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Why are Members on the Way out of Their Political Youth Organization?

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Why are members on the way out of their political youth organization?

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Party membership figures are in general in decline, even if some parties are experiencing increasing membership figures (Biezen et al., 2012; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2015b). Part of the reason for declining membership figures is that the cohorts with a high enrolment rate are becoming old and leave their party either by choice or for natural reasons. Middle-aged and younger cohorts are less likely to enroll in a party. Hence, the generational turnover implies that membership figures decline. However, party membership is far from being a life-long commitment for all (or at least not anymore if it ever was). Party membership surveys have shown that part of the membership is loyal for a very long time, some for a long time and some for just a year or two. In particular, parties have members that enroll once and newer renew their membership. No matter whether the membership figure is declining or increasing, members enroll and leave the parties. This implies that there is a turnover in party membership. This also implies that the net membership figures do not tell the whole story about how many are entering and exiting the parties.

There is a long tradition for looking into the incentives for engaging in political organizations (Clark & Wilson, 1961; Elklit, 1991; Katz, 1990; Olson, 1965; Panebianco, 1988; Schlesinger, 1984; Verba et al., 1995; Von Beyme, 1985; Wilson, 1995; Morales 2009). Several membership studies have looked into why members enroll in parties (e.g. Seyd & Whiteley 1992; Seyd & Whiteley 2002; Whiteley et al. 1994; Whiteley & Seyd 1996; Heidar & Saglie 2002; van Haute & Gauja 2015), and even why young members enroll (Cross & Young 2008; Bruter & Harrison 2009). However, few have looked at the exits (an exception being van Schuur 2012). On this basis my focus here is on the phase just before actually leaving the party. Why are party members considering leaving their party? By focusing on this time, I avoid the after-rationalizations that former members may have. However, I don't know whether those considering leaving their party actually do it. Hence, they make up a category of members that for some reason might leave their party and this makes it interesting to see what the party can do to keep them. In the perspective of the parties, it is easier to keep a member than to recruit a new member. So, the question is: Why are members considering leaving their party?¹

¹ This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of the political youth organizations, and I'm thankful for this. In particular I would like to thank the 2,187 members who took the time to fill the survey. Thanks are also due to DUF for financing and to Emily T. Christensen and Asmus Harre for incredible research assistance.

Theories?

One way to theorize about reasons for leaving political organizations such as parties would be to turn the enrollment reasons around. In that way, members are expected to leave their party if the incentives they initially faced are no longer relevant.

Taking the General Incentives Model (Seyd & Whiteley 1992; Seyd & Whiteley 2002; Whiteley et al. 1994; Whiteley & Seyd 1996) as the base, the first group of incentives regards the political goals. Members may exit if they themselves no longer agree with the party on the political goals/specific policies, or if the party changes their political standpoints. They could of course, as argued by Hirschmann (1970) stay and voice their disagreement in order to change the policies, but the exit strategy may be more appealing if there are other parties to choose from. Secondly, in regard to the selective incentives, members may not experience that political positions or information is available to them, or that they don't need it anymore. Furthermore, they may find that the political processes are less interesting or meaningful, either because they are a hassle or without much true influence or members may have those needs fulfilled elsewhere. The third group of incentives, the non-instrumental (altruism, emotional attachment and norms), may also lose meaning for members, e.g. if the norms loosen, or if their need for the expression of emotional attachment might be fulfilled by other actions, such as being a Facebook supporter.

However, instead of building a theoretical framework and test it, it could be interesting to let the members themselves do the talking. I had the great chance of conducting a member survey within the political youth organizations, and this provided me with the opportunity of asking the members themselves: Why are you considering leaving?

The method, case and survey

The research strategy is twofold: First, on the basis of their responses to an open-ended question on whether they have considered leaving their political youth organization, and if so, why, I find possible reasons as to why members want to leave their youth organization. Second, I analyze whether these categories of reasons are able to explain exit considerations among the members in general. The empirical base of the analyses conducted here is provided by a survey among members of Danish political youth organizations, and this is presented below.

The case

In Denmark there is a tradition of independent party-political youth organizations. All political parties have a youth organization linked to them, but the political party and the youth organization are independent organizations. However, they are in various ways linked (see party statutes). The political youth organizations are all, except SUF, mentioned in the statutes of their mother parties; 'mother party' being the term applied to the political party to which a political youth organization is linked. But it varies how this formal linkage is formed. Most youth organizations are represented in the higher decisive fora of the party, for example with a right to send delegates to the annual meeting of the mother party and seats on the national committee (Bille 1997). There is a tradition in most youth organizations that members may enroll for free in the mother party with same rights as

party members (political youth organization and party web sites accessed august 2015). Table 1 shows the political youth organizations included here, including their abbreviation, English translation and mother party.

Table 1: Political youth organizations

Political youth organization	Abbreviation	English translation	'Mother' party
Socialistisk Ungdomsfront	SUF	Socialistic Youth Front	Red-Green Alliance
Socialistisk Folkeparti Ungdom	SFU	Socialist Peoples' Party Youth	Socialist People's Party
Dansk Socialdemokratisk Ungdom	DSU	Danish Social Democratic Youth	Social Democrats
Radikal Ungdom	RU	Social Liberal Youth	Social Liberals
Venstres Ungdom	VU	Liberal Youth	Liberals
Dansk Folkeparti Ungdom	DFU	Danish People's Party Youth	Danish People's Party
Konservativ Ungdom	KU	Conservative Youth	Conservative People's Party
Liberal Alliances Ungdom	LAU	Liberal Alliance Youth	Liberal Alliance

Political youth organizations are in many ways taking on a role similar to that of political parties in representative democracies; even if they may be doing this in another way than the political parties. Political youth organizations provide a channel for participation and offer activities that are adjusted to the age groups to which they appeal. They also campaign among the electorate, in particular among the younger voters, and the style and content of their campaigns are also here targeted the younger cohorts. They aggregate the interests of younger voters and on that basis form political proposals within their own organizations as well as within their mother parties. Political youth organizations also contribute to the recruitment, socializing and training of political leadership. Their members make up a recruitment pool from which their mother parties can recruit candidates, and studies of MPs show that many politicians have been trained within the youth organizations (Jensen 2004).

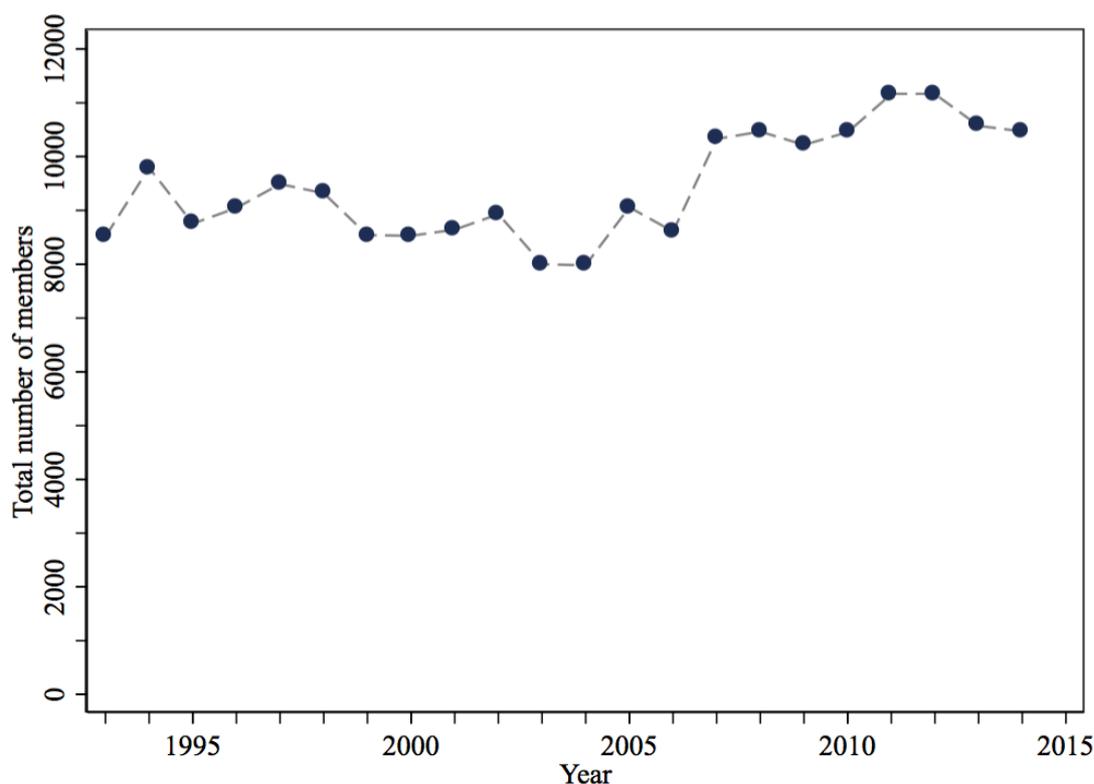
However, political youth organizations also differ in some respects to the political parties. Most importantly as membership organizations, they enroll a specific cohort, namely the 13/14-30 year olds. This is the age group that the parties are getting funding on the basis of, hence, they may enroll older members but this will be as 'supporters'. Most importantly for this study, their members have a deadline for leaving the youth organization contrary to political party members who may stick around till the undertaker takes over. The age group also implies that youth organizations have members that are not voters. When campaigning they have other opportunities when it comes to both style and content. They are not restrained by political deals made in parliament, or by the necessity of appearing as a responsible negotiation partner. They are not as an organization nominating candidates for elections and hence may also be more provocative and humoristic in their political communication.

Furthermore, the political youth organizations do not have declining membership figures like the political parties. On the contrary, the aggregate membership figure has been at a higher level the

latest 8-10 years compared to the previous period (see figure 1). However, the political youth organizations enroll far fewer members: Their memberships vary between 500 and 2,500, and it adds up to 1.3 pct. of the 18-30 year olds, and 1 pct. of the 14-30 year olds (population figures from Danmarks Statistik (2015)), while the Danish political parties organize around 4 pct. of the electorate.

In addition it should be noted that Danish political youth organizations are very explicitly calling themselves ‘political youth organization’ and not ‘youth party’ or similar terms. They are quite clear in stating that they are *not* political parties.

Figure 1: Membership figures 1993-2013



Note: Members below 30 years. Source: DUF – the umbrella organization for youth organizations.

The survey among members of political youth organizations

The survey is conducted among all members of the political youth organizations with links to the parties represented in parliament in the spring 2015. The survey is conducted in March-May 2015. In most political youth organizations members received an individual email with a link to the online survey. In three political youth organizations all members received the same email with a link to the survey. The number of invitations was 11,051 (varying from 661 to 2,663 in the eight youth organizations).

The response rates are poor compared to previous Danish party member surveys in the mother parties (Bille & Elklit 2003; Kosiara-Pedersen & Hansen 2012) if not to other party member

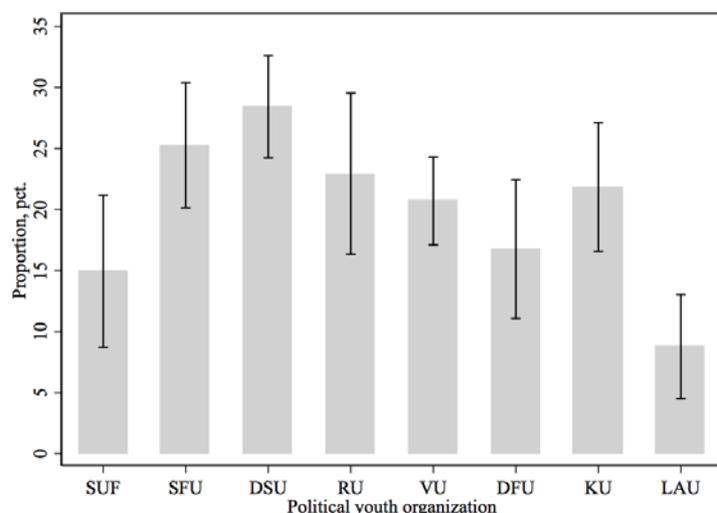
surveys (www.projectmapp.eu; van Haute & Gauja 2015). Around 20 pct. of the members (but lower for SUF (12 pct.) and higher for DFU (27 pct.)) have responded. This, of course, requires a discussion of the representativeness and quality of the data. On the one hand it could be expected that those choosing to spend time on the survey are also more active and attached to their political youth organization. On the other hand, those that are most active are also very busy people and may therefor choose not to spend time on a lengthy questionnaire. We can only take a guess. And that is why I only display descriptive statistics to show how the respondents have responded and don't take them to be representative for all members of youth organizations. I'm hesitantly willing to compare the youth organizations since I see no reason as to why different kinds of members would respond in the various organizations. However, most importantly, I do find that the variation among members warrants setting up and running models.

The survey provides data for a two-step analysis of why members are on the way out of their political youth organization. First, members are asked whether they have considered leaving their political youth organization. If so, they are given an open-ended question on why. The responses to these questions have been categorized inductively. On the basis of this categorization, the second part of the analysis explores to what extent the inductively found independent variables are able to explain whether members of the political youth organizations have considered leaving their organization or not. These steps are taken in turn in the next section.

Why are members on the way out?

Before turning to the analysis of the reasons for why members are considering leaving the political youth organization I first show to what extent they have considered this. Figure 2 demonstrates that around a fifth of the members taking part in the survey have thought about leaving their political youth organization. These shares are lower in LAU, SUF and DFU, while it is largest in DSU and SFU. It could be discussed whether there are any system or organizational level explanations for these trends, such as, e.g. whether the mother party is in government or not, and how the mother party stands in opinion polls at the time of the survey. However, focus is here on the individual level explanations and hence at how individual youth organization member may or may not react to these organizational and system level factors.

Figure 2: Share of members that have considered leaving their youth organization, pct.



Note: 2,072 respondents, 95% konfidensintervaller for andele.

Why are members considering leaving their party? The open-ended responses

On this basis I now turn to the analysis of the responses to the open-ended question on why members are considering leaving. I asked members whether they had considered leaving their political youth organization, and if so, why. Content analysis provides me with four types of reasons.

The first category of reasons given concerns personal issues that the youth organization cannot do much about. This is when members' membership is in conflict with their job, for example if they are (becoming) a journalist, or if they work for a competing organization. Age is also included in this category. There are two aspects of this. Members who are getting closer to the age (30 years) at which they cannot be ordinary members but may remain as 'supporting members' are naturally considering whether to stay or leave. However, there are also members some years from this limit who feels 'old' (or just 'too old') for membership, probably because the majority of the members are 18-23 years old and activities naturally cater to this group, which are also the ones participating the most. Hence, even members in their mid-twenties may feel too old.

I see it as a closed chapter and feel too old/grown up to continue. However, I will remain a member to support an organization that contributed so much to my development, and which keeps on giving me returns (anonymous KU member).²

The second category of reasons is related to inclusion and activism. Members point to their inactivity as a reason for considering exiting the organization. There are two versions of this argument. The members may not have been mobilized at all and hence never have participated, or they may have been active but are not anymore due to lack of interest, attachment or time. Without

² All responses are translated by the author.

activism members feel that they do not get enough out of their membership and therefore consider whether to discontinue their membership.

I don't participate and don't feel a strong sense of belonging anymore (anonymous SUF member)

Because I don't participate in local activities anymore (anonymous DSU member)

I feel that I haven't been introduced sufficiently to how a meeting takes place and how to participate as a new member (anonymous RU member)

I don't participate actively – feel that it is therefore a waste of money (anonymous VU member)

To save money. I'm never able to participate in the activities anyway. There is not much happening in my area (anonymous DFU member)

No inclusion in spite of two years membership. There are SO many who want to take part in the campaigns but have no idea what is going on. Don't make it a closed party (anonymous LAU member)

The third category of reasons for exit-considerations concerns responsiveness and includes dissatisfaction with the way the organization works, as well as with the political and social culture within the organizations. These reasons may regard the mother party but in most cases it is the organization and leadership of the youth organization that is criticized.

I had the feeling that [the youth organization] was more of a coffee club than a political youth organization, a place where the leadership take care of and enjoy themselves and doesn't care about the broader picture. A lot of top-steering and control of who is elected to which positions. I have experienced many examples of corrupt leadership and indirect manipulation. You get tired of that (anonymous member).

I think it is hard to be included. There is a lot of top-steering in the branches (anonymous member)

There comes a time where you realize that we have just been playing (and learned and experienced and a lot of other good things but still just played), and that the statutes are not the most important thing in the world. Beside that: Tired of the political culture that creeps from the 'grown up' parties to the youth organizations. (anonymous member)

The fourth category of reasons for exiting the political youth organization concerns political disagreement with the political youth organization, the mother party or both. Again, two versions of this argument are identified, namely that the opinions of the member her/himself have changed, or that the political youth organization and/or mother party have changed their policies.

Political disagreement with the Social Democrats – in particular that they sold stocks in DONG [a semipublic company] to Goldman Sachs (anonymous DSU member)

My basic political opinion has moved from VU's policies. In particular regarding European integration, where they are less pro-EU than they used to be (anonymous VU member)

Because the Liberals are a group of Social Democrats in disguise (anonymous VU member)

SUF is no longer sufficiently revolutionary (anonymous SUF member)

Some members indicate that they have considered leaving their political youth organization because they want to engage themselves (further) in the mother party, another political youth organization, another party or another political organization or movement. It may be discussed whether this is a fifth, and final, category on its own or whether it is the consequence of exit-considerations, that is, the implication of the reasons given in the first four categories.

I will vote and support the Liberal Alliance in the future (anonymous VU member)

Will work more for the Social Democrats in the future (anonymous DSU member)

I haven't had time to be active due to other activities, in particular student politics (anonymous SFU member).

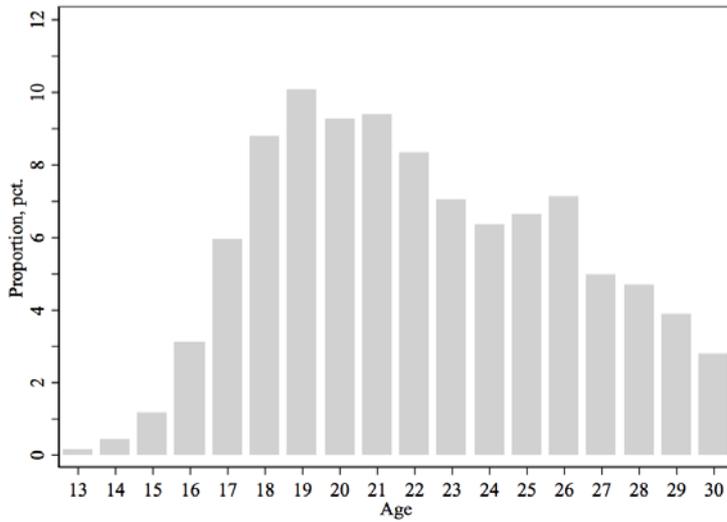
In sum, the responses by members of the political youth organizations to the open-ended question 'why?' indicates that members exit either because of age, lack of time, lack of participation, dissatisfaction with the responsiveness and culture of the organization, and political disagreement. The question is now whether we are able to identify the same reasons in a quantitative analysis.

Why are members considering leaving their party? The model

Before turning to the analysis I first spend some time on the model. The dependent variable is whether the member has considered leaving the party with 'yes' and 'no' the possible answers.

The first independent variable to include is age. The average age of members participating in the survey varies between 21 and 23 years in the eight political youth organizations. At the aggregate level, figure 3 shows the dispersion of the members along the age dimension, and this shows that members aged 18-22 years make up the bulk of the members.

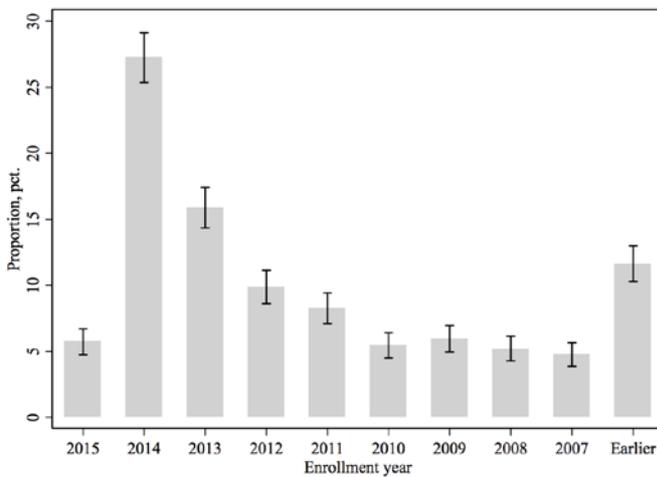
Figure 2: Age of members, pct.



Note: 1,449 respondents.

The second independent variable included here is number of membership years. Members enter and exit political youth organizations but how long do they stay? Figure 4 shows when members have enrolled, and this shows that members are both 'completely green' and 'very experienced'. Newer members make up the largest part: A third of the members enrolled in 2014 and the first quarter of 2015, around half in 2013-2015. Even though many members have been enrolled for a shorter period, there is also a share of around 10 percent who has been member in 10 years or more. Members may be almost born into the political youth organization and remain loyal members sustaining their membership and party attachment all through their youth (and potentially remain supporting members after they have turned 30 years).

Figure 4: Members' year of enrollment, pct.



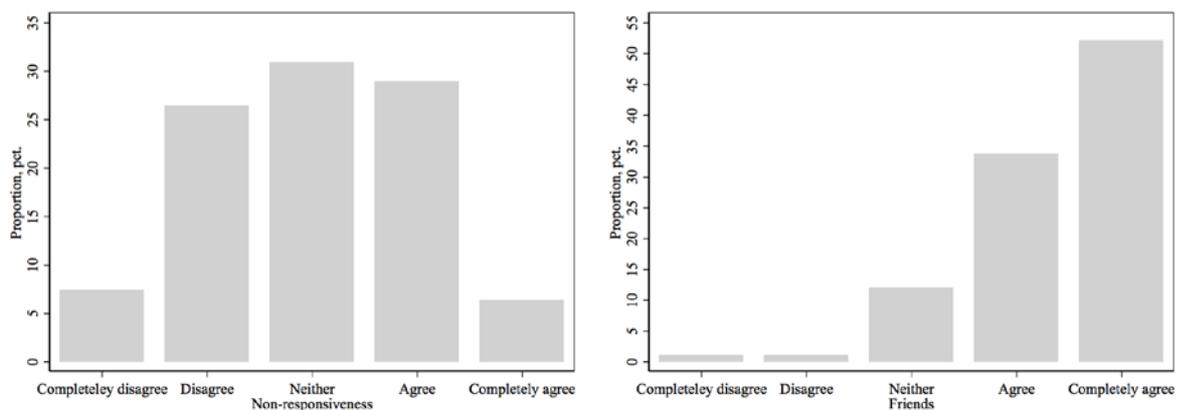
Note: 2,166 respondents. 95% confidence intervals.

Participation is assessed with the question of meeting attendance. Meeting attendance is a general activity that may vary in form, content, place, time etc. A large part of the members participating in the survey have attended a meeting within their political youth organization. This share varies from DFU (62 pct.), SUF and LAU (76-77 pct.) to VU and KU (85 pct.) and DSU (88 pct.). The intensity of participation is included here by using the measure ‘number of party meetings attended within the last year’ and not only whether the member has attended a meeting or not. The logarithm is taken since the first and second meeting is expected to matter a lot more than the 15th or 25th.

The degree of responsiveness is assessed by asking members to what extent they (dis)agree with the statement that ‘the mother party leadership in general listens too little to the opinions of the political youth organization’. This is not a measure of the (dis)satisfaction with how the political youth organization works but it tells us how the member in general feels about whether their input may make a political difference. Figure 5 (left side) shows that the bulk of members’ responses fall in the three center categories.

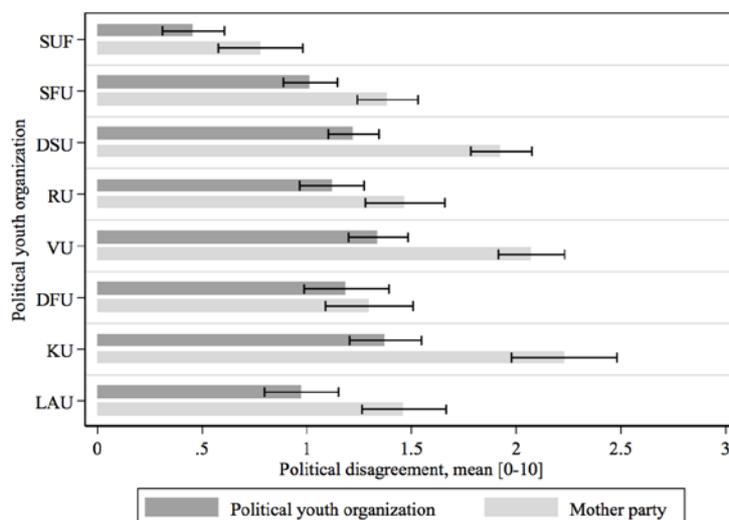
Anecdotal evidence suggests that parties have problems keeping new, younger members if they in their first local party meeting only meet fellow members at least the age of their parents and experience nothing but a wall of resistance: “we’re doing as we usually do”, “we tried this many years ago” etc. Political youth organizations are geared towards young members; it is their own organizations. However, there may still be an experience of an ‘exclusive party’ or a ‘young boys’ network’. The social inclusion of the political youth organization is assessed on the basis of members’ (dis)agreement with the statement that ‘membership is a good way in which to get friends’. This indicates the friendliness of the culture of the political youth organization and whether members may have more in common than their membership; something that seems to be quite important taken the share of social activities in the political youth organizations into consideration. Figure 5 (right side) shows that members in the survey to a large extent agrees with the statement that ‘membership is a good way in which to get friends’.

Figure 5: Members’ (dis)agreement with statements on non-responsiveness and friends, pct.



The members' perception of political distance between themselves and the political youth organization and the mother party is determined on the basis of five questions where members are asked to place themselves, their political youth organization and their mother party on political dimensions. The five questions concerns the number of refugees Denmark should accept, the size of the public sector, law and order, environmental concern and European integration. This gives us an index of the political disagreement that members themselves experience. The index is scaled from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates that members have placed themselves and the political youth organization/mother party on the same point on all five dimensions and hence do not experience a political distance, whereas 10 indicates that the member has placed themselves and the political youth organization/mother party in each end of the scale on all five political questions. It should, of course, be noted, that these five issues are not of equal importance to all members, political youth organizations and parties. However, they do represent political issues on the two relevant dimensions of the Danish political space (the old redistribute/economy and the newer new politics/'values' dimension) and are issues that are relevant in Danish elections (Kosiara-Pedersen 2012; Kosiara-Pedersen 2015c). Figure 6 shows the political disagreement experienced by the members. It is very clear that members find that they politically are closer to their youth organization than the mother party of their youth organization. The only exception is the Danish People's Party's Youth where the difference is not significant. Since the disagreement with the youth organization is in general smaller, this is the measure applied here.

Figure 6: Political disagreement with political youth organization and mother party (on 0-10 index)



Note: 1,155 respondents. 95% confidence intervals for average.

Why are members considering leaving their party? Results

I now turn to the results of the logistic regression model presented above as it is shown in figure 7. First, the younger the members, the more likely they are to consider leaving the party. Second, the longer time the member has been enrolled, the more likely the member is to have considered leaving the party. This indicates that members who enroll in a political youth organization at an older age are less likely to exit, whereas members who are both young and new are more likely to

consider leaving. Possible explanations are that younger members are less secure in where they stand politically and are more likely to move (for education and move out of their parents' house), which increases their (political) mobility.

The more members participate in meetings in their political youth organization, the less likely they are to consider leaving the organization. The causality may of course be discussed here since it is also likely that members who are considering leaving are less likely to attend meetings. But based on the responses to the open-ended question on why they consider leaving, it is possible to argue that members who are not participating (anymore) are more likely to consider leaving, since they do not 'get anything out of their membership'.

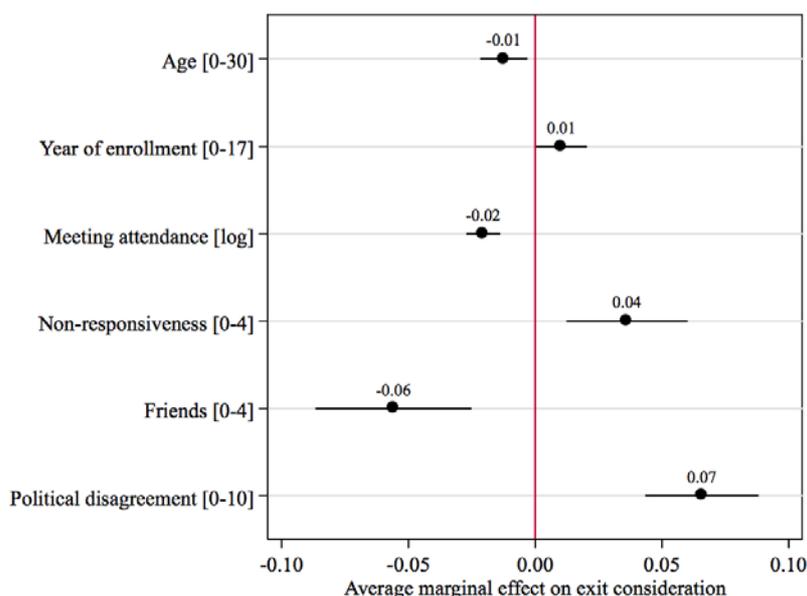
Members' perceived responsiveness of the mother party towards the political youth organization also matters for their exit-considerations. Hence, what could be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the intra-party democracy of the mother party has an impact on members' readiness to stay in the political youth organization. This, as well as other factors (Harre & Kosiara-Pedersen 2015) point to the delicate relationship between political youth organizations and their mother parties. Even though independent organizations, they have both formal and informal links.

The political youth organizations themselves emphasize the social aspect of membership, and members enroll to take part in parties and other social events within the political youth organization (Harre & Kosiara-Pedersen 2015). Figure 6 shows that this also matters to members' exit-considerations. Social inclusion makes a difference. Members who disagree more with the statement that membership is a good way to get friends are more likely to have considered leaving the party. Hence, a social network seems to contribute to membership.

Political disagreement is also leading to exit-considerations. The more members disagree with their political youth organization on the five issues included here, the more likely they are to consider leaving their party. This indicates that political disagreement leads to an exit rather than voice strategy. It may be expected in a system like the Danish where the number of both political youth organizations, parties and other political organizations such as student movements, social movements and interest organizations, are large and hence offer plenty of alternatives to the present membership. Of course, to the extent that the political disagreement is due to the political youth organization having moved (as opposed to the member's own repositioning), it may also matter to what extent members find that they may influence the political youth organization.

In sum, we find support for the explanations provided in the responses to the open-ended question on why members are considering leaving their political youth organization.

Figure 7: Explaining members' exit considerations



Note: 858 respondents. Members who are elected representatives are excluded. 95 % confidence intervals. Average marginal effects from multivariate logistic regression with exit-considerations as dependent variable.

Conclusion: The political youth organizations may do something about it

There are several different reasons for why members consider leaving their political youth organization. All the reasons identified in the analysis of members' responses to the open-ended question of 'why' they have considered leaving their youth organization are supported when the model is run among the members at large.

Members of political youth organizations consider whether to leave when they feel 'too old'. This applies even when they are not 'old' in absolute terms or close to the 30 years which provide a limit where they may no longer be 'normal' members but may remain only as 'supporting members'. They are also more likely to leave when they have been enrolled for a longer time, which is of course related to them getting closer to the 30 year cutting point.

Contrary to these political youth organizations, the age limit is not pertinent to political parties. However, the remaining reasons that members have for exiting their political youth organization may very well apply to political parties as well. Members who don't participate are more likely to consider leaving their party, either because they don't have a sense of belonging to the party or simply find that they do not 'get enough out of' their membership. The perceived responsiveness of the mother party towards the political youth organization also matters so that members are more inclined towards considering leaving their political youth organization if they find that they don't have a say. If members find that they have more in common than their membership and are likely to be friends, it also contributes to sustaining membership. This social aspect seems to be particular important to the political youth organizations, which might be explained by the difference in incentive structure when compared to political parties who both nominate candidates for public

elections and have a more direct say on party manifestos. Finally, political disagreement (either because the political youth organization, mother party or the member him/herself have changed their political opinions) also contributes to exit-considerations. The lower level of participation and higher level of political disagreement among members considering leaving the party indicates that they opt for the exit rather than the voice option.

In sum, the results indicate that parties and political youth organizations have a say when it comes to sustaining their membership. First of all how new members are received matters. New members have to be pulled out of the revolving door – otherwise they end up out on the street again without ever renewing their membership. There is an important task for local officeholders to receive and mobilize new members. Personal contact and a friendly atmosphere matter.

Secondly, parties and political youth organizations should be aware of how their organizations, in particular at the local level, but also at the national level, work. There may formally be a high degree of intra-party/organization democracy, but it needs to work in practice if members are to experience responsiveness. Cliques, elitist networks, etc. are not conducive to the integration of (new) members. And neither is a high degree of top-steering if the statutes and enrollment advertisement lead new members to believe that they may have a say. If they expect to have a say, their disappointment may lead them directly to the door.

Political youth organizations who want to keep their members can do something about it.

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