

Descriptive Results of the Survey on Party Insider Status

Oliver Huwyler*, Jeanne Marlier*, Manuel Wagner*, Florence Ecornier-Nocca* and Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik*

*University of Vienna

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1. Introduction

How do people go about making a career in politics? Traditionally, the answer has been through political parties. Yet recently, more and more politicians in Europe take office with little to no party socialisation. Technocrats and political outsiders have assumed power across Europe. Even established parties, for example, appoint ever more nonpartisans as ministers. Yet we still know little about how this ‘de-party-politicisation’ of political decision-makers affects representative democracy.

Our research concerns the importance of political parties for political trajectories and careers. To this end, we are working on a measure that allows us to predict someone’s involvement in their party based on their roles in the party and in public office. On 5 May 2024, we therefore launched a survey to which we invited 35,903 people with experience in either holding public office for their party and / or roles within their party. This sample covers individuals from 37 parties who are active in five countries (5 in Austria, 11 in France and 7 each in Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom).

The goal of the survey was to find out how strongly certain political roles in parties and public office are associated with party attachment and involvement. This is why we sought the expertise of people we presumed to possess a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of political parties. With the survey, we collected their assessment of hypothetical career scenarios as well as information on their own political trajectory.

This short report offers some first descriptive insights into the results of the survey. We provide an overview of the survey participation, the respondents’ characteristics and some insights into their assessment of the hypothetical scenarios.

2. Response patterns

2.1. Countries

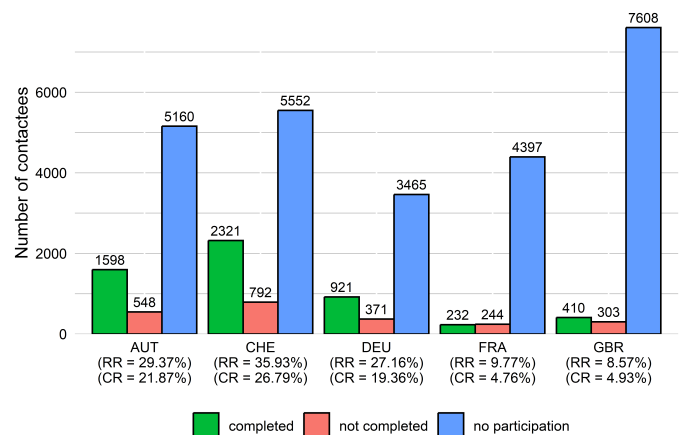
A total of 7,740 people participated in our survey (status as of 1 August 2024). This represents a response rate of 22.8 percent. The vast

majority of these respondents also completed the survey, bringing the completion rate to 16.2 percent (of those contacted). At the same time, more than three quarters of those contacted did not take part in the survey. The majority of them did not react to our e-mail requests. A minority of all those contacted, 9.4 percent, explicitly declined to participate.

It is important to note that our survey builds on a convenience sample. Our list of contacts was compiled from publicly available sources, which include websites of public institutions¹ and parties. This means that we did not contact the same number of people in all countries and that the absolute numbers of responses by country are not comparable.

Nonetheless, we observe clear differences between the countries in response rates. Figure 1 shows the survey response in the five countries in our sample. While Austria, Germany and Switzerland have a response rates between 27.1 and 35.9 percent, the share of responses from the United Kingdom and France remained just under the 10 percent threshold.

Figure 1. Survey response by country



Note: RR = response rate, CR = completion rate.

2.2. Parties

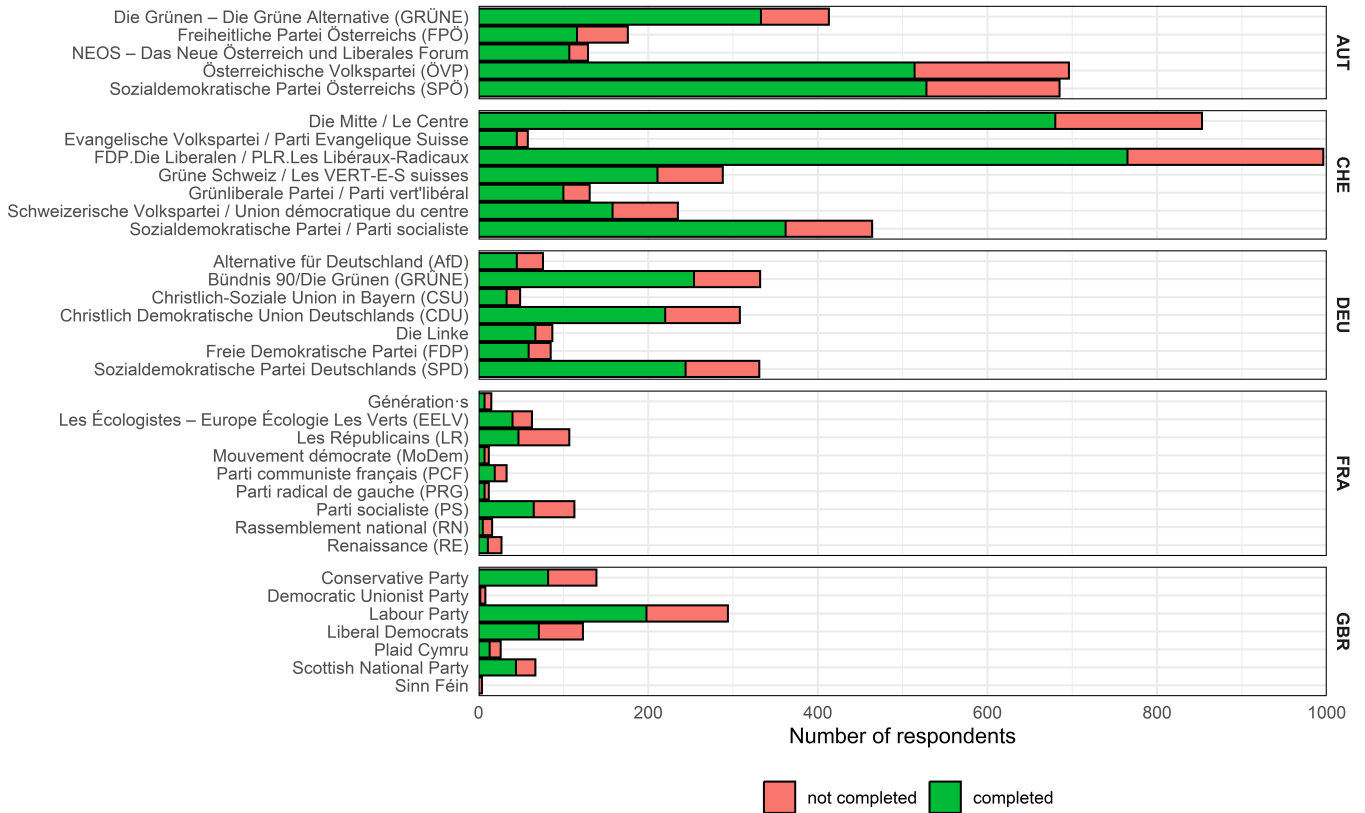
Our survey focused on established parties. We did not include parties if they did not have a recent history of holding public office at the national level, if they did not have an established party structure (i.e., members, party bodies, youth wing), or if it was not possible to identify at least 100 individuals currently holding public office at the local, regional, or national level. Thirty-seven parties in the five selected countries met these requirements.

Figure 2 presents the number of respondents per party.² It shows that the major party families were well covered in our survey. Most of the respondents – almost 4,000 – belong to either a social democratic party (N = 1962) or a Christian democratic party (N = 1894). A sizeable group of 1,351 respondents reported membership in a liberal party, while 1,024 adhere to a green / ecologist party. Members of

¹At the national level, this refers to national parliaments. At the regional level, this includes departmental and regional councils in France, the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish assembly, cantonal parliaments in Switzerland, and state diets in Austria and Germany. At the local level, this includes municipal councils in France, Switzerland and Austria, county, metropolitan boroughs, and unitary authority councils in the United Kingdom, municipal parliaments in Switzerland, and district diets in Germany.

²As we do not know the party membership of everyone contacted, the figure does not report non-response by party.

Figure 2. Survey response by party



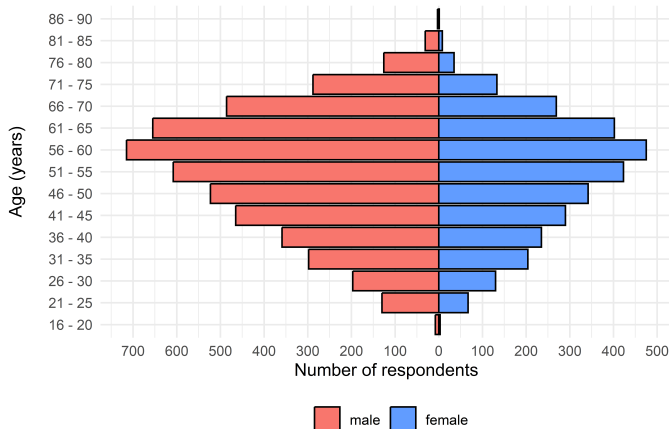
Notes: All regional and youth parties are listed under the name of the national party to which they are affiliated. In the United Kingdom, the Labour and Co-operative Party is listed under Labour.

conservative or right-wing parties account for 757 survey responses. Lastly, a small number of respondents (N = 124) belong to communist / socialist parties.

3. Sociodemographics

Figure 3 shows the distribution of age and gender of respondents. It reveals that almost two thirds of all respondents (62.3 percent) were male and 37.7 percent female. However, there are no pronounced group differences when it comes to age patterns. The average male respondent is aged 53, the average female respondent is 52 years old. In fact, half of those surveyed were aged between 43 and 63, with the total age range extending from 18 to 87.

Figure 3. Age and gender of respondents



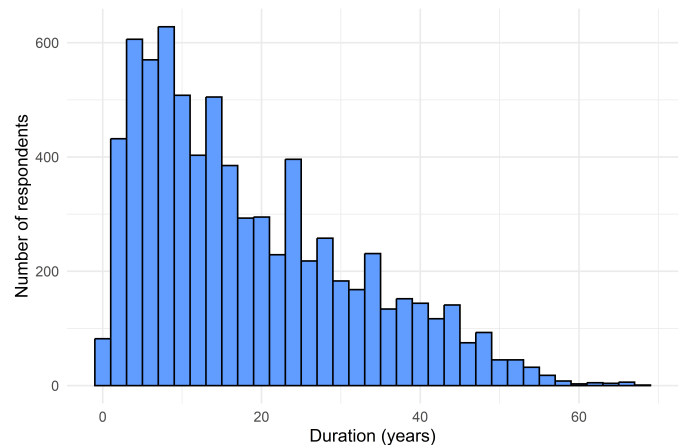
Note: Four non-binary respondents are not included in the figure.

4. Political experience of respondents

4.1. Party activity

The age patterns of respondents are also reflected in the long-term average involvement of respondents in their respective parties. Figure 4 displays for how many years respondents have been members of their parties. On average, a respondent can look back on almost 19 years of membership in a political party. The most seasoned party member in our survey has been a member of their party for 69 years.

Figure 4. Party membership duration of respondents

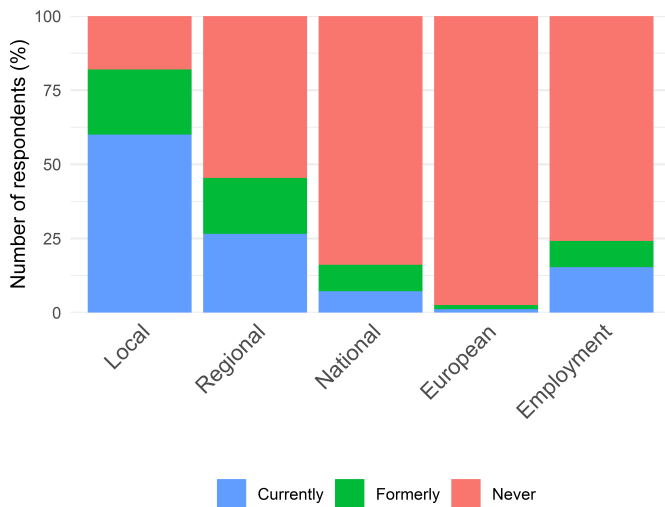


These long periods of membership are also reflected in the respondents' roles in their party. Figure 5 shows at what administrative

levels respondents have held office in the party.³ Furthermore, it displays information how many respondents have been employed by their party at any administrative level.

The figure shows that 60 percent of all respondents currently have a formal role in their local party branch and another 18 percent have held a local party office in the past. As might be expected, party political experience at higher administrative levels is comparatively less common. Forty-five percent have experience in party roles at the regional level and 16 percent have national party experience. Experience at European level is the least widespread, which is likely due to the fact that our contact list did not build on supranational sources and that the European level was not surveyed in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Nearly a quarter of respondents have also held paid party administrative roles, including 15 percent who are currently employed by parties.

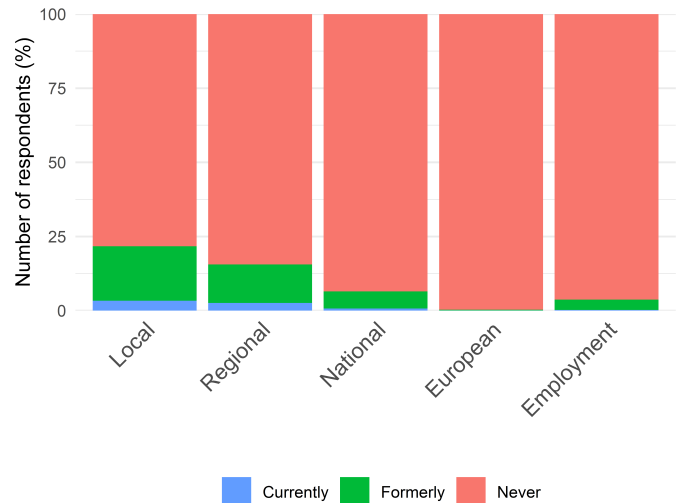
Figure 5. Experience with formal roles in the party proper



Note: Employment refers to staff / administrative roles in the party at any level.

In contrast to the party proper, experience with offices in the youth wing of the party is less common. Figure 6 indicates that most respondents with experience in formal youth party roles are no longer incumbent. This reflects, on the one hand, the age distribution of our respondents. On the other, it also highlights that the organisational structures of youth parties are not always available to the same extent as for the party proper.

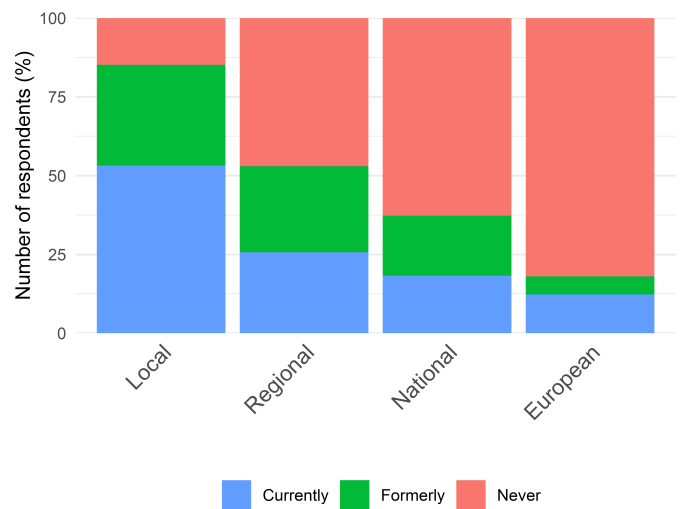
Figure 6. Experience with formal roles in the youth party



Note: Employment refers to staff / administrative roles in the party at any level.

Apart from holding party office, Figure 7 indicates that a large share of respondents also support their party in less formal ways. As party activists, they are engaged in very specific domains, campaign for very specific issues or are active in selected territorial or organisational contexts. Many of the respondents support their party during election campaigns, and in the Swiss case also in the context of popular initiatives and referendums.

Figure 7. Party and youth party activism



Despite the wide range of respondents' activities in their party, it would be remiss to assume that party activities are always very time-consuming. As Figure 8 shows, 58 percent of the surveyed party members spend 1 to 5 hours per week on party-related tasks. It reflects the fact that most respondents are politically active in local politics. More time-intensive commitment to the party is rarer, which also corresponds to the lower relative frequency of party offices at higher administrative levels and employment with parties that we observed in figures 5 and 6.

³Regional, in this context, refers to the *Land* level in Austria and Germany, cantons in Switzerland, regions and départements in France, and the constituent countries of the United Kingdom.

Figure 8. Weekly time investment in party activities

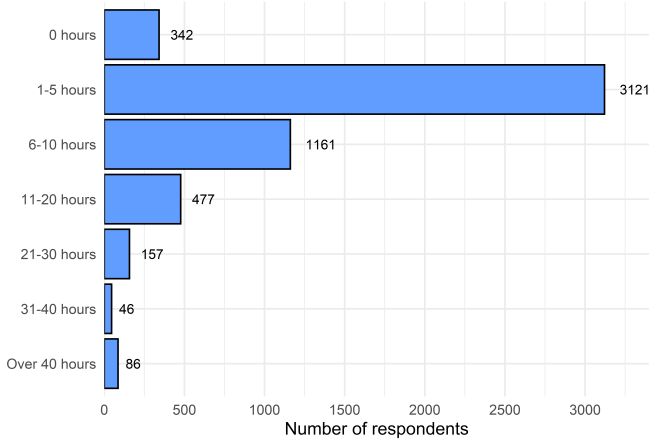
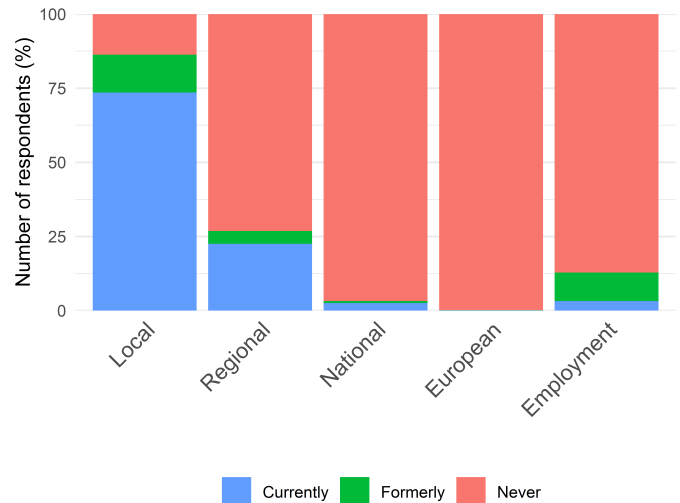


Figure 10. Experience with public office

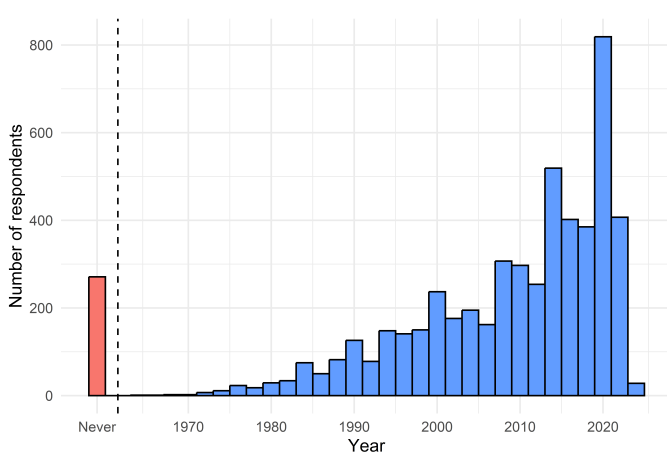


Note: Employment refers to work for politicians, e.g. assistants to elected officials, and employment in public institutions, e.g. parliaments.

4.2. Public office

Most of the survey participants, 95 percent, have also experience in public office. As Figure 9 indicates, only 271 respondents (5 percent) have never held public office. Among those with experience in public office, the largest group was first elected in 2020. The average year of first holding public office in our sample, though, is 2010. One respondent indicates that they have first held public office already in 1964.

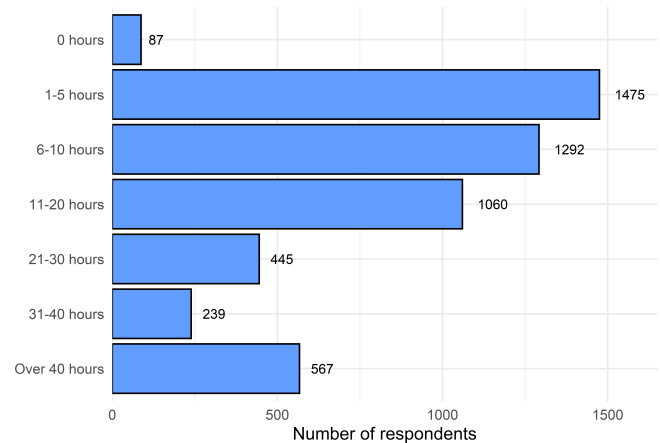
Figure 9. Year of first holding public office



Similar to experience in party roles, most public office experience pertains to the local level. Figure 10 shows that most respondents – 74 percent or 3927 in absolute numbers – currently have a local public office. Almost 23 percent (N = 1099) of the respondents held elected office at the regional level at the time of the survey, while a small group of less than 3 percent (N = 130) were current national parliamentarians. Only five respondents in total reported either current or past experience at the European level.

Figure 11 reveals how much time respondents spend on their public office per week. It shows that time investment in public office is generally greater than that in party activities (compare Figure 8). While 55 percent of the respondents spend one work day or less on their public office, there are also (quasi-)full-time politicians in our sample. More than 15 percent of all respondents work roughly four days or more per week for their public office. Moreover, one fifth of the respondents are semi-professional politicians. They invests between roughly 1.5 and 2 work days in their public office.

Figure 11. Weekly time investment in public office



5. Party insider status

5.1. Survey approach

The survey included an experimental part where respondents were asked to assess the party insider status of fictitious individuals based on their party and public office role(s) in hypothetical scenarios. Every respondent was shown a randomly selected set of scenarios. The definition used for party insider status was derived from an earlier survey with partisan politicians where we had asked about respondents' notions of party insider status.⁴ The definition we used in this survey was derived from the results of that earlier survey. Figure 12 shows the statements we used to define party insider status.

⁴This other survey was launched on 8 April 2024 and sent to 2,500 partisan politicians to ask for their notions of the term 'party insider' both with an open-ended question and closed questions.

Figure 12. Party insider definition used in the survey



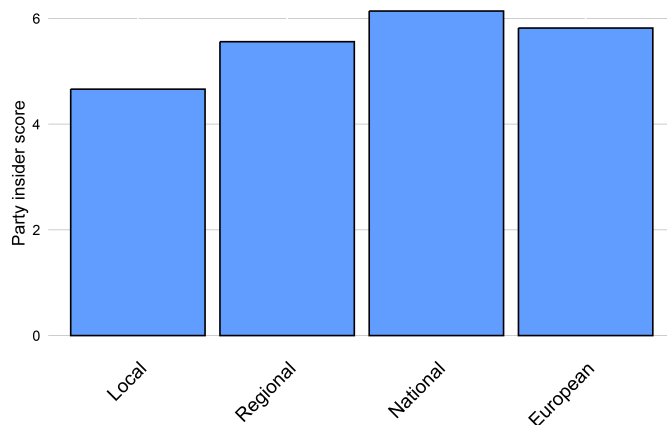
In the experiments, we used a selection of 78 partisan roles from the party and public office domain plus ordinary party membership. Given the disparities in the availability of roles across countries, we included 68 of the maximum 78 roles for Austria, 56 for Switzerland, 71 for Germany, 58 for France, and 54 for the United Kingdom.

In the public office domain, we incorporated public office holders in the legislative and executive (e.g., municipal councillors), political staff (e.g., personal assistants to MPs), and employees of the party group in public office (e.g., employees of the regional parliamentary party group). In the party domain, we covered a set of roles from the party proper and the youth wing of the party. This encompassed key party figures (e.g., members of the party leadership), less visible party roles (e.g., members of a party working group), employees of the party (e.g., heads of the party administration), and those without formal roles in the party organisation such as activists and ordinary members.

5.2. Administrative levels

Figure 13 suggests that the party insider score of different roles hinges on the administrative level. Respondents generally view local politicians as less of an insider than those at higher administrative levels. Roles at the national level are on average considered the most 'insider-y', followed by roles at the European level and the regional level.

Figure 13. Average party insider score by administrative level

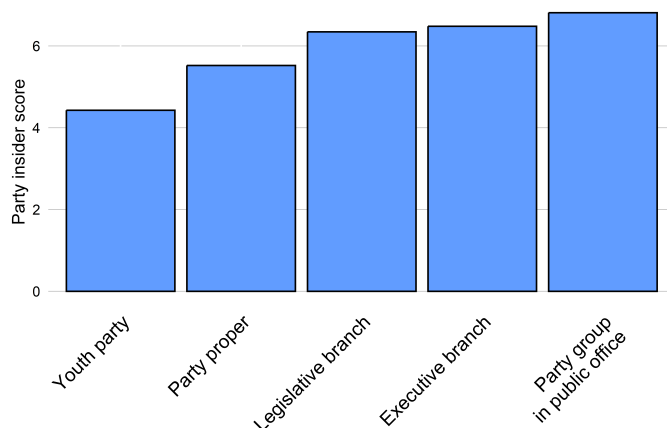


Note: The party insider score varies between 0 and 10.

5.3. Types of organisation

The survey also established a hierarchy between different types of organisations (Figure 14). Roles in public office (legislatures and executives) are on average considered a stronger signal of being a party insider than roles in the party proper or the youth party. In fact, respondents see roles in the youth party to be the least relevant for intra-party networks. In contrast, incumbents of roles related to the party in public office, i.e. party groups in the legislative and the executive, are conceived of as best connected and more knowledgeable of party affairs than co-partisans in other roles.

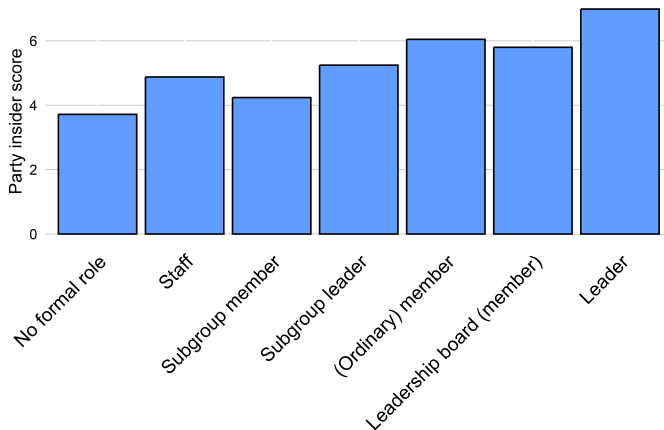
Figure 14. Average party insider score by organisation type



Note: The party insider score varies between 0 and 10.

5.4. Types of position

Lastly, Figure 15 indicates that party insider status also depends on the specific position at hand. Individuals with no formal roles in the party such as ordinary party members and activists are considered the least connected in their party. Leadership roles as well as membership status (in executives and legislatures), in contrast, provide the strongest boost to party insiderness. Other formal roles that more behind-the-scenes such as staff positions and roles in subgroups, e.g. party working groups also come with less party insiderness.

Figure 15. Average party insider score by position type

Note: The party insider score varies between 0 and 10.

Information

To learn more about the DEPART project:

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5.5. Average scores per role

Figure 16 displays the average party insider scores per role. It demonstrates that the people with the strongest network in the party and most knowledge of intra-party affairs are those in leadership positions in public office at the national level.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The goal of our survey was to collect data that allow us to develop a measure that can predict someone's party insider score at a certain point in their life based on their roles in the party and public offices. After all, political biographies are often publicly available, and such a measure can be applied to this type of data. Understanding what certain career steps mean for someone's standing in their party can be crucial to deciphering their positions on policies, strategic decisions, and, more broadly, their political fate.

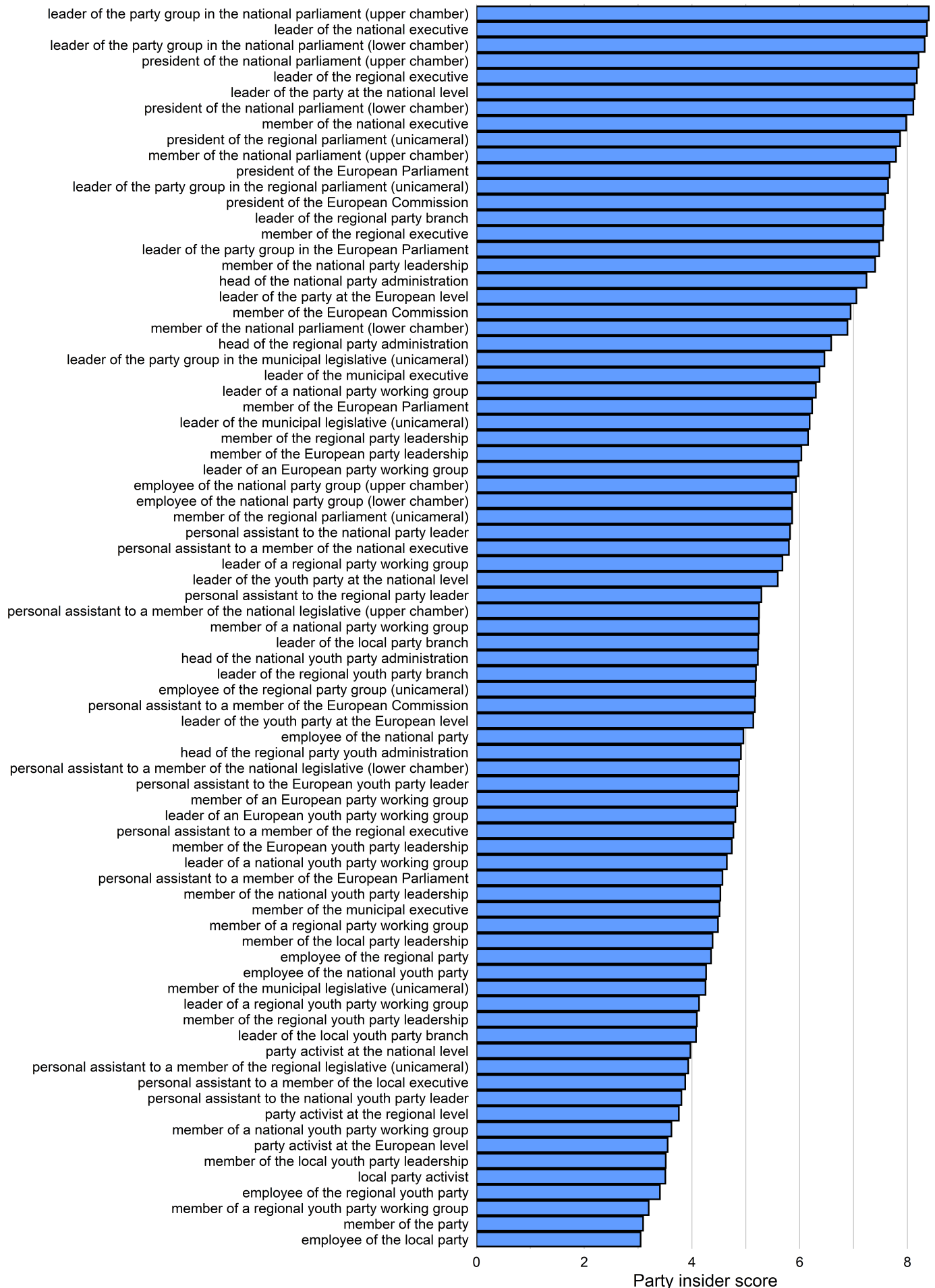
Any measure of party insider status, of course, can always only be an approximation of the *true* extent of someone's party political involvement. As numerous respondents also pointed out to us, there are party-specific conditions and situational intricacies that the hypothetical scenarios in the survey could not reflect. For example, the political trajectory of a successful entrepreneur in a liberal party or that of a trade union official in a social democratic party may be very different from that of party members with other backgrounds.

As part of our research endeavours, we therefore aim to construct a parsimonious measure of party insider status, knowing that our measure is based on typical, not exceptional trajectories. The measure will take into account how party insider status changes as individuals have multiple roles, hold roles for longer periods of time, and how insider status diminishes once they leave their roles. Once our research is complete, the full measure and its application to real-life biographical data will be presented in a scientific publication.

7. Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the respondents who contributed their time and insights to our study. Their willingness to engage with our research and provide their expertise is invaluable to the success of this project. Without their participation, this work would not have been possible. Moreover, we thank Daniel Bliem, Béla Duschek, Helena Hartl, Florian Kärcher, Katharina Mair, Klara Pernsteiner, Noah Schroth, Daniel Steinwider, Viktoria Strejc and Ella Wagnleitner for their excellent research assistance.

Figure 16. Average scores of all surveyed roles



Note: N = 79 (78 roles as well as ordinary party membership).