Impact and development of change uk

Introduction

Change UK: who they are

Change UK is a UK, centrist, pro-EU political party founded in March 2019. The party was formed with the defection of seven MPs who left the Labour party in response to the Labour party's push to the far-left, poor handling of allegations of anti-semitism, and the facilitation of Brexit. The party declares that their aim is to pursue evidence-based policies, rather than ideological policies, done through healthy debate and tolerance towards different opinions, in order to bridge between social and political divides in order to build a consensus to wrestle Britain's problems. Change UK ran in the 2019 European elections, and despite polling at 20%, won zero seats, gaining only 3% of the overall vote. They currently have 5 sitting MPs after 6 party members defecting in June 2019 and standing as independents and with Chuka Umunna joining the Liberal Democrats (BBC, 2019). Their future goals are to run in the next UK General Election and to win X seats (or at least regain their current MPs seats).

The professionalism of politics

In the last fifty years, Marien and Quintelier (2011) have shown that membership of political parties has dramatically reduced in all European countries, both in the percentage of the electorate and in absolute terms. The traditional organisational structure of modern political parties is changing, with party politics becoming less vocational and more professional. Parties are no longer a link between citizens and the state (Katz and Mair, 1995). Rather than representing a specific social group or class,

political parties started to broaden their appeal to the electorate at large through simple electoral persuasion, with political parties shifting from a ' bottom-up' to a ' top-down' party structure and the political elite playing a more incremental role in the intra-party decisions, such as party policies and party organisation. Parties have shifted from representing the interests of citizens to the state, to representing the interests of the state to its citizens (Mair, 2009: 6). As a consequence, party politics has become less about the mobilisation of social groups and more about a race for seats between elite professionalised parties, with voters being more as free-agents uncommitted to a specific party or ideology(van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014). There is an apparent ' democratic deficit' in the running of political parties (Hopkin, 1999).

The party's problem

Given this shift to a more professional politics, Change UK have to decide whether it is worth their time and effort to attract party members in order to achieve their objective of winning electoral seats and establishing itself as a legitimate alternative party to the already established elite parties.

To see change you have to be different: Change UK moving away from professionalism

Contents of this section:

- Given Change UK's principles they should build a membership base in order to secure a democratic party for the people and to maintain democratic legitimacy.

- To produce a long-standing party, and to avoid the problems of the Social Democratic Party in the 1980s, Change UK need a core membership base in order for those members to climb the party's leadership ladder, establish party infrastructure and cohesion in order to win seats in the next general election.

- One potential problem of a democratic party base is that a membership base with a lot of intra-party power can split a party and overturn it from the inside out.

Moving away from professionalism and towards democracy

Change UK state that they aim ' to recognise the value of healthy debate, show tolerance towards different opinions and seek to reach across outdated divides and build consensus to tackle Britain's problems' and they declare that British politics must devolve power to the most appropriate level by involving local communities more, with more power and representation given to local government in order to act in the community's best interests (Change UK, 2019). Rather than being ' locked in the old party-political interests' Change UK want to move towards a parliamentary democracy that is held more accountable by their whole electorate in order to represent the views of the British people (ibid.). As such, the party must be inherently democratic in its party structure (Kittilson and Scarrow, 2003).

It is clear that the party wants to move away from the professionalism of politics, moving towards a more democratic politics, with political parties being a point of contact between citizens and government and allowing citizens to be able to influence politics through respectful public spheres of debate and dialogue. Without a membership base Change UK would be no

different to the current established elite parties that they are declaring to be different from. If Change UK want a higher standard of deliberative democracy and to move away from the out-of-touch elite political parties then they must create a membership base that can influence party politics, as a lack of a membership base would call into question the democratic legitimacy of Change UK as a democratic party (Gibson et al., 2017). Therefore, in order for Change UK to be understood as a legitimate democratic political party, that will contest for electoral seats, they must build a membership base that has intra-party democratic power.

Problems with a membership base: fear of factions

One potential problem with a membership base with a lot of intra-party democratic power is that the membership can more easily split the party and overturn the party from the inside. As was seen in June 2019, with six MPs – including the interim leader Heidi Allen – quitting, Change UK have a particular vulnerability to a party split in the higher ranks of party leadership, which would hope to be avoided on the grass-roots level (BBC, 2019). As Bennie (2013) acknowledges, being a formal member gives you the rights and ability to dictate party policies. By limiting the access to membership, or by limiting members' access to intra-party power, Change UK can potentially prevent further internal factions, which can cause the party to permanently disband (Johansson, 2014). The party is internally susceptible to a party split to form due to its centrist nature. Change UK is a party made up of Labour and Conservative party defectors. If all members have internal power then the more right-leaning members will want to push the party further to the right, whilst the more left-leaning members will want to pull the party to the

left. This too-ing and fro-ing could cause significant structural and policy issues for the longevity of the party's survival. There must be measures taken in order to prevent the party from completely disbanding due to factions in policy preference.

Avoiding the problems of the SDP: Creating a long-standing party

Change UK should wish to avoid the fate of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which has enormous similarities with Change UK. The SDP was a centrist party formed in 1981, established by the ' gang of four' – four senior Labour party MPs, dissatisfied with how far to the left Labour had shifted and offered themselves as a middle position to the extremes of the Labour Party and Thatcherism promising to ' break the political mould'. In 1987, after a disappointing UK general election, the party fizzled out and merged with a more established small party, the Liberal party forming the Liberal Democrats (Adonis, 2018). With the party splitting in June 2019 and Chukka Umuna joining the Liberal Democrats soon after his defection, Change UK need to ensure that they learn from the SDP's mistakes in order to create an independent long-standing party and avoid a merger with the Liberal Democrats.

There are two important factors that led to the SDP's failure that Change UK can learn from (Crewe and King, 1995):

1. The SDP only had twenty-nine MPs turn up for their first general election, which is problematic for a new party. Under First Past the Post, a new party needs more than twenty-nine candidates up for election to make an immediate impact.

2. They failed to build the infrastructure that demonstrated to people on the local level of the competence of the party, which led to a failure of winning elections.

By having a strong core membership base Change UK can attempt to rectify these problems. Firstly, a cohesive party structure built from the ' bottom-up' will provide the party with a pool of members who can climb the leadership ladder and run as candidates in local, regional and national elections, allowing for more immediate electoral success in the next round of elections, as well as solidifying a supply chain of candidates, party officials and leaders for the long-run of the party (Bennie, 2013). Secondly, by securing a strong organisational capacity through a strong membership base, the party will therefore secure a strong electoral campaign (Ponce & Scarrow, 2016). In turn, building a party infrastructure from the grass-roots and creating party organisation attracts people who want to be in a political organisation (Gallagher et al., 2011).

One potential option to prevent

The Labour party currently offers party membership to serving and former members of the armed forces for £1. 00 per year, and following the 2010 general election and coalition between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, the Greens literally offered free membership to disgruntled Lib Dems

Do members necessarily translate into winning seats?

Fisher et al. (2006a) argue that simply having a large number of members is no guarantee of an effective campaign (cf. Whiteley & Seyd 2003), they

concede, nonetheless, that a campaign involving relatively few members is likely to be less successful than one that can call upon a large volunteer force

traditional techniques seemingly deliver more electoral benefits, but parties are increasingly unable to mount such campaigns using party members alone.

Supporters do not want to be members mainly because they do not want to be bombarded by election mailing lists ' begging' for money

Members online and ' on the ground': A bilateral approach to developing membership:

Contents of this section:

- The digital revolution – the enhancement of the use of online platforms, such as social media – has become an imperative ne pathway for political activity.
- The digital revolution has changed how party members are associated with a political party compared to traditional party memberships creating ' multi-speed party memberships.'
- The party should take a bilateral approach to developing membership – they must have both online and on the ground members; there are issues with a solely online membership and ' boots on the ground' can supplement for what digital members cannot achieve.

The digital revolution has revolutionised politics

Given the decline in party membership, over the past two decades parties have responded to this issue by redesigning party organisational structures to further extend their membership base, with most new initiatives dependent on the digital revolution – the internet, email and social media (Gibson et al., 2017). Online platforms, specifically social media, have become a vital new avenue for political activity for various reasons:

- The majority of British people believe that social media improves the democratic process by encouraging more open discussion and a greater access to debate, which makes them feel more understanding of political issues, more engaged in political debate and therefore more likely to vote (Miller, 2016).

- Those who used social media for political activity were also more likely to act on their political convictions as a direct result and with 39% of people more likely to vote (ibid.).

- Social media opens up political debate and allows new forms of contact between people and their elected representatives, building bridges between people and political institutions (ibid.)

- Online platforms have provided new way of accessing politics for newcomer parties that previously had not been able to reach a broad public. For example, the Five Star Movement in Italy, in just one year, went from polling under 5% to winning 25% of the national vote. This electoral success was hugely due to Five Star's online organisation through online organisation. Five Star showed that an internet enabled grassroots movement is possible (Bartlett and Grabbe, 2015).

- Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have allowed people to speak their mind far more freely about political issues and no matter where in the world you are social media enables political engagement with others of the same political persuasion (ibid.).

The digital revolution has changed traditional party membership roles

' Members are not the only fruit' of party membership (Fisher et al., 2013). In response to the challenge of the decline of party membership, parties have produced new supporter networks that lower the barrier to membership, with online platforms being useful tools to gain volunteers, specifically during election periods (Gibson et al., 2017). As a result, there has been an emergence in of ' multi-speed membership parties' which has changed the way people are associated with a political party compared to traditional party memberships (Scarrow, 2015). Scarrow (2015) gives six different classifications of party affiliates: followers and friends on social media, full members, ' light' members, online members, financial donors, and party sympathisers (ibid.).

The party supporter appears to be challenging the role of the party member. It can be advantageous for the party to find grassroot support beyond party membership, as active supporters are more demographically similar to the average voter than a party member. As a result, Change UK might be able to connect better to their broader constituents (Ponce and Scarrow, 2013: 15). Moreover, party supporters work very hard during election campaigns. In most instances supporters have not become formal members because they do not want to be bombarded by election mailing lists ' begging' for money (Fischer et al., 2013).

One problem with having lots of affiliated party supporters, rather than full members, it calls into question the level of intra-party democracy of the party. Party supporters possess few (if any) party membership rights therefore they cannot influence party policy nor vote on party leadership (Bennie, 2013). To address this issue, Change UK can allow party supporters and affiliated members to participate in policy forums and also take part in leadership elections. A more extreme options is that the party can allow affiliated supporters to enjoy almost all the rights as full members except for being representatives of the party and voting at the party conference (Gauja, 2015: 235). However, one downside of this is that it ' reduces the exclusivity of membership', with supporters gaining traditional membership benefits without the associate costs and calls into question why supporters would transition from a party supporter to a formal member (Bennie, 2013).

Change UK joining the digital revolution

Given Change UK's objective to show tolerance towards different opinions and seek to reach across outdated divides and build consensus to tackle Britain's problems, this discourse can be far easier facilitated through online platform. This paper advises that Change UK utilise online platforms in order to develop and sustain a membership base:

- Create an accessible and informative webpage containing party information, events organisation and links to the relative social media platforms (Scarrow, 2015).

- Create online discussion groups. For examples, Change UK can create private Facebook Groups for party members and supporters to discuss

and debate internally about party policy and organisation, furthering intra-party democracy.

- Use online platforms to allow members and supporters to take an active role in the party hierarchy. Members and supporters can organise events and marches through local, regional and national groups facilitated by the direct communication channels to the party through social media, allowing for a direct connection between the grass-roots of the organisation and the party (Pickard, 2017).

- Party leaders can use social media to engage and learn more about the needs and views of the party members, and as a convenient first-step gateway to face-to-face or more sustained contact with the party members. For example, this can be done by answering comments on Facebook posts and Twitter or by conducting live Q&A's on Instagram and Facebook Live (Miller, 2016).

Digital is not the be all end all: ' boots on the ground' still matters

The digital revolution definitely offers the potential of bringing more people into politics and developing a membership base for Change UK. But online platforms are not a magic bullet. This policy paper encourages Change UK to have a bilateral approach to developing a membership base – they must have both online and on the ground members.

Some issues with a purely online membership base:

- It is incredibly difficult to manage online political discussions effectively. It is a challenge to filter the amount of discussions and debates into any sort of collective decision-making procedure, let alone

a collective outcome. Online spaces are good for gathering information and collecting a pool of thoughts and discussions but they do not prioritise or deliberate what the information means (Bartlett and Grabbe, 2015).

- Not everybody uses social media, including some of the most vulnerable and poorest people in society. As such, solely focusing on gaining a digital will not only alienate huge demographics, such as the old and the poor, but will go against the party's own principles to lower barriers for more opportunities for those most vulnerable in our society (ibid.). It is vital that digital voices are not heard above others and that all groups of society are engaged and have access to Change UK's party membership (Miller, 2016).

Moreover, an on the ground membership base can supplement for what digital members cannot achieve:

- Ground-based volunteers enhance Change UK's chances of winning electoral seats. Studies have shown that personal one-on-one conversations have a profound impact on a potential voter's likelihood to turnout to vote, boosting turnout by 20%. Though, in order to have as many of these personal conversations, the party needs ample volunteers (Broockman and Kalla, 2014).

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