

5 Membership of Political Organisations

At the moment, we [the senior caucus of the CDU] have 58,000 members and are represented in 360 districts all over Germany ... Parallel to the growing importance of older people as a target group, older people themselves have the experience and the motivation to make themselves heard and to make things happen. The senior caucus of the Union [Christian Democratic Union] ... wants to make policies not only for older people, but with them as well.

(Senioren-Union 2008)

Due to the fact that European parties have a growing number of older members, some parties have institutionalised organisational sub-structures to give special representation to older people. An example of such a sub-organisation is the German *Senioren-CDU* that was established in 1988. Other German parties followed suit and set up comparable structures: the SPD (AG 60 Plus, 1991), the Liberals (Liberale Senioren, 2001) and the Greens (Grüne Alte, 2004). The membership of these caucuses is on the rise, whereas the membership of most parties in Western Europe is declining. For example, in 2008 the senior caucus of the German Christian Democrats had more than 50,000 members (about 10 per cent of their overall membership) and was represented organisationally all over Germany. Overall, the proportion of party members who were older than 60 rose from 29 per cent in 1990 to 48 per cent in 2007 (FAZ 2008).

Why is the membership of many political parties ageing? Is this ageing process merely an aspect of the ageing of the general population? In that

case, the ageing process within parties should proceed at the same pace as the ageing process of the populace at large. On the other hand, the process of membership ageing may be a result of a failure of parties to attract new members at a young age or of disproportionate success among older individuals. In that case, the ageing process within parties should be faster than the general ageing process.

Political parties are still the main but not the only mass organisational vehicles of representative democracy. In particular, trade unions have played an important role at the intersection between the economy and politics in many industrial democracies. Also, single-issue organisations – that is, organisations that target single policy areas, such as environmental groups or local action groups – are becoming increasingly important for policy-making. How are these other political organisations developing with respect to membership ageing?

Our theoretical model can answer these questions. The model projects four general expectations concerning the differences in political membership between younger and older people. We can expect three of the four effects to be at work here: political generation, socio-economic cohort and social life cycle. According to General Proposition 1, an individual's early political socialisation gives him or her political preferences for a particular type or types of organisation(s). If one type of organisation is generally on the decline, we would expect younger cohorts to be less likely to form preferences for that kind of organisation because the declining popularity would particularly impact on the youngest generation. Given the general trends in European democracies, political parties and trade unions may be

the preferred institutionalised channels of political expression of older cohorts, and single-issue organisations the channel preferred by newer cohorts.

In addition, individuals decide on the type of political participation based on a set of intrinsic factors (resources and motivation) and extrinsic factors (opportunities and mobilisation exposure). On the one hand, these factors differ between cohorts (according to General Proposition 2). For example, older cohorts are less postmaterialist, which we would expect to be a predictor of single-issue organisation membership. On the other hand, the factors vary across the social life cycle (as General Proposition 3 suggests). For example, trade unions are likely to show a strong life-cycle effect tied to employment status. This link makes middle-aged individuals, who tend to be employed, more likely to be trade union members.

The idea of political generation and life-cycle effects will also be analysed with regard to interaction effects between country-level characteristics and the variation between age groups. We have seen in Chapter 3 that when societies are shaped in favour of older people (where public opinion towards older people is positive and the dependency ratio is high), older people are less likely to vote relative to younger people, which seems to suggest that younger people are motivated to defend their own interests. Also, the length of democratic epoch increases the relative participation rates of older people because socialisation in longer established democracies leads to the internalisation of more participatory norms. Can we find the same patterns for membership of political organisations? If the hypothesised causal mechanisms are at work, they should be measurable in this area, too.

The main findings are as follows. For each type of membership there is one outstanding life-cycle effect at work at the individual level: duration of residence (parties, positive impact from the perspective of older people), employment (trade unions, negative impact for older people) and living with children (single-issue organisations, positive impact for older people). Also, the country context shapes the variance between individuals of different ages, especially the country-specific popularity of the organisation and dependency ratio. Finally, there is some moderate evidence for parties and single-issue organisations, supporting the cohort notion that parties on the decline indicates an ageing membership and single-issue organisations on the rise indicates a younger membership.

The empirical analysis proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss the long-term trends and democratic meaning of political parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations. Second, I carry out a series of regressions at the individual level explaining the probabilities of party, trade union and single-issue organisation membership. Third, I describe the general aggregate changes in membership numbers of the three main types of organisation, and analyse the changes in age composition and its relationship to general membership change. I then discuss the meaning of these dynamics for ageing Europe.

5.1 The dynamics of changing membership structures

The comparability of membership types

A central question in this chapter concerns the extent to which membership of a political party, a trade union and a single-issue organisation can be compared. To some extent all organisations are the same: they are formally

organised and aim to affect political outcomes, that is, the provision of public goods (see Morales Diez de Ulzurum 2004: 36), which makes membership of them fit into our definition of political participation. However, the three types target different structures of economic-political systems in their efforts to influence public policies and therefore attract different kinds of people. Political parties are characterised by a full set of ideological preferences that guide their policy preferences. In contrast to this broad ideological approach, single-issue organisations are concerned about only one policy area, such as human rights. Trade unions, in turn, cater to the interests of employees in a specific sector of the economy, sometimes only to those of a very small guild-type sector. In corporatist countries, trade unions are also partners of the government and other interest organisations in making policies; in Ghent system countries, they take the additional role of administering unemployment benefits.

Another way of characterising the differences between political organisations is suggested by Laura Morales (2004: 40). She characterises different kinds of political organisation in terms of the ‘nature of the representative link’. Trade unions and political parties are ‘traditional’ organisations that link specific constituencies or sectors of the population with the political system. ‘New’ organisations, by which she means single-issue organisations, do not provide this explicit link. They do not have an established mandate that allows them to represent any part of the population in the political distribution process.

In addition to differences between the three types of organisation, there is organisational heterogeneity within each type, which can make analysis

more complicated. For parties, it can be argued that the membership of an extremist fringe party, such as a separatist party, is likely to follow a different logic from membership of established mass member parties. The former is probably characterised by a high level of commitment on the part of its members, who are also motivated by the elite-challenging character of their party. In contrast, membership of parties that are regularly part of the government is likely to be motivated by identification with the current political system and perhaps career interests. For trade unions, membership of traditional craft unions requires a higher level of commitment in terms of time and effort than membership of a modern trade union (Calmfors et al. 2001: 11). Finally, single-issue organisations are by definition very diverse, sometimes targeting local political issues, sometimes big political issues, such as environmental protection. Thus, the differences in objectives within the group of single-issue organisations lead to differences in membership structures in terms of the degree of organisation and general organisational patterns.

Causes of membership changes

The political participation process is in flux in many advanced industrial democracies (Dalton 2004, 2002; della Porta and Diani 1999; Norris 2002). How citizens express themselves politically and which channels they use has changed in the last few decades. For example, we saw in Chapter 3 that voting is considered less of a citizen's duty by younger cohorts in Britain. As a consequence, overall voting participation is on the decline because younger, less civically minded cohorts are replacing older ones in the

electorate. Other industrial democracies are showing a similar decline in younger cohorts' sense of duty to vote (Blais et al. 2004).

Some easily measurable facets of this change, such as declining turnout, are unambiguously stated in the growing body of literature. In contrast, there is less agreement on how to interpret the observed changes. One thing that seems clear is the rise of the 'critical citizen' (Norris 1999). Citizens in advanced industrial democracies simultaneously embrace democratic values and distrust of the institutions of representative government, such as parliament, government and political parties (see also Dalton 2004). In organisational terms, waning trust seems to have led to the rise of social movements and political single-issue organisations and the decline of political parties and trade unions, although, as we shall see, these trends are not universal.

With regard to party membership, Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) identified three levels of potential factors that could further this demise of political parties in established Western democracies: the micro, meso and macro levels. At the micro level, the socio-economic process of modernisation makes higher levels of formal education available to unprecedented numbers of people. Higher education leads to cognitive mobilisation and more critical perspectives. The habitual bonds with parties that used to exist are lessening in strength. Furthermore, a widespread value change from materialism to postmaterialism makes individuals eschew hierarchical structures, such as those typical of established political parties. Also, increasing residential mobility – also a correlate of better education and the changing economy – weakens group membership ties. Citizens are less

likely to identify strongly with a particular social group. The political mobilisation exposure that comes from these social group memberships therefore loses its importance for individuals.

At the meso level, the authors put forward the increasing significance of the media, on the one hand in informing citizens about politics, a function long fulfilled by political parties, and on the other hand in their tendency to downplay the role of political parties. In addition, the growing professionalisation of political parties makes party elites less dependent on members for conducting election campaigns, instead relying on professional campaigning organisations and public opinion polls.

At the macro level, there is most importantly the advance of communication technology. Public opinion polls assist political parties in getting to know what the electorate wants, which was previously achieved through the party organisation. Moreover, the style of electoral campaigns has changed from a labour-intensive style – with party members, for example, delivering flyers – to a more capital-intensive style that involves professional marketing firms.

An analysis of trade unions in Western Europe also found some fundamental factors of social change that have furthered the membership decline (see also Checchi and Visser 2005; Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999): changes in the economy, labour force composition and individual values. Most importantly, the economy is changing from an industrial structure in which there is a high density of unions and a relatively homogenous workforce to a services-led structure with a growing number of white-collar job categories and rising female employment. The economy overall has

expanded in sectors that are less unionised. In addition, small-sized firms are on the increase and tend to have fewer unionised employees. The authors also cautiously point towards the change in values and life styles, a less collectivist working-class orientation and more individualised life styles with postmaterialist values.

The rise of single-issue organisations is probably the development with the least clear research findings. One problem is that these organisations, many of which are also known as ‘new social movements’, are not necessarily either mass organisations or strictly organised. Indeed, membership of these organisations requires much less ideological commitment on the part of the participants than membership of a party, their main rival in terms of membership recruitment. In general, membership of single-issue organisations is most difficult to measure. By its very nature, the transition between supporters and members of these organisations is fluid. Some organisations have almost no hierarchies and no membership strategies. Therefore, some of these organisations are closely intertwined with non-institutionalised participation, which will be the focus of Chapters 6 and 7. It seems that the long-term trend for single-issue organisations is upward. The Handbook of the Union of International Organizations has collected data on international non-governmental organisations, many of which have political goals. Their count of organisations in Europe as a whole went up from about 24,000 in 1977 to over 54,000 in 1993 and to 130,000 in 2006 (Union of International Organizations 1993: 1707; 2008). Of course, this can be only a fraction of all political single-issue organisations, but it is the best indicator apart from the survey material. Analyses of accumulated

surveys also point towards an upward trend of environmental, human rights and consumer organisations in European countries (Morales Diez de Ulzurum 2004: 115).

The reasons given for the increase in these social movements are manifold (Pichardo 1997; Tarrow 1994; Touraine 1981). One is the decline of conventional political organisations that I just have described. Another links the rise of these new organisations to the change from an industrial to a postindustrial society. The latter has created a new middle class that is less dependent on old sectors that are stratified by social class in the conventional sense. Also, in the postindustrial society the state is not able to correct its own flaws and needs corrections from outside (Offe 1985).

The bulk of studies on the fortunes of political parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations deal with established democracies in Western and Northern Europe. The new democracies, such as the post-communist ones, partly follow different logics; political organisations played an important role in the transition to democracy – for example, Solidarity in Poland and the Civic Platform in Czechoslovakia. Parties and trade unions that were part of the Socialist system often lost members after the transition, whereas new organisations gained members. Overall, however, there was an ‘overall reluctance of the newly empowered citizens to join parties and engage in the variety of activities they are traditionally associated with’ (Lewis 2001: 556).

Summing up, we can detect major changes that affect the decline and rise of different kinds of political organisations: the economy, technology, values and other things are put forward in the empirical literature, mostly on

established democracies. Age groups are likely to be affected differently by these macro changes. Most importantly, new developments are likely to impact more strongly on younger cohorts. The faster the pace of any change, the more dramatic the differences between cohorts should be as to their receptiveness to membership of various organisations. We now turn to the empirical evidence for the traces that these changes are leaving on age groups in European democracies.

5.2 Analysing differences at the individual level

In the European Social Survey, respondents were asked whether they had been a member in the last 12 months, and were then given a list of organisations. As single-issue organisations, respondents could tick humanitarian/human rights organisations or environmental/peace/animal rights organisations.

Before we start the analysis, a glance at the simple distribution of membership across age groups is illuminating. As a first result, we are reminded that political involvement is a minority phenomenon. Most people are not members of any organisation, with middle-aged people between 30 and 59 most likely to be members (27 per cent are members of some political organisation), followed by older people (18 per cent members) and young people below 30 (16 per cent). Second, trade union membership is still relatively widespread among the oldest age group (8 per cent) compared to 19 per cent among the middle-aged and 9 per cent among the young, a finding mirrored in the membership data of individual trade unions, such as the German *IG Metall* (Hassel 2007). Third, a significant number of older people (8 per cent) are members of the ‘new’ types of organisation, the

single-issue organisations, with a likelihood that exceeds that of young people (7 per cent). Finally, the likelihood of older people being party members (5 per cent) is two and a half times higher than that of young people (2 per cent) and slightly higher than that of middle-aged people (4 per cent).

Individual-level patterns in the multivariate regression analyses

Table 5.1: Random-intercept binary logistic regression models of membership of parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations for 19 European countries, 2002

	Correlations with age	Parties Model 1		Trade unions Model 2		Single-issue organisations Model 3	
		Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
30–39 (baseline 18–29)		0.03	0.15	0.50***	0.07	0.32***	0.08
40–49		0.09	0.15	0.71***	0.07	0.46***	0.09
50–59		0.21	0.15	0.87***	0.07	0.40***	0.09
60–69		0.31	0.16	0.84***	0.10	0.14	0.11
70–79		0.58**	0.18	0.40**	0.13	–0.08	0.13
80+		1.10***	0.21	0.20	0.18	–0.04	0.18
Trade union member	–0.07	0.70***	0.08			0.37***	0.06
Single-issue org. member	0.01	0.30***	0.09	0.37***	0.06		
Party member	0.10			0.75***	0.08	0.26**	0.09
<i>Cohort effects</i>							
Education	–0.27	–0.49**	0.15	0.04	0.09	0.76***	0.11
Left–Right	0.07	0.06	0.15	–1.11***	0.09	–0.69***	0.11
Town size	–0.04	–0.47***	0.12	0.04	0.07	0.25**	0.08
Postmaterialism	–0.15	–0.35	0.26	–0.23	0.15	0.61***	0.17
Religiosity	0.19	–0.23	0.12	–0.30***	0.07	0.17*	0.08
<i>Cohort/life-cycle effects</i>							
Political interest	0.07	2.25***	0.15	0.13	0.08	0.49***	0.10
Political information	0.23	0.73*	0.33	0.16	0.19	0.68**	0.23
Income	–0.14	–0.20	0.19	0.29*	0.11	0.66***	0.13
Social networks (logged)	–0.02	1.24***	0.14	0.90***	0.09	3.41***	0.10
Internal political efficacy	–0.09	2.59***	0.19	0.21	0.11	0.28*	0.13
External political efficacy	–0.08	1.15***	0.15	0.30**	0.09	0.39***	0.11
Female	a	0.06	0.07	0.26***	0.04	–0.50***	0.05
<i>Life-cycle effects</i>							
Employed	–0.53	0.03	0.10	1.46***	0.06	–0.11	0.07
Self-employed	–0.03	0.37**	0.12	–0.35***	0.10	0.01	0.09
Duration of residence	0.46	1.27***	0.20	0.18	0.10	–0.49***	0.12
Living with partner	0.10	0.13	0.08	0.13**	0.05	–0.10	0.05
Number of minor children in HH	–0.47	–0.08	0.40	–0.47*	0.22	–1.07***	0.28
Health	–0.33	–0.23	0.16	–0.29**	0.10	–0.21	0.11
Pension as main source of income	0.67	0.27*	0.12	–0.17*	0.08	0.25**	0.09
Constant		–4.55***	0.17	–3.68***	0.17	–2.92***	0.12
σ_u		0.47		0.66		0.42	
Intra-class correlation coefficient		0.06		0.12		0.05	
Valid N		28196		28196		28196	

Loglikelihood	-3858	-9495	-7009
AIC	7774	19047	14076

Note: ***/**/* significant at 0.001/0.01/0.05 respectively. Observations weighted by population weight. Without Czech Republic or Switzerland because of missing data. a: demographers use the masculinity ratio to describe how many men there are per 100 women in a particular age group. In 2000, the ratio was around 90 in European countries in the 60–64 age group and around 50 in the 80+ age group (Avramov and Maskova 2003: 51). Correlations for living with partner and number of children for those aged 40 and older. All continuous variables transformed to range from 0 to 1 and then centred around 0.

Source: ESS.

Table 5.1 shows the results from multilevel logistic regression models in which exactly the same approach was followed as in Chapter 3. We have a cross-sectional, but international data set and include a full array of age-related independent variables. Some of the independent variables have already been used in Chapter 3: education, religiosity, gender, political interest, income, duration of residence, internal and external political efficacy, pension as main source of income, living with a partner, health, social networks and number of minor children in household. Why these variables are age-related and predictors of political participation was explained in Chapter 3.

There are some new variables that are age-related and need to be included as predictors of political membership:

Cohort effects

Postmaterialism, Left–Right self-placement: trade unions and some single-issue organisations have been associated with Left politics and the latter more importantly with New Left politics. Younger cohorts in post-industrial societies are thought to have been socialised into a new set of values that include people’s desire to express themselves and caring about non-material public goods, such as the environment (Inglehart 1971, 1990).

The attachment of certain cohorts to specific parties leads to a moderate correlation of age with Left–Right ideological positions. Elderly people are not becoming more conservative in terms of shifting to the Right on a socio-economic conflict dimension. Rather, they stay where they were when they were socialised at a young age (see Chapter 4 for the cohort effects on party choice). However, society and party politics change. Thus, elderly people in post-communist countries position themselves more to the Left as they grew up in an era of socialism, and the party system has now moved relatively to the Right. In other countries, the elderly stand more to the Right because the post-materialist, New Left dimension of politics that has become part of politics in many European countries is new to them.²⁹

Size of town: the size of town a person lives in is a proxy for the quantity of opportunities for joining a political organisation. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, older cohorts are more likely to live in more rural areas, while newer cohorts tend to move to the towns due to employment opportunities.

Life-cycle/cohort effects

Political information: it is measured here via politically relevant media usage. Like political interest more generally, this is another side of the elderly's concentration on politics, which might diminish for later cohorts as a correlate of growing political disenchantment. Access to political information is important in decision-making because more information decreases uncertainty.

Life-cycle effects

Employment status: in addition to pension as main source of income, the estimations in this chapter will also include whether the individual is employed or self-employed. Especially with regard to trade union membership, we can expect employment to matter because it puts the individual into a context in which there is instrumental benefit from joining a trade union. Middle-aged people are more likely to be employed than young adults or older people.

In order to save space, all independent variables have a range of 1, so that readers can directly compare the overall impact of each independent variable on the likelihood of being a member of the respective political organisation (see Book Appendix for coding details). In addition, the first column indicates the bivariate associations of these independent variables and age. These pieces of information enable us to directly read the strongest age-related predictors of membership from the table. These are variables whose regression coefficients are high and have a strong overall correlation with age.

The variations of the coefficients of the age dummies are illuminating.

These coefficients still capture the variance not explained by the range of independent variables. For party membership, there is a clear increasing propensity to be a party member even with all the other age-related effects being equal. For trade union membership, the residual age dummies have a perfect inverse u-shape, with those between 50 and 59 having the highest likelihood of being trade union members. For single-issue membership, the probability rises from the very young to those in their forties, then gently declines for those in their fifties, after which it suddenly drops.

There are only a few age-related predictors of membership that have a large coefficient and a large bivariate association with age itself. From such an age-centred perspective, party membership is strongly determined by duration of residence. Older people tend to have lived in an area for longer and are therefore more likely to be party members. Individuals who are more embedded in an area because of the length of time that they have lived there are more likely to be party members. In terms of our theoretical model, this finding suggests the importance of motivation in becoming politically active because long-term residents are more familiar with the problems of the area and more likely to be asked to join.

Trade union membership shows different age-related dynamics. Here, not surprisingly, employment status is highly age-related and leads to a much higher likelihood of being a trade union member. This piece of evidence reminds us of the different benefits structure of trade unions in comparison with parties and single-issue organisations. They cater primarily to the needs of their members, who have much to gain from membership when they are

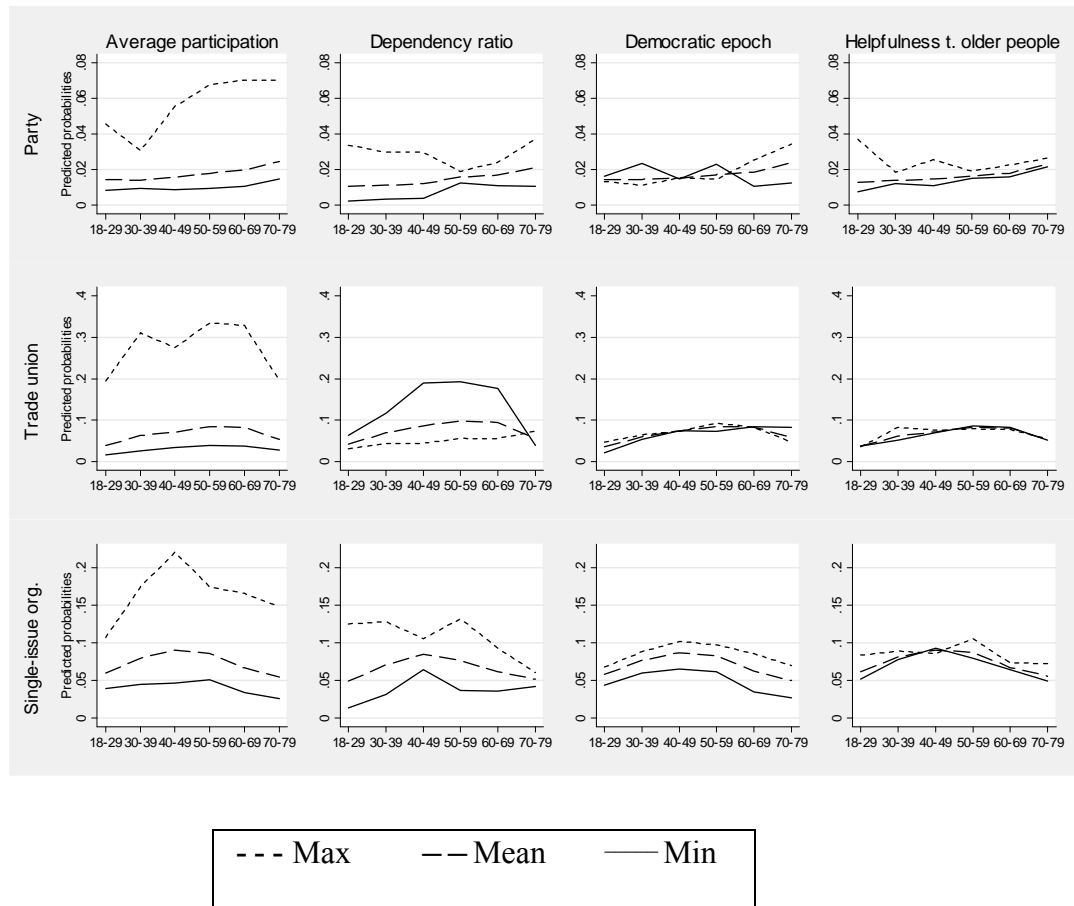
still working. Also, this suggests that trade unions, even though they try to retain retirees, are still mainly employment-sphere organisations in Europe. Finally, single-issue membership shows dynamics that are again different from the other two kinds of membership. Residual age does not matter very much in explaining why someone is a single-issue organisation member or not. The most outstanding age-related predictor is the number of children that live in an individual's household. It is a negative determinant of such membership and also negatively related with age (seen for those aged 40 and older). Older people are more likely to be members of single-issue organisations because they are less likely to have children living in their household. This direction of impact can also be found for the collective mode of non-institutionalised participation (and trade union membership at the 0.05 significance level). It might be best explained by the interests of individuals who have children in a household. Children are likely to require so much time and concentration that those concerned are less interested in supporting single-issue organisations, such as human rights groups, environmental groups and others.³⁰ Even though the number of children that parents have is going down across cohorts (Statistisches Bundesamt 2006; Frejka and Calot 2001; Kohler et al. 2002), having minor children in the household still carries a strong life-cycle aspect.

Macro–micro interactions

In a second series of regressions, we interact the residual variance captured in the coefficients of the age dummies – that is, the remaining difference between age groups that has not yet been accounted for – with macro characteristics of the country (see Web Appendix, part 5, for the regression

results): the average level of participation in each country (mean on the dependent variable per country), the dependency ratio, the length of democratic epoch and public opinion concerning older people.

Figure 5.1: Fitted probabilities of membership of parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations, interaction models – macro-level characteristics X age



Note: The scaling of the vertical axis is the same in each row, but differs between rows, so that the absolute probability levels can be more easily compared within one type of membership.

Figure 5.1 summarises the results of 12 regression analyses in the form of predicted probabilities for average individuals who have exactly the same values on all age-related individual-level predictors. Each partial diagram

shows three graphs, one for the macro-level variable at its minimum, one at its mean and one at its maximum. Starting with party membership, we see, first of all, that the average country level of party membership shapes the differences between age groups. For mean to minimal participation countries, there is no substantial variation left between age groups. In high participation countries, there remains an increasing trend with age of being a party member. In other words, the more popular party membership is in a country, the higher the age-related increase of the likelihood of being a party member. Second, the dependency ratio and helpfulness towards older people mildly affect the slope associated with age. In countries with low dependency ratios and low levels of helpfulness towards older people, the increase with age is more substantial. In countries with high dependency ratios or high levels of willingness to help older people, the likelihood of being a party member is the same across age groups (the increase has gone down to zero). Finally, the length of democratic epoch makes a difference for the older age groups, but leaves younger age groups virtually unaffected. For older people, the likelihood of being a party member is higher, the longer established the democracy.

For trade union membership, the first two graphs and the last two graphs are similar. High popularity of trade union membership and low dependency ratios create an inverse u-shaped variation between age groups. Trade union membership is still much more common at middle age even if we have controlled for things such as employment, in contexts in which many people are members of trade unions and relatively few older people depend on relatively many working people. In countries in which trade union

membership is low to average or where dependency ratios are mean-level to high, the variance across age groups is practically zero. That means, first of all and trivially, that union membership is still very much linked to middle age in those countries where it is popular and, second and more interestingly, that trade union membership is as common among older people as among younger people in countries characterised by a high weight of older people relative to the working population. Whether trade unions in such a context – for example, Italy – are eager to open their organisations to retirees seems likely and is congruent with the aggregate analysis in Section 5.3 (see for a related argument and evidence from Germany and Italy Anderson and Lynch 2007). The last two graphs for trade union membership show no effects of length of democratic epoch and public opinion. Once we know the differences between younger and older people at the individual level, more knowledge about the length of democracy or public opinion concerning old age does not further our understanding of trade union membership.

With regard to single-issue organisations, high participation rates and high dependency ratios lead to lower levels of membership among older people relative to middle-aged people around the age of 40. In other words, in countries in which single-issue organisation membership is widespread or in which many older people depend on fewer working people, older people are less likely to be members compared to middle-aged people. Length of democratic epoch and public opinion concerning older people do not have any substantial impact on the differences between age groups.

Let us now discuss the conceptual–theoretical meaning of these macro–micro results across the three types of membership. First, the popularity of membership matters. The more widespread a certain type of membership is in a country, the more pronounced the differences between age groups. In societies in which membership is very popular, party members are more likely to be older people, trade union members are more likely to be of working age (even once we have controlled for employment effects) and single-issue organisation members are more likely to be between about 30 and 50. The evidence for parties and single-issue organisations can be linked to the next section where we will analyse aggregate longitudinal data. Taking everything together, the explanation seems to be a political-generation one. Younger cohorts prefer single-issue organisations and older cohorts prefer political parties. In countries in which these organisations are popular, they are popular particularly among the age groups representing earlier (parties) or later birth cohorts (single-issue organisations). The evidence for trade unions only trivially mirrors the fact that high popularity of membership occurs primarily among people of working age (not necessarily employment), that is, trade unions are still primarily organisations of working age members.

Second, the evidence for the dependency ratio for parties and single-issue organisations suggests that in countries in which many older people are supported by few working people, younger people have – relatively speaking – a high likelihood of being members of parties and single-issue organisations. In other words, in contexts in which their activity levels may be more necessary because of a potential distortion of welfare state

resources to their detriment, younger people are more active. For trade unions in societies with high dependency ratios, the lessening importance of working age members in their membership profile can also mean that trade unions open their ranks more aggressively to retirees.

Finally, the evidence for length of democratic epoch and public opinion concerning older people suggests little to no impact. The small systematic differences that we see for party membership, however, is in accordance with what we saw in Chapter 3 and what we are going to see in Chapter 6. Older people are more active in politics in more established democracies, and differences between age groups grow to nil in contexts in which public opinion is most favourable towards older people. Considering that we are talking about residual differences that already account for many age-related differences, the effect of old age opinion must be seen in differential terms. In less senior-friendly contexts, older people are more active relative to younger people, which can be interpreted in terms of senior interests being taken care of already in more senior-friendly contexts so that seniors do not need to pursue their interests through party membership anymore. Younger people, in contrast, have a stronger incentive to use their membership efforts to defend their interests.

5.3 Longitudinal analysis of age structures of membership in 25 European countries

We now turn to longitudinal data from the World Values Survey (25 European countries, 1990–2000) in order to get a sense of the cohort implications of macro membership changes. The WVS includes 25 European countries: nine that have been democratic since before the Second

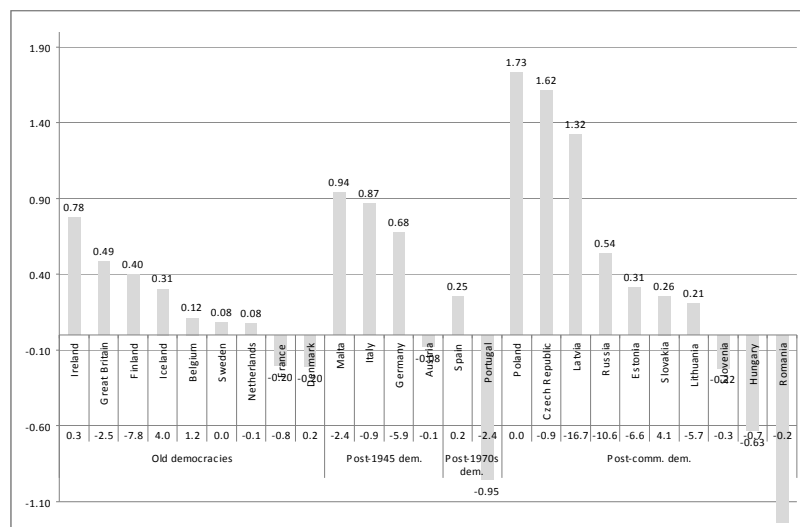
World War (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden), four that have been independent democracies since 1945 (Austria, Germany, Italy, Malta [1964]), two post-1970 democracies (Portugal, Spain) and ten post-Communist ones (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia). This survey is the only available source that allows an equivalent comparison of membership of parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations across countries, as well as across time.

The main indicators for aggregate membership are proportions calculated from the survey sample.³¹ First of all, I estimated the proportions of the population who were members in 1990 and 2000. Then, I calculated the proportion of members who were older people for each organisational form for each country in 1990 and 2000 (further data on these calculations can be found in the Web Appendix, part 5). Finally, I divided the proportion of older party members by the proportion of older people in the population, that is, I created a relative measure of representation of membership for older people in that country. For example, out of the British population in 1990, 4.9 per cent identified themselves as party members. Of these party members, 29 per cent were older than 60, in respect of which we need to remember that there is considerable uncertainty involved in this measure due to the low number of observations. Given the demographic proportion of older people in Britain in 1990 (20.1 per cent, United Nations estimate (2004)), the representation ratio was 1.40. For 2000, when party membership had declined to 2.9 per cent of the populace, the ratio stood at 1.89, yielding a difference in ratios of 0.49. That means that older people

were overrepresented in British parties in both 1990 and 2000 relative to their demographic weight, but that that overrepresentation had increased while parties overall had lost members.

Parties

Figure 5.2: Changes in representation ratios, four types of democracies, membership of parties, 1990–2000



Source: WVS 1990–2000.

Figure 5.2 shows the change in representation ratios for membership of parties. If the column goes above 0, it means that older people have gained representation in parties. If it goes below 0, it means that older people have lost representation – irrespective of the demographic change that occurred during the same period. Underneath each country name, a change in percentages is given circumscribing the change in overall party membership popularity between 1990 and 2000. Positive numbers capture an increase in popularity, negative numbers a decrease.

We see that each country group has positive and negative changes in the representation ratio; that is, in all groups there are countries in which party

membership aged disproportionately over and disproportionately under the pace of the demographic ageing process. Although both these patterns are visible for all groups of countries, the variance of changes is biggest for post-communist countries as the most extreme values in both the positive and the negative can be found in that country group. The transition phase of 1990–2000 in the post-communist countries seemingly represented a volatile party system in which generations might be caught up differently in the build-up of new parties and the demise of old ones. The evidence for post-communist countries leads us to conclude that the fate of parties in the circumstances of recent transitions may be systematically different from that in established democracies. Overall, however, a positive change in ratio is more dominant, with a mean of +0.30 for all countries and 18 countries out of 25 having this pattern.

The mean changes in overall popularity are negative for all four groups of countries, meaning that on average parties lost members in all types of democracies. Some countries show a deviant pattern, namely an increase in popularity (Ireland, Iceland, Denmark, Belgium, Slovakia, Spain) or constancy (Sweden, Poland). However, we must bear in mind that these survey measures are subject to sampling error. According to non-survey data for roughly the same time period and against our measures, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium had declining membership, while Hungary and Slovakia showed increases in party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001: 12).

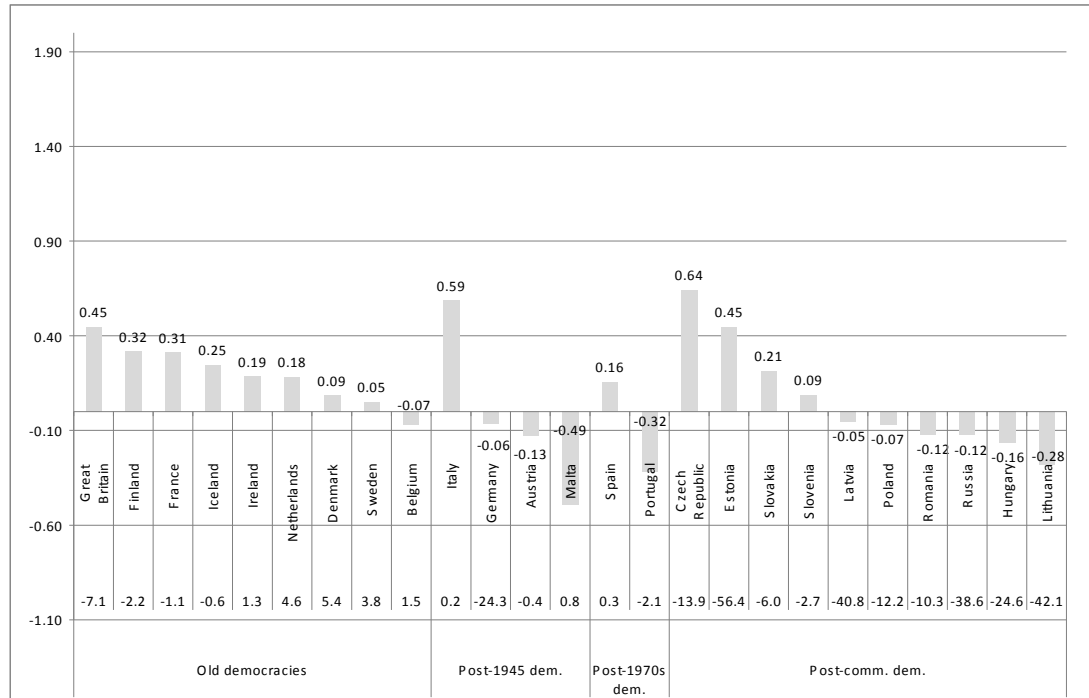
Our hypothesis at the beginning of the chapter was that political organisations that are on the rise have increasingly younger members

because they are likely to attract young people more. Vice versa, political organisations that are becoming less successful are likely to age as they fail to attract new members. Overall, the bivariate correlation between the changes in party membership popularity and the change in the representation ratio is -0.28 ; that is, the more parties become unpopular in a country, the stronger the representation ratio becomes biased in favour of older people. Also, the mean directions of change are as expected. On average, parties lost members in these 25 countries between 1990 and 2000 (decline of 2.2 per cent in the proportion of the population who are members) and on average the old age proportion of their membership increased by 7.3 per cent. These pieces of evidence moderately, but not unequivocally favour the political generation explanation. In countries in which parties are on the decline, the membership base ages more than the general demographic ageing process would suggest. In countries in which parties gain in popularity, their membership base rejuvenates. In the first instance, this regularity could be explained by parties losing their ability to recruit new members among the younger populace and/or their ability to retain older members for longer than younger members, a judgement we cannot make from this kind of data. Other studies of voluntary involvement using individual-level panel data seem to suggest that people tend to choose early in their life where to get involved and then stick to that organisation (Erlinghagen 2007). For example, the German CDU gained about 10,000 new members in the first half of 2008. 56 percent of them were younger than 40 and only 16.2 per cent were older than 60 (FAZ 2008).

However, there are significant deviations from this trend. Some may be explained by the uncertainty revolving around survey measures, but others are too large to be just a matter of uncertainty. For example, some countries have – at a substantial level and according to this measure – declining parties and a rejuvenating membership base (Portugal, Hungary); that is, parties are losing members, but have a younger and younger membership base. Other countries show parties gaining in overall popularity and still having an ageing membership base (Iceland, Belgium, Spain and Slovakia). What can explain the deviant country patterns? Besides the difficult data quality, we should remember that political organisations are not ships without captains in a sea of rising or declining popularity. Instead, organisations arguably notice demographic changes in their membership bases and adapt their strategies accordingly. One strategy is to attract the growing number of older people in the populace by targeting messages and programmes at them. The Senior CDU that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter is an example of such an adaptation strategy. Other strategies could be to make parties more successful by trying to acquire more members among younger age groups. Depending on how successful party organisations are with their strategies, they will counterbalance the cohort changes in party popularity.

Trade unions

Figure 5.3: Changes in representation ratios, four types of democracies, membership of trade unions, 1990–2000



Source: WVS 1990–2000.

Figure 5.3, first of all, tells us that the ageing process of trade unions that evolved in addition to demographic changes is not as widespread as for political parties. Fourteen countries had ageing membership profiles in their trade unions (in contrast to 18 countries in respect of parties). At the same time, 17 countries had decreasing trade union membership rates between 1990 and 2000. Furthermore, the mean change in age profiles within trade unions was only 0.08, whereas it was 0.30 for political parties. This difference in relation to political parties may be partially due to the fact that trade unions mainly target working citizens. Thus, the group of retirees is

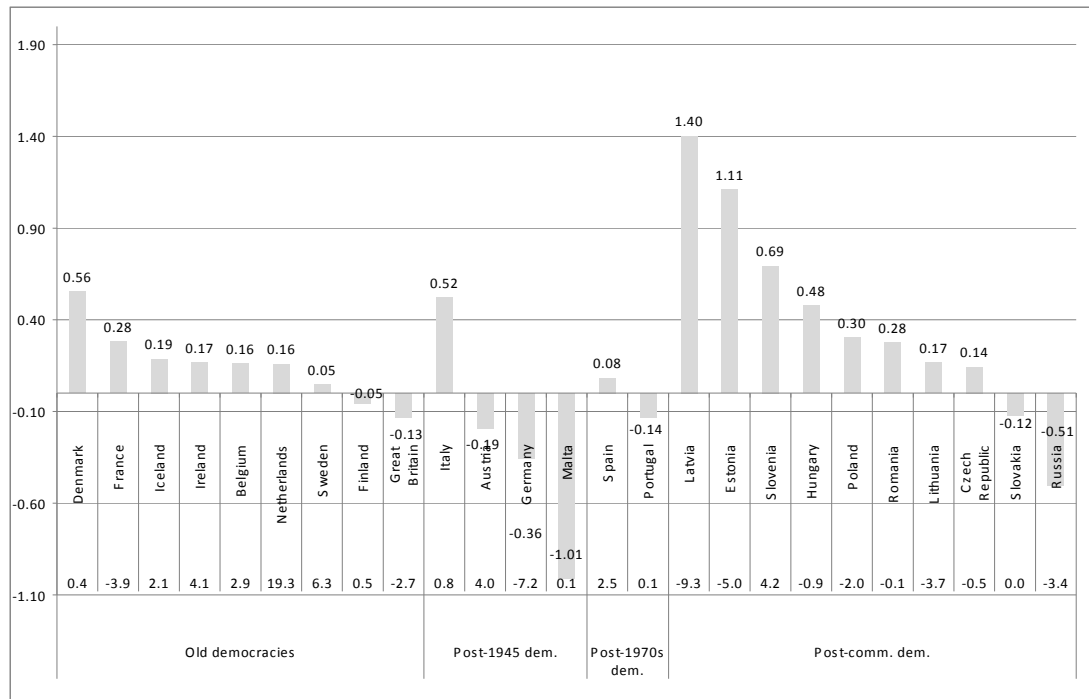
only of subordinate importance to trade unions. However, many trade unions also maintain membership for retiring members (see Hassel 2007). How does the evidence hold up in light of our expectations? We hypothesised that trade unions losing members primarily did so in younger age groups. This would then lead to an ageing membership profile. Also, we expected trade unions that did well in terms of membership to gain more among younger individuals. Overall, the expected relationship is non-existent. The correlation between the change in total membership and the relative change in old age members is 0.09 and not in the expected direction. Some countries demonstrated the expected patterns, either as declining and ageing membership (Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Slovakia, Slovenia) or as increasing and rejuvenating membership (Belgium, Malta). However, almost as many countries showed patterns other than the expected one.

The reasons for this lack of finding might lie in the flux that trade unions are in (Boeri et al. 2001). It might be that these numbers are too aggregated to show the structural membership changes that trade unions are going through. For example, industrial trade unions might be on the decline in terms of membership as services trade unions are on the rise, which is what the evidence of the macro–micro interactions suggested (see also Hassel 2007). We could then expect the declining industrial trade unions to show the ageing characteristics and the services trade unions the rejuvenating process, both of which together would not come up well in the aggregate analysis. Another reason could be changes of strategies towards trade union members on the part of organisational leaders. But from the evidence

presented here we do not find support for this political-generation explanation.

Single-issue organisations

Figure 5.4: Changes in representation ratios, four types of democracies, membership of single-issue organisations, 1990–2000



Source: WVS 1990–2000.

Turning to the final type of organisation (local political actions, environmental, human rights/humanitarian organisations and peace organisations), we see in Figure 5.4 that, overall, 13 countries show a growing popularity as regards membership of such organisations. Among the 12 countries with stagnating or declining popularity, we find nine post-communist countries, as well as Britain, France and Germany. The decline in the post-communist countries could again be interpreted as a sign of declining ‘transitional’ organisations, such as the Czech Civic Platform.

In terms of representation, over the decade from 1990 to 2000, 17 countries had ageing single-issue membership at a rate that was above that of demographic ageing. In 2000, at the end of the period, 18 countries had single-issue organisations with membership structures that represented older people at a ratio of 0.9 or better, compared to their demographic size in the population (see Web Appendix, part 5, for these numbers). Of those seven with a value below 0.9, four showed increasing trends between 1990 and 2000. This means that older people are catching up in their use of single-issue organisations as vehicles of political expression. This finding is similar to the results on non-institutionalised participation that we shall present in Chapter 6. In terms of the spread across age groups, we find a pattern of ‘normalisation’ in the membership of single-issue organisations with regard to older people.

The bivariate relationship between the growth/decline of organisational membership on the one hand and the relative number of older people as a percentage of all members is modest, but in the expected direction ($r=-0.17$). The more single-issue organisations grow in popularity in a country, the ‘younger’ the age structure of their memberships becomes. The modest magnitude of this correlation points to the weakness of the evidence for this hypothesis. There were a few countries with increasing overall membership and – against expectations – ageing age profiles (Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden), and also against expectations, countries with declining membership and rejuvenating membership (Britain, Germany, Russia). For the post-communist countries it could again be argued that the transition process has led to a volatile

landscape of emerging, merging and vanishing single-issue organisations. For the other countries, we could hypothesise that the aggregate numbers on single-issue organisations do not do justice to changing trends within this group in a given country. For example, Germany experienced a boom of the peace movement in the 1980s that was followed by its decline in the 1990s. During the same period, a different kind of organisation – for example, human rights organisations – could have increased in popularity. Even if the declining peace groups had had ageing memberships and the increasing human rights groups had had rejuvenating memberships, the aggregate number could show a seemingly deviant pattern on the country level. Another explanation of the deviant countries could be the behaviour of single-issue organisations. As we expected for trade unions, single-issue organisations could make an extra effort to counterbalance unequal distributions of their members across age groups.

All in all, political parties and trade unions are on the decline in a majority of countries; exceptions are often post-Communist countries. Single-issue organisations are on the rise, but not in a majority of countries. Also, membership is ageing in all three kinds of organisation beyond the pace of demographic change. There are exceptions, but overall this pattern holds. Surprisingly, the single-issue organisations are ageing, too, albeit at the slowest pace. Finally, we expected a relationship between changing organisational popularity overall and changing age profiles. The more an organisation lost popularity overall, the more its membership would age. This pattern could be found at some level with regard to parties and single-issue organisations; there was no evidence for this from trade unions. In

other words, a simple model – increasing organisational popularity equals rejuvenating membership – does not universally hold. One reason could be the behaviour of the collective actors themselves. In an ageing society, parties and other political organisations should develop strategies on how to deal with ageing populations to attract members.

5.4 Summary and discussion

At the individual level, the evidence showed life-cycle effects to be the most important predictors of membership preferences between age groups: (i) higher duration of residence increases older people's likelihood of being a party member; (ii) a lower likelihood of being employed decreases their probability of being a trade union member; and (iii) a lower likelihood of living in households with smaller children increases their likelihood of being single-issue organisation members. All of these effects are arguably rooted in the life cycle and are only changing slowly across time.

With regard to the interaction patterns between macro-level characteristics of a country and age, age-related party membership was shown to vary across all four country characteristics. Older people are – relative to younger people – more likely to be party members (i) where party membership is generally more popular, (ii) where relatively few older people compete with relatively many working people for welfare state resources, (iii) in more established democracies and (iv) in countries with a less senior-friendly public opinion. These findings suggest that older people's party membership depends not only on individual-level characteristics, but also on country-level traits. Party membership of older people is affected by the general constellation of young and old and the public image of older people. In

contexts in which older people are already benefiting from a favourable public sphere (high dependency ratio and positive public opinion concerning old age), their probability of being a party member is not that much different from that of younger people. The effects of the length of democratic epoch reiterate the findings from voting that socialisation in more democratic contexts has a stronger impact on participation than in other contexts.

The mean level of participation also has an effect on trade union and single-issue membership, with union members primarily being working age people in those contexts in which trade union membership is very common and single-issue organisation members primarily being in the first half of life.

This shows merely that the high levels of participation stem from the popularity of these organisations in certain age groups of the time.

The dependency ratio impacts on trade union and single-issue organisation membership, too. In countries in which many older people are supported by a smaller labour force, younger people have – relative to older people – a higher likelihood of being members of trade unions and single-issue organisations. In other words, in contexts in which their activity levels may be more necessary because of a potential distortion of welfare state resources to their detriment, younger people are more active relative to older people, compared to other countries. For trade unions in societies with high dependency ratios, the lessening importance of working age members can also mean that trade unions open their ranks more aggressively to pensioners.

In addition to the individual-level evidence, the aggregate results suggest that political socialisation processes are at work for parties and single-issue

organisations, but the evidence is ambiguous. However, at least in some countries, cohorts develop preferences for political organisations that make them more likely to join one kind over another, compared to later cohorts. The plenitude of deviations could be due to measurement problems and, more interestingly, to the strategic behaviour of organisations, such as the development of old age caucuses in political parties.

What do these findings mean for ageing democracies in Europe? First of all, all three kinds of organisation are affected by the ageing of their membership beyond the pace of demographic ageing. In terms of representing older people, political parties are at the highest level, followed by single-issue organisations and then trade unions. In terms of membership numbers, political parties almost everywhere represent older people at the level or more than the level that would be expected from their demographic size. Single-issue organisations are split between countries in which they overrepresent and countries in which they underrepresent older people. Trade unions are still mostly dominated by people younger than 60, which is a characteristic of their instrumental importance for working life. However, all kinds of organisations aged in the decade between 1990 and 2000, towards more representation of older people.

The modest evidence for the nexus between the popularity of an organisational form and its age profile suggests cohort differences in preferences for channels of political participation. This means that these differences between age groups are not stable across time. Insofar as the organisational participation process is in a process of change, so are the

differences between older and younger people in their organisational preferences.

These age dynamics in membership patterns have important consequences for the democratic participation process. An organisation's democratic function within the wider political process is seriously affected by the numbers and structures of its members. A few decades ago, political parties provided inter-electoral linkage in a West European political system; that is, a connection between public opinion or what citizens want and public decisions. Parties served to aggregate the preferences of their constituencies through their members to the public decision-making level. They 'linked' preferences to political structures. Declining and ageing membership impacts on that linkage function of political parties. The fewer members a party has, the less it seems legitimised to provide that kind of linkage. Also, the preferences that it can still link to the political system are increasingly skewed to represent the interests of older people. The rise of single-issue organisations as alternative vehicles of membership in the political process outside of the economy can be interpreted as having two distinct meanings from this perspective of linkage: on the one hand, the linkage traditionally provided by parties has declined and opened up 'linkage space' to new organisations; on the other hand, the new organisations may provide a new kind of linkage that has hitherto not been provided by parties (see Lawson 1988). The still higher representation of younger people in single-issue organisations may thus be interpreted as complementing their underrepresentation in political parties.