

Ownership and control in Swedish federative organizations

– or a member is a member is a member?

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The individual membership in civil society organizations has for a long time been acknowledged as important in various academic debates. The scale of formal memberships has for example often been used as an indicator of the degree of civility or civic and voluntary engagement in a country or region (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993). Despite this interest in memberships on the macro level, the meaning of the membership for the individual him- or herself as well as for the organization is often left out of the analysis. The concept of membership is thus often used in a taken-for-granted kind of way and formal organizational memberships are often simply counted or only distinguished through the construction of categories like “active” (or working memberships) and “passive” memberships (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Curtis, Baer, and Grabb 2001; Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992; Putnam 1993).

In this paper I will attempt to go beyond the “a membership is a membership” approach that we often can trace in many academic texts. Instead I will develop a perspective of the membership as a relationship between the individual and the organization consisting of a bundle of different dimensions (see also Hvenmark 2008). Another point of departure for this paper is a view that the individual member actually is the definitive principal and owner of the studied membership-based federative organizations. With the support of Sjöstrand’s (2000) theory about why different forms of organizations appear in society and Hirschman’s (1970; 1974) concepts of exit, voice and loyalty, I analyze the membership in a number of Swedish civil society organizations.

The empirical data used in the paper is from a large scale quantitative survey carried out in 2007 and covering 1000 members each from a sample of eight civil society organizations representing the ideal-typical Swedish popular movement organization. The result of a factor analysis on the survey data include twelve different dimensions of the membership and among these three fundamental rationalities or motives for membership, similar with the ones that Sjöstrand builds his theory on, are identified. The analysis shows that the ideal-based rationality dominates in these civil society organizations but also that there are quite large differences in how well represented the three rationalities are in different organizations. The analysis further suggests that it isn’t only the organizations that exhibit a multitude of rationalities. Nearly half of the respondents seem to, in their membership, be driven by two or three of the rationalities in combination. The final analysis reveals that the three rationalities in different ways are to various extents, linked to the individual’s feeling of ownership and ways of involvement in the control over the organization.

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