# MOTIVATIONS FOR
# PARTY ACTIVISM
## Multi-National Uniformities
## and Differences

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This article reports the data from studies in four countries (United States, Netherlands, Sweden, and India) on the reasons for initial involvement in party activism and the reasons for continuance in party work. Considerable cross-national uniformity is discovered, although there are differences in level of motivation. In addition, the differences in motivational orientations for certain parties in multi-party, more ideologically conflicted systems, are particularly noted when such systems are compared with two-party and more moderately conflicted systems. The evidence suggests more ideological (purposive) motivations for party activists at the distant right and left extremes of these systems.

It has long been an intriguing question: Why do people become active in parties? It is followed by an equally intriguing one: How do they sustain their motivation for party work? Many scholars, too numerous to list here, have expounded theories and presented their research on the nature and bases of such motivations. Implicit in this research is the belief that the study of motivations is a key to understanding modern parties. Through the study of entrance and current motivations of activists, presumably we can learn a great deal about what types of structures they are—dynamic or in a state of decline; ideological or pragmatic in style; combative or in a state of organizational slack; socially attractive networks or focused on other types of appeals; amateur or professional, or both. Whether one is interested in explaining the "drive" of the individual actor, or the dynamics of the party organization, or the democratic institutions of the polity, party motivational analysis may be significant.

We shall summarize here the knowledge we have about party activist motivations in four nations, drawing particularly on empirical work. We begin with a resumé of the work in the U.S. and then report on the results of empirical research in other countries, not all of which have been as extensive as in the U.S. Our interest here is to assess to what extent we have found uniformities across systems and to what extent

systems seem to differ. Our expectation is that since parties in democratic societies are conceptually similar we should indeed find a great deal of uniformity. Parties are power-seeking structures which represent socio-economic interests and compete with each other on ideological grounds. Because they are both political groups and social groups we should find activists with a diverse set of motivations. On the other hand, party systems differ radically. Since we cannot explore all of these differences, only one will be examined here: the ideological distance of parties in multi-party systems in contrast to two-party systems. In systems that are "ideologically conflicted," it is conceivable that activists may be more ideologically motivated, particularly at the extremes of the party spectrum, on the assumptions that party appeals are more explicitly ideological and the activists are more committed and consistent ideologues in such systems. This theory will be explored at the conclusion of this article.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTY ACTIVISM
## IN AMERICA

After World War II, various scholars pursued research on motivations for activism, particularly from 1956 to 1980 in Detroit and Los Angeles.[1] The Detroit and Los Angeles studies discovered a heavy emphasis on what was then called "impersonal" motivations at the time of entrance into party work (ideological commitments, philosophical views, a sense of community or civic obligation, and the like). These were subsequently referred to as "purposive" motivations (as distinct from "material" rewards or from "solidary" satisfactions resulting from social gratification and interaction; Clark and Wilson, 1961: 116ff.). Later research has shown that purposive motivations still dominate explanations for becoming active. Second, these studies demonstrated that "for most party leaders motivations were diverse, multiple, and represented a synthesis of personal and interpersonal interests." While impersonal orientations were important, most leaders "gave some evidence that personal need fulfillment was also important" (Eldersveld, 1964: 133-134). Third, strong evidence showed that for many local party leaders "motivational reorientation" occurred after they entered party work. Often the saliency of their ideological-philosophical perspectives diminished, so that when asked what their *current* motivation was (or what they would miss if they had to drop out), they were much more

TABLE 1

Incentives for Becoming Active in Politics (relative importance of
eleven considerations)

| (Per Cent saying it is 'very important'..) | DETROIT 1956 % | 1980 % | LOS ANGELES 1956 % | 1980 % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Desire to influence the policies of government | 58 | 65 | 74 | 71 |
| Feeling of community obligation | 65 | 58 | 59 | 50 |
| Party loyalty | 53 | 38 | 69 | 50 |
| Politics is my way of life | 43 | 50 | 43 | 56 |
| Social friendships and contacts | 56 | 41 | 32 | 33 |
| Fun and excitement of politics | 34 | 42 | 33 | 33 |
| Personal friendship for a candidate | 23 | 24 | 20 | 27 |
| Desire to be close to influential people | 34 | 20 | 7 | 14 |
| Desire for recognition in the community | 20 | 27 |  | 16 |
| Building a personal career in politics | 11 | 19 | 11 | 19 |
| Belief it will help with business contacts | 6 | 16 | 5 | 8 |
| (Cases) | (281) | (223) | (229) | (474) |

inclined to mention personal rewards (both material and solidary ) or to indicate a measure of disillusionment.

We can illustrate these American findings with the Detroit and Los Angeles studies of 1956 and 1980. The incentives for *becoming active* in the party are presented in Table 1. One notes the remarkable uniformity in relative and absolute importance of these motivations. Purposive incentives dominate, such as the "desire to influence the policies of government" (65% in Detroit in 1980, 71% in Los Angeles). Nevertheless, a minority did refer to material orientations as very important— "building a personal career" (19%) or "business contacts" (16% Detroit, 8% Los Angeles). A large group saw solidary reasons as social contacts and the fun and excitement of the campaign as very important (from one-third to two-fifths of all precinct leaders). Obviously there were multiple motivations for entrance into party work.

Based on the best or most salient reason for involvement, we can classify these entrance motivations for Detroit as follows: Purposive (including party loyalty) motivations held by 65% in 1956 and 77% in 1980; solidary (including friendship for a candidate, social contacts, and so on) held by 26% in 1956 and approximately 8% in 1980.

As for motivational reorientation, the data for Detroit, based on 1956 and 1980 interviews, is summarized in Table 2: In 1980, to state the conclusion otherwise, while 72% of the leaders said they began party work

TABLE 2

Motivational Reorientation in Detroit Parties (current motives and
entry-time motives)

|  | 1956 | | | 1980 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | DEM. | REP. | TOTAL | DEM. | REP. | TOTAL |
|  | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Began with personalised motives solidary or material. | 24 | 15 | 20 | 15 | 25 | 19 |
| Currently report personalised motives | 74 | 56 | 65 | 57 | 66 | 61 |
| Balance: in direction of more personalised motivations | +50 | +41 | +45 | +42 | +41 | +42 |

for ideological-philosophical reasons, only 28% reported these as their primary, current satisfactions.

## SWEDISH ACTIVISTS:
## THE PRIMACY OF IDEOLOGY

A study was conducted in three northern Swedish communities that paralleled the American studies.[2] Two of the communities were urban; one was rural. Two were competitive (Social Democrats versus Conservatives); one was dominant Social Democrat. Interviews were conducted with 261 activist Social Democrats and 74 Conservatives. Thus, we have no data on the center parties but can contrast the left and the right.

It is important again to keep in mind the political and electoral context. In the 1973 election, in which there was a 90.8% turnout, the proportions of the party vote suggest that this is a moderately pluralized system. It is also considered to be a "class distinct" system, surveys revealing in 1973 that the vote of the left bloc was 75% blue collar and the vote of the center right 25% blue collar (Berglund and Lindstrom, 1978: 108, 180). Swedish parties are mass membership structures.

The motivations of Swedish party activists are quite ideological (Table 3). Initial involvement as explained by the activists placed a heavy emphasis on purposive reasons. There was, to be sure, some reorientation in Sweden, in the direction of more personalized incentives—+34 for the Social Democrats and +33 for the Conservatives. But this represented primarily attrition in general philosophical reasons for involvement. The desire to influence policies held up rather well.

TABLE 3
Current and Entry Motives: Swedish Activists

| 1973-74 Survey | Social Democrats % | Conserva- tives % |
|---|---|---|
| ENTRY MOTIVES | | |
| .Influence policies | 50 | 54 |
| .Other impersonal reasons | 33 | 34 |
| .Personal rewards | 11 | 12 |
| | --- | --- |
| | 100 | 100 |
| CURRENT MOTIVES | | |
| .Influence policies | 45 | 45 |
| .Other impersonal reasons | 4 | 2 |
| .Personal rewards | 45 | 45 |
| .No satisfactions | 4 | 13 |
| | --- | --- |
| | 100 | 100 |

Approximately 45% to 55% of Swedish activists at the time of entry, *and* currently, were in party work presumably for policy purposes, compared to 30% in Germany and 28% in the United States. Other findings from the Swedish study corroborate this interpretation. Thus when asked what their most important *role* as activists is, 60% respond that it is "working for policies and programs."

Further, party activists in Sweden do represent ideological extremes. Thus 69% of the Social Democratic activists favored "income equality" legislation, while only 13% of the Conservatives did. There is considerable ideological "carryover" in Swedish activists—they take extreme issue positions, *and* they are more likely to define their activist role in ideological terms, *and* they are more likely to explain their continuance in party work on the basis of a desire "to influence the policies of government" than are activists in the United States. It is the persistence of purposive motivations and the relative saliency of ideology that distinctly characterize Swedish activities.

## THE NETHERLANDS: MOTIVATIONAL CHANGE
## IN A SEGMENTED, MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM

The Dutch system is similar to the Swedish system in that it is a pluralistic system, but it is distinctive in other respects. It has many more parties (11 represented in the Dutch Parliament today, fourteen earlier). As well, the social cleavage patterns, though changing in the 1970s, are sharply delineated with four "pillars" or segments: Protestant, Catholic, socialist, humanist (or "liberal," in the traditional sense). This "consociational democracy," we have been told, has remained stable through a "politics of accommodation" (Lijphart, 1975; Eldersveld, 1981).

Two opportunities to study party activists in this system were provided the author over a fifteen-year period, in 1961 and again in 1976, in Amsterdam. In 1961 we secured interviews with 192 local leaders in five parties: Labor (PVDA), Catholic (KVP), two Protestant parties (ARP and CHU), and the right-wing Liberal party (VVD). In 1976 we secured interviews with 86 leaders, including activists of the same 5 parties as well as those of two small parties that had come into existence in the 1960s (the D'66, a moderate left party, and the PPR, a Christian radical party of the left that was organized in 1968 and contested the election in 1971). These leaders whose names were on party lists provided were mailed questionnaires. The response rate was between 50% and 60%.

One must keep in mind that Dutch party politics has been undergoing significant change. The old parties have been challenged by the new parties, such as PPR and D'66 on the left, while Communist party electoral support has declined to under 2%. The three major confessional parties together declined from a vote of 51.6% in 1946 to 32% by 1977. In the latter year they coalesced into a new organization called the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). The VVD (the large right-of-center party) increased from 6% in 1946 to 10% by 1963 and 18% in 1977. During all of this, the Labor party, with some ups and downs, managed to retain the support of roughly 30% of the Dutch electorate. In Amsterdam city politics the left held 30 of the 45 seats on the city council in 1976 (17 by the Labor party).

The motivations of Dutch party activists for becoming active are, in both 1961 and 1976, basically purposive. However, only 20% to 25% are explicitly ideological. This is considerably less ideological than in Sweden. And this initial interest was not prompted by an explicit desire to put religious principles to work (only four cases in 1961 and only one case in 1976).

A fairly large proportion of Dutch activists mentioned personal reasons as relevant for involvement, such as a desire for contacts with people of influence in the party or community (31% in 1976).

Turning to current satisfactions, solidary rewards and other personal satisfactions were uppermost for Dutch activists. From 43% (1961) to 58% (1976) volunteered that they would most miss the social contacts with other party members, the discussions in party meetings, and so on if they had to leave party work. This does not mean that working on issues was not important; rather, such satisfactions were less salient. Thus there appeared to be only a small number whose primary satisfaction

**TABLE 4**
**Ideological Entry Motives: Dutch Party Activists**

|  | Catholics KVP % | Protestants ARP % | CHU % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1961 | 71 | 67 | 63 |
| 1976 | 30 | 51 | 60 |

was ideological—under 20%. Dutch activists are generally quite motivated—only 10% in 1976 said that they would miss "nothing." But as is the case elsewhere, social contact is a prominent reason for their involvement.

Motivational reorientation for Dutch activists appears to be away from ideological-philosophical incentives during the party career. The increase in satisfactions that were personalized (primarily solidary) was from 30% (entrance) to 70% (current) in 1961, and from 46% to 72% in 1976.

In the 1970s there seemed to be fewer individuals getting involved in Dutch parties for ideological-philosophical reasons than was the case previously. The exceptions to this development were the two new small parties in our 1976 study—the PPR and the D'66. Whereas 69% and 67%, respectively, of their local leaders joined for ideological reasons, this was true for only 44% of the Labor and CDA activists. The VVD activists were also relatively high in ideological commitment (60%). This represents a 20% decline for PVDA in our two studies. The same is true if we compare the religious party activists in the two years (Table 4). For both the socialist and confessional activists in Amsterdam, therefore, the modification of consociationalism appears to have brought with it a decline of ideological drive and a movement toward social and pragmatic politics, while the new parties on the left and the old party on the right are more ideologically involved (Table 5).

## INDIA: PARTY INCENTIVES IN A
## DEVELOPING SYSTEM

Elsewhere in this volume, Nageshwar Prasad presents data on Bihar activists. In addition, two other studies have asked questions about the motivations of local party leaders. In Delhi State, the author conducted interviews with 107 leaders of five parties in 1964. In 1967, a national study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

TABLE 5
Current and Entry Motives: Dutch Activists

| | (Amsterdam surveys) | |
| | 1961 % | 1976 % |
|---|---|---|
| ENTRY MOTIVES: Why joined | | |
| . Ideological or philosophical response -- explicit | 25 | 20 |
| . Generalized response (obligation to serve, personal desire) | 43 | 31 |
| . Non-ideological reaons | 30 | 46 |
| . Not ascertained | 2 | 3 |
| | 100 | 100 |
| CURRENT MOTIVES: Miss Most if left | | |
| . Social contacts, discussions in party groups, etc. | 43 | 58 |
| . Influence in party and on party decisions | 7 | 6 |
| . Being informed about politics | 20 | 8 |
| Subtotal | 70 | 72 |
| . Working on social problems, for beliefs or principles, or in terms of specific issues | 4 | 17 |
| . Winning elections, influencing the public | 2 | 1 |
| . No satisfactions, don't know what they would be | 24 | 10 |
| | 100 | 100 |

interviewed 1000 political élites, of which 264 were local party organization activists.

Focusing attention on the motivations of party leaders as revealed in these three studies, we find considerable corroboration of the central tendencies. The dominant reasons for initial involvement were purposive in all three studies, 80% or more joining for ideological-philosophical reasons.

While these entrance motivations were impersonal in gross terms, when we examine them in detail, we see that they were primarily not ideological or issue oriented. The national study in 1967 and the Bihar study in 1972 provide information in great detail (Table 6). Clearly, there is a limited amount of *explicitly* ideological motivation for beginning party work—8% in the national study and 32% in Bihar.

Turning first to current satisfactions (based, again, in response to the question, "What would you miss most?"), the Indian studies reveal the same basic tendencies noted in other countries—the decline in ideological and philosophical explanations, the relatively greater emphasis on solidary and personalized rewards, and a fairly high evidence of disillusionment. A summary of the basic facts can be found in Table 7. Explicit reference to ideology was not mentioned very frequently as a

TABLE 6
Entry Motives of Local Party Activists

| | 1967 INDIAN NATIONAL STUDY % | 1972 BIHAR (DARBHANGA) STUDY % |
|---|---|---|
| IDEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL | | |
| .Influence policies; attracted to party ideology | 8 | 32 |
| .Politics 'my way of life' | 7 | 15 |
| .Strong party attachment | 12 | 31 |
| .Obligation to community or society | 53 | 9 |
| | - - | - - |
| Subtotal | 80 | 87 |
| | | |
| SOCIAL INTERACTION AND STATUS | | |
| .Social contacts and friendship | 5 | 7 |
| .Personal friendship for a candidate | 3 | 1 |
| .Fun and excitement of politics | 2 | - |
| .Recognition in community or society | 5 | 2 |
| .Being close to influential or important people | 4 | 1 |
| | - - | - - |
| Subtotal | 19 | 11 |
| | | |
| MATERIAL INTERESTS | | |
| .Helps with business | 1 | - |
| .Building position in politics | 1 | 1 |
| | - - | - - |
| | 2 | 1 |
| | - - - | - - - |
| | 100 | 100 |
| Cases | (239) | (287) |

sustaining incentive—only 8% in the Bihar study, 3% in the national study.

Motivational reorientation patterns were extreme in India. Fifty percent or more shifted away from purposive motivations. If anything, Indian local party activists became more preoccupied with social and personal rewards, as well as more disillusioned, than party workers in the United States or Sweden. The comparative findings for reorientation were: –44% in the United States (Detroit 1980), –33% in Sweden, –17% in the Netherlands (1976), and –47% in India (National Study).

## CROSS-NATIONAL PATTERNS OF ACTIVIST MOTIVATIONS

The findings reported here reveal considerable uniformity across systems in reasons for involvement in party activism. There *are* system

## TABLE 7
### Current Satisfactions of Indian Activists
### (What would you miss most if left party work?)

|  | 1964 DELHI STUDY % | 1967 INDIAN NATIONAL STUDY % | 1972 BIHAR (DARBHANGA) STUDY % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ideological-Philosophical | 30 | 33 | 26 |
| Solidary and Personal | 37 | 31 | 54 |
| No Satisfactions | 33 | 36 | 20 |
|  | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Cases | (100) | (291) | (239) |

differences, but the evidence demonstrates a commitment to ideological-philosophical objectives at the time of entrance into party work and, on the other hand, the saliency of solidary satisfaction as the party career continues.

Parties vary in their ideological direction, i.e., in their position on a left-right (or liberal-conservative) continuum conceived in terms of support for or opposition to governmental intervention in the society and economy. Thus it is tempting to explore the possibility that the activists will vary in their motivations depending on their party's position on such a spectrum. Specifically, it might be expected that where one finds considerable ideological distance in a party system, where presumably parties appeal for support on ideological grounds, the activists' motivations would reflect this condition. In such a system one could hypothesize that activists would be more explicitly motivated by ideology. It is possible also that extreme left and right parties would consist of cadres that were particularly motivated by ideological concerns, while center parties' activists would be more muted in their ideological motivations. Similarly, in systems of less ideological distance (those tending to be two-party systems) theoretically there might be less explicit preoccupation with ideological concerns because the ideological stance of the parties is more moderate since the parties are more "catchall" in the character of their support groups. If we array our data by country in these terms, we do indeed find support in some countries for this theoretical expectation (Figure 1).

In the Netherlands and India we find a U curve when we look at the percentages of activists motivated by ideology. In the Netherlands in both studies we found a pattern of entrance and current motivations with that basic character. In India the pattern pertained to entrance
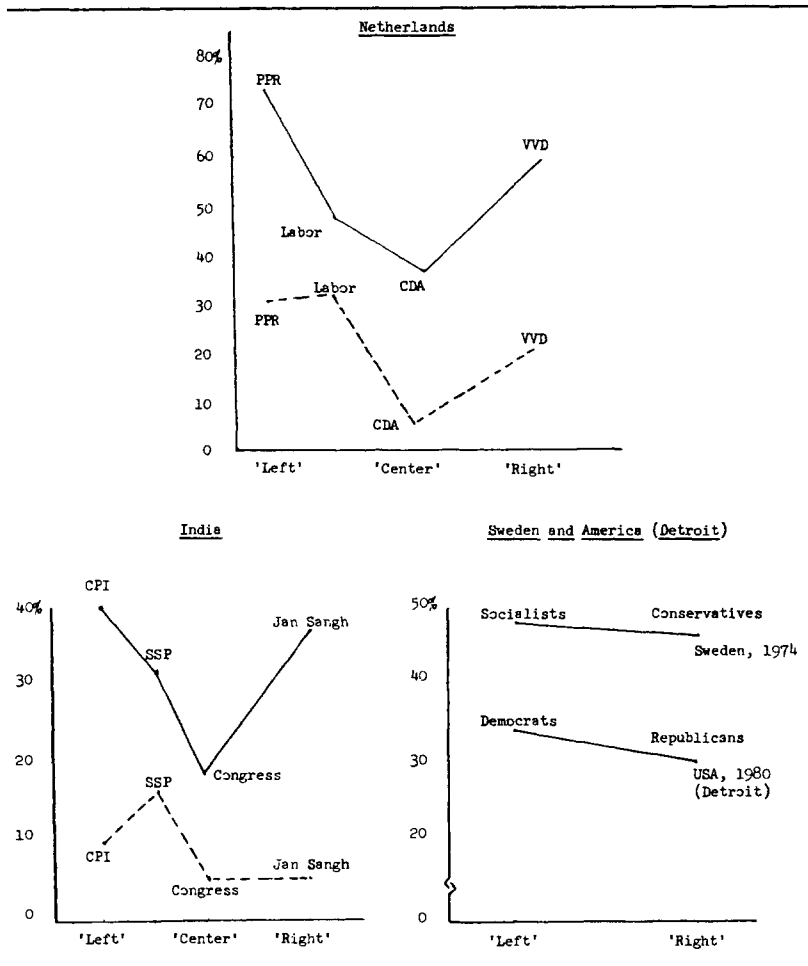
Figure 1    Ideological Motives (Current and at Entrance Time) by Party for Selected
Political Systems
————————Entrance Motivations; ————————Current Motivations

motivations only. In the other countries we do not find such distinc-
tions. In Sweden we do not have data for center parties, and both
parties—right and left—reveal similar and fairly high levels of ideologi-
cal motivation—about 45%. If we had data on center parties we might
well find a U curve also. So there are significant country differences, and
there is no evidence of a U curve in all countries.

**TABLE 8**

**Current Satisfactions of Detroit Activists**

**(What would you miss most if left party work?)**

|  | DEMOCRATS % | REPUBLICANS % | WALLACE PARTY % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ideological: working for issues,etc | 3 | 7 | 32 |
| Philosophical-moral concerns, service to community | 4 | 3 | 20 |
| IMPERSONAL total | 7 | 10 | 52 |
| Social contacts and friendships | 63 | 47 | 9 |
| Other persnal satisfactions, fun and excitement of politios, economic gains, etc.) | 13 | 9 | 5 |
| PERSONAL total | 76 | 56 | 14 |

In the United States besides the data for the two major parties, we fortunately also have an opportunity to compare the motivations of activists who worked in the Wallace (American Independent Party) campaign in 1968. A study was done in Detroit (in the 15th Congressional District) in the fall of 1968, in which 81 Wallace campaign workers were interviewed (Canfield, 1971). This district was 95% white, basically blue collar (52%), had a median educational level of eleven years, and rapidly increased in population from 1950 to 1960. It gave 17% of its vote to Wallace in the election. The study revealed a heavy commitment to ideological concerns among these Wallace workers— 67% said that the most important reason for becoming active was "to influence governmental policies," compared to 21% for the Republicans and Democrats in Detroit. For current satisfactions these comparisons were found with the 1956 study of Democrats and Republicans in Detroit (see Table 8).

The striking contrasts in these data by party suggest that right wing parties in the United States (and probably also the most left wing parties) have activists that, as in certain European countries, are much more involved with politics for ideological reasons. On the other hand, in countries like West Germany and the United States, where you have the two major parties attracting similar types of activists to structures that are not ideologically extreme, there is little asymmetry in the motivational basis for partisan activism.

## CONCLUSION

Party cadres at the local level are diverse groups of activists in all cultures—diverse in social backgrounds, career paths, levels of political training and expertise, and ideologies. These are "opportunity structures" for many citizens seeking upward social and political mobility. Further, because of ideological factionalism there is often considerable tension and conflict. The key question is how viability is maintained in such structures: How is it that they continue to function at a minimal level of loyalty and efficiency? One major answer to this must be the diverse set of satisfactions derived from party work. These local party cadres are also "reward structures." People enjoy party work and stay in it for many reasons, varying by party and by system. Purposive, material, and solidary motives all have a place. But apparently, throughout the world, solidary incentives tie more people to work in parties than do other types of satisfactions. When pressed to discuss what they would miss if forced to leave party work, the dominant response is clear. In the United States, 61% mention social gratifications and the fun of politics. In the Netherlands (Amsterdam), the proportion is 58%. In India (Bihar) it is 54%. In Sweden, where we found the most ideological cadre, 45% mention social satisfaction and 48% ideology. For many persons, therefore, while the party is a group pursuing ideological goals and working for collective interests, it is also basically attractive as a social group. The success of these parties as viable mobilization structures must therefore be related to a blend of rewards and opportunities, of which, if we can generalize at all, the most important may be social friendships and fun, social recognition, and/or social mobility.

## NOTES

1. The Detroit study in 1980 (directed by the author) was a sample of 223 precinct leaders, using both personal interviews and mail questionnaires. The Los Angeles study in 1980 was based on personal interviews with 474 club presidents and county committeemen. It was directed by Dwaine Marvick.

2. This research was reported first in a paper presented jointly by Berglund and the present author to the 1979 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association,

August 31-September 3, in Washington, D.C., entitled "Cross Cultural Contrasts and Uniformities in Party Activism: Sweden and the U.S."

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