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# Friend or Foe? Digital Technologies and the Changing Nature of Party Membership

RACHEL GIBSON, FABIENNE GREFFET, and MARTA CANTIJOCH

*As membership levels decline, parties are developing new forms of linkage with supporters, many of which rely on Internet technologies. To date, the discussion of these new modes of affiliation has been largely theoretical in nature, with little, if any, systematic empirical analysis undertaken on their appeal and impact on formal membership. This article seeks to fill this gap by examining the presence of three new types of digital affiliation—audience, friends, and digital activists—among the French electorate using original survey data from the 2012 Presidential election. Our findings are important in showing that while the new methods of affiliation are increasing parties’ reach into society, they are not necessarily widening parties’ socioeconomic support base. Furthermore, digital activism is mostly a supplementary channel for members’ input although there are a smaller group of people engaging in these activities that avoid formal membership ties. Such results suggest that digital methods of affiliation might offer an important new resource to parties during campaigns.*

**Keywords** campaigns, digital, France, online, party members

## Introduction

Party decline is a widely documented phenomenon. The evidence typically cited to demonstrate parties’ diminishing status includes falling rates of partisanship and membership among the electorate (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012; Whiteley, 2011). While the consequence of such losses for parties’ ability to carry out their key functions of policymaking and leadership recruitment have been questioned (Katz & Mair, 1995), such trends clearly challenge parties’ claims to be a primary linkage mechanism between state and society. Not surprisingly, the past two decades have seen parties respond to these problems with organizational reforms designed to extend their current membership base. While these initiatives have not been exclusively reliant on the Internet, digital technology underpins many of these new modes of affiliation.

The proliferation of alternative forms of partisan affiliation has resulted in new “lighter” categories of membership being added to the lexicon of party scholarship. Scarrow (2014) in particular has done important work in mapping the new terrain and

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speculating on how these changes will affect party organizational health. To date, however, there has been little, if any, empirical investigation of the questions raised by these new categories of support, and how they impact traditional party membership. How widespread are they? Who is engaging in them? And do they simply extend existing channels for member input? Or, do they offer the basis for a more “multi-speed” model of affiliation that draws new people into party politics?

This article addresses these questions with survey data drawn from voters and party activists during the French Presidential election of 2012. An election campaign was seen as particularly relevant for this analysis since this is a time when parties make extensive efforts to recruit supporters and we would expect the new forms of activism to be at a peak. Our analysis proceeds in three stages. First we build on the existing literature to specify three new forms of affiliation to parties that rely primarily on digital technology. We then measure the extent to which the three forms exist within the wider public and who is engaging in them. Finally, we examine the relationship between digital affiliation and traditional party membership with a particular focus on measuring the extent of overlap. Are these new forms of digital affiliation really opening up new channels that widen the reach of parties to new supporters? Or do they largely form new ways for existing members to exert further power within their organizations? The research is important in providing one of the first empirical insights into the popularity reach and finally impact of these new types of party “membership.” Are they allowing parties to recruit more supporters from new sectors of society? If so, how active and influential are individuals compared with existing members?

## **Party Membership in the Digital Age**

The decline in party membership within Western democracies is a widely documented trend that began before the arrival of the Internet as a mass medium. Although the implications for parties’ continued relevance and functioning may not be as dire as initially feared in that the composition of membership appears to have remained reasonably diverse (van Biezen et al., 2012), such trends clearly threaten parties’ legitimacy as conduits between governing elites and wider civil society. Also, in practical terms they can lead to a reduction in the resources—both financial and human—that parties typically draw on to help fight election campaigns. In the face of such challenges parties have responded by developing new supporter networks that lower the barrier to membership (Cross & Gauja, 2014; Gauja, 2014; Hansen & Kosiara-Pederson, 2014; Scarrow, 2014). Underpinning these efforts has been an increasing reliance on digital communication tools to help recruit volunteer labor, particularly during election campaigns (Gibson, 2015; Gueorguieva, 2008; Kreiss, 2012). The growth in these new types of virtual support networks has thus become a focus of interest for both party and communications scholars.

Among party scholars the work of Scarrow (2014) has been particularly useful in mapping the new forms of attachment which she captures in her “multi-speed” model of membership. Specifically, she identifies six modes of party involvement that range from traditional dues-paying loyalists to a more ephemeral party audience. Of the modes identified, three in particular rely heavily, if not exclusively, on digital technology. The most obvious of these are the “cyber-members,” who are registered online supporters that maintain a predominantly virtual relationship with the party, although they can also engage in offline supporting activities such as canvassing. Typically they would be given login access to special areas of parties’ websites and proprietary campaign resources but they do not have an attachment to a local branch or rights to vote on matters of party policy. In

addition, there are the somewhat less formalized group of party “followers” who regularly receive news and information via social network sites and e-mail that they then circulate and virally promote through their online contacts. Finally, there is the more amorphous category of “news audience,” who are primarily interested in consuming party information. This consumption could involve reading party publications and watching coverage of party conferences, but is more likely to take the form of reading party e-newsletters and paying attention to the party’s website.

Despite the potential significance of the emergence of these new lighter forms of party membership, empirical study of this trend has been minimal. A small number of studies have examined use of new technologies among party members in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia and compared the profile of those joining online to those recruited offline. Conclusions have unsurprisingly shown the former group are increasing and there is now a growing group of online-only members who do not attend any physical meetings. While there is some evidence to suggest they are not as active and engaged as their offline counterparts, the authors are cautious to draw any clear conclusions at this point (Gibson & Ward, 1999; Heidar, Kosiara-Pedersen, & Saglie, 2012; Pedersen & Saglie, 2005; Lusoli & Ward, 2004). Precise estimates for these newer types of non-member digital affiliation are even more limited. The 2008 U.S. election provided a focal point for investigation with several scholars identifying a new “co-production” or “citizen-initiated” mode of campaigning (CIC) (Gibson, 2015; Gueorguieva, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Kalnes, 2009; Karlsen, 2013; Kreiss, 2012; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). This involved ordinary supporters signing up to candidates’ campaigns through specialist Web portals that then allowed them to conduct key tasks such as fund-raising, event organization, and message creation. At the time it was claimed that as many as 2 million people had taken the opportunity to engage in CIC based on the sign-figures up for My.BarackObama.com (Gibson, 2015). Given the lack of opportunity for formal party membership in the United States, however, these numbers should clearly be treated with caution as a measure of the popularity of the forms of digital affiliation. Subsequent estimates of the take-up of CIC initiatives in other countries have indicated a more limited appeal. Reports from the 2010 UK general election, for example, reported a much more modest take up for MyConservatives.com of a few hundred thousand (Ridge-Newman, 2014).

### Analytical Framework

Building on these studies, we identify three new modes of affiliation to parties that digital technologies either introduce or enable in a more widespread manner than was previously possible. The first mode is that of *digital activist*. This corresponds to the cyber-member category of Scarrow but removes reference to *member* given the foregoing point that engaging in it does not necessitate joining the party. As such, it conforms more to the co-production role referred to earlier. The second category is that of *friend*, which corresponds primarily to the follower category in the multi-speed model. While the change in terminology might appear a semantic quibble, we consider *follower* misses the expressive and collective aspects of this form of affiliation and blurs the line with *audience*. In following a party through Twitter and particularly in liking it on Facebook, one is making some form of public declaration of support, at least within one’s online networks, and also opening up a new channel for personalized communication from the party and/or its leader. While the direction of that communication is typically downward, it can involve the receiver responding to and/or sharing information with others. Furthermore, in following the party in this manner one is joining a wider community of like-minded individuals.

We argue that the declarative, self-initiating, interactive, and communal dimensions of this type of affiliation make the descriptor of *friend* more accurate than that of *follower*. Finally, we adopt the term *audience* to refer to the wider pool of interested supporters that simply consume party news either by visiting the website or reading their blogs and/or receiving some type of e-news. The key difference from *friends* is that such individuals have not made their interest in the party public and sought to share this statement of support within their online network. Figure 1 presents our attempt to capture the three new types of affiliation we argue that digital technology has prompted within political parties.

The categories are not mutually exclusive in that *digital activists* can also be *friends* and form part of the *audience*. We do expect the items to align in an ordered manner, however, with the more intensive modes (i.e., digital activism) being more likely to attract a smaller group of adherents that engage in all three types of activity. Conversely, the “easiest” mode of affiliation (i.e., *audience*) is likely to attract more people but have less overlap with the other, more active categories. Finally, we expect that there would also be overlap between the categories and traditional membership and those who engaged with the party as *digital activists*, *friends*, and *audience*. The key question, however, is what is the extent of that overlap? Do these new forms of digital affiliation supplement members’ input or do they provide opportunities for new relationships to be created with supporters, short of formally joining the party?

### Multi-Speed Party Membership in France

Before presenting our specific research questions and the data used to interrogate them, we reflect on recent developments in French parties’ organization, membership levels, and

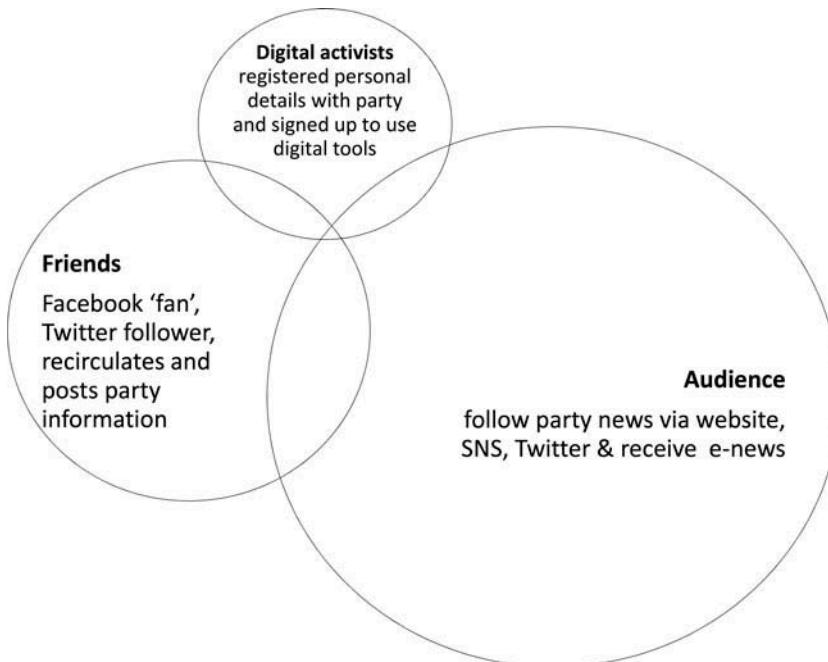


Figure 1. Types of party affiliation.

how well they correspond to the multi-speed model, particularly in their use of digital tools. A first point to note is that the decline of party membership in France is not as pronounced as in other countries. On closer inspection, this apparent “advantage” fades away, however, when it is revealed that levels of identification and trust in French parties have been among the lowest observed in established democracies.<sup>1</sup> In 2009, France ranked twenty-third out of 27 European countries in its levels of party membership per capita (1.9%). While one might argue that such conditions make France less than ideal for purposes of this analysis, this is countered by the fact that it is one of the few established democracies where we have seen a substantial increase in party membership since the turn of the century (van Biezen et al., 2012). Furthermore, this expansion has occurred during a period in which parties have been lowering the costs of joining and also offering a range of new “member-lite” categories of affiliation.

Prior to the 2007 election, both major right- and left-wing parties reduced their joining fees (Haegel, 2011). The Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) succeeded in replenishing membership levels to around 260,000 by the end of 2011 although the surge ended after Sarkozy’s election in 2012. The Socialists witnessed a similar swelling in their ranks, although reports indicated that two-thirds of the new “20 euro” members did not renew their membership the following year. The party then took the unprecedented step of opening up its Presidential nominating process by introducing “open primaries” in October 2011 (Lefebvre, 2013). For the princely sum of one euro, any interested citizen could cast a vote to select their preferred candidate. Around 2.7 million French citizens participated in the first round of voting, and nearly 3 million in the second. These efforts were accompanied by the establishment of the Socialists online network *La Coopol* in 2010 and the right wing’s somewhat less successful version shortly afterward, *Les Créateurs de possible*. Both initiatives were designed to allow members and particularly non-members the chance to participate more in party matters. For the 2012 election both Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy developed their own personalized portals—[www.toushollande.fr](http://www.toushollande.fr) and [www.lafranceforte.fr](http://www.lafranceforte.fr)—which explicitly followed the U.S. model of online activist recruitment, again with membership being optional. Such efforts have not been restricted to the major players, with some of the more prominent minor parties such as the Greens (EELV) and the far right Front National offering similar mechanisms for interested individuals to become more involved in their campaigns and activities, short of joining.

## Research Questions

The preceding section has shown how party activism and attachment in France are changing and widening and also how a multi-speed membership model, and particularly the new categories of digital affiliation, are becoming increasingly relevant for understanding those changes. It remains unclear, however, how widely practiced the new types of affiliation are in the wider population. Who engages in them? Also, how do they relate to formal membership ties? Do they simply offer new channels for members to engage in party matters? Or do they provide a way for those who would not otherwise join a party to become more involved in partisan activities? Perhaps both trends are occurring simultaneously?

In this article we address this debate by distilling three core research questions for empirical analysis. The first is descriptive and centers on measuring the extent of these new forms of digital affiliation within the electorate. The second question delves below the top line numbers and asks who it is that is engaging in these new modes of association. How similar or different are they to one another and to the wider population? The third

question focuses on the relationship between these new types of affiliation and formal membership. Are these new channels primarily supplementing the input of existing members? Or do they offer an important new way for those not interested in joining to opt in to support party activities? If so, what do the latter add in terms of activism to the party and wider campaign? To answer these questions we first operationalize our three categories of online affiliation using indicators drawn from two post-election surveys fielded after the 2012 Presidential campaign. We use the first survey to report their distribution across the electorate as a whole and compare the sociodemographic and political correlates of each type against one another and the wider French public. We then use the second survey to see how far each category overlaps or remains exclusive with party membership. If independence is observed we compare the sociodemographics and levels of campaign activism of our three types of digital affiliate non-members with party members.

### **Data and Measures of Digital Party Affiliation**

The data used to answer our research questions are taken from two election surveys. The first is a nationally representative face-to-face survey conducted by the Centre d'Études Européennes at Sciences Po and fielded by TNS Sofres on a probability sample of French voters after the second round of the election.<sup>2</sup> In addition to a wide range of typical election study questions we also included a special battery of items regarding citizens' use of online media to conduct political activities, including helping the parties and candidates during the election. The overall size of the French sample was  $N = 2,014$ , of which there was a subsample of 1,481 Internet users.<sup>3</sup>

The second data source is an online post-election survey that was targeted at party activists and fielded after the second round of the Presidential election.<sup>4</sup> This survey ([www.webinpolitics.com](http://www.webinpolitics.com)) used snowball sampling to recruit participants and was posted on a range of blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts likely to be popular with party members and activists. All the messages publicizing the survey invited people to forward or retweet a link to the questionnaire to increase the response rate. Beyond this open invitation we also sent individual messages via e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter to a randomly selected group of people who had commented on at least one of the five official party/candidate platforms (websites, Facebook Youtube, Dailymotion, and Twitter) that were operated by the six main candidates (Sarkozy, Hollande, Mélenchon, Le Pen, Bayrou, and Joly). A total of 900 people were selected through this process and contacted twice.<sup>5</sup> This yielded a total of 117 completed questionnaires. In addition, personal messages including a link to the questionnaire and request to forward it were sent through e-mail or Twitter to up to 50 known party officials and members. A total of 137 questionnaires were collected this way. Finally, a number of party-member forums, official party/candidates websites, political blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts agreed to post a fixed link to the questionnaire on their site. This resulted in 573 additional completed surveys. The overall number of respondents was 827. Given the self-selected nature of the sample it is not possible to calculate the non-response rate and the extent to which we successfully captured our population of interest—online party supporters. Given we asked for the party affiliations of respondents, however, we were able to see how well the survey represented different political viewpoints and the extent to which any obvious bias existed in the partisan distribution of the sample.

Although the questions used to measure our types of digital party affiliation were not identical in the two surveys, there was sufficient common ground to allow for a comparability of specification across data sets. For the French national election study, three



questions were used to measure the categories of *audience*, *friends*, and *digital activists*, respectively. For *audience* we used the question of whether they had “read or accessed the website of a party or candidate.”<sup>6</sup> For *friends* we used the question of if they had “registered as a supporter, friend, or follower of a party or candidate on their website or on social networks.” Finally, *digital activists* were measured by an item that asked if they had used “online tools to assist a party or candidate in their campaign.” In order to ensure respondents fell into only one group we followed a stepwise logic that was based around the expected levels of intensity of activism associated with each type discussed earlier. This meant that we constrained the *audience* category to include those who had accessed websites but had not engaged in either of the other two activities. The *friends* category included all those who had registered as supporters and may also have viewed party sites but who had not engaged in any type of digital activism. *Digital activists* could have engaged in the other two forms of activity but must have used party tools during the campaign. Respondents not falling into any category were classified as non-affiliates.

For the online survey of party activists we had a wider range of measures for all three types of digital affiliation and, importantly, we also had measures of traditional membership. As in the national election study, each category is exclusive in that an individual cannot be included twice. *Audience* was measured by a question asking if a respondent had accessed a candidate or party website, Facebook page, Twitter account, or signed up for a newsfeed/newsletter. The *friend* category was measured by a series of questions that included whether a respondent had followed a party or candidate on Twitter but also included some further sharing and dissemination activities such as if they had displayed their support publicly on their Twitter or Facebook page through a badge or button, joined a Facebook group to support or attack a party or candidate, or sent an e-mail (positive or negative) about a candidate. For *digital activists* we used a measure of whether respondents had opened an account with one of the candidate campaign websites. This is a more specific measure than that used in the French National Election Study, which we acknowledge is likely to reduce the numbers included in this category. However, it does constitute a more precise indicator of the core activity of interest here (i.e., registering formally as a supporter with one of the parties). Furthermore, all of the main candidates did offer a facility for this during the campaign.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to our main measures of digital affiliation, the surveys also contained standard socio-demographic variables and indicators of important political attitudes and behaviors. These were used to address our second and third research questions and we expand on the measures and methods used to address these questions in more depth in the sections that follow.<sup>8</sup>

#### Research Question 1: The Size and Scope of New Forms of Digital Affiliation to Political Parties

Table 1 reports the distribution of the three types of digital affiliates within the electorate as a whole as measured by the national survey. The figures make it clear that these activities are confined to a small minority of the population with the most popular mode of engagement—*audience*—being engaged in by 10% of the general population. Furthermore, given we are measuring these activities during a Presidential election when we might expect an upswing of interest in accessing party websites to occur, then it is likely that this figure is at the upper end of the scale. Looking across the three modes, as expected, the rates of involvement in the more demanding roles of *friend* and particularly *digital activist* are much less common. Despite the small number of adherents, however, if

**Table 1**  
Types of digital affiliates in France 2012

	Audience	Friends	Digital Activists	Non-affiliates
% of total sample	9.9	7.1	2.3	80.7
% of Internet users	12.8	9.2	2.9	75.1
<i>N</i>	199	144	45	2,014 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*N* from the total sample. *Source*: French National Election Study, 2012, weighted data (by gender, age, occupation, and results of the Presidential election). See design study report at [http://www.cses.org/datacenter/module4/design/FRA\\_2012\\_Design.pdf](http://www.cses.org/datacenter/module4/design/FRA_2012_Design.pdf) for further details on sample construction.

one interprets *audience* and *friends* as new categories of partisan affiliation then they are clearly extending parties' reach beyond the 2% which we earlier reported as constituting the proportion of the population classed as party members.

#### Research Question 2: Who are the digital activists, friends, and audience?

Having established the size of each type of digital affiliation within the wider population, we turn to look at who is engaging in them and how distinctive they are in sociodemographic and political terms? To do so we conducted a multinomial logistic regression analysis of Internet users that compared each of our three categories against the one for those undertaking none of the actions specified (i.e., non-affiliates).<sup>9</sup> Our explanatory model included age, gender, and education along with levels of interest in politics, trust in politicians, and satisfaction with democracy. These latter three variables are important for discriminating among the groups' levels of engagement in political matters and their levels of specific and diffuse support for the current political system. The results are reported in Table 2.

The results confirm that there are significant differences in the types of people engaging in each of the new modes of party affiliation, and also between each group and the wider population of non-affiliates. Unsurprisingly, all three groups tend to display a greater-than-average level of interest in politics and also typically have higher levels of efficacy than the ordinary voter. In addition, they are more likely to be younger. Beyond these commonalities, however, there are some interesting differences. Notably, *audience* members, despite being the largest of the three groups, are not the most heterogeneous in socioeconomic terms. As well as being more highly educated than the average voter, they are also more likely to be male. Party *friends*, while also more highly educated, are in fact more gender balanced. Finally, digital activists are perhaps most surprising in that aside from age, they are most similar in their socioeconomic characteristics to the wider population of all the digital affiliate categories. In political terms, *audience* members are generally more trusting of politicians than the population as a whole and when compared with *friends*. The latter, however, see themselves as better able to understand politics. The most distinctive political profile belongs to the digital activists, however. As one might expect, they are the most interested in politics, but are also more efficacious and trusting of politicians than the other digital affiliate types and compared with the public as a whole. On a more negative note, however, they show significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction with the working of democracy in France. These findings are interesting on a number of levels. First, they reveal that party activism online is not dominated by social elites but appears to be engaged in by quite a wide swath of society. Less intense forms of digital

**Table 2**  
 Multinomial regression model of digital affiliation types, French election study representative sample

Ref. Category = "Non-affiliates"	"Audience"			"Friend"			"Digital Activist"		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.
Age	-0.031	0.006	0.000	-0.009	0.006	0.151	-0.040	0.011	0.000
Gender (female)	-0.401	0.168	0.017	0.012	0.189	0.951	-0.557	0.347	0.109
Education	0.380	0.079	0.000	0.311	0.086	0.000	-0.102	0.151	0.501
Political trust	0.104	0.044	0.019	-0.015	0.049	0.764	0.268	0.088	0.002
Political efficacy	0.070	0.038	0.064	0.101	0.041	0.014	0.137	0.067	0.040
Interest in politics	0.707	0.110	0.000	0.854	0.125	0.000	1.947	0.250	0.000
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.159	0.123	0.198	-0.136	0.137	0.321	-0.634	0.226	0.005
Constant	-3.181	0.409	0.000	-4.486	0.476	0.000	-7.003	0.928	0.000
Pseudo- $R^2$	0.135								
$N$	1,442								

*Note.* Non-internet users excluded from the analysis. Weighted data (by gender, age, occupation, and results of the Presidential election). *Source:* French National Election Study representative sample, 2012.

association by contrast actually appear to draw in a more elitist segment of society. Second, they present an interesting twist on the “critical citizens” thesis that has gained ground as characterizing postindustrial politics. Specifically, those people who are most active in supporting parties and candidates’ online campaign activities are typically more trusting and supportive of politicians and are confident in their own capacity to influence political elites. They do, however, have strong concerns and anxieties about the functioning of French democracy as a whole.

### Research Question 3: Digital activists, friends, and audience, and Party Membership

To examine the relationship of these new types of digital affiliates and traditional party members we used the second data source—the webpolitics.com online survey of party activists. We undertake three main steps of the analysis in this regard. First, we report the proportion of members and non-members in the overall sample and then within each of our digital affiliation categories. Second, we compare the profiles of each type of non-member digital affiliate to the membership as a whole to see how different or similar they are in political and socioeconomic terms. Finally, we assess the levels of online and offline political civic activism of members compared with non-member digital affiliates. We do so using a set of four additive indices that were constructed to provide comparable measures of partisan and communal activism in the digital and real worlds. The specific items used to create the indices are detailed next. The measures are important in allowing us to understand the extent to which these new digital adherents that do not join the party are actually providing extra resources for parties over and above what they gain through member activity. Furthermore, is that extra resource limited to the online campaign sphere only or does it translate into additional offline and community activism as well?

Tables 3 and 4 address the first question of member versus non-member presence and overlap in the online activist sample. Table 3 replicates Table 1 and reports the frequencies of each of our three types of digital affiliates and non-affiliates. The results show an interesting reversal of the national sample with *digital activists* and *friends* being the most numerous types, and *audience* and non-affiliates the smallest group.

As a first step to explore the relationship of digital affiliation with party membership, we compare the proportion of members and non-members in the sample. We find that just under two-fifths of the sample (38.8%) had either joined a party or renewed their membership in the past 12 months. The majority of those renewals (63%) had been done online. Thus, despite constituting a minority of the activist sample, party members are clearly

**Table 3**  
Distribution of digital affiliates: Activist sample

	% Total Sample	% Affiliates	N
Non-affiliates	8.9	/	74
Audience	18.9	20.7	156
Friends	53.2	58.5	440
Digital activists	19.0	20.8	157
Total	100	100	753

*Note.* Seventy-four individuals are “non-affiliates,” including two offline party members (2.7%); they are not included in Table 5. *Source:* webinpolitics.com survey, 2012.

**Table 4**  
Overlap in membership and digital affiliation: Activist sample

	% Total Sample	% Within Category	N
Audience non-member	16.7	81	126
Audience members	4	19	30
Friend non-member	35.1	60	264
Friend members	23.4	40	176
Digital activist non-member	5.8	18	44
Digital activist member	15.0	72	113
Total	100		753

*Note:* The table excludes 74 individuals who are “non-digital affiliates,” including two offline party members (2.7%). *Source:* webinpolitics.com survey, 2012.

highly overrepresented compared to their presence in the population as a whole (as reported earlier). It also comes as no surprise to find that levels of political interest and education in the sample are also skewed toward the upper limits.<sup>10</sup> Given our interest is in probing the implications of these new types of affiliation for party membership, however, we do not see these biases as problematic. Furthermore, from a statistical perspective given the overall sample size, a greater parity between party members and non-members is welcome in providing a more robust basis for the subsequent analysis.

Table 4 probes the member/non-member division in more detail, comparing the proportion of each category of digital affiliates that are also party members. The results reveal that the *audience* group has the lowest proportion of members within it, while *digital activists* have the highest ratio. Just under three-quarters (72%) of all *digital activists* are also members while fewer than one-quarter of the *audience* (19%) are also members. *Friends* are more evenly balanced, with around two-fifths of *friends* (40%) also being members. These findings are important in that they confirm digital technologies are opening up new channels for members to help the party. However, more crucially perhaps, they also show that they offer a means for supporters who choose not to join to get involved in the campaign at quite high levels of activism. Subsequent probing of the distribution of partisan support within the sample (using reported vote in the first round of the 2012 Presidential election) reveals that supporters of the Greens and the radical left are most widely represented in our analysis and those for National Front and right-wing parties are underrepresented. While we accept that this distribution may reflect the stronger recruitment efforts by these leftist parties to circulate the survey link, the findings do provide at least preliminary evidence to suggest that it is parties of the left who are benefiting most from the new pool of online activism available to them.<sup>11</sup>

To more systematically investigate the relationship between digital affiliation and membership and thereby address our third research question, we undertake a multivariate analysis similar to that used in our analysis of the national sample. Here we compare each type of digital affiliate non-member against the reference category of members. This approach allows us to scrutinize this interesting segment of digital affiliates that are supporting candidates online but appear to resist joining the parties. For consistency purposes we include the same set of sociodemographic and political predictor variables. We add one further variable that measures whether an individual received online contact from a party or candidate. This helps us to control for any potential over-recruitment bias

associated with the snowball sample method whereby certain parties made a more organized and intensive effort to contact their supporters to take the survey. Given the characteristics of the sample, the estimation of standard errors and *p*-values has been conducted using a bootstrap method.<sup>12</sup> Table 5 presents the results.

A key point to emerge from this analysis is that compared with our comparison of the three categories to the wider electorate it is clear that sociological factors do not allow us to discriminate clearly between the online supporters of parties and their formal members. People who engage with parties and candidates online as *audience*, *friend*, or *digital activists* are generally not that dissimilar to members in age, education, and gender.<sup>13</sup> Such findings are consonant with the earlier findings that the new looser forms of digital association to parties are not necessarily drawing in a more diverse sociological base.

In political terms, however, the story is rather different in that non-member digital supporters do appear to be less politically engaged and trusting of parties than members. This is particularly the case for the more casual forms of digital support (i.e., *audience* and *friends*). *Digital activists* are the most similar to formal party members with the exception that they are significantly less likely to feel close to a party. Thus it would seem all forms of digital support are pulling in a group of voters that might otherwise be likely to be active in party politics but maintain a critical distance from them. Interestingly, levels of satisfaction with democracy are higher among *friends* compared to party members. The coefficient for *digital activists* is also positive and close to significance. This finding, in contrast with the results of Table 2, sets up the interesting conundrum that while digital affiliates and particularly *digital activists* tend to be more critical of how French democracy works compared to the average citizen, they are actually more supportive of the way democracy works in France than regular party members. This combination of political attitudes could help explain their choice of a loose yet engaged affiliation with political parties. They have concerns about democracy but are not so aggrieved that they consider the need to become more continuously involved through party membership to help to “fix” the problem. Finally, the results for the party contact variable are interesting in that aside from controlling for any over-recruitment by certain parties, they show that *audience* and *friends* are less likely than members to be contacted by parties, which is as we would expect. However, digital activist non-members are in fact just as likely to be contacted online as those who are members.

As a final step of this section of the analysis, we examine the behavioral impact of these differences on levels of campaign activism and more general levels of civic or nonpartisan activities. To do so we examined levels of online and offline political and civic engagement for each of our digital affiliate types, differentiated according to member and non-member status. Two indices measured party and campaign engagement online and offline while the other two measured online and offline civic activism.<sup>14</sup> The results are reported in Table 6. Given the space available, we do not report the results of each individual comparison of means for each category across the indices but highlight the significant ones.<sup>15</sup>

The results are interesting in that they reveal a uniform rise in online campaign activism across the three types of digital affiliate with the weakest mode being the least active. Interestingly, this trend holds, irrespective of member status. Thus while *audience* non-members are least active and *digital activist* members are most active, within this range of engagement, individuals who were both part of the *audience* and also party members were in fact less active than *friends* who were non-members. Similarly *friend* members were less active than *digital activist* non-members. This pattern is disrupted,

**Table 5**  
Multinomial regression model of digital affiliation types: Activist sample

Ref. Category = "Party Members"	"Audience (non-member)"			"Friend (non-member)"			"Digital Activist (non-member)"		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Sig.
Age	0.000	0.010	0.979	-0.007	0.008	0.347	0.011	0.012	0.341
Gender (female)	-0.263	0.230	0.254	-0.401	0.182	0.028	-0.030	0.378	0.936
Education	0.026	0.155	0.869	-0.109	0.118	0.355	-0.349	0.205	0.089
Political trust	-0.646	0.191	0.001	-0.682	0.152	0.000	-0.086	0.297	0.772
Political efficacy	0.093	0.110	0.394	-0.029	0.072	0.685	0.205	0.183	0.262
Interest in politics	-0.948	0.303	0.002	-0.398	0.226	0.079	0.097	0.552	0.861
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.005	0.162	0.976	0.287	0.113	0.011	0.422	0.220	0.055
Party closeness	-1.630	0.245	0.000	-1.325	0.196	0.000	-1.272	0.302	0.000
Party contact	-1.071	0.258	0.000	-0.812	0.172	0.000	0.160	0.405	0.693
Constant	8.082	1.546	0.000	6.817	1.371	0.000	-0.024	2.558	0.993
Pseudo- $R^2$	0.140								
$N$	738								

*Note.* Bootstrap estimation of standard errors. *Source:* webinpolitics.com survey, 2012.

however, when it comes to offline modes of campaign involvement, in that members are clearly much more active irrespective of their digital affiliate status. Finally, we look at rates of civic engagement across the six groups and here we see a preference for online versus offline activism become much less pronounced.

One clear and important finding to emerge from this section of the analysis in relation to our starting questions is that digital affiliates who do not join the party tend to confine their partisan activism to the online sphere. By contrast, members are more likely to be active in both online and offline spheres. When it comes to wider forms of civic and communal activity, this difference in preference for mode disappears for non-member digital affiliates who are as active (or inactive) in the offline sphere as they are online.

These findings combined with our earlier analysis of the differences in political attitudes between digital affiliates and the wider electorate suggest that digital channels may be providing a new space for party politics to occur that is expanding rather than simply substituting or reinforcing existing levels of activism. From our initial national sample we have seen that these digital affiliates are generally more trusting, efficacious, and interested in politics than the average voter, although there is some skepticism about the overall health of democracy in France among the more activist types. We also know from our second sample that digital affiliates who do not join a party are typically more critical of parties than the average member and also much more inclined toward using online tools if they are politically active. As such, it would seem the online environment may be opening up a way for individuals who want to support a party's campaign effort and perhaps a particular candidate but do not necessarily want to join the party to get involved. Given that members are also highly engaged in these other modes of affiliation,

**Table 6**  
Levels of political engagement by type of affiliation: Activist sample

	Online Campaign Engagement	Offline Campaign Engagement	Online Civic Engagement	Offline Civic Engagement	N
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
Audience non-members	0.69	0.27	0.71	0.78	126
Audience members	1.26	1.40	0.93	0.90	30
Friend non-members	1.33	0.66	0.92	0.72	264
Friend members	1.99	1.90	1.35	1.06	176
Digital activist non-members	2.04	1.07	1.11	0.77	44
Digital activist members	2.61	2.61	1.59	1.07	113
Total	1.61	1.23	1.09	0.87	753

*Note.* For items used to construct indices, see Note 14.

*Source:* webinpolitics.com survey, 2012.



it would seem that there is a possible dual track for digital activism emerging in parties. The first forms an adjunct or support for party members and the second is a more informal and independent pathway that exists outside the official channels of affiliation.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This article has developed the multi-speed framework of Scarrow (2014) to specify three new types of partisan affiliation that rely on digital technology—*audience*, *friends*, and *digital activists*. While not necessarily incompatible with traditional membership, each type constitutes an alternative and increasingly active mode of party involvement. Using two data sources, we have analyzed the social and activist profile of those engaging in them, comparing this to the wider population and established members.

Our results have shown that French parties are using digital tools to build up an online *audience*, as well as set of *friends* and *activists*. Furthermore, these new forms of digital affiliation intertwine with “traditional” party membership to varying degrees. While there is a considerable degree of overlap for *digital activists*, the majority of *friends* and *audience* are not party members. Probing further into the social characteristics of the new affiliates, we find that they do not differ markedly from the existing membership base with a slight exception in regard to age. Specifically, *friends* are somewhat younger than existing members. Given that all the members included here are online, this finding carries more weight as there is likely to be less variance in age across the two groups than would the case if offline members were included. We also see a broad similarity in levels of civic and community involvement among the new digital affiliates and members, suggesting again they are drawn from a fairly small section of engaged citizens.

Where differences do exist they center on political attitudes and behavior, with non-member digital affiliates typically displaying a greater distance from parties than members. For those with the weaker type of digital ties (*audience* and *friends*), there is also a lower propensity to undertake campaign actions for the party during the election. That said, the fact that such individuals are paying attention to partisan sources during the campaign and are willing to publicly declare their support for a candidate can be seen as a small but potentially important new channel for expressing interest in party politics. Whether that relationship can be nurtured into something stronger is clearly a question for further longitudinal study.

Among the minority of *digital activists* who are not members, there is a much stronger commitment to helping a candidate, although this does not translate into the offline sphere. Given their lower levels of partisanship, one can begin to build a picture of this group as people who are happy to help candidates online in fighting elections, but stop short of committing themselves to parties formally and taking action in the offline world. Again, whether this commitment could solidify into something more permanent and “real world” for parties over time is a topic for future research. At minimum, however, our results suggest that if parties continue to promote these new forms of digital affiliation they are likely to see the emergence of a more blended model of campaign management, whereby the traditional membership are supported by less formally committed partisans who offer selective or “lighter” forms of online-only input.

While we remain cautious of overstating the generalizability of our findings outside of the French case, it is clear that French parties have come to be regarded as pioneers in lowering barriers to membership and opening up decision-making processes to the grass-roots. The resultant swelling of their membership ranks will not have escaped the notice of party elites in other countries. As such, one might anticipate their use of digital tools to enhance membership options to inform practice elsewhere. Certainly if the results of this

analysis are anything to go by then one might expect a re-evaluation by party elites of the role and value of traditional membership. While it clearly remains the “frontline” and driver of campaign activity (particularly in the offline domain) it is certainly not the only fruit on offer. Looser forms of digital connection to parties do exist and they are extending the breadth if not depth of parties’ reach into society. Whether they can provide a new ladder of engagement into party politics remains to be seen.

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## Notes

1. Recent Eurobarometer 80 reports show France at half (7%) of European Union (EU) average of 14% saying they trust parties (Autumn 2013). Data available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/cb/cb80/cb80\\_anx\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/cb/cb80/cb80_anx_en.pdf).
2. The French National Election Study 2012. The authors thank Nicolas Sauger for making the data available.
3. A proportion of the sample (73.5%) did not have access to the Internet, which meant they could not engage in online activities. This proportion is consistent with, albeit slightly lower than, that reported by other sources. According to the World Bank, 81.4% of the population had accessed the Internet during the previous 12 months in France in 2012 (see <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>). The figures from the French National Election Study may be slightly lower given that the sample is restricted to those 18 years old and older and includes French citizens registered to vote.
4. May 6 to May 27, 2012.
5. Full details of the selection process and URLs used are available from the authors upon request.
6. See Appendix A for full question wording.
7. For example, Hollande’s *TousHollande*, Nicolas Sarkozy’s *La France Forte*, *marinelepen2012.fr*, *www.bayrou.fr*, as well as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s website, *placeaurope.fr*. These candidates and their parties also had Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.
8. See Appendix B for variable coding.
9. This decision was based on the consideration that our main focus is on how citizens engaged with the online campaign during the 2012 Presidential election. Also, from a methodological perspective inclusion of non-Internet users would mean they were coded as zero for the purposes of analysis and thus treated incorrectly as equivalent to those with access but who did not participate.
10. More than three-quarters of respondents (75.8%) said they were “very interested” in politics and a majority (57.4%) were highly educated, holding a postgraduate degree. There was also a gender bias in that three-fifths (61.9%) were male. In terms of ideological outlook the distribution tended to overrepresent leftist parties as compared with support in the wider French electorate.
11. The view that online political activists are more left-wing in France is in keeping with the extant literature (Gadras & Greffet, 2013). It is also possible that the distribution reflects our use of snowball sampling techniques and a greater efficiency by leftist parties in

recruiting respondents. The Greens and the Socialists both held party primaries in the preceding year to choose their Presidential nominee, which may have given them an advantage in developing and nurturing communication networks with their supporters. In addition, the research team were aware that Green party officials, including the head of the e-campaign team, were circulating the survey link on Twitter to encourage participation. Also, anecdotal evidence from discussions on radical-right forums and blogs where the survey link was mentioned suggested a stronger reluctance and even suspicion toward participation in the project than was seen among left-wing equivalents. That said, we can see that when the sample is restricted to members only we do see a reversal of partisan dominance in that right-wing parties are actually better represented than their left counterparts. Appendix C presents the full breakdown of vote choice among the overall activist sample, members only, and compares this to the national vote choice of the general electorate. Finally, to try to control for any bias that party recruitment efforts may have introduced to the analysis, we introduce a control for party contact in our multivariate analysis (see Table 5).

12. The objective of this non-parametric technique is to produce estimates that are based on the distribution function of the observed data. This is done through a process of resampling observations (with replacement) from this data. In this way, standard errors and  $p$ -values are not computed based on the assumptions of a known distribution (e.g., the multinomial distribution) but on the distribution of the sample itself.
13. One exception may be among the party *friends* where a negative coefficient for gender is significant, meaning that those engaging in this mode of party support are more likely to be male than the average member. On first view this does appear to run counter to the earlier findings, which revealed that it was audience members (not friends) that tended to be more male. However, this was a feature of audience in comparison to the population as a whole. Here we are comparing against a different reference group—online party members. Nevertheless, the fact that friends now overtake audience as the more male-dominated group of digital affiliates is somewhat surprising and suggests that despite the comparability of indicators we have for the core activities of each of the groups across the two surveys, our differing methods of recruitment (online and offline) may have introduced some socio-structural differences in the composition of the three groups, which reduces their direct comparability.
14. The index of party and campaign engagement online included three campaign actions and one party action: watching a video of a public meeting with a candidate; sending an e-mail to a candidate; downloading campaign material; and donating money to a party online (over the past 12 months). The index of party and campaign engagement offline is similarly composed of three campaign actions and one party action: attending a public meeting of a candidate; delivering leaflets and hanging posters; other campaign actions; and donating money to a party offline (over the past 12 months). The index of civic engagement online includes the following: signing an e-petition; buying products online for political, ethical, or environmental reasons; and volunteering online for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) or a charity (all over the past 12 months). The index of civic engagement offline includes the following: signing a paper petition; buying products (offline) for political, ethical, or environmental reasons; and volunteering (offline) for an NGO or a charity all over the past 12 months).
15. ANOVA results comparing differences of means show that all categories were significantly different ( $p > 0.05$ ) in the online party and campaign engagement except between audience members and friend non-members; and between friend members and digital activist non-members. In the index of offline party and campaign engagement the only differences that were not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ) were between audience members and friend members; audience members and digital activist non-members and friend non-members. For online civic engagement, differences were mostly insignificant except for digital activist members against all other categories other than friend members, and between audience non-members and friend members. For offline civic engagement, differences were also mostly non-significant with the

exception of friends non-members' scores, which were significantly lower than those of friend members and digital activist members.

16. Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur, <http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats>.  
 17. The results of two right-wing candidates (N. Sarkozy: 27, 2%, and N. Dupont-Aignan: 1.8%) are added to each other.

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**Appendix A: QUESTION WORDING FOR MEASURING Three CATEGORIES OF DIGITAL AFFILIATION**

	French National Election Study	Webinpolitics.com survey
Audience	<p>Respondents were counted as “Audience” when</p> <p>(1) they replied NO to the questions defining friends and digital activists</p> <p>(2) they replied YES to the following question:            “Can you tell me if, during the past month of the campaign for the Presidential election, you did one of the following activities on the Internet, in connection with political parties in France or candidates?”</p> <p>Read or accessed the website of a party or candidate?</p>	<p>Respondents were counted as “Audience” when</p> <p>(1) they replied NO to the questions defining friends and digital activists</p> <p>(2) they replied YES to at least one of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Regarding this presidential election, have you visited a candidate or a party website? ”</li> <li>- “Regarding this presidential election, have you visited a candidate or a party Facebook page?”</li> <li>- “Regarding this Presidential election, have you visited a candidate or a party Twitter account?”</li> <li>- “There are different actions related to the presidential campaign that one could do over the Web. During this campaign, have you, personally, given your contact information to be registered on a mailing list or to receive a newsletter about the campaign?”</li> <li>- “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, been registered to the RSS flux of a party or candidate website to keep informed about the campaign?”</li> </ul>
Friends	<p>Respondents were counted as “Friends” when</p>	<p>Respondents were counted as “Friends” when</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

	French National Election Study	Webinpolitics.com survey
	(1) they replied NO to the question defining digital activists	(1) they replied NO to the question defining digital activists
	(2) they replied YES to the following question: “Can you tell me if, during the past month of the campaign for the Presidential election, you did one of the following activities on the Internet, in connection with political parties in France or candidates?”	(2) they replied YES to at least one of the following questions: - “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, followed the Twitter account of a candidate or a party?”
	Registered as a supporter, friend, or “follower” of a party or candidate on their website or on social networks	- “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, put a candidate support badge or a slogan on your Twitter account?” - “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, added a party picture or banner on your Facebook page?” - “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, joined a Facebook group supporting or attacking a political party or a candidate to the election?” - “There are different actions related to the presidential campaign that one could do over the Web. During this campaign, have you, personally, sent a support or a protest e-mail to a candidate, a party, or another politician?”
Digital Activists	Respondents were counted as “Digital Activists” when they replied YES to the following question: “Can you tell me if, during the past month of the campaign for the presidential election, you did one of the following activities on the Internet, in connection with political parties in France or candidates?”.	Respondents are counted as “Digital Activists” when replying yes to the following question: - “During this Presidential campaign, have you, personally, created an account on the campaign website of a candidate?”
	Used online tools and resources to assist a party or candidate in their campaign	

**Appendix B: VARIABLES USED IN MULTINOMIAL REGRESSION ANALYSES**

## (1) Sociological variables: Gender, age, and education

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Gender	0– Male 1–Female
Age	Continuous variable. Minimum age: 18
Education	5 categories: Primary, Primary incomplete, None; Secondary; College, High school, Baccalaureate, Vocational; University degree, Teaching qualification, Nursing qualification; Doctorate, Master’s, Postgraduate degree.

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## (2) Political attitudes: Trust, efficacy, interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy, party closeness, and party contact

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	French National Election Study	Webinpolitics.com survey
Political Trust	On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all confident and 10 completely confident, how would you say that we can trust politicians in France?	Do you trust the following institutions a lot, quite a lot, not very much, not trust at all: Political parties?
Political Efficacy	Overall, to what extent would you say that politics is complicated?	Do you totally agree, somewhat agree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat disagree, or totally disagree with the following statement?: “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that someone like me cannot understand what is going on.”
Interest in Politics	Answer on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means not complicated at all and 10 means extremely complicated. Are you interested in politics? Very much, much, a little, not very much, not at all	Are you very much, quite, not very much, not at all interested in politics?
Satisfaction With Would you say that in France	Democracy democracy works:	Overall, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied,

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*(Continued)*



(Continued)

	French National Election Study	Webinpolitics.com survey
	or not at all satisfied with the functioning of democracy in France?	Very well, pretty well, not very well, not well at all.
Party Closeness		This was measured in two parts. First, respondents were asked to choose from a list “which party do you feel closer to or less far from?” Then they were asked “Do you feel very close, quite close, or not very close to this party?”
Party Contact		“During the election campaign, did a political party or candidate contact you directly (e.g., in person, by post, telephone, or online, excluding party propaganda received by all voters) to encourage you to vote for a specific candidate?” (Yes/No)

### Appendix C: Party Identification and Party Membership: Activist Sample

	% of Respondents ( <i>N</i> = 827)	% of Votes First Round, April 2012 <sup>16</sup>	% members ( <i>N</i> = 321)
Radical left	12	1.7	10
Left (Front de Gauche and allies)	14.5	11.1	25
Socialists and allies	28.7	28.6	34.2
Greens & other ecology parties	11.1	2.3	43.5
Centre parties	12.5	9.1	49.5
Conservative & right-wing parties	19.0	29.0 <sup>17</sup>	61.8
National Front & other extreme-right parties	5.6	17.9	34.8
Other or no reply	7.4	0.3	8.1

*Note.* The first column reports the percentage of the sample that voted for a particular party’s candidate in the first round of the Presidential Election 2012. The second column reports the percentage vote share that those candidates actually received in the first round. The final column reports the breakdown of vote choice for the party members in the sample only. *Source:* webinpolitics.com survey, 2012.