Does family politicization affect party membership activity?  
A study of four Flemish parties.

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Abstract

Family politicization has been found to affect the recruitment process of election candidates and political officeholders. This phenomenon can be explained by both supply-side factors (i.e. higher levels of political socialization and motivation) and demand-side factors (i.e. name recognition). In the present study, we investigated whether family politicization also affects party membership activity, which is situated lower on the participation ladder and does not require election, thus rendering demand-side factors less relevant.

Our results demonstrate that family politicization plays a role in campaign activities (e.g. distributing leaflets) and legitimization activities (e.g. electing the party leader). However, for more time-consuming activities such as policy-oriented matters, supply-side factors alone do not give party members from a politicized family an advantage compared to other party members.

Keywords
parties, party members, socialization, participation, family politicization, Belgium

Introduction

The democratization of political recruitment is one of the major developments in Western countries since the end of the 19th century (Best & Cotta, 2000). Democratic elections are now deeply embedded in most political systems and they are presumed to entail free access and equal opportunities to all citizens. Many studies have, however, indicated representational imbalances regarding gender, education, age or ethnicity (e.g. Best & Cotta, 2000; Bovens & Wille, 2010). Moreover, it has been shown on several occasions that political elites tend to come disproportionately from politicized family backgrounds. From presidents over ministers...
and members of parliament (MPs) to local officeholders and even election candidates, a disproportionate amount of have parents who held political office before (e.g. Hess, 1997; Kurtz, 1993; Patriat & Parodi, 1992; Dal Bó, Dal Bó, & Snyder, 2009; Van Liefferinge & Steyvers, 2009). This overrepresentation has been explained by means of Norris’ recruitment model (1996), pointing out that it is due to a good match between supply-side factors (i.e. higher levels of political socialization and motivation) and demand-side factors (i.e. being more attractive to voters due to name recognition and name loyalty), in combination with a favorable opportunity structure (‘personalization’ and ‘mediatization’ of politics are said to be beneficial for politicians from politicized families) (Van Liefferinge, 2012). Our central question here is whether family politicization also influences activities for which only supply-side factors play a role. In particular, we will shift our focus to party members and explore the effect of family politicization on participation in internal party activities. As party members do not need to be elected in order to participate, demand factors are less relevant to explain their participation behavior.

The objective of this study is twofold. We will map to what extent family politicization is present among party members and then explain how it affects members’ intra-party activity level.

Our first objective involves examining the degree of family politicization among party members in Belgium. As party membership activity is a form of participation that involves fewer efforts and obstacles than, for example, a political mandate (Whiteley, 2011), we hypothesize that family politicization plays a more limited role in this. To investigate this hypothesis, we will determine how many party members have a parent who was also a party member and whether or not they are members of the same party. When possible, we will compare our results with previous research on election candidates and elected representatives (e.g. Van Liefferinge, 2012).

A second goal of our analysis is to determine whether supply-side factors alone can explain family politicization effects on participation behavior. Questions that are relevant in this respect include whether family party members are more active than others and, if so, in what kind of party activities. If this is the case, we can expect family politicization to also have an impact on activities in which demand factors (such as name recognition) do not play a major role. Our findings can also be relevant for the literature on the decline in party membership figures. In almost all European countries, the number of party members have been decreasing.
since the 1980s (e.g. Whiteley, 2011; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012.). Although evidence is inconclusive, it is often feared that fewer members in a party will lead to less party activity, since the same workload has to be divided among fewer people (Voerman & Van Schuur, 2011). Consequently, some party functions may no longer be executed to the full extent. If family members indeed are more active than average, this could mitigate the detrimental effects of the decrease in party membership figures.

We base our study on a survey of party members of four Belgian (Flemish) political parties. This survey with specific questions on party membership activity and on parents’ membership allows us to thoroughly investigate the impact of family politicization on a wide range of party activities.

This article is structured as follows. We will start by outlining a theoretical framework about family politicization, followed by a discussion of the various functions that are performed by party members. After formulating our hypotheses and describing our methodology, we will present the results of our empirical analysis. To conclude, we will discuss the main findings of this article and reflect on whether family members could be safeguard for declining parties.

**Family politicization**

In this section, we will present relevant insights from the literature on family politicization. First, we will briefly elaborate on the concept and illustrate its current relevance. We will present a pyramid (based on the intensity of participation) for the parents, and one for the children. The links between both pyramids are helpful for explaining the different effects of family politicization. Second, we will turn to the more substantial meaning of family politicization as an awakener of political interest, a value transmitter and a stimulator for political participation.

**Family politicization: concept, current relevance and appearance**

Family politicization is not an unequivocal concept. It involves two levels of political participation, one for the parents and one for their child(ren). As for the underlying mechanism of family politicization, broad support exists for Prewitt’s ‘overexposure hypothesis’ (1970), meaning that children growing up in politically engaged families from a

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1 In a broader sense, family politicization can also refer to other family members than parents, but these are the scope of this paper.
young age onwards receive a relatively high amount of political incentives, which may leave a lasting impression on their future political attitudes and engagement. Prewitt differentiates between two types of family political inheritance. The first type can be captured under the heading of political dynasties and involves children following in their parent’s political career footsteps. The second type is the inheritance of a specific interest in political affairs. This type includes parents who pass on a general attention or even a passion for politics.

The current relevance of family politicization could be questioned, however. From a historical perspective, social background has lost much of its significance for political recruitment due to processes of democratization and professionalization (Best & Cotta, 2000; Rush, 2007). The process of democratization refers to opening up political arenas for those formerly excluded. It consists of several aspects, among others granting suffrage rights, granting political rights, mobilization and effective representation. As a consequence, elites from aristocratic backgrounds (often found in a limited number of interconnected families) became less numerous in parliaments. Despite this historical relativity, it cannot be denied that the political profession remains an occupation in which intergenerational following is more than coincidentally present. In fact, compared to other occupations, politicians appear to have the highest ‘dynastic bias’, i.e. the highest number of intergenerational followers (Dal Bó, Dal Bó, & Snyder, 2009). Although this topic has not been extensively addressed in political science, an overrepresentation of family members in elected bodies has been reported in various countries such as the United States (Hess, 1997; Kurtz, 1993), Japan (Fukai & Fukui, 1992), France (Patriat & Parodi, 1992), and the United Kingdom (Rush, 2012). In Belgium, too, family politicization continues to be highly relevant. In the early 1990s, more than one out of six MPs had a parent who (had) held political office (De Winter, 1992). Over one fifth of all Belgian mayors (22.6%) during the 2000-2006 legislative term had a father in political office, and approximately half of them (47.7%) had a father who was a party member (Van Liefferinge & Steyvers, 2009).

Depending on what level of political participation it is situated, family politicization will have a different appearance, relevance and impact. We have visualized this in two pyramid-like continuums: one for the parents’ activity and one for the child(ren)’s activity. These pyramids are built up according to the intensity of participation and are inspired by Milbrath (1965) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). The top layer in both pyramids is comprised of
people occupying a political mandate, with many other forms of political activity underneath. These other, descending forms of activity can be party-based (e.g. candidacy at elections) or not (e.g. an interest in politics). Several relationships between the different layers of the two pyramids can be established. Political dynasties, for instance, connect parents occupying a mandate with children doing the same.

<< Figure 1 about here >>

In this article, the focus will be on the effect of family politicization on party membership activity. Whereas for election candidates and elected representatives, both supply-side factors (i.e. socialization process) and demand-side factors (i.e. name recognition) provide an advantage to people grown up in political families (Van Liefferinge, 2012), only supply-side factors are at stake for party membership activity. Participating in party activities is mostly freely accessible, as no election or delegation (in which family name could play a role) is needed. The central question is therefore whether family politicization also increases chances of this kind of participation. We will use a dichotomous variable for the parents’ participation (i.e. whether or not they are party members), and focus on the effect on activities that their children perform in a party. We are fully aware that this approach only takes one aspect of family politicization into account, but in order to conduct a feasible analysis, the broad concept of family politicization simply needs to be narrowed down. Moreover, by linking the parents’ party membership to the children’s party membership and party membership activities, the relationship between two comparable activities is investigated. The inner triangles in the pyramids in Figure 1 illustrate our central research question, namely whether growing up in a family in which at least one parent is a party member affects party members’ activity level. We will come back to this operationalization in the Methods section of this paper (section 4).

How does family politicization work?

In the introduction of this paper, we already referred to the interaction between supply and demand factors to explain the overrepresentation of political family members among candidates and office holders. As our research population consists of party members, we will
mainly focus on supply factors. We assume that political engagement can be affected by both political socialization and political motivation, which are interrelated as well.

The political family is generally considered to have a socialization influence at three levels, i.e. as an early awakener of political interest, as a transmitter of political values, and as a stimulator of political engagement.

In the first place, a political family can function as an **awakener of political interest**. Socialization is a lifelong process, which is largely shaped by family, school, peer groups and mass media (Greenstein, 1968). However, socialization in childhood (and to a lesser extent also adolescence) may have greater impact than socialization in adulthood. Because of the frequent contact during the first, impressionable, life period, primary groups such as the family play a pivotal role in shaping a child’s political consciousness (Zuckerman, Dasovic, & Fitzgerald, 2007). Parents do not need to have the same political opinions for this effect to materialize: it was found that especially in systems of proportional representation, political discord among parents (and consequently political debate within the family context) stimulates political interest among children (Fitzgerald & Curtis, 2012). In particular, elite research among American and Canadian MPs, conducted by Kornberg and Thomas (1965), revealed that the period in which political awareness was initiated strongly correlated with the socialization agent they referred to as most important: MPs who developed their initial political consciousness in childhood mostly refer to the family as a primary socialization agent, whereas those whose interest awoke later tend to stress more often their own political awakening and external events, respectively.

A second function of political families is to act as a **transmitter of political values**. Politically active parents do not only inspire children’s interest, they can also affect their offspring’s future political values. Although in his early publications Jennings tended to downgrade the role of family political inheritance (Jennings & Niemi, 1968), he later stressed the importance of contextual conditions to stimulate a successful value transmission. These conditions come down to politics being concrete, affect-laden and salient in the home atmosphere, and parents being politically homogeneous\(^2\) and having conversations with their children about politics (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009).

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\(^2\) Note that heterogeneity in values among parents stimulates political interest, as indicated above, but also has a negative effect on the transmission of political values.
One interesting study in this respect is Thomas (1971), who studied the parent-adolescent congruence in strongly politicized families (i.e. families who are active in politics) and perceived a comparatively high intergenerational level of agreement on 12 topics. Similarly, Zuckerman, Dasovic and Fitzgerald (2007) found that German and British parents play a very important role in influencing partisanship, including identification with a particular party and vote choice. Kroh and Selb (2009) demonstrated that partisan loyalties passed on from parents to children in their younger years are more central and affective, and therefore tend to be more resistant to change than loyalties emanating from other sources.

Apart from these approaches which stress the role of the environment, also biopolitical insights provide arguments for an intergenerational correspondence of opinions. Hatemi et al (2011) for instance contend that a part of family resemblance on political attitudes is genetically influenced. Attitudes in this view are the product of biological processes (which regulate for instance anxiety and disgust) that interact with several environmental influences during one’s lifecycle.

All these features of family politicization in combination with biopolitical processes suggest that children will share political values with their parents and are therefore also more likely to end up in the same political party.

Finally, a third potential role of a political family is to **stimulate political engagement**. In this respect, Fox and Lawless (2005) make a distinction between ‘expressive’ and ‘nascent’ ambitions. The former refer to the rational consideration to run for office (Schlesinger, 1966), whereas the latter refer to the desire to engage in politics. Fox and Lawless (2005) examine six predictors on nascent political ambition, of which politicized upbringing appears to be the third most important one. They conclude that the magnitude of pre-professional experiences is striking. Family politicization thus often creates a politically stimulating environment for the offspring, generating lasting effects. In addition, also diverse psychological and personality aspects play a role, especially the degree of identification with the parent’s political role (Recchi, 1999).

To conclude, family politicization can lead to an earlier and more intense (inherited) build-up of political capital, which can have a stimulating effect on the motivation to further develop this inherited political capital with one’s own assets and capital. Together with demand
factors (which are less relevant for party membership), these factors give a competitive advantage to people coming from a politicized family.

**Functions of party members**

We will now deal with functions party members can perform in the party. Together with theoretical insights from the previous section, this will lead to hypotheses.

Notwithstanding the wide-spread idea that electoral-professional parties have become increasingly more dependent on (social) media en and less on large membership bases (Panebianco, 1988; Scarrow, 2000; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), it can clearly be observed that most parties continue to make efforts to attract members (Scarrow, 1994). Members are still worthwhile for parties since they continue to fulfill a number of crucial functions. We make a distinction here between three kinds of functions: electoral, legitimization and policy-oriented functions.

First of all, we describe the **electoral functions**, which have many aspects. Party members are likely to vote for their party. As such, they may provide their party with a stable voting base (Scarrow, 1994), although it should not be taken for granted that party members always vote for their own party.

Party members could adopt also a more active role by encouraging others to vote for the party. This can be done in informal face-to-face contacts, by distributing leaflets, etc. Party members could be considered as party ambassadors generating support (Scarrow, 1994) or even as part-time marketeers (Van Aelst, van Holsteyn, & Koole, 2012). These activities could provide an invaluable complement to the media-oriented approach of campaign professionals and party leaders, as it allows parties to build stronger ties with voters and clearly expresses that the party is more than a selected elite far away from the citizens’ needs (Scarrow, 2000).

Finally, party members constitute a large pool of potential election candidates. Parties without a large membership base might encounter problems in filling all positions on their candidate lists. As the influence of family politicization on election candidates has already been extensively researched (e.g. Van Liefferinge, 2012; Dal Bó, Dal Bó, & Snyder, 2009), this element falls outside the scope of this study.
A second group of functions of party members is made up by **legitimization functions**. The increased role of rank and file members in intra-party decision-making is a recent trend in many Western parties. In most parties, they can now choose party leaders and candidates for parliamentary elections and they are allowed to vote at party conferences (e.g. LeDuc, 2001; Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Pilet & Cross, 2014). These organizational changes increased (at least on paper) the impact of party members. Yet, the results of this process are rather ambiguous (Young & Cross, 2002; Wauters, 2009). Party statutes are officially amended but it did not have a real influence on the way party elites behaved as there was no shift in the internal balance of power in practice. On the contrary, these internal reforms have often even strengthened the powerful position of party leaders, since their actions are now officially authorized by party members (Wauters, 2014). In that sense do these participation procedures legitimize the party elite and their actions, rather than providing party members with a real impact. As such these participation activities can be labelled as legitimation activities.

Finally, we pay attention to the **policy-oriented functions**. A small but significant part of party members see their membership as an instrument to influence the policy options of their party (e.g. Cross & Young, 2004). By actively participating in party meetings, they try to influence a party’s policy. Miller and Schofield (2003) attach great importance to members for the ideological choices of their party. Policy-motivated activists are a force of stability and they discourage ideological change, while the party elite are more prepared to change the ideological position of the party in order to win elections and to enter government.

In the methodology section, we will indicate how we operationalize these three functions. In combination with the theoretical considerations on family politicization, we come to the following three hypotheses:

**H1:** The level of family politicization among party members will be lower than among election candidates

**H2:** Party members from a politicized family will belong predominantly to the same party as their parents

**H3:** Party members from a politicized family will be more active in party activities
  
  **H3a:** they will be more active in promoting the party externally / participating in election campaigns
H3b: they will be more active in legitimation activities (participation at one moment in time)

H3c: they will be more active in taking up positions within the party / making the party function

Methodology

For our empirical analysis, we rely on a survey conducted in four parties in Flanders (a major region in Belgium). This survey among party members allows us to investigate the involvement in a wide range of specific party activities. This is in contrast with general cross-country surveys, who are conducted among the population at large (instead of only among party members) and who contain (if any) only questions about involvement in party activities in general. The same applies to household surveys. Lacking cross-country surveys among party members, our approach is the best option to grasp the effect of family politicization on party member activity.

Our focus is on Belgium, which has a political system in which parties play a dominant role (Deschouwer, 2009; Van Haute et al., 2013). Parties have strong roots in society by large membership bases, which tend to decline more slowly than in other countries.

In the course of 2012, we conducted a postal survey among party members of the Flemish-regionalist party N-VA and the liberal-democratic OpenVLD in Belgium, using the Total Design-method (TDM) of Dilman (1978). The same method was used one year later to survey party members of the Christian-democratic party CD&V and the ecologist party Groen.³ Although we followed the same method, response rates varied from one party to another. N-VA members recorded the highest response rate with 65.5%, followed by Groen with 62.0% and CD&V with 44.3%. For OpenVLD (whose membership file suffered from several inaccuracies), we obtained a response rate of only 28.9%.

We will use these data to conduct analyses of family politicization and its effects. For our analysis, we take into consideration both the participation level of the parents (whether or not

³ Apart from the four parties studied in this article, there are two other Flemish parties represented in Parliament: the extreme right Vlaams Belang and the social-democratic sp.a. Vlaams Belang refused to cooperate, while for sp.a data are still being gathered at the moment of writing.
they were a party member, based on the declarations of their children\(^4\), and that of the children themselves (i.e. our survey respondents), the former constituting our central independent variable and the latter our central dependent variable. Non-party political engagement of parents is not taken into account here. The inner triangles in the pyramids in Figure 1 in Section 2 illustrate our central research question, namely whether growing up in a family in which at least one parent was a party member, affects how active children are as party member.

There are different ways to categorize our central **independent variable**, i.e. whether or not parents have been a party member. One could differentiate between members with both, only one or none of the parents being a party member. Another differentiation could be made between parents belonging to the same party and parents adhering to a different party than their children. Yet another distinction could be made between parents as office holders, active members or passive members, but this distinction will lead us too far. We will deal more extensively with the other different possible categorizations (and their frequencies) in the descriptive analysis of our results. For the explanatory analysis, we limit family politicization to two variables, i.e. members with at least one parent belonging to a party and members with a parent of the same party.

As for the **dependent variables**, we will consider (as indicated in the second section) three different functions that party members can fulfill. Rather than only examining the frequency of party activities in general (e.g. Van Haute et al., 2013), we will also take into account the diversity in activities.

We will measure the electoral functions by studying the frequency of undertaking each of the following campaign activities: distributing door-to-door flyers during an election campaign, convincing others to vote for the party, and putting up election posters at one’s home.\(^5\)

For the legitimization functions, the analysis will center around three activities: attending a national party conference, voting in party leadership elections, and voting for the composition of candidate lists.\(^6\) These are three activities in which rank and file members can directly

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\(^4\) The question was ‘Has one of your parents ever been a member of a political party? Only father, only mother, both father and mother, or neither of them? And if so, which party?’

\(^5\) An exploratory factor analysis show that they indeed measure the same concept. Factor loadings (after a varimax rotation) range from 0.541 to 0.769. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.732.

\(^6\) Factor loadings (after a varimax rotation) range here from 0.683 to 0.865. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.770.
participate (a system of delegation is not used anymore in the four parties under consideration).

A final group of functions refers to activities aiming to actively influence the party’s policy and strategy. Activities that are catalogued under this heading include participating in a debate at a local party meeting, being a candidate for an internal function or position, and preparing and organizing internal party meetings.  

For each of these activities, one question in our survey asked how often party members have conducted this activity for their current party (never, only once, a number of times, often/always). In order to have enough observations in each category, these variables were recoded into dummy variables indicating whether or not the respondent has participated more than once.

Before analyzing the impact of family ties on activities that party members fulfill, we will first present a descriptive analysis of the extent and the different forms of family politicization in the four parties of our analysis.

**Descriptive analysis**

Looking at how many party members come from politicized families, we can distinguish between three groups of party members. For a first group, one of the parents was also a party member. In a second group, both parents were party members, and in a third group neither of the parents were a party member. In Table 1 results are displayed for our respondents, arranged according to the party to which they belong.

<< Table 1 about here >>

In all four parties being investigated, most members’ parents were non-party affiliated. However, clear differences exist. Especially the Christian Democrats (CD&V) come from politicized families, with about 45% having at least one parent who was a party member. The lowest number of parental party members is found in the green party (Groen), namely about 27%.

The differences are especially clear in families with both parents as party member, where we see that more than one quarter of CD&V members come from these ‘strongly’ politicized families, compared to only approximately 10% of green party members. The figures for only

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7 Factor loadings (after a varimax rotation) range here from 0.769 to 0.887. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.862.
one parent being a party member show less diversity across the parties, and in the light of a
general lower female political participation especially in previous generations (Scarrow &
Gezgor, 2010), it is not surprising that fathers are considerably more often party members.
In fact, any differences between the various parties are not surprising either, as traditional
parties have a much longer record in politics and government, and especially the Christian
Democratic party has always been strongly rooted at the local level, with large numbers of
councilors and mayors (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2013). Moreover, due to ‘pillarization’, many
people were linked to the party via membership of various satellite organizations (which was
often, together with party membership, transmitted within a family) (Van Haute et al., 2013).
The green party, in contrast, is much younger (established in 1979), has from the beginning
onwards mainly recruited from non-traditional sources and has never developed an own
network of organizations.

Earlier, we already mentioned some figures for comparison (based on previous research on
election candidates). Nearly 55% of the Flemish candidates of the 2003 and 2007 federal
elections appeared to have a father and/or mother who were party members (Van Liefferinge,
2012). We could also observe that the green party has the lowest number of candidates with at
least one parent affiliated to a party (38.2%), whereas the Christian Democrats have the
highest number in this respect (65.8%). Percentages of family politicized election candidates
are higher than percentages for party members, but the same differences between parties can
be found.

From these comparisons, it seems that family politicization increases when we move up the
political participation ladder. Party members generally come less from politicized families
than election candidates, which confirms our first hypothesis (H1). This can be explained by
what we referred to above, namely that family ties play a bigger role in the recruitment
process because at that level demand factors are in play (e.g. the importance of name
recognition for election).

A second important aspect to be studied is the extent to which parents and children adhere to
the same party.

<< Table 2 about here >>

We immediately notice huge differences across the various parties. Once again, CD&V and
Groen make out the two extremes, with the former showing a very high rate of party members
who belong to the same party as their parents (more than 9 out of 10), while for the latter the

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reverse is true (about one fourth). With almost three out of four liberal party members belonging to their parents’ party, OpenVLD has a relatively high score, whereas N-VA occupies a middle position with over half of the members following their parents.

To explain these numbers, we can repeat the above-mentioned reasons, such as the age of the party and her roots at the local level. In addition to these explanations, CD&V was the party with the highest number of families in which both parents were party members. Linking this back to Thomas (1971) and Jennings et al. (2009) who underlined the importance of a homogeneous socialization environment for value transmission to be successful, this high number can certainly play a role. For the regionalist party N-VA in particular, also the recent influx of new members (parallel with their enormous increase in vote shares) could be an explanation: they recruited not only voters from other parties, but also party members (Wauters, 2013). Consequently, the share of members belonging to the same party as their parents is lower than we would expect from a party with a long history (taken also into account its predecessor the VU).

Given this evidence, our second hypothesis (H2) could only partially be confirmed. When children are members of established parties, they mostly follow the party preference of their active parents while when choosing to join new parties, they sometimes defect from the party of their parents.

Comparing these data to the candidate survey results again reveals similar tendencies. The figures ranged from 38% of candidates with no parental party membership, sharing their father’s political preference, over 61% in ‘slightly’ politicized families, to 80.9% in ‘highly’ politicized families (Van Liefferinge, 2012).

**Family politicization as an explanatory variable for party activity**

In the following section, we will explore the effects of family politicization on the activities that party members undertake. As indicated above, we expect party members who have parents that have been politically engaged in a party to be more active.

In Table 3, we present the results for two variables, one that adopts a general approach by taking into account parents’ membership irrespective of the party they belonged to, and a
more specific variable that only considers parents’ membership of the same party as their children. The results for both variables are largely similar.

<< Table 3 about here >>

Table 3 reveals clear differences between party members from a politicized family and other members. These differences can mainly be situated in the electoral and legitimization functions, and not in the policy-oriented functions.  

As for the electoral functions, it is striking that party members from a politicized family are significantly more likely to distribute door-to-door flyers: about 48% of party members from a politicized family have more than once distributed flyers versus about 42% member without family roots. The same applies to displaying election posters at one’s home: 59% of party members from a politicized family have done this before, versus 51.7% and 53.3% for members without parents as party member. There is only one electoral function that does not exhibit significant differences, and that is convincing others to vote. If we restrict the analysis to parents belonging to the same party (columns 3 and 4 in Table 3), more or less the same picture appears: significant differences for flyers and election posters, no significant differences for convincing others.

Convincing people is less visible and perhaps therefore more comfortable for those party members from whom it is not widely known that they and their family are party members. Another possible explanation may be found in the fact that we did not specify how many or what kind of other people they tried to convince. For example, it might be that party members from a politicized family try to convince a broad range of people (including their family members, friends and neighbors), but that other party members approach only a handful of very close relatives. A third explanation for the lack of effect could be that this is an activity conducted by a large group of members. With almost 60% of members declaring that they have more than once tried to convince others, this activity obtains the top score. Consequently, barriers to this kind of activity will be lower, which could explain the lack of effect of socialization and of family politicization in particular.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that hypothesis 3a (H3a), stating that political family members will be more active in promoting the party externally, is generally confirmed.

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8 The same observations can be made when we examine all answer categories of the original question (never, once, several times, often/always). Family politicized party members are more likely to be found in the higher categories for electoral and legitimization functions, but not for policy-oriented functions.
For the **legitimization functions**, significant differences can also be observed between party members from a politicized family and other members. Both for attending a national party conference, voting in party leadership elections and voting for the composition of the candidates lists, members with family ties are more likely to participate, hereby confirming hypothesis 3b (H3b). Unlike for electoral functions, differences between party members from a politicized family and other members become larger when we only take into account members whose parents belonged to the same party. For instance, for participation in leadership elections, the difference between party members from a politicized family and other members is 38.2% versus 27.2%, while this gap widens when we only consider membership of the same party (44.3% versus 27.7%). In sum, for legitimization functions, it is not only party membership of the parents that matters, but also party membership of the same party that provides an extra explanation.

Finally, the **policy-oriented functions** will be examined. In contrast to the previous functions, no significant differences can be noted between members with a pedigree in the party and others (except for being a candidate in internal elections, where a tiny significant effect can be noted). This applies to the three activities that belong to this category, i.e. debating in local party meetings, being a candidate for an internal position and organizing internal party meetings. Consequently, hypothesis 3c (H3c) is rejected.

Two possible explanations for this lack of effect can be given. First of all, it might be that members just copy their parents’ behavior. In the questionnaire, it was asked whether parents have been party member, not whether they conducted policy-oriented activities. As these kinds of activities are performed by fewer party members than other party activities (for instance, 15% have been a candidate for an internal function, while 60% have convinced others), the chance of parents conducting this activity is lower, so socialization effects for this specific activity will also be lower. A second explanation elaborates this point further. Since fewer members participate in this kind of activity, we expect barriers for participation (having enough time, resources, etc.) to be higher. When thresholds are so high, family politicization alone cannot overcome them, especially when demand factors do not provide extra support. Taken together with our findings for convincing others to vote (where we could not find a significant effect either), we could conclude that for activities where participation thresholds are either very high or very low, the effect of family politicization disappears.
In order to test the robustness of our findings, we also conducted binominal logistic regressions with the degree of party activity as a dependent variable. This allows us to control for the effect of other socio-demographic variables, such as age, gender and level of education. We also include the reason to join the party as a control variable. It has been shown that this has an impact on the activity rate and the kind of activities performed inside the party, especially by young party members (Bruter & Harrison, 2009). A distinction can be made in this respect between purposive incentives (altruistic and ideological motives), social incentives (meeting minded-like people) and material incentives (in order to obtain a particular benefit) to become member.

In Table 4, we present the results of only one of these regressions (i.e. with participation to leadership elections as a dependent variable). For the regressions with the other party activities, the results are similar, in the sense that the effects found in the previous table (Table 3) are not altered when the control variables are added\(^9\), except for being a candidate for an internal position or function.

<< Table 4 about here >>

Table 4 indeed shows that family party membership continues to have an effect on the propensity to participate in leadership elections: the odds of voting for the party leader are twice as high for party members whose parents belonged to the same party (2.338) compared to members without parents who are a party member. This clearly confirms that this effect holds even when we control for socio-demographic variables and for reasons to join the party. This applies to all other party activities discussed above: where an effect was found in the chi\(^2\) analysis in Table 3 (electoral and legitimization functions), it was confirmed in the logistic regressions, and where no effect was found (policy-oriented functions), no effect appeared in the logistic regressions.

One notable exception is being a candidate for an internal function or position. The effect of family party membership on this kind of activity was not significant in all bivariate analyses (see Table 3), but did become significant in the logistic regression (see Table 5). We should note, however, that the level of significance is lower than for the other party activities. Given

\(^9\) We also ran the same logistic regressions with an additional control variable that indicated whether or not one was a member of the local party executive. The results were not altered: family politicization continued to be significant for legitimization and electoral functions, and not for policy-oriented functions (not for being a candidate for an internal mandate either). Because being a member of the local executive and being a candidate for an internal mandate are logically related and a tautological reasoning could be made, we chose to present the analyses here without this control variable.
that being a candidate for an internal function is an activity in which demand factors could play a role, this effect is actually not surprising.

Although not directly relevant for the purposes of this paper, it should be noted that age and gender have significant effects on the chance to participate in party leadership elections. Men and older members (older than 65) are more likely to participate. Idealism as a reason to join the party also appears to have a positive effect, whereas level of education did not significantly impact on participation in leadership elections. Further research should further explore these differences.

**Conclusion**

Family politicization can be interpreted as a general dynamic that has an effect at diverse levels of participation. Children growing up in politicized families are relatively exposed to politics from a young age onwards, which can stimulate their own political awaking and eventually boost their motivation and engagement. This could be referred to as a supply-side factor. For election candidates and political officeholders, who rank higher on the participation pyramid, this effect is strengthened by demand-side factors (including name recognition among voters), giving them an additional advantage compared to other people.

In this paper, we examined the relationship between family politicization and intra-party activism. This relationship is theoretically interesting as for this kind of activism, demand-side factors are less relevant because election (in which name recognition could be useful) is not needed in order to participate in most of these activities. The main theoretical question is whether supply-side factors alone can offer people an advantage in high-intensity participation activities within a party.

Dividing party members’ functions in three types, we differentiated between electoral, legitimization and policy-oriented functions. Family politicization, measured by parental party membership, appeared to play a role in electoral and legitimization functions, as members from politicized families participated significantly more in this type of activities (especially when members followed their parents in the same party), but not for policy-oriented functions. We concluded that the supply-side factors of family politicization affect the level of intra-party activism, unless the participation threshold is either high (policy-oriented
functions) or low (convincing others). In these cases, family politicization cannot affect the activity level of party members, as other factors are more at play (e.g. available time in high-threshold activities). To a certain extent the higher presence of people with family ties in politics can be explained by supply-side factors, but for very intense participation demand factors (name recognition leading to electoral success) also need to be present.

All in all, our analysis shows that also grassroots party members are affected by family politicization. Earlier research has shown that this phenomenon influences the recruitment process among election candidates and mayors (Van Liefferinge, 2012), but it is now clear that it also impacts on party members. Moreover, with figures between 27% and 45% of all party members having at least one parent who was a party member, this is not a trivial phenomenon. Especially when members are following their parents in the same party, they can be considered as a loyal and predictable member base. The party knows whom they can count on for spreading and displaying campaign material and who will participate in internal voting procedures. For very intense participation within the party, here called policy-oriented functions, family ties do not provide an added value. This seems to be at odds with the high presence of family members among election candidates, which also constitutes a high-intensity form of participation. Nevertheless, election candidates who come from a politicized family also benefit from an inherited political and electoral capital (i.e. demand factors), and it is this that gives them a major advantage and explains their relative overrepresentation in today’s elected political bodies.

Finally, it is important to note that family politicization could be an asset for parties in decline, especially when the engagement of people from politicized families remains within the same party and does not involve any considerable efforts. Although quite a lot of party members grew up in politicized families and although this is not a neutral fact, it would be an overestimation to say that the family can save a party. However, it is true that they can be a stabilizing factor for parties in decline. Parties experiencing difficulties to convince people to join as a member and especially to activate their members can rely on those members who have this little extra motivation because of their family roots. It is therefore crucial that parties cherish these ‘deeply rooted’ members, while still attracting other, new members. To conclude, we must not forget that family politicization has little or no effect on policy-oriented functions. In other words, while family politicization may soothe the wounds of decline, it cannot completely cure them.
We end by discussing some limitations of our study. Studying current party members and interrogating them about the party membership of their parents results in the selection of only successful cases, and limits the information about parental party membership. First, by surveying (grown-up) children about the party membership of their parents, only parents who have children that has become party member are included in the analysis. We cannot say anything about e.g. the share of parents that have children who also become party member. Second, the dependent variable of our analyses was the activity rate of children in the party. We explain this by the party membership of the parents (irrespective of whether parents were active or not in the party). Perhaps, the explanatory power of the model would be even larger if we could include the activity rate of the parents, but data availability hinders us to do so here. Future research (for instance through panel studies or household studies) should tackle these problems, preferentially also in a comparative cross-country analysis.

List of references


WHITELEY, P. 2011. Is the party over? The decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world. Party Politics, 17, 21-44.


Figure 1. Family politicization: linking parents’ and children’s political activities
Table 1. Percentages of party members whose parents have also been a party member

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CD&amp;V</th>
<th>Groen</th>
<th>N-VA</th>
<th>OpenVLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only father</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only mother</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total: at least one parent</strong></td>
<td><strong>44.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>26.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>35.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>39.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither of the parents</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Percentages of parents who have been a member of the same party or a different party, respectively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CD&amp;V</th>
<th>Groen</th>
<th>N-VA&lt;sup&gt;10&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>OpenVLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same party</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different party</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>10</sup> VU was considered the same party as N-VA. VNV, a Flemish-nationalist party active in the inter-war period, in contrast, was not considered the same party.
Table 3. Percentages of members that have conducted activities more than once, divided into two categories: parents who have been a member of any political party, and those who have been a member of the same political party (chi² test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often have you conducted these activities for your current party?</th>
<th>Parents member of a political party?</th>
<th>Parents of the same party?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No parents member</td>
<td>Parents member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electoral functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distributing door-to-door flyers</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>48.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>convincing others to vote for the party</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>displaying election posters at home</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>59.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimization functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attending a national party conference</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>21.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voting for the selection of the party leader</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>38.2***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voting for candidate lists</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>29.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy-oriented functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in debates at local party meeting</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candidate for internal function or position</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>16.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizing internal party meetings</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1835</td>
<td>948</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001
**Table 4.** Binominal logistic regression with frequency of participation to leadership elections (more than once or not) as a dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (reference: older than 65)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 35 years old</td>
<td>-1.418</td>
<td>.176***</td>
<td>64.608</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 35 and 65 years old</td>
<td>-.524</td>
<td>.106***</td>
<td>24.511</td>
<td>.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman (dummy)</td>
<td>-.378</td>
<td>.098***</td>
<td>14.829</td>
<td>.685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education (reference: university)</td>
<td>(ns)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.919</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower education or no degree</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>.164</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher secondary</td>
<td>-.203</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>2.656</td>
<td>.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher non-university</td>
<td>-.078</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>.432</td>
<td>.925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposive incentives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I agree with the socio-economic points of view of my party</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>1.003</td>
<td>.910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of idealism</td>
<td>.528</td>
<td>.095***</td>
<td>31.206</td>
<td>1.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social incentives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the pleasant and interesting activities they are organizing</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>1.523</td>
<td>1.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because friends asked me</td>
<td>-.219</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>2.231</td>
<td>.803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the good and amicable atmosphere in the party</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td>1.091</td>
<td>1.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material incentives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the help and counselling offered when I encountered problems</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.196</td>
<td>2.418</td>
<td>1.356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good contacts with politicians can be useful in obtaining benefits</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>.185</td>
<td>1.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To obtain a job or political mandate</td>
<td>.179</td>
<td>.329</td>
<td>.298</td>
<td>1.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family party membership (same party)</td>
<td>.849</td>
<td>.109***</td>
<td>60.901</td>
<td>2.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.154</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nagelkerke’s $R^2 = 0.11$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; p $< 0.001$
Table 5. Binominal logistic regression with frequency of being a candidate for an internal function or position (more than once or not) as a dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (reference: older than 65)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 35 years old</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>.207</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 35 and 65 years old</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.632</td>
<td>1.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woman (dummy)</strong></td>
<td>-.323</td>
<td>.130*</td>
<td>6.188</td>
<td>.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of education (reference: university)</strong></td>
<td>***</td>
<td>38.801</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower education or no degree</td>
<td>-1.197</td>
<td>.423**</td>
<td>8.007</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>-.944</td>
<td>.253***</td>
<td>13.938</td>
<td>.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher secondary</td>
<td>-.835</td>
<td>.170***</td>
<td>24.247</td>
<td>.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher non-university</td>
<td>-.100</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td>.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purposive incentives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I agree with the socio-economic points of view of my party</td>
<td>-.138</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>1.274</td>
<td>.871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of idealism</td>
<td>1.055</td>
<td>.122***</td>
<td>74.353</td>
<td>2.872</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social incentives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the pleasant and interesting activities they are organizing</td>
<td>.456</td>
<td>.304</td>
<td>2.256</td>
<td>1.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because friends asked me</td>
<td>-.356</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>2.743</td>
<td>.700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the good and amicable atmosphere in the party</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.411</td>
<td>1.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material incentives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the help and counseling offered when I encountered problems</td>
<td>-.126</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.201</td>
<td>.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good contacts with politicians can be useful in obtaining benefits</td>
<td>-.064</td>
<td>.338</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To obtain a job or political mandate</td>
<td>.708</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td>3.520</td>
<td>2.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family party membership (same party)</strong></td>
<td>.330</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>5.300</td>
<td>1.391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>-1.625</td>
<td>.233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nagelkerke’s $R^2 = 0.11$; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; p < 0.001