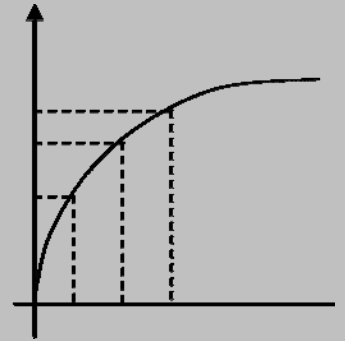


Diskussionspapiere des
Europäischen Instituts für Sozioökonomie e. V.

Working Papers of the
European Institute for Socioeconomics



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Nr. 31

2019

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German Sports Clubs' Recruitment of Executive Board Members

This paper analyzes the recruitment of executive board members for German sports clubs, an issue of key interest given that volunteers play a dominant role in these sports clubs. Based on a new, micro-level data set, we examine how members of a sports club advance to become executive board members and how board members differ from ordinary members. Based on the results of our study, we examine whether Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" applies and whether democratic procedures for elections in sports clubs are replaced, even in part, by trust-based oligarchic structures.

Key Words: Sports, Volunteering, Oligarchy, Sports clubs, Executive boards

Introduction

German sports club organizations are characterized by a bottom-up membership democracy that builds on the voluntary engagement and commitment of their members (Heinemann & Horch, 1981). Hence, a sports club can be defined as a resource pool of time, money, knowledge, and social capital that is voluntarily provided by its members. These resources are means to affect decision-making in a sports club and its broader environment (Emrich, 2008, 2009; Vanberg, 1982). Decisions made in a sports club are aimed at the production of the club's goods or services (Buchanan, 1965; for an extension of Buchanan's theory in a sports-specific context, see Pierdzioch, Emrich & Balter, 2013). To this end, a sports club must solve three interrelated problems involving the contribution, delegation, and distribution of resources (Gassmann et al., 2017). The contribution problem concerns the decentralized input of resources provided by members to produce a club's goods or services. The distribution problem affects the allocation of the club's goods among the members in such a way that members' expectations are met over the long term. Finally, the delegation problem pertains to the allocation of power within a sports club and the delegation of authority through its

elections.

The delegation problem is typically solved before the contribution and distribution problems are addressed, because the members of a sports club's executive board are elected at the general meeting. Only *after* being elected can the executive board members decide on the production and distribution of the club goods or services; as such, the election of the executive board members can be seen as a trust-based delegation of authority. In addition, a trust-based exchange occurs between a member's vote and future chances to participate in the consumption of the club goods produced by means of voluntary work. This exchange must be organized in a way such that the expectations of voters (i.e., members of the sports club) are met over the long run (Gassmann et al., 2017).

Results of earlier research suggest that recruiting sports club members to volunteer—and, in particular, to become executive board members—are key problems for German sports clubs (Breuer & Feiler, 2016; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; Heinemann & Horch, 1981). These researchers found that volunteers' willingness to become executive board members is rather limited, with some past studies arguing that the overall system of sports clubs is experiencing a crisis rooted in the absence of voluntary engagement and difficulties in recruiting volunteers for their executive boards. Upon comparing the difference between the number of total positions and the number of elected persons on executive boards, Emrich, Pitsch and Papathanassiou (2001; see also Pitsch, 1999, and Pitsch & Emrich, 1997; for a longitudinal study see Anthes, 2009) show, however, that the gap in voluntary engagement in German sports clubs is not yet at crisis levels. Thieme, Liebetreu and Wallrodt (2017) review the problem of recruiting executive board members and argue that reporting such a problem is a rational strategy for them to gain attention and enhance their social reputation.

Adams (1980) describes the process of becoming a board member for the American Red Cross (ARC), which is a voluntary organization that mainly produces goods for external consumers rather than for members (in contrast to sports clubs). He finds that social-heritage

mechanisms matter insofar as male executive board members “inherit” their position from family members, while others receive their board membership directly from a vacating member and are asked to join the board, a form of co-optation. Some male executive board members are requested directly because of specialized skills, primarily in the fields of finance, taxes, and law, whereas female executive board members often “[...] were ‘promoted’ to elite positions from inside the organization” (Adams, 1980, p. 96). Hence, men start their career from outside of the ARC, “[w]hile the women make their way to the top of the organization inside the chapter [...]” (Adams, 1980, p. 96).

According to Hovden (2000, p. 76), in sports organizations, persons in leading positions and elected members are often “[...] highly educated, affluent, middle-aged, in full-time employment and have had more administrative experience than the average member.” These findings confirm the early results of Milbrath and Klein (1962), who report a link between a person’s socioeconomic status and their level of political participation. An explanation for this link is given by Frey (1971, p. 103), who argues that “[c]itizens with high-paying jobs are more used to deal[ing] with political questions which are in principle of the same character as their daily work, and which are therefore done much more efficiently.” In this regard, it is also likely that socioeconomic status affects people’s level of volunteerism as well as their reasons for engaging in volunteer work.¹

Based on a new, micro-level data set, this study discusses the following two research questions:

¹ Three main economic models explain why people volunteer. First, the public-goods model, which stipulates that the production of a public good and, thus, altruism, is a key motive for doing volunteer work. Second, the private-consumption model assumes that private utility (e.g., derived from the “warm glow” feeling, or from social interactions or social standing) is the main motivation for volunteering. Third, the human-capital model rests on the assumption that volunteering increases special skills that may be useful for a volunteer’s job and helps them to build networks that are important for a volunteer’s (future) career (Emrich & Pierdzioch, 2015, 2016).

- (1) How do members of sports clubs become executive board members, and how do executive board members differ from ordinary members?
- (2) Does Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" apply, and are democratic procedures for elections in sports clubs partly replaced by trust-based oligarchic structures?

The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" (1957; Figure 1; for a brief overview, see Lipset, 1962) sheds light on (1) organizational conditions that facilitate the emergence of oligarchic structures, (2) how the elected gain power, even in democratic systems, as a specific form of "democratic" organization, and (3) structural conditions that promote this process.

Organizational conditions that facilitate the emergence of oligarchic structures relate to the two aims of an oligarchy—continuity and stability and a strong desire of sovereignty—that spread into the following three dimensions:

- *Psychology of the individual*, which means that a person needs special knowledge, personal competence, and/or expertise to become an elected leader in an organization.
- *Needs of the organization*, which comes into play when an organization expands. In such a situation, administrative tasks become more and more complex, and the organization will need persons with special skills, competences, and ties.
- *Psychology of the crowd*, which is based on the notation of a natural "group incompetence" with regard to self-regulation and the management of a system of traditions and forms of gratitude.

All three dimensions induce a specific type of bureaucracy that leads to the perception among the organization's members that there is a need to have people with special skills at the top to lead and make decisions. As a result, oligarchy in democratic organizations can be described as a system in which members prefer personal "inactivity" more than "development

of self-interests,” whereas the leaders prefer “development of self-interests” more than “inactivity” (Wippler, 1985, p. 29). Enjolras and Waldahl (2010, p. 216), who base their research on Michel’s iron law of oligarchy in Norwegian sports organizations, state that “[...] executive control is in the hands of those at the top, leaving the membership with little real power.” Wippler (1985) describes the dilemma that, because members’ preferences and action/inaction may have unintended consequences, democratic actions and procedures often can result in oligarchic structures.

Going one step further, an “elite“ (or a group of authorities) can be interpreted as an intraclub network (often termed “an old-boys network” or “old-boys club”), comprised of executive board members who share and support the agenda of the executive board and who share a specific social status. The formation of an elite has been viewed in earlier research as a precondition for the emergence of an oligarchy (Perkins & Poole, 1996). Building on the terminology developed by Michels (1957), Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956) describe the process of elite formation as the domination of a few over many and the formation of cliques. Cassinelli (1953) argues along these same lines; in his view, organizations consist of people who provide order for others, where the latter are, therefore, usually not members of the elite (for circulation of elites, see Mosca, 1950, and Pareto, 1955; for leadership elites in organizations, Pettigrew, 1992). Similarly, Emrich, Papathanassiou and Pitsch (1996) describe “rope teams,” which is a specific form of closed relationships within an organization (on closed relationships, see Weber 1978). They describe these rope teams as social networks of a specific quality (i.e., strong ties) that are only explainable by means of a trust-based and long-term examination of behavior. They illustrate this special type of social relationship through a case study that is based on an intensive and long-standing observation by the authors, wherein members of rope teams establish and defend processes and techniques that protect and extend their own power and status, not least by exchanging power resources.

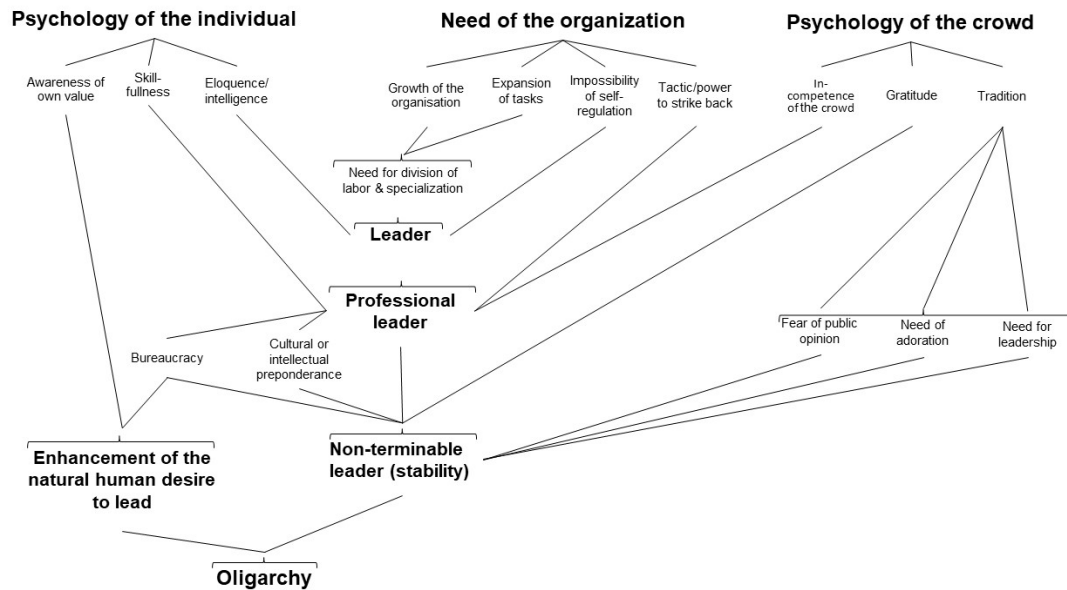


Figure 1: Etiology scheme to describe oligarchic structures in democratic parties (own translation based on Michels, 1957, p. 368).

Operationalization

Which sociodemographic characteristics make a person more likely to become an executive board member? Building on earlier research (see Table 1) and using the theoretical findings of Michels' iron law of oligarchy, we consider the following to be characteristics related to this advancement:

When a person's parents already work or worked as volunteers (not necessarily in the same sports club), then such a person is likely to have better access to resources (both material and networks) than persons whose parents did not work as volunteers. *Parental volunteering* may also establish a kind of family tradition of volunteering, raising the likelihood that a person will become an executive board member of a sports club.

Gender also may play a role, because male volunteers may have better access to old-boys networks.

Similarly, *age* may be another important characteristic because becoming a member of an old-boys network and developing the trust-based relations on which such networks are built requires time.

The *number of years* that a volunteer has worked in a specific executive position is likely to matter as well because of learning-by-doing considerations, and because other

members of a sports club may view a long-time executive board member as a “natural” part of the inside elite group.

Additionally, *income* is likely to matter because only financially independent individuals have the resources to take on a leading position as a board member, wherein high income is likely to be a good proxy for a volunteer’s administrative and management skills as well as habitual capital. At the same time, however, a high income may signal that the opportunity costs of doing volunteer work are high.

Education and *job-market position* are also characteristics that are likely to govern a volunteer’s access to resources, and they proxy a volunteer’s expertise, general skills, and self-confidence.

Time allocation may correlate with high income, where some volunteers may find it difficult to reconcile their voluntary work with their career and family obligations that naturally arise when a volunteer has a child or children. At the same time, however, having children may be a major motivation for becoming a volunteer in a sports club (although not necessarily for becoming an executive board member).

Table 1: Operationalization of the model to explain oligarchic structure: Earlier research.

Unequal access to resources	Old-boysnetwork	Traditional authority	Elite	Gender
- Adams (1980) - Hovden (2000) - Smith and Baldwin (1974)	- Adams (1980) - Perkins and Poole (1996) - Emrich et. al. (1996)	- Hovden (2000) - Emrich and Papanthanassiou (2003) - Weber (1978)	- Hovden (2000) - Milbrath and Klein (1962) - Frey (1971) - Bourguignon and Verdier (2000) - Lipset et al. (1956)	- Adams (1980) - Hovden (2000) - Erlinghagen et al. (2016)

Instrument and Data

We collected our data by means of an online questionnaire conducted from May 29, 2016, to June 30, 2016. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to approximately 14,000 registered volunteers mined from the database of the Sportbund Pfalz e. V. (a regional sports association of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany). Sportbund Pfalz e.V. was interested in studying the motives of sports club members in their region and to give information to sports clubs, for example, as to how to recruit volunteers.

We asked volunteers several questions regarding their volunteer work, motives for doing volunteer work, and their sociodemographic status. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 20–30 minutes. In total, 3,067 volunteers (a 21.9% response ratio) participated in the survey, though not every respondent answered all questions. The sample used for this analysis includes 1,717 elected volunteers (executive board members) and 1,124 non-elected volunteers (e.g., coaches, N = 2,841).

Results

Tables 2-4 summarize the statistics for two groups of volunteers: those who are executive board members (executives), and other volunteers (non-executives who do other voluntary work in sports clubs, such as coaching a team). Executives are significantly older and spent more hours per week in their voluntary position than non-executives. At the same time, executives have been in their position for a slightly shorter period of time than non-executives, but both executives and non-executives have volunteered for about 12 years in their current position, indicating that both types of volunteering are rather persistent (Table 2). Executives are, to a higher extent, male, have children, and are more likely to have had parents who volunteered (Table 3). Male executives mainly take the position of chairman (82%) and vice-chairman (83%), while female executives tend to be secretary (48%) or assessor (43%). Executives also have a higher income than non-executives, and executives work to a higher percentage in managerial positions than non-executives. There are no significant differences in education between the two groups (Table 4).

Table 2: Socioeconomic variables I (N = sample; SD = standard deviation; p = level of significance, d = Cohen's effect size).

	Executives		Non-executives		t-Test
	N	Mean±SD	N	Mean±SD	
Age (N = 2355)	1506	49.65±14.25	849	43.61±15.37	t(2353) = -9.60 p = 0.00 d = 0.19
Hours spent as volunteer per week (N = 2535)	1617	7.80±6.42	918	5.53±5.14	t(2533) = -9.2 p = 0.00 d = 0.14
Years in position (N = 2420)	1555	12.54±11.81	865	12.81±11.07	t(2418) = 0.6 p = 0.07 d = 0.01

Table 3: Socioeconomic variables II (N = sample; p = level of significance; V = Cramer's effect size).

		Executives		Non-executives		χ^2
		N	Percent [%]	N	Percent [%]	
Gender (N = 2428)	Female	522	33.7	472	53.8	$\chi^2 = 92.65$ p = 0.00 V = 0.20
	Male	1028	66.3	406	46.2	
Parental volunteering (N = 2501)	Yes	926	58.1	505	55.7	$\chi^2 = 1.28$ p = 0.27 V = 0.00
	No	668	41.9	402	44.3	
Children (N = 2270)	Yes	979	67.9	489	59.0	$\chi^2 = 18.07$ p = 0.00 V = 0.09
	No	462	32.1	340	41.0	

Table 4: Socioeconomic variables III (N = sample; p = level of significance; Z = test value; d = Cohen's effect size; V = Cramer's effect size).

		Executives		Non-executives		
		N	Percent %	N	Percent %	
Income (N = 2116)	under 1000€	97	7.1	101	13.6	U-Test p = 0.00 z = -3.973 d = 0.09
	1000€-1500€	91	6.6	52	7.0	
	1500€-2000€	155	11.3	76	10.3	
	2000€-2500€	195	14.2	97	13.1	
	2500€-3000€	198	14.4	124	16.7	
	3000€-4000€	284	20.7	143	19.3	
	more than 4000€	355	25.8	148	20.0	
Job² (N = 2134)	1	199	14.9	225	28.2	Pearson χ^2-test p = 0.00 $\chi^2(6) = 73.14$ V = 0.19
	2	88	6.6	29	3.6	
	3	99	7.4	42	5.3	
	4	358	26.8	220	27.6	
	5	92	6.9	31	3.9	
	6	354	26.5	194	24.3	
	7	147	11.0	56	7.0	
Vocational education³ (N = 2378)	1	65	4.3	81	9.5	U-Test p = 0.956 z = -0.06 d = 0.00
	2	453	29.7	241	28.2	
	3	377	24.7	157	18.4	
	4	310	20.3	145	17.0	
	5	319	20.9	230	26.9	

² Job 1: pupil, student, vocational training, unskilled worker, homemaker; Job 2: skilled worker, vocational school, self-employed farmer; Job 3: foreman, worker/clerk with simple tasks; Job 4: worker with qualified skills, middle-ranking clerk/official; Job 5: self-employed up to 9 employees/partners; Job 6: high-qualified worker or worker in leading position, senior official, self-employed academic; Job 7: executive with extensive management tasks, self-employed more than 10 employees/partners

³ Education 1: None; Education 2: technical/vocational training, still in education; Education 3: completed a professional training/ school for master craftspeople/professional academy; Education 4: completed degree at university of applied science; Education 5: completed degree at university

How do members of sports clubs become executive board members? From earlier research (Freeman, 1997), “being asked” is a significant factor that leads to a person becoming a volunteer. Our data show that being asked by a *leading* person of a sports club is significantly more important in the case of executives than in the case of non-executives (Figure 2). Non-executives are, to a higher extent, recruited by friends or family members. Compared with executives, an important reason for non-executives to become volunteers is their own experience. Being exposed to advertisements is not a reason for volunteering either for executives or for non-executives.

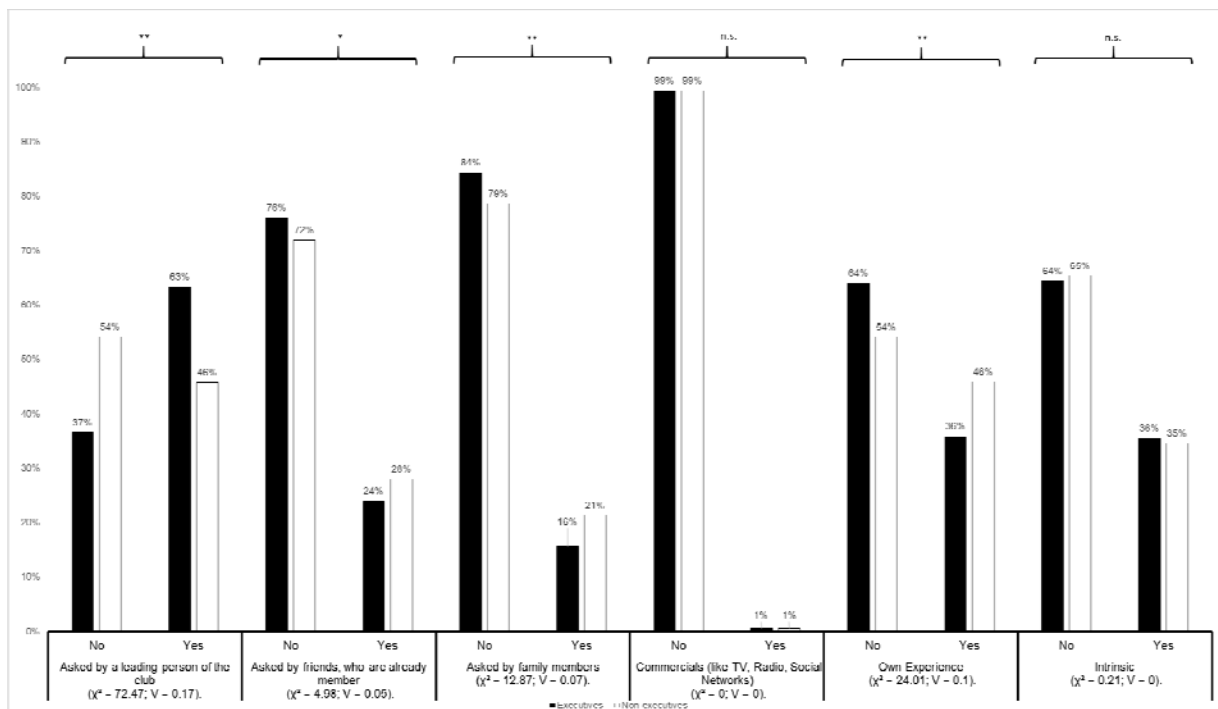


Figure 2: How volunteers assumed their position (N = 2,489; non-executives: black bars; executives: white bars; test values: $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.05$ *, n.s. = not significant; Cramer's V as effect size).

Given that the necessary skills for a position on the executive board differ from those for non-executive volunteer work, it is not surprising that the two types of volunteers differ with respect to the (self-reported) necessary skills for their positions (Figure 3). We found differences in the mean assessment of self-reported organizational skills, level of commitment, skills in dealing with authorities (such as state authorities), resilience, and selflessness, wherein executives emphasized to a higher extent than non-executives the

importance of these skills. Non-executives, in contrast, emphasized the importance of skills related to dealing with people. Interestingly, we found no difference between the two groups in regard to the self-reported importance of leadership skills.

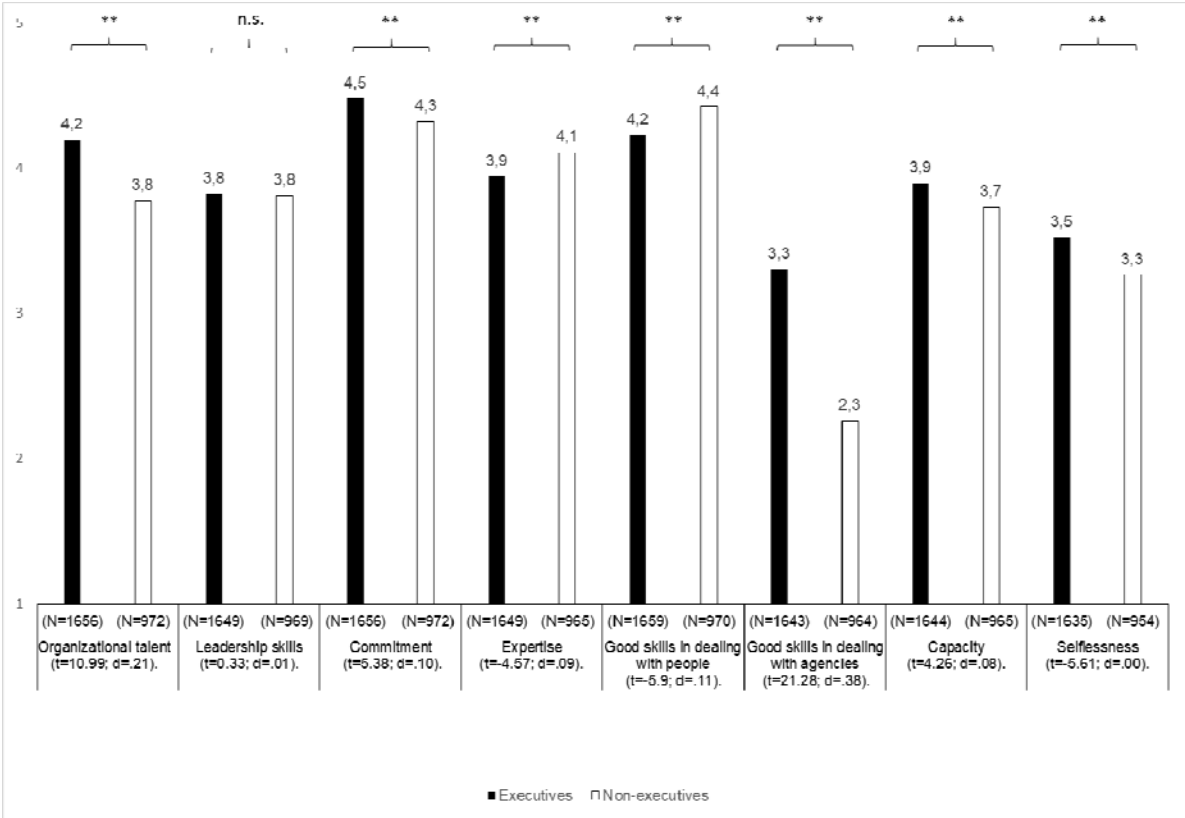


Figure 3: Mean assessment of skills for voluntary positions from 1 (low extent) to 5 (high extent). (level of significance: $p < 0.01^{**}$; n.s. = not significant; t = t-test-value; d = Cohen's effect size).

Upon estimating a binary logistic regression model (Table 5), we studied in a multivariate setting potential sociodemographic characteristics that influence the probability of a person becoming an executive rather than a non-executive volunteer. The estimated model has a Pseudo McFadden fit of approximately 0.095 (Nagelkerke 0.160) and results show that parental volunteering, being male, and being of a certain age have a positive and significant

Table 5: Logistic regression (level of significance $p < 0.1+$; $p < 0.05^*$; $p < 0.01^{**}$).

Logistic regression	N	1,645
	Pseudo Mc Fadden R^2	0.095
	Pseudo Cragg-Uhler/ Nagelkerke R^2	0.160
Executive board members	Coef.	Std. Err.
Parental engagement (Yes)	0.20 ⁺	0.11
Gender (male)	0.51 ^{**}	0.12
Kids (Yes)	-0.30 ⁺	0.15
Age	0.03 ^{**}	0.01
Years in position	-0.03 ^{**}	0.01
Hours per week	0.08 ^{**}	0.01
Salary: <1000 €(reference)		
1001-1500 €	0.19	0.29
1501-2000 €	0.11	0.27
2001-2500 €	0.17	0.26
2501-3000 €	-0.19	0.25
3001-4000 €	-0.14	0.25
>4000 €	0.32	0.25
Job 1 (reference)		
Job 2	0.52 ⁺	0.30
Job 3	0.69 [*]	0.29
Job 4	0.19	0.20
Job 5	0.48	0.31
Job 6	0.23	0.22
Job 7	0.56 [*]	0.29
Education 1 (reference)		
Education 2	0.39	0.27
Education 3	0.39	0.28
Education 4	0.44	0.28
Education 5	-0.04	0.26
Constant	-1.78 ^{**}	0.29

For job and education information see footnotes 1 and 2 in Table 4.

effect on the probability of becoming an executive volunteer, indicating that network effects and family traditions play a role in whether a volunteer assumes an executive position

in a sports club. The time (in years) that a volunteer has spent in an executive position, in contrast, has a significant negative effect. This could be because some sports clubs have restrictions with regard to the time that a person can stay in an executive position. Time constraints due to having children have only a weak negative significant effect, while income (net income of a household) and education have no significant effects. As for the influence of job-market position, we observe that working as a laborer or foreman and working in a managerial position both have a significantly positive effect on becoming an executive volunteer. In contrast, the coefficients estimated for volunteers in the intermediate groups “qualified laborer,” “self-employed,” and “highly qualified laborer” are not significantly different from zero; hence, it seems that the executive boards of German sports clubs are composed of board members who can meet the operational demands of managing a sports club as well as those who are responsible for performing managerial work.

Summary and Discussion

Hovden (2000, p. 76-77), who cites Mancur Olson's view that "[...]businessmen are increasingly being asked to sit on boards of sports clubs in order to professionalize their operations," argues that the selection of candidates is based on incumbency, personal- and performance-based leadership skills, and an agreement with the organizational policies of the club. Our results shed light on whether a similar proposition can be made with regard to the executive boards of, in particular, German sports clubs, revealing that executive volunteers in German sports clubs are when they bring special knowledge from their jobs into the organization, where job-market skills, organizational skills, and skills in dealing with external agencies seem to matter more than formal education and specific leadership skills. In addition, age, gender, and (to a lesser extent) parental volunteering affect the probability that a person will become an executive board member of a sports club, as does being asked by a leading person within the sports club. These results, where "being asked by a leader" matters along with age, gender, and parental volunteering (and, thus, family tradition and established networks) suggests that German sports clubs rely on old-boys-networks to recruit candidates for board positions.⁴

Emrich and Papathanassiou (2003) argue that elections at the general assembly of German sports clubs are not truly democratic procedures but rather instruments to corroborate and demonstrate the status of traditional elites and intraclub authorities. As a result, they argue that "neo-feudalistic" structures dominate in German sports clubs, where elected

⁴ Hence, there is a role for the type of "rope teams" described by Emrich et al. (1996). It should also be noted that we estimated the regression model (for those who are executive board members) given in Table 5 with the dependent variable replaced by the variable "being asked by a leader." These results are not reported here, but are available from the authors upon request. We found that the model has virtually no explanatory power; in other words, the socioeconomic variables we study in the regression model do not predict who is "being asked by a leader," lending support to the view that other factors, such as being member of an old-boys-network, are important when persons who assume leading positions in a sports club recruit candidates for board positions.

representatives are distinguished members who are quite different from those who have elected them (Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010, p. 226). In fact, a characteristic feature of German sports clubs' general assemblies is that there is very seldom more than one candidate for an open position on the board, and this scenario is so well-understood by all participants that makes it difficult for potential opposing candidates to run without presumed negative effects. In addition, potential opposing candidates know that there is no chance of being elected when they lack the recommendation of a leading person. Researchers, therefore, have argued that the type of representative democracy characteristic of German sports clubs mixes democratic and aristocratic principles (Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010; Emrich & Papathanassiou, 2003; in general, Halbwachs, 1950).

Max Weber (1972, p. 21) provides an explanation for this phenomenon when he wrote: “[...] in reality the authority is always a minority rule, sometimes a dictatorship of individuals, the rule of one or more persons qualified by selection or by adaptation for the tasks of leadership.” Perkins and Poole (1996, p. 84) find the same tendencies for social differentiation when they investigated oligarchic tendencies in an all-volunteer American fire department. They describe the special social structures at the top of organizations as “[...] cliques, nepotism and domination by a few” (see also Emrich & Papathanassiou, 2003, and Emrich et al., 1996; on the incentives for an educated oligarchy wherein societies subsidize the education of the poor and initiate a democratic transition, Bourguignon & Verdier, 2000).

Leadership is present in nearly every type of social system; as such, the issue is not whether oligarchic structures in sports clubs are, in principle, “good” or “bad”⁵; rather, whether oligarchic structures in democratic organizations like sports clubs imply that

⁵ A potential damaging effect of intraclub networks, of course, is that such networks tend to support corruption (Hiller, 2005). Nye (1967, p. 419) states that “corruption is behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence” (for *ars corrumpendi*, Emrich, 2005; for a sociological approach, Hiller, 2005).

leadership and its development do not agree in total with the principles of democracy (Michels, 1957, p. 369); in addition, oligarchic structures in democratic organizations also allow such organizations to survive better than those that lack these internal structures (Perkins & Poole, 1996). Oligarchic structures, therefore, can be interpreted as a kind of organizational self-insurance against adverse environmental influences (Thiel & Meier, 2004). In a sense, the complexity of club matters, passivity of members, and unequal opportunity of access to resources lead, in a natural process, toward power appropriation by specialists (Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010), implying that expertise and bureaucracy both lead to the emergence of hierarchical structures in sports clubs (Heinemann & Horch, 1981). At the same time, oligarchic structures naturally establish a circular system that is tailored to guarantee self-preservation, resulting from the unwillingness of those belonging to the ruling elite group to pursue reforms and innovation.

Disclosure Statement:

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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