

To what extent is declining pressure group membership a bad thing

[Politics](#)



To answer this question the consequence of declining party membership must be considered, which is the growth in pressure group membership. Some of the key functions of political parties are to represent the nation, to encourage participation in the political system and to educate the public. Therefore, if pressure groups do not enhance representation and participation more than parties, the decline in party membership could be considered ' a bad thing. Political parties are funded by their members, so funding is also a point to consider. Having considered all of these points it is clear that the decline in party membership is ' a bad thing' Firstly, the question asking why party membership has declined needs to be addressed. The rise of new labour under Tony Blair and a more central conservative party under David Cameron has meant that parties represent a smaller spectrum of interests, thereby leaving some voters feeling unrepresented. Furthermore, in the 2010 election the similarities between the parties lead to a coalition government, which in turn meant that neither the Conservative or the Liberal-Democrats could fulfil their manifesto's promise which, in many cases, led to public unrest due to the feeling of poor representation. The tuition fee protests in December 2010 are the best example of this. Therefore, it is clear the decline in party membership is for a good reason, it is not clear, however, if the increase in pressure group membership enhances representation.

Pressure groups are able to represent the specific interests or concerns of citizens. For example, groups such as Life and SPUC serve to represent the interest of those who oppose abortion. Therefore, pressure groups do enhance the representation of those who are affected by a particular

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concern or interest; these people however, will inevitably have other concerns and interests that are not represented by one pressure group. This is why parties are so important to representation. Pressure groups and parties are not meant to oppose each other but work together to create a policy that best represents the nation.

Ultimately it is the party that decides the policy and represents individuals and the nation, therefore, the fact that people are happy with how they are being represented is ' a bad thing. ' The quality of participation afforded to members is shaped largely by the extent to which political parties or pressure groups are internally democratic. Therefore, to deduce if the decline party membership is ' a bad thing' it is necessary to determine whether parties or pressure groups are more internally democratic.

Of course this is deeply varies between individual parties and pressure groups. For example, with in the Conservative party the leadership has absolute power over party policy; neither the members nor the leadership have any formal powers and therefore, in theory, the leadership of the party can enforce any policy that they want to. Where the implementation of Labour party policy appears to be more democratic. The Joint-policy forum (JPC), composed of 9 senior MPs who are effectively the leadership, shapes initial policy ideas.

The policy is then considered and amended by the National Policy Forum before it is given wider consultation. Finally, it is presented to the members at the party conference before the JPC has the final say as to whether it is enforced. Either way there are glitches in each system and in general parties

are a mix between democracy and autocracy. It cannot be said, however, that pressure group democracy is better than party democracy. This is true, especially because of the growing number of members which has led to the term 'cheque-book' membership; passive membership.

Where some groups such as the RSPCA do engage in intense internal debate, the vast majority such as Greenpeace are very centralised with the ultimate power with the leader. Therefore, declining party membership is a 'bad thing.' The declining numbers of party members means that parties are becoming more reliant on large donations from individuals. This can lead to scandals, such as 'the cash for honours' scandal, where sizable donations were rewarded with either peerages or policy change.

For example, Bernie Ecclestone donated a large sum of money shortly after F1 became exempt from advertising tobacco. Therefore, it is likely that there will be far more corruption in the system in the future. The rising numbers in pressure group membership, however, means that pressure groups receive more funding. This in turn allows them to gain more resources to fund a campaign, which educates the public better. Equally, however, fewer members and therefore less funding to political parties mean that they are less likely to be able to campaign and educate the public as well. So, in terms of funding, the enhancement of pressure groups usually correlates to the hindrance of parties. Furthermore, it also accentuates the unfairness in pressure group competition by creating an elitist system. Therefore, the decline in party membership is 'a bad thing.' In conclusion, having considered three of the main effects of the decline in party membership, it is

clear that these effects are more of a hindrance than a help to British politics.