of increasing electoral volatility. Of course, finding potential candidates is more problematic without members, as searching outside the party might result in ideologically less committed and consequently less loyal candidates (Pettitt, 2014: 95–96). Paradoxically, it is at the same time easier for the leader of a memberless party to decide on candidate selection and campaign strategy, to draw up manifestos and to change the party agenda and to solve internal factionalism among representatives.

A party without members challenges the common views concerning the relationship between the party in central and in public office. Although the literature tends to define party membership as grass-roots membership, members also include the holders of public office. As representatives are not formally members of the party, what will happen to them? For electoral reasons, representatives must be prepared to follow the leader, enhancing message coherence in order to reach voters. There is a tension between the pursuit of internal party democracy and the need for internal cohesion, discipline, efficiency and unity (Katz, 2006).

The influence of members on setting the party's electoral programme might harm not only its coherence and clarity but also its representativeness and might lead to less balanced lists of candidates in the nomination process, giving little room to categories of supporters who are underrepresented or less active within a party (Voerman and Lucardie, 2015). Grass-roots members (the party on the ground) can therefore pose a risk for the party (in central and public office) in terms of curbing its leadership, undermining its unity and distorting its representativeness. This is all the more relevant for parties that pursue vote seeking as their first aim. In such electorally driven parties, internal democracy can be perceived as an obstacle to realizing their goals, and a party without members might seem a logical way to solve this problem.

However, these arrangements represent crucial constraints in terms of legitimation. In order to legitimize this strategy for supporters or sympathizers, the party leader's popularity seems a *conditio sine qua non* (Blondel and Thiébault, 2010: 71). A memberless party – like a party with members – has to supply local and regional government candidates and mobilize regular financial resources (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010: 840). The main way to enhance the leader's popularity is for that leader to be perceived as (somewhat) exceptional, providing a clear and cohesive message. Paradoxically, a durable memberless party has to offer high ideological incentives. In contrast to the 'flexible ideology' of the business-firm party (Krouwel, 2006: 261), it apparently rejoins the ideological cohesive pattern of the mass parties. As the apex of the party membership in expressive form, the mass party enhances the 'illusion of community' as a stable collective identity (Pizzorno, 1990: 68–69). Similarly, the memberless party also has to develop a performative, antagonistic discourse creating symbolic boundaries between 'ours' and 'others', between the 'people' and the 'power' (Laclau, 2005), targeting a somewhat virtual and mediated community compensating the more socially and territorially rooted belonging provided by membership parties, and above all by mass parties.

Aiming at popular and electoral legitimation, through populist claims, the memberless party may seek to present itself as more democratic than its competitors. Mudde (1996: 269) points to the 'populist anti-partyism', which – in the name of the people – stigmatizes the 'party centrism', 'corruption' and 'anti-democratic behaviour' of the established parties. The scope is twofold: on the one hand, the memberless party defends its lack of bureaucrats, who would develop their own interests within the party, and on the other, it gives an impression of proximity between the memberless party's representatives and voters – a line of reasoning in which formal membership creates barriers with the rest of the citizens.

Two examples of memberless parties: The Freedom Party and the Lega dei Ticinesi

Do durable memberless parties really exist in Western European countries and are they able to achieve some electoral success? Is it true that party leaders are actively working against the construction or maintenance of large membership organizations because a party on the ground reduces a leader's power, or does this largely remain a generic statement (Epstein, 1967: 116; Poguntke, 2002: 56; Pettitt, 2014)? In an attempt to answer these questions, we will focus on two political parties, one in the Netherlands and one in Switzerland, looking at their foundation and evolution, the memberless organization, and its justification, ideology, resources and media strategy.

Freedom Party

The Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) was founded in February 2006 by MP Geert Wilders. Wilders broke away from the conservative–liberal VVD party because he favoured a stricter position on Islam and integration, but he still retained his seat (Lucardie and Voerman, 2013). He also had a personal interest, for he could not imagine life without being politically active at the highest level. At the national elections in November 2006 – ruled by a proportional and single constituency system – the Freedom Party won 5.9% of the votes; it subsequently accounted for between 10% and 17% of the vote at the provincial,

national and European elections. In autumn 2010, Wilders lent formal support to a right-wing minority government. One and a half years later, he sparked a government crisis when he disagreed with the substantial budgetary cuts decreed by the European Union. At the next elections, the Freedom Party lost a third of its voters (10.1%). At the provincial elections in March 2015, the party got 11.7% of the vote.

The Freedom Party has only two formal members: the natural person Wilders and the legal person *Foundation Group Wilders* – although in reality only one. The party's emergence brought the first appearance of a memberless party in Dutch parliament since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1917. As the party on the ground and in central office is non-existent, there is only a party in public office, headed by Wilders. Initially, the Freedom Party did not recruit members for fear of infiltration by right-wing extremists or troublemakers. Later, Wilders' right-hand man Martin Bosma provided a theoretical justification, arguing that a 'virtual' or 'network' party without an intermediate layer of members would 'have a clear line and a clear leadership' and would be only directly accountable to the Dutch voters. In his view, 'the structure of a member-based party has a disruptive effect on democracy' (Bosma, 2010: 30–31, 215–216). In this sense, the Freedom Party is the odd man out in the Dutch political system, which is still characterized by party-oriented politics and not by leader-dominated politics. The organizational structure of most Dutch parties still resembles the mass party model, with a long tradition of formal membership (Voerman and Van Schuur, 2011). Nonetheless, the party in public office is formally dominant; its leader is generally regarded as the party leader. Leadership personalization has become stronger in recent decades due to the mediatization of politics but is still relatively weak.

Bosma's defence of the memberless party fits seamlessly into the populist political programme of the Freedom Party. According to Wilders, a selfish, progressive and cosmopolitan political elite has betrayed the interests of ordinary, innocent people, giving free rein to European integration and in particular to 'mass immigration'. By demanding a stop to 'Islamization' (by refusing any more immigrants from Muslim countries, or even banning the Quran), an identity is constructed in which 'the others' are excluded – Muslims in the first place, but also multicultural 'progressives'. By identifying common enemies, this populist and nationalist discourse (in which Wilders' liberal roots are in fact still discernible) increases the cohesion of the Freedom Party; its Islamophobic position and the negative response from civil society contributes to its closed character (Lucardie and Voerman, 2012: 167–170; Vossen, 2013: 66–75, 189–191).

Although the Freedom Party does not enrol members, its elected representatives (as with non-elected candidates and volunteers) at the local, provincial, national and European levels can be considered informal members. Like members of other parties, they have costs (in terms of investing time and putting their reputations at risk, due to the party's controversial character), but no formal rights at all: they have no say in party affairs. All the power is concentrated in Wilders' person (De Lange and Art, 2011: 1240). Supported by a small inner circle, he controls the main party functions such as candidate recruitment and drafting platforms. He operates in a soloistic manner, partly because he is under constant security protection on account of continuing death threats (Vossen, 2013: 184–187).

Wilders has tried to keep his party formation as small as possible in order to minimize the risk of dissent. He has only taken part in national and European elections, and in 2 of some 400 municipalities in local elections. Yet his party had to participate in the provincial elections in 2011 in order to play an influential role in national politics since the provincial councils elect the upper house of the Dutch parliament. Wilders tried to control these groups of representatives by implanting confidants, but this strategy was not effective (De Lange and Art, 2011: 1243). As the representatives were not entitled to participate in the internal decision-making process and in the absence of formal procedures for resolving conflicts, disagreements within the Freedom Party could easily escalate and criticisms often became personal, given Wilders' erratic dominance within the highly centralized and hierarchical party structure. By early 2015, in a process that had begun in 2011, dozens of representatives at all levels had broken with the Freedom Party, some of them founding a party of their own (Lucardie and Voerman, 2012: 179–184; Vossen, 2013: 193).

Although the Freedom Party's parliamentary group receives government funds to support its activities, the party is not legally eligible for other public funding because it has no members. Since it must also do without membership revenues, it is completely dependent on donations. These gifts are channelled through a foundation, which has no legal duty of disclosure. Nevertheless, according to some observers, the party may well receive large sums of money from conservative organizations and individuals in the United States and probably Israel, but hard evidence is lacking (Vossen, 2013: 210–219).

The party's website and Wilders' tweets are the most important communication channels for the Freedom Party. For the rest, the party is dependent on free publicity. Wilders has a very selective and effective media strategy, enabling him to regularly determine the news agenda. With a confrontational style that perfectly suits his populist position, and extreme, taboo-breaking sound bites such as 'tsunami of Islamization', 'head rag tax' and 'fewer Moroccans', he is able to attract more media attention than most other parties. Generally refusing to give any further explanation (or only doing so on Twitter), he has become the darling of the media, which has enabled him to make his

own choices about engaging with the media when and where he likes (Bakker and Vasterman, 2013).

Thus, Wilders is in all respects at the centre of the Freedom Party, being the personalization of the party's politics (Vossen, 2013: 185–187). Paradoxically, he banned formal membership for fear of conflicts, but by doing so, he introduced structural instability and a potential for disunity, because informal members have no say at all in the party organization. Moreover, Wilders has a repressive way of managing conflicts. As the party is highly dependent on its leader and since there are no mechanisms to fall back on in order to solve internal conflicts, the only way out for informal members who disagree is to leave.

Lega dei Ticinesi

The Lega dei Ticinesi was founded in 1991 in Ticino, the Swiss canton next to Italy. It has been successful since its inception, achieving more than 10% voter support within its constituency in the cantonal and federal elections of 1991. The party reached a peak in the 2011 cantonal elections (regulated by a proportional system within a single constituency), when it won about 30% of the vote. Giuliano Bignasca, the party's founder, was a businessman, who had no previous political experience but was close to the pivotal liberal party. He created the Lega after losing a formally open real estate competition allowed by the government, denouncing it as a result of clientelistic rules. Whilst continuing his activities as a real estate agent, construction magnate and publisher, Bignasca remained the unchallenged party leader for 22 years. During this period, the Lega had no formal members apart from its president. In January 1991, the party's constitutional assembly, in which three people participated, designated Bignasca as the Lega's 'president for life' (De Lauretis and Giussani, 1992: 237). One of the founding participants, originally designated as the party 'secretary', has never actually played that role because of clear resistance from the leader. Thus, officially speaking, the only 'extra-parliamentary' role in the Lega is that of the 'President', flanked by a few representatives of the party.

Attempting to legitimize these original organizational patterns, Bignasca often tried to present the Lega as a 'movement' rather than a 'party' (Albertazzi, 2006: 136). Because of this claim to be a movement and the lack of state rules prescribing formal party membership, the leader was never pushed to justify the absence of formal membership, also because, in the Swiss legacy, party membership is often weakly formalized, especially for centre-right parties (Ladner and Brändle, 2001). However, the Lega acts in a context (at the regional and national level) in which no other party shares a similar memberless strategy. At the same time, the Lega has often stressed its protest against the Swiss government, characterized by large and durable party coalitions. This is particularly strong in Ticino, where centre-right and left-wing parties worked together for decades in the government cartel, before the Lega was founded in a period of increasing electoral volatility. As the Lega openly and continuously fights against the political establishment, immigrants, European integration and Islam, it has unsurprisingly been described as a populist party (Mazzoleni, 1999; Mazzoleni and Pilotti, 2015).

The importance of personal leadership in the Lega implies the absence of formal internal decision-making structures by which delegates and leaders are elected and electoral candidates designated in Swiss parties (Albertazzi, 2007: 70). According to the statutes, the general assembly is the 'supreme organ of the Lega', but it has never convened. Bignasca justified this option by referring to his opposition to bureaucratic constraints. In this way, the Lega is a radicalized manifestation of another Swiss legacy, in which a party apparatus with paid employees is traditionally absent. By running the party almost single-handedly, Bignasca effectively protected one of the essential conditions of his individual leadership, limiting the creation of clusters of influence within the party that were not under his direct control. With his business position, his control of the party, but also his election as a member of the executive of the canton's main city (Lugano), which permitted him to develop a patronage function, Bignasca developed a dense network to ensure its leadership. This strategy was always successful because internal dissidence was rare and the only option for dissidents was to leave the party. At the same time, Bignasca was able to tolerate some diversity within the party, in particular among some more moderate representatives such as Marco Borradori, a lifelong member of the cantonal executive (Mazzoleni, 2010: 9–10).

Strategies and resources devoted to communication are other crucial elements of the party. As the leader pointed out in 1992, 'communication is power' (De Lauretis and Giussani, 1992: 148); this means taking advantage of the rich opportunities offered by the mass media landscape in the canton of Ticino, with public and private television/radio broadcasts, as well as daily newspapers with a mass circulation. This also explains the importance of the free weekly party newspaper *Il Mattino della Domenica* throughout the existence of the party in linking with the leadership's business experiences and professional skills. Apart from Bignasca, who was the editor of the party newspaper, the second founder Flavio Maspoli was a journalist, whilst national MP Lorenzo Quadri, one of the main disciples of the leader, is currently the editor-in-chief. At the same time, the leaders never presented the newspaper as the official organ of the movement.

On the ground, sympathizers and local activists are certainly important supporters of the party, both among ordinary citizens and elites – among representatives of interest groups and journalists, for example. However, it is difficult to count or identify sympathizers and activists, as these

individuals are committed on an intermittent basis. As the party on the ground does not ensure any stability in terms of resource availability, and the Swiss political system does not allow any public funding of parties and electoral campaigns, the Lega was clearly mainly sustained by private funds, allowed by territorially based interest groups aiming to influence public policies, and above all by the leader and his enterprise, who personally guaranteed the weekly newspaper.

The political personnel elected under the party label at the local, cantonal and national levels might be considered the main informal members of the Lega. That personnel also represents a crucial condition of party sustainability after the death of the founding leader Giuliano Bignasca in 2013. However, this was not the only condition. As Bignasca was the unique owner of the party's label, it was easy for him to simply leave the ownership to his brother. Avoiding internal factionalism – and with the support of his daughter and Giuliano's son – Giuliano's brother has been able to survive through the party newspaper and the constitution of a new informal committee heading the party, which brings together all the politicians selected or supported by the founder-leader. Benefiting from a political agenda increasingly influenced by the Lega's issues and from personalized trends in party strategies and media coverage (Mazzoleni et al., 2009), without the founder-leader but explicitly on his behalf, the Lega has been able to confirm its electoral success as a memberless party in the 2015 cantonal elections, with about 28% support in the race for government.

Discussion

The Freedom Party and the Lega have very similar profiles. In both cases, the founder was in fact the owner of the party, with exclusive power over candidate selection and agenda setting. Both are right-wing parties and are as such less influenced by the legacy of the mass party model than left-wing parties. Both have developed a very small central party office and relied on the leader's personal strategy. Wilders and Bignasca are/were popular and extraordinary leaders, fighting against the political elite. The accusation that the established parties form a cartel fits perfectly in their populist frame and corresponds with their efforts to present themselves as outsiders and as the only parties that really connect with the people. Both developed media-seeking and vote-seeking strategies. Each created and developed a party in a party system without a strong leader-driven party legacy, running within a single (national or cantonal) constituency applying proportional electoral rules.

In many ways, both memberless parties resemble the above-mentioned business-firm party model, if we compare them on the basis of the dimensions distinguished by Krouwel (2006). This model is largely based on rational choice assumptions and on the analysis of two parties: the Unión de Centro Democrático in Spain and Forza Italia in Italy (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999). In terms of their genesis, memberless parties emerged – like the two business-firm parties – in times of crisis. Both the Lega and the Freedom Party were founded in a period of political instability, characterized by high levels of electoral volatility and a decline in traditional parties – providing electoral opportunities for new political actors. Both parties were established by a political entrepreneur, one from inside parliament and the other from outside. Apart from their political aims, they both also had personal incentives for creating a party of their own.

Within the organizational dimension, the memberless parties seem a more radical version of the business-firm party model. Whereas membership was minimal and irrelevant in the latter, the former have no formal membership at all, because the party leader considers members detrimental to party cohesion and the party's main party function, namely, vote maximization. Due to this dominating objective, however, memberless parties do need a minimum number of volunteers (campaigners and candidates), who can be regarded as informal members, in order to perform election-related activities. Memberless parties mainly exist as a party in public office; there is formally no party on the ground and no party in central office (or only a minimal one in the case of the Lega) that might function as a counterbalance to the party in public office. The position of the party leader in memberless parties seems even stronger than in business-firm parties. Whereas party leaders in this latter model have a 'high level of autonomy ... to "promote" themselves' (Krouwel, 2006: 263), in the memberless parties, power is concentrated in the hands of the party leader himself.

Apart from these similarities, there are also differences between the business-firm party model and the memberless parties, which relate particularly to the ideological dimension, the mode of campaigning and the development path. Firstly, the basis for party competition for both models is to focus on issues and personalities. However, whereas both business-firm parties showed a 'lack of ideological orientation' and were likely to be 'politically incoherent' (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999: 315, 307), both memberless parties have developed over time a clear and consistent populist message of a highly divisive character, stressing the antitheses between ordinary honest people and harmful others (elites, foreigners, etc.). Even though populism is generally regarded as a partial and not a fully fledged ideology, both parties provide a 'community-building' nationalist discourse, integrating issues such as a fear of Islamization and Euroscepticism (Mazzoleni and Pilotti, 2015).

The second main distinction relates to campaigning. In business-firm as well as memberless parties, the popularity of the leader and his electoral attractiveness is of immense importance, which is the reason why these parties all

struggle permanently for media attention. The business-firm parties are able to utilize sophisticated electoral-professional campaigning techniques in mass communications in order to frame the political message or to construct a favourable image of the leaders. The level of professionalization is much lower in the two memberless parties, particularly due to a lack of financial resources. The Freedom Party especially has no large sums to spend – also because it lacks membership revenues – on hiring external experts. The media strategies of both memberless parties are different, however, with Wilders relying on social media and manipulating the generally hostile traditional media, and with the Lega counting on a developed network of friendly media and journalists. In the Lega, dependency on the single personality of the founder appears to have declined as party ownership has been inherited by members of his family. Family relations do not play any role in the inner circle of the Freedom Party.

All things considered, in their organizational form, the memberless parties appear to be a radicalization of the business-firm party model. The number of members is minimized (to only one) and the leadership's control over the party is maximized, not permitting informal members a voice in the highly informal decision-making procedures. However, the memberless parties are less professionalized than the business-firm parties. The differences between the two party models are not fundamental, as they appear to be more gradual than principal. Their incentives do indeed appear identical: providing the leader with a political vehicle and, by extension, vote maximization. However, constrained in their options (because of the political culture, resource configuration, political opportunity structure, etc.), they have chosen different strategies. The memberless party rules out party membership in order to increase its electoral effectiveness by augmenting its organizational cohesiveness and its representativeness. The business-firm parties might prefer to do the same but may feel forced by societal norms and expectations or other reasons to enrol members. In their turn, the professionalizing aspirations of memberless parties might be blocked by insufficient financial resources. In terms of development path, the Lega seems to be surviving and to have ensured its electoral success without its founder; for the Freedom Party, this remains to be seen. One key condition is the possibility of maintaining party ownership under the control of the leader's relatives. In this sense, as with Forza Italia, the Lega is closer to the business-firm party model under the form of a patrimonialist party (Paolucci, 2008).

Conclusion

Although further empirical research including other parties without formal membership is needed in order to assess whether a new model in the evolution of political parties is emerging, memberless parties certainly represent a radicalized form of the business-firm party model. Given similar contextual conditions and incentives, it is not unlikely that memberless parties and business-firm parties, depending on specific circumstances and strategic considerations, will at some point converge or merge in some crucial aspects. With dominant personal leadership and strongly focused on mass communication channels, they can also be durable and successful. At the same time, the memberless party presents a less eclectic ideology, helping them to create incentives and collective identification.

In Western European political systems, the memberless party represents an extreme and in some ways a paradoxical response to the crisis of the mass member parties. The first reaction was the catch-all electoralist party, followed by the cartel party and the business-firm party (Krouwel, 2006). In this evolution, the leadership of the party in public office of mainstream parties increasingly strengthened its power vis-à-vis the party on the ground, marginalizing the party members, even if their formal say has expanded (e.g. Farrell and Webb, 2000; Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014). In this sense, as highly personalized and centralized organizations, the memberless parties underline emerging trends, like the presidentialization of power within the political party (Passarelli, 2015; Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

The memberless party reflects a strengthened form of the competitive model of democracy, in which leaders compete for people's votes in order to acquire the power to decide (Katz, 2006; Schattschneider, 1960; Schumpeter, 2003). In its emphasis on the importance of leaders and their competition for power, this conception implies a top-down perspective of democracy, the more so because grass-roots engagement of the people is regarded as a potential threat to the stability of the political system. In the competitive model, according to Schattschneider (1942), a party's internal structure does not have to be democratic. The memberless party fits seamlessly in this elitist conception of democracy; in a way it is the radicalization of the secondary position that the parties have in this model. The memberless party is not organizationally rooted within society (although it is certainly connected in a mediated way); participation and deliberation by members are ruled out and it only serves as an instrument of the leader. Through its personalized and entrepreneurial populism, the memberless party provides an extreme example of competitive democracy. It appeals to the people, but paradoxically, without admitting them to its organization.

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Note

1. American parties also do not have formal members (Ware, 2006). They are excluded here, however, because their specific evolution, structure and nomination process deviates strongly from the two hierarchical and centralized memberless parties studied here.

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