

HEAD START IN POLITICS

The Recruitment Function of Youth Organizations of Political Parties in Belgium (Flanders)

Marc Hooghe, Dietlind Stolle and Patrick Stouthuysen

ABSTRACT

It has been claimed that the current decline in party membership indicates the demise of mass-based parties. Despite the fact that youth organizations within parties traditionally played an important role in the recruitment of party members, these organizations have never been studied systematically. A survey among city councillors in Belgium (Flanders) demonstrates that youth sections of political parties serve as crucial recruitment channels: 41 percent of all councillors started their political career in a youth organization. We provide evidence that youth membership offers substantial advantages in building a political career. Youth organizations lose members much more rapidly than parties in general, which might further contribute to the demise of political parties. This implies that in the future political parties will have to rely on alternative mechanisms to recruit members. The current crisis of youth organizations could imply that the downward trend in the number of party members will continue.

KEY WORDS ■ Belgium ■ political recruitment ■ political socialization ■ youth organizations

Introduction

For at least two decades now, party membership has been declining in most liberal democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Mair, 1997: 124 ff.; Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Whereas in the 1960s roughly 13 percent of the electorate paid their dues as members of political parties, in the 1980s this proportion shrunk to 9 percent, and in the 1990s only 6 percent called themselves party members (Putnam, 2002: 406). Belgium has been no

exception to this trend. While in 1980 all Belgian political parties combined had 615,000 members (Deschouwer, 1992; Scarrow, 2000: 89), the latest figures stand at 455,000 members (Hooghe and Stouthuysen, 2003; Noppe, 2001). In relative terms this means that while in 1980 9.0 percent of the electorate was a party member, this has declined to 6.2 percent in 2000.¹ This downward trend might signal that mass parties are losing ground in liberal democracies, only to be replaced by new types of political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow, 1996, 2000).

The thesis that party systems are gradually being dominated by 'cartel parties' is now well known (Katz and Mair, 1995, 1996; Mair, 1997), but it has also received substantial criticism (Detterbeck, 2002; Kitschelt, 2000; Koole, 1996; Rihoux and Delwit, 2003). According to Katz and Mair, cartel parties are rooted less firmly in society than traditional mass parties, while they tend to approach state institutions more closely. The 'party on the ground' is overrun by the 'party in public office' (Katz and Mair, 1995). In this respect, Katz and Mair offer an elaboration of the thesis on 'rational-efficient' parties (Wright, 1971) or the advent of the 'electoral-professional' party (Panebianco, 1988). In the ensuing debate on the cartel thesis, however, both the empirical validity and the generalization of this claim and its theoretical repercussions have been questioned (Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Rihoux and Delwit, 2003). Detterbeck (2002), for example, points to the fact that in numerous political parties rank-and-file members and party militants actually receive a larger say in party decisions. Scarrow (2000: 100), too, reminds us that political parties still experience various incentives to recruit party members and militants.

In this article we focus on one specific element of the recruitment of party members: the role of youth organizations within political parties. Traditionally, this kind of auxiliary organization has played a very important role in mass parties, as it has served as one of the key instruments in establishing links between political parties and society (Duverger, 1951; Koole, 1992). Youth organizations are especially interesting in this respect, since they serve as an important recruitment channel for party members. If contemporary political parties are indeed less inclined to invest in their mass membership base, as Katz and Mair state, this would imply that youth organizations will become less important. Youth organizations of political parties offer a unique opportunity to study the recruitment function within parties, for the simple reason that their membership turnover is much higher than in parties in general. Within a decade, all current members of youth organizations will have left the organization, either by dropping out or by graduating into the 'adult' party, and new members enter and shape the organizations. In other words, youth organizations are more directly exposed to structural transformations in society at large than the parties themselves.

Secondly, the study of youth party organizations allows us to address a more general concern in political participation studies: the political participation and motivation of young citizens. It has been stated that especially

young citizens are more likely to refrain from political activity, and in some cases the drop in civic engagement among the younger age cohorts has been shown to be responsible for the general decline in participation and turnout rates (Dekker and Hooghe, 2003; Gauthier and Pacom, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Rahn and Transue, 1995). Canadian Election Studies research, for example, shows that the decline in voter turnout can be attributed almost completely to the fact that younger age cohorts are less inclined to vote than their counterparts were a few decades ago (Gildengil et al., 2002). With regard to the decline of party identification too, Dalton (2000: 31) concludes: 'the decrease of partisanship in advanced industrial democracies has been disproportionately concentrated among the young'. This decline in youth participation could have long-term consequences, since research suggests that participatory habits tend to be picked up quite early during the life cycle (Fendrich and Turner, 1989; Galston, 2001; Hooghe and Stolle, 2002; Jennings, 1987; Jennings and Stoker, 2002; Youniss and Yates, 1997). This even holds for elections: those participating in elections when they become eligible to vote (in most countries this is at the age of 18) remain far more likely to vote throughout their life cycle (Franklin, 2004; Plutzer, 2002). This implies that if young people abandon youth organizations of political parties now, it will become more likely that, in future decades too, political parties will find it increasingly difficult to attract new members (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003). Our basic assumption, therefore, is that the current state of youth organizations allows us a glimpse at the potential future of party organizations. If youth organizations are less successful with regard to their recruitment function, this most probably implies that parties will attract fewer members or that they will have to resort to alternative recruitment channels.

In this article, we first sketch the historical development of youth organizations within the main political parties in Belgium (Flanders). Second, we examine the importance of the recruitment function of these youth sections for political parties by using a survey among Flemish city councillors. In the conclusion some general implications about recruitment patterns and their consequences are drawn.

Youth Organizations and Political Socialization

Despite the fact that numerous political parties throughout the world have important youth sections, as far as we know youth organizations of political parties have never before been studied in political science research. Scattered evidence suggests that the membership base of youth organizations is in decline, even more so than party membership in general. In Germany, where the Social Democratic Party has had a powerful youth section, the decline in youth party membership has been considerable (Offe and Fuchs, 2002: 216). In Sweden, youth organizations lost more than 60 percent of

their members: from 220,000 in 1972 to less than 50,000 in 1993 (Rothstein, 2002: 294). If this demise of youth organizations were confirmed for other countries, this is a significant finding for the future recruitment of new party members.

The study of youth organizations is highly relevant from the point of view of political socialization research: it can be expected that youth organizations function as socializing agents for partisanship and organizational learning processes. Not only do they introduce young members to the ideology of the party, they also function as a kind of learning school, where the members gradually grow acquainted with political and party life. The fundamental insight of socialization research is that age matters in this process: all new members of organizations adapt to, and subsequently help to shape, the group culture within the organization they enter, but the socialization experience is stronger at a younger age. Although not all political attitudes or behavioural patterns are stable throughout the life cycle, the general assumption is that socialization experiences early on in one's life will have a more lasting and a more enduring impact on future behaviour and attitudes (Fendrich and Turner, 1989; Galston, 2001; Hooghe and Stolle, 2002; Jennings and Niemi, 1981).

The enduring impact of youth participation on adult activism can be explained by invoking two different causal mechanisms (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003). On the one hand an *attitudinal mechanism* suggests that the effects of socialization experiences on attitudes and beliefs are most powerful at a relatively early age, and remain discernible as actors grow older. On the other hand, a *network mechanism* suggests that networks are established more easily and more effectively at an early age, and will remain accessible throughout the life cycle. Therefore actors who are already immersed in politicized networks at an early age will continue to be more easily targeted for any kind of political mobilization effort later on (Recchi, 1999; Young and Cross, 2002). These two causal mechanisms obviously do not exclude one another, and most likely even reinforce each other.

Given these considerations about the recruitment function of youth sections of political parties, we hypothesize that the demise of these kinds of organizations will lead to membership loss in adult party organizations. Although political parties can and will adapt to changing circumstances, and may resort to alternative mechanisms to recruit party members (Scarrow, 2000), losing members and activists at an early age will have lasting effects.² Our assumption here is that the link between members and parties inevitably grows weaker as party members are integrated into party culture, networks and ideology only at a later stage in their life cycle.

Lending credibility to the claim that the demise of youth organizations spells trouble for party membership in the future requires evidence on two fronts. First, it has to be demonstrated that the membership base of youth organizations declines far more rapidly than the membership base of parties in general. The second task is to demonstrate that youth organizations fulfil,

or have fulfilled, an important recruitment function for the adult political party. In this article, both of these claims are tested using data from Flanders, the Dutch-speaking autonomous region in Belgium. The party system in Belgium is linguistically segregated, without any national parties. Although there is a strong symmetry for the three largest traditional parties (socialist, liberals and Christian Democrats) in Flanders and Wallonia, the parties in the two language communities function completely independently of one another (Deschouwer, 1992; Deschouwer and Lucardie, 2003). This segregation implies that Flanders is a valid geographical entity for studying the function of youth organizations within a party system.

Youth Organizations of Flemish Political Parties

Early on in the development of the Belgian party system, political parties invested heavily in their youth organizations.³ Already in 1891, the Belgian Socialist Party founded the 'National Federation of Socialist Young Guards', a highly successful organization with over 25,000 members in the 1930s. The official start of the youth organization of the Christian Democrats can only be traced back to 1951, six years after the founding of the post-war Christian Democratic Party. The CVP Youth was especially successful in the 1970s, and two of their leaders, Wilfried Martens (1981–92) and Jean-Luc Dehaene (1992–9) moved on to become prime minister of Belgium. The Liberal Young Guards were founded in 1904, and they too had their heyday in the 1930s with well over 20,000 members. The current prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt (1999–present) was chairman of the liberal youth section from 1979 to 1981.

In the 1970s and 1980s in particular the youth sections also had a significant ideological impact on their respective adult party. Within the Socialist Party, the youth organization introduced concerns about development problems, the arms trade, nuclear weapons and other post-materialist issues. Within the Christian Democratic Party, the youth organization promoted a more radical Flemish profile, thus undermining the traditionally close ties between the Christian Democrats in Flanders and the French-speaking community. Indeed, subsequently the party expressed itself in favour of constitutional reform, giving more autonomy to the regions and communities of the country. It was prime minister Wilfried Martens, a former president of the youth organization, who implemented this constitutional reform. Within the liberal party, the youth organization in the late 1970s was first to adopt the neo-conservative ideology that originated in the United States and Great Britain at the time. The leader of the youth section in that period, Guy Verhofstadt, was also the driving force behind the transformation of the Liberal Party in 1992, turning it into an electorally successful broad-based party that succeeded in attracting new voters in every election between 1991 and 2003 (Ackaert, 1984; De Donder, 1991; Deschouwer and Lucardie, 2003).

Just as in Germany and Sweden, however, youth organizations have lost much of their appeal since the 1980s. From newspaper reports, one can gather that the most important organization, the young Christian Democrats, has lost almost half of its members in two decades, while the youth organization of the Socialist Party is immersed in a deep crisis. It is difficult, however, to establish reliable time series: for youth organizations it does not seem a priority to keep good membership records over time, partly because of the constant turnover in staff and officials. As a result, it proved to be impossible to gather regular membership records for every year from the 1970s. We do have access to some membership figures, and these were collected from the archives of the youth sections, from interviews with individuals currently in charge of the administration of the youth section, and from various publications of the section. The way we had to collect the data implies that the figures presented in Table 1 have to be interpreted with caution. However, given these various independent data sources, the overall tendency is clear: in Flanders too, youth organizations of political parties are confronted with a heavy loss in their membership base. The youth organization of the Christian Democrats has lost half its members: from approximately 12,000 in the 1980s to 5,000 in 2003. For the Liberals, the loss is even more dramatic: from 8,000 members to less than 2,500 in 2003. Within the Socialist Party, the youth organization now has less than 1,000 members. While it is a reasonable guess that in the early 1980s these three youth organizations together had some 25,000 members, in 2003 this number has shrunk to less than 10,000, or a loss of more than 60 percent. In the same period, the 'adult' political parties limited their membership loss to about 25 percent.

The results in Table 1 are limited to the three major parties in Flanders. First of all, these are the most important parties with regard to membership: of all 296,942 party members in Flanders, 256,980 (86 percent) belong to these three parties (Noppe, 2001). Including smaller and more recently established parties, will not therefore change the picture of dramatic decline. The Flemish-Nationalist Volksunie Party had a separate youth organization too, but this party split up in 2001 after heavy losses in its membership base during the preceding years. The Greens and the extreme right Vlaams Blok were not included either. It has to be remembered that despite the electoral successes of these two parties, their membership base remains small. The Greens (Agalev) report 6,171 members, and for the Vlaams Blok this figure stands at 17,167 (Noppe, 2001). Even though these parties have youth organizations, their membership is inevitably limited compared to the youth sections of the major parties.⁴

It will be remembered that our claim is not just that youth organizations are losing members, but, to be more precise, that they are doing so more rapidly than the parties themselves. Therefore, we include not just the absolute number of members in Table 1, but also the percentage of all party members belonging to the youth organization. It is important to present the

Table 1. Membership base of the major youth organizations in Flanders

	<i>Christian Democrats (CD&V)</i>		<i>Liberals (VLD)</i>		<i>Socialists (SP.A)</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
1969	4,000	3.6				
1970						
1972					8,988	8.6
1973	1,500	1.5				
1974					9,181	8.4
1975	5,000	4.1	8,000	18.3		
1976						
1977	8,000	6.4				
1978	9,000	7.2				
1979	11,220	9.6				
1980	11,238	9.0				
1981	11,966	9.6				
1982	10,697	9.2				
1983	12,285	11.3				
1984	11,218	10.5				
1985	11,988	10.5				
1986	13,955	10.9	8,220	11.2		
1987	11,608	8.3	7,589	10.1		
1988	11,114	8.3	9,568	12.7		
1989	11,930	9.5	8,467	11.2		
1990	11,309	8.6	8,189	11.5		
1991						
1992			7,000	9.1		
1993	7,880	6.3	7,745	9.6	1,280	1.4
1994	11,629	9.6			2,374	2.7
1995	10,048	9.2	6,611	8.3	1,096	1.4
1996	10,611	9.1			1,087	1.3
1997	8,946	8.0	6,200	7.8	1,119	1.5
1998						
1999						
2000						
2001	5,900	5.7	2,500	3.1	900	1.2
2003	5,058	4.9	2,269	2.8	870	1.2

N = members in that year. Percentages are based on the total number of members of that party. Sources: Debroye (1998), interviews with party staff, publications, magazines. For 2001 and 2003: Communication from party staff.

figures this way, because it is especially the Socialists and the Christian Democrats that have lost members in the previous decades. What we might be observing in the figures for the youth organizations is just a general downward trend for the party as a whole (Deschouwer and Lucardie, 2003;

Mair and van Biezen, 2000). A look at the relative figures shows that this is not the case, however: the youth organizations lose members more rapidly than the party in general. In order to test the implications of this trend for the future functioning of political parties, we now turn to our second area of investigation: the recruitment function of these youth organizations.

The Recruitment Function of Youth Organizations

An obvious point of departure for an investigation of the recruitment function of youth organizations within a party is a survey among *adult* party members: our question is not how the youth organizations recruit their own members, but rather how many members youth sections 'deliver' to the adult party. A survey of party members or militants, however, is difficult: a representative survey can only be conducted if all parties are willing to collaborate and make their member lists available, and not all of them were eager to do so. We therefore quickly abandoned the idea of a large-scale membership survey and decided to approach the level of active party militant members as closely as possible by the study of city councillors. The Flemish political parties taken together have 297,000 members, and approximately 10,000 of them serve as city councillors. The councillors cannot be considered as representative of the ordinary, passive members of the parties, but they are very closely related to the group of locally engaged party activists.⁵ Furthermore, career research demonstrates that being a city councillor is often the first stepping-stone to building a political career (Best and Cotta, 2000; Fiers, 2001).

For this project, 32 of the 308 municipalities in the autonomous region of Flanders were selected.⁶ In every municipality, the mayor was asked whether s/he would allow a short questionnaire to be distributed and collected at a gathering of the city council. This was allowed in most municipalities, and the result of this form of distribution, with face-to-face contact between the researcher and the councillor, was a high response rate of 76.3 percent: of the 881 city councillors in these municipalities, 672 returned a full questionnaire.⁷ There were no significant differences in the response rate for the five provinces in Flanders. The respondents can be considered as representative with regard to the distribution of local councillor seats, with 30.4 percent belonging to the Christian Democrats, 23.1 percent Socialists and 22.5 percent Liberals.⁸ Twenty-seven percent of the respondents were female and the average age was 48, with 9 years of experience in the city council. More than 60 percent of all councillors reported that they had finished higher education. In total, the sample included 498 'ordinary' councillors and 174 aldermen and mayors (in Belgium, the aldermen and mayors are elected members of the city council). All of these indicators confirm the assumption that the sample is representative of the total population of city councillors in Flanders.

Recruitment for the Party

The survey offered solid evidence for the recruitment function of youth organizations: 41 percent of all councillors indicated that they had started their political career in the youth organization of their party. This percentage was a bit higher for the Christian Democrats, and was substantially lower for the political parties that entered the Belgian political arena in the 1980s: the Greens and the extreme right Vlaams Blok. We did not observe any differences between small villages or major towns with regard to the percentage of councillors starting their career in youth organizations, while gender of the councillor was not significant either.

The finding that more than 40 percent of all city councillors started their political career in a youth organization indicates the importance of these organizations and warrants their inclusion in political science research. We believe that this percentage is reliable since it is in line with the results from a general population survey conducted in Flanders in 1998 showing that 6 percent of all adults belong to a political party – and this percentage corresponds to the actual figures on party membership. However, this survey also included questions on youth participation, and it was shown that among those who had never been a member of a youth organization of a political party, only 4 percent belonged to a party at the time of the survey. On the other hand, among those who had been a member of a youth organization, this number was 43 percent (Hooghe, 2003; Stolle and Hooghe, 2002). Although the figures from these two surveys cannot be compared directly, both the general population survey and the survey among city councillors convey the insight that a very substantial proportion of all party members started their party career in a youth organization.

If youth organizations function as a recruitment channel for the adult party, it is possible that members who were youth party members received a political career boost and competitive advantage compared to their colleagues who were recruited in some other way. It can be expected that

Table 2. Previous membership of the youth organization

	%	N
VLD (Liberals)	45.3	150
SP.A (Socialists)	43.2	155
CD&V (Christian Democrats)	48.0	204
VU/ID/NVA/Spirit (Flemish Nationalists)	(44)	18
Agalev (Greens)	(15)	26
Vlaams Blok (extreme right)	(34)	35
Others (mainly local lists)	(22)	79
Total	40.9	670

Percentage of respondents indicating that they have been a member of the youth section of their party.

their political careers will be facilitated because of their youth membership (De Graaf and Flap, 1988). Networks tend to be important for any kind of political recruitment, and so we might expect that those who are strongly integrated into the party fabric, partly because of their youth membership, will have a better chance of acquiring leading political positions (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Stouthuysen, 1991).

There are indeed striking differences with regard to the career of members and non-members. To start with: those who have been a member of a youth organization start earlier with their careers: on average they were 31 when they first entered a local election list, while this was 39 years for the others. They received their first mandate at the age of 34, while the others had to wait until the age of 42 (Table 3). This eight-year difference can be extremely important. Almost all political parties now have an age limit of 65 for an elected mandate, and this implies that the former members on average have 34 years to go to build their political career, while for the non-members this period is limited to 26 years. The number of opportunities to 'move on' in their career is fairly limited for politicians, since municipal elections are held only once every six years, regional elections every five years and national elections every four years in Belgium. Apart from elections, there are very few opportunities for any job promotions. Furthermore, it is usually expected of politicians that they have gathered experience at the local level before moving on to parliament; and for cabinet positions some parliamentary experience is required. Despite the fact that some political newcomers have attracted a great deal of media attention, in general there are no short cuts within political careers (Norris, 1997). To start eight years earlier than one's competitors and/or colleagues can therefore make an enormous difference with regard to the likelihood of eventually arriving in a senior position.

However, the figures show that the former members do not move ahead more rapidly than the former non-members: for them, too, it takes on average three years to move on from the first candidacy to the first mandate. This implies that their competitive advantage is not a result of the fact that

Table 3. Age for first candidacy and first mandate

	<i>First time on list (1)</i>		<i>First time elected (2)</i>		<i>Difference (1)-(2)</i>	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Members youth organization	29.9	32.1	33.4	35.3	3.5	3.2
Non-member youth organization	38.8	38.9	41.6	41.5	2.8	2.6
All	35.9	35.9	39.0	38.8	3.1	2.9

Average age for respondents at the moment (1) they first became candidates on a local election list; (2) they were elected for the first time in the municipal council. For both indicators the difference between members and non-members is significant at the 0.0001 level (chi-squared).

they move *faster* through the career track, it simply means that they start *earlier*, and therefore have more time available for the remainder of their career.

A possible indication of this advantage is that among the aldermen and mayors, 47 percent reported having been a youth member, while this was 39 percent for the ordinary city councillors. It is self-evident that one cannot jump to the conclusion here that an *effect* of youth participation was detected. Self-selection, too, is probably important in this matter. It is reasonable to assume that those who are highly committed to the cause of a political party will not only join earlier than lukewarm supporters, but will also be more likely to move on to more important functions within the party. Because we rely on cross-sectional data, we cannot solve this problem of endogeneity (Stolle, 2001). In the following sections more evidence about the factors facilitating the transition from youth to adult politics are presented: do we observe an affect on attitudes and skills, or rather an affect on the network position of former youth members?

Starting a Political Career

Being a member of a youth organization is obviously only one way of starting out on a political career, and therefore other factors need to be scrutinized as well (Recchi, 1999; Young and Cross, 2002). Therefore councillors were asked why they entered politics in the first place, and several responses were allowed on this question (Table 4).

It is striking that three motives top the list: being asked by the party, being active in local associational life, and being active in the party. Being asked by the party to enter a local election list is an important factor: this element is mentioned by more than 70 percent of all councillors, and by more than 80 percent of women. The finding that the initiative clearly comes from the party itself is in line with the results by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995: 374): a major reason for any form of political activism is the simple fact that people have been asked to join. The second most important reason is involvement in local associational life: local voluntary associations still seem to have a privileged link to political parties, despite a tendency toward depillarization in Belgium. This link is important for the Christian Democrats in particular, with over 70 percent of their councillors reporting that they entered an election list at least partly because of their involvement in local associational life.

Equally interesting are the reasons that are less often mentioned: only one out of every six councillors states that his/her specific knowledge or skills for the job are essential for being put up as a candidate in local elections, which does not convey the image that being a city councillor is a highly skilled job. On average, women report 2.5 motives for their first candidacy, for men this figure stands at 2.8. Women also report more motives that are

Table 4. Reasons for first candidacy at local elections

	<i>All</i>	<i>VLD</i>	<i>SPA</i>	<i>CD&V</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Asked by the party	70	71	70	74	83	66
Was active in local associational life	52	45	43	68	46	55
Was active in the party	44	36	59	41	33	48
Was known in the community	32	38	29	35	25	35
My family members were in politics	17	18	14	25	23	15
I have specific knowledge or expertise	17	18	14	15	11	19
Was a member of an advisory council	14	11	18	15	10	16
Was a member of the youth organization	12	18	12	15	8	14
Was active in social movement	9	5	7	10	7	9
Already had a political mandate	3	3	3	3	2	3

Percentage of respondents who mentioned this motive for first candidacy at local elections. Multiple answers were allowed. Only the three major parties are reported because of an insufficient number of respondents for the smaller parties. 'All' (672 respondents) includes respondents from all parties, including smaller parties.

beyond their own control, such as being asked or being a member of a family with a political tradition. Compared to men, they tend to downplay their own skills and knowledge, which is in line with earlier research on political recruitment of women (Norris, 1997).

Returning to the main question about the importance of youth organizations, however, at first sight the findings reported in Table 4 seem disappointing: only 12 percent of all councillors mention her/his involvement in youth organizations as a reason for their engagement as councillors. Does this imply that youth organizations are not important for the start of a political career after all? We do not believe this conclusion is warranted. Table 3 indicates that the average age for the first candidacy is 35.9 years; in other words, when everyone has already left the youth organization. Therefore there cannot be a direct link between membership in the youth section and the first candidacy. Rather, the link might work indirectly: the three motives that were mentioned most often can be affected by youth membership. It is more likely that people will be asked by the local party elite to enter an electoral list if they have already made a favourable impression at the youth level. They might know more people within the party, and they are likely to be more integrated in local community life. So the most likely link between youth involvement and the start of a political

career is indirect: youth section membership generates networks, which, in turn, facilitate the start of a political career.

Political Careers

Youth sections of political parties do not just participate in political action, they also provide training opportunities for their members. Almost all former members of youth organizations indicated that they had received some sort of training within that organization. It might therefore be expected that those who have had this experience are better equipped to perform their job once they start their political career.

To ascertain this effect, we asked the councillors whether they felt up to the task when they entered the municipal council (Table 5). A slight difference can be observed between members and non-members of youth organizations with regard to their initial self-confidence. A far more important difference showed up with regard to gender, with women admitting more readily that they had to adjust to their new task. The most interesting finding here, however, is that membership of youth organizations seems to strengthen inequalities. Among the councillors who have not been a youth member, the difference between those with limited educational credentials and those with a university degree remains small. However, the highly educated members benefit most strongly from their membership experience and receive a substantial boost in their initial self-confidence. While among the non-members the difference between the lowest and the highest education category is relatively negligible, this difference is larger among the former members. What can be observed here is a cumulative pattern of inequality: those who already have more resources, because of their high

Table 5. Self-confidence after first being elected

	<i>Members youth section</i>	<i>Non-members youth section</i>	<i>Difference</i>
All	2.80	2.61	+0.19
Women	2.44	2.34	+0.10
Men	2.92	2.72	+0.20
Education:			
Lower Secondary	2.42	2.68	-0.26
Higher Secondary	2.68	2.57	+0.11
Higher/Not University	2.71	2.53	+0.18
University	3.09	2.76	+0.33

Average score on the Likert item: 'The first time I was elected in the municipal council, I had the idea I was up to the task'. Answers range from 1 (no, not at all) to 4 (yes, no doubt). The higher the average score, the more self-confidence. Difference between members and non-members is significant at the 0.01 level (chi-squared).

educational level, gain an additional advantage with the training they receive within the youth organization.

Finally, we examined whether youth participation influences satisfaction with the current job as a city councillor. Again this is measured with a Likert statement: 'In general, I'm quite satisfied with the way I work as a councillor/alderman/mayor'. Here, too, the former members were just a little bit more satisfied, but the difference was not significant (Table 6).

The questionnaire also included various other questions about the way councillors experience their positions, but all of them came to the same conclusion: with regard to skills and attitudes, differences between members and non-members are small or even negligible. The attitudinal causal mechanism between youth participation and adult political career does not therefore explain the political success of the former youth members.

Does this mean that the link between youth participation and adult political career can be attributed to their integration into networks generated by youth participation? The material that is available from this survey does not allow us to make such a bold statement. Since there is no information about the networks of the councillors at the moment they entered the party, there is no way of disentangling the effect of self-selection and network generation (Molenaers, 2001). What we do observe, however, is that all indicators are compatible with a network explanation: all the elements mentioned as important for the start of a political career are network-related, while it is known from other research that experiences in youth are often highly effective in generating networks.

Conclusion

As far as we know this is the first systematic research on youth sections of political parties, and the findings show clearly that this area merits further attention. A survey among local politicians in Belgium shows that over 40 percent started their political career in a youth section. Furthermore, youth

Table 6. Satisfaction about current function

	<i>Former members</i>	<i>Non-members</i>	<i>All</i>
All	1.92	1.98	1.95
Women	2.17	2.04	2.07
Men	1.85	1.94	1.90
Local majority	1.88	1.93	2.04
Local opposition	2.04	2.05	1.91

Score on Likert item about current satisfaction with the job. Scale ranging from 1 = very satisfied, to 4 = very unsatisfied. Lower score means more satisfaction. The difference between members and non-members is not significant; the difference between women and men and between majority and opposition is significant at the 0.001 level (chi-squared).

sections have lost 60 percent of their members since the 1980s, so their traditional recruitment function has weakened. There are two conclusions that can be drawn from this survey.

The finding that structural inequalities accompany entry into political life is by itself not new. Earlier research has shown that gender, family links and traditions, educational status and income largely determine one's chances of building a political career. This research has shown that inequality is further strengthened by membership in youth organizations. Political careers seem to be ruled by the same mechanisms as any other career: early starters are better off, and they remain better off. It is important to note that the two phenomena are necessarily linked, like two sides of the same coin. Establishing that youth organizations are important recruitment channels means that those who had this experience gain a competitive advantage over those who did not. This is an important finding with regard to recent policy initiatives ensuring unbiased party recruitment, addressing gender, ethnic background and other inequalities. What we can learn from this study is that initiatives of these kinds should be taken at an early age. If it is only adults who are targeted, as has been the case thus far, some patterns of inequality will already have been well established.

The second conclusion is tied more closely to the functioning of political parties. Not only do youth organizations have an important recruitment function, but additional evidence suggests that these organizations are losing members far more rapidly than the parties themselves. The figures on this decline are very much in line with what is known from Germany and Sweden. In the near future, parties will therefore be confronted with the fact that one of their main sources for the provision of new members is drying up.

Several counter-arguments concerning the importance of youth involvement seem plausible at first sight. Perhaps young people no longer need separate youth organizations, but instead move on immediately as new members to the adult party; or is it possible that they arrive later in the political party. Even so, one must not forget that youth organizations are a highly effective solution for a problem facing every organization. Organizations tend to be dominated by certain age cohorts, and as a result are often less attractive for new recruits. Establishing a separate youth organization is an institutional way to solve this conflict, as it allows new recruits to have their own playing ground that is only loosely controlled by the older party elite.⁹

Although at this moment it cannot be predicted what kind of strategy party organizations will pursue, the most likely development is that in the foreseeable future, too, they will face an uphill battle if they want to recruit new members. The theoretical relevance of this investigation into youth sections, therefore, is that it lends credibility to the claim that in the near future parties will continue to lose members. Given the importance and the strength of youth socialization, it is likely that feelings of partisanship will

continue to weaken if new recruits integrate into the party system only at a later age. Furthermore, it is extremely likely that they will do so in ever smaller numbers. Although these findings about one specific recruitment channel cannot fully address issues of party transformation in general, it is clear that the dramatic decline of youth organizations in political parties confirms the assumption that the days of mass membership parties may be gone forever.

Notes

- 1 The total number of registered voters in Belgium has risen from 6,800,584 in 1979 to 7,343,466 in 1999.
- 2 Available evidence on the Internet activity of political parties suggests that the Internet has become an important campaign tool, but is not being used fully to recruit new members (Gibson, et al., 2003; Hooghe and Stouthuysen, 2001).
- 3 Belgian political parties split up in the 1970s, so it would be correct to talk of a 'Belgian party system' for the period 1831–1970, while from that moment on it is more accurate to make a distinction between the Dutch and the French language party systems (Deschouwer, 1992).
- 4 Agalev reports 1,183 members in its youth section. We did not succeed in obtaining reliable figures for the Vlaams Blok.
- 5 An additional advantage for a survey at this level is that it circumvents privacy rules, since the names and addresses of city councillors are public information, so there was no need to get the approval or the collaboration of all Flemish parties.
- 6 First, regions were assigned to limit transportation time and costs; subsequently, municipalities were randomly selected within those regions.
- 7 The response rate is calculated based on the total number of councillors in these municipalities. The 23.7 percent non-response includes councillors who were not present at the meeting, those who refused and others who failed to return a full questionnaire.
- 8 It has to be remembered that the three 'traditional' parties obtain more local seats than their score in national elections might suggest. First, the electoral system used for local elections (Imperiali) over-represents larger parties, and second, the 'new' parties (Greens and extreme right) are still not present in every municipality. As a consequence, their scores at the local level tend to be lower than their scores for national or regional elections.
- 9 Political parties constitute a special case, because they can only operate one organization in every municipality. Other organizations can solve internal generational conflicts by splitting up into several organizations working within the same geographical area, but this is out of the question for parties, thus forcing them to find another solution for generational differences.

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MARC HOOGHE is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Catholic University of Leuven. He holds PhDs in Political Science (Brussels) and in Sociology (Rotterdam). He serves as editor for the political science journals *Acta Politica* (with H. Keman) and *Res Publica*. He has published on participation and social capital, e.g. in *Political Behavior*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Environmental Politics* and *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. His most recent books are *Generating Social Capital* (edited with Dietlind Stolle, Palgrave, 2003) and *Sociaal kapitaal in Vlaanderen* (Amsterdam University Press, 2003)

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Catholic University of Leuven, E. van Evenstraat 2B, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. [email: Marc.Hooghe@soc.kuleuven.ac.be]

DIETLIND STOLLE (PhD, Princeton University, 2000) is Assistant Professor in Political Science at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. She has published on membership in a variety of organizations, civic values and forms of political partici-

pation, for example, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Political Psychology*, *Scandinavian Political Studies* and *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* and in various edited volumes. Besides the book *Generating Social Capital. Civil Society and Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (with Marc Hooghe) (New York: Palgrave, 2003), she co-edited (with Michele Micheletti and Andreas Føllesdal) *Politics, Products, and Markets – Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2003).

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, McGill University, 855, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal H3A 2T7, Canada. [email: Dietlind.Stolle@mcgill.ca]

PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN is Associate Professor in the Political Science Department of the Free University Brussels. He obtained his PhD in 1992 and has published mainly on new social movements and green and extreme right parties. His recent books deal with extreme right parties in Europe since World War II (Brussels, 1993): *The Myth of Democratic Peace* (edited with Gustaaf Geeraerts, 1999) and *The Tradition of Progressive Liberalism* (edited with Sven Gatz), (Brussels: VUB Press, 2001).

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Free University of Brussels, Pleinlaan 2, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium. [email: Patrick.Stouthuysen@vub.ac.be]