Living Conditions (levnadsförhållanden)
An abridged version of the Swedish language report (98)

REPORT no 101

Associational life in Sweden

General Welfare
Social Capital
Training in Democracy

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Producer SCB, Programmet för Social Välfärdsstatistik
Box 24300, 104 51 Stockholm.
Tfn + 46 8 506 940 00
E-mail: uno.davidsson@scb.se

Inquiries Joachim Vogel, tfn +46 8 506 949 30
e-mail: joachim.vogel@scb.se

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1 Introduction

There is a long tradition of voluntary association in the Nordic countries, with high levels of membership and participation in non-profit organizations. It is a tradition whose origins can be traced back to the 19th century, and it continues to play an important role in both political and private life. By international standards, membership and activity levels in Sweden are extraordinarily high.

In fact, Sweden has been referred to as a ”popular-movement democracy” in which associations perform a key role in linking a homogenous culture to an egalitarian system of general welfare. In particular:

(1) Associations contribute to the production of general welfare by facilitating valued activities and providing a source of social contacts, personal identity, information and collective support.
(2) Participation in associations develops a social capital of interpersonal relationships and mutual trust.
(3) Associations help to develop democratic skills essential to representative democracy, including tolerance and experience of collective decision-making.
(4) Associations provide an alternative arena for political action.

In recent decades, especially that of the 1990s with its deep recession and its cutbacks in general welfare, active participation in Swedish associations has sharply declined. A recent analysis based on nationwide social surveys in 1992 and 20001 traces this development by focusing on trends in different types of association, including membership figures, activity levels and characteristics of members. Findings are discussed in terms of the impact on general welfare, social capital and political capital.

This is a summary of the Swedish-language report that was financed by Sweden’s Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Industry & Commerce, and Statistics Sweden.

[1] Vogel, J. , Amnå, E., Munck, I. and Häll, L. 2003. Föreningslivet i Sverige: välfärd, socialt kapital och demokratiskola [Associational Life in Sweden: General Welfare, Social Capital and Training in Democracy]. Report 98, Living Conditions series. Stockholm: Statistics Sweden.

International debate and research on associational life was revitalized during the 1990s, primarily due to Robert Putnam’s research on the role of voluntary organizations in the development of democracy and society. Putnam (2002a) concluded that, the more people organize themselves voluntarily in all sorts of societies, clubs, choirs, etc., the more they come to trust one another. He also found that this led to improvements in the function of democracy and to increased economic growth.

Thus, associations give rise to social capital by providing a setting in which people dare and learn to co-operate toward a common goal. The experience of interacting with others teaches that there is a basis for mutual trust. In this way, social capital forms a foundation of trust that benefits democracy and economic development.

In short, it is the union of trust, social networks and active citizenship which creates the conditions for a functioning democracy (Putnam 1996). This is hardly a novel idea: Other social scientists made the same point much earlier.

In subsequent works, Putnam has gone further to show that the United States is characterized by a very clear reduction of social capital. Having been most active in voluntary associations during the first few decades following World War II, U.S. citizens are increasingly pursuing individual interests. This is reflected in the title of Putnam’s second major work, Bowling Alone (Putnam 2001).

In Swedish political circles, Putnam’s analysis has generally been greeted with a sense of recognition, and interpreted as confirmation of the Swedish model’s value.

By international standards, Sweden displays a high level of active associational life. The Swedish model - with its vital popular movements, innumerable study circles, and sizeable public expenditures in support of temperance, youth, athletic and religious organizations - has expressed precisely the connection between civil society and politics to which Putnam refers.

It may well be that the special character of the Nordic general-welfare state resides in the combination of a large public sector and a large voluntary sector of great significance (Klausen and Selle 1996).

It is therefore no exaggeration to state that the results of Putnam’s research provide scientific legitimacy for the much-appreciated collective ide-

ology that is a central component of the Swedish self-image (Demokratiutredningen 2000).

2. Three perspectives

Our analysis is based on three different categories of information: level of participation in associational life; participation in some thirty different types of association, sorted into five main groupings; and traits of the total population.

These variables - participation level, association type and population traits - form a three-dimensional array of characteristics that we have studied in relation to each other. In addition, these characteristics form a structure that can be followed over time - in this case, from 1992-2000. Our purpose is to describe and explain how the structure changed during that period.

The results of the analysis are discussed within three different theoretical perspectives, corresponding to three basic functions of society.

The first perspective focuses on the general-welfare function, which is related to the various kinds of services that members jointly provide through their associations. In other words, this has to do with the role of associations as producers of general welfare by, among other things, facilitating valued activities and providing opportunities for social contacts, the exchange of information, identity-formation, comradeship, stimulation of creativity and, in many cases, judicial, economic and collective support.

The second basic function of associations is formation of social capital through co-operation toward common goals, exposure to other life experiences and values, joint planning and decision-making, and the organization of daily life within collective settings. From this, participants learn that there are suitable conditions for mutual trust— a lesson that can also be applied outside of associations, in marketplace relations and in the broader democratic system.

The third basic function is to provide training in the democratic process. Participation in associations helps to develop the competence and the ethical norms that are essential to joint decision-making, giving rise to a social infrastructure of open forums in which alternative political agendas can be discussed and established. This is a ”by-product” of associational life that has great significance for democracy.

The following discussion will present the research results as they relate to changes in values, behaviour and the world at large, as well as the implications of those changes for the general-welfare and democratic-training functions of associations.

3. Research data

The data used in this research were derived from the annual surveys of living conditions, conducted by Statistics Sweden (ULF). The surveyed population consists of residents in Sweden aged 16-84.

Changes in associational life are described on the basis of (a) a cross-sectional comparison of random samples of adults aged 16-84 selected in 1992 and 2000, and (b) a longitudinal study of a panel of adults interviewed in 1992 and 2000. Sample sizes for this study were 5980 and 5677. The non-responses rate was approximately twenty percent. The sample design was based on mixed-panel and cross-sectional samples.

The sample of some thirty different associations (see diagram 2) is large enough to permit comparisons of their development in relation to each other, both individually and sorted into categories based on their primary activities (*political, shared interest, solidarity, religion, recreation and life style*).

4. General overview

This analysis distinguishes between many different levels of participation in associational life:

1. formal membership
3. position of trust (“officials”)
4. other active participation
5. passive membership
6. number of associations joined
7. spoke at a meeting or not
8. attempted to influence decisions
9. amount of time devoted to association
10. interested in a variety of associations.

This differentiation by level of involvement makes it possible to show not only how formal membership has developed, but also how members use associations in a broader sense through different levels of participation.

Among other things, this chapter presents evidence that association membership declined to-

ward the end of the 1990s, and that the level of active participation also decreased. There was a certain ”phasing out” of membership during the 1990s, along with a shift between different levels of participation.

Types of association and the activity levels of members vary widely. Some associations are based on direct personal contact and local activities. Others may involve minimal personal contact and be limited to soliciting financial support from ”chequebook members” or spreading information via newsletters, magazines and other media.

Diagram 1 summarizes membership in all types of association (i.e. without sorting them into categories) and compares the overall level of participation in years 1992 and 2000. (See also the full report with a variety of tables.)

Membership decline in the 1990s

Ninety percent of adult Swedes aged 16-84 years (6.2 million) are members in at least one association. About four million are members of labour unions. Nearly 700,000 adults, roughly ten percent, do not belong to any association.

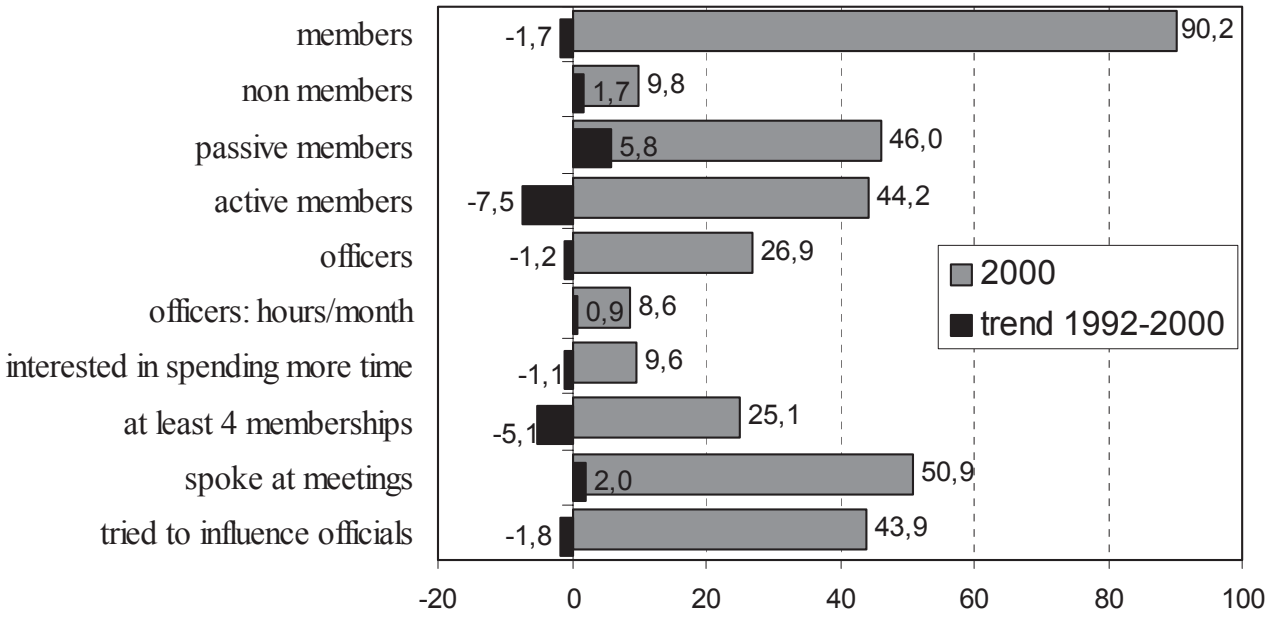
The number of individuals who were members of at least one association decreased by 120,000, or 1.7 percent, between 1992 and 2000. One important explanation for this is a decline in employment, with a later start in working life and reduced union membership, primarily among young people and immigrants. This trend was not limited to labour unions, however.

The vast majority of associations experienced membership declines during this period. The number of those who did not participate at all in associational life grew by ca. 120,000— an increase of roughly twenty percent in just eight years.

Fewer active members

There has also been a reduction, amounting to 7.5 percent of the adult population, in the proportion of active members (see Diagram 1). Nearly half of all members (46 percent) are passive, i.e. they ”have not participated actively in any association during the preceding twelve months”. The number of passive members increased by roughly 400,000 (ca. ten percent of adults) during 1992-2000, while the proportion of active members declined by 7.5 percentage points to 44 percent of the adult population.

Diagram 1 Participation in at least one voluntary organisation. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Adults 16-84 years. Percent.



Our findings thus indicate that Swedish associations lost around half a million members between 1992 and 2000. As explained in detail in the full report, there was significant movement of people in and out of associations. In general, however, the rate of replacement was slow, and recruitment of younger new members did not compensated for the loss of the older generation. In addition, there was a significant increase in passive membership among those who remained.

However, the fact that remaining members reduced their level of participation does not necessarily mean that membership became less important. The mere fact of joining an association implies that one has taken a position, or has at least associated oneself with an ideological, cultural or political point of view. We therefore urge caution in assessing the significance of associational life for politics and democracy on the sole basis of activity level.

Fewer officers carrying a bigger load

In 2000, every fourth adult Swede occupied a position of trust of some sort in one or more associations. That figure also represented a decrease since 1992, but not as great as the other downward trends noted. In any event, it means that the work of associations became more concentrated among fewer individuals. Diagram 1 shows that, compared with 1992, there were fewer officials spending a greater portion of their time on association duties in 2000. The average increase was about nine hours per month, for a total of roughly twenty percent more than in 1992.

Among association members in general, there was no apparent increase in activity level. A typical response was, ”I do not have enough time or interest to devote more effort to any organization”. This is consistent with the trends toward declining membership and fewer active members.

Thinning of the ranks

The number of individuals who were members of several different associations was substantially higher in 1992. By 2000, the proportion of those active in at least four associations had decreased by twenty percent (see Diagram 1). The proportion with only one membership increased significantly during the same period.

Increase in personal initiative

It has already been noted that there were significant reductions in both *total* membership and *active* membership during 1992-2000. But there was very little reduction in the proportion of individuals who exercise personal initiative (speak at meetings, try to influence decisions, etc.). Statistic Sweden’s analyses point to a long-term increase in individuals’ political activity (”participate in political discussions”), and their citizen competence (”able to appeal a decision on one’s own”).

Diagram 1 shows a slight increase in those who spoke at least once at a meeting (51 percent in 2000), but it appears that slightly fewer (44 percent) cared to contact an association official in order to influence a decision.

5. Membership trends in various types of association

Participation in Swedish associational life declined sharply during the relatively short period of 1992-2000. The total number of members decreased, while the proportion of passive members increased. Fewer individuals accepted positions of trust and, as a result, those who did were forced to bear a larger burden. There were also fewer interested in actively participating in associational life. Other studies indicate that this downward trend had already begun in the 1980s.

Let us now take a closer look at how this general decline affected various aspects of associational life. Diagram 2-6 provide details on membership trends for thirty different types of association, including the situation in 2000 and developments during 1992-2000. The typology of associations is based primarily on their principal activities.

Membership declines in most types of association

One conclusion that emerges from the data is that the decline in membership affected nearly all types of association. It follows that the trend cannot be explained entirely by reduced union membership due to lower employment levels. Neither was the drop in membership limited to political organizations, including parties.

The exceptions to the downward trend are few but interesting. They consist of local action

groups, pensioners' organizations[2], and the state-affiliated (Lutheran) Swedish Church. Local action groups are often "alternative" movements in opposition to established political parties; membership in the latter decreased dramatically during the 1990s (see Diagram 2).

A fundamental change in the Swedish Church's relationship to the state went into effect on 1 January 2000. This may help to explain why the Church did not experience the same downward trend as other Protestant denominations or associations in general. It may be that the interest generated by the organizational change made the question of membership in the Church more concrete and urgent. Pensioners' organizations are part of an older popular-movement tradition that remains strong among older age-groups. A related factor is the long-term trend toward better health, higher incomes and more active recreational lives of pensioners, which has been detected by surveys of general welfare. It seems that pensioners' associations have succeeded quite well in competing for the time and interest of Sweden's increasingly healthy pensioners.

Membership declines in traditional popular movements

The extent of the membership decrease varied somewhat between associations. But all of those for which the decrease was greatest were traditional popular movements such as political parties and special-interest organizations.

Among the latter are labour unions, whose membership declined by 3.3 percent of all those eligible to join[3]. This decrease may be interpreted as primarily the result of weak and uncertain connections to the labour market. During the 1990s, young people entered the labour market at increasingly later ages, often experiencing repeated periods of unemployment and insecure/fixed-term jobs.

Consumer and housing co-ops also experienced significant reductions in membership. The sharpest declines were among parent associations; altogether, they lost about forty percent of their members between 1992 and 2000[4]. New possibilities for parental influence in the schools were introduced during that period, due partly to changes in the rules for state subsidies, and partly to changes in the organization and objectives of Sweden's parent-teacher associations.

Membership in immigrant associations declined by one-third during the 1990s, despite an increase in newly-arrived refugees, primarily from the Balkan region.

The general trend was also followed by solidarity organizations and religious denominations (except for the Swedish Church, as noted). But the negative trend was so slight as to be statistically insignificant. Membership decreased in all life-style organizations; but the trend here was also slight.

There was a sharp decline in the membership of political parties, corresponding with a decreasing rate of participation in elections. These trends, which are not unique to Sweden, are not surprising given the sharp reduction in general-welfare (work, income and social benefits) during the 1990s, and intensified political conflict over the scope of the general-welfare state. However, these same factors might just as well have led to a higher level of political organization.

Thus, the decrease in party membership cannot with certainty be interpreted as a sign of increasing withdrawal from government policy, the political system or elected officials. Most likely, it has more to do with more general, complex and illusive trends in politics and society.

The results of our research indicate that it is not merely a question of declining participation in political parties. Rather, participation has decreased in essentially all types of associations. Even the alternative environmental movement has experienced heavy membership losses.- around half within a very short time. Only local actions groups, whose total membership is quite low, experienced slight increase.

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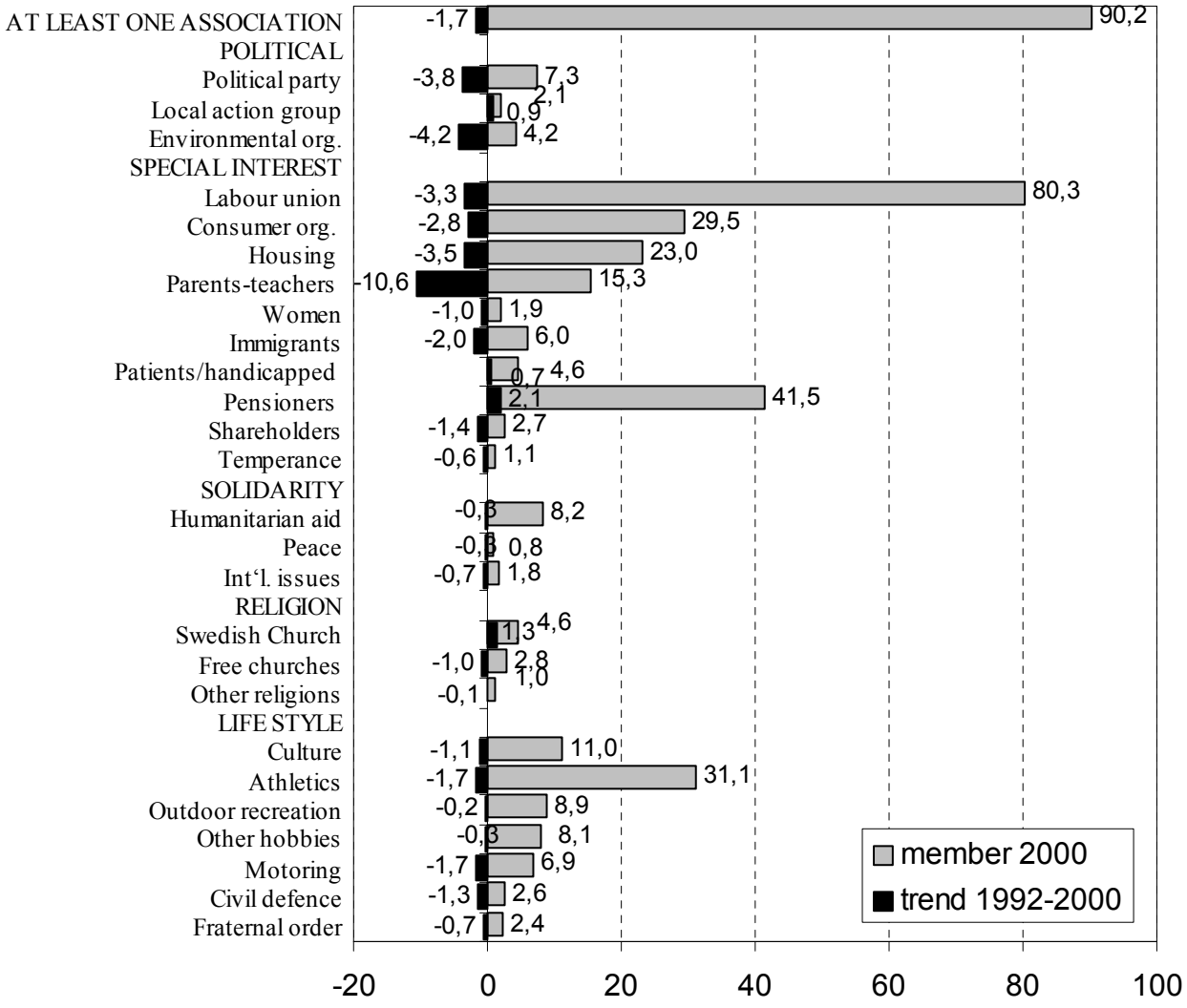
[2] For some associations, the figures in diagrams and tables apply in some cases only to certain subgroups, e.g. women, pensioners, immigrants, parents, employees, etc.

[3] Figures for labour unions apply only to employees who have worked at least 16 hours

[4] Figures apply only to parents of children aged 18 or less.

Diagram 2 Memberships in various associations. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Adults 16-84 years. Percent.



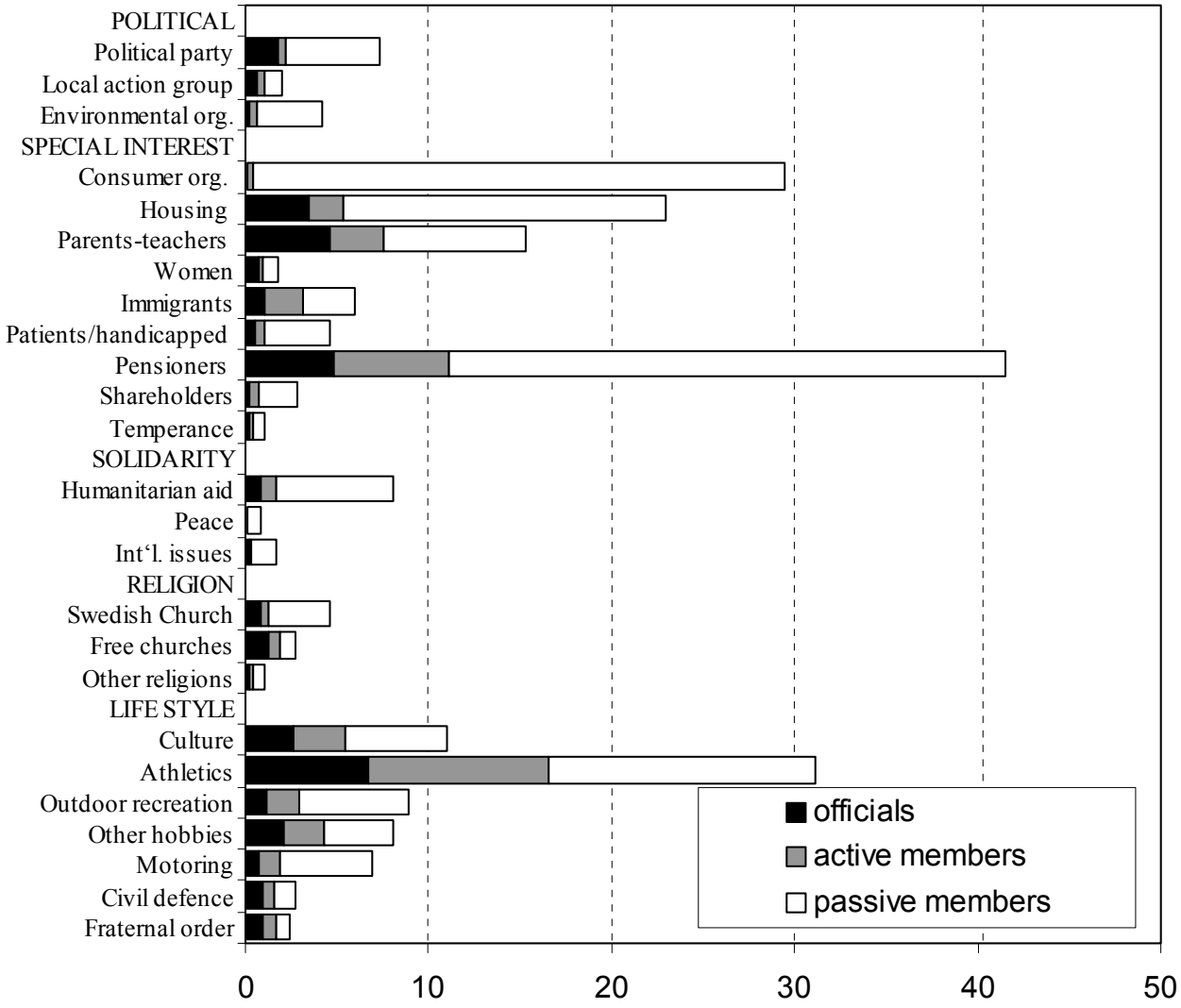
Given that the decline has been general, involving most types of association, the factors involved must also be general in nature. They may involve changes in the surrounding world which lead in turn to behavioural changes that result in lower levels of participation.

The low rate of replacement among younger age-groups may well be related to the large increase in unemployment among young people during the 1990s. A related factor could be longer periods of education before becoming financially independent and establishing oneself in the labour market. All of this could be expected to delay a general increase of participation.

The fact that the decline is especially great among younger age-groups raises the possibility that there has been a generational shift of values that has reduced the comparative attractiveness of traditional associations. This need not be entirely, or even primarily, a matter of rejecting the purposes or objectives of associations. It might just as well involve dissatisfaction with traditional forms of associational life - despite attempts by many associations to ”modernize” their activities to some extent.

Another likely factor is the wide array of leisure activities now available. There have been dramatic changes in terms of both quantity and quality. To cite but a few examples: computer games, the Internet, the proliferation and variety of films and TV channels, and other informal ”meeting places” which provide increased opportunities to develop personal interests apart from associational life.

Diagram 3.a Adult members in voluntary organisations in 2000: officials, other active members and passive members. Percent.



In short, there was a general decline in membership during 1992-2000. Most heavily affected were the popular movements that comprise the core of associational life in Sweden - labour unions, consumer and housing co-ops, political parties and parent-teacher associations.

6. Participation levels in different types of association

Participation in different types of association may vary widely with regard to recruitment of new members and different forms of participation. The study distinguishes between three levels of participation: holding a position of trust, other active participation and passive membership. The distribution of members among the three levels is shown in Diagram 3.a.

Diagrams 2.3.a and 2.3.b provide an overview of the activities and opportunities that members discover in associational life. There is a high level of participation in many lifestyle organizations, which is naturally related to the fact that they are primarily concerned with arranging shared activities. These are often physical activities or local meetings based on voluntary efforts.

In addition, lifestyle organizations provide opportunities for social contacts, as do certain types of special-interest organization (pensioners, housing co-ops, parent-teacher associations) and free churches, which are also based on local activities.

Solidarity associations, especially those on the national level, and environmental organizations

have memberships whose direct contacts and contributions of work are very limited. The large majority of members are passive; they often join to provide support and to receive information. Local activities do not have the same basic function as for other types of association.

Active members

The composition of membership varies considerably among associations. At one extreme are the consumer co-ops, nearly all of whose members are passive. The proportion of those holding positions of trust comprise about one-tenth of one percent, and only 0.3 percent regard themselves as active. The co-ops are operated for the most part by paid employees, and direct contact among members is limited.

At the opposite extreme are athletic associations, with their many local activities and high proportion of members in positions of trust. Most age-groups are actively involved, often through the participation of parents in connection with their children's athletic interests (providing transportation, selling lottery tickets, serving as game officials, etc.).

Diagram 3.b provides additional details on mobilization for association activities. It shows that lifestyle organizations (culture, athletics, outdoor recreation and other hobbies) have higher levels of mobilization than the large special-interest organizations with broad-based memberships (consumer and housing co-ops, parent-teacher associations, pensioners organizations). The diagram also shows that organizations connected with various ideologies (solidarity, alternative politics, religion) have very low levels of mobilization, despite their potentially large recruiting bases.

Further, Diagram 3.b indicates that the decline in membership was not restricted to passive members. For nearly all associations, it also involved a reduced level of mobilization (active members in relation to the entire population).

Members in positions of trust

Diagram 4.a summarizes data on positions of trust in various types of association. The proportion of members in such positions (officials) was generally quite low; and the changes within associations during 1992-2000 were in most cases relatively slight and statistically uncertain.

However, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding general trends. In most associations, the proportion of officials decreased only marginally or not at all, while there were significant reductions in total memberships. Most positions of trust are in labour unions, athletic associations, pensioners' organizations, housing co-ops and parent-teacher associations. Thus, positions of trust are closely related to the roles of associations in supporting certain basic functions of households (work, housing, parenting) and in dealing with lifecycle issues (retirement). Not included in these categories are athletic associations, in which the activity level tends to be intense during certain segments of the life cycle (children active in sports and their parents, in particular).

It has previously been noted that, when the number of members holding positions of trust declines, the voluntary efforts of those who remain increase (measured here in terms of hours per month). Diagram 2.4.b shows the total contributions of officials.

Diagram 3.b *Active* members in various associations as a percentage of all adults 16-84 years. Current status (2000) and trend 1992-2000.

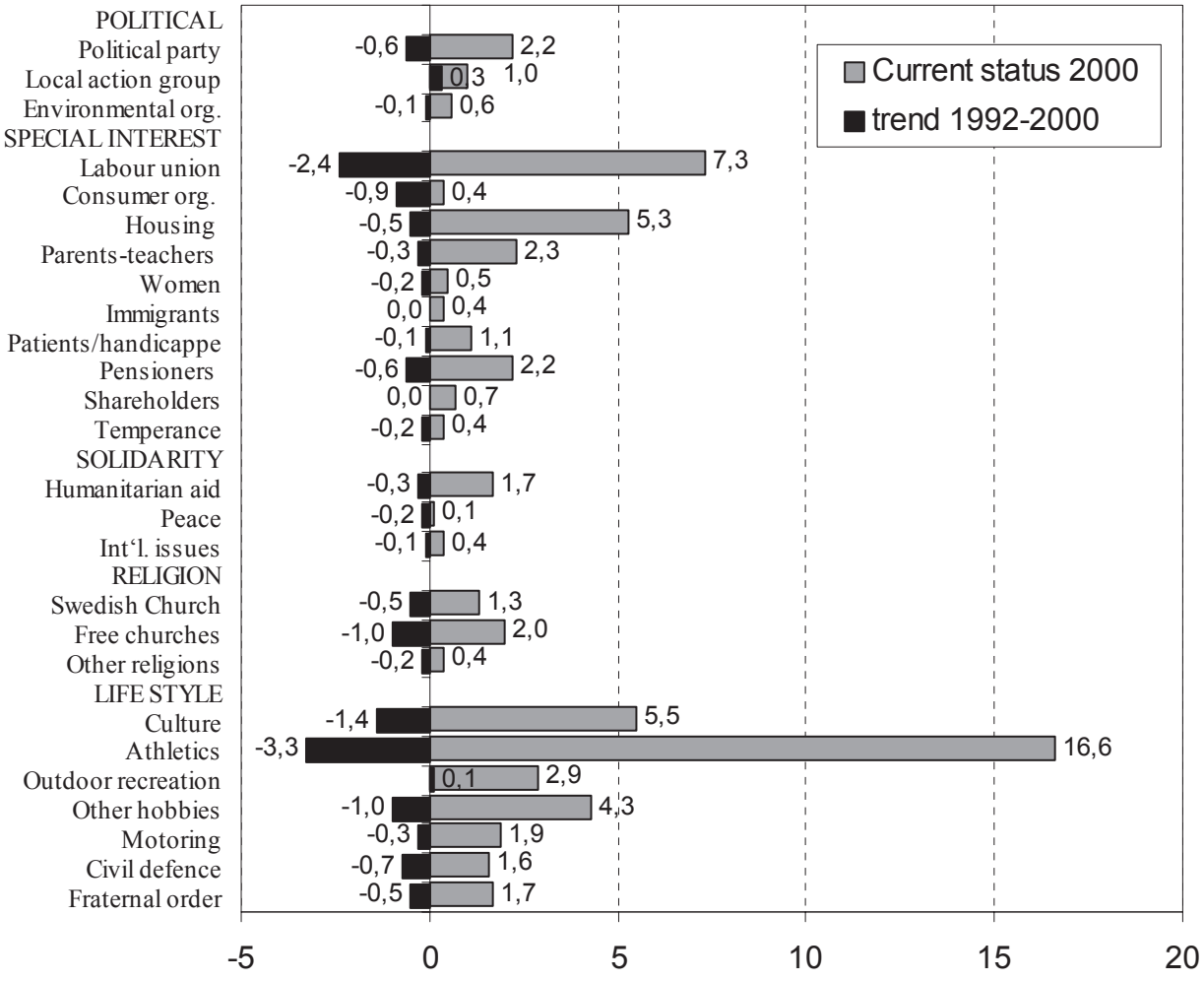


Diagram 4.a Officials of various associations. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Adults 16-84 years. Percent.

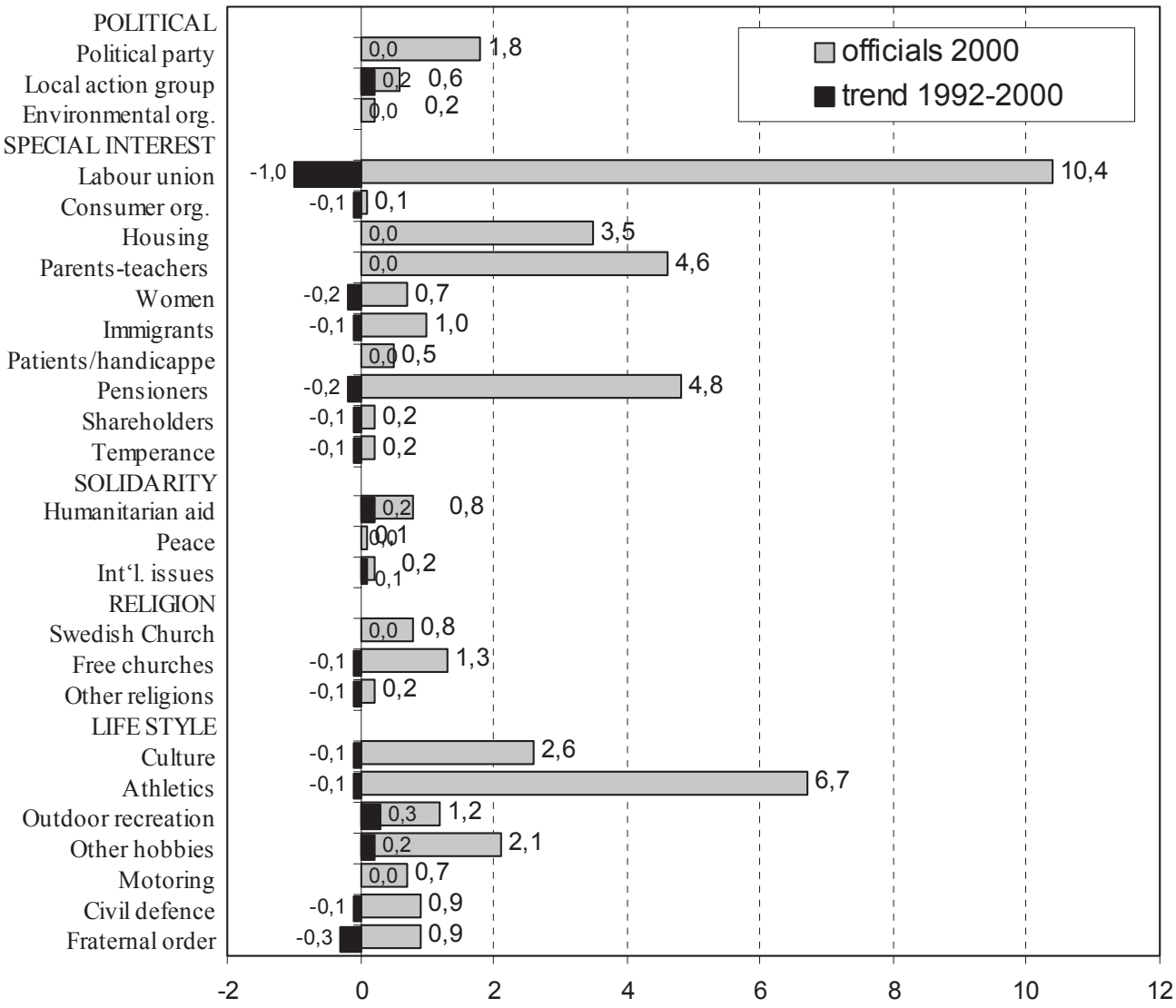
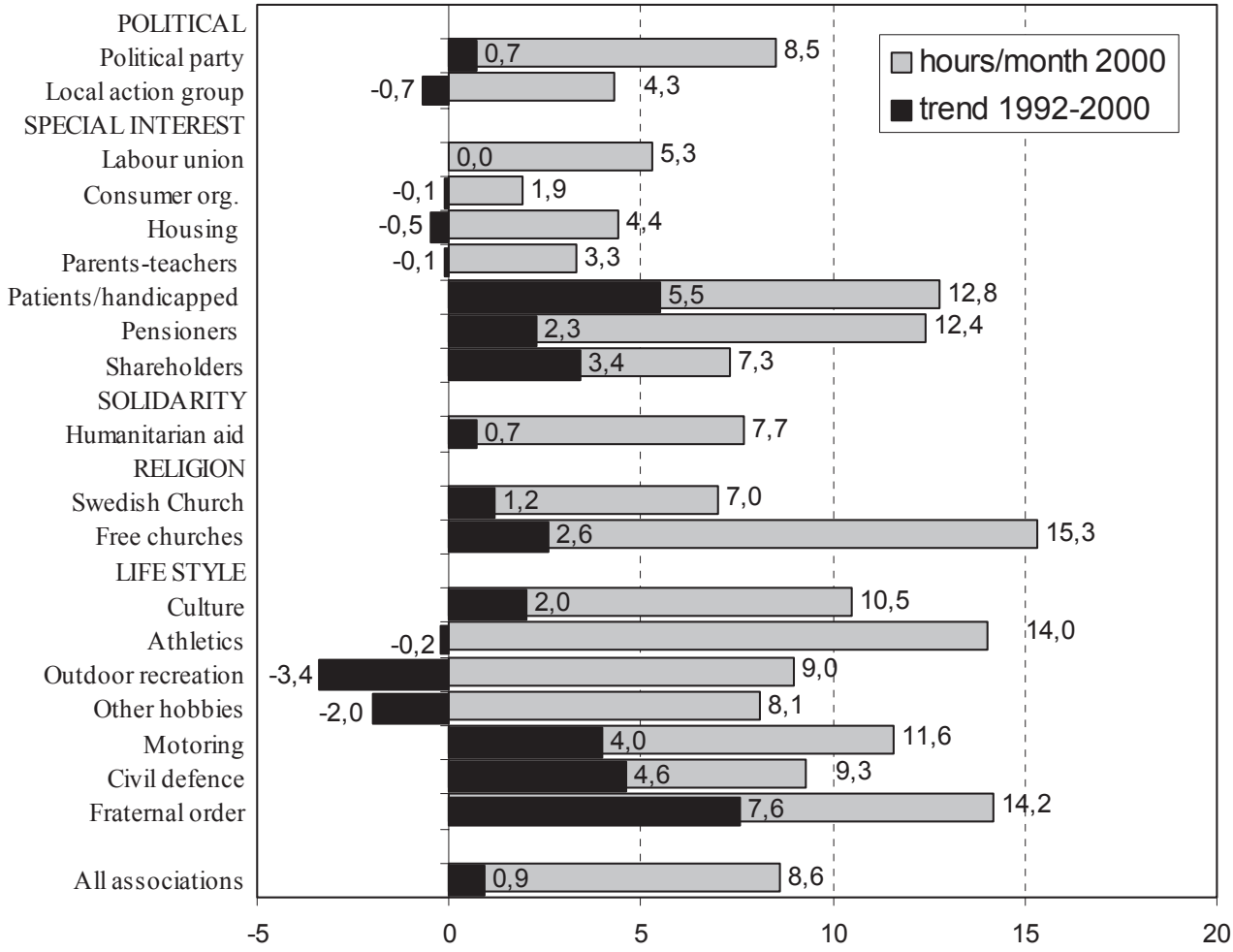


Diagram 4.b Contributions of officials (hours/month). Curent levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.



Passive membership

A large proportion of association members are passive, i.e. they do not participate actively through personal contacts, or in events and meetings at the local level. Their involvement is usually limited to providing financial support or receiving information. Membership can provide an important source of social, ideological, special-interest or identify-forming affiliation, even if it is not expressed in action.

Diagram 5 shows that the proportion of passive members decreased in many associations. This does not mean, however, that they became more active. Rather, it appears that it was often within the category of passive members that departures from the organization occurred and/or new recruitment failed to take place. In some cases, however, there was a definite increase in passive members and in their proportion of the total; this resulted in a shift to a more passive membership. Pensioners' organizations and the Swedish Church provide examples of this trend.

Diagram 5 shows that the proportion of passive members was large in certain associations, in both absolute and relative terms. This is especially true of consumer co-ops (29 percent passive), labour unions (68 percent of the employed) and pensioners' organizations (30 percent of the 68-84 age-group).

As noted above, parent-teacher associations constitute a special case. While the number of active members remained nearly unchanged during 1992-2000, the number of passive parents with children aged 18 decreased from eighteen to eight percent. In other words, the major part of the passive parents left, while the more active core membership remained.

In connection with the decline in association membership, it may be noted that both interest in voluntary work among the general population and willingness to perform work within associations also declined (see Diagram 6). In 2000, only some ten percent of the population was prepared to contribute (more) to the work of an association. But it can be seen from Diagram 6 that, within some individual associations, about ten percent of the members were willing to consider increasing their efforts; this proportion decreased during the 1990s. Only 0.6 percent of the population was willing to work within a political party, and only 0.2 percent in a labour union. The figures were much higher for both athletic associations and humanitarian aid organizations.

Diagram 5 Passive memberships. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

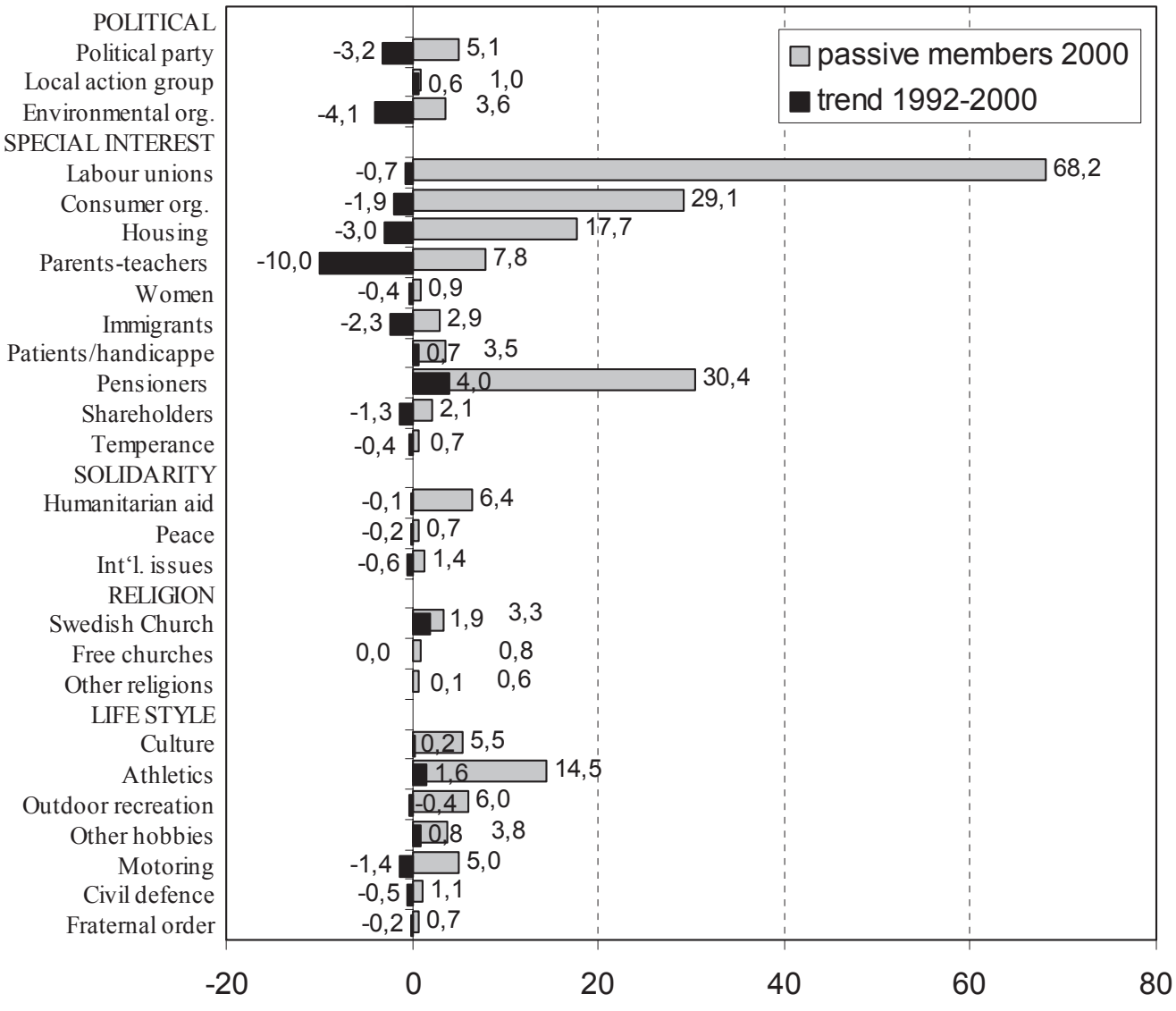
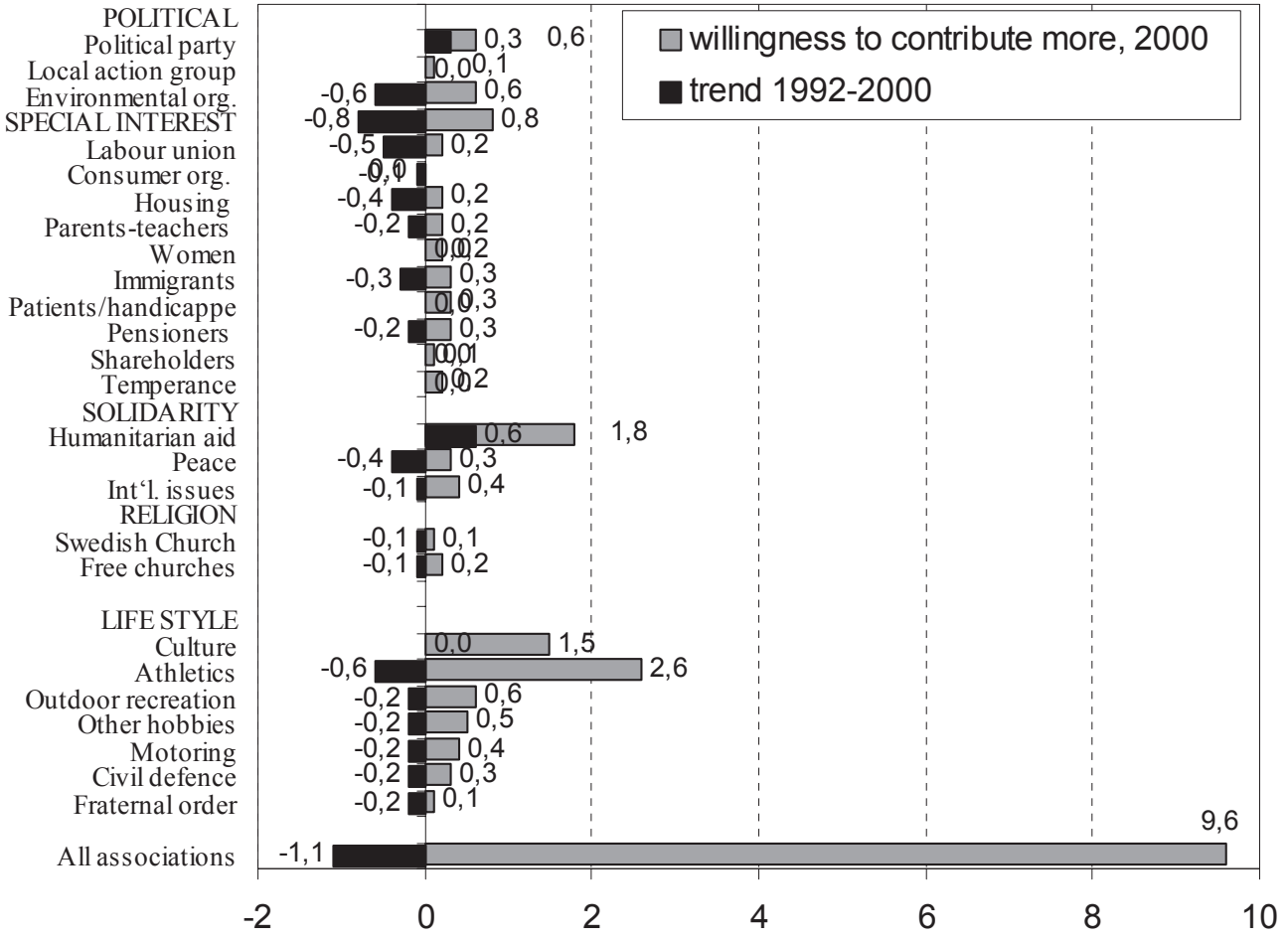


Diagram 6 Willingness to increase contributions (work hours) to associations. Adult members. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.



7. Participation of various population subgroups

In this section, the perspective is broadened in order to localize participation and development 1992-2000 on the basis of six levels of participation in associations:

1. membership in at least one association
3. membership in at least four associations
4. active participation
5. hold position of trust
6. speak at a meeting
7. attempt to influence decisions.

We attempt to localize participation within a large number of population subgroups in relation to gender, age, family situation, social class, education level, income, region and ethnicity (see Diagrams 8-13).

The subgroups represent different values, life styles and living conditions that are related to participation in associational life. It may also be hypothesized that changes in the surrounding world which could influence participation in associational life do not affect the various subgroups in the same way, and perhaps not at the same rate.

Sweeping changes in the surrounding world that influence the type and nature of associational activities or the interests of various subgroups (e.g. economic resources, knowledge acquisition, recreation, values) could have consequences for who participates where, and at what level. In other words, such changes could affect the ways in which various segments of the population choose among the alternatives provided by associational life.

Differences in participation between various subgroups, along with changes in participation within subgroups, can help to understand and ex-

plain level of involvement, choice of association and participation trends.

This section analyses overall participation. The following section will deal with details of individual associations and their membership profiles, i.e. what categories of individual join which types of association.

Replacement levels in various types of association

The results of our research indicate a general decline of participation in associational life. The decline is evident in most types of association and applies to most levels of participation. Thus, it was not limited to specific segments of the association spectrum, although the analysis of trends indicates that political and special-interest organizations experienced the greatest changes, as reflected in Diagram 2.

The following analysis focuses on which population subgroups participated in associational life, and which experienced declines.

Perhaps the most important trend that emerged from the survey data for year 2000 was the decreasing rate of membership replacement among younger age-groups. Most types of association displayed a pattern of large age differences and varying trends for different age-groups.

That the decline took place during the relatively short period of eight years suggests that strong temporary effects may have contributed to the decline in participation. The results indicate that changes in the labour market (temporary effects of the 1990s' economic crisis) led to lower rates of new recruitment among younger age-groups.

The 1990s were strongly influenced by a sharp rise in unemployment which primarily affected young people. The labour market was also characterized by growing insecurity (flexible job descriptions, fixed-term and contract employment), increased competition, more demanding educational requirements and faster work pace.

It may also be expected that heavier work-related demands lead to more frequent conflicts between recreational interests, family and work. This should be reflected in associational participation during the 1990s among subgroups most affected by the changes - primarily young people, but also immigrants. It is during their 20s that young adults gradually become involved in associational life, eventually replacing the older generation whose participation gradually decreases. Accordingly, a logical outcome of the 1990s economic crisis would have been a delay of one or more years in young people's establishment in associational life. Every tenth job disappeared during the 1990s, and unemployment among young people increased in great leaps, to an extent that was unique in a global context. This should have had a powerful effect.

The data clearly reveal that the decline in participation was greatest among younger age-groups (see diagrams 8-13). Diagram 7.a summarizes the data on participation by age, and Diagram 7.b shows changes in participation among various age-groups during the 1990s. The comparison applies to the six levels of participation.

Diagram 7.a shows that participation was highest among the middle-aged, and lowest among the youngest age-groups (i.e. those in the "establishment phase" of the life cycle, which also applies to associational life) and the oldest age-groups (when members gradually withdraw due to declining health and/or income).

However, differences between age-groups changed considerably during the 1990s, as indicated by Diagram 7.b. There was a clear decrease in participation among those below age 35, as measured by all indicators. The proportion of members in the youngest ages decreased by ten percentage points, and their proportion of all active members decreased by sixteen percentage points. The only increase was among those aged 60 and older.

These figures conform well with more general results of the Statistic Sweden's continuing series of living standards surveys (Vogel et al. 1997, 2000), which indicate a sharp rise in existential problems related to the labour market among those in their 20s. The same survey data indicate a general improvement in the health and activity level of pensioners.

It may also be noted that the younger generation appears to have been strongly affected in other ways by the economic crisis and increased financial insecurity. For example, Swedish family formation was characterized by delayed childbearing during the 1990s. (Regeringskansliet 2001; Vogel 2002a, 2002b).

Diagram 7.a Participation in associations. By age. Current levels (2000). Percent.

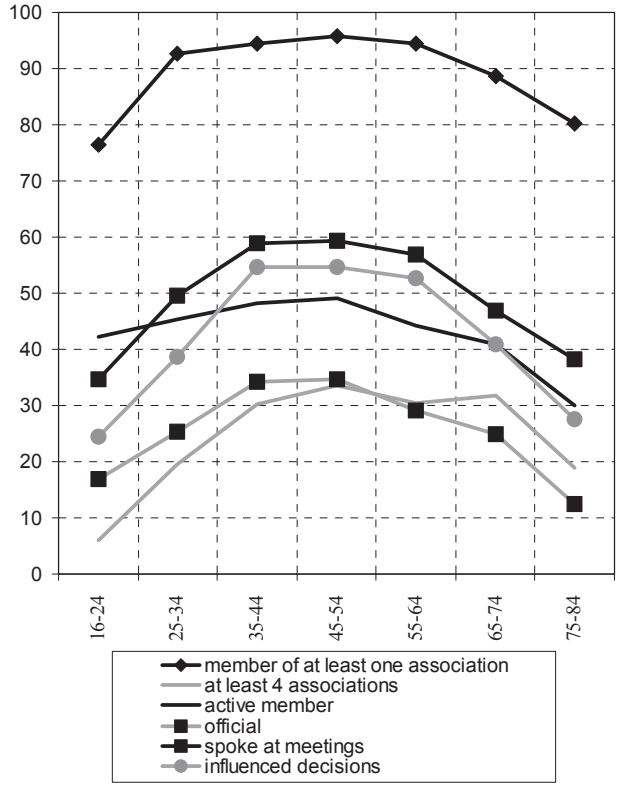
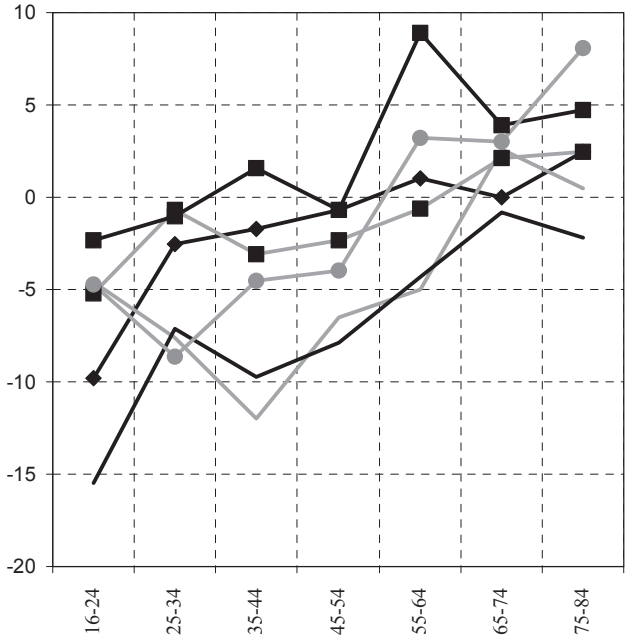


Diagram 7.b Participation in associations. By age. Trend 1992 till 2000. Percent.



From the foregoing we conclude that today's young people take on the roles of adult life, including those connected with associational life, one or more years later than their counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s. For most, the need for and interest in associations develops somewhat later: One joins a labour union when one gets a (usually, permanent) job, a housing co-op after acquiring one's own home, a parent-teacher association when one's children start school, etc. With establishment in the adult world follows a broader sense of responsibility for society, which may be expressed by membership in political or solidarity organizations, and interest in a wide range of associations (e.g. culture, politics, solidarity associations).

We conclude that participation in associations is correlated with existing conditions for such participation. Thus, increased conflicts (over time, attention, etc.) during the younger years may contribute to reduced participation in associations through delayed replacement of members in younger age-groups.

But there may have also been other factors that contributed to the decline in participation between 1992 and 2000. During that period, new media developed sufficiently to compete with associational life. It is also possible that there was a gradual shift of basic values toward a more individualistic outlook, leading to a devaluation of collective association. In that case, the lower replacement rate of members in younger age-groups would reflect a "post-material" shift of values toward individualism.

Similarly, the trend for older age-groups could be interpreted as preservation of an older view of collective enterprises such as associations, with those who grew up in an era of popular movements now entering retirement age. However, there is nothing in the research data that permits conclusions about the possible relationship between attitudes and participation in associations.

Gender equality and associational life

The previous section reviewed the research results on participation within various age-groups and general trends in participation. Establishment in associational life follows roughly the same age-related pattern for both men and women.

The data reveal that male-female differences in participation were fairly limited. It is true that

men were represented more often at all six levels of participation. But there were interesting variations between the sexes with respect to types and trends of participation. A slightly higher proportion of men belonged to one or more organizations; but the level of activity was often higher. They were more likely to be active members, hold positions of trust, speak at meetings and attempt to influence decisions (see Diagram 14.a).

A more detailed comparison shows that men of upper-middle ages (45-64 years) were strongly over-represented with regard to positions of trust, active participation and personal initiative (see Diagrams 10 and 11).

However, the gender pattern became somewhat less distinct during the research period (see Diagram 14.b). Men's participation declined more than women's, especially at the higher activity levels (positions of trust, speaking at meetings and active membership). One effect of men's reduced participation was a slight increase in gender equality in associational life.

Diagram 14.a Participation in associations. By age. Current levels (2000). Percent.

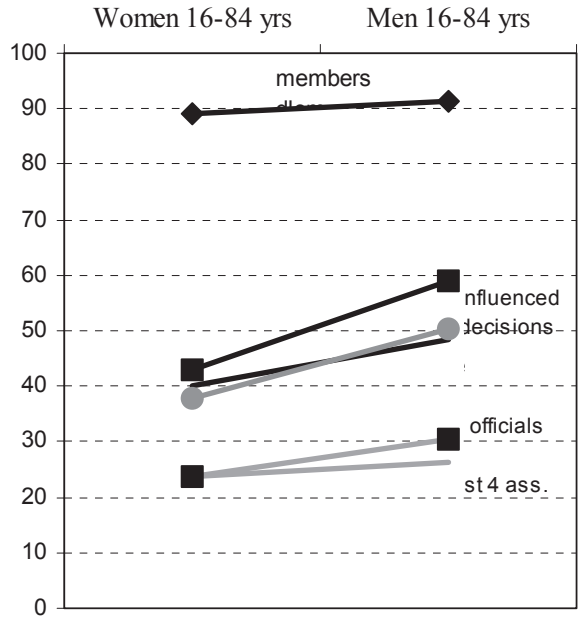


Diagram 14.b Participation in associations. By age. Trend 1992 och 2000. Percent

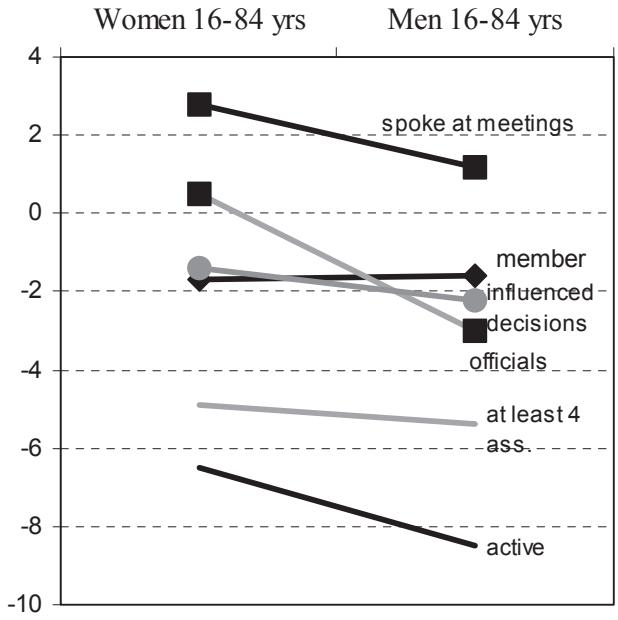


Diagram 8 Adults who are members of at least one association. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

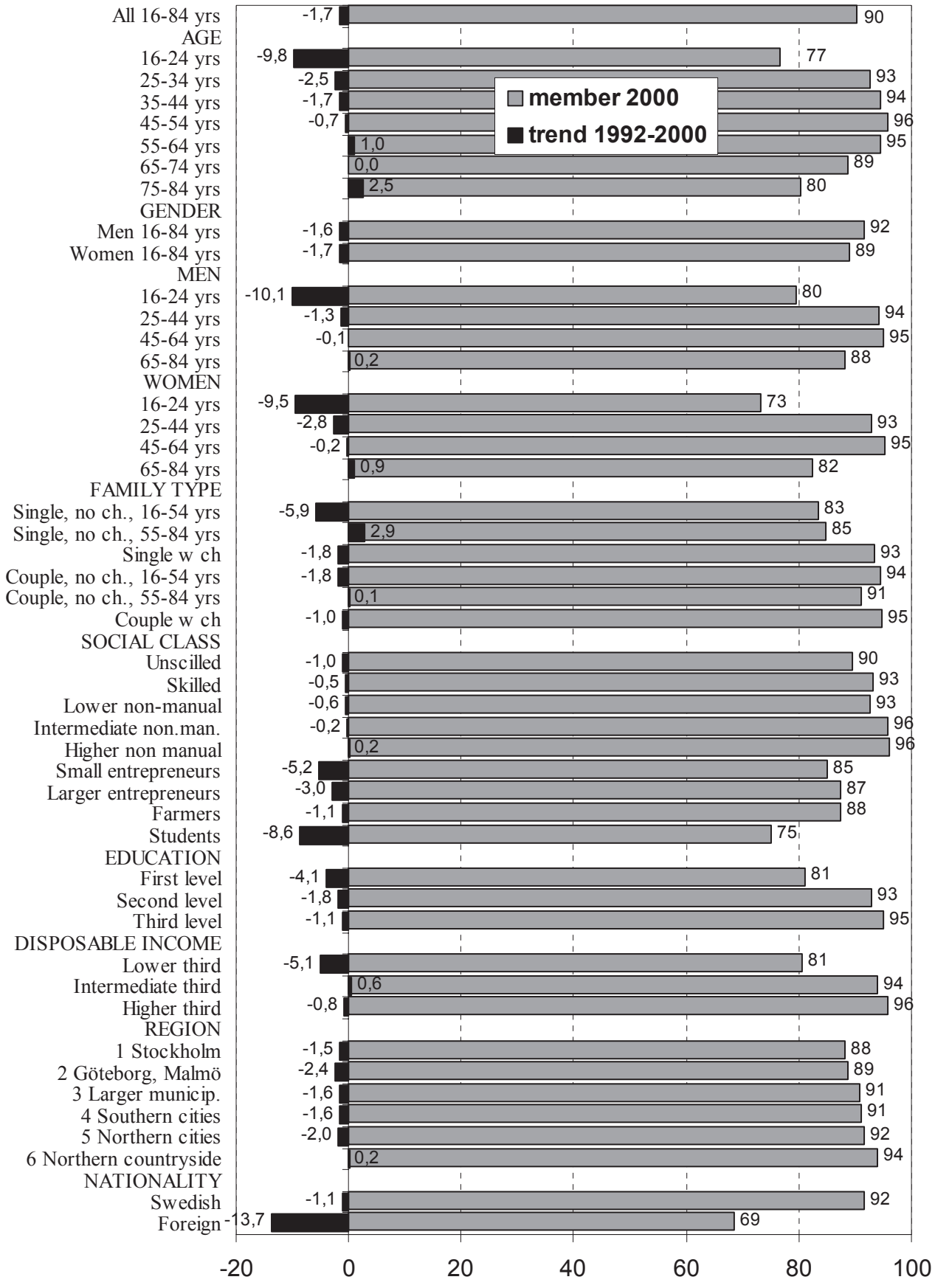


Diagram 9 Adults who are members of at least four associations. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

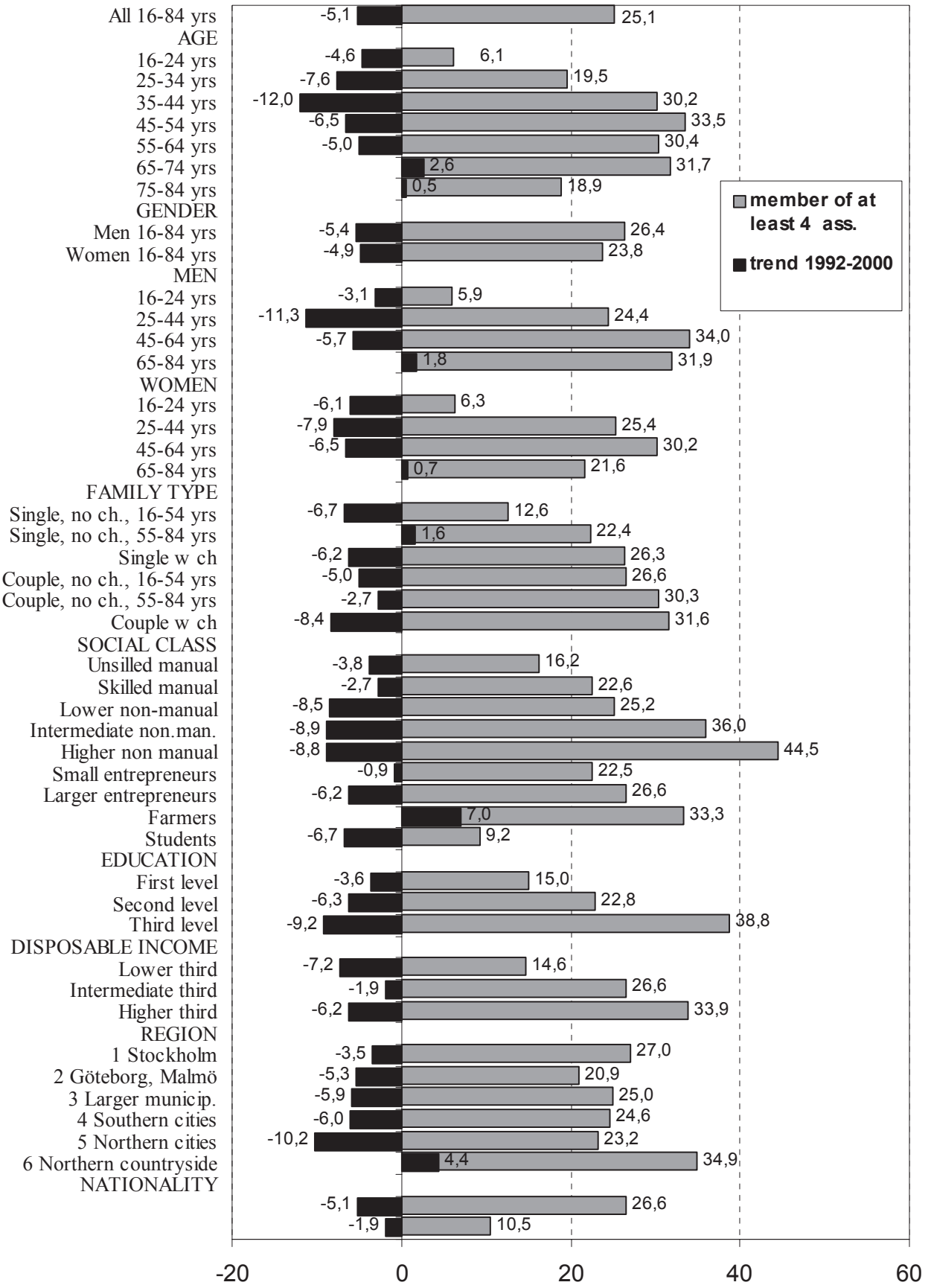


Diagram 10 Adults who are active members of at least one association. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

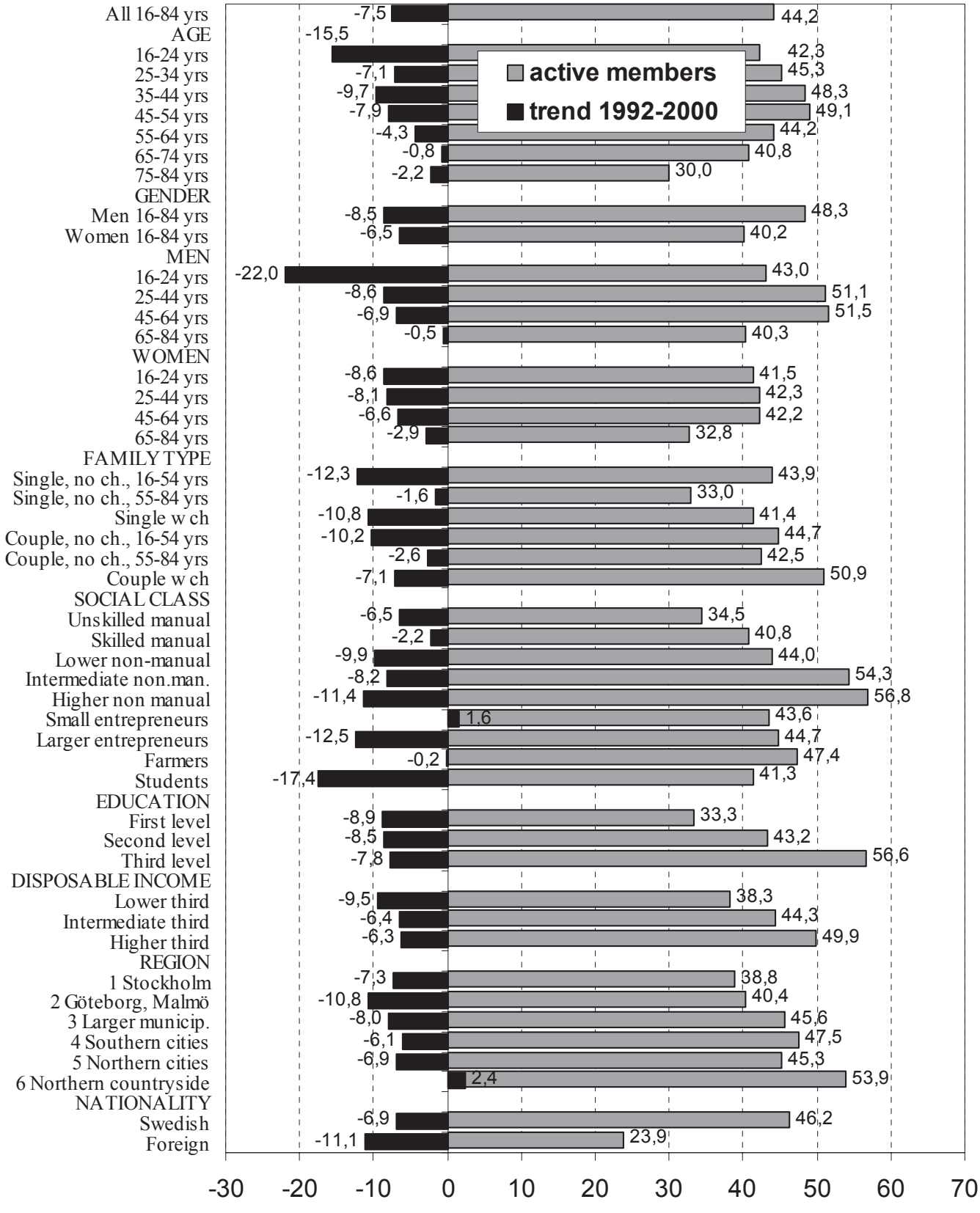


Diagram 11 Adults who are working as officials in at least one association. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

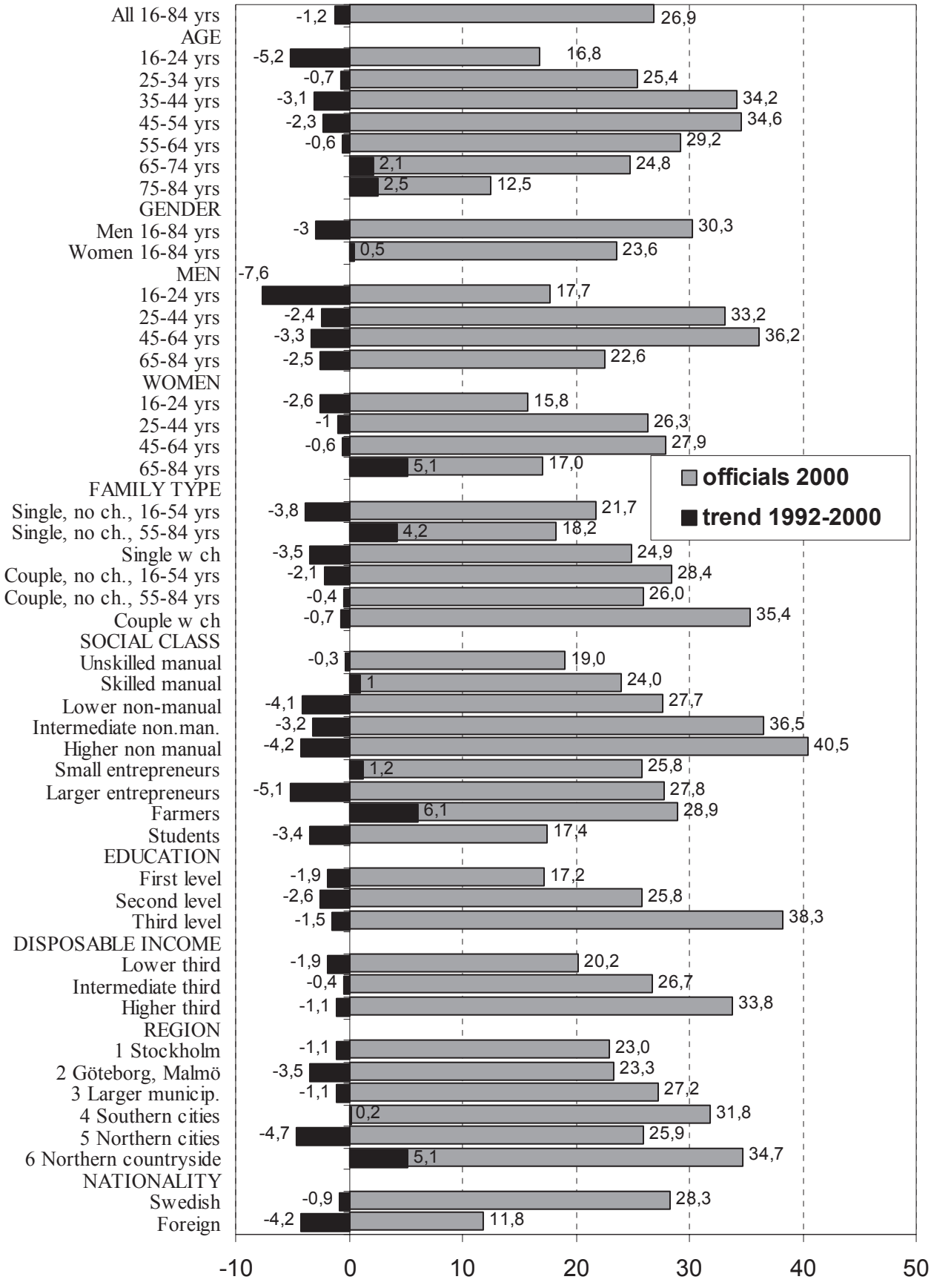


Diagram 12 Adults who spoke att meetings during last 12 months. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.

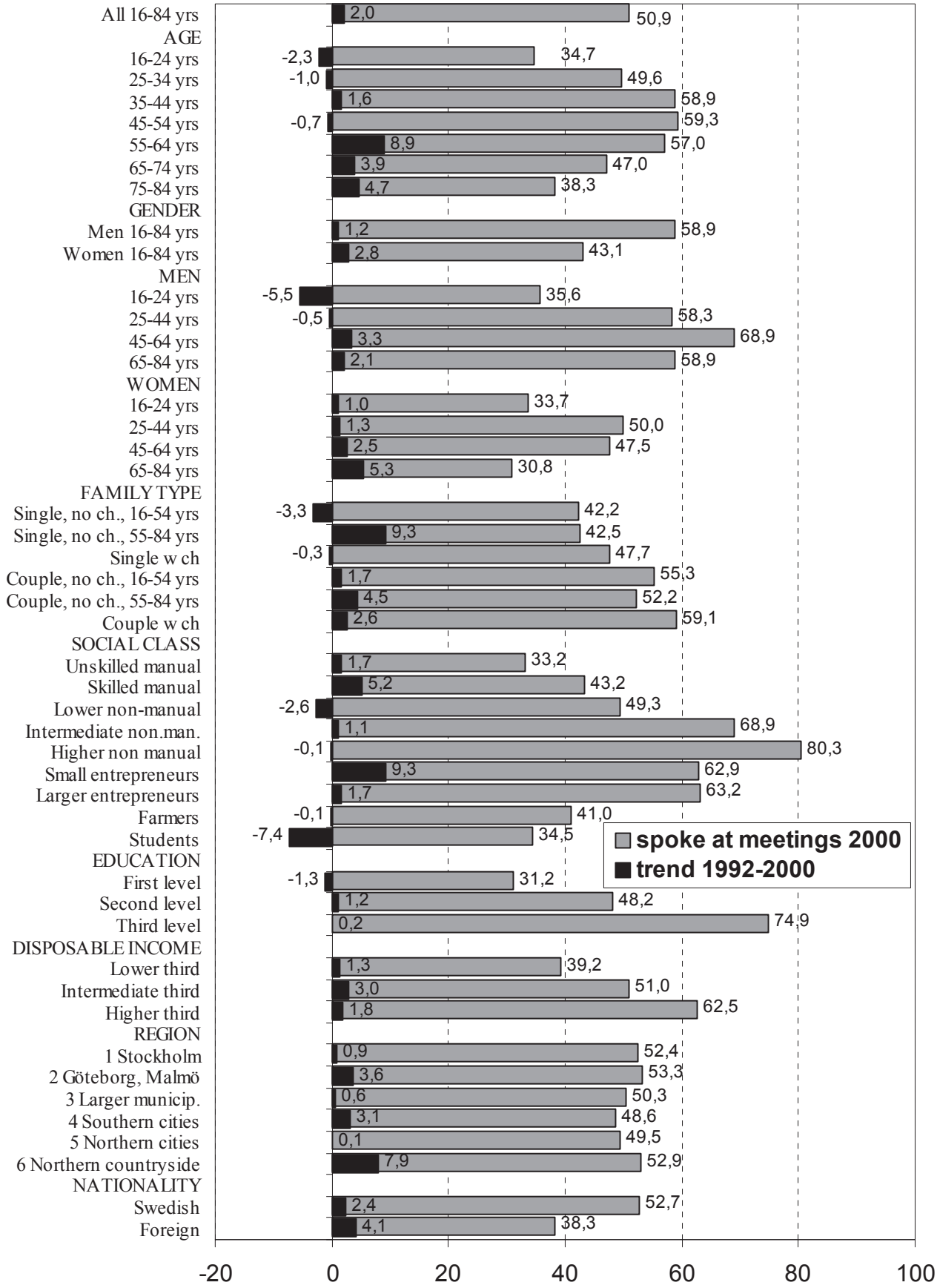
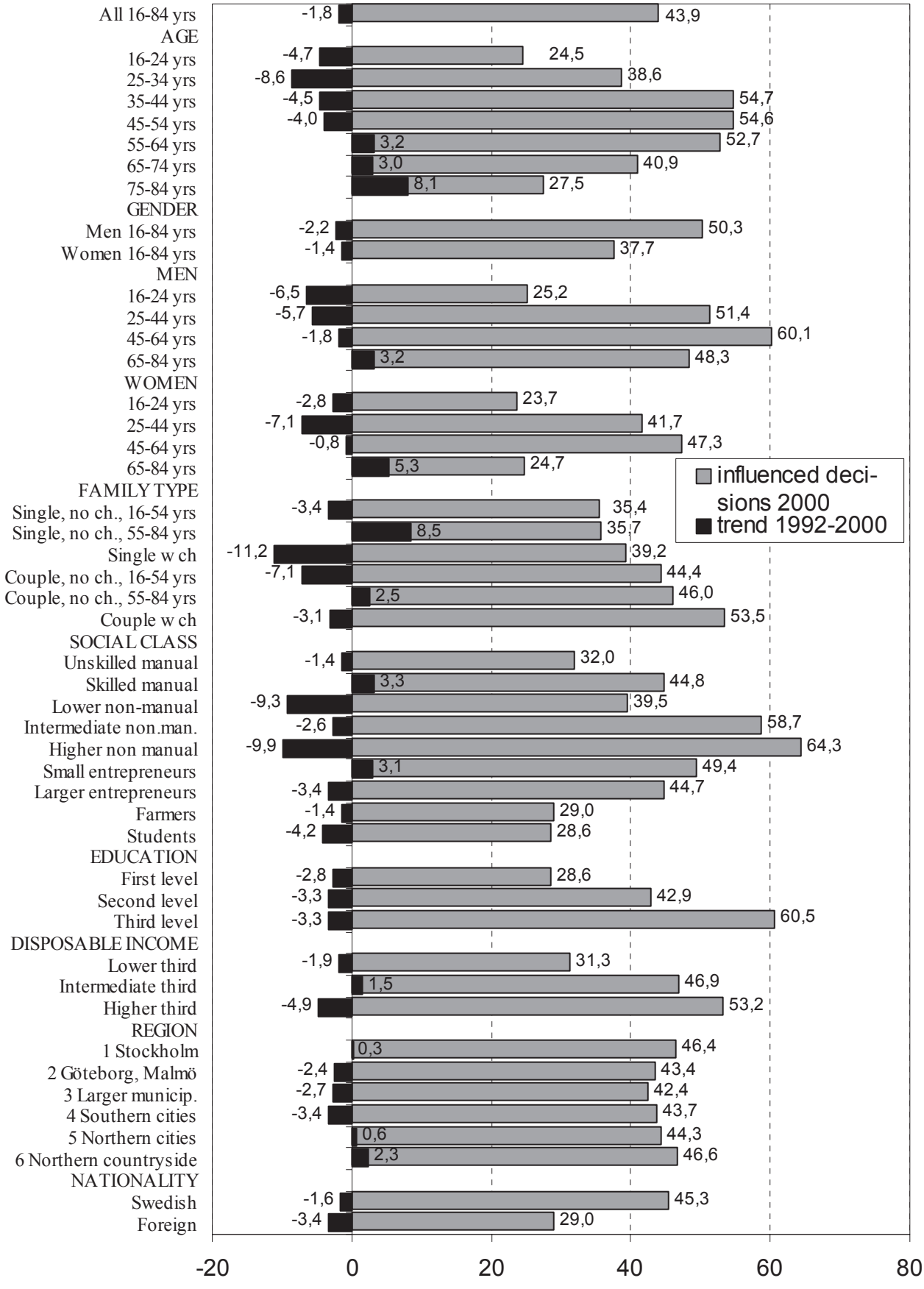


Diagram 13 Adults who tried to influence decisions previous 12 months. Current levels (2000) and trend 1992-2000. Percent.



Family situation and participation

As noted above, participation in associational life is strongly related to age. This is related, in turn, to young people's establishment in adult life, assumption of responsibility and life styles. For the oldest age-groups, it has to do with gradual reductions in health.

There is also a connection with family situation and various responsibilities (children, work, etc.) which may impose restraints on participation. But associational life can also offer opportunities in the form of interesting activities and social contacts. This applies, for example, to those who have few constraints on their time (unemployed, pensioners, part-time workers) or have no family (single persons). For such persons, associations provide alternatives.

Establishment in the labour market often coincides with family formation (partner, children), and to life styles leading to involvement in many different areas, including participation in associations such as labour unions, housing co-ops, parent-teacher associations, etc.

Among the adult population as a whole, ninety percent belong to at least one association. But the level of participation in associations is generally quite low. Families with children, for example, are often involved in athletic associations due to the children's interests. But parents of young children participate slightly more often in cultural associations than the childless.

This suggests a complex variation between different types of household, as reflected in diagrams 8-13.

Among those who are members of at least one association, cohabiting parents have a slightly higher level of participation than single and childless persons (Diagram 8). The same is true of those who are members in four or more associations (Diagram 9). In general, parents are also more active in the associations to which they belong (Diagram 10), and they hold positions of responsibility much more often (Diagram 2.11). In addition, parents speak more often at meetings, attempt to influence decisions, and are more stable members. The decline in membership during the 1990s was not as great for parents of young children as for other categories.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from cohabiting parents were childless single persons, who in every respect participated less in associational life. Their inclination to participate was evidently not affected by either their greater resources of time (no children or other family obligations) or any need for social contacts.

These were the basic trends for associations as a whole. But for specific types of associations, there were wide variations in the nature and extent of participation among various types of household (see diagram 15 and the full report).

Social differentiation and participation

The research included three indicators of social differentiation: socio-economic group or social class (blue-collars workers, white-collar workers at various levels, entrepreneurs, farmers, etc.); education level; and disposable income (calculated per household and consumption unit). These variables are strongly correlated and follow roughly the same pattern in relation to associational life.

Socio-economic differentiation refers to variations in class-related experiences and traditions, general life style, financial resources, and socialization to the Swedish tradition of popular movements. It correlates strongly with both the level and extent of participation, and with the types of associations that one joins.

Within the general perspective of this summary, the research disclosed patterns and relationships for class, education level and income that are very clear and uniform. At a more detailed level, there is a distinct orientation toward various segments of associational life, an issue that is addressed in the next section.

The data indicate that there was a higher proportion of members among white-collar workers. A significantly greater proportion of them were members of at least four associations, were active members, held positions of trust and spoke at meetings (see diagrams 8-11). There was a distinct rank order from unskilled manual workers to upper-level white-collar workers.

There were few class differences when it comes to memberships, but such differences were greater with regard to activity and influence (positions of trust, number of memberships, speaking, influencing). The participation of blue-collar workers was often limited to passive membership, whereas white-collar workers were often more active and exercised influence. Upper-level white-

collar workers, for example, held positions of trust, spoke at meetings and attempted to influence decisions twice as often as unskilled workers. This distinction was even greater for certain types of association (culture, fraternal orders, shareholder associations).

The pattern was the same for education level and disposable income (see below). Increased education was correlated with more memberships, higher activity levels and greater influence through positions of trust, speaking at meetings and decision-making. Seventeen percent of those without a first-level education held positions of trust, compared with 38 percent of those with third-level education. The corresponding figures for speaking at meetings were 31 vs. 75 percent and, for attempts to influence decisions, 29 vs. 61 percent.

Disposable income refers to households' current financial resources, in relation to living expenses for all household members; calculated by consumption units. Disposable income includes not only earnings from work, which are related to education level and class, but also to a number of other factors such as household employment volume, dependency ratio, economies of scale and age. Participation is also strongly correlated with income level, especially with regard to higher levels of participation, i.e. proportion with many memberships, active participation, positions of trust and, to an even greater extent, speaking at meetings and attempting to influence decisions.

With regard to participation trends in relation to socio-economic factors during 1992-2000, the patterns are not as clear. The rate of membership in at least four associations decreased most among white-collar workers and those with third-level education. The decrease in active membership was also greatest among white-collar workers and, proportionately, they held fewer positions of trust, spoke less often at meetings and attempted to influence decisions less toward the end of the 1990s. This pattern of withdrawal resulted in a slight levelling out of socio-economic differences, analogous to the trend for gender equality (see above). But in 2000, basic patterns of gender inequality and social differentiation remained largely unchanged.

Regional variations in participation

It is to be expected that regional variations in participation in associational life reflect variations in the available options at local level. Sparsely populated areas provide fewer opportunities for a broad and attractive variety. But there is a great need for associational life in such areas, and this is often expressed in the form of local action groups.

For associations as a whole, i.e. including all types, regional variations are fairly small. But for certain types of association, there are substantial variations. In urban areas, participation is greater in cultural societies, housing co-ops, shareholder associations and environmental organizations, while sport associations, political parties and labour unions tend to attract more members in rural areas. Membership in labour unions and political parties is much lower in the metropolitan areas.

In more remote regions, especially in the North of Sweden, a comparatively large percentage of the population belongs to one or more associations. Membership in at least four associations occurs primarily in Stockholm (more opportunities) and in northern countryside. Especially in the most sparsely populated areas, the proportion of active members is somewhat higher than in major cities; the same applies to positions of trust.

While participation in general declined with respect to all indicators, there was an increase for all indicators in northern rural areas.

8. Encounters between citizens and associations

Our conception is that citizens choose to participate in various associations within a framework of options and constraints imposed by their resources (time, finances, etc.), for two principal reasons. One is that associations offer benefits such as interesting activities, valuable information, stimulating tasks in matters of personal interest, social contacts and a source of identity. The other basic attraction is that collective action on political issues or various problems of daily life may conform with personal values.

The nature and conditions of the choice may vary considerably between different types of association. Some take very high membership fees and other financial outlays (golf clubs, for example), while the expense of participating in others is negligible. The purpose of the latter type may be to

provide members with economic benefits, as in the case of discounts and purchasing credits offered by consumer co-ops. In some cases, membership is more or less obligatory in order to gain certain benefits (playing golf or tennis, certain types of housing, etc.).

Participation in associational life, as defined by the general indicators referred to in this chapter, may be the expression of a wealthy life style or of a fairly well-established tradition within some group. It may also be due to the way in which the operation and administration of various activities have been institutionalised.

The extent and diversity of participation in associations therefore varies among different subgroups of the population. In this final section, subgroups are matched with the types of association by which they are most likely to be recruited. That analysis is again graphically illustrated here. The accompanying diagrams show the extent to which population subgroups are represented among the memberships of various associations, with their proportion of the general population as a point of reference. Note that, in these diagrams, associations are ranked according to degree of under- or over-representation.

The establishment phase

Young people are socialized into associational life by stages, beginning with membership in sport and student associations. Gradually, during the establishment phase (moving out of the parental home, working, acquiring an own home, family, etc.), they become more involved in various associations with different purposes and activities.

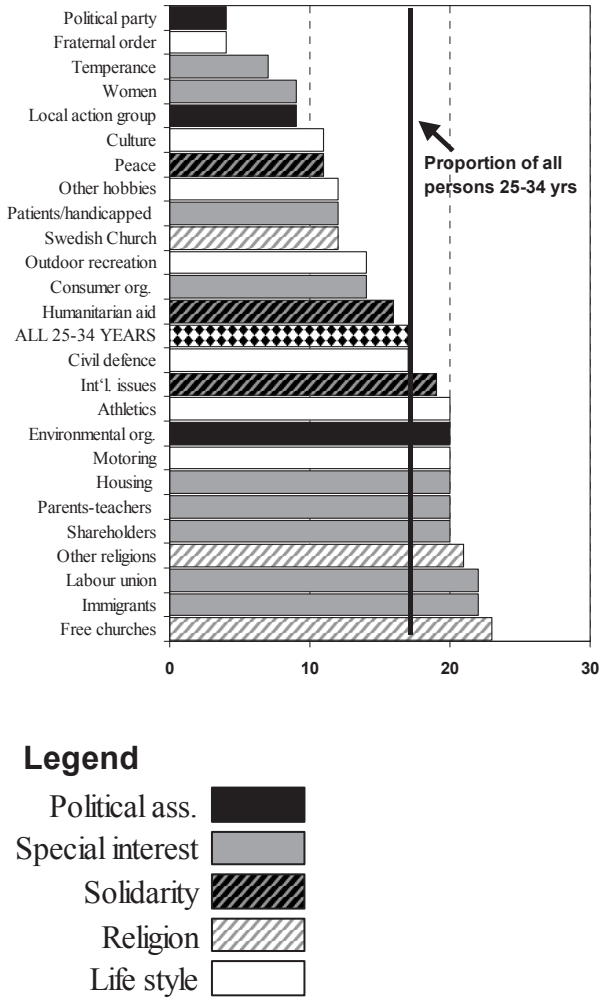
More broadly, age is related to establishment and individual development with respect to occupational role (career), personal resources (income, health, time), family situation (social and economic support, dependents), values and age-related recreational interests, among other things.

Of course, changes during the life cycle are also related to participation and establishment in, and withdrawal from, associational life, as well as choice of associations, and the nature and extent of participation at different ages. We have chosen to look more closely at two subgroups: One consists of those who have recently established themselves in various roles of adult life; the other consists of pensioners aged 65-84 whose participation is declining due to age and/or health.

Diagram 15.a shows that early middle ages are over-represented in associations that deal with the fundamental tasks of labour unions, housing and parenting. The same applies to immigrant associations, given that the average age of immigrants is lower. Younger age-groups are strongly over-represented in sport and motoring associations.

With regard to political associations, the early middle ages are strongly under-represented in the traditional parties, action groups and the women's movement. But they are over-represented in the environmental movement. The early middle ages are also under-represented in the Swedish Church, as well as in free churches.

Diagram 15.a Persons aged 25-34 years. By membership in various associations. Percent.

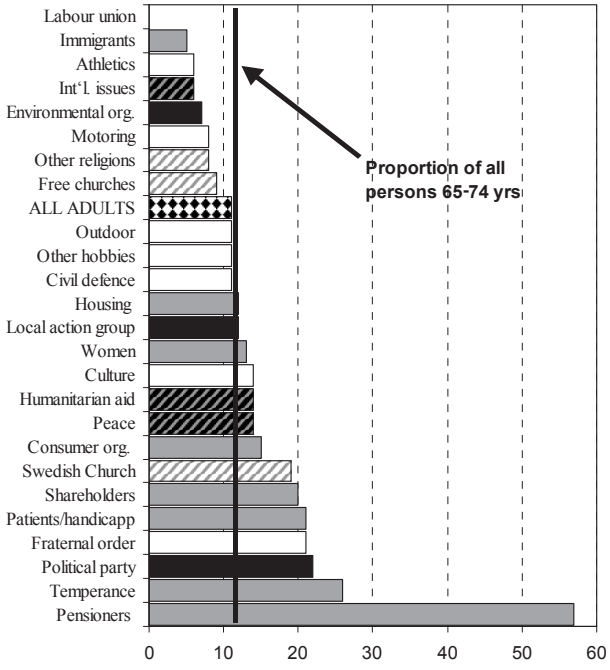


Pensioners in associational life

With increasing age, there is usually a gradual shift in interests. For example, membership in political associations increases and there is a growing interest in other life styles (e.g. cultural associations).

By retirement age, participation in associations has usually been reoriented toward other types of association in response to changes in life style, health, social roles, consumption patterns, etc. Nowadays, pensioners also have more free time than previous generations, along with better health and finances. These factors contribute to a continued high rate of participation in associations.

Diagram 15.b Persons aged 65-84 years. By membership in various associations. Percent.



With regard to choice of association type, there is often a "position exchange" with younger generations (Diagram 15.b). Naturally, pensioners are under-represented in sport and motoring associations. Instead, they are over-represented in cultural associations, and particularly in fraternal orders. They participate more frequently in the Swedish Church than in free churches, and are slightly over-represented in humanitarian and peace associations.

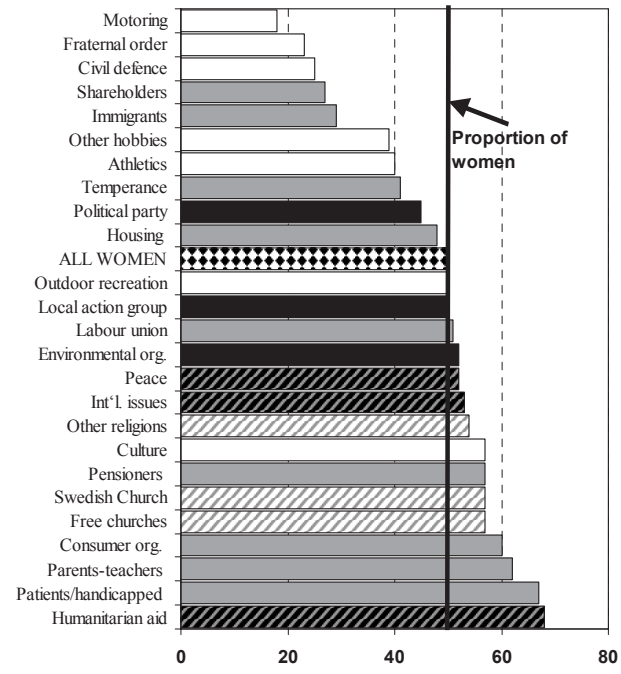
It can also be seen that pensioners' share of membership in political parties is twice as great as their proportion of the total population. They comprise the only age-group whose membership in political parties did not decline during the 1990s.

Women in associational life

Associational life may be viewed as the "life space" in which we attempt to satisfy our interests and cope with the problems of everyday life. It is also an arena in which to manifest sympathy, loyalty and solidarity.

Both women and men choose associations in accordance with traditional gender roles. Diagram 15.c shows clear gender differences that reflect family roles. It is primarily women who provide care in the home, and women are also over-represented in parent-teacher associations, consumer co-ops, and organizations for medical patients and the handicapped. Women's greater interest in humanitarian and global issues is also reflected in the membership profiles of solidarity movements concerned with humanitarian aid, peace and international solidarity.

Diagram 15.c Women by membership in various associations. Percent.



Men, on the other hand, are over-represented in the majority of lifestyle associations such as those relating to motoring, sports, hobbies, civil defence and fraternal orders. However, men are under-represented, and women over-represented, in cultural associations.

These findings are based on interviews with individuals, but participation in many associations involves entire households. This applies, for ex-

ample, to such areas as housing (co-ops and renters' associations), household stock portfolios, parenthood, consumer co-ops and solidarity movements (where the emphasis is on financial support). The fact that more women report membership in such associations indicates that they also have a stronger sense of involvement in them.

The data also reveal that, compared with men, women are over-represented in the three types of religious association referred to in the study.

Social class and associational life

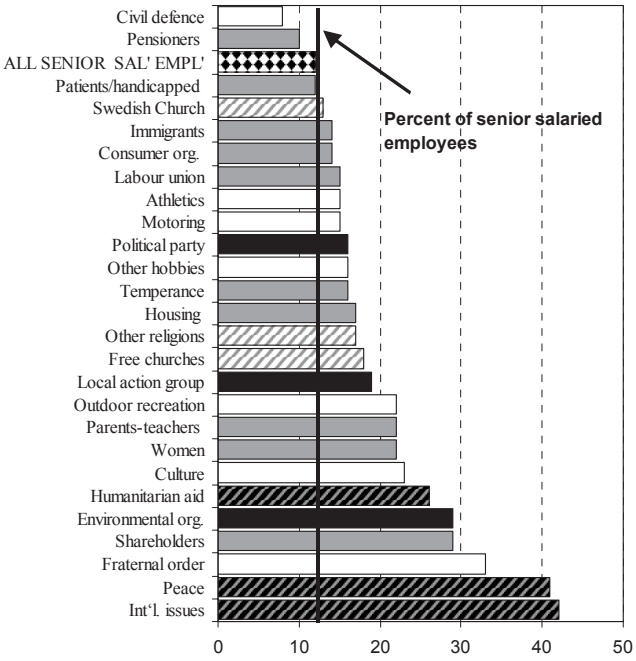
Class differences in living conditions, life style and basic values are partly related to economic resources and partly to personal interests; the latter are in turn related to education level, field of education and occupation. We have studied the role of class in associational life through the use of three variables: socioeconomic status (based on occupation), educational level, and disposable income. Diagrams 15.d and e compare senior salaried employees with manunal workers in relation to participation in associations. Also noted are the associations in which those subgroups are over- or under-represented in relation to their shares of the total population.

To begin with, it can be stated that senior salaried employees are over-represented in nearly all types of association, with the exception of pensioners' and civil defence organizations. In addition, a relatively large proportion of them belong to many associations, and their participation tends to be more multi-faceted than other subgroups'. Senior salaried employees are also strongly over-represented in positions of trust in nearly all types of association.

Diagram 15.e presents the corresponding figures for manual workers, for whom the general pattern is just the opposite. They are under-represented in nearly all types of association in relation to their share of the total population. The exceptions are labour unions and immigrant associations. This pattern conforms closely with Statistic Sweden's analyses of recreation habits.

Class differences are also clearly evident in the distribution of membership among different types of association. Upper-level white-collar workers are over-represented, and manual workers are under-represented, in political associations; this is especially true of the environmental movement. Upper white-collar levels are also more deeply involved than manual workers in special-interest associations such as those relating to women, parents-teachers and housing. The exceptions are labour unions, immigrant associations and consumer co-ops.

Diagram 15.d Senior salaried employees. By membership in various associations. Percent.



Even larger differences are found for solidarity associations, in which manual workers are very strongly under-represented. But class differences in religious organizations are not as great.

The variety of upper class participation is also evident in lifestyle associations. They are over-represented, and manual workers under-represented, in all lifestyle associations studied. The exception is the category of civil defence associations, the only type that has a predominantly working-class profile. White-collar workers are particularly over-represented in cultural associations.

The greatest class differences were found in fraternal orders and shareholders' associations, in both of which there are hardly any manual workers.

Diagram 2.15.f shows that individuals with no secondary education follow the same pattern as manual workers. Their under-representation in association memberships is even more greater.

Diagram 15.e Manual workers. By membership in various associations. Percent.

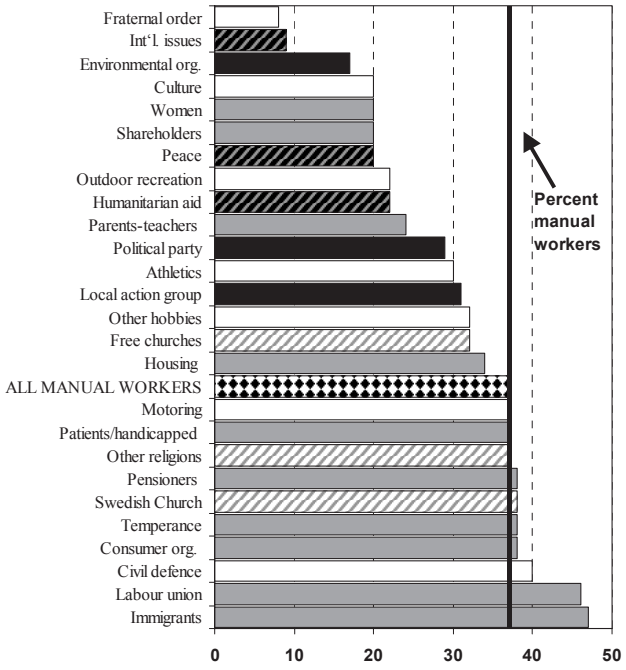
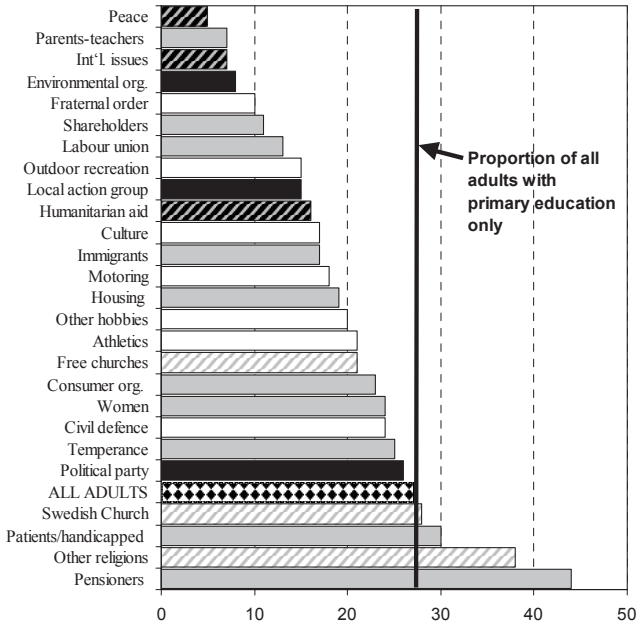


Diagram 15.f Adults with primary education. By membership in various associations. Percent.

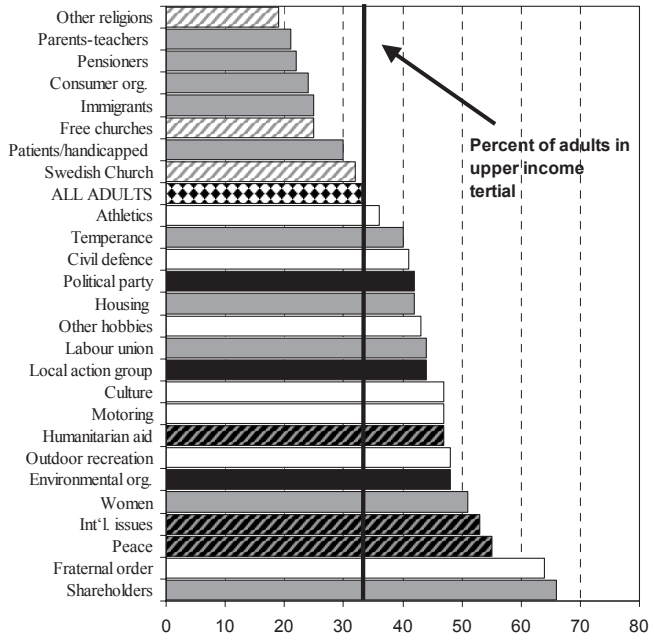


Financial resources and participation in associations

It has previously been noted that there is a strong correlation between disposable income, education and social class. Disposable income is also related to employment volume within households, dependency burden, age, health and ethnicity. The participation of various income groups follows the same pattern as that noted for social class.

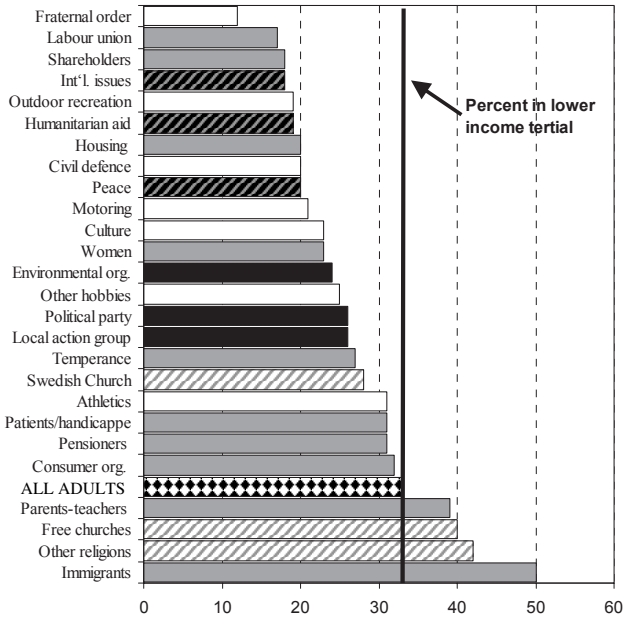
Diagrams 15.g and h compare membership frequency for those with the highest and the lowest disposable incomes[5], defined here as the top one-third and lowest one-third. As with class and education, membership in various associations is related to disposable income: Individuals from different income categories tend to choose associations on the basis of their particular interests and resources. In other words, there is a strongly negative rank order in the representation of high and low income groups in various associations. This is especially evident in the case of solidarity associations, in which high-income individuals are strongly over-represented and those with low incomes are under-represented. The same is true of membership in free churches, in which low-income individuals are over-represented and those with high incomes are under-represented. Of course, the same applies to shareholders' associations, fraternal orders and cultural associations.

Diagram 15.g Upper tertial of eq. disposable income. By membership in various associations. Percent.



[5] Disposable income refers to households' current economic resources— consisting of total earned income, social benefits and taxes— in relation to household members' living costs measured in terms of consumption units. Disposable income is calculated on an annual basis, and all household members are considered to be at the same income level.

Diagram 15.h Lower tertial of eq. disposable income. By membership in various associations. Percent



Regional variation

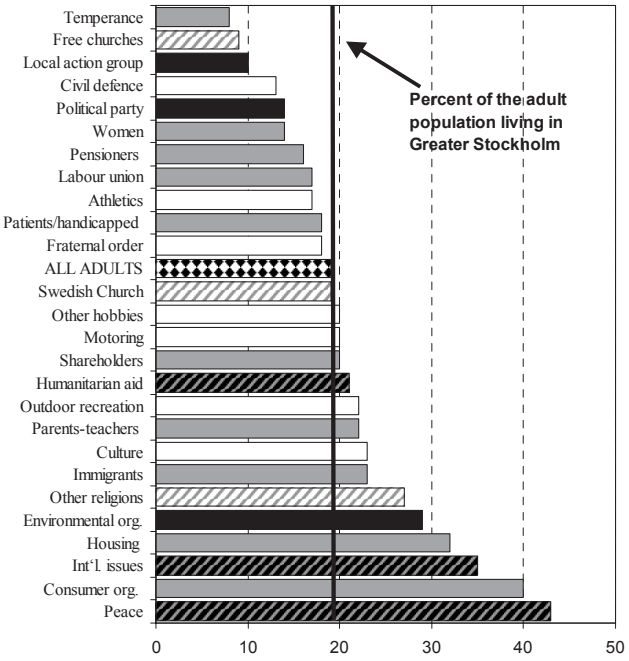
Participation in associations is correlated with type and location of housing. The following discussion is limited to a comparison of Stockholm with the rest of the country.

Housing location refers to living conditions in a broad sense, including local employment opportunities, occupational structure, wage level, recreational habits and values. With regard to the range and quality of associational life, it may be assumed that larger cities offer greater opportunities. However, regional differences are relatively small, and activity levels are actually higher in rural areas.

There is a clear difference in choice of association between residents of the Stockholm area and the rest of the country (Diagram 15.i). The difference reflects both the variety of available associations and characteristics of the regional populations. Solidarity associations, in particular, are much stronger in Stockholm than in the rest of the country. This is presumably due to population density and a larger ”critical mass” of dynamic local leaders. A larger population base also explains why immigrant associations and religious denominations other than the Swedish Church (Catholicism, Islam, etc.) are stronger in Metropolitan Stockholm than elsewhere in Sweden.

Residents of the Stockholm area are also over-represented in cultural associations (greater opportunities) and environmental organizations (probably easier to form in major cities). They are under-represented in free churches, which have proportionately larger congregations in more rural areas.

Diagram 15.i Adults who live in the Greater Stockholm metropolitan area. By membership in various associations. Percent.



Political participation

Previous studies have shown that those who participate in associational life, generally, also utilize their political resources by participating in political organizations, and are interested in political debate. Individuals with such interests gravitate to associational life; and associational life trains citizens in preparing, discussing and making collective decisions.

Those findings are confirmed by the results of our research, which included several indicators of political participation taken from Statistic Sweden's survey module of political resources as a component of general welfare. This section reviews the results for three of those indicators:

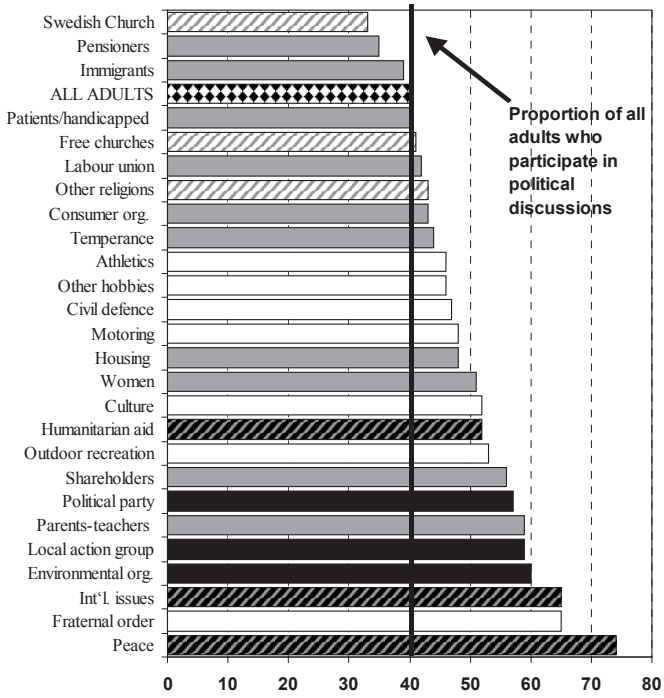
1. Whether or not one ”usually participates in political discussions when in a social gathering where political discussions take place”.
2. Whether or not one is a member of a political party, i.e. participates in traditional representative democracy.

3. Whether or not one has ever participated in a political demonstration.

Politically active individuals are over-represented in associational life, and they pursue their personal interests within the framework of association life. All three categories are over-represented in virtually all types of association (diagrams 15.j-l). This applies, for example, to members of associations concerned with special interests, life styles and humanitarian solidarity. The degree of over-representation varies, however. It is much greater in political parties. This is due to the fact that party members comprise a relative small and exceptional subgroup— only seven percent of the adult population— whereas those who participate in political discussions comprise forty percent of the population.

Party members are more frequently involved in solidarity associations, the environmental movement and local action groups; and they are strongly over-represented in cultural associations. Thus, they are not representative of the population as a whole.

Diagram 15.j Adults who participate in political discussions. By membership in various associations. Percent.



Otherwise, party members and those who participate in political discussions are fairly similar in their choice of associations. The principal difference is that party members have a relatively stronger over-representation in associations with a distinct political/ideological orientation.

Diagram 15.k Adults who are members of a political party. By membership in various associations. Percent.

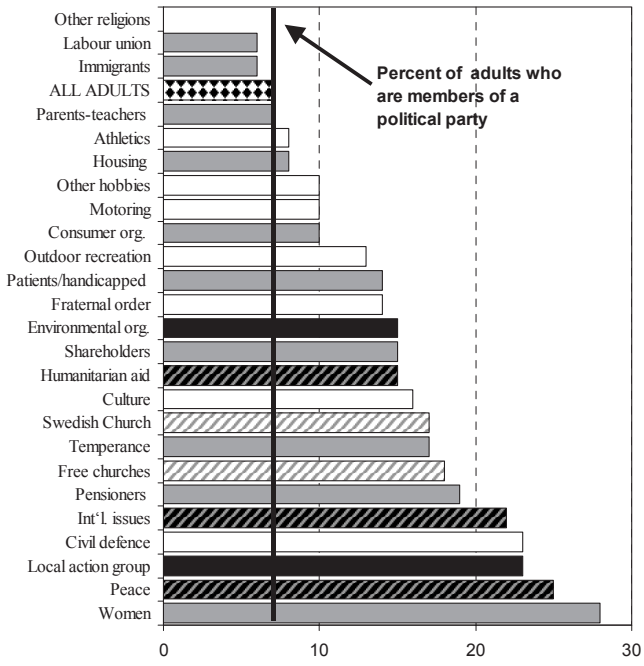
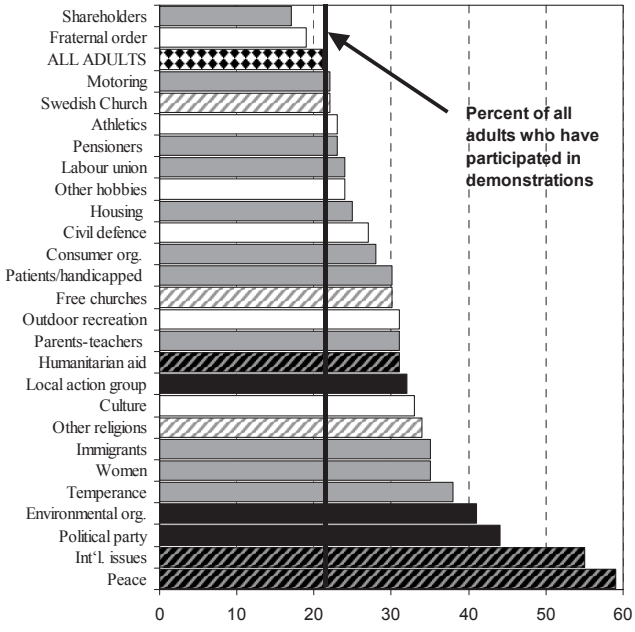


Diagram 15.l Adults who participate in demonstrations. By membership in various associations. Percent.



The same applies to the third category, i.e. those who have been active outside the framework of representative democracy through participation in demonstrations. This subgroup is also significantly over-represented in solidarity associations, the three types of political organizations and cultural associations.

In some respects, however, demonstrators (who act outside the political system) differ from party members (who act within the system). This has to do with their relationship to the economic establishment. Party members and those who regularly discuss politics are much more likely to be members of fraternal orders and shareholders' associations, in both of which demonstrators are underrepresented. Also, party members more frequently participate in groups and organizations within both the Swedish Church and the free churches.

9. International perspective on Swedish associational life

Associational life in the Nordic countries has a long tradition. It has played a central role in the development of the region's representative democracy and the Nordic model of general welfare; and it is still of great importance in Swedish society.

This report highlights the significance of three functions performed by associations: They contribute to individual well-being by giving shape to daily life through their many activities. They also constitute an important political resource, by supporting members in conflicts with markets and political authorities.

In addition, they provide arenas for social interaction and thus give rise to social capital in the form of competence, the ability to co-operate, and mutual trust. Associational life is a nursery of democracy, providing shared experience in evaluating, debating and making decisions.

Statistical comparisons with other industrial countries indicate that participation in associations is strikingly different in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. The number of members in relation to the total population is much higher in Sweden. Diagram 16 shows a comparison from 1990 (Dekkel, Koopmans and van den Brook, 1997). In this comparison, "political organizations" consist of parties, humanitarian and environmental organizations, and labour unions. "Social organizations" include those involved in education, caring services, culture and athletics. (Note that this typology differs from the one used in the rest of this report.)

Diagram 16 shows that the Nordic countries form a separate cluster with high rates of membership in both political and social organizations. At the opposite extreme is a Southern European cluster (Italy, Portugal, Spain) with low membership rates. In between is a Central European cluster with moderate rates of membership.

This cluster-pattern corresponds almost exactly with the pattern that emerges from studies of European approaches to the production of general welfare (Vogel 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). A common feature of the Nordic general-welfare states is a strong and well-established associational life.

Diagram 16 Members of political and social associations. 14 European nations. Percent. Source: World Value Survey 1990.

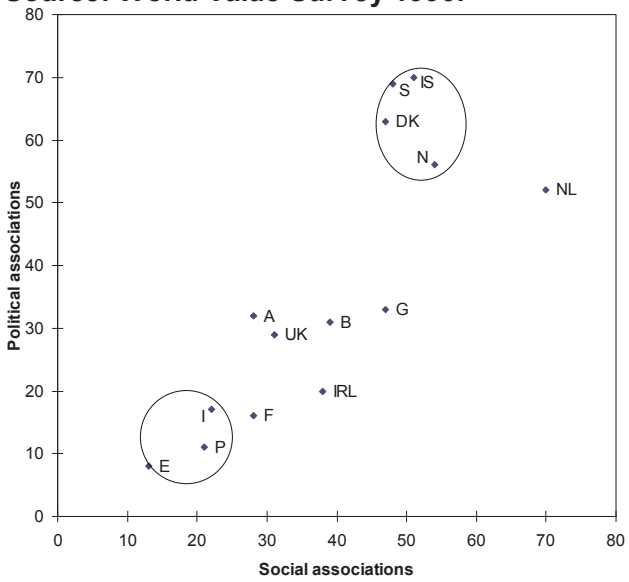
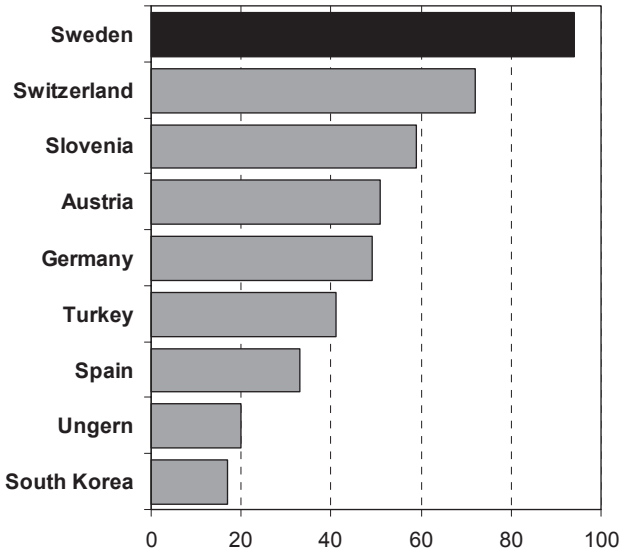


Diagram 17 presents results of a separate study (EUROMODULE 1999/2000) which enables comparisons with other than highly developed industrial countries. The indicator in this case is the percentage of those who have been members of at least one association (based on a smaller number of associations than in the Statistics Sweden surveys from 1992 and 2000). The same pattern emerges here: Sweden at the top, Central Europe in the middle, and the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe at the bottom.

Diagram 17 Membership in at least one association. 9 nations. Percent. Source: EUROMODULE 19972001



10. Discussion

At the start of the 20th century, approximately one of ten Swedes was involved in associational life. A century later, the ratio is just the opposite: Only one in ten is ***not*** involved. Under the surface of the constant growth implied by those figures, however, there have been major changes in the structure of associational life.

The breakthrough for associations in Sweden came around 1830. This was followed during the latter half of the 1800s by the growth of the labour, temperance and free church movements—the traditional folk movements with a strong class basis and/or complex ideologies and belief systems. Somewhat later, the co-op movement, adult education and athletic associations were established.

Special-interest organizations such as labour unions and temperance societies continued to expand until the mid-1900s, as did religious associations such as the free churches. In the latter half of the 20th century, gains were made by other special-interest associations such as those serving medical patients, the handicapped and women, and by lifestyle associations such as those devoted to athletics and culture.

New social movements developed during the last few decades of the 20th century. These included modern variants of the radical left, peace, environmental and women's rights movements. With their critiques of the established order, they challenged the older popular movements (see Wijkström & Lundström, 2002).

Traditionally, there has been a strong belief in the ability of associations to solve social and political problems. During certain periods of Sweden's modern history, lack of involvement in associational life has been regarded as the probable, and rectifiable, cause of societal problems. "Associationless youth" has at times been the label commonly applied to this perceived problem, whose solution is implied in the label's formulation (Olson, 1992).

General-welfare and democratic functions

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that we view associational life within three perspectives. It could be said that the legitimacy of associations is based on three basic functions which they perform: promotion of general welfare, production of social capital, and democratic training.

The general-welfare function is related to the benefits that associations offer households. Associations provide services and information appropriate to various stages of life, with collective solutions that are beneficial because they augment the individual's resources and offer enhanced opportunities for improvements in the quality of life.

Associations give shape to the various roles of everyday life by providing an institutional framework that is relevant to most components of general welfare, including: work (labour unions), housing (housing co-ops), consumption (consumer co-ops), health (associations for medical patients and the handicapped) and leisure (culture, athletics, outdoor recreation, hobbies, etc.).

In modern society, participation in associations is often a condition for access to benefits (e.g. golf clubs and certain cultural associations) or to economic advantage (consumer co-ops). Associations provide means of channelling and expressing care, solidarity and religion. More generally, associations contribute to the production of general welfare by:

- facilitating valued activities
- providing opportunities for social contacts
- providing access to special knowledge and information

- helping to shape identity (membership as a component of self-image)
- promoting a sense of affinity with a certain group, set of values or enterprise
- providing opportunities to express creativity by organizing activities within the organization.

By providing political resources to individuals, associational life also plays an important role in the production of general welfare. This is relevant to most contexts and sectors of society in which there are opposing interests. Labour unions support their members in the labour market, renters' associations support their members in dealing with landlords, patient associations support those receiving medical care, etc.

But associational life is also a more fundamental resource for the welfare of society as a whole. It contributes to the formation of social capital, and to the democratic process. It benefits representative democracy by helping to develop the competence and the virtues essential to joint decision-making, for example the ability to express oneself, to evaluate, argue a case and decide. Associational life also provides society with a social infrastructure within an open "public space" in which alternative political agendas can be promoted. Members gain authority and increased opportunities to make their voices heard.

Research findings

Our research shows that Swedish associational life, in general, was weakened during the 1990s. The proportion of both non-members and passive members increased. More and more citizens left their associations or never joined any. The combined effect of these and related trends during the 1990s was that the overall membership of Swedish associations became older, more passive, more balanced in terms of gender, less political, more market-oriented and more conservative. The class-related divisions within associational life remained.

1. Ageing

In comparison with the preceding decade of the 1980s, significantly greater numbers of young people did not join any association. The proportion of those aged 16-24 who did became members decreased by ten percentage points, the proportion who were active members decreased by 15 percentage points and the proportion in positions of trust by six percentage points. Thus, the replacement rate of memberships declined, a change that took place in a very short time.

One of the most crucial questions addressed by the research was how to interpret this trend. Was it a temporary effect of the 1990s' economic crisis, or was it a more profound change that was related to organizational forms and the range of available alternatives?

There is much to indicate that the ageing of memberships was due, at least in part, to the delayed establishment of young people in adult life during the 1990s. As noted, this was due to an unusually large and rapid increase in youth unemployment, longer periods of education, later acquisition of an own home, delayed entry into the labour market, and later age for commencement of childbearing.

On the other hand, young people age 25-34 were over-represented in free churches and other religious alternatives to the Swedish Church. They were also over-represented in associations devoted to the interests of immigrants, labour unions, automobile enthusiasts, environmentalists and those concerned with international issues.

For the most part, however, associational life was sustained by a comparatively old segment of the population. Pensioners comprised the only age-group whose participation did not decline.

2. Increased passivity

Parallel with membership declines in most types of association, there were also reductions in the level of activity among those who remained. The proportion of passive members increased by more than ten percent. There were also increasing numbers for whom membership was limited to moral and/or financial support without active participation (supporting members or information-seekers).

Voluntary contributions of work also declined somewhat. The research data indicate that half a million active members (roughly twelve percent) withdrew during the eight-years covered by the study.

3. Gender equality and distribution

Men were proportionately more active than women. They more frequently occupied positions of

of trust, spoke at meetings and attempted to influence decisions. This is especially true of men aged 45-64.

However, the rate of membership declined more among men than women, resulting in a more even gender balance, overall. But there were distinct gender imbalances in specific types of association. Women's involvement was oriented more toward care, culture, religion and solidarity. They were over-represented in humanitarian organizations, consumer co-ops and religious organizations.

By contrast, men predominated in associations concerned with life styles, motoring, athletics, hobbies and civil defence. Men were also more active than women in political parties, fraternal orders and shareholders' associations.

4. Political involvement

The research data indicate a decrease in political involvement, especially with regard to two trends. One was that political parties lost members without being able to completely replace them. The second trend was that associational life provided fewer and fewer opportunities for democratic training, in two respects: there were reductions in the proportion of members actively participating and holding positions of trust; and activities became less political in nature.

In political parties, the proportion of active members declined only slightly during the 1990s (by 0.6 percent). But there were sharp drops in total membership, especially among passive members. In 1968, thirteen percent of the adult population belonged to a political party; twenty years later, that figure had risen to fifteen percent. In 2000, it had been cut by more than half, to seven percent. Altogether, Swedish political parties lost one-quarter million members between 1992-2000[6].

Sociologist Manuel Castells has argued that associations have lost their previously important function as sources of personal identity, and now merely promote members' interests. He maintains that all three primary functions of associations have been weakened, i.e. to provide legitimacy, channel opposition and carry out projects (Castells, 2000).

According to a Norwegian research into the development of associational life, organizations that are preoccupied with surviving, and are not aware that they are out of step with the times, have difficulty maintaining widespread belief in the legitimacy of their traditional goals. Further, there has been a decline in the number of associations that resist societal trends and those that introduce alternative societal projects (Selle and Øymyr, 1995).

Other Norwegian studies have also found that associations have become less concerned with political discussions and basic values of general interest, and have instead become more absorbed in their own activities. In short, there has been a weakening of associations' democratic-training function.

Danish and Norwegian studies of volunteer work have fund that today's associations "place a greater emphasis on individual choices and interests, and less on traditional values and affiliations. At the same time, we find a greater emphasis on self-interest, less continuity in associations, a weaker connection between the individual and the organization, and a growing tendency to short-term involvement". (Selle, p. 94)

Of course, this is not to say that individuals no longer join associations in order to become better democratic citizens. Training in democracy is an extra benefit that accrues from pursuing the goals and interests of an association. But there is reason to consider the possibility that these changes have been so fundamental that they weaken the political functions of established associations, and that the significance of associational life for democracy may no longer be as self-evident as it once was.

5. Social class and associational life

From the standpoint of occupational status, disposable income and education level, the data reveal a general pattern in which upper-level white-collar employees, the highly educated and those with high incomes are over-represented in associational life as a whole, while manual workers, the poorly educated and those with low incomes are under-represented.

This applies to associations concerned with politics, the environment, special interests, women's

[6] This was after the sharp drop occasioned by the elimination of collective membership in the Social Democratic Party by members of labour unions. See Gidlund and Möller, 1999.

women's rights, housing, solidarity and life styles. Religious organizations comprise the only type of association in which white-collar employees are not over-represented. The only type which has a relatively high proportion of manual workers is that of civil defence associations.

As noted, however, the distribution of membership by social class narrowed somewhat during the 1990s. This is because white-collar employees withdrew from associational life to a greater extent than manual workers.

Changes in associational life in relation to changes in the outside world

6. New relationships to both the state and the market

How to interpret these fairly profound changes in associational life during the relatively short period of 1992-2000? In many respects, those changes in what is usually called the voluntary (or third) sector reflect what happened in the two other major sectors of society, labour market and public sector.

One example is provided by the trend toward cutbacks in the public sector and privatisation of social services— especially within the areas of education, child care and health care— often resulted in responsibility for those services being taken over by religious associations, temperance societies, co-ops, etc. But it is important to note that the extent of the shift was not all that great. By 2000, only some thirteen percent of those providing social services were employed within the private sector, including some corporations (Montin, 2002). But the transfer, in some cases the restoration, of traditional social services to associations signals a new epoch in the history of general-welfare states.

This shift represents a new, in some cases a restored, function of associational life. To a growing extent, associations are being contracted by national and local authorities to provide certain services. In many cases, the formerly general and imprecise contributions of associations have been replaced by specific tasks that are compensated on the basis of performance (Johansson, 2001). This is part of a general trend by which associations have, to some extent, gone from providing a voice for members to providing services to clients (Wijkström och Lundström, 2002).

Whereas associations previously were recipients of unrestricted grants, they have increasingly been contracted to provide services in return for performance-based compensation; the financial demands upon them have become more stringent. This may be disadvantageous, possibly resulting in higher costs for members, for example through sharp increases in meeting-hall rents and cutbacks in activities. The new order may also have led to a concentration on activities that impair internal democratic processes and external political activities. Increasing efforts must be devoted to fundraising activities, for example through the sale of lottery tickets.

Comparisons of Swedish associational life with other countries' illuminate the connections and the distribution of roles between the voluntary and public sectors. Where Sweden's general-welfare state is strongest— medical, educational and caring services— associational life is weakest. The same applies, in reverse, to countries with limited general-welfare systems, such as the United States. In none of 24 industrial countries studied did the voluntary sector make such a proportionately large contribution as in Sweden. In Finland, France and Great Britain, paid labour and volunteer work accounted for roughly fifty percent each. In the United States, volunteer work accounted for only 37 percent, and in Israel, Ireland and Japan only 28 percent (Wijkström and Lundström, 2002). The corresponding figure in Sweden was 76 percent.

The division of labour among sectors can also be analysed within a different perspective. Several actors in the private sector have been trying to draw upon the legitimacy of the voluntary sector. Businesses have provided economic and professional support to a number of associations in exchange for goodwill and market exposure, among other things. One example is the "Ideas for Life" project of the Skandia insurance company. Some private businesses, including IKEA and Family, have also started quasi-associations in the form of members' clubs that offer discounts and other benefits.

In addition, some associations have been affected by the market philosophy that has gained ground since the 1980s. Consumer co-ops, for example, have undergone incorporations and re-

structurings that have radically altered the conditions for individual members' influence. Having once been a leading pioneer in the construction of democracy in Swedish society, the KF consumer co-op may now be regarded as a supermarket chain like any other. In short, historic value distinctions between very different kinds of association have been gradually obscured and erased. The membership card has been devalued to a discount ticket.

Increasingly, the boundaries between state, market and association are shifting. Although that process was already apparent in the 19th century, it does not provide as basis on which uncritically to maintain the somewhat mythic rhetoric of associations and other popular movements. It is hardly appropriate, for example, to invoke basic democratic values to legitimate an enterprise or organization merely because it is formally constituted as an association.

Traditional beliefs surrounding associations and popular movements need to be demystified. Modern secular processes of change within and beyond associations call for an intellectual and political reassessment. This applies to both the general ideological and the financial support which local governments and the state provide to associational life on the assumption that they strengthen grassroots democracy.

7. Alternative approaches

The foregoing analysis clearly indicates that the contribution of associational life to Swedish democracy greatly diminished during the 1990s. Of course, this does not permit the conclusion that Swedes have become more individualistic, since the analysis applies only to the traditional types of association and the degree of participation in them.

The data do not cover the new and unconventional arenas that have developed in recent decades. Among them is the Internet, of course, but also the types of involvement manifested by wearing a clothing trademark, listening to a certain style of music, buying certified fair-trade products, or making a donation to support some idealistic purpose even though not a member in any solidarity organization (Bennet and Entman, 2001).

The most significant finding of the research is that traditional associations do attract young people less, especially boys and young men, in sufficient numbers to ensure renewal. There are probably several reasons for this. For one thing, it is likely that the forms and methods of traditional associations, with their time-consuming democratic procedures, are perceived as impractical and inefficient. Collective social and political activities are now developed only to a limited extent within the framework of traditional associational life. While it is true that some long-established associations and popular movements have attempted to modernize their activities and procedures, citizens make increasing use of the alternatives provided by media, the market and new social movements. Examples of the last-named include global boycott initiatives and the establishment of certified fair-trade networks (Thörn, 2002).

Other alternatives include alternative life styles, such as those based on concepts of ecological sustainability. In these, the individual's connection with an association is looser; it may consist largely of a general sense of belonging to the environmental movement (Sörbom, 2002).

Therefore, when assessing the significance of associational life in creating the conditions for grassroots democracy, there is reason to warn against assigning too much importance to the questions of whether individuals join associations and, if they do, whether they are active or passive (Selle and Wollebaeck, 2002).

8. Diffuse identity

As demonstrated above, another change in associational life may be due to altered relationships with the state and the market. Having previously received unrestricted grants, they now enter contracts in exchange for performance-based compensation with more stringent demands. This has often been to their disadvantage, leading to higher costs for members, for example through sharp increases in meeting-hall rents and cutbacks in activities. It may also have led to a concentration on activities that impair internal democratic processes and external political activities. It is possible that, as a consequence, affected associations are perceived as part of the public sector and the political establishment. If so, their former image as alternatives to the establishment may have been weakened.

9. New values and conflicts

It appears, that the ideas represented by traditional associations do not always reflect current lines of conflict. The development of many associations has been linked to the development of the nation-state. In a time of globalisation and the related debate, being isolated within national borders may be perceived as a weakness - even though several of the traditional popular movements have long been involved in international co-operation, for example labour unions and religious organizations.

Associational life in the 1990s also showed signs of a major shift in values relating to the balance between individual and collective projects, short- and long-term perspectives, and material vs. non-material interests. For the most part, associational life represents a special combination of those elements. Their comparatively time-consuming, formal and established procedures could easily be perceived as boring and inefficient by those steeped in the (to some extent) new values of the 1980s and 1990s.

This is hardly a matter of a one-way process, but rather of interaction. An equally plausible interpretation is that the traditional Swedish popular movements failed to win support for their perspectives, procedures and values.

10. Increased competition for leisure time

Another key factor is greater competition for available leisure time, as employment frequency has increased (especially among women), along with the demands and intensity of work. This applies especially to urban settings, with their greater opportunities for social contacts, recreational activities, travel, and media consumption, especially the greatly expanded offerings of television and the Internet.

Changing democratic function?

Will the innovative social and political ideas of the 21st century also be created by democratic associations? Will citizens and political leaders continue to receive their primary democratic training within the framework of associational life?

We do not want to give the slightest impression that changes in the surrounding world automatically undermine the foundation of a vital associational life. In general, one should not underestimate the adaptability of the Swedish variant. It is not impossible that at least some elements of associational life will successfully adapt, with new forms for social encounters, the production of general welfare, and political action in a world that is increasingly being global zed and reshaped by technology. So far, however, we have not seen any clear examples of success in this regard— although the decline might conceivably have been even greater if no attempts at adaptation had been made.

In any event, this research is primarily concerned with evaluating the functions of established associations, and provides little guidance concerning possible future trends. It does not address the question of whether new approaches have been or will be developed to replace the loss of older approaches to the promotion of general-welfare, mutual trust and grassroots democracy. Perhaps training, education and critical skills will be developed in other arenas, both individual and collective. This might include the Internet, new social movements and networks, organizations for economic aid and environmentally-friendly consumption, etc.

Accordingly, the research should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

It is interesting to note that associational life has suffered its greatest setbacks just when it has become a focus of international research. A number of new studies were published during the 1990s which for the most part did not question the viability of associational life, but were concerned with the nature and extent of its significance for democracy.

We do not maintain that people join associations in order to become better democratic citizens. Training in democracy is an extra benefit that derives from participating in associations. But there is reason to consider the possibility that the changes that have taken place are so fundamental that the political role of established associations has been weakened, and their significance for democracy may no longer be as self-evident as it once was.

The social scientists who have dealt with these issues are mainly agreed that associational life is good for democracy. In associations, people develop the competence and virtues essential to joint decision-making, for example by learning to express oneself, evaluate, present arguments and make decisions. They provide arenas, separate

from the market and the state, in which people can develop the skills and virtues that are essential to both economic and social growth.

In Robert D. Putnam latest book, Democracies in Flux, he once again expresses his admiration for Swedish associational life, especially the study circles. He is astonished that they continue to grow, managing to attract forty percent of Swedish adults, year after year. He is equally surprised that over half the costs of study circles are covered by the state and municipalities, contradicting the theory that a large public sector weakens civil society (of which study circles are a clear expression).

This suggests that Statistic Sweden's new data on trends in associational life during the 1990s should be the subject of a critical debate, not only within associations, but also in society as a whole.

Thus far, we have only touched upon one democratic function of associations, that of meeting place and "training center". But they also have another democratic function— providing society with a social infrastructure within a free public space where alternative political agendas can be developed. This has the effect of augmenting members' freedom: Through social organization, the authority of association members is increased, along with opportunities to make their voices heard and the potential for exerting direct or indirect political influence.

In other words, this has to do with the *external* democratic function of associations, which consists of making social and political claims on the state. Modern research on democracy has been primarily concerned with their *internal* function. The external aspects have not been dealt with as frequently in recent years.

Interpretation of the almost uniformly negative trend for membership figures, activity levels and positions of trust during the 1990s, for example, is affected by the theoretical framework chosen. The fact that an increasing proportion of members is becoming more passive does not necessarily have great significance for associations' success in producing general welfare, or for their roles as political critics and as links between the state and citizens.

With regard to the external function, low levels of member activity do not constitute a great problem. But the selective recruiting by social class, discussed above, is problematic. So is the shift toward a greater emphasis on activities at the expense of basic values, since this may lead to a weakening of the ties between local and national levels. Associations' self-absorption could also lead to their marginalisation in cultural life and society as a whole.

If the connections between the local and regional levels have been weakened, as indicated by other Nordic studies, there could be consequences for associations' contribution to the nation-state. It would mean a reduction in the ability of associations to integrate citizens across social and geographic boundaries, which in turn would mean the loss of an important connecting structure between citizens and the state. From this standpoint, the growth of local action groups during the 1990s constitutes an especially interesting exception.

A more nuanced approach

As noted above, there is still a strong belief in Swedish associational life and its ability to successfully perform its general-welfare and democratic functions. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to warn against a tardy response to the trends outlined here and their significance for associational life. The development of traditional and newer types of association should be monitored, so that hopes and concerns for democracy and general welfare are not based on conditions that no longer exist.

As we have shown, the associational life that emerged from the 1990s is burdened with the same problems as democracy and general welfare, in general; they include reduced participation, individualization and sharper class divisions. Society's support for citizens' participation in voluntary organizations should be based on this reality.

Associations have not only lost a large portion of their members and failed to recruit new members to replace them. They have also undergone profound qualitative changes, such as an increased market orientation, growing conservativism, higher costs, reduced grants and subsidies, less independence from the state and the market, and generally more passive memberships.

This development may be regrettable from the standpoint of both general welfare and democracy, but to some extent it has been controlled and even steered by members. But if associations are still to be regarded as important elements of the political infrastructure, the state and municipalities should perhaps review existing and desirable

policies in this area, and take appropriate measures.

A key question is: What is needed so that both new and traditional associations can increase their independence from the state, municipalities and the market? The fact that few initiatives in that direction have been taken by associations is perhaps an indication of the de-politisation of which there are so many clear signs.

Without in any way minimizing the value of other arenas for democratic training and social criticism, such as the schools, media and the Internet, we do not believe that society can afford to ignore the potential of associations to provide citizens with the means to create autonomous organizations with which they can arrange what they regard to be important supplementary general welfare, develop their interests, articulate their demands or simply enjoy a hobby.

Society's support for associations always involves a risk, and it should. Perhaps the democracy and general welfare to be developed by new groups of citizens will be out of step with that which has gone before. The democracy and general welfare of society at large may also be transformed in the process.

In short, the trends that we have detected are by no means unidirectional. Associations have been influenced by changes in the surrounding world, including new technologies, values, family patterns and, not least, altered government policies toward popular movements. But associations have, themselves, been actors with a capacity to influence civil society, general welfare and democracy in accordance with their own interests.

It is our hope that this study provides the basis of a more nuanced understanding and reassessment of associational life, especially to those who (perhaps somewhat idly and reflexively) assume that associations are capable of solving problems of democracy and general welfare today and in the future.

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