HAS PARTY MEMBERS' REPRESENTATIVENESS CHANGED OVER TIME?

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Abstract

Party membership decline has been a prevalent feature of Swedish political parties in the last decades. In this chapter I study to what extent this change in the size of Swedish party membership has been accompanied by a change in the representativeness of members. Using the longitudinal file of the national SOM surveys (1986-2016), all socio-demographic variables included in the analysis suggest that party members are different from non-members. More so, I find that in terms of education and income, party members are nowadays less representative of non-members than they used to be. On the other hand, the results also indicate that party members are becoming more representative of non-members in terms of political ideology. It means that party members might look increasingly different from non-members but may be thinking increasingly alike.

Political parties throughout Europe appear to be in a participatory crisis. Despite some noteworthy exceptions, the vast majority of parties has substantially been losing their members in the last decades (e.g. Kölln, 2016; Scarrow, 2015; van Biezen et al., 2012). According to officially reported membership figures provided by political parties in 27 European countries, about half of the countries lost 25 per cent or more of their members between 1960 and 2008 (Scarrow, 2015: 72). Sweden's parliamentary parties are generally no exception to this. In 1960, they reported a total of 1,124,917 members (Erlingsson et al., 2015: 172) and only 250,947 at the end of 2016 (Aftonbladet 03/03/2017[1]). It means that, today, Sweden's parliamentary parties pull only about 22 per cent of the membership size that they used to at the beginning of the 1960s. The development is perhaps even more dramatic given the simultaneous population growth.

At the same time, comparisons with the heydays of mass political participation might not be fair because party memberships were maybe unusually high and not the norm either during these times (Scarrow, 2015). Yet, even if we take that into consideration and do not infer a 'participatory crisis of parties', the sharp decline in party membership remains undisputed. The decline in membership size might have implications beyond the financing of party organisation, especially if we consider that parties and their members are intermediaries between ordinary citizens and the state.

Party members contribute to parties' fulfilment of their democratic functions in representative democracies. Members assist parties in being linkage mechanisms for political participation and representation because of their communicative and ambassadorial role for party politics. Members are parties' 'eyes and ears' on the ground that bring in new ideas to the party, which can subsequently be translated into policy proposals (Gunther & Diamond, 2001). They also often represent the pool of potential political candidates because most parties prefer filling offices with their own members rather than with outsiders (Gunther & Diamond, 2001). Relatedly, parties are almost uniquely responsible for the training of tomorrow's politicians. But party members also communicate back into the electorate. They are communicators and transmitters of parties' policy proposals and they spread the party's message in the electorate (Scarrow, 2015). This suggests that the more members a party can draw on and the better these members are connected to the electorate, the more successful a party can be in connecting ordinary citizens with the state. The decline in membership is well-documented and other research already indicates that political representation through parties works still quite well (see for example Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). However, what is less well studied is the connection between party members and the general electorate. Are party members representative of ordinary citizens? And to what extent has that changed with the decline of mass party membership?

Existing research in this field is still rather limited in scope due to data availability. One of the most comprehensive studies in this area investigated the changing profile of party members in twelve European countries (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). Comparing pooled data from two time periods, 1989-91 and 2002-05, the authors conclude that the quantitative shift in party membership was not accompanied by a qualitative shift. In fact, according to many socio-demographic indicators, 'party members have become a lot more like the general population' (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010: 840). However, Sweden was not part of this study. In a similar study, exclusively focussed on Swedish parties and their ideological representativeness, Widfeldt (1999: 307) concluded that Sweden's parliamentarians were still representative of the electorate but that party members had 'become radicalized compared to the voters'. Both studies provide important contributions to the literature and valuable starting points for further investigation. However, it also means that we still know relatively little about Swedish members' socio-political representativeness over time.

One of the challenges such a study faces is the acquisition of good longitudinal data. Survey questions on party membership are not standardly asked and even fewer surveys ask members to indicate the specific party they are a member of. In addition, given the relatively small membership sizes in today's electorate with around 4.5 per cent (van Biezen et al., 2012), general surveys often lack enough respondents to conduct meaningful analyses (Kölln & Polk, 2017). As a consequence, Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) had to conduct their over-time analyses

on two different datasets, the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey. Widfeldt (1999), on the other hand, was able to draw on the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) but was still confined to election years and therefore based his analyses on a total of only three time-points. With two or three time-points changes over time are difficult to ascertain. In order to arrive at firmer conclusions about developments, ideally more than three time-points stemming from the same data project are needed. The national SOM surveys fulfil these requirements and provide a good opportunity to test existing hypotheses about a potential change in party members' representativeness of the Swedish population. To what extent and in what ways has party members' representativeness changed over time?

To investigate this question, the chapter will proceed in three analytical steps. First, I am going to present the development of reported party membership in the SOM surveys between 1986 and 2016. Second, differences between reported members and non-members in the most important personal characteristics – age and gender – are studied descriptively. In a third step, and using multiple regressions, I investigate differences in several socio-economic and political factors and their cumulative effects over time.

Swedish party members and their potentially changing profiles

As already reported above, Sweden's parliamentary parties have lost a substantial number of members, according to parties' official reports. The time-series data of the national SOM surveys, 1986-2016, largely corroborates this trend via reported membership. The time-series data contain almost annually (except for 1989 and 1996) a question on membership in any of the Swedish parties. It offers respondents three different response options: 'No, I am not a member', 'Yes, I am a member', and 'Yes, I am a member and hold an office'. Over the years, between 167 (1997) and 538 (2015) respondents reported being at least a party member. This total number of respondents is obviously affected by the number of members in the citizenry but also by sample sizes; while the share of members has been decreasing over time, gross and net sample sizes of the SOM surveys have increased. Irrespective of what causes these total numbers per year, they are sufficiently large in size to conduct analyses on them. A basic categorisation of party members (with or without office) versus non-members forms the basis for all subsequent analyses in this study. These numbers of responses allow conducting meaningful analyses on a total of 29 time-points. Figure 1 below shows the over-time trend in reported party membership in the national SOM surveys between 1986 and 2016.

Although the national SOM surveys do not go back in time as far as the 1960s, already the development since 1986 illustrates the dramatic trend in membership loss over the last thirty years. Some fluctuations are clearly normal, as elections or their aftermaths often inspire membership gains or losses. However, despite these

short-term changes the downward trend is still staggering. In the mid- and late 1980s as many as almost 15 per cent of respondents indicated being a member of any of the Swedish parties. In comparison, this figure had dropped to just over 6 per cent in 2012, only to recuperate in the next two years. The most recent trend is again one of falling reported membership rates. Based on these observations, the central question this study intends to answer is whether this quantitative shift has also been accompanied by a qualitative shift (see also Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). To what extent has Swedish party members' representativeness of the general electorate changed over time?

Figure 1   Percentage of respondents with reported party membership, 1986-2016
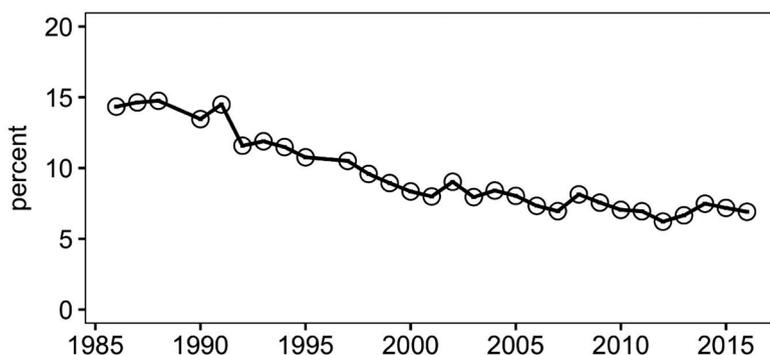
Comment: Survey question: 'Är du medlem i någon typ av förening/ organisation? Politiskt parti/förbund' ['Are you a member of an association/organisation? Political party'] with response categories of 'Nej', 'Ja', and '…och jag har någon typ av uppdrag' ['No', 'Yes', 'Yes, with a political office']; N = 1 374 in 1986 and 5 958 in 2016.
Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

Before investigating the potential consequences of this change as regards representativeness, it is important to highlight that the composition of party members has hardly ever been a perfect reflection of a country's general population (see Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). One of the most prominent reasons for that lies in the resource model of political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). According to this model, citizens with more resources, such as time, money, or civic skills, are more likely to participate in political life. Participation in political parties can be considered a high-intensity political activity, perhaps even more so than participation in elections. And so, these resources play a more important role for higher-level political activities. Therefore, we would not expect to find party members as perfect mirrors of ordinary citizens. And the same is true for their political attitudes. It is implausible to expect that party members would be

just as politically interested or uninterested or just as ideological compared to non-members. Rather, we would expect members to be more politically interested and more ideological in their political views. However, even if we expect a certain gap, it is still possible that this gap has been widening over time and with the loss of a substantial share of party members. If party membership sizes have become so much smaller, who is then left in today's party and how much do they differ from non-members? Or to say it with Widfeldt's (1999: 307) words: Are Swedish parties 'losing touch'?

Are party members representative of non-members according to age and gender?

In this first part, I only consider age and gender as two of the most important aspects of anyone's socio-demographic profile. Later I will also consider other factors and their cumulative effects in a single analysis. Age is a crucial factor in the case of party membership because, according to comparative research, the dramatic changes in party membership sizes are often a consequence of difficulties in recruiting new, young members rather than retaining existing ones (see Bruter & Harrison, 2009; Cross & Young, 2008). An over-time comparison of average ages amongst party members and non-members thus not only allows assessing the representativeness of members according to this feature. Furthermore, it also provides first hints at the potential reasons underlying membership loss in Sweden.

For the comparison, I used the above-mentioned distinction between members and non-members in each of the national SOM surveys in the trend file and computed the average age. Figure 2 shows the average ages and standard errors of both groups across time. As can be seen, both party members and non-members have become older over time, on average. It makes sense given that the Swedish population is generally aging. However, beyond these overall and generally parallel trends, differences between the two groups are also very clear. At each single time point between 1986 and 2016, members were decidedly older than the rest of the respondents. This age gap was almost 10 years at the beginning of the study period, in 1986, and it seems to have been decreasing over time, especially in the last ten years. According to the latest figures from 2016, the age gap in average ages was only around 3.3 years.[2] This pattern suggests party members have not become *less* age-representative of the general population but indeed *more*. This could have to do, for instance, with new recruitment strategies or more accessible parties through online communication.

Figure 2 ***Average age of respondents with and without reported party***
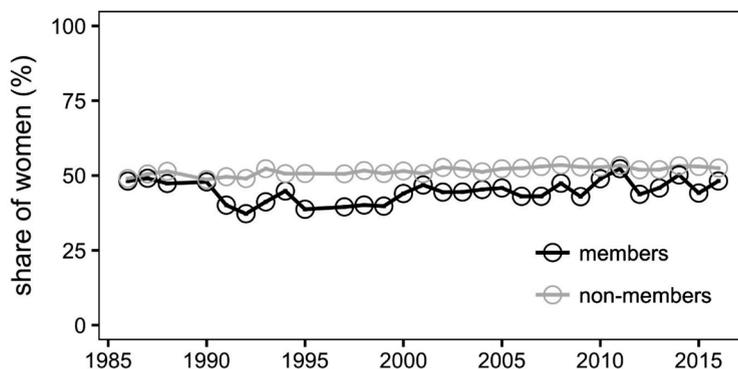***membership, 1986-2016 (means, standard errors)***
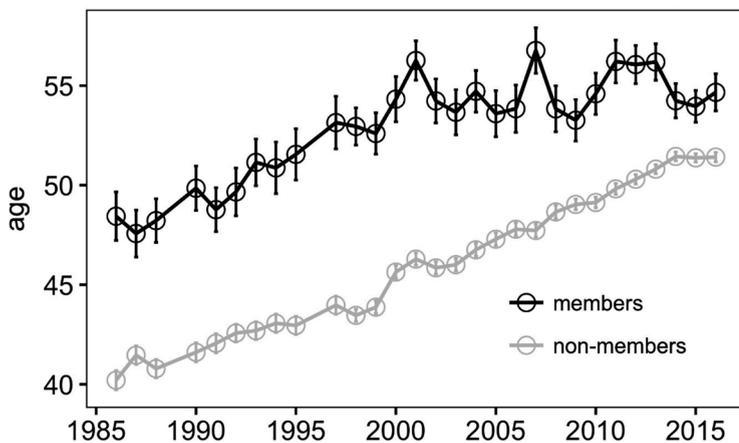
Comment: The exact question wording is 'Är du medlem i någon typ av förening/ organisation? Politiskt parti/förbund' ['Are you a member of an association/organisation? Political party'] with response categories of 'Nej', 'Ja', and '…och jag har någon typ av uppdrag' ['No', 'Yes', 'Yes, with a political office']; N= 1 374 in 1986 and 5 958 in 2016. And the other question is 'Vilket år är du född?' ['In which year were you born?']; N= 1 300 in 1986 and 5 956 in 2016.
Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

Gender presents another important indicator of social representativeness that I consider in this first descriptive analysis. As early as the 1970s Swedish parties had already started implementing rules for promoting gender equality on, for instance, the ballot sheets or the party leadership (Wängnerud, 2009). They were designed to increase the number of elected women. However, female candidates can often only appear on the list when there are any as part of the political party. Therefore, comparing the development of the share of female members with the share of female non-members is another good indicator for Swedish parties' representativeness. Figure 3 does precisely that and shows the share of female (non-)members in each of the national SOM surveys. While the figure shows fluctuations in the share of female members over time, it also shows that the share only approaches the levels observed amongst non-members in a handful of years. In all other years, women are underrepresented in parties and the gender gap is substantial; in the last decade, the share of female members fluctuates around 45%. Based on these results, it appears as if Swedish party members have at least not become more representative of the non-members in terms of gender.

Figure 3   Share of female (non-)members, 1986-2016

Comment: The exact question wording is 'Är du medlem i någon typ av förening/ organisation? Politiskt parti/förbund' ['Are you a member of an association/organisation? Political party'] with response categories of 'Nej', 'Ja', and '…och jag har någon typ av uppdrag' ['No', 'Yes', 'Yes, with a political office']; N= 1 374 in 1986 and 5 958 in 2016. And the other question is 'Är du kvinna eller man?' ['Are you a woman or a man?'] with response options of 'Kvinna', 'Man', and 'Annat' ['Woman', 'Man', 'Other']; N= 1 542 in 1986 and 9 802 in 2016.
Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

On the basis of these first findings, it appears as if the decline in party membership did not severely harm Swedish party members' representativeness. Members are older than non-members but the gap appears to be smaller in 2016 compared to 1986; members are more likely to be men than women but the gender gap seems as least to not have worsened over time. However, these first analyses can at best give us a first impression of the underlying trend for certain aspects of (non-)members' profiles. What is additionally needed is a more systematic time-series analysis beyond mere visuals.

Cumulative effects of socio-demographic and political factors

In order to get a more accurate picture, I conduct a multiple regression analysis. This has the advantage of showing which specific factors have changed the most over time, while still controlling for all of the other factors. For, it might well be that certain socio-demographic factors are correlated, such as gender and income. The purpose of this analysis is therefore, firstly, to establish the socio-demographic and political correlates of party membership as opposed to non-membership, and secondly, to ascertain the extent to which change has occurred in those correlates. I will be able to answer questions such as the following: has the probability of reporting party membership for a female respondent changed over time? Answers to this and similar questions provide a first glimpse at the potentially changing representativeness of Swedish party members.

For the analysis, I use again the membership variable and I distinguish between members (=1) and non-members (=0). This is the outcome I would like to predict. My predictors are largely based on the resource model of political participation as well as on findings from Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) and Widfeldt (1999). I take the same socio-demographics into account as above when making my prediction: age and gender. In addition, I am also including education in the analysis, which has three different levels: low (maximally elementary school or similar), medium (above elementary school but no university degree), and high (degree from a university or similar). The expectation is, in line with the resource model, that those with higher levels of education would be more likely to participate in political parties. And that given increasing levels of education throughout Western democracies in the last decades, the education gap in party membership should have diminished over time. The effect of the highly educated should have diminished over time. I expect similar effects for the factor of income, which has the levels of 'low', 'medium', and 'high'. High income should play a less important role for predicting party membership than it used to. I also include a variable that measures whether a respondent is a Swedish national that distinguishes between those that reported 'Yes / Swedish citizen' or having two citizenships on the one hand (= 1) and those that responded with 'No / Citizen of another country' (= 0). Here, the expectation is that Swedish nationals are overrepresented amongst party members and that this gap has also diminished over time with more non-nationals arriving and integrating into Swedish society. I also measure union membership that contains information on whether a respondent was a union member. Research has shown that members and unionists used to have tight connections, which have diminished over the last decades (see van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014). And so, I expect that the representativeness of unionist has declined. Finally, and leaning on Widfeldt (1999), I am including a variable of ideological distance to the mid-point. Widfeldt reported that members were more extreme and had also become more extreme in their ideology compared to the general population. I would like to test whether this result also holds after controlling for several important socio-demographic variables and when testing it on more time-points. The national SOM surveys measure respondents' ideological self-placement on a five-point left-right scale from 1 ('clearly to the left') to 5 ('clearly to the right') with 3 as a designated mid-point of 'neither left nor right'. I recoded this variable to measure individuals' absolute distance from the mid-point and so respondents can take on values ranging from 0 to 2, depending on their original answers.

In my analytical approach, I follow Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) but adapted it to the trend file of the national SOM surveys. Specifically, I am predicting party membership with a logistic multilevel model that takes into account the longitudinal nature of the data. It considers that individual responses in a particular year might be having something in common, something that is specific to that year. The data are modelled with years as the higher-level group and individual responses as the

lower-level unit. Finally, and in order to also measure changes over time I include a time predictor that simply enumerates each survey round from 1 to 31. It allows seeing whether time itself had an effect on the probability to be a member. Given the descriptive results in Figure 1, I expect to see that time had a negative effect.

Table 1   Effects of socio-demographic, political and time factors on probability to be a party member

	Member (= 1)	
	Odds Ratio	*CI*
Fixed Parts		
(Intercept)	0.02 ***	0.02 – 0.03
Time	0.96 ***	0.96 – 0.97
Female	0.77 ***	0.73 – 0.82
Age	1.02 ***	1.02 – 1.02
Union member	1.14 ***	1.08 – 1.21
Education: medium	1.10 *	1.02 – 1.19
Education: high	1.29 ***	1.19 – 1.40
Income: medium	0.91 **	0.85 – 0.97
Income: high	0.82 ***	0.76 – 0.89
Citizen	1.32 **	1.10 – 1.58
Ideological distance	1.88 ***	1.81 – 1.96
Random Parts		
Variance intercept, year	0.004	
N_{year}	23	
Observations	74655	
Tjur's D	.030	
Deviance	38902.904	

Notes: * *p<.05*   ** *p<.01*   *** *p<.001*

Comment: Results are based on a multilevel logit model with party membership (yes = 1, no = 0) as the outcome variable. Reference categories: Men, not a unionist, low education, low income, non-Swedish national. Comment: Survey question for dependent variable: 'Är du medlem i någon typ av förening/ organisation? Politiskt parti/förbund' ['Are you a member of an association/orga-nisation? Political party'] with response categories of 'Nej', 'Ja', and '…och jag har någon typ av uppdrag' ['No', 'Yes', 'Yes', with a political office'].

Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

Table 1 summarises the results of predicting party membership across time and shows the odds ratios as well as their confidence intervals. All explanatory factors are statistically significant and largely corroborate the expectations. Generally, this

means that the odds of being a party member are not equally distributed across different ages, genders, educational levels etc. It suggests that party members are not entirely representative of non-members. This should not come as a surprise given the theory and empirical findings on the resource model of political participation. More importantly, however, these results only present a first step and cannot yet tell us whether the gap in representativeness has decreased or increased over time – the main interest of this study.

For that, I interact all of the substantive variables included in the model with time. The idea behind that is to evaluate whether the impact of any of these factors on the probability to be a reported party member has changed over time, after controlling for other time trends. In the interest of space and clarity, I do not report the precise coefficients. They can be accessed in the online appendix on the SOM Institute's website. According to the results, a total of three explanatory factors have changed in their effects over time: highest levels of education, highest levels of income, and ideological distance. In all other factors, members still differ from non-members and the difference has not changed over time. Figure 4A-4C show how the predicted probabilities associated with different levels of the individual characteristics have changed over time.
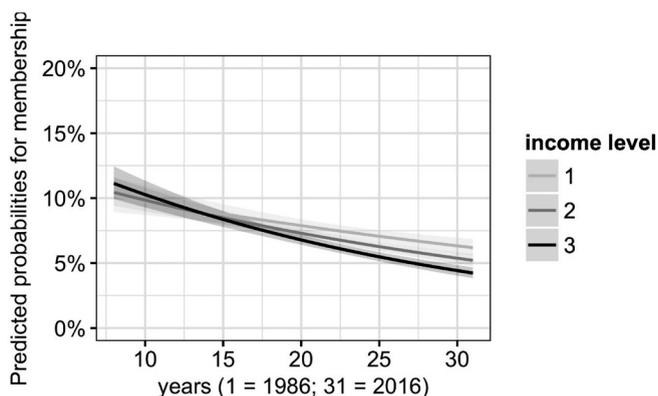
Figure 4A Predicted probabilities of being a party member for different educational levels and over time
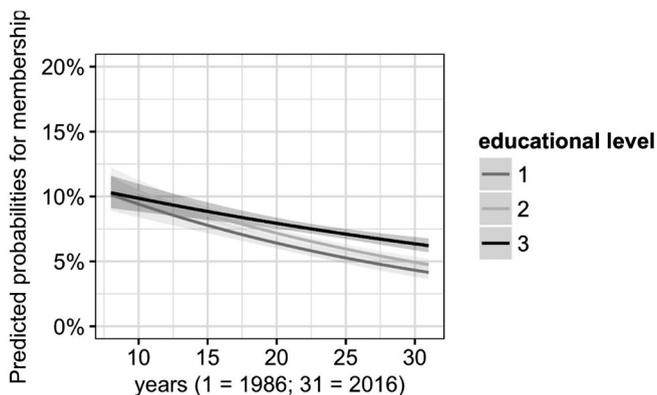
Comment: Results are based on a multilevel logit model with party membership (yes = 1, no = 0) as the outcome variable. Educational levels: 1 = Låg (max grundskola eller motsvarande) [low, maxium of elementary school or equivalent], 2 = Medel (allt över grundskola men ej högskola/universitet) [medium, above elementary school but not higher education], 3 = Hög (studier/examen från högskola/universitet) [high, higher education].

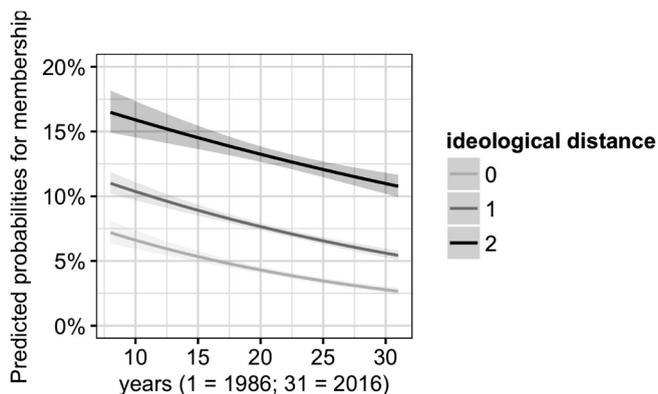**Source:** National SOM survey 1986-2016.

Figure 4B **Predicted probabilities of being a party member for different income levels and over time**

Comment: Results are based on a multilevel logit model with party membership (yes = 1, no = 0) as the outcome variable. Income levels: 1 = Låg [low], 2 = Medel [medium], 3 = Hög [high].
Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

Figure 4C **Predicted probabilities of being a party member for different ideological distances from the mid-point and over time**

Comment: Results are based on a multilevel logit model with party membership (yes = 1, no = 0) as the outcome variable. Ideological distances: 0 = Varken till vänster eller till höger [neither left nor right], 1 = Något till höger/något till vänster [somewhat to the right/left], 2 = Klart till höger/ klart till vänster [clearly to the right/left].
Source: National SOM survey 1986-2016.

In Figure 4A and Figure 4B we can see that the three levels of education and income did not differ in their predicted probabilities in early rounds of the national SOM

surveys. Here the three lines overlap and are indistinguishable in their effects on reported membership. However, in both cases, the highest category differs from the other two in its development over time. And this is an important point for the purpose of this study. While all three educational levels have somewhat lost their influence on predicting party membership, the highest level (higher education) less so. Since around the mid-2000s, the highest educational level is a significantly stronger predictor of membership compared to the other educational levels. It means that respondents belonging to the highest educational level are today more likely to be a party member compared to the other two educational levels. The reverse is true for income levels as predictors of party membership. The highest income level has today, and has had for the last 5-8 years, a decidedly lower effect on party membership than the other two income categories. It means that people reporting to belong to the highest income category are less likely to be a party member than people belonging to other income categories. For both factors – education and income – it means that in this cumulative analysis party members have become less representative of non-members in terms of education and income.

Finally, Figure 4C illustrates how the effect of ideological distance to the mid-point has changed over time. It sheds light onto the question whether today's smaller membership size is more ideological extreme than it used to be under a larger size. The figure shows that larger distances to the ideological mid-point have always been a distinct characteristic of party members. More so, the larger the distance the higher the probabilities of reported membership. We can also see that all three categories of distances have lost some of their effects over time. But what the graph does not show, yet the underlying estimates, is that the group of respondents saying they are clearly to the right/left ("klart till höger/vänster") have lost the largest effect on party membership over time. This group has lost about 5 percentage points in its predicted probability to be a party member over the last 30 years, whereas the other two groups have lost a bit less. It suggests that today's party members are not necessarily more extreme in their political views but perhaps even *less* extreme. In addition, it also suggests that party members are trending towards becoming more representative of non-members in their ideological profile. All of these results are also robust to a weighting of respondents by age that considers the declining response rates amongst younger age groups in the SOM surveys. Detailed tables can be found in the online appendix.

Conclusions

Party membership decline has been a prevalent feature of Swedish and European political parties in the last decades. Today, Swedish parties jointly only pull about 22 per cent of the membership size they used to in 1960. In this chapter, I studied to what extent this change in the size of Swedish party membership has been accompanied by a change in the representativeness of members. Given political parties' and their members' prominent role in the policy-making process as well as

in providing political personnel, it is desirable that party members are representative of the general population. This mostly holds for their political views, but in line with some theories of representation a match in socio-demographic profiles can already be enough.

According to findings from the national SOM surveys (1986-2016), members differ from non-members in their socio-demographic profiles. All socio-demographic variables included in the analysis suggest that party members are different from non-members. More so, the time-series analysis also suggests that only the effects of education and income have changed over time. Unfortunately, not for the better because the results show that different educational and income levels used to be associated with the same predicted probabilities of being a party member. However, over time and with the loss of membership, these associations have changed and people with different educational and income levels have different probabilities of being a member. It indicates that in terms of education and income party members are nowadays less representative of non-members than they used to be.

However, the results also suggest that party members are becoming more representative of non-members in terms of their political left-right orientation. They have become less extreme in their political ideology and seem to be trending towards greater representativeness of non-members over time. This is good news. For, although the smaller group of members that is still left might still differ from non-members in their socio-demographic profile, they seem to becoming more like non-members in their general political attitude.

Noter

1 http://www.aftonbladet.se/senastenytt/ttnyheter/inrikes/article24499078.ab

2 When weighting the data for age to account for the lower response rates amongst younger age cohorts in recent years, the differences are similar but not as strong. The age gap in 1986 is 8.4 years and in 2016 2.6 years.

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