

# Democratic Participation in Voluntary Associations: A Multilevel Analysis of Sports Clubs in Europe

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Published online: 22 January 2019

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**Abstract** Non-profit associations are usually democratically organized, and this feature plays a legitimizing role for the public support to associations. This article examines which characteristics at country level, organizational level and individual level can explain variations with regard to member engagement in the association democracy in sports clubs in Europe. The statistical analyses use data on 12,755 members from 642 sports clubs in ten European countries. The findings show that the majority of the members in sports clubs participate in the association democracy, but the level and form of engagement varies considerably. At the country level, no link between the democratic strength and quality of the countries on the one hand and member engagement on the other could be identified. Instead, characteristics at the organizational and individual level were found to be relevant. More concretely, (1) the size of the sports club, (2) the socioeconomic background of the members (gender, age and education), and (3) the way in which the members are involved in and affiliated to the club (engaged in voluntary work, participating in social activities, etc.) were found to be significantly correlated with the engagement of members in the association democracy.

**Keywords** Participatory democracy · Organizational characteristics · Macro, meso and micro level

## Introduction

‘Good government comes from singing choirs and soccer clubs’ (Dekker and Uslaner 2001:2). This insight from the social capital discourse is pivotal for the increased interest many people—practitioners, politicians and researchers—have for what goes on in voluntary associations. There is, accordingly, an extensive debate on how exactly participation in sports clubs matters for good government, and the main message is that participation in voluntary associations is conducive to the trickle-down of social networking and trust into the wider society and somehow oils the wheels of social and political action throughout society (Putnam et al. 1993; Putman 2000; Warren 2001; Fung 2003; Rossteutscher 2005; Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007a, b; Freise and Hallmann 2014).

Such large-scale effects of activities in small voluntary associations do, probably, depend on what actually happens inside voluntary associations: In what ways and to what extent do members participate in the activities of the association. Whereas participation in associations is reflected in the wider society has received a lot of attention (see, e.g. Verba et al. 1995; Warren 2001; Putnam et al. 1993; Putman 2000; Quintelier and Hooghe 2013; Freise and Hallmann 2014; Dekker 2014), a less studied, but equally important question concerns in what ways and to what extent the members participate in the internal democracy within associations and the potential explanations for the difference in this regard. This democratic ideal is called ‘participatory democracy’, meaning that people are collectively responsible for the pursuit of common

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interests and goals (i.e. active citizenship, communitarian democracy or associative democracy) (Pateman 1970, 2012; Barber 1984; Hirst 1994; Etzioni 1995; Cohen and Rogers 1995; Streeck 1995; Fung 2003; Fung and Wright 2001; Hirst 1994; Kaspersen and Ottesen 2007). It is this aspect of democracy in sports clubs that is analysed in this article.

When people join a sports club, it is mostly for the purpose of doing some kind of sport or physical activity, and providing sport is also the primary goal of these clubs (Breuer et al. 2017). Association democracy, however, is an acclaimed ideal for sports clubs that largely legitimizes public financial support for clubs in many European countries (Council of Europe 2004). However, studies from different countries have shown that a relatively small proportion of members of sports clubs are engaged in association democracy (Østerlund 2014; Peterson et al. 2016). However, we do not know to what extent this differs between countries and which associational characteristics affect the extent to which members engage in the democratic processes of their club. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to answer the following research question:

*Which characteristics at country level, organizational level and individual level can explain the variations between sports clubs with regard to members' participation in association democracy in Europe?*

Although the study is limited to sports clubs, we believe that the analysis is relevant to associations in general. First, sports clubs make up a very significant part of the voluntary sector based on the number of associations, volunteers and members (Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007a, b). Second, studies show that, although sports clubs have certain unique characteristics, they also have many characteristics in common with other types of associations (Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007a, b; Ibsen et al. 2013).

Democratic issues have been prominent in research on associations and civil society in general, but these studies have mainly examined the importance of associations for representative democracy. Very few studies have examined the internal democracy and we were not able to identify a study that has investigated it across borders. From a practical, organizational point of view, the results of the study can contribute to knowledge about how associations can strengthen member democracy.

## Definition, Theory and Hypothesis

Horch (1992) has defined the ideal type of 'democratic voluntary association' as a freely chosen union of persons who jointly pursue their specific goals within the framework of a formal structure where the members are the

sovereign decision-making body. Formal structure means that there are rules (statutes) governing members' duties and rights and the democratic processes (including how the board is elected) (Gundelach 1988). In continuation of this, we define 'association democracy' as the members' involvement in the discussions and decisions concerning the management of the collective affairs of an association, i.e. policy-making and policy decisions regarding the association's governance, goals and activities. Association democracy can be divided into (a) participation in formal democracy, that is participation in the formal decision forums (general assembly and other formal meetings), and (b) participation in the informal democratic decision-making which includes, for example, discussions with other members about issues in the association and talks with members of the association's board in an effort to influence conditions in the association.

The extent to which members participate in both the formal and the informal democracy in the association is assumed to depend on factors at the macro level (country), meso level (organizational conditions) and micro level (members' backgrounds and how members are affiliated to the association) (Nagel et al. 2015). In the following, we argue for four overall hypotheses that will be tested in the statistical analysis. Since there are very few significant studies of internal democracy in associations that can be used as inspiration for this study, we include theory and empirical studies from other research areas that we consider relevant to this study. This applies to research into participation in political democracy, research into active citizenship and research into workplace democracy.

## Country (Macro) Level

Engaging in an association is an expression of active citizenship. Several studies have shown a correlation between political culture and active citizenship (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Wuthnow 1991; Putnam et al. 1993; Van Deth et al. 2007). Hoskins and Mascherini (2009: 462) define active citizenship as 'participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy'. They distinguish between two forms of active citizenship: (a) action-oriented participation such as protests, demonstrations and boycotts and (b) participation in community life where people collaborate based on a common interest, for example in associations.

Active citizenship is supposed to depend on the 'political opportunity structure' for people's involvement in decision-making—i.e. determined by legislation, public aid that supports associations and the culture for engaging in democracy. The basic assumption is that associations act in

response to the opening of opportunities in the political structure and culture (Eisinger 1973; Micheletti 1994; Tarrow 1994; Kriesi 1995; Meyer 2004).

Generally, it is conceivable that the strength of a country's democracy has an effect on the extent and manner of members' engagement in association democracy in that country. Political scientists have ranked the democratic strength and quality of European countries based on an assessment of different dimensions of democracy in each country (especially freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, equal opportunities for political influence, and control of the political power) (Bühlmann et al. 2012). Among the countries included in this study, Denmark, Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands have the highest democratic strength and quality, while Spain, Hungary, the UK and Poland have the lowest. Inspired by this study, the following hypothesis will be tested:

- (1) *In countries with a high 'democratic strength and quality' the democratic participation of members in sports clubs will be higher than is the case for countries with a lower 'democratic strength and quality'.*

### Organizational (Meso) Level

The degree and quality of democratic participation are not only affected at the macro level. Organizational, meso factors, such as the size of the club, the type of sports club, and how the club is managed, are also assumed to affect the extent to and manner in which members participate in the respective clubs (Nagel et al. 2015).

Regarding *the size* of the club, it is a widespread belief that this parameter is inversely correlated with democracy. 'When it comes to democracy, small is beautiful' as Gering and Zarecki (2011: 2) state. The reasoning behind this statement is among other things that preferences are more homogeneous within small communities, allowing for a better fit between what citizens want and what they get in small units compared to large units (Larsen 2002; Lassen and Serritzlew 2011; Denters et al. 2014). Several sports club studies, indeed, indicate that the size of the association is important for members' participation in association democracy (Enjolras and Seippel 2001; Seippel 2008; Thiel and Mayer 2009; Ibsen and Seippel 2010; Schlesinger and Nagel 2013; Østerlund 2014; Wicker et al. 2014; van der Roest et al. 2016).

With regard to *types of sports clubs*, the European countries typically distinguish between single sports clubs and multi sports clubs (Nagel et al. 2015). We assume that members are more engaged in association democracy in clubs offering only one type of sport than in a multi-sport

club, because there is a higher consistency between the club's goals and interests, and the individual member's involvement in the club (Horch 1982; Ibsen 1992). Even though we could not identify recent studies in sports clubs that have examined the correlation suggested here, studies show that members are generally more socially integrated in single sports clubs than in multi sports clubs (Nagel 2006; Schlesinger and Nagel 2015). And other studies suggest that social integration and democratic participation is strongly correlated (Østerlund 2014; Østerlund and Seippel 2013).

Regarding the *management-related* issue, research into voluntary organizations and associations find that there is an increasing contradiction between demands for efficiency and demands for democracy (Gundelach and Torpe 1997). In a historical study of civic participation in USA, Skocpol (2003) finds a transformation of civic organizations from a mass-membership model to a professional management model 'through which paid employees deliver services and coordinate occasional volunteer projects' (Skocpol 2003: 7). Studies of sports organizations in Europe find the same transformation (Theodoraki and Henry 1994; Kikulis and Slack 1995; Fahlén et al. 2008; Hansen 2018), and this has (probably) created a democratic deficit (Enjolras 2002; Green and Houlihan 2004; Sam 2009). Studies of sports clubs indicate that many clubs also may be challenged by a growing need for effective and professional management—due to increased demands from public authorities and increased commodification—which has created democratic deficits in the clubs (van der Roest et al. 2016; Fahlén 2017).

Research into workplace democracy, defined as a more equitable distribution of power (Feldberg and Glenn 1983), can also inspire this part of the study. Theoretical workplace democracy depends firstly on the organizational culture, where team culture and a participatory (involving) culture are assumed to increase workplace democracy, and secondly on the structure of the organization, where decentralization, a flat hierarchy and a low level of formalization is positive for democracy in the workplace (Yazdani 2010). Empirical studies have confirmed that the culture as well as the structure of the organization has an influence on organizational democracy (Safari et al. 2018).

Based on the theory presented at meso level, the following hypothesis will be tested:

- (2) *Members' participation in the democracy of sports clubs depends on the organizational and managerial setting: participation in club democracy is higher in small clubs, single-sport clubs and in clubs that aim to involve members in decision-making than in large clubs, multi-sport clubs and in clubs where no decisions are delegated.*

## Individual (Micro) Level

In addition to the national and organizational level, we assume that the members' background and how they are affiliated with the sports club have an influence on the members' participation in the association democracy.

Regarding the members' background, we expect to find the same patterns in the correlation between participation in association democracy and gender, age, education and ethnicity as those revealed in the research into general political interest and participation. This expectation is based on the assumption that the social and cultural conditions that may explain the unequal participation in politics also influence participation in association democracy:

- Research into a number of Western democracies finds that women are less politically engaged than men (Kirbis 2013; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). Therefore, we assume that men are more active in association democracy in sports clubs than women.
- Over many years, research findings have been consistent across countries in terms of the greater interest in politics and higher voter turnout among older people (Kirbis 2013; Goerres 2007). Therefore, we assume that older members are more active in association democracy in sports clubs than young members.
- We also assume that education has an impact on the extent to which members are engaged in association democracy, because education is a powerful determinant of political interest. Across most countries, the more highly educated are much more likely to vote than the less educated (Blais et al. 2004; Kirbis 2013).
- It is also a general pattern across countries that ethnic minorities are less politically active than the majority population (Martiniello 2005). Therefore, we also assume that ethnic minorities are less active in association democracy than the majority population.

We also assume that the nature of members' affiliation with the sports club has an influence on participation in association democracy—both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Firstly, the longer the members have been a member of the club and the more they join in the activities, the higher the likelihood is that they participate in both formal and informal democracy (Østerlund 2013; Ibsen and Levinsen 2016). Secondly, we also assume that the nature of the members' relationship with the association is a significant factor in their participation in association democracy. According to Gundelach and Torpe (1997), the members' relationship with the association of which they are members can be characterized as 'conventional solidarity' that 'refers to a sense of 'we-ness' of groups involved in a common struggle or endeavour' (Dean 1995: 115). Conventional solidarity has much in common with

socio-affective integration, which broadly deals with the integration of members into club life. Here, two concepts are key: interaction and identification. The concept of interaction seeks to capture the active participation of members in sports clubs during their lifetime. Most members join a sports club to practice sports, many also participate in social activities and a relatively smaller proportion are also involved in various forms of voluntary work (Nagel et al. 2015; Elmoose-Østerlund and van der Roest 2017). We expect that members who participate in social activities and voluntary work have a greater interest in the club and therefore also participate more in the democracy of the club than other less active members. The concept of identification focuses on the emotional commitment of members to their respective clubs and to other members within their clubs: the members' we-feeling and affective affiliation to the sports club.

Based on the theory presented at the micro level, two hypotheses will be tested.

- (3) *Participation in sports club democracy depends on the social background of the members: gender, age, educational level and migrant background.*
- (4) *Participation in sports club democracy depends on the nature of the member's affiliation with the sports club: How many years they have been affiliated with the club, activities they take part in (volunteering, type of sport and social activities) and their affective affiliation to the sports club.*

## Methods

The data used to examine the hypotheses presented is based on two surveys conducted as part of the research project 'Social inclusion and volunteering in sports clubs in Europe', which included ten European countries: Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. In each of these countries, comparative data has been collected on three different analytical levels, the macro, meso and micro levels. In this article, a combination of data collected among members and volunteers (micro level) and sport clubs (meso level) was applied in the statistical analyses.

## Two Surveys

The first survey, on the meso level, was a sports club survey conducted in the autumn of 2015. In all ten countries, the sports club samples were as representative of the sports club population as practically possible. However, existing databases and information on sports clubs across

countries varied. In Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland, databases from national sports organizations were applied, which means that clubs that were members of a sports organization were included in the survey. In Belgium (Flanders), about 50% of the municipalities provided contact information on sports clubs. The same applied to Spain for six of the seventeen autonomous regions. In the Hungary and Poland, data from statistical offices on the population of sports clubs were used. However, due to a lack of valid email addresses, additional desk research was conducted to gather further contact details for clubs. In England, it was only possible to collect data from a selection of sports, meaning that some sports are under-represented or absent in the English sample (for further details see Breuer et al., 2017). A total of 35,790 sports clubs replied to the survey.

This sports club sample represents the population from which 642 sports clubs were selected for a member and volunteer survey. In the selection procedure, the researchers from each country were instructed to sample at least thirty sports clubs. No upper limit was set for the sampling of clubs, which explains the large differences between countries in the number of clubs and, accordingly, members and volunteers included. Therefore, the sample is not proportionate to the distribution of clubs or members and volunteers between the countries. The goal of the sampling procedure was rather to produce samples of members and volunteers from each country that were as representative as practically possible. Specifically, the clubs were selected in order to represent the variation found within sports clubs concerning a number of structural characteristics (club size, single-sport vs. multi-sport clubs and sports) and the context of sports clubs (community size). Three sports—football, tennis and swimming—were oversampled to allow for comparisons within specific sports. In general, the structural variables were selected because studies on sports clubs have found them to be relevant for different aspects connected to sports clubs, such as social integration and voluntary work (e.g. Nagel 2006; Schlesinger and Nagel 2013, 2015; Østerlund 2014; Østerlund and Seippel 2013). To be able to examine the influence from these variables, we needed to ensure variation in these variables in our country samples. The reason for choosing football, tennis, and swimming specifically was that these sports are all relatively large sports in the ten European countries included in our sample. Thus, it was possible to select sufficient clubs providing these sports in each country. Given this selection procedure, the sample cannot be expected to be representative for members and volunteers within European sports clubs. However, the clubs represent the diversity of sports clubs with regard to the central structural and contextual characteristics described above, and should be useful for analyses of how organizational

and individual factors might make a difference for democratic participation.

The member and volunteer survey was conducted in 2016. An English questionnaire was developed in the research group and translated into the language of each of the ten participating countries. Within the clubs sampled, all adult members and volunteers (aged 16 or above) were contacted electronically in all clubs—where possible—and asked to participate in the study. The choice to focus on adults is appropriate in relation to the purpose of this article since it is mainly adults (e.g. due to age restrictions in terms of voting rights in the general assembly) who are involved in democratic decision-making processes in sports clubs. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent directly to members and volunteers or through club representatives. A total of 13,082 members and volunteers replied to the survey, ranging from about 450 in Spain to about 3200 in Denmark (see Table 1). The questionnaire included questions about participation in formal and informal democracy in the sports clubs, but it also asked for key characteristics of the members and volunteers.

When merging the club data (meso level) with the member data (micro level), it was necessary to exclude 327 members. The reason for this is that in the selection procedure for the member survey, a small number of clubs were sampled even though they did not complete the club survey. Nevertheless, the vast majority of replies from members—12,755 in total—were included in the merged dataset, and, thereby, in the analyses for this article. The number of replies to the various questions range from just under 10,000 to just under 13,000, with the most replies being given to the earlier questions in the survey and the fewest to the later questions. It is not possible to calculate response rates for the member and volunteer survey, since sports club representatives were responsible for distributing the majority of the survey invitations to members and volunteers.

### Potentials and Limitations in the Data Material

The data material has potential in the sense that it contains comparable knowledge about sports clubs, members and volunteers from ten European countries with different sports systems and different social structures and cultures. Hence, the results do not only refer to one particular national context. The combination of ‘club variables’ with ‘individual level variables’ also represents a significant potential. This combination allows for statistical multilevel analyses that examine the relative influence from the national level, variables at the club level and the individual level on participation in association democracy.

The members and volunteers included do not come from a representative sample of sports clubs in each of the

**Table 1** The number of clubs selected and the number of responses from members and volunteers obtained in the ten countries included in the data collection

Country	Number of clubs	Number of responses
Belgium (Flanders)	47	762
Denmark	36	3163
England	40	717
Germany	141	2455
Hungary	47	716
The Netherlands	144	1965
Norway	30	1330
Poland	61	570
Spain	55	445
Switzerland	41	959
Total	642	13,082

participating countries, and the most engaged members and volunteers are likely to have been more inclined to participate. These potential sources of bias are, however, more likely to affect the validity in terms of descriptive inference, while they are less influential with regard to analytical inference, which is the main aim of this article.

Although the same experts that had designed the survey conducted the translation, this procedure could potentially have affected the understanding of key concepts and potentially make for differences between countries that do not reflect real differences, but rather linguistic differences in how questions are understood. This is likely to be more of an issue in connection with attitudinal questions than factual ones. In order to mitigate this, the most ambiguous words were elaborated with an explanation or an example.

## Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using the ‘Generalized Mixed Models’ option in ‘IBM SPSS Statistics 24’ (Heck et al. 2012). The hierarchical structure of the dataset was taken into account by conducting multilevel analyses comprising three levels: macro (country), meso (club) and micro (member and volunteer). In this connection, the results revealed that intercept variances at the country level were non-significant in the statistical multilevel models for two of the three dependent variables. The country level ICCs were relatively low (between 0.03 and 0.07), indicating that a limited percentage of the variation in the dependent variables is accounted for by clustering. However, rather low ICC-values were found in prior cross-sectional sports club studies (Swierzy et al. 2018). The number of units at the country level is smaller than recommended in most of the literature on multilevel

modelling (Maas and Hox 2005; Snijders and Bosker 2011), but recent simulation studies (Stegmueller 2013) indicate that as long as the models are relatively simple (in our case: random intercept models only), the standard errors (and the estimation of confidence intervals) are within reasonable limits. As our results will show, the significance levels for the variables that we chose to emphasize are also at a very high level.

## Dependent and Independent Variables

Five items from the member and volunteer survey were designed to measure participation in the democracy of sports clubs. Of the five items, two were measures for formal democracy, two were measures for informal democracy and the last item was a more general measure for the likelihood of members and volunteers to attempt to influence decision-making in the club. The five items are shown in Table 2.

In order to simplify the statistical analyses, we tried to discover whether the five items could be reduced to three dependent variables. Reliability checks were conducted using the Cronbach’s alpha test before constructing the indexes for the proposed dimensions of formal and informal democracy. In this connection, the Cronbach’s alpha test showed values above 0.6 for both constructs, which means that the constructs can be considered as reliable (Eckstein 2008). We therefore decided to conduct the statistical multilevel analyses using the three dependent variables described in Table 3.

The overall assumption for this analysis is that association democracy depends on factors and conditions at macro level, meso level and micro level. Regarding the macro level, we have included the country level indicator to take into account that the country context could potentially influence the actions and structure of sports clubs as well as the actions and characteristics of members and volunteers (hypothesis 1).

On the meso level we expect that association democracy depends on the size of the club, the type of the club and how the club is managed with the purpose of involving the members (hypothesis 2). Here, we use information from the sports club survey. The four questions that identify the organizational and managerial setting are shown in Table 4.

On the micro level, we expect that members’ participation in association democracy depends on the background of members and volunteers (age, gender, education and ethnic background) (hypothesis 3) and the nature of the member’s affiliation (the duration of membership, time spent in the club, in what capacity the members are involved in the club, and the emotional and affective affiliation to the club) (hypothesis 4). Here, we use

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics for the five items that measure the participation of members and volunteers in the democracy of sports clubs

Items	Percentage (%)	Total number of replies (N)
<i>Formal democracy</i>		
Participated in last general assembly		11,125
0: No	62	
1: Yes	37	
Frequency of participation in member meetings and/or other club meetings		9911
1: Never	32	
2: Once a year or less	28	
3: Once every half year	15	
4: Once every 3 months	10	
5: Once a month	8	
6: Several times a month	6	
<i>Informal democracy</i>		
Frequency of speaking mind to key persons in the club		9249
1: Never	24	
2: Once a year or less	16	
3: Once every half year	13	
4: Once every 3 months	14	
5: Once a month	13	
6: Several times a month	19	
Frequency of sharing views with other members		9370
1: Never	16	
2: Once a year or less	11	
3: Once every half year	10	
4: Once every 3 months	13	
5: Once a month	18	
6: Several times a month	31	
<i>Both forms of democracy</i>		
Time since last attempt to influence decision-making		10,864
1: I have never attempted to influence decision-making	43	
2: More than 1 year ago	13	
3: 7–12 months ago	5	
4: 4–6 months ago	6	
5: 1–3 months ago	13	
6: Within the last month	20	

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha for the three dependent variables

Dependent variables	Average (SD)	Total number of valid cases (N)	Cronbach's alpha
Formal democracy (scale 1–6) (2 items)	2.67 (1.82)	11,155	0.681
Informal democracy (scale 1–6) (2 items)	3.67 (1.75)	9836	0.864
Time since last attempt to influence decision-making (scale 1–6) (1 item)	2.94 (2.05)	10,864	Not relevant

In the formal democracy index, prior to the construction of the index, the general assembly variable was recoded to 1 = No and 6 = Yes to match the scale of the member and club meeting variable

**Table 4** Descriptive statistics for the independent variables included in the analyses

Independent variables	Percentage (%)	Total number of replies (N)
Club size		12,755
1: 0–199 members (ref.)	29	
2: 200–399 members	22	
3: 400–999 members	23	
4: 1000 + members	26	
Single or multi-sport club		12,706
1: Single-sport club	59	
2: Multi-sport club	41	
The club aims to involve members when making important decisions		12,727
1: Don't agree at all	2	
2: Don't agree	6	
3: Undecided	18	
4: Agree	53	
5: Totally agree	22	
The club delegates decision-making from the board to committees		12,655
1: Don't agree at all	9	
2: Don't agree	19	
3: Undecided	15	
4: Agree	38	
5: Totally agree	18	
Gender		10,525
1: Female	41	
2: Male	59	
Age (categorized)		10,201
1: 16–39 years (ref.)	33	
2: 40–59 years	44	
3: 60 years or over	23	
Educational level		10,134
1: Low (no formal education or primary school only) (ref.)	9	
2: Medium (secondary education or tertiary education (< 3 years))	40	
3: High (tertiary education (3+ years), bachelor's or master's degree)	51	
Born in the country in which the club is located (no)	4	10,396
Participation in competitive sport in the club		12,042
0: No	58	
1: Yes	42	
Connection to the club (0–1 items)		
Member of the club (yes)	88	11,814
Regular volunteer (yes)	40	11,913
Occasional volunteer (yes)	54	12,049
Number of years connected to the club		12,401
1: Less than 1 year	8	
2: 1–2 years	12	
3: 3–4 years	16	
4: 5–10 years	23	
5: 11–20 years	19	
6: More than 20 years	22	



**Table 4** continued

Independent variables	Percentage (%)	Total number of replies (N)
Frequency of sports participation in the club		12,123
1: Never/not sports active	24	
2: Less than once a week (ref.)	12	
3: 1 time a week	21	
4: 2 times a week or more	43	
Frequency of participation in the club's social gatherings		9824
1: Never	17	
2: Once a year or less	25	
3: Once every half year	27	
4: Once every 3 months	17	
5: Once a month	8	
6: Once every 2 weeks	3	
7: At least once a week	4	
The club is one of the most important social groups I belong to		10,117
1: Strongly disagree	11	
2: Partially disagree	14	
3: Neutral	22	
4: Partially agree	27	
5: Strongly agree	25	

information from the member survey. The questions that identify the variables on the individual level are shown in Table 5.

## Results

This section provides an overview of the multilevel analyses. Table 5 displays the results of the three multilevel regression models. Model 1 represents the dependent index variable for formal democracy, model 2 assesses informal democracy also constructed as an index and model 3 has a single dependent variable that reflects the time since the last attempt made by the member to influence decision-making in the club. Overall, the effects of the independent variables are relatively similar across models, particularly on the meso level.

On the macro level, we assumed in the first hypothesis that the democratic culture and strength of the country has an impact on association democracy in sports clubs. However, the multilevel analysis can only confirm a slight statistically significant correlation between ‘country’ and ‘participation in informal democracy’ [see ‘Model characteristics, intercept variance (country)'] and the between-cluster variance, i.e. the correlation between clubs in the same country, is rather low [see ICC (country)]. A ranking of the ten countries in terms of members’ participation in association democracy in sports clubs—based on

descriptive results to the question as to whether members speak their mind to key persons in the club—compared with a ranking of the ‘democratic strength and quality’ in the same countries, described in the theoretical part of the article—does not show the expected match (Fig. 1). Similarly, there is no match between ‘democratic strength and quality’ and the other measures for members’ participation in either formal democracy or informal democracy in sports clubs. In short, the analysis cannot confirm the first hypothesis.

On the meso level, the results show that as member numbers increase, participation in association democracy falls significantly. What can also be seen is that the effects are somewhat more significant in model 1, i.e. the model that measures formal democracy, than in the other two models. Overall, hypothesis 2 can be confirmed for all three models. However, the remaining independent variables from the meso level, i.e. the type of sport club, as well as management-related issues, expressed by the likelihood of clubs to involve members and the delegation of decision-making to committees, show only very modest effects on member participation in democratic decision-making. An exception is that clubs that aim to involve members when making important decisions have more active members in the club democracy. Although statistically significant, except for participation in informal democracy, it should be noted that the effect sizes are relatively small (beta coefficients between 0.071 and

**Table 5** Results from the statistical multilevel analyses

Independent variables	Model 1: formal democracy (n = 7768)		Model 2: informal democracy (n = 7172)		Model 3: time since last attempt (n = 7734)	
	Empty model non-stand. B	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β
<i>Club level variables—size, type and management</i>						
Club size						
0–199 members (ref.)		– 0.287***		– 0.196*		– 0.216**
200–399 members		– 0.518***		– 0.238***		– 0.231***
400–999 members		– 0.536***		– 0.268**		– 0.262*
1000 + members		0.071**		0.053		0.078***
The club aims to involve members when making important decisions (1–5)		0.029		– 0.007		– 0.021
The club delegates decision-making from the board to committees (1–5)		0.000		– 0.020		– 0.005
Single or multi-sport club (multi-sport)						
<i>Individual level variables—socio-economic background</i>						
Gender (male)		0.168***		0.293***		0.255***
Age						
16–39 years (ref.)						
40–59 years		0.196***		0.108**		0.300***
60 years or over		0.399***		0.126		0.293**
Educational level						
Low (ref.)						
Medium		0.168**		0.122		0.426***
High		0.238***		0.265**		0.832***
Born in the country in which the club is located (no)		– 0.067		– 0.033		– 0.077
<i>Individual level variables—attachment and participation</i>						
Connection to the club (0–1 items)						
Member of the club (yes)		0.431***		0.159**		0.232***
Regular volunteer (yes)		1.340***		1.111***		1.582***
Occasional volunteer (yes)		0.248***		0.333***		0.320***
Number of years connected to the club (1–6)		0.086***		0.037***		0.093***
Frequency of sports participation in the club						
Never/hot sports active		0.090		0.252*		0.176***
Less than once a week (ref.)						
1 time a week		– 0.075		0.100		– 0.013
2 times a week or more		0.021		0.247*		0.079
Participation in competitive sport in the club (yes)		– 0.036		0.088		0.067
Frequency of participation in the club’s social gatherings (1–7)		0.286***		0.300***		0.278***

**Table 5** continued

Independent variables	Model 1: formal democracy (n = 7768)		Model 2: informal democracy (n = 7172)		Model 3: time since last attempt (n = 7734)	
	Empty model non-stand. B	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β
The club is one of the most important social groups I belong to (1–5)						
<i>Model characteristics</i>						
Intercept	3.193***	0.146***	4.050***	0.158***	3.292***	0.112***
Intercept variance (country)	0.210	– 0.487*	0.229*	0.557***	0.170	– 0.742**
Intercept variance (club: country)	0.589***	0.053	0.289***	0.102	0.358***	0.096
Intercept variance (residual)	2.693***	1.735***	2.635***	1.623***	3.817***	2.625***
ICC (country)	0.0601	0.0272	0.0726	0.0571	0.0391	0.0338
ICC (club: country)	0.1687	0.0831	0.0917	0.0342	0.0824	0.0416
– 2 Log likelihood	43,457.32	26,777.38	37,938.42	24,115.30	45,854.87	29,725.37
Akaike Inf. Crit.	43,463.32	26,783.38	37,944.42	24,121.31	45,860.87	29,731.38
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	43,485.28	26,804.24	37,966.00	24,141.93	45,882.75	29,752.22

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001

0.078). In short, the results with regard to the meso level mainly show that club size is a key driver for participation in association democracy, while management and club type seem to be less important.

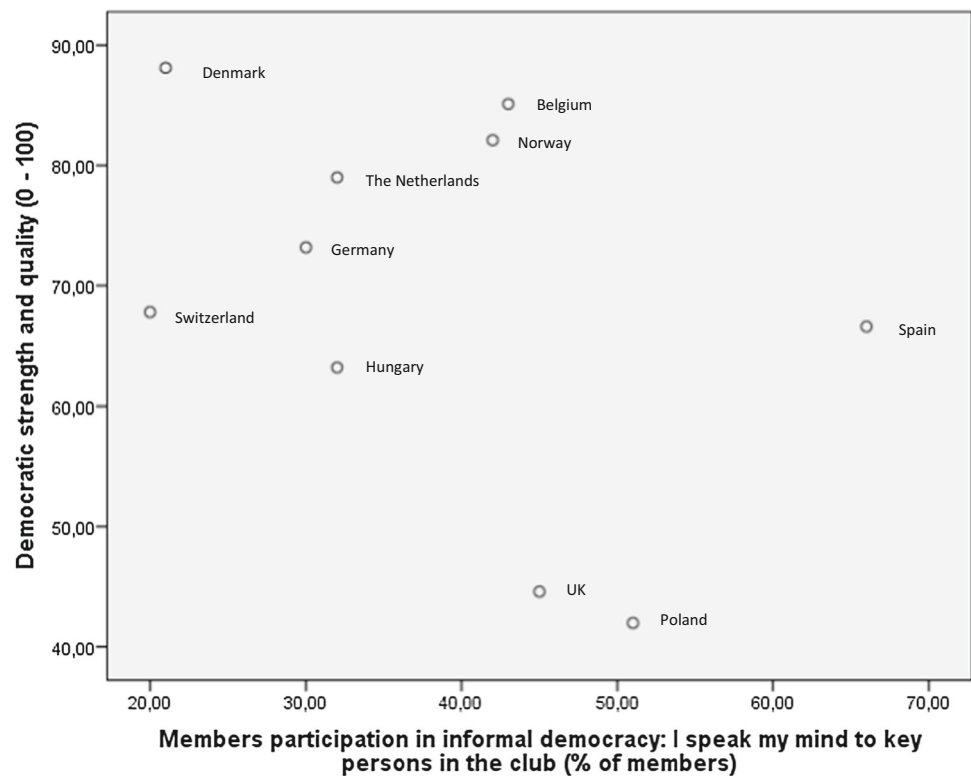
On the micro level, clear and stable results across all three models are found for the socio-economic background variables (hypothesis 3). First of all, men are significantly more involved in association democracy in sports clubs than women. Secondly, age also shows significant effects in all three models, meaning that with increasing age, participation in both formal and informal democracy increases. The effects are slightly greater in model 1 than in model 2 in which there is also no difference between the participation of younger adults (aged 16–39) and the elderly (aged 60 or above) (see Table 5). With regard to educational background, the results show that people with a high educational level have higher levels of participation in association democracy in sports clubs than people with a low educational level. The effects for people with a migration background are negative, but they are relatively small and not statistically significant. Overall, the effects of the socio-economic variables on participation in association democracy are mainly as hypothesized.

With regard to individual level variables that reflect attachment to the club and general participation in the club, the results are more diverse across models (hypothesis 4). The connection to the club, measured by being a member of the club and being a regular or occasional volunteer, shows positive and significant effects in all three models. The effects of being a member and a regular volunteer are somewhat greater in model 1 than in model 2. Moreover, regular volunteers participate more in association democracy than both occasional volunteers and ordinary members.

The number of years of connection to the club is found to have a positive effect in all three models, although the effect sizes are relatively small. The frequency of active sports participation only shows significant effects in models 2 and 3: people who are never physically active in the club are more involved in informal democracy than people who are active less than once a week. However, people who are frequently active, i.e. twice per week or more, are more involved in informal democracy than people who are active less than once week. With regard to participation in competitive sport, no significant effects can be identified in Table 5.

Regarding the social aspects, i.e. members’ socio-affective integration in the club, positive, significant and relatively strong effects are detected in all three models. It should, however, be noted that the effect sizes from the frequency of social participation are somewhat stronger than the effect sizes from the affective affiliation. Thus, hypothesis 4 can generally be confirmed, but it is primarily

**Fig. 1** A scatterplot of the association between ‘democratic strength and quality’ and ‘participation in informal democracy in sports clubs’ in ten European countries



social participation and volunteering and secondly socio-affective integration in the club that have positive effects on participation in the formal and informal democracy of the sports clubs.

## Discussion

Unlike most studies on associations and democracy which focus on the external democratic roles and functions of associations, this article focuses on the internal democracy of associations. A review of the last 20 years of articles in *Voluntas* and other journals, as well as the latest books regarding associations and democracy (Rossteutscher 2005; Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007a, b; Freise and Hallmann 2014), shows few articles about the internal democracy of associations. In the following section, we firstly discuss what the study has contributed in relation to research into participatory democracy. Secondly, we discuss how the results of this study can inspire future research into the democratic role of associations.

First of all, the analysis contributes to the discussion of participatory democracy as a democratic ideal. As explained in the introduction, participatory democracy is a model of democracy in which citizens have a more direct influence on political decisions than in representative democracy. Participatory democracy as a democratic ideal presupposes, however, that those who join an association

also participate in the democratic decision-making process (Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007a, b). This study shows that a relatively large proportion of sports club members participate in the democratic processes of the clubs. However, it is surprising that the country level has relatively little significance for how much members of sports clubs in European countries participate in association democracy. A study of active citizenship in Europe found large differences between the countries included in this study as regards the citizens’ participation in ‘community life’ where people collaborate based on a common interest (Hoskins and Mascherini 2009). This immediate contradiction between the results from the referenced study and our study is probably due to the fact that there are very large differences between countries in the relative number of associations where groups of citizens themselves decide on their own interests. Comparative analyses of sports clubs show very large differences in the relative number of clubs (Breuer et al. 2015).

While participation in internal democracy in sports clubs does not depend on the democratic culture and tradition of the individual country, the study shows that participation in internal democracy largely depends on organizational conditions, first and foremost club size. The bigger the club is, the lower is the members’ participation in the democracy of the club. This confirms what other studies of sports clubs have shown in that the size of the club is of importance to members’ involvement (Schlesinger and Nagel

2013; Østerlund 2014; Wicker et al. 2014; van der Roest et al. 2016). This is a challenge for sports clubs. On the one hand, sports organizations and many clubs want more members and it is also politically desirable that the clubs attract more citizens (Ministry of Culture in Denmark 2016; Harris et al. 2009). On the other hand, it seems that members in small clubs find it easier to identify with the club and other members, they are more inclined to master dominant values and norms, and they are more active in the democracy of the club.

One of the ideals of participatory democracy is that citizens are more committed to democracy when it comes to the concrete tasks that the individual citizen is involved in than in representative democracy (Hirst 2002). The study shows that a relatively large proportion of the members take part in the decision-making processes in the sports club, but the study finds the same inequality as in representative democracy: men are more involved in association democracy than women, with increasing participation as age increases and people with a high educational level are more involved in association democracy than people with a low educational level.

The study also shows that the nature of the attachment of the members to the specific club is important for participation in association democracy. Participation in voluntary work and participation in the social activities of the association is conducive to the members' engagement in the democracy of the club. In recent years, in several of the countries included in this study, e.g. England (Harris et al. 2009), there has been a strong focus on increasing participation in sports clubs in order to increase the physical activity level of the population. This raises questions about what society wants from sports clubs in terms of their role: either as democratic communities or as promoters of healthy lifestyles. Although these roles do not necessarily cancel each other out, some articles suggest that sports club members who participate in more flexible and exercise-oriented activities were found to be less active in democracy, social life and voluntary work than members who participate in other forms of sports activities (Østerlund 2014; van der Roest 2016).

In short, this study suggests that the organizational, meso level has a decisive impact on citizens' active participation in community life, i.e. the (relative) number of associations, their size and how the associations are able to integrate the members so that they have a strong affiliation to the association.

As mentioned, the research into associations and democracy has focused primarily on the democratic functions and effects of associations. This study does not contribute any new insights into this part of the research, but we are convinced that the results can be an inspiration for future research into the democratic role of associations.

The literature distinguishes predominantly between three democratic functions of associations (Warren 2001, 2003; Freise and Hallmann 2014): That members of associations acquire democratic skills; that associations are intermediaries between the individuals and the state through the articulation and aggregation of interests; and that associations collaborate with public authorities and institutions with the intention of increasing the democratic legitimacy of public institutions. It's primarily the first mentioned democratic function of associations this study can be an inspiration for future research.

The alleged democratic significance of associations has been investigated in a number of studies, many of which have shown a correlation between participation in associations and political interest, political self-confidence and knowledge of society (see, e.g. Verba et al. 1995; Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 2000; Warren 2001), while other studies have questioned this alleged connection (Van der Meer and Van Ingen 2009; Freise and Hallmann 2014; Dekker 2014). However, these studies have not distinguished between different types of members. A question that has remained unanswered is whether the form of participation in an association makes a difference in relation to the socialization effect. Therefore, there is a need for further studies into the extent to which the nature of members' involvement in an association (participation in internal democracy and volunteering) has an impact on members' political interest and participation in elections.

## Conclusion

This study shows that all three analytical levels (macro, meso and micro) are relevant for the participation of members and volunteers in association democracy in sports clubs, but the micro level is of primary importance followed by the meso level, while the macro level has little significance.

Firstly, the majority of the sports club members in the ten European countries included in the study participate in some form of association democracy. But only a minority of members participate in formal association democracy. Between the countries, there are large differences in how much members engage in association democracy. But this is primarily due to differences between the countries in terms of the characteristics of the sports clubs, the members' socioeconomic background and their affiliation with the sports club.

Secondly, the size of the club has a significant impact on how much members engage in association democracy. Other structural features and management characteristics of the clubs have little importance.

Thirdly, the members' socioeconomic background is essential for participation in association democracy. Involvement in association democracy is higher among men than women, and participation generally increases proportionate to age and educational level. Migration background has no statistical significant influence.

Fourthly, the way the members participate in the clubs has great importance for their participation in the association democracy. Members engaged in voluntary work, especially regular volunteering, members who participate in social activities and members who attach great importance to membership of the club are more engaged in association democracy than other members. However, it is surprising that the duration of membership and the frequency with which members participate in sport activities in the club are of relatively little importance to participation in association democracy.

**Acknowledgements** The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution to this article from research partners in the project 'Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe' (SIVSCE): Elien Claes, KU Leuven, Belgium; Geoff Nichols, University of Sheffield, England; Matthew James, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Dirk Steinbach, Leadership Academy, Germany; Szilvia Perényi, University of Physical Education in Budapest/University of Debrecen, Hungary; Harold van der Werff, Mulier Institute, the Netherlands; Monika Piątkowska & Sylwia Gocłowska, Josef Pilsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw, Poland; Ramon Llopis-Goig, University of Valencia, Spain; Siegfried Nagel & Jenny Adler Zwahlen, University of Bern, Switzerland.

**Funding** This study has been co-funded with 500,000 Euros by the Erasmus + Programme of European Commission (Grant No. 2014-3140/004-001).

#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest and have not received funding that would influence their conclusions or data presentation for this research.

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