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After the Divorce:  
Intra-Party Power and Organisational  
Change in Swedish Social Democracy

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Keele European Parties Research Unit  
(KEPRU)

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Launched in September 2000, the Keele European Parties Research Unit (KEPRU) was the first research grouping of its kind in the UK. It brings together the hitherto largely independent work of Keele researchers focusing on European political parties, and aims:

- to facilitate its members' engagement in high-quality academic research, individually, collectively in the Unit and in collaboration with cognate research groups and individuals in the UK and abroad;
- to hold regular conferences, workshops, seminars and guest lectures on topics related to European political parties;
- to publish a series of parties-related research papers by scholars from Keele and elsewhere;
- to expand postgraduate training in the study of political parties, principally through Keele's MA in Parties and Elections and the multinational PhD summer school, with which its members are closely involved;
- to constitute a source of expertise on European parties and party politics for media and other interests.

The Unit shares the broader aims of the Keele European Research Centre, of which it is a part. KERC comprises staff and postgraduates at Keele who are actively conducting research into the politics of remaking and integrating Europe.

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## INTRODUCTION\*

European political parties have undergone considerable organisational change since their emergence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Duverger (1990 [1954]) first distinguished between two basic party types: the cadre party of notables, and the mass party, the political arm of socio-economic groups outside the political establishment. Later, whereas Duverger observed a “contagion from left”, with the cadre-type parties adopting the organisational features of the mass-type, more recently others have detected something akin the opposite. The old mass parties, with their relatively decentralised and democratic internal structures, are, it is argued, becoming like “post-modern cadre parties” (Bäck and Möller 1997:291). Back in the 1960s Kirchheimer (1990 [1966]), for example, suggested that parties were looking increasingly like each other. In addition to a dilution of ideological identity in favour of programmatic flexibility and pragmatism, he also suggested: that the power of the top leadership was growing vis-à-vis other sections of the party, particularly individual members; that appealing to a specific target group of voters was becoming less important than “catch-all” vote-seeking throughout the electorate; and that the range of interest groups with which the party had contact was widening. Panebianco (1988) identified the rise of the electoral-professional party, which pursued votes above all other goals, and in which the leadership was able to promote its vote-maximising preferences through relying on a staff whose motivation was pecuniary rather than ideological. The last few years have seen further refinements to these general assertions. In short, the argument is that a principal-agent relationship has changed: that the party is no longer the agent of other social organisations, but has become itself a principal, with its own survival and prosperity as its fundamental goals. This paper comprises a case study of the organisational changes and innovations in one European party, a mass party in the classic mould, and a highly long-lived and successful one: the Swedish Social Democratic Party.

There have been various empirical investigations into these new conceptions of the party. The project led by Katz and Mair (1994) on comparative party organisation lent weight, if not uniformly, to the notion that parties were becoming more elite-driven, and it provided party scholars with vital data. But they are now well over a decade old. Later studies have tended to focus on changes in mass parties, especially social democratic ones. Kitschelt (1994) attempted to explain European social democratic parties’ varying electoral fortunes by pointing, among others factors, to organisation, especially relations with trade unions (cf. Koelble 1995). His account is in many ways impressive. But its basic premise – that there is a large “left-libertarian” constituency in West European electorates that social democrats could position themselves to exploit electorally, albeit “only if there is a match between environmental conditions and party organisation” (Kitschelt 1994:253) – is empirically unproven (Pontusson 1995). His argument that the extent of ties between party and unions is inversely correlated with capacity for programmatic repositioning, and thus electoral success, has also been challenged (eg, Kunkel and Pontusson 1998). Within Scandinavia, Elvander’s magisterial study of the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish labour movements (1980) devoted plenty of discussion to organisational matters, but over 20 years have now elapsed since it appeared. More recently, other work, cited in the sections below, has provided a base for the narrow research question addressed here. That question is: in the light of theories of party change that suggest increasing autonomy of party leaderships both from their own memberships and from associated or “collateral” organisations, to what extent can the deep and longstanding ties between the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the country’s Confederation of Trade Unions be observed to have loosened? Or, to put it another way: how

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deep do the ties between party and unions remain in Sweden? Answers to these questions may allow a tentative and partial contribution to answering bigger ones, concerning the changing nature of parties in general, and social democratic ones in particular.

## BACKGROUND: THE SCANDINAVIAN LABOUR MOVEMENTS

### *The genesis of party–union ties*

Panbianco, for one, lays great emphasis on a party's origins in explaining the pattern of its later organisational development. Its "genetic model", he argues, establishes a framework within which its internal actors subsequently operate (Panbianco 1988:50-51). With that in mind, the origins of the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP), like those of the Danish Social Democrats and the Norwegian Labour Party, offer ample testimony to their close ties to one particular group of collateral organisations. It was organised labour that created them, looking to open a new, political front in their struggles with the powers of the employers and of the state (Korpi 1981) in the latter part of the 19th century. While in Denmark and Norway, the union confederation – as in all three Scandinavian states, known by its abbreviated title, LO – was established a few years after the party, the two main wings of the labour movements were initially considered essentially one and the same. In Sweden, SAP's formation, in 1889, occurred nine years before that of LO, and the party seemed consequently to attain slightly more of a senior-partner position than had its Scandinavian sister parties. Two of the five members of the Swedish union confederation's executive were nominated by SAP. Even more significantly, delegates at LO's founding conference agreed that the members of its constituent unions should also automatically be members of the party (Gidlund 1992:106). This system of collective membership long provided 75-80 per cent of the Social Democratic membership – a figure that reached a staggering 1.23m, or around 15 per cent of the Swedish population, in 1983 (Widfeldt 1999:112). Elite-level links between party and unions were less formal than in Denmark and Norway, but were perhaps no less significant for that. Hjalmar Branting, SAP's first leader, declared that "the trade-union movement has been the basis for all the political work in the Social Democratic Party" (1906).

The foundations of this exceptionally close relationship between SAP and LO in Sweden were various. Apart from some incursions in the north, the Social Democrats managed fairly successfully both to keep communist influence out of the highly unionised workforce, and to restrict the coverage of non-LO unions to a small, professional section. It also increasingly attained a strong internal authority. From the 1930s it managed largely to win control of organised labour's primary weapon, the strike, from its constituent unions (Bäck and Möller 1997:249); ballots in individual unions on pay agreements negotiated by LO were dropped. In the 1950s, at the employers' behest, national pay bargaining was centralised, giving LO an even more crucial role. Thus, LO came to possess both the "encompassing" character and the internal coherence that made it a reliable negotiating partner, if by no means a pliant one, and a valuable ally for a political party. On the other hand, the Social Democrats had plenty to offer LO in order to keep their relationship sweet. If the unions controlled the labour supply, the party controlled almost exclusively the supply of public policy at the national level: apart from a few months in 1936, SAP governed Sweden continually between 1932 and 1976, sometimes in coalition, but mostly alone, as a minority government, with the usually reliable parliamentary support of the Communists.

Moreover, a virtuous circle of payoffs ensued. LO's ability to see its unions' and their members' common interest in moderate wage development was obviously a boon to Social Democratic governments (cf. Olson 1990), which happily reaped the benefits of rapid post-war economic growth to secure concurrently its three major goals: vote-maximisation, office-holding and policy implementation (the latter involving primarily the building of Sweden's famously generous and comprehensive welfare state). LO, meanwhile, could claim two vital achievements. First, it could wring fiscal rewards, in the form of extended social insurance and targeted tax cuts, from government in return for co-operation in wage formation. Second,

and most importantly from its own perspective, it could keep the state out of wage negotiations, at least in an overt role. Danish and Norwegian governments felt compelled periodically from the 1930s to step in and impose statutory resolutions to deadlocked pay talks. When a similar scenario loomed in Sweden, LO quickly reached with the employers the milestone agreement at Saltsjöbaden in 1938, which set the terms – essentially bipartite rather than tripartite – of industrial relations for several decades to come. This in turn added a final virtuous twist to the party–union relationship. With the state staying out of the labour market, the scope for conflict in that arena between the two wings of the labour movement – the state as defender of the national economic interest, the unions as defender of their members’ narrower interest – was reduced.

### *Towards divorce*

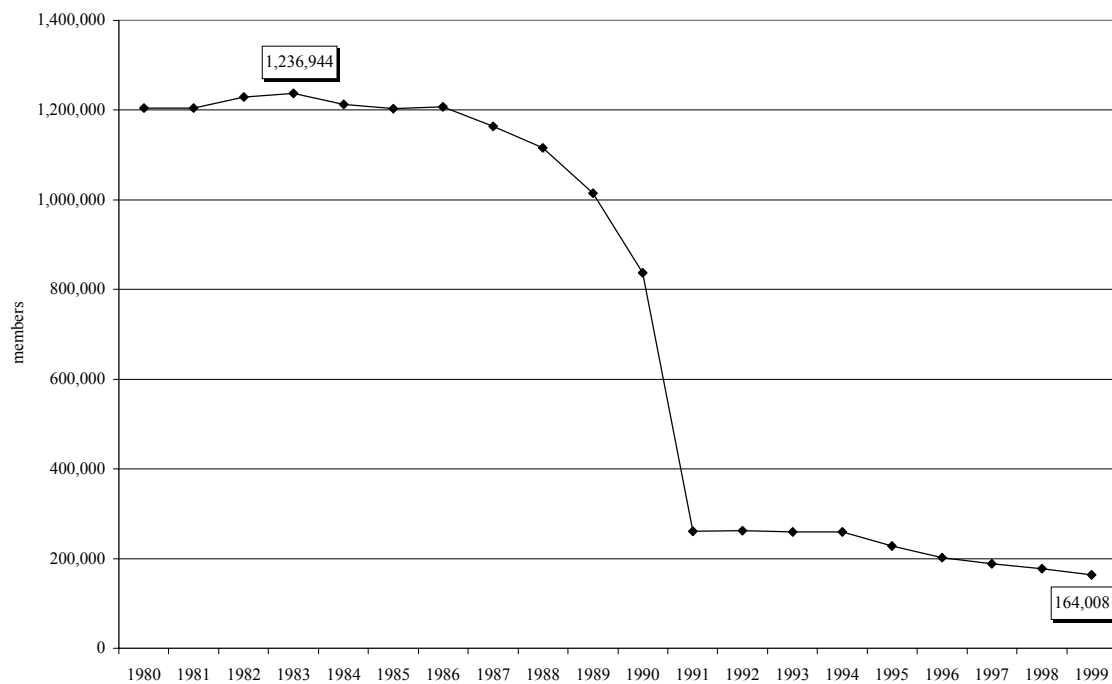
The picture changed markedly, however, during the 1970s and 1980s. As harsher economic times arrived, the labour movement took a radical turn to the left. LO persuaded the Social Democrats to require employers to consult with workers over management decisions, and then to adopt the confederation’s deeply controversial proposal for creating wage-earner funds, a scheme that would have forced bigger firms to pass a proportion of their equity annually to trade-union control. Not surprisingly, the plan provoked bitter opposition from employers and the bourgeois (right-of-centre) parties, and it contributed to the Social Democrats’ losing the 1976 election.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the foundations of the relationship were tottering: neither wing could offer quite what it had previously. LO was no longer able to deliver wage restraint. As Martin (1984) points out, it would have been hard for it to do so in an inflationary climate, and especially one in which Sweden’s big exporting firms were making large profits. But, in addition, there had been structural changes in the labour market that had undermined LO’s previous strength. The expanding section of white-collar employees who worked in public sector tended to belong to unions that confederated not under LO’s umbrella, but rather under that of other organisations, TCO, SACO and SR. Public-sector workers began to lead wage-bargaining, which tended to drag up wage inflation throughout the economy. The state found itself drawn into labour-market conflicts, not only as overseer, to settle disputes, but also as protagonist, in the role of employer (Åmark 1992:91). LO’s internal discipline also eroded, as LO and non-LO unions in the public sector formed their own wage-bargaining cartels. Simmering discord culminated in early 1990, when, in a desperate attempt to tackle dangerously high inflation, a Social Democratic government attempted to reinforce a prices-and-wages freeze by prohibiting strikes. The LO unions were furious; the government resigned.

Even before the labour movement’s internal relations reached its nadir in this “war of the roses”, however, basic change in SAP and LO’s institutional relationship had been agreed. The 1987 party conference decided to end the system of collective membership. There was a direct external stimulus for this reform: the Communist Left, as it was by then called, had threatened to co-operate with the bourgeois parties in building a parliamentary majority that could enforce change through legislation, something the Social Democrats were keen to preempt. But, in fact, although both party and unions contained their strong advocates of keeping collective membership, the leaders of each wing had come to see advantages in a looser relationship. For LO, exclusive commitment to a single party, and an increasingly unpopular governing one at that, was seen as unhelpful in an increasingly competitive market for union members.<sup>2</sup> For SAP, meanwhile, excessively close identification with a particular socio-economic group sat rather uncomfortably with its catch-all electoral strategies. Furthermore, nearly a decade previously Elvander had seen the system as entailing a certain “psychological disadvantage” for the party. A large proportion of its collectively affiliated membership was entirely passive, and over a quarter even voted for other parties. Presciently, Elvander predicted that “sooner or later” collective membership would have to be abandoned in Norway and Sweden (1979:18).<sup>3</sup>

### A “voter party”?

Predictably, the abandonment of collective membership led to a collapse in SAP’s membership (see figure 1). Moreover, it became clear that this decline was not just a one-off adjustment, but part of a trend. The Social Democrats were not alone in this. In 1962 there were about 1.5m members of the different parties in Sweden, the equivalent to a fifth of the population, and there were nearly as many in 1990 (Gidlund and Möller 1999:30). But after years of falling party membership in other West European states, by the mid-1990s Sweden was rapidly catching up in this respect (see figure 2).<sup>4</sup> But for SAP, this was a particularly uncomfortable trend. The party has a very strong sense of identity as a “people’s-movement party”, rooted in civil society; social democratic parties elsewhere in Europe that lack this historical character are occasionally referred to condescendingly as “lawyer parties”. For a party that had always seen itself as the political wing of the Swedish working class, and perhaps as much an expression of that class identity than as a vehicle for fighting elections, to lose nearly 90 per cent of its membership in the 1990s – even if much of it had been passive – was a “psychological disadvantage” in itself.

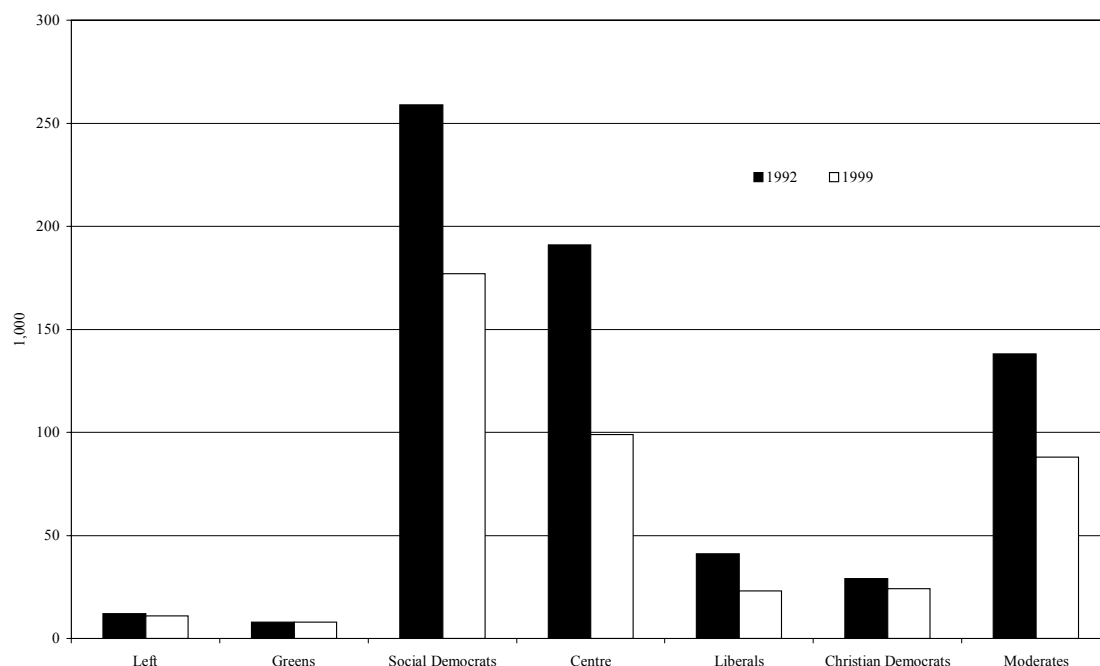
Figure 1. Total SAP membership



Source: SAP.

Yet psychological problems can, of course, be overcome, and the silver lining for the Social Democratic leadership was that this loss of members was not crippling for the party’s ability to operate, at least in regard to two of its “faces”, those in the state and in central office (Mair 1994:4-5). The main reason for this was state subsidy for political parties, introduced in Sweden in 1965. In 1945 the party obtained 86 per cent of its income from membership dues, with most members paying automatically as members of LO-affiliated trade unions. By 1996 that proportion had fallen to 3 per cent. Similarly, 27 per cent of SAP’s income in 1950 came from LO; by 1996 it was 4 per cent (Wörlund and Hansson nd).<sup>5</sup> Nor was this financial bounty confined to the national level. The introduction of subsidies at the municipal level in 1970 had an “almost revolutionary effect on the parties’ economic situation” (Gidlund and Möller 1999:94).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. Membership trends in Swedish parties



Source: Gidlund and Möller (1999).

Thus, without the organic connection to the trade-union movement that collective membership had represented, and without even a truly mass membership, SAP seemed finally to have discarded the organisational trappings of a classic mass party. Add to that the widespread impression among its remaining members of a loss of ideological integrity, with many complaining that they had trouble recognising the party in office during the 1990s, and the characteristics of something resembling a catch-all party can be observed. When levels of professionalisation, financed by public money, are noted, SAP begins to look like an electoral-professional party – or, as two Swedish researchers have called the model, a “voter party” (Gilljam and Möller 1996). The interests of the leadership in having the party pursue two of its basic goals, votes and office, seem to have prevailed over the interests of other sections of the party, such as activists, members and collateral organisations, in its pursuing another fundamental goal, policy (cf. Müller and Strøm 1999).

In fact, persuasive as it sounds, the voter-party thesis has not gone without challenge, both theoretical and empirical. Within the parties, the charge that members have left *en masse* in response to their increasing marginalisation in decision-making and policy formulation has been generally dismissed, both in Sweden and elsewhere, for lack of evidence. Teorell (1998), in an exhaustive study of decision-making in Sweden’s two biggest parties, including SAP, concludes that they are, in their different ways, “oligarchic” rather than “democratic” – but that they have probably always been so. The brutal verdict of one recent résumé of Swedish research is that “the people’s-movement party...never existed in the ideal form in which it appears, in particular, in Swedish party debate. It belongs to the many beautiful, but false, myths in Swedish society” (Petersson 2000:87). Conversely, questions have been raised about whether modern party leaderships are actually as autonomous in pursuit of their goals as those in an ideal-type electoral-professional party. Most relevantly for this paper, the mass party’s relationship with its collateral organisations may not be as estranged as some of the evidence would suggest. After the 1994 election, rumour had it that LO had blocked the Social Democratic leadership’s inclination to strike a deal with the Liberals in parliament. More visible evidence could be observed in 1996, when, with unions already angered by cuts in unemployment benefit, a Social Democratic government attempted to promote employment

by reforming labour-market regulation through increasing the scope for local wage-bargaining and exemptions from job-protection rules. LO's furious reaction – in some places, the unions organised rival May day rallies separate from the traditional ones held for all organisations connected to the labour movement, and a senior LO official threatened to withhold its contribution to the party's funds (*Svenska Dagbladet* Sep. 7th 1996) – led to the plans being ignominiously dropped. In the aftermath of this severe crisis in party–union relations, a much-discussed book written by a then Liberal parliamentarian, and who later became editor of the country's main broadsheet newspaper, accused the Social Democrats of being almost completely in thrall to LO on matters of economic policy (Johnson 1998).

## EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

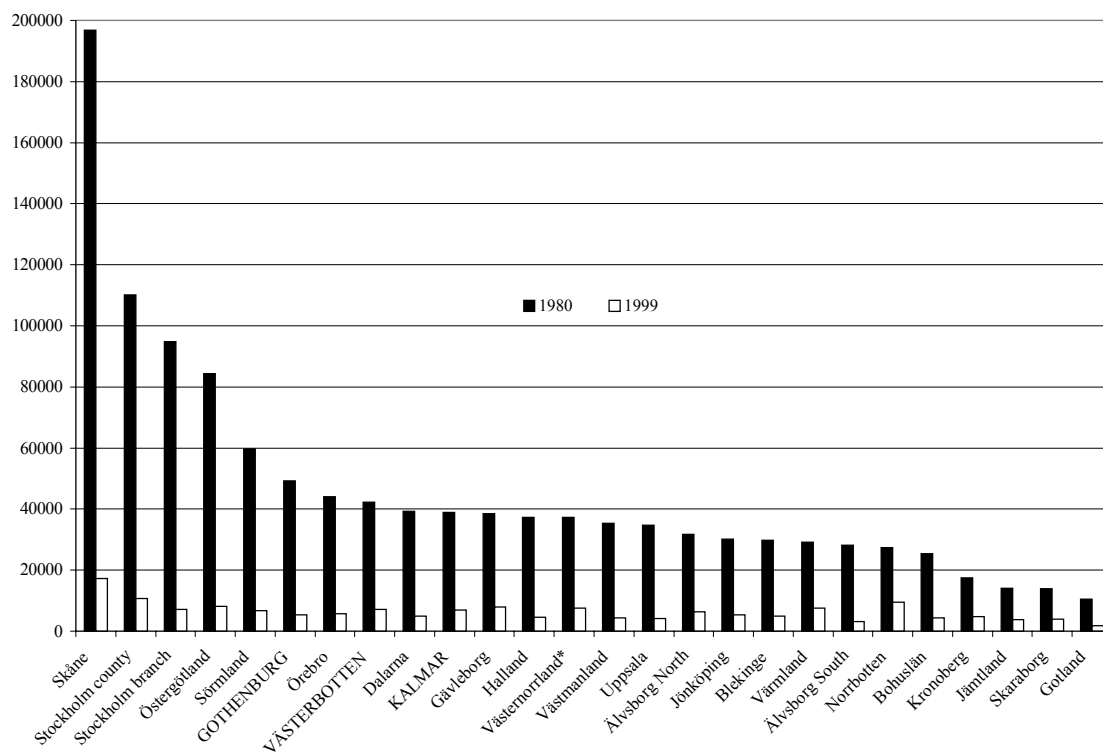
It is in this context that the current study explores the enduring relationship between SAP and LO. Its attention is not so much on the national level, important though that is, but rather on the local. This is for two main reasons. First, collective membership of the party was implemented at the level of the branch (*arbetarekommun*, literally, “workers’ commune”). Unusually, this is not the basic level of organisation and membership in SAP.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the basic unit is an association of individuals with something in common, apart from their “recognising the basic, general elements of Social Democracy’s programme and party statutes” (SAP 2000:39). This commonality can be place of residence, but also, as we shall see, gender, age, ethnicity, employment or something else. During the era of collective membership, sections of LO trade unions could affiliate to the local Social Democratic branch in this way, like any other basic unit, bringing their members with them and concomitantly enjoying considerable power within that branch. Note, however, that the local union sections were under no obligation to affiliate. The second reason for looking at the local level is the level of formal influence that branches enjoy within the party. In SAP, the branches select delegates to the party’s sovereign body, the national congress. As for selecting parliamentary candidates, this is the responsibility of the regional level (in SAP, *partidistrikt*). But it is the branches that select the delegates who comprise the regional congresses, and it is the basic units that nominate the potential delegates. The national party plays virtually no role in the process. Clearly, then, power within these branches remains very important for the party’s wider character and orientation.

### *Exploring the local level*

In order to assess the residual presence and influence in the party of the Social Democrats’ main collateral organisation, the LO trade unions, primary data were gathered from three SAP branches. These data comprised interviews with local members and activists, the most important being the branch secretary (*ombudsman*), a full-time salaried organiser and campaigner, who sits (without voting rights) on the branch executive committee, maintains contact with the affiliating units and manages relations with the party’s local municipal councillors. The recent history and character of relations between party and unions in each branch were investigated. Interviewees were almost invariably open and helpful. Quantitative data was sometimes rather harder to obtain, due more to less-than-perfect record-keeping than any reluctance on the branches’ part to divulge information. This underlined an inherent difficulty in research into political parties, particularly the “face” that exists “on the ground” (Mair 1994:4). Nevertheless, Swedish parties probably keep rather better records than those in most countries, and some data derived from them can be deployed to interesting illustrative effect.

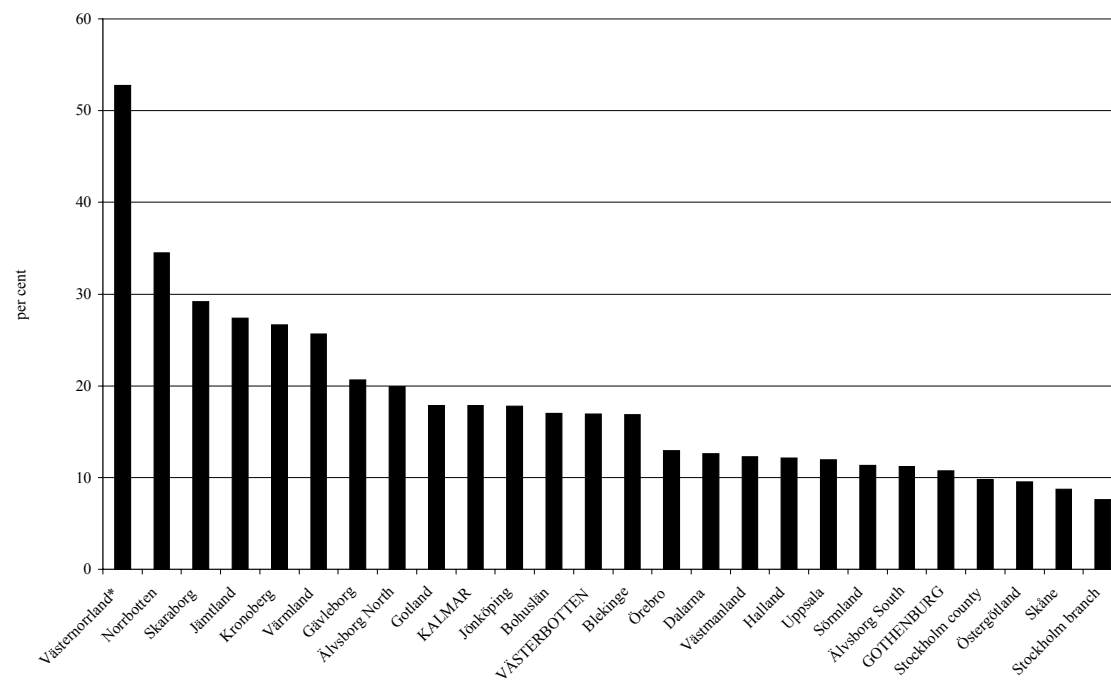


Figure 3. Membership of SAP regions



\* Created by merger of Medelpad and Ångermanland in 1991. Before that date, those two districts' combined membership is used. *Source:* SAP

Figure 4. Rate of membership maintenance in SAP regions, 1980-99



\* Created by merger of Medelpad and Ångermanland in 1991. Before that date, those two districts' combined membership is used. *Source:* SAP.

Three methodological considerations determined the choice of which branches to study. First, their status as *those covering the main town or city within a party region* marked them out. This was because data on branch membership levels are unavailable above the level of each individual branch. Regional memberships, by contrast, are collated by the party's central office. Thus, a national comparison of membership trends was possible only by comparing regions, and then selecting branches on that basis. Second, levels of *membership loss in party regions* were treated as an indicator of how the components of SAP in different parts of Sweden had been affected by the end of collective membership. All Social Democratic regions have lost members, but some have done so more than others (see figure 3), and the proportion of membership loss varies (figure 4). Of course, not all membership loss can be attributed to the end of collective membership. But precise figures for the proportion of the party membership that flowed in this way from affiliated unions are unavailable above the level of the branch, and very incomplete even there; hence the necessary assumption that membership loss overall is correlated to membership loss through the ending of collective membership. Selection of cases according to this criterion was influenced by the objective of targeting branches in three categories of region: one that had suffered a relatively high rate of membership loss, one with a roughly average rate and one with a relatively low rate. Third, *regional and economic characteristics* were considered. In particular, it was thought desirable to investigate a branch in northern Sweden, one in the south-west and one in the south-east; to have one that covered a big city; and to have at least one covering one of Sweden's more prosperous towns.

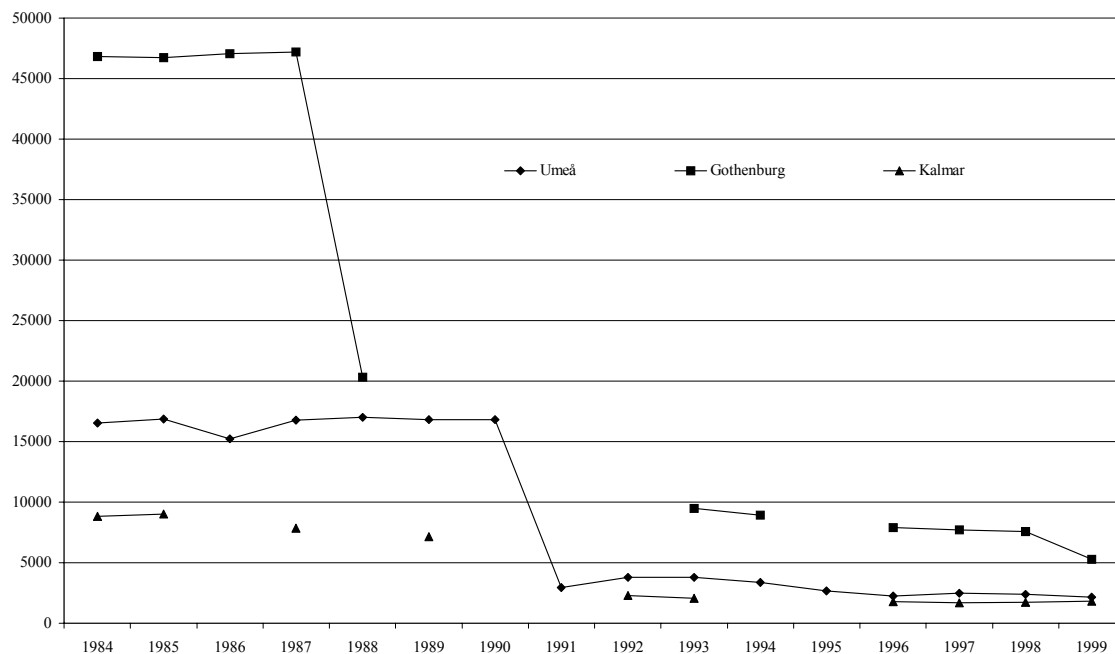
These criteria led to the selection of the Social Democratic branches in the following locations. *Umeå*, with a population of 100,000, is the main town in Västerbotten county and party region. Although the vast Swedish north is the least prosperous part of the country, Umeå is an exception; its status as Sweden's fastest-growing city is derived partly from its hosting a big university and a regional hospital. In terms of maintaining its membership level over the last two decades, Västerbotten is almost the median performer of SAP's 26 regions, having 17 per cent of the number it had in 1980. The historic town of *Kalmar*, with a population of 70,000, is, by contrast, somewhat stagnant economically. Kalmar county remains a fairly rural part of the country, situated on and around the eastern Baltic coast. Kalmar's is among the better party regions at maintaining membership levels, having 18 per cent of its 1980 figure. The third branch was the one covering *Gothenburg*, Sweden's second city and a west-coast port, around which a powerful tradition of labour activism was based. The size of the local population, about 500,000, gives the Social Democratic Party in Gothenburg a special, dual identity. For many purposes, including selection of parliamentary candidates, it possesses the status of a party region. But although four branches do exist in the city, the basic Social Democratic units affiliate not to the branches but directly to the Gothenburg region, thus making it comparable to the two branches investigated here. Gothenburg region has been fairly hard hit by membership loss. In 1999 it had only 11 per cent of its level in 1980. (The average for all Social Democratic regions is 14 per cent. See figure 4).

#### *Analysis: membership collapse, institutional resilience*

The early 1980s was the zenith of SAP as a membership organisation. Thereafter, partly in anticipation of a change in the institutional relationship between the party and LO unions, local union sections began to end their members' collective membership of the party, until the practice was finally abolished at the end of 1990. As figure 5 shows, and as we would have expected, our three branches have lost many members since the mid-1980s. Some difference is noticeable, however. Membership loss in Gothenburg was especially pronounced, although this was from a much higher starting point than in the other two branches. Umeå also suffered a big fall, but Kalmar's membership decline was more sedate. This could indicate that Gothenburg relied more heavily on collectively affiliated members, whereas Kalmar's was less dependent on that source. It is also notable that, whereas Umeå's decline coincided with the final year in the period in which collective membership was phased out, 1987-90,

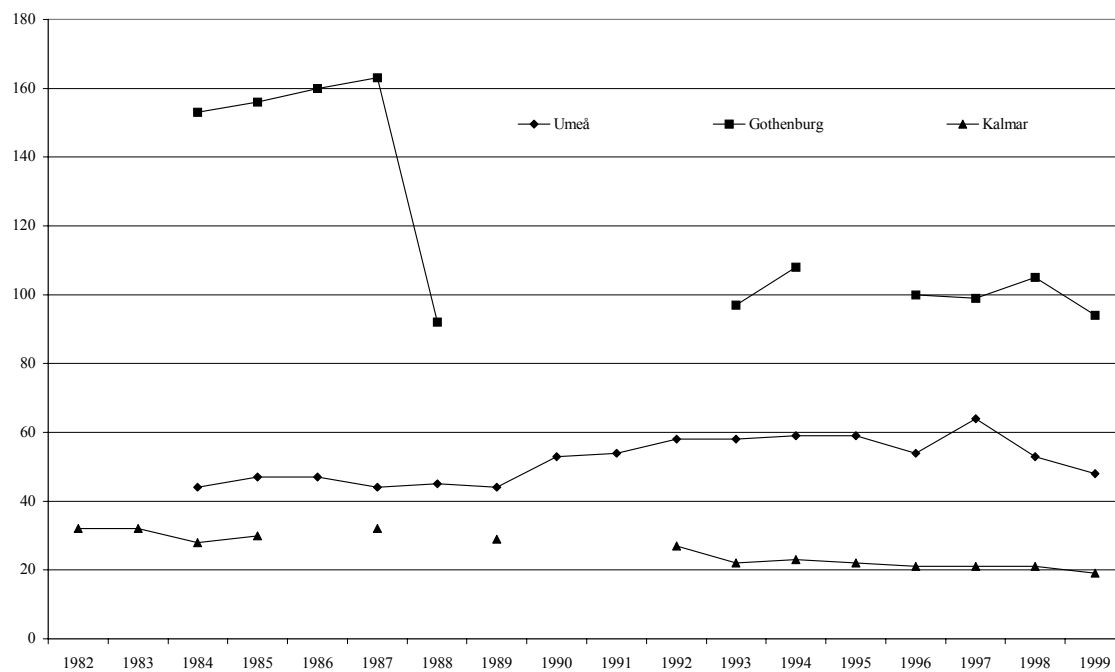
Gothenburg's began as early as 1987-88. That possibly suggests that there was a greater anticipation in that city of the impending change.

Figure 5. Membership levels in SAP branches



Source: Branch annual reports. Some data is missing, due either to missing reports or their omission of the relevant data.

Figure 6. Number of basic units affiliating to SAP branches



Source: Branch annual report. Some data is missing, due either to missing reports or their omission of the relevant data.

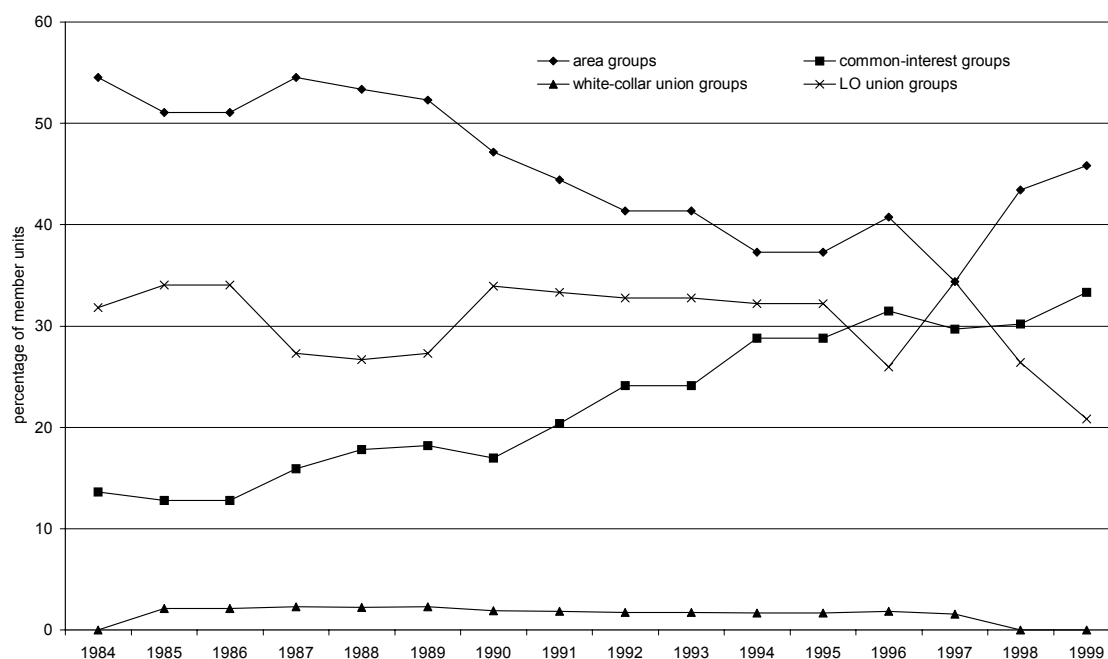
While memberships have fallen drastically, changes in the number of basic units that affiliate to each branch have varied. Figure 6 shows that Kalmar experienced a steady decline from the mid-1980s. In Gothenburg, the fall in the number of basic units was very significant from 1987, again suggesting the relative importance of the trade unions there as a source of party members. In Umeå, the number of basic units has actually increased, indicating both that collective membership was of limited importance to the party there, and also that the branch has managed to establish new constituencies from which basic units can recruit. Overall, we may note that, with the partial exception of Gothenburg, the number of groups that affiliate to our three branches has not declined drastically, despite the end of collective membership and the subsequent erosion of the party membership throughout the 1990s. This suggests that the basic institutional infrastructure of the “party on the ground” remains more or less intact. It also adds weight to the notion that, while party membership has declined, decline in party activity – in terms of meetings, and the numbers who attend them – has been much less dramatic (Möller 1999); or, put another way, that it has been the passive members who have left (Pettersson 2000:68-69). The secretary of the Umeå branch reported that in advisory postal ballots of the whole membership, which the executive can call on certain issues, turnout is nowadays around 30 per cent. In the era of collective membership it was about 1 per cent.

*Analysis: the enduring presence of the trade unions*

The end of collective membership did not herald the end of institutional connections between the wings of the labour movement. In 1987 and afterwards the party and LO agreed that, to compensate for this loss, each side would work to keep as many members as possible in the party through other organisational forms. The closest form to the old system is that which allows a union section “*organisational affiliation*”. The section affiliates to the local party branch, but any members it brings must join SAP actively and voluntarily (SAP 2000:32) – that is, whereas previously the onus was on the trade-union member actively to opt *out* of joining the Social Democrats via the trade union, now he or she must actively opt *in*. Another form of organised labour’s affiliation is through a Social Democratic association based on individual members of a local trade-union section, sometimes called a “*union club*”.<sup>8</sup> A third form is the *workplace association*, which draws employees from a local firm, who may belong to different unions. The union clubs and workplace associations existed during the era of collective membership, but were given added emphasis after it.

Has the reform of party–union relations seriously weakened the presence of the trade unions in SAP at the local level? Figures 7-9 illustrate the character of the basic units that affiliate to each branch. Units are categorised as belonging to one of four types. The first type is *area groups*, which cover a part of the locality for which the branch has responsibility, usually a residential area. Second, *common-interest groups* include associations whose members are brought together by something other than place of residence. This category includes women’s, youth, student and Christian groups, each of which have national structures within the party; and groups based on language, ethnicity or culture, which do not. The third and fourth types are both based on trade-union membership. One covers units that do not have a traditional LO background, but which organise on the basis of membership of *white-collar unions*, both within and outside the public sector. A growing presence of white-collar associations within branches might indicate that SAP is, as the catch-all model predicts, establishing organisational links with a wider range of interest groups, albeit, in this case, still with those based on organised labour. Finally, the fourth type of basic unit covers those that recruit *members of LO unions*, whether through union club, workplace association, organisational affiliation or – prior to 1991 – collective-membership affiliation. Those in this last category can be considered the inheritors of the old ties between the party and the blue-collar union confederation.

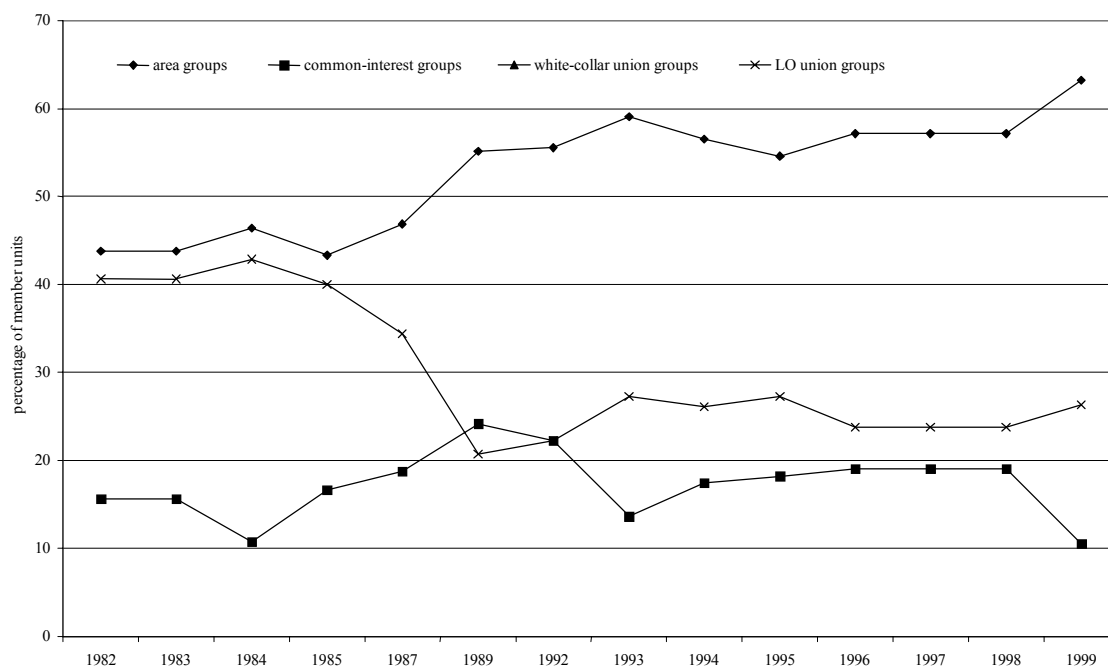
Figure 7. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Umeå branch



$N = 44$  in 1984, 48 in 1999.

Source: Branch annual reports.

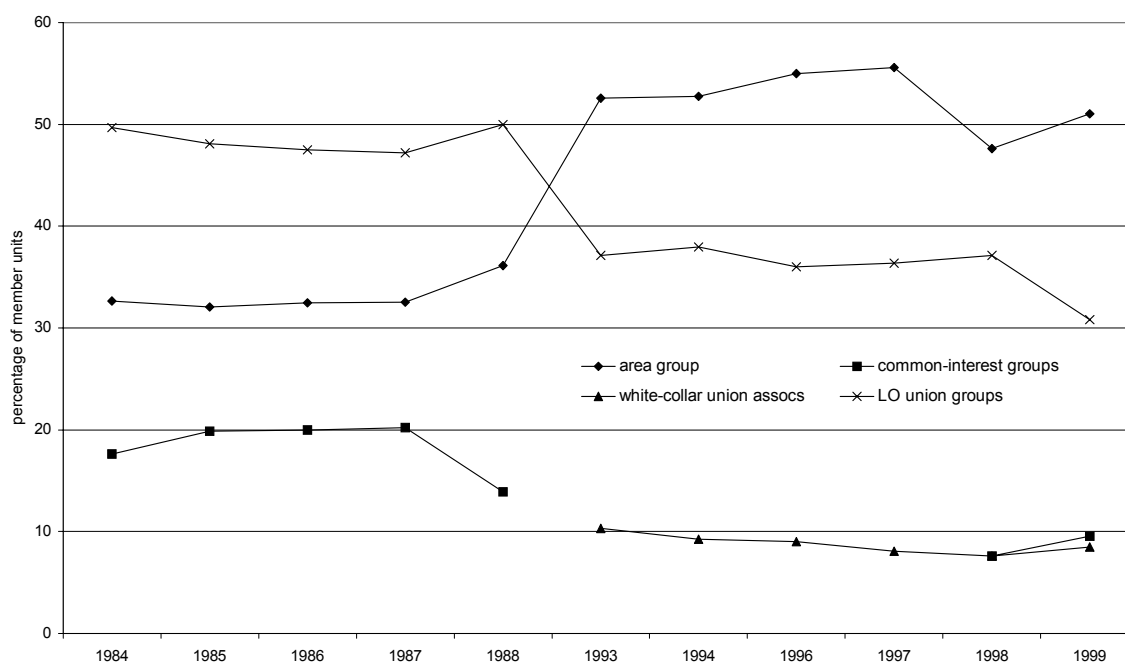
Figure 8. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Kalmar branch



$N = 28$  in 1984, 19 in 1999.

Source: Branch annual reports. Data for some years is missing.

Figure 9. Types of basic unit affiliated to SAP's Gothenburg branch



*N* = 153 in 1984, 94 in 1999.

*Source:* Branch annual reports. Data for some years is missing. In particular, the ostensible absence of any common-interest groups affiliating to the region between 1988 and 1998 is surprising and unlikely. The probable explanation is that these were, for whatever reason, simply omitted in the regions annual reports – and some of those reports were impossible to track down for that period.

The data, notwithstanding its missing parts, presents a mixed picture. Umeå offers a clear indication of diminishing LO-union presence, although one that only really became marked following the crisis of 1996 between the confederation and the party at the national level, after which the number of LO-union units fell by nearly a third, to 14. This explains the concomitant increase in the proportion of area groups affiliating to the branch: rather than increasing in absolute numbers (they have fluctuated only between 22 and 25 since 1984), area groups have simply made up a greater share of the affiliating units. Common-interest groups, though, *have* increased their numerical presence, mainly through the affiliation of more Social Democratic Youth associations (from two in 1991 to ten in 1999). Kalmar's general situation is similar, but with two important differences. First, decline in the total of affiliating units has been marked, from 32 at the beginning of the 1980s to just 18 in 1999. Second, there has been no equivalent of Umeå's increase in common-interest groups, including Youth associations. In fact, no unit type has expanded its presence in the branch, leaving area groups, whose numbers have declined the least (16 in 1989, 12 a decade later) to assume the biggest share by default. Of our three branches, only Gothenburg had LO-union groups comprise a majority of the affiliating units at the beginning of the 1980s. Again, the fact that area groups, as in Umeå and Kalmar, now make up the Gothenburg branch's biggest type of affiliating unit is not because their numbers have risen (the total has hovered around 50). Rather, it is because the number of LO union groups has fallen, from 76 in 1984 to just 29 in 1999.

Some further points, which are not visible in the charts, can be made about trade-union presence in the branches. First, although the primary sources of data (branches' annual reports) are not always entirely clear about this, it does seem that the forms of party-union link that were supposed to replace collective membership have not done so to a very impressive degree. The branch in Umeå had 14 union sections collectively affiliated to it in 1984. By 1999 it had six workplace associations and four organisationally affiliated union

sections; union clubs, which numbered seven in the mid-1990s, seemed to have disappeared by 1999. Kalmar's branch had in 1999 four such clubs and a single workplace association, compared to ten collectively affiliated sections in 1984. Gothenburg has a pattern that is distinct again. Its annual reports bear out the assertion made by several interviewees that collective membership *per se* was surprisingly unimportant in the city. In 1984 ten union sections affiliated in this way, compared to 13 workplace associations and fully 53 union clubs. Unfortunately for the party, the fact that the party's preferred post-1990 structure was in place in Gothenburg some time earlier did not spare the Social Democrats there the type of losses subsequently seen elsewhere. By 1999 the number of union clubs had almost halved, to 28; workplace associations seemed to have disappeared; and organisationally affiliated sections, which numbered four in the middle of the decade, had fallen to just one (the Electricians).

What can we infer from this? First, LO-union groups do appear to have declined in SAP at the local level, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the basic units affiliating to its branches. The end of collective membership seems clearly to have weakened the blue-collar unions' presence in the party – although, judging by the evidence from Gothenburg, and keeping in mind the two big rows within the labour movement at the national level in 1990 and 1996, it may be that organisational reform is only part of the explanation. Perhaps unexpectedly, we may also note that white-collar unions still have only a limited presence in the branches. Eight affiliated in Gothenburg in 1999, down from ten in 1994; none affiliated during our period of analysis in Kalmar; and one did in Umeå for most of it, but dropped its connection in 1997.

*Analysis: the enduring influence of the trade unions*

The number of LO-union groups in a party branch and their proportion of the total are rather crude indicators of the *influence* of such groups. Influence is, of course, a famously hard variable to measure. But, in this part of our analysis, it is operationalised in two ways. The first uses further quantitative data; the second draws, necessarily briefly, on qualitative data taken from annual branch reports and interviews with activists within the three branches.

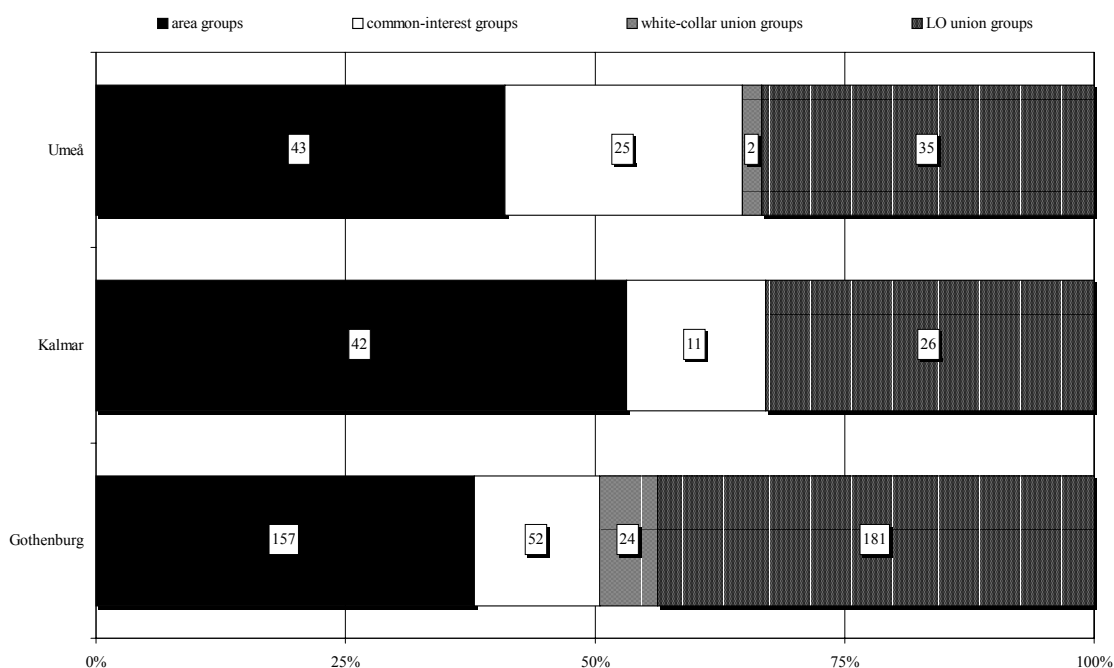
The paramount decision-making body in nearly all Social Democratic branches is the general assembly (*representantskap*).<sup>9</sup> Its scope for holding the branch executive committee to account is somewhat limited in practice. Its significance lies rather in its power to elect candidates (a) to positions of authority within the branch, (b) to regional congresses that decide the composition and order of lists for parliamentary elections, (c) to the branch's delegation to national party congresses, and (d) to the Social Democratic list in local municipal elections. The general assembly comprises at least one delegate from all the affiliated units, including organisationally affiliated union sections, all of which have the right to propose motions to the general assembly and to nominate candidates in branch elections.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the basic mandate that each unit enjoys, extra mandates are given to individual units according to how many members each has. It is here that union influence can be seen to be considerably stronger than the preceding section might have suggested.

The average number of mandates for an area group in Umeå, Kalmar and Gothenburg branches is 2.5, 3.5 and 3.3, respectively; the average for an LO-union group is 3.5, 6.1 and 7.8. Clearly, then, some unions can still rally their members to join the party, and thus boost their units' presence in the general assembly – especially in Gothenburg, where one union section does so sufficiently to warrant 57 mandates. This strength in numbers is illustrated in figure 10, which depicts the voting power of the four different types of basic units in each of our three branches. Only in Kalmar do area groups have a majority of the delegates at the general assembly; the union groups there have less than a third. In Umeå, the LO union groups also have a third of the vote, to the two-fifths that the area groups have and the quarter held by the common-interest groups. In Gothenburg, the area groups have less than two-fifths of the voting power, and, between them, they and the common-interest groups have a majority of the delegates. But it is a bare majority: the combined votes of LO union groups, whose votes amount to over two-fifths, and white-collar groups are only just in the minority. Of

course, what would have been useful here is longitudinal data on the general assemblies' changing composition. The Umeå branch secretary, for example, estimated that LO used to provide around two-thirds of its delegates, not far off double what it does now. Unfortunately, such data proved impossible to obtain. Yet, quite clearly, the snapshot provided by examining the current composition does show that, in Gothenburg especially but in the other two branches as well, trade-union groups, in their different forms, have a large influence on the internal politics of the Social Democratic branches.

Exactly how that influence is exercised requires a still closer look. There are various ways in which the unions manage to shape the agenda, and then to wield significant influence when votes are taken.

Figure 10. Types of basic unit and votes in the general assembly in three SAP branches, 2000



Source: Branch secretaries.

Each branch and each region should have, according to the party's statutes, a trade-union committee (*facklig utskott*), which itself has the right to submit motions to the general assembly and to nominate candidates for the different internal elections. LO can expect a place when the committee is elected by the branch general assembly; representatives from other confederations, principally TCO, and individual unions may also obtain places. The trade-union committee existed during the collective-membership era, and has survived it. Its chair is usually the trade-union officer (*facklig ledare*) on the branch's executive (*styrelse*), who will also be found on the executive committee (*verkställande utskott* or *arbetsutskott*), which, with at least seven members, comprises about a quarter of the executive. Perhaps just as importantly, trade-union representation is also usual on the election commission (*valberedning*), a similar-sized body that fields nominations and prepares lists for internal and external elections.<sup>11</sup> The LO unions co-operate informally but closely – “in the corridor” or “over the coffee table”, as two interviewees put it – in manipulating the composition of the trade-union committee. In Gothenburg, for instance, they ensure that its dozen members (which also currently include two white-collar representatives, one from the TCO confederation) do not include more than one from any single union. Nor is that the only internal election for which the unions work together. It is understood that the three big LO



unions in Gothenburg – the Metal-Workers, the Municipal Workers and the Retail Workers – ensure that “their” people are represented on the party’s important organs. At different levels of the party, a semi-formal quota system governs the lists chosen for external elections. Outcomes must be balanced, in that they take account of sex, age, ethnicity and geography, but also of union background. Three of five MPs that represented each of Gothenburg and Kalmar after the 1998 election had a strong identification with LO or a particular union.

Institutional ties between party and unions in Gothenburg do seem to be especially strong, as, with that city’s history of labour activism, might be expected. In Kalmar, by contrast, qualitative research reinforces the indication of the quantitative data, mentioned in previous sections, that party–union ties have long been relatively weak. Indeed, the branch’s trade-union committee was wound up in the early 1990s, so ineffective had it become. It was replaced with “union meetings”, to which the branch’s trade-union officer invited representatives of local union sections in order to discuss local and national issues; but they, too, petered out, as the unions stopped attending. Interviewees from each side acknowledged that the unions’ support for the party in the 1998 election had been very limited.<sup>12</sup> It is quite likely that the other two branches had also experienced conflict with LO that interviewees were not keen to talk about.

Nevertheless, the importance attached to maintaining – and, indeed, re-building and improving – relations with local LO unions was strongly inferred from interviews in all three branches, even in Kalmar. There and in Umeå, the last few years have seen the local SAP and LO branches, plus the local sections of some individual unions, move into shared offices (in Kalmar, the “House of the Labour Movement”). The deliberate intention in such physical relocation has been to improve personal, everyday contact between people in each organisation, and thus to enhance a climate of co-operation and low-key, informal discussion of potential problems. In Gothenburg, the party, LO and a number of trade unions have long held offices together in the House of the People (*Folkets hus*), a labour-movement centre that most Swedish towns still have. After the 1998 election, the secretary of Kalmar’s Social Democratic branch took the initiative in contacting all the union sections in the area (after first having to construct an inventory of which actually operated there), and had recently begun – unprecedentedly, as far as its officials were aware – to hold systematically joint party–LO meetings at the level of executive and general assembly. It appears that in most of Sweden, the legendary “s-representatives” in workplaces, whose task was to spread Social Democratic propaganda to workers (Gidlund 1992), appear to have become moribund. In Gothenburg, however, the party secretary formally abolished them and sought from the early 1990s to replace them by using LO officials in this role. They have been sent through the same training courses as ordinary party officials.

## CONCLUSIONS

The limitations inherent in this type of local-level parties research must be acknowledged before any firm conclusions are drawn about the nature of the relationship between SAP and the LO trade unions, and thus about the extent of the party’s contemporary resemblance to a voter-party model. Collection of reliable data is usually a problem in this type of work, and it has been so here, especially regarding longitudinal data on units and their mandates at our three branches’ general assemblies. Yet other data is arguably of surprisingly good quality.

This paper has focused narrowly on institutional connections. Further research could, given necessary time and resources, investigate other ways in which party–union ties endure at the local level. We have looked at union groups’ representation in each branch’s general assembly and its other decision-making organs. Such representation constitutes the main medium through which union grievances can be communicated to the party, but not the only one. It is quite possible for an individual member to belong to two or more basic units simultaneously. (One interviewee in Gothenburg belonged to an area group, a women’s club and a union club.) Thus, union members will hold places on the general assembly by dint of their membership of other basic units, usually residential ones, and so can promote union

interests through these, too.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, from the unit's perspective, any additional member, irrespective of whether he or she also belongs to another, will improve its chances of obtaining more delegates at the branch general assembly. It can probably be assumed that the union groups take advantage of this scope for double representation, although to what extent is unclear.<sup>14</sup> Extensive survey research of the branch's membership would be one way of shedding further light on this aspect of union presence within the party.

One very important connection between the wings of the labour movement at every level, which is hardly explored here, is financial. Its neglect is mainly because of limited space and partly because of sometimes questionable data, but it cannot be forgotten. Social Democratic finances were unquestionably hit hard by the end of collective membership. Not only were dues for collectively affiliated members lost, but public subsidies, which are partly allocated on the basis of party membership, also fell as a consequence. SAP and LO agreed that such loss of resources would be offset by adopting a "grant model", according to which LO – at branch, regional and national level – would annually donate money to Social Democratic coffers. Some of the bigger LO unions also contribute to their members' party-membership fees. The extent to which this new model has compensated the party for its loss of members is uncertain. It is plausible, though, that the grant model may in some ways have increased the unions' influence. Previously the unions could conceivably have withheld funds through rescinding their local affiliation to the party. But that would have been a one-shot sanction for use in extreme circumstances. The need for the party to negotiate with LO and its unions annually about their contribution – an employee in one Social Democratic branch described it as "begging" – might mean that lower-level, subtler, more continual pressure could be placed on the party to defend unions' interests. This, though, remains in the realm of speculation.

What cannot be claimed is that nothing has changed in the relationship between SAP and LO. Beyond the basic reform of organisational ties, interviewee after interviewee agreed that each wing's view of the other and of its own role had indeed undergone transformation. It is harder to persuade union members to take up political roles and to take responsibility for Social Democratic policy, it was asserted. A newer generation of party members, with a high level of education and white-collar employment, has changed the party's character, and made personal ties with members of the blue-collar unions less natural. All this gives support to the well-known observation that "The sociological ties between individuals and parties are breaking down as European societies become more diversified, fluid and 'modern'" (Katz 1990:159). The difficult economic times since the end of the 1980s have also left their scars, and estranged not just the unions, but also the party's rank-and-file members, from the leadership. The old assumption of common purpose between the political and economic wings of the labour movement can no longer be taken for granted, it seems.

But precisely because of this, activists on both sides emphasised the need to work even harder to rebuild the old ties. And there is a rational basis for such efforts: elements of the old exchange relationship remain. For the party, at both the local and national level, LO's co-operation can still be very useful in successfully managing public finances and services, which should bring electoral payoffs. The unions can offer even more direct vote-maximising services. Sweden's labour market remains the most unionised in the developed world, with around 80 per cent density. Even if LO's share is less than it was, its unions still have the infrastructure to communicate, through its membership lists and its officials, with a sizeable proportion of the Swedish electorate (cf. Bäck and Möller 1997:154). LO's commitment to mobilising them in support of SAP is obviously something the party must value very highly. From LO's perspective, meanwhile, and notwithstanding the downward trend in the Social Democratic vote at all levels, the party can still offer in return a big say over the shape of public policy. This is obviously the case at the national level, where, despite SAP's disastrous score in 1998, there was never any real likelihood of an alternative government, such was the division and collective weakness of the bourgeois parties. But this applies also at the municipal and county level. The management of many public services has been decentralised in recent decades; indeed, public-welfare provision is often seen as the key function of local government in Sweden (Strandberg 1998). The interests of the many workers employed

within them will, in all probability, be enhanced by their union representatives enjoying close relations with the political leaders responsible for these services. Interviewees from LO stressed that, for their part, access to political decision-makers was the main dividend from close co-operation with the Social Democrats.

In conclusion, then, we may cautiously offer the following thoughts. First, the end of collective membership has been part, if only a part, of a long-term change in the nature of SAP's relationship with the organised labour covered by LO's umbrella. The party does look less like a mass-type than it used to. But this development, when examined empirically at the local level, is patchy. The influence of the trade unions within the party remains very significant, and is probably understated by the data on institutional presence and voting weight presented here. Contact with non-LO, white-collar trade-union groups does seem to be increasing, but not dramatically. SAP still looks to be some way from being a voter party.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Elvander (1979:28-29), "Never before had the two branches of the labour movement appeared to be so divided in an election campaign."

<sup>2</sup> The then chair of LO, Stig Malm, when asked in 1999 what had been his biggest achievement during his time in charge of the confederation, answered: "To abandon collective membership of the Social Democratic Party. It would have been a millstone around our necks in today's society. Why should it have remained when the whole of the iron curtain and the Berlin wall had fallen?" (NSD Oct. 28th 1999).

<sup>3</sup> In 1992 the Norwegian Labour Party instigated a series of reforms that led to the winding up of collective membership by 1997. Even in Denmark, where the Social Democrats had never had collective membership, the relationship between the party and LO was loosened further, with mutual representation on decision-making organs ended in 1996.

<sup>4</sup> A recent newspaper estimate put the Social Democrats' membership in 2000 at 156,000, around 12,000 or 5 per cent down on the previous year's figure (svd.se Mar. 14th 2001).

<sup>5</sup> These days, SAP derives most of its money from lottery schemes (Wörlund and Hansson nd:11).

<sup>6</sup> In a survey of branches in 1978, half the respondents reported that public subventions accounted for all their branch's income (Gidlund and Möller 1999:94).

<sup>7</sup> There is the possibility of holding direct membership of the Social Democratic branch, without belonging to an affiliated basic unit. But such members are not entitled to votes at a branch general assembly (SAP 2000:31).

<sup>8</sup> Some youth associations that affiliate to a Social Democratic branch are also based on a particular union's membership.

<sup>9</sup> "The branch's highest decision-making body is the members' meeting, as long as a general assembly, which assumes the membership meeting's authority, has not been introduced" (SAP 2000:34).

<sup>10</sup> This is a significant right. One interviewee in Umeå suggested that the union-based units had become "nomination organisations" – that is, vehicles for pushing the trade unions' favoured candidates.

<sup>11</sup> In the Gothenburg region, this function is split: *valberedningen* handles internal elections, and *valkommittén*, which includes representatives from the four city branches, handles external ones.

<sup>12</sup> It should be mentioned, though, that the decline in the number of Social Democratic votes since 1994 in Kalmar county was, at 17.2 per cent, lower than the average in all constituencies (19.0 per cent) and much lower than in Gothenburg (26.8 per cent). The loss in Västerbotten was 16.9 per cent.

<sup>13</sup> This ruled out an earlier idea for operationalising the measurement of union influence within SAP branches, which would have measured the success of LO-union groups' nominees to elected posts within a branch and to regional meetings. Not only were nominees' sponsoring units sometimes hard to identify in the branch records, this method would also have missed – as several interviewees pointed out, especially in Gothenburg – the nominees who enjoyed the unions' confidence, but who were nominated by other basic units. One activist identified a large proportion of elected officers in a branch as having the confidence of one union or another; but, after looking at which basic units each belonged to, it became clear that there was no objective means of verifying the activist's opinion.

<sup>14</sup> In the organisational anomaly of Gothenburg, there is yet more scope for multiple representation of individuals. There, members of basic units, which affiliate directly to the Gothenburg party region, are automatically also members of one of the four branches in the city, determined by where they live, and so enjoy additional representation at the regional level through that branch.

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