



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

The effects of party membership decline

- *A cross-sectional examination of the implications of membership decline on political trust in Europe*

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has established an extensive and persistent decline of party members throughout Europe since the 1960's. However, research establishing the effects of membership decline is limited. This thesis will explore the impact of decline on society's' perception of politics. The outset is that membership decline is reflected in the levels of trust in parties. Two hypotheses are applied; First, that the levels of membership size affect the levels of trust in parties. Second, that changes in membership size can predict changes in trust in parties.

The thesis applies statistical analysis, mainly through regression, and will do a cross-sectional comparison of 22 European countries. The causality will be tested in two ways; static, applying a specific time point (2008). And dynamic, through a time-interval of four years (2004-2008). Additionally, alternative explanation is considered using three control variables. Those are newness of democracy, GDP growth and party closeness.

The results indicate that membership size has a strong effect on levels of trust when tested on a specific time period. The relationship remains statistically significant until the variable party closeness is applied. When testing the correlation over time, the effect is much weaker, and not significant. These results may change if a longer time series is applied, suggested by the strong results of the static model.

Key words: membership decline, political trust, party member functions, political partisanship.

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY.....	5
2.1 Research on political partisanship and its decline.....	5
2.2 Decline, trust and the functions of members.....	6
2.3 Purpose and hypotheses.....	9
3. METHOD.....	11
3.1 Data consideration.....	12
3.2 Approach.....	12
3.3 Dependent variable.....	13
3.4 Independent variable.....	14
3.5 Control variables.....	14
3.6 Application of design.....	17
4. RESULTS.....	17
4.1 Descriptive variable data.....	18
4.2 Results H1.....	19
4.3 Results H2.....	24
4.4 Summary.....	26
5. DISCUSSION.....	27
6. REFERENCES.....	29
7. APPENDIX.....	32

1. INTRODUCTION

Parties have always played a crucial role in the sustainment of the political system as legitimate and democratic (Kölln, 2014, 31-37). Further, the main functions of parties have been to establish and uphold a representative link between state and society. Members of political parties have previously served as source of information regarding society's needs. Additionally, party members have added input in the policy process, assisting in formation of party programs (Kölln, 2015: 595). Furthermore, members have functioned as glue, binding the different party levels, from grassroots to party elite. Other than that, the membership base has been a source of recruitment for party representatives (Erlingsson, Persson & Öhrvall, 2012: 195). Although members undoubtedly have been of value for parties, their functions are indicated to matter beyond the party line. Strengthening the representative features of politics, members have served as a connection to the political sphere. As the literature indicates, members are suggested to contribute to the notion of parties as well as the system as legitimate and democratic (Mair, 1997: 147-148) (van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke, 2012: 42).

Although research can identify valuable functions of party members, a persistent and extensive decline of members has been established in recent decades' (van Biezen et al. 2012: 24, 31-35). The downward trend is found in almost all European countries, and documented throughout most party families (Hooghe & Kern, 2013: 946). Simultaneously, party identification has weakened as well as the levels of trust for parties. Furthermore, voter turnout has dropped in many European countries suggesting to signal volatility (Kölln, 2014: 1). These findings indicate an increased gap between citizens and the political sphere. In reference to the values of members, the trend of decline should have implications for parties, as well as for the bond between state and society.

In the field of party politics, the value and functions of parties are well-established. And although the political system has changed in many ways, parties are still established as crucial actors for the functions of representative democracy. Viewed as the link between society and state, parties are seen as main legitimizers of politics. However, the effects of the extensive decline of party members are less explored. To some extent explained by the absence of relevant data, the available research on membership decline largely downplays the effects on society's perception of politics. Although some of the earlier functions of members have become obsolete, others still hold value. Parallel to the process of membership decline is an increased mistrust and de-alignment of citizens to politics. If these occurrences are connected, party

members play a crucial democratic role. Whether there is an actual connection between citizens' trust in parties and the base of party members are not established. While the field of party politics has documented a staggering decline of members, the effects on society remains unexplored. To some extent, research has established that members matter for the perception of politics, as well as for the functions of parties (Hooghe et al. 2013: 945). Research on whether the loss of members has affected the functions of members in reference to society's' perception of parties is largely absent.

While previous research has recognized the value of members, and established the extent of membership decline, the effect of decline is therefore in need of further examination. In reference to this, the aim of my thesis is to fill this gap. The purpose is therefore to explore the effects of decline on society. In this thesis I argue that membership decline and citizen mistrust is connected, indicating that membership size and levels of trust correlates.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH & THEORY

2.1 Research on political participation and its decline

Within the field of party politics, a change in the conditions of the party system is well-established. As a consequence of growing voter-volatility and de-alignment of citizens to politics, a crisis of parties is suggested. Through mainly the work of Russel J. Dalton (2009) the growing discontent of citizens is established through the *de-alignment thesis*, describing the decrease of party identifiers. The conditions of politics, Dalton means, have changed as a result of the modernization of industrial democracies. As the educational levels as increased and the scope of media has developed, citizens have become less dependent on parties for political skills and information (Dalton, 2000: 29, 32). While this theory contributes to clarify the process of partisan decline, the effects are mainly explored in reference to parties. Additionally, regardless of declining support, the value of party identification and alignment for party system legitimacy remains. Research confirms that partisans and party members' express higher levels of support for parties as well as the political system (Anderson & Just, 2013: 339). Conversely, non-members show lower levels of support for parties and the political system (Miller & Listhaug, 1990: 385). In other words, partisanship play an important part in influencing citizens' view of the political system as legitimate (Anderson et al., 2013: 355). Therefore, as citizens appreciate parties less, they de-attach themselves causing a weakened support for not only parties, but for the political system (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000: 266-270, 21-22).

Most research on partisan decline is limited to examining levels of party identification. However, the impacts of partisan decline specifically regarding membership loss is less common. In reference to limited survey data, decline is more commonly illustrated through levels of party identification. This being said, the extent and implications on specifically membership decline is scarce (van Biezen & Mair: 2001: 6). Therefore, additional data reporting the extent and implications on specifically membership loss is needed. The biggest contribution on the subject so far is undoubtedly the work of Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke in 2012. Compiling survey data for 27 European countries, the membership rates from the 1980's and 1990's are compared with contemporary membership levels. With few exceptions, decline is confirmed in absolute numbers as well as percentage of the electorate throughout Europe (van Biezen et al., 2012: 5-6, 25). Due to the extent of membership decline, the importance of members is believed to vanish. The levels of members are now too low to signal the previous mobilizing force. Additionally, the characteristics of remaining members have become too similar to the party elite to hold the former representational value. Therefore, the former functions of members are believed to be eroding (van Biezen et al., 2012: 38-39).

2.2 Decline, trust and the functions of members

Based on previous research, the connection between membership decline and trust is not self-evident. Although research establishes that members and party identifiers are more prone to trust parties as well the political system (Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Though, a direct correlation between the variables has not been applied. Therefore, there are few theories which I can base my hypothesis on. The ambition is therefore to establish this connection. As mentioned above, decreasing trust levels can partly be understood in reference to the party decline thesis (Dalton, 2000). However, the theory does not provide answers regarding the mechanisms of membership rates. In order to understand the connection between membership size and trust levels, theory explaining the contemporary functions of members for the system is needed. A recently published article by Marc Hooghe and Anna Kern contributes to the causality of membership levels and trust. Here, trust is defined as direct reflections of citizens' judgements of the political system. Furthermore, party members and identifiers are recognised as 'trust generators' (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 945).

As mentioned earlier, data regarding specifically the decline of party members is limited. However, available research is concurrent when establishing the decline as persistent and comprehensive throughout Europe over the last decades (van Biezen et al 2012; Kern & Hooghe, 2015; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; van Biezen & Mair, 2001; Dalton, 2000).

Authors Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke consider possible factors that might affect the results. For example, the effect of population size as well as whether countries are old or new democracies are considered (van Biezen et al., 2012: 29-30). Though newness of democracy does not seem to have substantial affect, size seems to matter as smaller countries elevates the decline rate. In absolute terms, with few exceptions, the loss of members is significant, and ranges from 0, 5-1 million members. Many countries report a loss close to or over half of the membership base. In some countries the decline of members is equivalent to 5 per cent of the electorate, and in extreme cases the loss exceeds 10 per cent. Due to the major extent of decline, the profile and relevance of party member is expected to have changed (van Biezen et al., 2012: 36-38). These findings are complemented by similar research by Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) using slightly different methods. They find that today, few European parties reach member-levels over 5 percent of the electorate. In general, few parties are unable to reach these levels. Compared to the level of members reported in the 1950's reaching 10 per cent of the electorate, the difference is substantial. The decline can partly be explained through parties' inability to hold on to members. More prominently parties have difficulties enrolling new and younger members (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010: 825, 830). In summary, available research concludes a large and consistent drop of party members throughout Europe. In addition, the decline is extensive enough to be considered to have implications for the future value of parties.

It is now time to turn to the established functions of members. One function that is often emphasized is that political partisanship enables citizens to grasp the complexity of politics (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 946). Further, political partisans and members are documented to express higher levels of trust towards parties and the political system (Anderson & Just, 2013: 339), suggesting that political participation makes the political system relatable to citizens. Put simply, parties integrate members to the system, which is manifested through higher rates of support. While parties' functions as a link between society and state, members work as a mechanism for these functions as they contribute to party and system legitimacy (Hooghe & Kern, 2013: 945-946). However, as party members and identifiers has decreased, the disenchantment of citizens to politics has grown (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 824).

Additional research on the functions of partisans comes to similar conclusions. Partisanship is established to enable citizens to refine and develop political views. Further, these skills generate political awareness necessary to address and respond to the political system. This is a crucial part of representative democracy, as it reinforces the capacity for citizens to respond to politics

and articulate the needs of society (White & Ypi, 2011: 386-387). Also known as political justification, a responsive system is an essential part of the democratic process. As a form of legitimization, justification occurs when different political approaches are confronted with each other. In order for political justification to function as a response to political need, it relies on citizens to comprehend and evaluate the alternatives and articulate the preferred line of action. It is through the organizational force and educative functions of parties that these demands are met, making partisans' crucial actors in the upholding of democratic ideals (White & Ypi, 2011: 393-394).

So far, partisans and members are indicated to generate trust and enable system legitimacy. Additionally, they also seem to hold symbolic effect for parties;

"...Party members often play a role in establishing the party 'brand'. One of the ways that parties may profit from their memberships results from the legitimacy members can provide: members have a symbolic role in the chain of representation. Party membership can boost a party's perceived authenticity by visibly symbolizing its support in the community- showing that it is not just an organization by and for elites." (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010: 827).

Members seems to hold promotional value for the own party. Beyond that, they also accumulate societal bonds that affect citizens' perceptions in general. In that way, a party's membership size matters as it may suggest representational force. Although a small or declining membership-base does not necessarily translate to representational difficulties, it can however be perceived as such (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 839-840). In other words, all party members' function as general communicators for all parties. Membership decline has led to shifts in the composition of member profiles. That in itself does not mean that parties are not representative anymore. However, as members become more distinct, the ability for parties to be perceived as relatable diminishes. As the loss of members have been substantial, parties have therefore lost important political communicators. In addition, as the size of the membership has declined, citizens have lost an important link to parties. Beyond that, society has loss an actor that enhances society's perception of politics. So while parties separately have lost party promoters, all parties have lost political legitimizers, also affecting society's views of the political system as a whole.

In conclusion, so far the functions of members seem to be direct as well as indirect, and of value to parties as well as the political system in general. Of direct value, as members show higher levels of trust to parties and the system than non-members. Of indirect value, as members' are

important for the mechanisms of parties as link between state and society. Through a strong link to society, politics becomes relatable, increasing the legitimacy for state institutions (Anderson & Just, 2013: 357). Beyond that, as political partisans develop enhances citizens' political skills, they become politically aware. This leads to higher capability to voice society's needs, making the system responsive (White & Ypi, 2011: 386-387). Furthermore, members are indicated to function as signals, generating legitimacy as the increase the perception of parties and politics as relatable.

This being said, the literature indicates that members mainly affects the perceptions of politics as they function as trust generators. Therefore, as membership levels drop, so does society's perception of parties. Trust can be regarded as the most basic form of approval that goes beyond being an evaluation of incumbent government. Rather, trust is a measure of the perception of the political system as a whole. High levels of support can therefore be regarded as indications of acceptance of the state's management of society (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 945). It is already established that citizens that can relate to politics express higher levels of trust (Miller & Listhaug, 1990). In addition, political partisanship makes politics more relatable. Consequently, party members are more trusting towards parties than non-members. Party members are also more prone to higher levels of trust towards the system as a whole (Anderson & Just, 2013). Therefore, if members work as trust-generators, and as mechanism for parties as political link, a large membership base should reflect higher societal approval of parties, the party system as well as state capability (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 945). Conversely, a declining and weak membership base should be reflected in lower levels of trust, and support for parties, system and state.

In summary, the functions of partisans and members seem to matter, mainly for the parties as they seem to impact citizens' perceptions and trust levels. In reference to the established functions of members, correlation between membership size and trust becomes more evident.

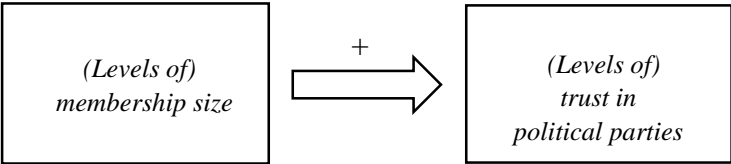
2.3 Purpose & Hypotheses

The purpose of my thesis is to explore the dramatic membership decline throughout Europe and its effect on trust levels. While the literature on the actual decline is established the effects are less recognised. Recent empirical material has emphasized the actual extent of parties' member loss. Based on these contributions, my aim is to explore the implications of decline on aggregated level. My hypothesis is based in background of research on the functions and values of members. Taking this to account, I argue that membership size should have implications for society's attitudes towards the political system. Put more precise, membership size should affect

the perceived trust in political parties. This hypothesis has recently been tested by Marc Hooghe and Anna Kern (2015), but while Hooghe and Kern article explores the linkage on individual level, I want to test the connection on country level, making a time-series cross-sectional analysis. My thesis aims to explore if larger membership size translates to higher levels of trust in parties. Hooghe & Kern establish a correlation between the variables on individual level. Exploring this in a similar way on country level, my thesis therefore positions itself parallel to the work of Hooghe and Kern while testing the correlation on a different level. In addition, the operationalization of trust differs as well as the applied control variables.

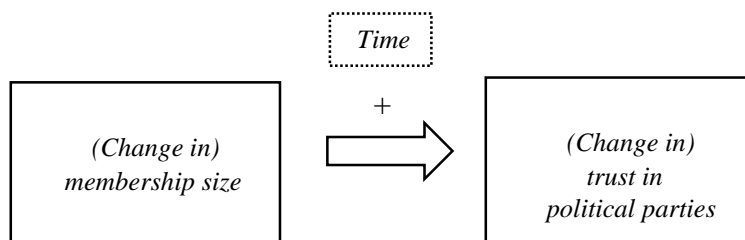
My hypothesis will be tested in two ways and are based on the question ‘To what extent does party membership size affect Europeans’ perceived trust in parties?’. First, through a basic correlation as I want to examine whether levels of party membership can predict levels of trust in political parties (illustrated as H1. in figure 1). This type of correlation scheme examines a static relationship where the membership size of a country is presumed to influence the perceived trust in parties on country level.

Figure 1, Correlation H1.



However, since levels of party members is continuing to decline we need to look beyond a static correlation model. Instead we need to take time into account, as it allows us to test the changing membership size effect on trust effect on trust. Having already established that membership rates have dropped significantly over the last decades, a relevant factor is to test how the actual decrease affect the anticipated correlation to trust. Taking differences in membership rates over time into account, we can test the effect on trust. Or put differently, by introducing time as a factor we use the reported change in membership size to predict changes in trust. Figure 2 illustrates (H2) the correlation of membership and trust when taking regard to differences over time. Exactly how difference in membership size is tested will be discussed in the method section.

Figure 2, Correlation H2.



3. METHOD

The aim is to understand the relationship between two variables using a quantitative approach. As the predicted causality between two variables is formulated in beforehand, the study is theory-testing (Esaiasson et al., 2014:36-43). As I wish to quantify the strength of the correlation, measure of association is applied (Healy, 2002: 7-8). A statistical approach will be applied; therefore, it is possible to examine a larger number of cases. The selected cases are all European countries, enabling the analysis to be relatively coherent. These two features makes the results to be generally applicable, increasing the external validity (Esaiasson et al., 2014: 58).

As I will examine if we it is possible to make predictions of trust in political parties based on countries' membership size, I will apply countries as unit of analysis. I want to test if my hypotheses are applicable on a general level and will therefore do a cross-country analysis of 22 countries.

I have chosen European countries as objects of analysis. Limiting the thesis to European countries seem appropriate as they are suitable objects in reference to membership. First, membership in political parties is most commonly a European occurrence. Additionally, in reference to earlier research, membership decline is concentrated to European countries. As I want to be able to make general assumptions on the consequences of membership decline, limiting the analysis to European countries is a fitting approach. Applying European countries therefore allows the analysis to be somewhat coherent, and in line with the phenomenon I wish to examine. Although an assortment of more than 20 countries is generally considered a small

selection¹, it is still large enough to obtain a more general picture about the validity of the chosen phenomenon.

Similar to previous research on membership decline, I will use data from European Social Survey (ESS) for my dependent and independent variables (also see Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; van Biezen et al., 2010; Hooghe & Kern, 2015). ESS offers survey data based on individuals, and covers most European countries. The minimum sample size in the surveys are 1 500 per round and country, or 800 if the country has a population smaller than 2 million (European Social Survey, 2015).

3.1 Data considerations

When applying data collected from ESS I had to make some considerations which has have implications for the conditions of analysis and results. ESS offers cumulated survey data for 32 European countries, covering six waves (or time-series) from 2002-2014. Making a large amount of data available for a large amount of countries for a long time-span, ESS is therefore an appropriate source of material. However, the data is not available for all countries and waves, creating a trade-off when choosing the time frame for the thesis. The ideal approach would be to choose all available countries while covering the largest amount of difference in time. However, data for my main variables is not available for all time-series, therefore adjustments had to be done. Prioritizing a large amount of countries, the interval for the two time-sets had to be compressed. Therefore, a selection of 22 countries were achieved over a timespan of four years, comparing data from 2004 and 2008. As the time interval is quite short, the extent of the analysis is somewhat limited. This is problematic as membership decline is an occurrence that is usually evident over longer time periods of time. However, the larger amount of countries enables a general analysis. Additionally, since the purpose is to test whether *changes* in membership leads to changes in trust, the time-span might be sufficient for the cause. However, the size of the data can therefore limit the possibility for strong result and external validity.

3.2 Approach

Having two hypotheses the approach of analysis will be conducted in two sections. Whilst H1 tests the basic correlation between membership size and trust at one point in time a simple statistical analysis will be conducted. I've chosen to test the connection based on data from ESS from 2008. Choosing the specific data for H1 as well as H2 is mainly motivated by maximizing the number of cases. As I want to enable a general analysis, a larger selection of

¹ A small number of cases is in generally considered as 20 or less (Healy, 2002: 25).

countries has been prioritized when choosing time points. Additionally, the specific time points are also chosen in reference to available data on ESS for my variables. For H2 I want to test whether change in membership size affects changes in trust in political parties. Applying time as an aspect in reference to declining membership rates, differences in membership size must be compared to differences in trust over two time points. Therefore, the difference in data on membership as well as trust will be used for the statistical analysis. Similar to H1, data from ESS will be used, the two time-series applied are for 2004 and 2008. In order for me to conduct this analysis I will need to create my own data-set, making the data unique. Therefore, I will create data for my main variables as well as for the control variables. Making the data-set quite extensive.

As I want to examine the connection between membership size and trust on country level in order to enable a cross-country analysis I will naturally create aggregated data, either through calculating country-level ratios or means. Therefore, nuances will be lost in the process. Or in other words, differences within a country regarding members within different parties or party-families will not appear. Similarly, the measured trust levels do not show differences in perceptions of different parties.

3.3 Dependent variable

My dependent variable, trust, will be operationalized by measuring trust in political parties. Data is collected from ESS and is based on survey questions. I have decided to operationalize trust as trust in political parties. Although data regarding trust is available on multiple political institutions and actors, I've decided to limit the operationalization on my dependent variable to trust in political parties. The choice to operationalize trust through political parties can mainly be understood in reference to my application of theory. In reference to theories establishing that higher trust in parties is related to higher trust in the political system at large, operationalizing trust through parties seems suitable. Additionally, by linking some of the functions of parties to their members, measuring trust in parties appears to be an appropriate approach. To operationalize my dependent variable through trust in political parties, instead of, for example, trust in a countries parliament or politicians, is most coherent to my theoretical frame.

The ESS survey question on political trust is constructed as an interval scale question (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 349-350) ranging from 0-10, which means that the space between each options is equal. The respondents are asked to respond to how much trust they have for political parties where 0 equals to no trust at all, and 10 equals complete trust. In theory, this means that the highest possible value is 10 and the lowest possible value is 0.

3.4 Independent variable

My independent variable, membership size, is operationalized by measuring the ratio of formal members in political parties. Data is collected from ESS and cross-national survey data. The question formulated by ESS is “are you a member of any political party?” (European Social Survey, 2015). It is a dichotomous question, which means that it is a question with two possible answers; yes, or no (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 380). By measuring ratio, the highest possible rate of members is therefore 100% and the lowest 0%. Operationalizing the independent variable membership size by measuring the ratio of respondent of members in political parties is valid as it corresponds very well with the theoretical definition which is exactly the same. I find this to be the most suitable option, and most accurate way of operationalizing the independent variable. Also, using this approach goes in line with recent research on membership decline. For example, Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke (2012) use the same measure when establishing the extent of decline in Europe. In that regard, my measure of membership follows previous research.

3.5 Control variables

In order to account for alternative explanations, I include control variables. Based on previous research, I’ve chosen three control variables which may possibly affect the correlation between membership and trust.

Newness of democracy

Whether a country is a well-established democracy or has a history of communist rule is suggested to influence the membership ratio. When comparing the ratio of post-communist polities with well-established democracies a significant different of membership ratio is established by van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke (2012: 29). The newly democratized countries, which is defined as polities democratized after 1989 (van Biezen et al., 2012: 29), overall shows systematically lower membership rates as almost all post-communist countries fall under the overall mean. Altogether, it is presumed that the newer the democracy -the smaller the overall membership ratio of a country. Although the effect is suggested to abate a few years after democratization, it can still be regarded as a relevant factor (van Biezen et al., 2012: 31). In reference to this, newer democracies are expected to measure lower membership rates as well as trust levels. Newer democracies are therefore expected to show weaker correlation than older ones. Due to the lack of democratic history and institutions and organisations, the linkage

between declining membership and trust in parties are expected to be weaker. The correlation is however expected to be positive, although not as strong. These countries, although democratised much later, also have democratic institutions and organisations as well as members of political parties, though the democratic history is not as well-established.

Kern and Hooghe also take account to the democratic history of the countries investigated. Referencing the fact that many Eastern and Central European countries still show comparatively low levels of political trust, more than 20 years after being democratized (Kern & Kern, 2015: 949). When testing if declining membership affects trust they apply legacy of authoritarian rule as a control-variable on country level. The result shows a significant negative effect on political trust, thereby establishing democratic history as an indicator relevant to political trust (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 949).

In reference to earlier research, applying democratic history as a variable seems appropriate as it appears to affect both of my main variables, membership size and political trust. Democratic history is operationalized as newness of democracy. To operationalize the variable, I've used data on electoral democracies 1989-1990 from Freedom House (Freedom House, 2016). Countries that were democratized after 1990 will be coded as 1 in the data, and countries democratized before 1990 will be coded as 0.

Economic development

Economic development is often taken in regard when exploring social phenomenon's' and a common control variable when conducting comparative research involving many countries. As a concept, economic development can be applied in multiple ways, and as it is a wide notion it holds strong explanatory force. As an indicator, economic development can be operationalized to measure amongst others, a country's unemployment, income or GDP rate. In the context of trust, economic development appears to be a relevant factor. Intuitively, high measures of economic development should be associated with high levels of trust. However, research suggests contradictory theories. Some reinforce the idea of wealth and development through i.e. industrialization or modernization as drivers of trust in society (see for example Knack & Keefer, 1997). Others suggest that the process of development will lead to decreased trust. As countries develops and the standard of living increases, the trust is believed to paradoxically decrease. Dalton (2005) explains this partly as a results of increased educational levels, raising the awareness and demands of citizens. As a result, the development of the country will move faster than the performance of government. Long term, this will decrease the ability to align

with parties, reflected in trust levels as well as the membership size of parties. However, these manifestations are suggested to be a reflection of declining support in parties rather than the actual performance of incumbent government (OECD, 2013: 21). Additionally, it is reported that a negative correlation between education and trust is conditional and limited to countries accompanied with high levels of corruption. Conversely, countries with low levels of corruption, indicates positive correlation as education boosts trust levels (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012: 747-748).

Research on the correlation between development and wealth point in different directions. In other words, measuring trust is evidently complex and highly contextual. However, economy is suggested to be one of four major indicators of trust. Alongside cultural and institutional settings, and the overall performance of institutions, the economic preconditions are established drivers of trust (OECD, 2013: 28-29). Research suggests that societies with high rates of wealth indicators (for example GDP) show higher levels of trust (Delhey & Newton, 2005: 322-323). Overall, countries demonstrating high economic characteristics are also associated with higher levels of trust. Additionally, economically strong societies are accompanied with other trust generating factors, as absence of corruption, income equality and societal well-being (Delhey & Newton, 2005: 323).

When applying economic development, I will follow research that proposes a positive correlation between economic strength and trust. The economic factor will be operationalized through GDP growth, and is, as emphasised above, anticipated to correlate to trust in a positive way.

Party Closeness

Last, in reference to the research of Hooghe and Kern (2015) party closeness will also be applied as control variable. Having the same value as party membership, party closeness functions as a societal link to parties. Similar to membership, party closeness functions as a political compass, guiding citizens through the political decision-making process (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 952). The main difference is self-evident; as card-carrying members show a more absolute measure of closeness to a particular party. While party closeness is a looser use of roughly the same concept it holds wider range, presumably, a higher proportion feels close to a political party. These differences are confirmed when comparing the average ratio, using my compiled data. The differences are quite illustrative. While the average ratio of members in political parties in

2008 are 4.26 compared to people feeling close to particular amounts to an average of 50.04 parties at the same time.

Hooghe and Kern (2015) applies membership as well as party closeness as independent variables when testing the correlation to trust in parties. The results indicate that membership as well as closeness has a positive effect on trust (Hooghe & Kern, 2015: 951- 952). In reference to this, when testing the cross-country correlation between membership and trust, party closeness will be applied as control variable. This to make sure there is not a spurious correlation caused by party closeness.

Party closeness will be operationalized through survey data from ESS and the question “do you feel closer to a particular party than all other parties?” (European Social Survey, 2015). The question is dichotomous, that is, it is possible to answer yes or no. In that sense, my operationalization of party closeness differs from Hooghe and Kerns’ as they measure the degree of party closeness as an interval question ranging from 1-4. As my operationalization of closeness only gives two possible alternatives, the highest theoretical ratio party closeness is 100 %, and the lowest 0 %. As a last note, the variables’ associations are summarised in in a correlation matrix in the appendix.

3.6 Application of design

The statistical analysis will be conducted through multiple regression, as it enables us to test the extent of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Sundell, 2009). Applying multiple regression, the correlation is exposed to additional force as control variables can be included in the analysis. This means that I can test if the relationship can be explained through additional or alternative variables. Therefore, some of the many alternative explanations can be accounted for. As I can include multiple variables to the main relationship the analysis becomes more powerful than a simple measure of correlation (Esaiasson et al., 2014: 381-382). Before introducing additional effects on the relationship, I perform a bivariate regression. After that, the control variables will be applied, making it possible to isolate the different variables specific effect on the dependent variable (Healy, 2002: 441).

4. RESULTS

The results will be divided into three parts. The first, and shortest section is a description of the complete variable set applied in the analysis. The purpose of this section is to introduce the dataset. Secondly the relationship between membership size and trust will be tested in a static

framework (H1). For this analysis data from 2008 will be applied, and the relationship is examined through a correlation as well as a multiple regression. In addition, histograms over the main variables, and scatterplot illustrating the correlation will be applied as illustrative aids. For the third part, the relationship between membership size and trust will be examined through a dynamic model (H2). As the purpose is to measure differences in time, data from 2008 as well as 2004 is used. Similar to the procedure of H1, the connection and variable effects will be tested through correlations and multiple regression. A scatterplot over the correlation is included as well.

4.1 Descriptive variable data

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Min.	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
Membership size 04	22	0.90	8.50	4.53	2.36
Membership size 08	22	0.50	9.00	4.26	2.31
Membership size diff.	22	-3.00	3.10	-.26	1.45
Trust in parties 04	22	1.89	5.65	3.61	0.95
Trust in parties 08	22	1.66	5.66	3.54	1.08
Trust in parties diff.	22	-1.95	.99	-.07	.60
Democratic history	22	0	1	0.23	0.42
GDP 04	22	1.18	12.10	4.37	2.47
GDP 08	22	-5.33	5.45	0.82	2.22
GDP diff.	22	-11.81	.22	-3.55	3.26
Party closeness 04	22	22.10	71.10	50.17	11.35
Party closeness 08	22	23.20	75.40	50.04	11.10
Party closeness diff.	22	-14	14	-1.4	6.82

Comment: Data collected from European Social Survey, Freedom House & World Bank.

Variable name in data: Membership size (mb), trust in parties (tptr), newness of democracy (newdem), GDP (GDP), party closeness (prtcl).

As presented by table 1, the variables are measured in three ways. The data for 2008 will be used when testing the basic correlation; H1. The difference in data, calculated by subtracting the 2008 data from the 2004 data, will be applied when testing the dynamic model; H2.

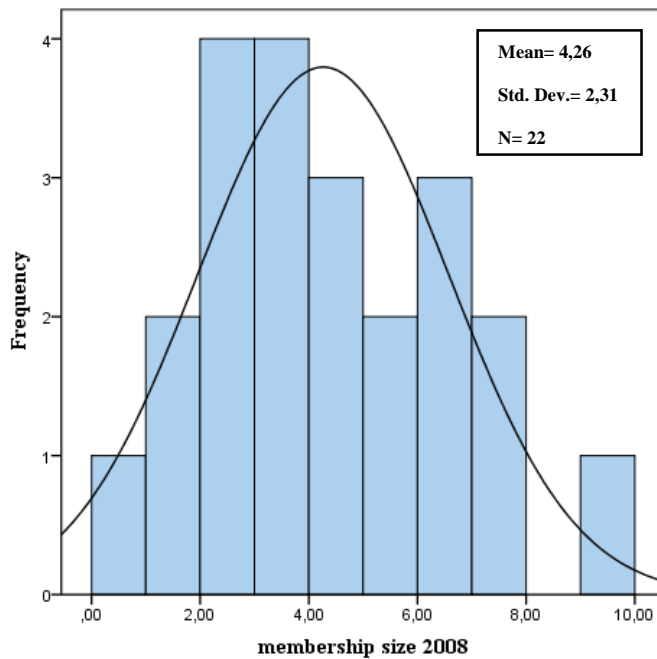
In addition to serving as an overview of the variables, the descriptive data illustrates two interesting aspects. First, the means are valuable pointers in many regards. Confirming previous research, the membership size is remarkably low, with a reported mean of 4.26 for 22 the countries in 2008. The reported GDP is also noteworthy, and significantly lower than the reported mean from 2004 (probably as a result of the ongoing economic crisis). Additionally, the mean for newness is also low. As new democracies are coded as 1, and old as 0, I can therefore establish that a large share of countries can be considered old democracies. Finally, by comparing the means of 2004 to those of 2008, a negative trend can be detected for all comparable variables (Sundell, 2010: a).

4.2 Results H1

Distribution

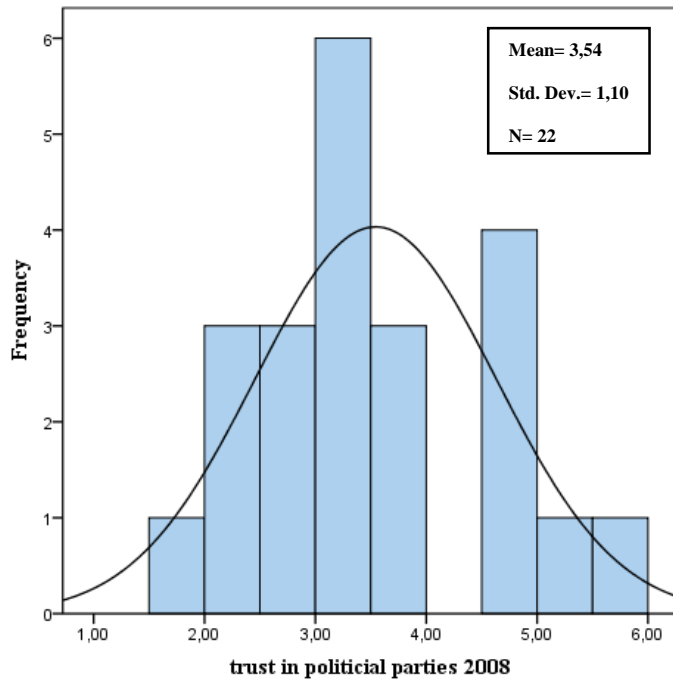
As mentioned above, the mean for membership size is quite low, which is also illustrated in the histogram in figure 3.1. Additionally, the histogram shows us the distribution of membership size across a number of countries. Also noticeable is that the distribution follows roughly the normal curve in reference to the mean and the standard deviation. That is, that the countries are distributed 68, 95 and 99 per cent within the normal curve distribution (Healy, 2002: 121-125). This is important, as it tells us that the applied cases are approximately normally distributed (Healy, 2002: 130). Additionally, as the standard deviation is quite close to the mean value the normal distribution curve is quite different than the one illustrating trust (figure 3.2)

Figure 3.1 Histogram membership size 2008



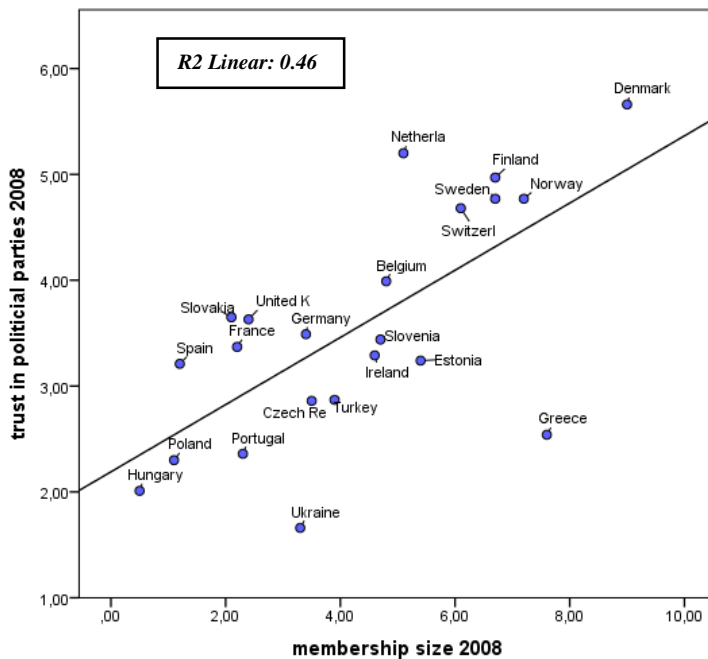
As for the distribution of trust (see figure 3.2), that too can be fitted within the theoretical areas for the normal curve, although less well than for membership size. As the total number of cases need to be fitted within the curve tested at 68, 95 and 99 per cent, the distribution can be concluded to fit within a normal distribution. However, I can also see that a large share of the 22 countries moves within the lower range of trust, considering that the theoretical scale differs from 0-10. In that regard, having 13 of the total 22 countries at the lower end of the scale is noteworthy. Additionally, in reference to the theoretical maximal value, the mean for the 22 countries is relatively low.

Figure 3.2. Histogram trust in political parties 2008



Correlation

Figure 4. Scatterplot over the correlation between membership size and trust in political parties 2008.



Through the scatterplot above (figure 4), we learn three things. First, as the curve moves up, that the correlation between membership size and trust is positive. That is, high rates on the y-axis is associated with high rates on the x-axis. Or differently, the more members, the higher levels of trust. Conversely, the higher the levels of trust, the more members. Second, from the

R² value we now know that 46% of the variation in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variable (Sundell, 2010). As the R² value can go from 0-1, the relationship between membership size and trust can be considered relatively high, explaining almost half of the variation. This is also illustrated through the scatterplot, as many of the countries are located quite near the R²-line. Last, through the scatterplot the outliers become visible. Here, Ukraine and Greece are moving further from the curve than average. Possibly far enough to make a difference for the results. These countries will not be excluded from the analysis the aim is to test the validity of a generally applicable hypotheses. However, the outliers are worth taking into account when viewing the results. A scatterplot where the outliers are excluded can be found in the appendix, including R² value.

Regression

In order to take account for the effect of all variables on the dependent variable I need to conduct an analysis through regression. This allows us to take account for the control variables simultaneously to testing the effect of the independent variable on the dependent.

Table 2. Multiple regression model. Dependent variable: Trust in political parties 2008. Unstandardized b-coefficients, standard error in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Membership size 2008	0.32*** (0.08)		0.34*** (0.08)	0.19 (0.11)
Newness of democracy (new)		-0.72 (0.57)	-0.66 (0.41)	-0.39 (0.42)
GDP 2008		-0.02 (0.11)	0.11 (0.09)	0.10 (0.08)
Party closeness 2008				0.04 (0.02)
Intercept	2.19*** (0.38)	3.72*** (0.27)	2.15*** (0.42)	0.58 (0.95)
N	22	22	22	22
R2	0.46	0.09	0.54	0.62

*Comment: ***= p<0,001 **= p<0,01 *= p<0,05*

Data collected from European Social Survey, Freedom House & World Bank.

Variable name in data: Membership size (mb), trust in parties (tptr), newness of democracy (newdem), GDP (GDP), party closeness (prtcl).

From table 2 the following information is collected. In model 1 we see the bivariate effect of membership size on trust. The effect is significant at the 99% level, and the effect of the independent variable is positive on the dependent variable. Further, through the value of the coefficient we see that an increase of one in membership size, has a positive effect (of 0.32) on trust in political parties. In model 2, membership size is removed, and variables newness of democracy and GDP is applied. The two variables respond in a negative way to trust. Further, there is no significance for the variables separately. In model 3 membership size is re-applied in combination with the two control variables. As we can see, the effect of membership size actually increases marginally when controlling for GDP and newness of democracy, whilst remaining at the 99% significance level. As membership size increases by one unit, taking GDP and newness of democracy into account, has a slightly increased effect (of 0.34). However, when applying the third control variable, party closeness, in model 3 we see drastic change. First, the effect of membership size decreases dramatically from 0,34 to 0,19. Additionally, as the significance disappears, we cannot be sure that the effect did not occur by chance alone. By looking at the R^2 measures, the influence of the control variables on the correlation for the main variables becomes clear. When only applying newness of democracy and GDP, the two variables together explain 9% of the correlation to trust. By comparing the R^2 value of model 3 I can also account for the added value of membership size, measuring 45 percentage points higher than in model 2, which is a large improvement.

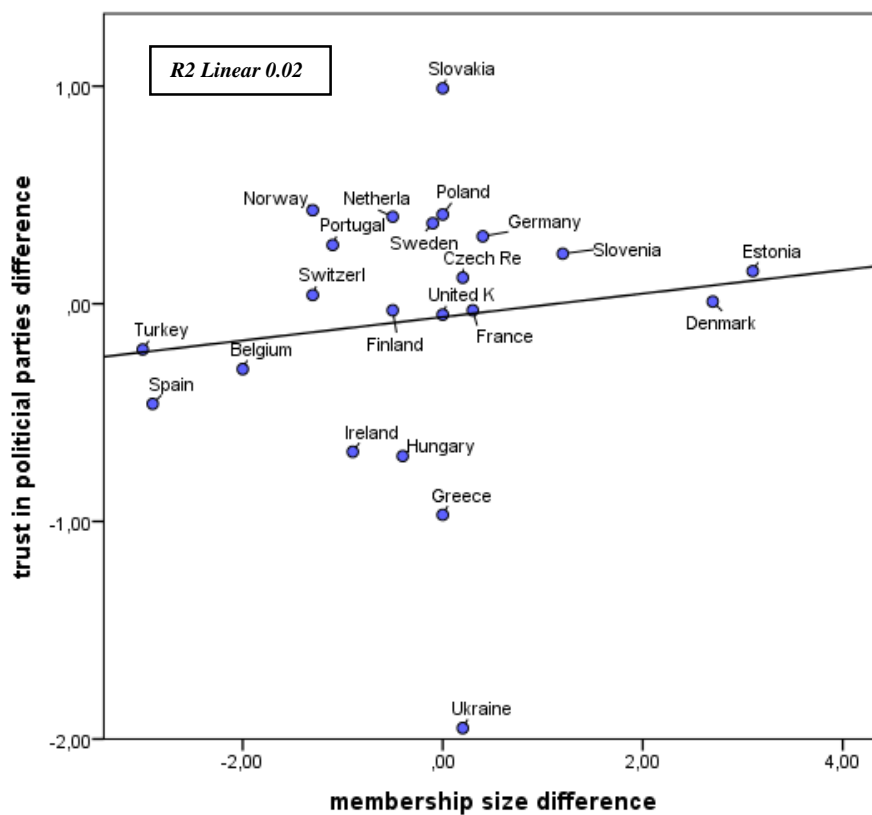
In conclusion, when testing my H1, whether predictions on the trust levels of political parties through the levels of membership size, using data from 2008 I get the following results; Measuring 22 countries I can see a correlation between membership size and trust, established through a relatively high, and positive R^2 value. Further, I get a significant result for the effect of membership size on trust through a bivariate regression. I also get a significant marginally increased effect when introducing two of three control variables. However, when introducing the control variable party closeness, the effect largely decreases. As the significance is lost as well, this suggests that the effects on trust rather can be understood through party closeness than membership size. In addition, through regression I can isolate the correlation value of membership size to trust when taking control variables into account. When comparing the added value of the difference variables, it becomes clear that membership size has the largest effect on trust. The largest contribution of explained variance when looking at the R^2 value is generated through membership size.

4.3 Result H2

Correlation

It is time to test the dynamic model (H2), where I want to see if change in membership size can predict change in trust for political parties. As mentioned earlier, over-time differences will be calculated in order to take time into account. This is done by subtracting the countries' values in 2008 from those in 2004. First the correlation will be examined, as illustrated by figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Scatterplot of the correlation between membership size difference and trust in political parties' difference.



From figure 5 I come to the following conclusions. First, although the correlation is positive, illustrated by the upward direction of the line, it is marginal. Although not flat, the R^2 value tells us exactly how much of the variance can be explained by the independent variable. The R^2 value is 0,02 therefore only explaining 2% of the variance. As the R^2 value can differ from 0-1, our R^2 value of 0,02 must be considered to be low. Additionally, as the R^2 is low the countries are positioned further away from the line. A few more outliers are detected than when testing H1. As when testing H1, Ukraine and Greece are clear outliers, with a negative trust value. It

also becomes clear that trust has declined, more than average, in Ireland and Hungary. Slovakia is also an outlier, although on the other side of the R² line displaying a positive trust rate.

Regression

Table 3. Multiple regression model. Dependent variable: Differences in trust in political parties. Unstandardized b-coefficients, standard error in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Membership size diff.	0.05 (0.09)		0.09 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.07)
Newness of democracy (new)		0.18 (0.27)	0.04 (0.30)	0.03 (0.19)
GDP diff.		0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.07** (0.02)
Party closeness diff.				0,07*** (0,01)
Intercept	-0.06 (0.13)	0.28 (0.17)	0.35 (0.18)	0.14 (0.12)
N	22	22	22	22
R2	0.02	0.33	0.37	0.76

*Comment: ***= $p < 0.001$ **= $p < 0.01$ *= $p < 0.05$*

Data collected from European Social Survey, Freedom House & World Bank.

Variable name in data: Membership size (mb), trust in parties (tptr), newness of democracy (newdem), GDP (GDP), party closeness (prtcl).

Examining the regression table, we can make the following observations. First, when testing the bivariate relationship membership size on trust in model 1, we get a small but not significant effect. In model 2, membership size is removed and two of the control variables are applied. For both variables, the effect is positive. Additionally, GDP has a significant effect on trust. In model 3 membership size is re-applied, the result is a marginally increased effect in combination with the two control variables, however not statistically significant. Moreover, applying party closeness in model 4, dramatically alters the effect of membership as it becomes negative. From model 4 we can also see that party closeness has significant effect on trust at the 99% level. Finally, looking at the R² value we get the following information. First, the R² value for membership size and trust in model 1 is positive, although quite small, quite small,

assumably a result of the short interval applied. However, when looking at model 2 and 3, the R^2 value increases quite dramatically. This tells us that the control variables GDP and newness of democracy together increases the explained variance of difference in trust noteworthy (+0.31). Re-applying membership size in model 3 only marginally increases the explained variance of trust (+0.04). Most visibly however, is the effect of party closeness to the dependent variable. Here, we can see a radical difference of the R^2 value (+0.39).

In conclusion, whether changes in membership size can predict changes in trust in political parties, the results suggest that there is no direct relationship between the variables. When testing the correlation, the relationship is weak and not significant. In addition, the bivariate regression shows a small effect without significance. The multiple regression suggests a weakened membership size effect when control variables are taken into account. Additionally, when applying all variables, the effect turns negative. Instead, party closeness has a significant effect on trust when applied when all variables are taken into account. The only result that points to a relationship between changes in membership and trust is the added value of membership measured through comparing the R^2 values. Although small, indicating an effect of membership size on trust.

4.4 Summary

In summary, when testing H1 and H2 we reach the following results. First, when testing the static relationship (H1) between membership size and trust there seems to be a connection. When testing the correlation, we get a high R^2 value, revealing that almost half of the variation can be explained through membership size. Additionally, through the bivariate regression, a statistically significant relationship can be established. Although statistical significance is lost when applying party closeness, it remains when only testing for GDP and newness of democracy. Last, through multivariate regression we can see that although the applied control variables influence the effect on the dependent variable, the independent variable shows the largest increased effect. Additionally, the added R^2 value of membership is relatively high. Testing the dynamic model (H2) the results are quite different. Here, the correlation is much weaker, illustrated by the low R^2 value. The bivariate regression does not generate any statistical significance for the relationship, and the b-coefficient is relatively low (though positive). As membership size differences increases by one unit, the effect on trust is small, although visible. Applying control variables not only weakens the effect but also turns it negative. Last, when examining the R^2 values, the control variables seem to have a larger effect on difference in trust than difference in membership size.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on previous research establishing the extent of membership decline, the aim of this thesis has been to examine the effects of decline. Using theories on political de-alignment of citizens, and the value of political participation, the outset has been that when the membership size falls, so will also trust in parties. This has been applied through two hypotheses. First, can predictions be made of a country's levels of trust based on the level of the membership size? The results suggest not only that there is a connection, but also that it is quite strong. According to cross-sectional results, membership sizes have a positive association to trust, and knowledge about a country's membership size improves the prediction of trust levels. Whilst these findings are somewhat limited to the circumstances of a static time-frame, the results can serve as basis for further research on the subject. Additionally, as the aim has been to maximize the number of applied cases, the results can be generalized to other European countries. Second, can we make predictions of changes in trust in a country based on changes in the membership size? The results are largely not in line with these predictions. However, based on the strong results of the static model, applying a longer time frame would perhaps change this.

In order to be able to evaluate these results however, we need to look beyond the data. As for all results, there are limitations that need to be addressed. First, the results reflect the method. And as a cross-country analysis is applied, nuances within countries are somewhat lost in translation. Second, the chosen time-frame has implications for the results. For example, the circumstances of the ongoing economic crisis in 2008 is possibly reflected in the measured trust levels. To detect and go beyond these kind of circumstances, a comparative study over a longer time-frame is required. Additionally, as research has established that membership decline is mainly visible over a period of decades, a longitudinal analysis applied over a longer period of time would be ideal.

Moreover, although the aim has been to maximize the number of cases while sustaining the ability to generalize, the amount of applied cases is relatively low. Although this is in reference to available data, it would be ideal to apply more cases. While it is appropriate to limit the research to European countries (essentially because membership decline is a European phenomenon), widening the research to all European countries would be ideal.

Furthermore, the choice of control variables also has ramifications for the interpretation of the results. Naturally, including more or other control variables could alter the results. Although the element of uncertainty and error is always present, the aim is naturally to limit these effects. The control variables applied for this thesis, where chosen in reference to previous research. Although other or more variables could alter the results, due to the limitations of this thesis, the chosen variables seem appropriate.

Last, it is appropriate to mention the causality of the applied model. Although the outset has been that membership decline affects trust, it is certainly possible that there is a reversed causality between the variables. That is, that decline in trust affects membership size, and that decreased trust in political parties leads to a decline in members. Undisputedly a possible alternative worth considering. The cause and effect of the variables can hypothetically go both ways. It is also possible that the process is equally reinforced by each other. For example, a decline of members can lead to lower trust levels, reinforcing the decline of members. However, the applied direction of causality of this thesis finds support in previous research. Kern and Hooghe (2015), illustrates the expected causality well. In reference to the fact that citizens who feel close to a party also express higher levels of trust, they point out that a reversed connection is less self-evident: *“It is difficult to imagine, however, that those who would be trusting toward the system therefore would be more incline to state that they feel close to one specific party. If one is satisfied with the functioning of the political system as a whole, there is no apparent reason to develop a close relationship with one specific party within that system.”* (Kern & Hooghe, 2015: 952).

In summary, although the results are limited by the circumstances listed above, there are indicators suggesting a correlation between membership size and trust in amongst others, parties. As members seem to matter, further research regarding the implications of decline is ideal. Optimal would be to examine the relationship on country level in European countries with a long time-frame applied. To evaluate the long term consequences of decline on society in reference on trust would be ideal.

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7. APPENDIX

Table 1. Country overview.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
<i>Austria</i>	<i>(AT)</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	<i>(BE)</i>
<i>Bulgaria</i>	<i>(BG)</i>
<i>Croatia</i>	<i>(CH)</i>
<i>Cyprus</i>	<i>(CY)</i>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	<i>(CZ)</i>
<i>Denmark</i>	<i>(DK)</i>
<i>Estonia</i>	<i>(EE)</i>
<i>Finland</i>	<i>(FI)</i>
<i>France</i>	<i>(FR)</i>
<i>Germany</i>	<i>(DE)</i>
<i>Greece</i>	<i>(GR)</i>
<i>Hungary</i>	<i>(HU)</i>
<i>Iceland</i>	<i>(IS)</i>
<i>Ireland</i>	<i>(IE)</i>
<i>Israel</i>	<i>(IL)</i>
<i>Italy</i>	<i>(IT)</i>
<i>Lithuania</i>	<i>(LT)</i>
<i>Luxembourg</i>	<i>(LU)</i>
<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>(NL)</i>
<i>Norway</i>	<i>(NO)</i>
<i>Poland</i>	<i>(PL)</i>
<i>Portugal</i>	<i>(PT)</i>
<i>Russian Federation</i>	<i>(RU)</i>
<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>(SK)</i>
<i>Slovenia</i>	<i>(SI)</i>
<i>Spain</i>	<i>(ES)</i>
<i>Sweden</i>	<i>(SE)</i>
<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>(CH)</i>
<i>Turkey</i>	<i>(TR)</i>
<i>Ukraine</i>	<i>(UA)</i>
<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>(GB)</i>

Table 2. Correlation matrix -2008

	Membership size 08	Trust in parties 08	Newness of democracy	GDP 08	Party closeness 08
Membership size 08	1				
Trust in parties 08	0.67**	1			
Newness of democracy	-0.11	-0.29	1		
GDP 08	-0.36	-0.10	0.21	1	
Party closeness 08	0.75***	0.73***	-0.31	-0.28	1

*Comment: ***= $p < 0.001$ **= $p < 0.01$ *= $p < 0.05$*

Data collected from European Social Survey, Freedom House & World Bank.

Variable name in data: Membership size (mb), trust in parties (tptr), newness of democracy (newdem), GDP (GDP), party closeness (prtcl).

Table 3. Correlation matrix -data difference

	Membership size diff.	Trust in parties diff.	Newness of democracy	GDP diff.	Party closeness diff.
Membership size diff.	1				
Trust in parties diff.	0.13	1			
Newness of democracy	0.46*	-0.02	1		
GDP diff.	-0.17	0.56**	-0.24	1	
Party closeness diff.	0.60**	0.71**	0.24	0.17	1

*Comment: ***= $p < 0.001$ **= $p < 0.01$ *= $p < 0.05$*

Data collected from European Social Survey, Freedom House & World Bank.

Variable name in data: Membership size (mb), trust in parties (tptr), newness of democracy (newdem), GDP (GDP), party closeness (prtcl).

Figure 1. Scatterplot, correlation between membership size and trust in political parties 2008, Ukraine and Greece excluded.

