Member Acquisition and Retention in Associations

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A. Introduction

This chapter reviews research on the acquisition-recruitment of members and the retention versus turnover of members of different kinds of membership associations (MAs) around the world. The leadership-management perspective of this chapter differs from the basic research perspective of Part IV, on why people participate. For civic and community-based MAs, institutional context and internal organizational characteristics are key influences. For religious congregations, we describe research in religiously free societies versus more restrictive ones. For professional associations, we examine whether national and international forces versus the strength and viability of local framework influence primarily member attraction and maintenance. The chapter also points briefly to research on acquisition and retention of members in political parties, alumni associations, credit unions, worker cooperatives, solidarity associations, and emergency response teams.

On the individual side, potential members usually decide whether an MA can promote their personal or communal goals (Olson 1965). For example, Asante, Afari-Sefa, and Sarpong (2011:2273) describe farmer associations that “increasingly voice the needs of their members in various fora on policy-making and … service provision” in Ghana. However, farmers generally join these MAs when they calculate net benefits from membership and participation. Asante et al. demonstrate that membership is most attractive to larger-acreage farmers who use the MA for access to credit and machinery services. When benefits are less tangible, farmers do not join the association. This is the kind of calculus that association managers take into account when working to recruit and retain members.

The needs and sensibilities of potential members are only part of the equation, however; acquisition is also a function of the ability of MAs to reach
out strategically to potential members. Vala and O'Brien (2007:79) note that “recruitment, even of the so-inclined, is far from automatic.” Activation of individual networks is a primary means by which MAs increase their membership base. Vala and O'Brien, however, study the recruitment of strangers to Protestant churches in China, where social relationships are not the general pathway to increasing membership. Rather, churches in their study succeeded through timely interactions and events that fulfilled emotional needs.

Acquisition has also been fruitfully conceptualized in terms of competition for members. McPherson (1983) quantified overlaps in membership across MA types (e.g. church-related, civic, fraternal, youth-serving) in some US communities. He documented greater competition when membership bases shared individual demographic characteristics. Hobby and youth-serving associations exhibit a high degree of overlap (and therefore competition for members), whereas veterans and professional associations exhibit almost none. In a later formulation, McPherson and Smith-Lovin (2002) linked shared demographic characteristics to group cohesion and member retention: people stay in groups where they share interests, motivations, and other features with other members.

As with acquisition, the decision to remain in some MAs is at least partially based on a calculation of goal attainment. However, once inside the association, members can directly judge the quality of the experience and increasingly make decisions to leave or remain with the association based on commitment (Roy and Berger 2007). Drawing on Meyer and Allen (1991), Gruen, Summers, and Acito (2000) differentiate continuance commitment (the perception of loss that would come from leaving the association), normative commitment (moral obligation to the association), and affective commitment (the degree of favorability that one feels about the association).

The remainder of this chapter outlines research on the acquisition and retention of members in MAs of different types all over the world. Following some definitions and prominent cases of historical interest, we review research on acquisition and retention in civic associations, political organizations, religious congregations, professional associations, and worker unions.

**B. Definitions**

This chapter accepts the general definitions in the Handbook Appendix. We also define some special terms relevant to this chapter, as follows:

Recruitment of members refers to conscious efforts to bring members into the MA. The term implies action on behalf of the MA to attract or entice individuals to join the membership. For example, Turner, O'Sullivan, and D'Art (2011) probe the recruitment practices of Irish trade unions, where organizing techniques actively increased the number of new members. Action on behalf of
the organization, as in recruitment, is not always required for attracting new members, however.

*Acquisition* of members may be automatic or organic (as in student clubs), or bureaucratic (as in some worker cooperatives), reducing or even eliminating the need for active recruitment. Consequently, some researchers prefer the broader term of *member acquisition*, as we do here. Zuckerman and Kretovics (2003) use this term in describing how college students proceed through stages of awareness, attraction, and affiliation in club memberships. We use that broader term in our chapter title and often below, when relevant.

*Mobilization* of members is a related term. In social movements, association membership may be informal, with individuals joining, adding to, and leaving the MA’s meetings, protests, or other activities without registration. In this case, acquisition is frequently described more broadly as *mobilization*.

*Retention* refers to efforts to keep members in the MA. Turnover refers to the loss of members in a given time period. In situations where active efforts to retain members are not needed or employed, retention (rate) can also refer passively to the proportion of members who maintain their membership over a given timeframe. The value of membership retention depends on the level of attendance and volunteer activity that members contribute to the MA, since active members contribute more value to the association than passive ones. Putnam (2000) documents widespread tertiary association membership in the United States, where individuals pay dues and receive some MA benefits, but do not interact with other members in person. Failure to retain these kinds of members represents incremental financial losses for the MA. In contrast, the primary work of many MAs is often conducted through the collective co-production of members interacting in person (Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000). Member co-production is synonymous with volunteering or active membership in the association. Failure to retain these kinds of members represents mission, programmatic, or advocacy losses for the MA.

**C. Historical background**

Research on member acquisition and retention in MAs is quite recent, occurring mainly in the past few decades. Large, supra-local MAs have led the way in such research, often doing applied rather than basic research (cf. Feirman 2001; Levin 1999). But many scholars have been doing basic research on membership participation for at least seven decades, as Handbook Part IV demonstrates. The content of this chapter is different, looking at membership as a leadership/management issue from the standpoint of the MA. Such research goes back a few decades at most (e.g., Smith 1985).

Membership trends in MAs of all types face ebbs and flows stemming from social changes that can systematically shift individual needs for collective
action. In this section, we briefly note two such shifts that have gained the attention of researchers and other observers: union membership in Europe and overall associational activity in the United States over much of the past century.

1. Labor union membership in Europe, 1960 to 2010

Unions in many European countries are shaken by ongoing membership decline that is deep enough to interfere with their ability to influence standards for wages, hours, and working conditions. Lind (2009) notes long-term declining membership in trade unions in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Upchurch, Taylor, and Mathers (2009) analyze the cases of United Kingdom, France, and Germany and argue that a crisis of social trade unionism can be explained by three factors: politicization of unions, opening of bureaucratic procedures, and willingness to mobilize beyond the workplace.

Upchurch and colleagues point to deep social changes influencing both the propensity to join labor unions and the role of labor unions themselves. From the later 1970s, new social demands transformed the role of social movements, unions included. Conventionally, unions had been oriented to national agendas, and they have largely been unable to transfer their attention to international ones. The replacement of business unionism with social unionism is central to the labor movement’s survival (Ross 2007). Robinson (1993) characterized social unionism as an organizational-maintenance strategy based on a particular moral economy of union action. Social unionism works to attract, retain, and mobilize members, leaders, and supporters. This debate is open, and research on decentralized collective bargaining indicates that locality may become the most important pole of future unions. Meanwhile, support activities may be centralized on the national and, if possible, on the international level.

2. Decline of social capital in the United States, 1930 to 2000

While many scholars have commented on changes in community life and social norms in the United States over much of the past century, Robert Putnam (2000) captured and fostered an international dialogue with his *Bowling Alone* work. His provocative thesis is that concurrent with documented decreases in membership in associational activity across a broad variety of domains, more Americans were bowling in homogeneous subgroups rather than in leagues that prompt discourse and learning across political and social differences.

Decline of associational activity in the United States over the past century is stark, according to Putnam. He first documents declines in voting and other forms of political participation before moving to discussions of downturns in community, religious, and work–life joining. He observes more named associations at the close of the millennium, but many fewer members per association. Following sharp growth in associational membership in the 1940s, Americans
slowly tapered their membership activity through 2000 to a point similar to those at post-World War I (1920) and the Great Depression (1935). Even among association members, involvement level and attendance is less than in the associational heyday of the 1930s and 1940s. However, research in many other nations finds no such decline in either association membership per se or in active membership (Smith and Robinson 2017).

Underlying these shifts in associational life are changing attitudes toward institutions and neighbors in America. Putnam points to Americans’ enchantment with television and the Internet in a process of disengagement, distrust of government and strangers, and declines in social trust that reflect in the loss of formal association and neighborliness. Putnam believes that association can restore social and institutional trust. Others, however, such as Uslaner (2002), theorize declines in social and institutional trust as the cause of disconnectedness in modern America. Sønderskov (2011) documents the trust to association relationship in a study of 23 countries, the World Values Survey. Rennó (2003) raises questions about the explanatory value of social capital in a study of 17 countries in Latin America. Cause and effect aside, anomie in the United States at turn of the century has proven to be fertile ground for new forms of social connection introduced by the Internet.

D. Key issues

Research on association membership acquisition and retention spans the broad variety of associational forms. In this section, we summarize relevant exemplary research on civic, political, religious, professional, and work–life associations.

1. Acquisition and retention in civic and community-based associations

Civic participation can be expressed informally through social interaction, or formally through organized membership in civic associations. Putnam’s (2000) bowling leagues provide one example, where members learn about and develop trust for people outside their social circles through the interaction fostered by civic associations. Recruitment into and active participation in these associations provide avenues for civic engagement and the development of social capital. Scholarship diverges on whether membership in civic associations is best explained by (1) institutional context or (2) internal organizational characteristics.

On the context side, we know that creation and development of voluntary associations varies across countries and other socio-political boundaries. Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchar (2001) explain and document how the nature of government and the relationship between the public and polity influence the establishment and growth of associations. They focus on two ways that national governments vary. One is on a continuum that establishes
power in the state versus civil society. France and Germany are characterized as *statist*, where national government is recognized as the superior order of governance and features a well-developed bureaucratic elite. Low statism, on the other hand, is contrasted by countries that emphasize self-government. In Anglo-Saxon countries like Great Britain and Canada, the state is legitimized by representing the general public.

A second defining characteristic is high versus low *corporateness*, which defines and divides countries according to whether individuals or corporate groups primarily have *actorhood* in public matters. The United States is given as an example of a country with low corporateness. In contrast, Sweden is coded as corporate, described as empowering individuals mainly as members of collectives. Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas argue that civic associations will flourish where statism is low and corporateness is high, and their analysis of 1981 and 1991 World Values Surveys supports these contentions. Their analysis further reveals that statism is particularly stagnating for membership in environmental organizations and human rights associations. Corporateness particularly fosters labor unions and political associations.

Other research projects in this tradition use the World Values Surveys to extend these ideas and develop new ones. Nissan, Castaño, and Carrasco (2012) use the data to conceptualize social capital and entrepreneurship across countries. Schofer (in Schofer and Longhofer 2011) expands his thinking to include the modern state and world society as drivers of associational activity (see Handbook Chapter 50).

Whereas context may be important in explaining the development of civic associations, Andrews and colleagues (2010) argue that civic and political contexts do not explain why people choose to join and engage in civic association activities. Their study focuses on the branches of a single US civic association with 750,000 members across the country, the Sierra Club. Instead of civic or political contexts, Andrews and colleagues document four organizational level forces that drive member engagement: the amount of activity the branch generates; the number of core, committed activists; how well leaders work together; and the strength of programming and fundraising. Research studies by Feinberg, Bontempo, and Greenberg (2008) and Baggetta (2009) also concentrate on management and governance in explaining why people join and remain committed to civic associations.

2. Acquisition and retention in political associations and parties

Political associations and parties provide a means for individuals to collectively communicate with and influence government institutions (Berger and Neuhaus 1977). Research on political associations revolve principally around (1) their growth, decline, and role in different societies and (2) the ways in which people join and participate in these associations.
Political participation (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978) and involvement in political parties (Dalton 2008) are common topics in political science and international comparative politics. Siavelis and Morgenstern (2008) document the importance of political recruitment and candidate selection practices among political parties throughout Latin America to democratic processes and governability in the region. Whiteley (2011) observes that political party membership has been declining in many democratic countries and attributes this change to their appropriation by the state and technological influence on political and civic participation. Social media and easy access to political news may replace the role of political parties for many potential members.

Whiteley (2011) outlines three traditional arguments regarding why people join political parties. The first is labeled the *civic voluntarism* model, which he principally attributes to Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978; also Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). This perspective emphasizes differential access to resources, with wealthy people relying on money and personal connections to influence political agendas and less-wealthy people relying on collective action through political associations. Membership, then, is a tool for the powerless in effecting political change. In contrast, the *cognitive engagement* model emphasizes education, which gives people the ability and willingness to process complex political and social issues. Membership, then, is a tool for the educated for political access and influence. Lastly, the *social capital* model emphasizes the value of interacting with others in civic organizations, where norms of reciprocity are built. Membership, then, is a tool for engaging other interested actors. Each model receives qualified support in Whiteley’s study of 36 countries participating in the 2004 International Social Survey Programme Citizenship Study.

The question of how people choose to join political associations has chiefly fallen to sociologists and has provided fertile ground for the development of social network theory and methods (Diani 2002). In short, network connections are a primary means for recruitment and mobilization in political associations (see Handbook Chapters 7 and 27). Lim (2008) provides both good explanation of network arguments regarding membership recruitment and retention as well as reanalysis of Citizen Participation Study data collected by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). Lim visits common explanations for what types and strength of ties lead to successful recruitment into political associations. He finds that ties through associational membership (Whiteley’s *social capital* ties) help to recruit for protests, but not for community politics and for drives to contact government officials. In contrast, knowing somebody outside associational memberships increases the likelihood of successful recruitment for community politics and contact with officials. When people know each other well (direct, strong tie), recruitment is successful on all three types of political action.
3. Acquisition and retention in religious congregations

Religious congregations fulfill many functions from which their members benefit, easing the burden of recruitment and retention. Cnaan and Curtis (2013) summarize research on these benefits: shared expression and validation of beliefs, facilitation and organization of interaction and social activities, education, promotion of volunteering and civic activity, growing of cultural capital, and improvement of overall community well-being. Participation in religious activities positively influences overall health – physical and mental. However, recruitment and retention differ according to whether religious association is being developed in (1) religiously free societies versus (2) more restrictive ones. Access to benefits is influenced by the levels of religious freedom in a particular country. To illustrate, we consider research on religious congregation membership from the United States and China. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), the United States ranks as a country with low government restriction on religion index, while China has a very high index score.

In the United States, research has focused on various aspects of congregational membership. Recruitment of new members often takes the form of personal invitation (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Larger evangelical churches, however, have been using sophisticated business-oriented tactics to recruit members such as direct mail, leaflets, media, billboards, and the internet. Among American megachurches, advertising and strategic planning are leading recruiting strategies (Newman and Brechender 2008).

Scheitle and Dougherty (2010) analyzed the effects of race on the length of congregational membership in the United States and found that minority members tend to have a shorter congregational tenure. Olson (2008) showed that small religious groups have more committed members due to high turnover rates. Other studies showed positive influence of variables such as the member’s more traditional beliefs on their identification with a congregation (Stroope 2001), the effects of social class on the introduction of new members (Schwadel 2012), or the general fluidity of membership in American religious organizations (Putnam and Campbell 2012).

In contrast, restrictions of religious congregations in China introduce complexity in recruitment and retention that makes it fundamentally different from proselytizing in more open societies (Vala and O’Brien 2007). Though current law allows freedom of belief, it does not explicitly guarantee the freedom to practice religion. Yang (2006) distinguishes three types of religious markets in China: red (Buddhist, Daoist, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic organizations endorsed by the Communist Party); black (banned religious groups); and gray market (organizations whose legal status is not clear). Government provides guidelines on aspects such as proselytizing, which is officially allowed only on the premises of red market congregations. According to Yang, the size of
the gray market fluctuates with the introduction of stronger regulations, as it serves as a space for individuals who do not want to be part of the underground (black) religion market.

This split is visible in recruitment and retention in Chinese Christian churches: Protestant house churches that are organized without government approval or registration exhibit higher exclusivity in congregational membership. On the contrary, Three-Self churches have a very fluid membership base and, despite their official status, do not keep track of their members by the means of registration (Xie 2010).

4. Acquisition and retention in professional associations

Most research on professional associations focuses on the United States, where professional work and industry associations are common. Bauman (2008) studied which school counselors joined their professional organizations. She learned that their graduate programs’ emphasis on professional membership, whether their colleagues were members, and their perceptions of whether the association advanced the field and whether membership conveyed professional identity were central to the decision. White and Olson (2004) surveyed nurses, who reported increase in field knowledge and professional development as key reasons to join their professional associations. These studies point to two different kinds of motivations to join professional associations: (1) personal development and (2) value of broader public goals from collective action.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, individuals make membership decision based on both personal and communal goals. Olson (1965) emphasized this distinction in his landmark study on collective action, arguing that individuals are overwhelmingly motivated by private gains. Moe (1980) first tested the relative membership valuations of public and private goods among professional associations, but Knoke (1988) assembled new arguments and measures in his study of membership associations, including professional associations.

Knoke (1988) acknowledges that a variety of private or personal incentives motivate membership. One incentive is social: members join professional associations for the opportunity to form friendships or for social activities with people who share career aims. Another is informational, where the association provides newsletters, data services, and conferences for its members. A third is occupational: professional associations provide members help with job searches and professional contacts. A fourth is material: professional associations provide group benefits, or field licensing or certification. Knoke’s analysis of National Organization Survey data indicates that social and informational incentives motivate internal participation and commitment to the association, but informational incentives are also associated with members who donate less and spend less time volunteering with the association. Occupational incentives
work against commitment. Material incentives motivate external participation, but work against time spent on co-production of outputs and commitment to the association.

However, as a challenge to Olson (1965), Knoke (1988; compare Hager, 2014) was more interested in the value of public goods motivations for joining and participating in professional associations. One such incentive is normative, where members value the role of the association in establishing the legitimacy of the field and representing it to the general public. A second is lobbying on behalf of the field and those it might represent. Knoke concludes that these public incentives also motivate member action: normative incentives are associated with more internal participation, time spent in co-production, and commitment to the association. Members who value the lobbying function are more involved in external participation and are more committed, although they tend to spend less time in active involvement overall.

More recent research has shed little light on the public–private distinction. Descriptive research on members motivations in professional associations has tended to focus on personal incentives (e.g., DeLeskey 2003), although both the normative (Nerland 2010) and lobbying (Barbieri and Mattozzi 2009) function receive some attention when membership motivations are considered among professional associations.

5. Acquisition and retention in labor/trade unions

Unionization and the capacity of trade unions to attract and maintain their members are studied and discussed from several points of view, including (1) the influence of national and international environmental forces, and (2) the strength and viability of local frameworks. For example, in studying trade unions in Namibia, Jauch (2010) emphasizes both the historical influence of the country’s contract labor system in apartheid as well as the need for unions to defend working-class interests at the local level.

As the brief case study above on the decline of union membership across Europe illustrates, unions are strongly subject to the ebbs and flows of social forces. However, density of union membership varies substantially with what Ebbinghaus, Göbel, and Koos (2011) call “institutional and social contextual factors.” As entities linked to the performance of a national economy and its politics, the recruitment and retention of membership in unions are subject to business cycles and underlying structural characteristics such as the size of the labor force. Union membership is directly related to the way trade unions and socialist or liberal parties have been able to build strong national institutions. Also, labor market regulation and characteristics of the bargaining system affect member calculations of value in union membership (Visser 2006). Multi-employer bargaining and an inclusive bargaining system may encourage trade
union membership, but may result in free riding if potential members do not perceive individual benefits from membership.

Consequently, other research on union membership emphasizes local frameworks and personal outcomes. Hancké (1993) argues that the main reason a worker joins a union is the workplace; workers evaluate membership primarily in terms of local union action and its ability to deal with questions, grievances, and membership services. Waddington and Whitston (1997) contend that the main reason for workers to join trade unions is to be protected against competition in the labor market. De Witte and colleagues (2008) find similar results in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, but not Sweden. The promise of job protection may be enough to motivate membership in many cases, but in some cases unions must persuade workers to ignore their own financial interest to contribute to a collective project where success or failure depends on the action of others. Rational-choice explanations of union membership assume that individuals decide to become members if the expected benefits of membership exceed opportunity costs. Most recent formulations reject the notion that becoming a trade union member is exclusively the result of environmental and macroeconomic considerations, and embrace the idea that other factors such as attitudes toward unions or ideologies must be considered.

Modern research on worker unions seeks to shed light on the reasons why national union movements have fared so differently, but the role of central and local union structures and their mutual relationship need a new conceptualization. The newly emerging structure of industrial relations not only highlights the importance of transferring more decisions-making power to the locals but also forces unions to rethink their role in the wider political economy.

6. Acquisition and retention in other types of associations

While research on civic, political, religious, professional, and worker union associations cover the majority of scholarship related to membership recruitment and retention, other kinds of associations are represented amid the literature. Research on membership in school alumni associations can be found from around the world, including the United Kingdom (Hall 2011) and South Africa (Rust 2012). McKillop and Wilson (2011) describe the evolution of credit unions around the world, and Gugerty (2007) documents individual motivations of Kenyans for participating in them.

Majee and Hoyt (2010) illustrate how the development of cooperatively structured businesses can increase both the financial and social capital of low-income communities; Hernandez-Espallardo et al. (2013) explore agricultural worker cooperatives in Spain, while Ngugi and Kariuki (2009) do the same for Kenya. In Brazil and most of Latin America, research on associations is commonly linked to broad concepts such as solidarity economy (e.g. França Filho 2004). In this vein, membership-based solidarity associations and cooperatives
recruit members on both a normative base (as an ideological tool to reform or resist capitalism) and an economic one (as generally these associations gather small farmers, waste scavengers, artisans, and other small producers). Lastly, recent research documents efforts to develop local grassroots emergency response teams by organizing into trained local membership teams in Australia (Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace 2009). These topics illustrate the diversity of membership associations where recruitment and retention of members are of primary concern.

E. Usable knowledge

Agatha Christie is credited with saying that “the simplest explanation is always the most likely.” In the case of membership recruitment and retention, the simplest answer comes down to asking people to join, asking them to stay, and rewarding them for staying (see also Handbook Chapter 27). In the section on political associations, we note research where various network ties lead to participation, partly because people are able to positively leverage their personal relationships, and partly because people fear social repercussions from letting people down. Andreoni and Rao (2011) studied the value of ‘the ask’ under experimental conditions and concluded that personal communication is key to influencing the feelings of empathy and pro-social behavior that lead to giving and joining. Often, the best way to get people to join and stay is simply to ask them.

F. Future trends and needed research

Nearly three decades ago, Knoke (1986) observed that despite a lack of consensus on the central issues regarding associations and the ways that scholars should study them, research on joining and participation had attracted the interest of many researchers. That continues to be true, with robust research on membership recruitment and retention dominating both practical and conceptual research across a rich array of association types (see Handbook Chapters in Part IV).

Despite this vibrancy, Knoke’s concerns about theoretical disarray still ring true today. Researchers from around the world draw on a variety of disciplinary bases to study membership associations from a variety of points of view. Psychologists point to motivations, economists point to institutional forces, and sociologists point to network connections, all of which shed light on different pieces of the membership and retention puzzle. What our scholarship needs on this topic is a more holistic theoretical approach that draws on various disciplinary bases and explains an even greater, more general assortment of recruitment and retention questions than is possible through the current
cacophony of scholarly work. Smith’s (2017) S-Theory reflects this goal, and has been successfully tested (with a regression equation explaining over 67% of the variance in formal volunteering) on national sample survey data for Russians (Smith 2015; see also Handbook Chapter 31). However, much future testing is needed for S-Theory in a variety of other nations.

Our review also uncovered research that mostly draws inferences from relationships between variables measured for large numbers of cases. We uncovered fewer studies that thickly describe and explain recruitment and retention efforts for specific organizations or movements. Such studies would give us more insights into the specific mechanisms that drive associational behavior.

Finally, a stronger attention to context-based concepts and data outside of the OECD countries is needed. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) have used many multi-national data sets to show that people in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) nations are unrepresentative of the global human population. Houtzager and Acharya (2011) argue that the notion of members and membership-based association must be adapted when studying Third Wave democracies such as Brazil, Mexico, and India. Many of these countries’ so-called community associations have mostly informal membership bases and define their role as acting with or for a particular community or target population as opposed to acting as a gathering of equal members.

G. Cross-references

Chapters 6, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 31, and 39.

H. Bibliography


