

## **After the Party: What Can Political Parties Learn From 38 Degrees**

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Dennis, J. (2014, May 22). After the Party - What Can Political Parties Learn From 38 Degrees. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/james-dennis/after-party-what-can-political-parties-learn-from-38-degrees>.

This year's entry into the Hansard Society's annual [Audit of Political Engagement](#) makes for some [uncomfortable reading](#). One of the most reputable measures of the health of British democracy, the report offers a comprehensive insight into public attitudes and the outlook for political parties does not look good; just [30% of respondents](#) align themselves with any political party, compared to 37% who did so in 2007. Membership levels seem to paint a much bleaker picture, with less than one per cent of the electorate now a member of a political party ([Wilks-Heeg, Blick and Crone, 2012](#)).

In light of these dwindling numbers, some have pointed to the increasing prominence of UKIP as a sign that the mass party can still be saved. The party does deserve some recognition as they buck the trend of party decline, with UKIP's membership currently totalling [over 37,000](#), an increase of 11,000 since 2004 ([Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 46](#)). However, given that UKIP was only formed in 1993, it is hardly a fair comparison. Furthermore, these figures pale into insignificance when juxtaposed with 38 Degrees, the political activist movement that, now in its fifth year, boasts a membership of [over 2.4 million](#). The group has an impressive track record across a range of political issues, most notably their campaign against the coalition government's plans to sell off public forests in 2011. While MPs are often quick to dismiss the movement as a [nuisance](#), or label their actions as [scaremongering](#), the huge levels of engagement seen on their campaigns suggest that they have captured the interest of the public. This post seeks to address two questions: what makes 38 Degrees such an attractive proposition for its members? And what, if anything, can political parties learn from 38 Degrees?

### **The allure of people-power**

What is most striking about the group is their organisational ethos, "[People. Power. Change.](#)". Individual empowerment is at the heart of the movement and, based on my interviews with 38 Degrees members, it is key to understanding their popularity. Unlike political parties, members are responsible for a number of decisions made throughout each campaign. For example, during their recent campaign to compel the energy provider npower to pay more corporation tax, members were consulted on [whether the movement should launch the campaign](#), their ideas were sought for [potential campaign tactics](#), and they were also given the choice as to [whether or not the movement should organise a mass switch away from npower to alternate energy suppliers](#). More broadly, surveys are also used so that the

membership can direct the movement's issue priorities. For example, prior to this campaign, tax avoidance had been established as an ongoing priority in their weekly poll of members, the results of which are shared on the [38 Degrees blog](#). Therefore by using forms of digital media that are diffused widely amongst their membership, members are able to express their opinion very quickly on an unprecedented scale. For those involved, this is a clear and visible way of exerting their influence.

However, it is important to stress that 38 Degrees is not an example of self-organisation like the [Occupy movement](#). The staff at 38 Degrees perform a gatekeeping role and clearly have an enhanced level of influence over the design and selection of campaign actions. Yet, equally, this is not an elite dominated hierarchy masquerading as being member-driven. The movement relies on the staff to assimilate the opinions of their members and then structure the campaigns, whilst minimising the encroachment on the will of individual members. As such, the movement's ultimate direction is decided by their vast network of members.

The speed at which the movement solicits the opinion of their membership is of equal importance. Agility is a defining characteristic of 38 Degrees. Through the constant and thorough monitoring of members' attitudes, the organisation is able to strategically adapt and respond to current events, riding the groundswell of enthusiasm and interest that surrounds current affairs ([Chadwick, 2013](#)). This responsiveness helps us to partially understand the activist movement's attraction for citizens. It is this agility, [coupled with the organisation's fluid structure](#), that is central in cultivating a sense of proximity for the membership, a vital characteristic for their diffuse and networked structure.

### **Falling on deaf ears?**

In assessing what political parties can learn from 38 Degrees, Danny Rye's [excellent reflections](#) on the inaugural seminar provide an accurate summary of where I stand on the future of political parties; 38 Degrees is not the 'afterparty'. To achieve the policy change that the movement needs for both its legitimacy and wider attraction, 38 Degrees must sometimes adhere to the established norms, and hierarchies, of political campaigning; they must engage with those who wield influence over the policy-making process. As such, they depend on MPs and political parties.

While this tactic may seem old-fashioned, the process taken in undertaking these actions is anything but. The members, not the leadership, are making important decisions. Although the levers of power are often very much the same, it is those who operate them, and the means by which they do so, that are unique.

If political parties wish to remain a relevant vehicle for mass participation, they need to account for the increasing demand for flatter power structures and build networks with “publics as affiliates rather than members” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 760). Numerous scholars have noted a rise in public aspiration for personal efficacy, the feeling that each individual member has, or can have, an impact (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011). This has fundamentally altered what citizens expect from their engagement, with a shift from banal representation to active involvement. As traditional modes of organised politics fail to diversify and evolve, alternative forms of political action, like protest and community action, flourish and thrive. If a citizen believes that their own participation has little impact on an outcome, whether they are political, social or psychological, then there is little incentive to get involved.

The popularity of 38 Degrees stems from how the organisation attempts to maximise each individual member’s sense of efficacy. As Rye points out, to survive parties need to let go. Parties must reject the traditional conditions of membership and become more inclusive.

Perhaps the most critical concern for political parties is in the plummeting levels of support from young people: just over half of 18 to 24 year olds do not identify with any political party. Findings from the interviews that I conducted with young 38 Degrees members mirrored those of other studies (see Henn and Foard, 2012; Sloam, 2007); younger citizens are politically engaged, often with non-institutional forms of political activism, and they want to see value from their involvement. Influence is not a word we can associate with youth involvement in political parties. Upon joining a party, younger members are often siphoned off into a separate youth wing, immediately disconnected from the decision-making process. In the recently released *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission* volume, Emily Rainsford (2014) calls for an overhaul in how political parties engage with their young members. Rainsford suggests that if parties are to realistically attract younger citizens, they must offer more opportunities for them to influence policy.

However, political parties are faced with a more difficult task when we consider recent attitudinal shifts amongst citizens in Britain. Contemporary political citizenship is now personally defined rather than derived, and engagement is focused around issues of importance to the individual, rather than overarching platforms or ideologies. As such,

citizens increasingly identify with new emergent forms of group-based politics that are organised around personal identity.

This alludes to an important trend in the type of organisations that citizens are joining; there has been a significant increase in the number of citizens belonging to a range of UK campaigning organisations (Wilks-Heeg, Blick and Crone, 2012). The success of 38 Degrees reflects these trends as members are not tied into one fixed ideology but pick and choose the campaigns that they support. These tend to be those political issues that have personal relevance and have little in common with traditional left-right issues that have previously delineated the partisan boundaries between the two major parties in Britain (Heffernan, 2009).

The loose affiliations of individuals that 38 Degrees mobilise around single-issue campaigns reflect a drastic departure from the collective identity frames that underpin membership to a political party. I witnessed this dynamic first hand at a lively members meal that I organised as part of my research. In this face-to-face setting the fundamental divides that exist between different members soon became apparent, be it on climate change, LGBT rights, or one's right to privacy. However, following the vivacious debates that ensued it became clear that what united my dinner guests was how much they all valued the freedom to act collectively but on their own terms.

Can political parties adopt any of these practices? Increasing the influence of grassroots members and diversifying issue representation within the party hasn't figured too highly on the agenda for either Labour or the Conservatives in their recent history. If anything, there has been an emphasis on centralisation. When digital technologies have been used, they have not been designed to democratise grassroots engagement but as a means of maintaining elite control, what Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2014) describes as 'controlled interactivity'. The use of Facebook by Labour and the Conservatives in the run up to the European elections illustrates how members can share and personalise campaign materials but their involvement is orchestrated by campaign professionals within the party. What may seem like active involvement is really a facade; members are no closer to influencing decision-making or policy.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, what distinguishes 38 Degrees from political parties is their relationship with their members. The diffusion of power is central to the movement's popularity. Conversely, today's parties scarcely resemble anything close to a mass party. [Richard Heffernan \(2009: 448\)](#) argues that parties now represent a new organisational form, the electoral professional party; elite driven, hierarchical organisations, with their eyes transfixed on the vague, amorphous notion of public opinion. Unless there is a complete re-think of the role that grassroots members play within the party structure, it is difficult to see beyond a terminal decline for the mass party.

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