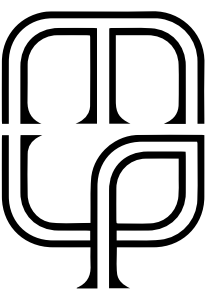
ELITES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

NIKLAS ALTERMARK, MALIN ARVIDSON,
JAYEON LEE AND ROBERTO SCARAMUZZINO

Elites in civil society



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Niklas Altermark, Malin Arvidson,
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Contents

List of figures *page* vi
List of tables vii

Introduction 1
1 Defining civil society elites: theoretical foundations 17
2 Tracing elites: methods and research design 37
3 Climbing the ladder: careers, backgrounds and distance to the grassroots 71
4 Crossing boundaries: civil society leaders at the nexus of power 97
5 Comparative patterns of elitisation 121
6 Values at the top: the ethos and attitudes of civil society elites 139
Conclusion 165

Bibliography 181
Index 197

Figures

1.1 Elite stratification and integration *page* 22
1.2 The elite stratification–integration model 23
1.3 Visualising the civil society elite 28
3.1 Patterns of stratification in civil society 95
4.1 Patterns of integration in civil society 118
5.1 Civil society elite patterns 123

Tables

2.1	Types of resources for each indicator	*page* 41
2.2	Operationalisation of indicators	42
2.3	Distribution of CSOs on the elite score in each national context	44
2.4	Mapping of leaders in each context	47
2.5	Population and respondents of the civil society elite survey	49
2.6	Non-response bias analysis of the survey based on three variables (percentages)	51
2.7	Variables used to measure privileged background	57
2.8	Variables used to measure achieved status	59
2.9	Civil society grassroots	61
2.10	Variables used to measure the gap between CS elites and grassroots	62
2.11	The general elite (% within country, N)	66
2.12	Variables used to measure proximity to the general elite	67
3.1	High-profile career and board membership	77

Tables

3.2 Privileged background and high status among the civil society elites 83
3.3 Social distance between the civil society elites and the grassroots 89
3.4 Stratification in civil society measured in three dimensions across countries 93
4.1 Elite integration through boundary crossing 103
4.2 Elite integration through personal and professional networking 108
4.3 Elite integration as proximity to the general elite 113
4.4 Integration in civil society measured in three dimensions across countries 116
6.1 Individual level variables 148
6.2 Correlation between stratification and integration 149
6.3 Elitisation of civil society leaders and key attitudes 159

Introduction

The idea that there are elites, elevated above and distinct from the general population, is generally accepted in society. Ask anyone 'who belongs to the political elite' and you are likely to receive the names of ministers, party leaders and well-known parliamentarians. The political elite may be criticised for being out of touch with ordinary people or admired for their exceptional skills. Similarly, individuals belonging to the economic elite have become household names. They are commonly talked about as innovative entrepreneurs, extraordinary CEOs of large companies and brave investors, but also as a group with substantial power beyond their position as company leaders. Regardless of whether you praise, criticise or scorn these individuals, few would question the existence of such elites.

Having researched civil society elites for six years, we can confidently say that the idea of an elite in this field evokes reactions ranging from complete puzzlement to

passive-aggressive defensiveness. Those active in the sector tend to view the elite perspective as an insult, highlighting the valuable causes of their organisation and the vital democratic functions of the sector. Civil society researchers may be slightly more open to the idea; after all, many have problematised the effects of professionalisation and the adoption of leadership ideals from the private sector. Nevertheless, the concept of elites is often considered alien in this field. When speaking to elite scholars, however, the idea of civil society elites is often met with hesitation. While there may be union and business association leaders who are part of the elite, this is due to their political and economic influence rather than because they form an elite specific to civil society.

Why is this the case? Why is an elite perspective not considered significant to our understanding of civil society by either practitioners or academics? One possible explanation is that the term 'elite' does not fit well with a sector commonly understood to challenge the power of business and government, give a voice to marginalised groups and draw attention to worthwhile but often overlooked causes. Consequently, leaders of civil society organisations may seem to have little in common with business CEOs and top politicians, which is why elite studies have focused on potentates in other sectors (Hartmann, 2015). Another reason may be that this sector is associated with collective rather than individual action; consequently, the focus is often on the collective rather than the individuals at the top of organisations (cf. Anheier, 2005). This is also reflected in civil society

studies, which tend to focus on movements, networks and organisations rather than individual leaders.

We contend that neglecting a civil society elite is a mistake. This sector is a field of power and is often expected to fulfil vital democratic functions. A variety of civil society organisations, addressing issues such as gender, climate change, water and sanitation, food security, human rights and corruption, possess power and influence comparable to that of high-level political and economic actors. We should therefore expect civil society to have its own internal structure of resource and power concentration. While civil society elites may not become household names like their counterparts in other sectors, they nevertheless exert tremendous influence.

We define elites as individuals in positions of power who form a distinct group and enjoy high status and recognition within their social field. In this book, we examine who belongs to the civil society elite. We demonstrate that the attributes of this group are similar to those of elite groups in other sectors and that there is considerable integration between the civil society elite and other elite groups. However, the extent and intensity of elitisation differ in the four countries we examine: Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. We argue that these differences are structurally explained by the specific characteristics of each of these countries' civil societies. We also demonstrate that the attitudes of top leaders in the sector, regarding issues such as democracy and social inequality, are linked to their elite attributes. Civil society leaders from elite backgrounds tend to be more satisfied with

how society functions and are less likely to view social divisions as problematic.

These insights are important. Civil society is a central pillar of democracy and democratisation processes. However, what will happen to its distinctiveness and role as a counterbalance to economic and political interests if its leaders become increasingly similar to those in these fields? How is the sector to advance democratic ideals if the top echelons are detached from its grassroots? In order to address these questions, we need to understand the civil society elite.

Why study civil society elites?

This book aims to call into question two assumptions. First, the idea that the civil society sector does not nurture its own elites. Second, it challenges the sector's self-image as a field of equal opportunities and egalitarianism. Why is this important? We have already touched upon one motive. Civil society is widely recognised as playing a vital role in liberal democracies by channelling dissent and representing marginalised communities, thus fulfilling key egalitarian functions (Cohen and Arato, 2002). The possible existence of an exclusive and insular elite within the sector would certainly call into question its ability to fulfil such a function. Indeed, there have been clear indications in recent years that these questions are pertinent. Media coverage of high-profile scandals involving corruption and abhorrent behaviour by senior civil society leaders, as well as the failure to represent disadvantaged groups, has raised real concerns in several

countries about who represents civil society and what characterises the sector. Rather than viewing such scandals as isolated events, they may also suggest a disconnect between leaders and the people they are supposed to represent.

Another reason for studying civil society elites is the sector's distinct nature. Civil society is commonly understood to be distinct from business and politics, deriving its value from its independence from these spheres (Salamon et al., 2003). Voluntary organisations, charities and advocacy groups are often portrayed as being governed by a specific ethos that is separate from profit interests or the sheer will to power. Elite literature has devoted considerable attention to the integration of different elite groups and how this can nurture homogenisation of worldviews and attitudes (Best, 2018). If civil society elites are becoming increasingly similar to political and business leaders in this way, and thereby distancing themselves from the grassroots and constituencies they are expected to represent, questions arise about their democratic legitimacy and the autonomy of civil society itself (see Guo and Musso, 2007; Harris, 2001).

Lastly, there is a need to focus on civil society elites in light of the transformative processes affecting the sector. First, civil society organisations are often described as playing a key role in policymaking processes (Casey, 2004). This is based on their role as advocates representing the interests of their constituents to local or national policymakers. However, in many contexts, advocacy is increasingly carried out by professional lobbyists who work for, but are not necessarily part of, the civil society

organisation in question (Mellquist, 2022a; Svallfors, 2016). Knowledge that was previously embedded in the organisation across a range of groups, including volunteers and clients, is at risk of being lost. Furthermore, as welfare arrangements transform in many Western countries and public services are reduced, civil society organisations' role may shift towards service provision rather than advocacy and watchdogs (Skocpol, 2003). As these processes drive professionalisation, studies are already pointing to a widening gap between leaders and senior managers and those at the grassroots. We argue that an elite perspective is a valuable addition to these discussions.

The research problem

This book addresses the question of how we should understand and analyse the top echelons of civil society as an elite. This requires three things: that we develop a theoretical model to facilitate such a description; that we use this model to describe and compare civil society elite groups in the countries we study; and that we analyse how different elite structures can be understood in terms of both country-level differences and the attitudes and ideals held by members of the elite.

We believe that there are two important tensions to bear in mind when tackling these tasks. First, civil societies in different countries appear to be facing a dilemma at this particular moment in time. As we have mentioned, this sector is commonly understood to be egalitarian and a central pillar of democracy, functioning according

to ideals distinct from profit-seeking and the pursuit of power. In order to fulfil these functions, civil society leaders must be able to stand up to political and business interests, advocate important causes and communicate with both members of their organisation and the general public. The power of civil society as a whole depends on its leaders being able to exert power and confidence on a par with economic and political leaders. Leaders must embody and demonstrate authority in relation to other stakeholders, while also accepting a leadership role that involves nurturing the collective's ability to influence internal decision-making processes – no easy task, admittedly. Therefore, it seems that civil society leaders are expected to be exceptional in several respects while also being equal and fine-tuned to their constituencies.

The second tension relates to the aforementioned reactions to our research topic from people active in the sector. While the sector undoubtedly seeks power, there is also a strong denial of personal ambition to reach powerful positions. In many cases, the legitimacy of civil society leaders appears to be closely linked to their connection to the groups they represent and to the causes they promote. Conversely, it may be necessary for leaders to have personal ambitions to reach the top of the sector, especially considering the growing number of skilled professionals available.

We believe that the future role of the sector will depend on how these tensions play out. We also believe that research into the sector would be much better placed to understand its development if it were to focus on its elites. In this book, we use the elite perspective as an

analytical entry point to describe the top leaders of the sector, and as a lens through which to understand the internal structures of civil society. More precisely, the book addresses questions such as who the elite are, what processes shape them and how they relate to other elite groups in society.

Elites and leaders in civil society

Although the elite perspective has been absent from civil society research, our research problem does not emerge out of thin air. The existing literature provides several clues as to why an elite perspective is necessary. To pinpoint our contribution, we will first review the literature on which our research is based.

In the early 2000s, several American researchers argued that leadership ideals in civil society were changing. While previous leadership ideals were based on 'street credentials', i.e. a long-term career commitment to the sector, new norms regarding organisational efficiency and performance were steadily gaining ground (Abzug and Galaskiewicz, 2001; Dolan, 2002; Einolf, 2021; Froelich et al., 2011; Suarez, 2010). This is reflected in the emergence of training programmes for civil society leaders which emphasise general management skills, as well as the importance of leaders being able to coach and nurture qualities specific to civil society (Altermark, Johansson and Stattin, 2023; Dolan, 2002; Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024). Meanwhile, several studies have examined recruitment patterns in the sector, highlighting the growing emphasis on formal educational qualifications.

These tendencies are commonly described as the 'professionalisation' of civil society, a theme that we will revisit throughout the book. Conversely, studies have also pinpointed that, in practice, recruitment to senior leadership positions involves selection based on gender and ethnicity (Fredette and Sessler Bernstein, 2019; Jonsson and Lagerlöf Nilsson, 2007; Lee, 2023), that the top segment of the sector suffers from a lack of diversity (Fulton, Oyakawa and Wood, 2019) and that an 'ethnic divide' exists in the leadership of non-profit organisations (Lee, 2023). As in other sectors, senior leadership appears to be dominated by white, middle-aged men (Danley and Blessett, 2022; Ivanovska Hadjievska and Arvidson, 2025). Another strand of civil society research has observed that business and political elites are frequently recruited to the boards of civil society organisations (Callen, Klein and Tinkelman, 2003; Iecovich, 2004), which can be perceived as a means of achieving legitimacy. It has also been noted that networking with other sectors can secure access to funding, information and skills (Harris, 2014). These descriptions express what is conceptualised as 'integration' in elite literature.

Civil society is rarely conceptualised as an independent sector with its own elite in the elite literature. However, civil society is occasionally recognised as a space for networking and relationship-building between business and political elites (e.g. Farkas, 2012). Such networking is sometimes linked to 'quiet politics', i.e. negotiations and decision-making that are out of reach of public scrutiny (Ibsen, Ellersgaard and Larsen, 2021). Several studies also examine the motives behind the involvement of

business and political leaders in civil society. Being associated with civil society can give the elite a 'good glow' (Dean, 2020) and can increase their status and prestige within the community (Egholm, Heyse and Mourey, 2020; Middleton, 1987; Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024). Recent research also suggests that altruism drives the involvement of senior managers and leaders from other sectors in civil society. When asked why they move to civil society despite lower pay, corporate executives cite the social mission as a key attraction (Niendorf, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2023).

Lastly, the comparative component of the study warrants a comment. There are indeed studies that compare non-profit leadership with leadership of, for example, the corporate sector (Miller-Stevens et al., 2018; Niendorf, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2023). However, there is little research comparing non-profit leadership in different national contexts. Also, the elite literature falls surprisingly short with regard to comparative approaches that allow for complex, nation-based comparisons beyond elite composition. A few exceptions illustrate why such comparisons are important. Engaging in a comparative approach to how 'success' is defined and social mobility is managed, Naudet's (2018) ethnographic study of elites in India, France and the US offers detailed insights into contextually derived differences in the definition of elite status. Also, Harrington (2017) touches upon the significance of national, and global, contexts in his exploration of habitus among wealth managers. In the recently developed World Economic Elite database (Bühlmann et al., 2025), a group of researchers explore new ways

of compiling comparable data on economic elites from different national contexts, indicating that comparative approaches in elite studies are on the rise. Together, we take these studies as indications that a comparative analysis of civil society elites is called for.

In summary, while there are important insights to build on, we find no comprehensive efforts to bring together civil society and elite research. Bringing these perspectives together is the primary contribution of this volume. In doing so, we develop a theoretical model that can be used to study the civil society elites of different countries, as well as facilitating comparisons between different elites. We also develop methodological tools that can aid future scrutiny of the top strata of civil society. More broadly, we hope that our empirical results will stimulate debate about the internal and external challenges faced by civil society, and about whether its distinctiveness and egalitarian ethos are under threat.

The empirical contexts

As we have already mentioned, our approach to studying civil society elites is comparative in nature. Given the differences in the roles and functions of the various sectors, there are good reasons to believe that elite structures within civil societies differ as well. Capturing this variety, as well as identifying similarities, is essential to understanding what constitutes a civil society elite.

As we will discuss further in Chapter 2, our analysis is primarily based on quantitative survey data from 739 leaders of resource-rich civil society organisations in Italy,

Poland, Sweden and the UK. This material is complemented by over 40 interviews with leaders and prosopographic data, to exemplify, verify and nuance the results of our survey analyses. Our case selection is designed to achieve empirical diversity and provide grounds for variation in elite composition within advanced welfare states and liberal democracies. The four countries represent different political systems and models of civil society, which are described below.

Historically, Italian civil society has been dominated by a few large actors primarily associated with the Catholic Church and the labour movement (Barbetta and Maggio, 2008; Cartocci and Maconi, 2006). Another distinctive feature is corporatist arrangements involving interest group representation in policy processes and service provision. A historical review of Italian civil society reveals that, prior to the formation of the Italian state in 1861, charitable organisations such as hospices, orphanages and associations for the poor, established by the Catholic Church, played a pivotal role in providing welfare services. The emergence of the labour movement in the early twentieth century introduced new organisations, such as trade unions and mutual benefit societies, particularly in the north of the country (Barbetta and Maggio, 2008; Cartocci and Maconi, 2006). These developments formed the basis of a diverse civil society sector characterised, at least in part, by competition for resources and influence over local and national political agendas. Today, large umbrella organisations operating at national and regional levels are key players in domestic politics. However, other actors, such as professional

social cooperatives engaged in service production, have become increasingly influential (Borzaga and Fazzi, 2010).

Poland's history as a post-socialist country is the most important historical factor in shaping its civil society (Ekiert and Kubik, 2014). Following democratisation, organisational forms and types of civic engagement from before and after 1989 have coexisted within a changing political, social and economic environment. Contemporary Polish civil society is often portrayed as underdeveloped and bureaucratic compared with other European countries. The sector is not as dominated by large umbrella organisations as other countries in our sample (Gawin and Gliński, 2006; Kościański and Misztal, 2008). However, there are many signs of a new phase in Polish civil society, including a revival of grassroots activism against established actors and politicians. This is exemplified by the mass demonstrations organised by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy in 2015–2016 (Jacobsson and Korolczuk, 2017), which indicate that the sector is an important platform for protests. In other words, recent political dynamics, with changing governments representing different stances towards civil society, may present challenges as well as opportunities for the sector and its leaders to increase their influence and profile (Korolczuk, 2022).

Swedish civil society is characterised by a relatively large number of formal civil society organisations, with a large proportion of the population being members of them (Wijkström and Einarsson, 2006). Twentieth-century political development was dominated by the labour movement and its associated organisations. The

institutional arrangements of corporatism, which invited interest group representatives to participate in policy processes, also led to the formation of business associations as counterparts. However, Swedish corporatism also involved other popular movements, such as disability organisations, sports organisations and the temperance movement (Lundström and Svedberg, 2003), i.e. large, hierarchical associations of membership-based organisations representing different social groups. Consequently, there is a strong tradition of close and cordial relations between civil society and political leaders. More recently, however, there has been an orientation towards professional, service-oriented organisations, which may have weakened links with the state.

In the UK, civil society has been shaped by the Charity Commission's laws, which were established in the mid-nineteenth century. This legislation emphasised that charities should provide support and social services, but prevented registered charities from engaging in overtly political activities, a matter that remains a point of contention to this day (Hilton et al., 2012). In the early 2000s, the government encouraged partnerships between the state and civil society. This led to the capacity building of civil society organisations (CSOs) in terms of leadership and management, as well as increased funding. Today, the sector is highly professionalised, and leaders are expected to have considerable management expertise. There is a tradition within the sector of recruiting high-profile individuals from the corporate and public sectors to serve on the boards of CSOs. Recent debates have highlighted a division within civil society between 'insiders',

i.e. well-funded CSOs that provide services, and 'outsiders', i.e. less well-established community groups. The former enjoy privileged access to the media and policymakers (Alcock and Kendall, 2011). In recent years, cuts to the welfare state have prompted many organisations to take political action, which has in turn provoked some political leaders to call for stricter regulation of organisations' critical voices.

Overall, there are clear differences and similarities emerging between the countries we examine. We do not suggest that particular aspects of these countries produce a specific civil society elite structure. However, we will demonstrate the importance of contextual factors and national specificities in understanding how civil society elites are formed. These are questions that will prove central when we interpret our results further down the line.

Structure of the book

The next step in our endeavour to understand the civil society elite is to outline the theoretical model used to identify a civil society elite. This model is based on the idea that an elite represents a distance between itself and the grassroots of the sectors, as well as proximity to other elite groups. This theoretical discussion (Chapter 1) is followed by an outline of our empirical strategy and data used for studying civil society elites (Chapter 2).

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the distance between the top strata of civil society and their supposed constituencies, focusing on the internal hierarchies of the sector. Chapter 4 describes and compares the proximity of civil

society elites to other elite groups. These two aspects – distance and proximity – are then considered together in Chapter 5. Here, we focus particularly on how patterns of elitisation relate to our four country cases.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of civil society leaders' attitudes, focusing on their views on democracy and inequality in their respective societies. This is an intriguing aspect of the effect of civil society elites integrating with other elite groups and speaks to discussions regarding leadership ideals and sector distinction.

In the concluding chapter, we return to the questions and concerns raised in the Introduction, revisiting the interesting findings presented in the empirical chapters. What do our descriptions of the civil society elite imply for our understanding of the sector? What can we learn from adopting an elite perspective when studying the sector?

1

Defining civil society elites: theoretical foundations

To analyse the top segment of civil society as an elite, we will use a theoretical framework based on elite literature. First, we provide a brief overview of elite studies, identifying stratification and integration as two key dimensions on which our theoretical model is based. We then discuss how this model can be applied to understand the elites of civil society. In the final section, we relate our theoretical framework to contemporary civil society studies.

Stratification and integration in elite studies

There are numerous conceptions of elites that highlight exclusiveness, elevation and inequality in different ways. Here, we follow Shamus Khan's (2012) relatively open definition, specifying elites as small, cohesive groups that control a disproportionate share of resources. These resources enable elite members to exert disproportionate influence over a particular sector of society or society

as a whole (see also Pakulski, 2018). While this working definition defines our area of study, it does not provide much guidance on how to identify a civil society elite. Therefore, we must delve deeper into the rich theoretical tradition of elite studies.

During the early twentieth century, a number of canonical social scientists devoted their analytical energies to exploring the top echelons of social stratification. The first generation of elite scholars, notably Robert Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, set up arguments against democratic egalitarianism, conceiving it as little more than rose-tinted idealism (Nye, 1977). According to Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy', the formation of elites is the result of organisations becoming increasingly complex. In order to manage this complexity, a smaller group of individuals would come to occupy a limited number of leading positions (Michels, 1962). The power attached to these positions can then be used to gain even more influence, forming an oligarchy. For Michels, the elite was characterised by control of such positions and by the lack of turnover among those in them.

Mosca (1939) argued that the formation of elites reflected the unequal distribution of talent in society. However, as there is a popular perception of a distinction between the elite and non-elite, the former will act to protect its position. Pareto (1991) complicates this binary by introducing a third category: society consists of the ruling elite, the non-ruling elite and the masses (Pareto, 1991). In practice, Pareto posited that there would be limited mobility between these groups, meaning that the

most competent individuals could be excluded from elite positions.

Thus, the reasoning of Michels, Mosca and Pareto builds on the idea that the elite is a group that has power based on inhabiting certain positions, and that there is a level of organisation and coordinated action to preserve the group's exclusive character and access to power. Society is understood to be organised according to hierarchical principles, establishing stratification as a defining aspect of what constitutes an elite group. These thinkers also agree that the emergence of elites is a process intimately linked to societal development. Although they all pointed to certain risks associated with increasing elitisation, the formation of elite groups was seen as more or less unavoidable.

After World War II, elite studies developed in several directions. One central debate relevant to this concerns the conflicting perspectives of those who advocate a power elite perspective and those who propose a pluralist understanding of elites. The power elite perspective is often associated with C. Wright Mills's ([1956] 2000) analysis of the connections between elite groups in politics, business and the military. While acknowledging the existence of different elite groups in various societal sectors, Mills argued that these groups are integrated into a societal power elite capable of steering societal development by acting in concert. In this analysis, elite integration appears to pose a significant threat to democratic equality. Thus, rather than viewing elitisation as inevitable, Mills and other power elite theorists view the

existence of power elites as a political phenomenon that can be countered.

In contrast, the pluralist view rejects the notion of a societal power elite, instead viewing society as comprising various elite groups that counterbalance each other. In his study of political decision-making in New Haven, Connecticut, Robert Dahl (1961) argued that no specific elite group dominated political processes. Instead, representatives of different societal interests balanced each other out, reached compromises and competed for influence within the framework of democracy. As no elite came to hold a permanently dominant position in society, stratification into elite groups was perceived as less of a democratic problem. Rather than elite integration, the pluralist view contends that different elite groups represent different interests, all of which are included in fair competition for power.

Although both pluralists and power elite theorists advance strong normative propositions about how democracy should function, the divide between these two perspectives appears to be empirical in nature. Power elite advocates contend that elites integrate and coordinate action, whereas pluralists emphasise elite integration to a lesser extent. Indeed, much subsequent elite research has also approached the hierarchical structures forming elites and their integration as empirical matters (Higley et al., 1991; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018b). Consequently, we find studies examining the degree to which political elites are embedded within business elites (Miliband, 1969), discussions about the impact on democratic legitimacy (Domhoff, 2018), analyses of elite individuals' multiple

board memberships (Ibsen, Ellersgaard and Larsen, 2021; Mizruchi, 1996; Moore et al., 2002) and projects focusing on the 'revolving doors' between sectors, where individuals typically transition from politics to the lobbying industry (Clausen and Can, 2011). There are also numerous studies focusing on how elite groups are distinguished and how they seek to preserve their status.

We take two important insights from this review. First, in line with the prevailing trend in elite research, we also treat questions about elite structure as empirical issues that may manifest differently in various contexts. This is why we speak of 'elitisation', indicating that the processes that form elite groups can vary in intensity and scope between contexts. Second, we note that elite research has consistently focused on stratification as a defining aspect of elites (if elite groups are not hierarchically ordered above the masses, it would not make sense to refer to them as 'elites') and on integration between elite groups. Although we agree with previous research that these dimensions are related – a point that we will develop in our empirical analysis – we posit that they can be measured separately. As we shall see, this enables us to construct a theoretical model that helps us to compare different civil society elites.

The stratification–integration framework

In the introductory chapter, we mentioned that comparisons between different elite groups require a theoretical model and terminology that can be applied across contexts. We also noted that the literature on elites lacks

such models. Understanding elites in terms of their degree of stratification and integration provides a means of thinking about and describing how different elite groups compare.

Research on the stratification of elites suggests that small, distinct groups are becoming increasingly distant from the groups they are supposed to represent or lead. Conversely, research on integration discusses the extent to which elites from different sectors form a coherent group. Using this approach, stratification and integration can be visualised as a series of vertical triangles representing the hierarchical structures of different societal sectors and a horizontal sphere of integration between their top segments (Figure 1.1).

This model visualises a reasonable expectation of how elite stratification and integration function. The steeper the triangle, the more accentuated the stratification, with integration becoming more intense at the top of each sector.

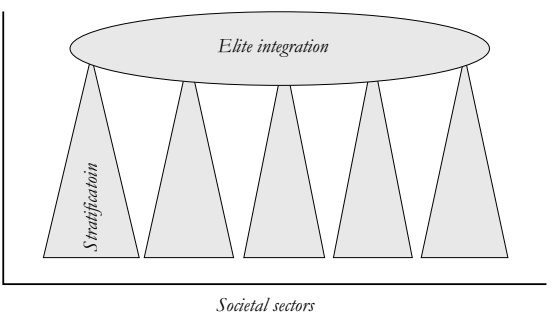

Figure 1.1 Elite stratification and integration

However, as noted above, both stratification and integration can vary in intensity. By measuring these dimensions, the degree of stratification can be plotted on the vertical axis and the level of integration on the horizontal axis of a two-dimensional field. Figure 1.2 illustrates this.

In this model, Country A is measured to have a high level of stratification, meaning that civil society elites are far removed from the grassroots, as well as a high level of elite integration, meaning that they have close contact with other elite groups. Country B is measured to have a low level of both stratification and integration. The model thus serves as a means of comparing different elite groups. As we will expand on further in Chapter 2, when applying this model, countries are positioned relative to each other. However, it could also be used to measure absolute position, provided baselines and operational indicators are created.

The key idea is that by combining the dimensions of 'stratification' and 'integration', we can meaningfully

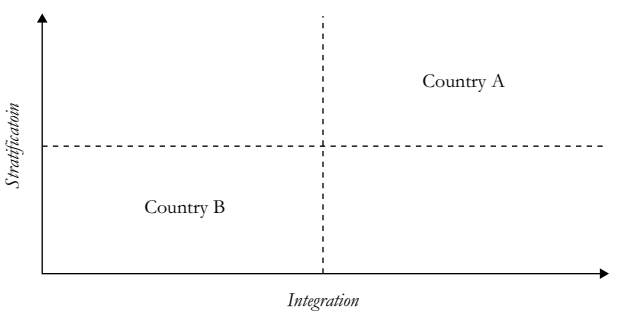

Figure 1.2 The elite stratification–integration model

discuss how different civil society elite groups function and compare them. While the simplicity of this model is its greatest strength, reducing broad phenomena such as stratification and integration is also challenging. Before discussing how these concepts are operationalised, we therefore need to provide a detailed review of previous scholarship on stratification and integration.

Stratification

A group of leaders does not constitute an elite per se. For this concept to apply, a certain level of elevation and distinction is required. It is not the leadership position itself that matters, but rather the disproportionate access to resources that it provides, and the difficulty of joining the elite group. Below, we pinpoint three important themes in contemporary elite literature that will guide our operationalisation of stratification.

First, elite research has analysed careers and career patterns (e.g. Ellersgaard and Larsen, 2020). This has enabled the examination of the criteria individuals must fulfil to enter an elite position (Lindellee and Scaramuzzino, 2020). Career trajectories can indicate exclusion mechanisms, glass ceilings and preferential treatment for privileged individuals. Long career trajectories and complex election, selection and recruitment processes can create distance between the elite and the grassroots, as well as exclusionary dynamics that are not captured by formal requirements (Johansson, Uhlin and Arvidson, 2022; Pirie and Rogers, 2013; Uhlin and Arvidson, 2023). Against this background, we posit that an important

aspect of stratification is how difficult it is to access elite positions.

Second, elite research has discussed the importance of social background in relation to individuals' social outcomes (e.g. Daloz and Hoffmann-Lange, 2018; Reeves and Friedman, 2024). Scholars widely agree that most societies and societal sectors are structured in such a way that people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to end up higher in societal hierarchies (Daloz and Hoffmann-Lange, 2018; Putnam, 1976). Pierre Bourdieu (1984) famously argued that the structure of education could explain this, as it rewards cultural capital acquired through the birthright of people from privileged backgrounds rather than academic merit. If the majority of top leaders in civil society come from a privileged background, this suggests that the elite is exclusive and resistant to meritocratic ideals. If top leaders in civil society are well-paid and have considerable influence, this also says something about their social positioning in relation to broader constituencies.

Third, elite research has analysed the social distance between elite groups and the masses (e.g. Dellmuth et al., 2022). Elites are often theorised as being relatively closed off and distinguished by where they live, what they earn and their attitudes. A key part of identifying a social group as an elite is therefore estimating their distinctiveness, in the case of civil society, compared with the majority of volunteers, activities and employees. For a group to be considered an elite in civil society, its background and societal outcomes must differ from those of the grassroots (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024).

Integration

Scholarly focus on integration stems from the empirical observation that different elite groups tend to interact and blend. As mentioned previously, the extent to which integration results in the formation of a unified power elite is debatable and likely contingent on contextual factors, such as institutional proximity and competing interests. Research on elite integration has provoked a number of different research themes, some of which we draw on to inform our theoretical model.

First, a prominent research theme concerns the integration of elite groups through interaction across sectoral boundaries (Gulbrandsen, 2012; Higley et al., 1991). In the context of this study, we use the term 'boundary crossers' to refer to individuals from civil society who have held senior positions in several sectors (Arvidson et al., 2025; Arvidson and Uhlin, 2024; Lewis, 2008, 2012). A high prevalence of boundary crossers is indicative of elite integration.

Second, research into elites has produced a number of maps of elite networks and estimated the extent to which such networks span different societal sectors (see Larsen and Ellersgaard, 2017, for further information). Modern societies contain institutions and social arenas where representatives of different sectors meet. These could be formal settings, such as governance arrangements involving business, politics and civil society organisations, or informal ones, such as closed societies, dinner clubs or social meeting places connected to where people live (Edling et al., 2015). In either case, the networking of elite members tells us something about the integration of different elite groups.

Third, integration research has focused on estimating the proximity of different elite groups (Ivanovska Hadjievska and Arvidson, 2025). The argument is that if considerable similarities are found across elite groups with respect to demographic factors such as where they live, what they earn and their educational background, then there is a high level of integration. While stratification provokes questions about the gap between elites and their constituencies, integration between elite groups raises questions about how loyalties, interests and priorities are formed at the top level of civil society.

A theoretical model of civil society elites

Although the theoretical model we have developed largely builds on elite research, it is specifically designed to examine elites in civil society. Therefore, we will discuss how our theoretical thinking relates to civil society studies here. First, consider the illustration of the civil society elite (Figure 1.3).

This figure illustrates the same reasoning as the theoretical model described earlier: namely, that there is stratification within the sector, and that elite groups may be integrated with other elites. However, the model raises a question that has not yet been addressed: how does civil society differ from other societies, and how might this impact elite formation? In most research on the topic, this sector is commonly understood as a separate arena from the state and the market, where associations and organisations bring individuals with common interests together, regardless of their size. Civil society

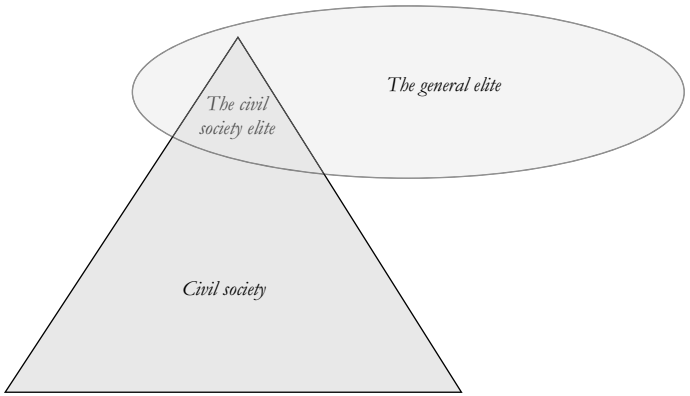

Figure 1.3 Visualising the civil society elite

organisations are often described as significantly different from other sectors in terms of their resources, goals, organisational values and principles (Brandsen and Karré, 2011; Kendall and Knapp, 2000; Lipsky and Smith, 1989). This understanding also broadly permeates the sector's self-perception.

The dimensions in our model challenge common presumptions about civil society. First, there is a strong democratic ethos within the sector, emphasising the representation of marginalised groups and the provision of services to those in need. More generally, there is an idea that civil society fulfils key functions in liberal democracies (Meeuwisse and Scaramuzzino, 2019; Trägårdh, 2007). However, the idea that elite groups within the sector are detached from the groups they supposedly represent or provide services for due to stratification does

not sit well with this democratic ideal. Regarding integration, the notion that civil society elites blend together with business, bureaucratic and political elites calls into question the idea of independence from other sectors (Billis and Glennerster, 1989; Hall, 1987; Lipsky and Smith, 1989). Such questions are reinforced by a number of tendencies and concerns addressed in the civil society literature. More specifically, we suggest that three prominent themes in civil society research are relevant to discussions about the sector's stratification and integration. First, we discuss the movement from volunteering towards professionalisation, which is considered a significant trend in many contexts. Second, we relate our analysis of civil society elites to discussions about how civil society organisations exert influence through corporatism, lobbying and shaping public opinion. Third, we will draw insights from analytical perspectives in the civil society regime literature, focusing on the primary role of civil society organisations, whether in service provision or influencing policy.

The purpose of discussing these themes is not to formulate hypotheses about how countries end up in our theoretical model, nor to suggest that there is a direct relationship between stratification and integration, professionalisation, methods of influence and the primary role of civil society organisations. Rather, we will use the analytical insights generated by civil society researchers regarding these themes to explore their relationships and advance a broader discussion about elite patterns.

From volunteerism to professionalisation

Historically, civil society has been a sector dominated by unpaid engagement in organisations that are separate from the state (Billis, 2010). This has been particularly evident in countries with strong popular movements, although in some of these countries, civil society has tended to develop strong ties to the state through corporatist entanglements. A significant body of research has identified professionalisation as a dominant trend in civil society over the past few decades, with organisations becoming increasingly dependent on paid labour for their activities (Hwang and Powell, 2009; Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024; Maier et al., 2016; Salamon, 1987). This is often linked to an increasing proportion of employees who have attended higher education, creating a class of civil society professionals. In many countries, leadership training programmes organised within the sector or by higher education institutions specifically address the needs of civil society (see Altermark, Johansson and Stattin, 2023; Ivanovska Hadjievska, Johansson and Altermark, 2023).

This literature provides several insights that could have implications for the stratification and integration of leadership within the sector. First, concerns are growing that 'managerialism' is exerting an increasing influence within the sector, with leadership skills focused on goal management and efficiency being valued over grassroots engagement and membership representation. Training programmes developed within the sector appear to promote generic leadership skills similar to management training in the private sector. This

could result in leaders becoming more integrated across sectors, as civil society management is viewed as being comparable to leadership in other sectors (Stewart and Kuenzi, 2018; Suarez, 2010). However, it may also lead to stratification, as leaders become distanced from the grassroots. Other scholars have described how reliance on state funding is linked to this development. As civil society engagement wanes in most countries, civil society organisations today rely on state funding or philanthropy for many of their activities (Papakostas, 2011). The ability to write competitive applications for commissioned welfare services and private funding for project-based interventions is therefore becoming increasingly important, creating demand for those with the necessary skills (Barman, 2002).

This creates a situation in which civil society is transforming from a sector of idealistic engagement outside of work to a labour market sector in which people have careers. While developmental lines differ between countries, most observers would probably agree that professionalisation is an important trend in most countries.

Political influence

A second stream of research deals with how civil society organisations operate to exert political influence. This is often understood in terms of corporatism, lobbying or public advocacy (Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005). In a corporatist system, interest organisations influence policy by being invited by the state to participate in policy formulation. This system was historically prominent in

Scandinavian welfare states and Italy (Feltenius, 2008). In this system, clashes between different interest groups are resolved through the state's mediation during the policy formulation process. When successful, corporatism can establish compromises that endure, while also enabling interest groups to influence policymaking.

In contrast, lobbyism involves stakeholders exerting influence from outside the policy process by shaping the views of decision-makers (Dür and Mateo, 2013). Although lobbying's influence varies between nations and international bodies, most countries today have professional lobbyists who advise businesses and civil society organisations on how to influence politicians (Mellquist, 2022b). In response, it has become increasingly common to ensure transparency through legislation.

Public advocacy refers to the ongoing work of shaping public opinion. For organisations operating at a distance from policymaking processes, building popular support for their policy positions is important. However, even organisations with considerable influence and standing often choose to participate in public debates about certain issues. This means that civil society organisations also need skilled communicators who specialise in opinion-making and media strategy.

All of these ways of influencing policy are related to stratification and integration. Corporatism requires representation, whereby specific individuals are tasked with speaking on behalf of organisations. Lobbying and public advocacy require professional skills, thereby reinforcing processes of professionalisation. Regarding integration, corporatism is based on the idea that interest

organisations are invited by the state to participate in policy processes alongside the elites of other organisations and sectors, working together to formulate policy. Lobbying, on the other hand, may result in integration with business elites.

The literature has also identified some specific risks associated with these models of policy influence. In Sidney Tarrow's work, corporatism carries the risk of co-optation, whereby civil society organisations become too closely associated with the state (Tarrow, 1998). Consequently, civil society organisations (CSO) representatives may adopt the inviting party's perspective, as well as their counterpart's goals and vision in corporatist arrangements. Lobbyism, on the other hand, is often said to favour organisations with ample resources that can afford to hire consultants to influence policymaking. Lobbying is also frequently criticised for a lack of transparency, which contradicts the democratic ethos of the sector.

The role of civil society: voice or service

Lastly, civil society literature has emphasised that organisations can fulfil various functions. In some contexts, the main goal of civil society organisations is to represent the interests of their constituencies by seeking to influence policymaking or raise awareness (Arvidson et al., 2018; Mosley, 2012). In other countries, civil society organisations provide services that complement the welfare state. This distinction is a key theme in literature on civil society regime types (Salamon and Anheier, 1998).

The question of which roles civil society organisations are expected to fulfil may have implications for the stratification and integration of civil society elites. We have already touched upon how different ways of voicing constituents' opinions might contribute to integration with other elite groups, as well as increasing the distance between grassroots members and organisational professionals. For organisations that primarily work to voice the interests of members or constituents, integration with political elites may be seen as a strategic resource, albeit one that carries the risk of co-optation.

Service-providing organisations often require internal management and bureaucracy, which can increase professionalisation and consequently create distance between leaders and client groups. In some contexts, service-providing organisations have considerable budgets and play an important role in the domestic labour market. This gives these organisations leverage and power in their relations with other societal sectors, but this power is not evenly distributed within the sector. Leaders of such organisations may be well placed to influence labour policy, whereas the broader movement will have to rely on these leaders to represent their interests and views.

These themes, derived from civil society research, will inform our discussion of the elitisation patterns evident in our empirical data. While we do not suggest that they determine the elite structures of the countries we are analysing, we do contend that civil society elite structures are affected by them in complex and multifaceted ways. As discussed in other chapters, civil society has a strong democratic and egalitarian ethos. Meanwhile,

trends and features highlighted in civil society research pertaining to professionalisation, policy influence and service provision may create a strong need for specialised groups of individuals to fulfil professional functions. The civil society elite must be analysed with this balancing act in mind. We will return to discuss how this balancing act plays out in different contexts in the book's concluding chapter.

2

Tracing elites: methods and research design

In this chapter, we outline the methodological work that underpins our research. In addition to the theoretical and empirical contributions already mentioned, we also make an important methodological contribution to elite studies, given that this literature primarily focuses on studies of specific national contexts rather than cross-country comparisons (but see Bühlmann et al., 2025). Our analyses of civil society elites in four European countries are based on one of the most widely used methods of elite identification, the positional method. From this starting point, we have developed a methodological approach that takes into account the multiple types of resources that provide civil society organisations and their leaders with positions of power in different national contexts.

As already stated, our comparative analysis is based on empirical data from four national settings: Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. This case selection was made with the aim of ensuring diversity in terms of the role and

function of civil society and the national systems of socio-economic stratification. Here, we have advanced from the comparative John Hopkins study, now part of the Global Civil Society Index and the UN Nonprofit Handbook (Salamon et al., 2003), with Italy as a case of a corporatist regime, Poland as a post-communist regime, Sweden as a social democratic regime and the UK as a liberal regime. Our descriptions of these different civil society regimes take into account the historical events that have shaped the sectors, their functions and their relations with the surrounding society. The historical and relational factors that shape the sector may also be important in understanding the internal structures and values that form the respective civil society elites. Although we allow ourselves to make certain assumptions regarding characteristics of the elite depending on the civil society regime, these are tentative and suggest empirical questions rather than hypotheses about links between regime and elite characteristics.

We begin the chapter with a detailed description of the operationalisation of the framework, specifically developed for this comparative study, of the empirical data and the method of analysis used in our empirical chapters. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of methodological contributions.

Mapping resource-rich CSOs

Based on our interest in the top leadership of powerful civil society organisations (CSOs), we developed a novel approach to characterise and map CSOs based on their

access to different types of resources. The positional method of elite identification in the tradition of elite studies starts with the assumption that formal leadership positions in key organisations or institutions confer political influence on those who occupy them (Higley and Burton, 2006; Mills, [1956] 2000). In the case of business and politics, it is relatively straightforward to identify the most powerful organisations and to identify the individuals who hold formal leadership positions within them. For example, previous studies have defined the business elite as the CEOs of the largest companies in terms of sales or employees (e.g. Ellersgaard et al., 2013) and the political elite as members of parliament (Cotta and Best, 2007). In the case of civil society, it remains a challenge to translate how resource concentration and power are defined. This applies both to organisational hierarchies and to the leaders of the most resource-rich organisations. Some CSOs' sources of power and influence may lie in their membership numbers, which provide leverage for their political representation. Others may derive their influence from expert knowledge. Still others can influence societies through their role as service providers with large resources in terms of organisational and administrative infrastructure, staff and volunteers, and not least the service users who depend on them. The diversity of CSOs and the different sources of power and influence make it difficult to identify the most resourceful and, presumably, powerful organisations.

As we assume that the civil society elite are the leaders of the most resourceful and influential CSOs, our first task has been to identify what signifies a 'resourceful'

and 'powerful' organisation. To address this challenge, we have developed a new method for mapping civil society organisations: The Multi-dimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil Society (MMRSC, see Scaramuzzino and Lee, 2024). The method is based on a set of indicators that measure different types of resources, both internal to civil society, either at the organisational level or relevant within the civil society sector, and external to civil society, including indicators that capture the recognition and status of organisations from the perspective of external actors.

As listed in Table 2.1, we define the most resourceful CSOs in terms of the types of resources that are internal to civil society, in that they have access to substantial resources in terms of membership, staff and revenue; they hold positions on the board of umbrella organisations in specific policy areas; and they are members of umbrella organisations that represent the entire civil society sector. In addition, we consider CSOs to be powerful in terms of resources that bring external recognition, including those that receive core public funding, those that are represented on policy-specific public committees or in consultation processes and those that are represented in formal state-civil society relations (contracts of different types).

The indicators were operationalised using different data sources for each country context, striking a balance between comparability across countries and context sensitivity (see Table 2.2).

In mapping the most resourceful CSOs in our study, we decided to make a strict distinction between the civil

Table 2.1 Types of resources for each indicator

Indicator	*Resource*
Economic resources – internal	Employees and budget
Economic resources – external	Public funding and private donations
Political resources – internal (within specific policy area)	Umbrella organisations within specific policy area
Political resources – external (within specific policy area)	Decision-making within policy area
Political resources – internal (within civil society policy area)	Umbrella organisations representing the civil society sector
Political resources – external (within civil society policy area)	Decision-making with state-civil society relations

society sector and the market and public sectors. As our analytical interest lies in conceptualising and studying civil society elites as distinct from economic or political elites, we wanted to exclude, for example, those organisations that might be considered civil society organisations in their form but represent economic interests. For similar reasons of delimitation, we excluded political parties, employers' organisations and organisations representing industrial sectors dominated by private or public companies. The leaders of these types of organisations can instead be seen as part of the economic or political elite. However, we have included employers' organisations representing the civil society sector, including non-profit social service providers, cooperatives and schools. As

Table 2.2 Operationalisation of indicators

Indicator	*Condition*	*Operationalisation*	*Source*
Economic resources – internal	To have at least a certain number of employees or a certain size of budget	50 or more employees (Sweden, Poland) 910,000 euros or more as budget (EU)	Registries provided by public authorities and statistical agencies
Economic resources – external	To receive at least a certain amount of funding from a source or be eligible at all	200,000 pounds (UK) 80,267 euros (EU) Be eligible for donations with a tax deduction for donors (ITA)	Registries provided by public authorities and statistical agencies
Political resources – internal (within specific policy area)	Umbrella organisations representing the civil society sector and their members within specific policy area	Umbrella organisations and the member organisations that are represented on the board (ITA, SWE)	Webpages of CSOs, public agencies
Political resources – external (within specific policy area)	CSOs that are invited to or have participated in policymaking	CSOs invited to comment on legislation (SWE) that are invited to consultations (ITA, POL) CSOs that have met with ministers (UK) or the EU Commission (EU)	Public agencies/ authorities

(*Continued*)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Indicator	*Condition*	*Operationalisation*	*Source*
Political resources – internal (within civil society policy area)	Umbrella organisations representing the civil society sector and their members	Umbrella organisations representing the sector and their members (SWE, ITA, POL)	CSOs webpages
Political resources – external (within civil society policy area)	CSOs that participate in consultation bodies dealing with state-civil society relations	CSOs that participate in consultation bodies dealing with state-civil society relations (all countries)	Public agencies

the service provision function of the civil society sector is very important in some country contexts, we would have missed some important organisations had we not included employers' organisations representing the civil society sector. Finally, we have also chosen to exclude organisations representing specific professions, such as doctors or lawyers, and organisations that are widely understood as interest groups, including trade unions.

The data collection methodology has been approved by the Regional Board for Ethical Review in Sweden (Dnr 2018/852). For each country context, our research programme established coding teams of two to three researchers in order to maximise the use of contextual knowledge in the screening of CSOs, using different sources of information available for the desk research (see Table 2.2). All coding teams were led and coordinated by

Scaramuzzino to ensure a coherent working process and the internal validity of our work.

Resource stratification and 'elite scores'

In identifying CSOs using the indicators presented in this chapter, we assigned each organisation an 'elite score' based on how many of the conditions for inclusion a given organisation met. If an organisation entered our pool of the most resourceful CSOs by fulfilling one condition for an indicator, the organisation was given a score of one. If an organisation entered our pool by meeting the conditions for three indicators, it received a score of three, and so on. The elite score thus allows us not only to map CSOs, but also to identify patterns of resource concentration and stratification in each country context. As shown in Table 2.3, we observe a pyramidal hierarchical structure in all country contexts where we

Table 2.3 Distribution of CSOs on the elite score in each national context

Score	*Italy (1–5)*	*Poland (1–6)*	*Sweden (1–5)*	*UK (1–6)*
6M	–	1	–	–
5MM	3	–	1	–
4MM	12	3	10	–
3	35	27	39	13
2	133	80	72	63
1	110	336	272	358
Total N	**293**	**447**	**394**	**434**

find the majority of CSOs with scores of one and two. The elite organisations with scores of four to six are only a handful in each country, and they are the actors that have both economic resources and internal and external recognition as carriers of the representative voice of the civil society sector. In the UK, we do not find any CSO with a score higher than three, which is largely explained by the less hierarchical governance structure within the sector. Instead of having umbrella organisations at different administrative levels as in the other countries, in the UK, organisations claiming to represent the sector have members at all levels, including local organisations. This is very different from Italy, for example, where we find four levels of networks from local to national. The fourth level network has fewer than one hundred members, but they are all national umbrella organisations with a complex membership structure, sometimes involving tens of thousands of organisations.

The MMRSC is therefore a unique cross-sectional comparative mapping of the most resourceful CSOs in four European countries, based on a systematic methodology. Considering the total number of CSOs in each context (over 250,000 in Sweden), the CSOs identified in our study probably represent a small minority of CSOs.

Limitations

A potential weakness in our method of mapping CSOs is that our method does not capture sources of power that have more informal characteristics that can be decoupled from formal organisations or leadership positions.

However, several rounds of expert consultation for each country context have given us confidence that our method does not generally miss important organisations that hold power. The same specific organisations that score highest in our elite score index have often emerged as powerful actors in the interview studies conducted as part of the research programme. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our mapping methodology does not allow us to include CSOs that operate at the regional or local level. This means that some influential civil society organisations that do not operate at a national level are excluded, and this can be a limitation, especially in the case of Italy and the UK. In Italy, it is well known that many powerful regional CSOs remain based at the regional level and have significant resources and influence, as in the case of some large cooperatives. In the UK, some London-based 'local' CSOs, such as the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home or the Whitechapel Mission, run extensive service provision activities and also have an important voice in policymaking. Furthermore, CSOs or social movements that operate without clearly established formal organisational structures are not captured by our methodology and we therefore miss out on forces that could wield significant power based primarily on their social media presence, such as Fridays for Future or MeToo.

Survey of civil society elites

The empirical chapters of this book are based on the analysis of comparative data collected through a survey method. The Civil Society Elite Survey was conducted

between 2020 and 2021 in all four countries, with the aim of exploring the background, network and contacts of civil society leaders, as well as their values, views on leadership and power, and status in civil society. Below, we describe the survey population, the data collection process and the strengths and limitations of our survey data.

Identifying top-level leaders

The next step we took after identifying the most resourceful CSOs in each country context was to identify the top-level leaders who run and represent the organisations – the population we define as civil society elites. We therefore collected the names and e-mail addresses of individuals holding the following positions: top representative positions (e.g. chair, spokesperson, president) and their deputies and top executive positions (e.g. secretary general, director, CEO) and their deputies. We identified between 680 and 1,005 leaders in each country (see Table 2.4).

The differences can largely be explained by how common the presence of deputy leaders is in different countries (for example, the UK has the highest average number

Table 2.4 Mapping of leaders in each context

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
Number of mapped leaders	680	961	835	1,005

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey Study.

of board members, including honorary positions) and, to a lesser extent, by the availability of data. This step of coding leaders was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Board (Dnr 2019-04400), under which we conducted our survey study, which is presented next.

Data collection

The sixty-item questionnaire included questions on demographic and socio-economic background, respondents' previous and current leadership positions within and outside the civil society sector, their professional and personal networks, on career development and leadership-related values, on power and influence and a series of attitudinal questions on key social and political issues. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and translated into Italian, Polish and Swedish. An online survey instrument was used, and invitations to participate in the study were sent via the leaders' e-mail addresses, supplemented by postal letters sent to the organisations to reach those leaders whose e-mail addresses were not available. At least two reminders were sent, and the data collection period was approximately three months for each survey. Responses to the survey were anonymised and we have no way of linking individual responses to specific CSOs. The number of leaders included in our survey population in each country, the number of completed questionnaires and the final response rates are presented in Table 2.5.

The response rates in the different countries vary, and the Swedish case in particular stands out, with 37 per cent

Table 2.5 Population and respondents of the civil society elite survey

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
Number of leaders (total population)	680	961	835	1005
Number of completed questionnaires and response rate	133 (19%)	175 (18%)	308 (37%)	123 (12%)

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey Study.

compared with the other countries with less than 20 per cent. There are two possible explanations for this outlier. One reason could be that only in Sweden did we send out the questionnaires before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and its negative impact on the work of CSOs may have affected the likelihood of CSO leaders taking the time to complete the questionnaire. The other possible reason for the relatively higher response rate in Sweden may be related to the fact that the research programme and the researchers who sent out the survey are based in one of the well-known Swedish universities, which may have positively influenced the likelihood of leaders participating in the study.

The response rates in the other countries are lower, but in the case of Italy and Poland, the response rate of almost 20 per cent is not considered particularly low for this type of survey population. Last but not least, considering the problem of generally decreasing survey response rates, the segment of the population that can be considered as 'elite positions' is known to be more difficult to

reach with the survey instrument (Walgrave and Joly, 2018). It is also important to note that our survey study is not based on a random sample of a larger survey population. Instead, it is a survey of the entire population, meaning that all civil society leaders identified as holding the highest representative and leadership positions in the four countries at a given point in time were invited to participate in our survey study. This means that the consequences of potential non-response bias in our survey data are not as serious as they would have been in the case of survey studies based on a sample drawn using sampling techniques. A higher response rate, even in studies of the whole population, would, of course, provide greater confidence in the analytical results using inferential techniques. We have carried out analyses of non-response bias using the variables for which we have known information about the total population, i.e. the distribution across gender categories, leadership categories and the elite score. These analyses show that we do not observe any non-response bias of concern (Table 2.6).

Although our analysis of non-response bias does not raise concerns about representativeness, the relatively low response rate of 12 per cent in the UK and the fact that not all four surveys were sent out at exactly the same time can be seen as limitations to the final survey data. However, these limitations should be seen in light of the fact that our survey study contributes to the launch of a new field of research with a novel, systematically conducted comparative survey study of four European civil societies.

Table 2.6 Non-response bias analysis of the survey based on three variables (percentages)

Variable	*Italy*		*Poland*		*Sweden*		*UK*	
	Pop	*Resp*	*Pop*	*Resp*	*Pop*	*Resp*	*Pop*	*Resp*
Number of conditions met by the organisation ('elite score')								
1	31	34	68	62	63	58	82	82
2	47	45	21	21	21	24	14	14
3–6	22	21	12	17	16	18	4	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Leadership position of the leader								
Representative	44	58	41	59	38	41	36	39
Vice-rep	34	18	46	27	31	19	16	12
Administrative	22	24	12	13	30	37	34	48
Deputy-admin	0	0	1	1	1	3	14	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Gender of the leader								
Male	73	72	61	51	57	58	60	60
Female	27	28	39	49	43	42	40	40
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey Study.

Supplementary qualitative data

The survey study was conducted in the context of a larger programme of research on civil society elites, 'Civil society elites? Comparing elite composition, reproduction, integration and contestation in European civil societies' (M17-0188:1, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ)). As part of this programme, we have also collected qualitative material in all country contexts. This includes interviews with elite individuals and prosopographic data based on publicly available material (LinkedIn, organisational websites, Wikipedia and the like). The purpose of the interviews varied depending on the specific research focus. Whereas some related to the reproduction of elites, others focused specifically on the interaction of elites across sectors. One set of interviews has focused on understanding recruitment procedures and what constitutes elite status from the perspective of elite leaders themselves. Another has focused specifically on career trajectories, discussing the motivations and experiences of moving, for example, from elite positions in the public sector to elite positions in civil society. The number of interviews that have been used in the writing of this book amounts to around forty. A few have been relatively brief (thirty minutes), but a majority have lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. Prior to interviews, we have emphasised that we are interested in the interviewee's personal careers and reflections thereof, rather than the interview assuming them as a representative of the particular organisation they may be associated with at the moment. While a large part of our conversations has concerned

personal life histories and career trajectories, this has been done with the interviewee's experience from civil society leadership as a recurring point of reference.

In this book, the qualitative material has been used as supplementary material to the survey data. The qualitative data has hence not been analysed in its own right, but is used to illustrate the phenomena, experiences and processes addressed in the survey-based analyses. Interview quotes and summaries of career trajectories illustrate the rationale behind the indicators we use in our analysis. For example, we refer to individual career paths to illustrate elite integration as elites move between sectors during their careers, and to illustrate how the internal career path creates an important image of a leader who embodies a civil society ethos. While the qualitative material is relevant to all country contexts, it has not been used in a representative way. For example, although quotes and biographical data may be quite explicit about the country of origin of the interviewee, the individuals represent types, illustrating a point rather than representing a specific regime elite.

The collection of qualitative material presents its own challenges, not least because the concept of a 'civil society elite' was sometimes rejected by the interviewee. While we do not pursue this discussion further here, it is important to note that the collection of all material was undertaken within the confines of an ethically reviewed research programme. In this book, we have chosen to anonymise all qualitative material. This is partly because we wish to avoid the distraction that the mention of names, particularly of well-known people, can bring.

However, there are debates within elite research about the specifics of elite interviews (Ellersgaard, Ditlevsen and Larsen, 2022). It can be difficult to hide the identity of the individual in elite interview reporting; after all, these are unique individuals with very specific characteristics in terms of career paths and networks. It can be an impossible balancing act for the researcher to conceal the identity of the individual on the one hand and to create sufficient transparency for the analysis to be perceived as understandable and credible on the other.

To ensure the integrity of the participants' narratives, minor grammatical corrections were made without altering the content of their responses, while taking care to preserve the participants' unique voices and intentions. As the original interviews were conducted in different languages (English, Polish, Swedish and Italian), the translated and language-edited quotations aimed to accurately convey the nuances of the participants' expressions in English. In cases where verbatim quotes could potentially be distracting due to hesitations or fragmented speech, language editing was used to improve the flow while keeping the participants' core messages intact.

Comparative analysis

At the heart of the book is our aim to understand elitisation in civil society by examining the structure of stratification and the extent to which civil society elites are integrated with general elites. The analytical work in our empirical chapters begins by illustrating the central concepts using qualitative interview data. Once we have

established the measures of stratification and integration, our analytical focus is on identifying the relative extent to which civil society elites are stratified and integrated in each country. Our measures of stratification and integration thus provide us with comparative insights into civil societies in the four countries, which we discuss using our contextual knowledge of each country and existing knowledge of the sources of stratification and integration in the civil society sector.

We then describe how we have operationalised the concepts of stratification and integration into measures that allow us to compare the civil society elite in the four countries using our survey data.

Operationalising stratification

Stratification is operationalised through three different dimensions, each measured separately for each country context: high-profile careers and board membership; privileged background and high achieved status; and social distance.

High-profile careers and board membership

The career-related measure is operationalised through a survey question asking respondents to identify the three previous employments that were most relevant to their current leadership position. For each job listed, leaders were asked to choose from pre-defined alternatives regarding the sector in which they were employed (public organisation, private company, civil society organisation

or other). In addition, respondents were asked to indicate the position or title of their employment (open-ended question). We consider respondents who have had at least one employment in 'CSOs' with an executive position to have a high-level career background in civil society. We manually coded one of the following positions or titles as a 'leadership position': board member (or trustee), representative leader (e.g. president, chair, spokesperson), executive leader (e.g. director, secretary general, CEO) or middle leader (e.g. head of communications).

Although leading board positions allow for influence in the strategic decisions of organisations, they are often not based on employment and sometimes not even remunerated (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024). Therefore, we integrate the variable on previous employment with another variable based on a question in the survey that allows us to capture previous board positions as part of a high-level career in civil society. Respondents who have held board positions in the civil society sector, including the following types of organisations, are considered to have a high-profile career in civil society: 'foundation', 'other civil society organisation at national level', 'civil society organisation at European level' and 'civil society organisation at international level'.

The percentage of respondents with previous leadership, executive and board positions within the civil society elite in a given context is used as a dimension of stratification in our comparative analysis. In this sense, a stratified civil society is characterised by a civil society elite with a larger share of leaders who have had

high-profile careers and board memberships. A smaller share of these types of leaders within the elite would signal a less stratified civil society, as elite positions would be more open to people with other types of experience (cf. elite openness and closure in Ruostetsaari, 1993).

Privileged background and high achieved status

We address the composition of civil society elites by measuring how exclusive they are as the proportion of leaders who come from privileged backgrounds and have achieved high status. Thus, by identifying the extent to which civil society elites have a socio-demographically privileged background, we can assess the degree of stratification of that particular civil society. The higher the proportion of elite leaders from such backgrounds, the more stratified the civil society context. Table 2.7. lists the variables we use to examine the socio-demographic background of respondents and, for each variable, the social categories we define as privileged attributes.

Table 2.7 Variables used to measure privileged background

Variable	*Privileged attribute*
Age	The final part of working life (56–65 years)
Gender	Male
Country of birth	Native (born in the country)
Social class	Upper or middle class family background
Parental leadership position	At least one parent had a leadership position

Each respondent was assigned a score (zero to five) based on the number of privileged characteristics the respondent possessed. A respondent with a score of zero has no privileged attribute and a respondent with a score of five belongs to the most privileged category. We consider a privileged background to be one in which four or five of the attributes are present. These variables relate directly to the question of elite homogeneity, but also to how inequalities are reproduced in society on the basis of specific social categories (cf. 'categorical pairs' in Tilly, 1999). They can also be linked to theories of resources and capital that different individuals control based on their social position, such as cultural and social capital (Swartz, 1997, see also the introductory chapter). Age is related to long career paths and gerontocratic power structures, where younger leaders are kept waiting for their 'turn' to achieve high positions in organisations. The latter part of a career is relevant because it presupposes a need for employment and a salary, unlike pensioners whose income is often guaranteed. Gender, country of birth and social class relate to patriarchal, ethnic/racial and class power structures and discrimination. The leadership position of parents relates to social determinism and the fact that parents' positions of power can provide their children with the networks and early access to organisations that are often necessary to achieve higher positions, for example, among political elites (see Madestam, 2015).

Next, we can see the extent to which civil society is stratified by comparing the proportion of civil society leaders who have achieved what is generally considered to be high social status (see Table 2.8 for the variables

Table 2.8 Variables used to measure achieved status

Variable	*Achieved status*
Income	Above the 95th percentile income cut-off point in 2018 for each country[1]
Place of residence	Resident in capital city
Level of education	Higher education (at least bachelor's degree)
Perceived influence	Perceived influence on a scale of one to five (at least four)
Organisational resources	Number of indicators scored by the respondent's organisation (three to five indicators)

[1]*Source:* Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/51b38197-95a3-49d4-a0f5-3376ef3a3789?lang=en (accessed 15 December 2025).

used). We consider a given civil society elite to be highly stratified if we find a larger proportion of leaders who enjoy high social status in terms of these variables compared with civil society elites in other contexts.

The variables considered are often attributes acquired over the life course (Daloz and Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). Variables such as place of residence and level of education are considered to be part of the socio-demographic background, related to family background, rather than the result of individual achievement. Our point here is that these variables are not necessarily given at birth, but can be achieved through a change in status. The variable measuring perceived influence is based on a survey question asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they feel they have influence in their organisation's policy

area. The variable on organisational resources is based on the 'elite score' of the CSO that the respondent heads. The elite score measures the types of economic and political resources (six types in total) that the organisation controls. As with the socio-demographic background variables described above, these five status-related variables were used in an additive manner to assign each respondent a score between zero and five.

Social distance

The measure of social distance between civil society elites and civil society grassroots in our analysis is operationalised by selecting respondents to the European Social Survey who answered positively to the question of whether they had ever volunteered for a non-profit or charitable organisation to try to improve things in their country or to help prevent things from going wrong. Table 2.9 shows how many respondents in each country answered 'yes' to this question and thus the size of grassroots civil society compared with the rest of the population.

The share of grassroots civil society is similar in Italy, Poland and Sweden, ranging from 15.5 per cent to 17.4 per cent. The UK has a much higher proportion of people involved in civil society, with 27.2 per cent of the population responding positively to this question.

It is important to note that this operationalisation of grassroots civil society, which focuses on the volunteering aspect, underestimates the proportion of the population involved in civil society in the Swedish context. For

Table 2.9 Civil society grassroots

% (N)	*Italy*	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
Grassroots	17.4 (893)	19.1 (598)	15.5 (132)	27.2 (1,498)
Rest of the population	82.6 (4,236)	80.9 (2,526)	84.5 (720)	72.8 (4,011)
Total	100 (5,129)	100 (3,124)	100 (852)	100 (5,509)

Source: European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.1. Bergen: NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2022. https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020

example, if one follows previous studies using a different type of operationalisation using the ESS round 9 where the survey question emphasises 'working for organisations/associations' rather than 'volunteering' (see Boeri et al., 2021), the share of grassroots civil society in Sweden is instead estimated at 36.3 per cent. Similarly, this operationalisation results in a much smaller share of grassroots civil society in the other three countries, ranging from 6.3 per cent to 7.5 per cent. This would have resulted in a much lower share of grassroots civil society in these contexts compared with the indicator we use in our analysis (ESS round 10).

We measure the gap between the civil society elite and the grassroots on the basis of four variables (Table 2.10) related to social composition: Age (average); Gender (per cent male); Educational level (per cent higher education); and Country of birth (per cent native). These variables coincide with those used in studies of elite characteristics and are also used in the socio-demographic background

Table 2.10 Variables used to measure the gap between CS elites and grassroots

Variable	*Privileged attribute*
Age	The final part of working life (56–65 years)
Gender	Male
Country of birth	Native (born in the country)
Level of education	Higher education

dimension described above. We consider a given civil society to be more stratified if we find a greater social distance/gap between leaders and the grassroots in terms of these variables compared with other contexts.

Operationalisation of integration

Integration is also operationalised through three different dimensions, each measured separately for each country context: boundary crossing, social networks and proximity to the general elite.

Boundary crossing

Three different variables are used to measure boundary crossing. The first variable links boundary crossing to membership of boards of public and business organisations. The question is whether civil society leaders have been or are currently on the boards of these organisations. Since we are only interested in elite boundary crossing, we consider board positions in other sectors

that may be associated with elite status. We therefore consider boundary crossers to be respondents who currently hold or have held board positions in government agencies at the national level, in publicly traded companies or in business or employers' organisations at the national level. Respondents who have only held board positions in civil society organisations (e.g. at national, European or international level and in foundations) are considered as non-boundary crossers.

The second variable that measures boundary crossing deals with the previous employment of the civil society elite. Here, boundary crossers are respondents who have had at least one previous employment at the executive level in public or business organisations. The executive level of the position allows us to focus again on elite boundary crossing. Respondents were asked to write the title of their position and these open-ended responses were manually coded. Specifically, positions/titles such as board member, representative leader, upper-level executive leader, mid-level executive leader, political representative and owner are considered as the executive positions. Those who have been employed in the private and business sectors, but only as a regular employee, are therefore not considered to be boundary crossers. Non-boundary crossers are, of course, also those leaders who have only been employed in the civil society sector.

The third variable focuses on the path from civil society elite positions to elite positions in the public and business sectors. Since our respondents currently hold elite positions in civil society, we examine the career

paths of their predecessors. We therefore measure the extent to which respondents' predecessors have moved to another organisation in the public or business sector. Boundary crossers are those who have moved to leadership positions in the other sectors. Non-crossers include those who have not moved to another leadership position, as well as those who have moved to other leadership positions within the civil society sector.

By combining these three measures, we analyse the extent to which the integration of civil society elites in terms of boundary crossing varies across different country contexts. The percentage of respondents with boundary-crossing experiences measured in the three different ways is used in our comparative analysis.

Social networks

Our second dimension of elite integration is based on the assumption that the personal and professional ties that civil society leaders have with people in other sectors can be seen as a sign of elite integration. In one of the survey questions, the respondent is asked to consider people in leadership positions that are included in their personal and/or professional network, and select what types of organisation they are leading. Again, we were targeting networks with elites rather than networks in general. In the public sector, we included: national parliament, national government departments, central government offices or agencies, county councils, local councils, judicial institutions (courts), civil service, military, EU Parliament, EU Commission, other EU institutions and

international organisations (e.g. UN) are included as part of the public sector. Banks and financial companies, media companies and other listed companies are included as part of the business enterprise sector. The question specified that respondents should consider people with 'central positions' in these organisations, as our intention is to capture integration at the elite level.

Our measure assumes that the more institutions in the private and public sectors that respondents include/cross in their professional and personal network, the more integrated they are. We end up with a measure that goes from zero to fifteen for how many institutions the leaders include/bridge. We consider leaders who bridge at least eight types of organisations to be integrated with other elites, while those with seven or fewer institutions in their network are not integrated (the number eight was chosen as the cut-off point for the upper half of the scale). The analysis compares the proportion of leaders in each national context who are integrated with other elites through their professional and personal network.

Proximity to the general elite

In order to operationalise this dimension, we use a similar methodology to the distance dimension, using the European Social Survey (ESS round 10) to compare the social composition of civil society leaders in our survey with that of the general elite. For our analysis, the general elite population is identified using a variable in the ESS dataset on the number of people respondents are responsible for at work, and we use the cut-off point of

Table 2.11 The general elite (% within country, N)

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
General elite population (supervising fifty or more people at work)	2.3% (117)	5.5% (176)	4.6% (39)	4.2% (229)

Source: European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.1. Bergen: NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2022. https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020

fifty. Table 2.11 shows that our operationalisation of the general elite population results in different proportions of ESS respondents in each country context.

This measure gives us a small proportion of the population in each country, between 2 per cent and 5 per cent of the population. Supervising fifty or more people can be considered an important position of responsibility within organisations, regardless of the sector of employment. Of course, this way of capturing the general elite is not perfect. The measure focuses on those organisational leaders with formal positions that supervise others in their work. We may therefore miss some other types of societal leaders who may not have formal positions but have other types of resources and influence (wealth, fame, network). The population could also include civil society leaders. However, this measure provides us with a coherent operationalisation that can be applied in different contexts for our purpose of comparative analysis of the proximity of the civil society elite to the general elite in society. We have tried to use different variables such as job titles to identify economic and political elites (e.g. 'chief

executives', 'senior officials and legislators', 'senior government officials', 'managing directors and chief executives'). These job titles are arguably reserved for top-level leaders, and it is understandable that only a small minority of ESS respondents belong to these occupations. When we attempted to collapse the above job titles in order to operationalise 'general elites' using the ESS data, we were unable to secure a sufficient number of respondents to carry out a comparative analysis (fewer than fifteen individual respondents in each country).

In order to analyse the proximity in terms of social composition between the civil society elite and the general elite identified in the ESS data, we use the same socio-demographic variables as for the study of stratification and, more specifically, the gap between the elite and the grassroots (see Table 2.12). We examine the difference in the proportion of leaders in the civil society elite and in the general elite who are characterised by an attribute of privilege. For each variable, we compare the proportion of the category specified in Table 2.12 among civil

Table 2.12 Variables used to measure proximity to the general elite

Variable	*Privileged attribute*
Age	The final ten years of working life (56–65 years)
Gender	Male
Country of birth	Native (born in the country)
Level of education	Higher education

society leaders on the one hand and among the general elite on the other, in each country context. We consider the smaller differences between the two groups to imply a relatively higher degree of elite integration.

Limitations in operationalisation

Both in the case of operationalising civil society grassroots (for the analysis of stratification) and general elites (for the analysis of elite integration), we were faced with a number of possible choices as to which specific waves of the European Social Survey to use and which specific variables to employ. In both cases, we made choices that allowed us to achieve both measurement validity and cross-country comparability. The fact that the proportion of grassroots civil society in our four country contexts can vary greatly depending on the operationalisation we use calls for careful, context-sensitive interpretations of our results. When it comes to identifying ESS respondents who can be considered the general elite, we cannot entirely avoid the inherent limitation of public opinion research in including the elite population. However, we argue that having fifty or more people to supervise is not only associated with significant managerial responsibility, but also with corresponding economic rewards. Nevertheless, we remain cautious that our analysis of elite integration, by focusing on proximity to general elites and relying on ESS data, may have underestimated the social distance between civil society elites and general elites.

Contributions

The main methodological contribution of the book is that we examine the interplay of stratification and integration in relation to civil society elites in different country contexts, based on unique comparative data.

Previous research on stratification and inequality in civil society has focused primarily on the distribution of organisational resources, especially economic resources. Our operationalisation of resource-rich organisations is based on an understanding of the multi-dimensionality of resources, which can confer power and influence on CSOs in different ways. With this original approach, we provide a novel method for mapping civil society organisations and a new analytical framework for understanding the different civil society regimes in contemporary Europe.

What is also novel about our approach is that we look specifically at the individual leaders who occupy the top positions in the most resource-rich civil society organisations. By examining their backgrounds, career trajectories, social networks and attitudes, we compare patterns of stratification and integration in relation to civil society elites across the four countries. Using original survey data and contextual knowledge of each country, our analysis contributes to the understanding of patterns of stratification and integration of civil society elites against the backdrop of the role of the civil society sector and its political and economic positions in their national contexts. Our analytical focus on the top leaders of the most resource-rich CSOs brings new perspectives that have been missing in the existing literature on civil society regimes.

3

Climbing the ladder: careers, backgrounds and distance to the grassroots

The idea of an elite suggests a small group of individuals who are distinct from the masses. Elite distinction is based on a set of well-defined and exclusive characteristics. In civil society as elsewhere, an elite presupposes stratification, and distance between the group occupying the top layers of a hierarchical structure and the rest. While we acknowledge stratification as a definitional requirement for the existence of elites, we argue that it is also an empirical phenomenon that can be studied and measured. In this chapter, we empirically examine and compare stratification in civil society in four countries: Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. How stratified is civil society in these countries and how do the patterns of stratification compare?

We define stratification in civil society in terms of three different dimensions and explore them using questions from the Civil Society Elite Survey and the European Social Survey (see Chapter 2 for a detailed description of

the datasets and operationalisation). First, stratification is measured as the extent to which civil society elites in each country context have had high-profile careers within civil society before reaching their current leadership positions. We see this as an indication of a well-institutionalised and structured sector that allows for the formation of hierarchies and career paths with upward mobility. Second, stratification is measured as the extent to which the social composition of the civil society elite in each context is characterised by privileged socio-demographic backgrounds and high achieved status. This perspective reflects questions about what qualities are required to rise in the hierarchical order and how exclusionary these requirements are. Third, stratification is measured as the social distance between the civil society elite and the grassroots in each context. This dimension is based on the idea of descriptive representation, i.e. the expectation that the social composition of the elite will look like that of the population active in civil society at the grassroots level (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). A greater mismatch between the social composition of civil society elites and that of grassroots signals a higher degree of stratification, as it reflects a lack of descriptive representation within the sector.

In this chapter, we examine the patterns of stratification within each civil society context along the three dimensions outlined above and compare the overall degree of stratification across the four countries. A civil society is considered more internally stratified if its leaders tend to have high-profile civil society careers,

privileged socio-economic backgrounds and characteristics associated with high social status – and if there is a pronounced socio-demographic gap between elites and the grassroots. The aim is to assess how these patterns vary across different civil society regimes and to contribute analytically by offering a systematic cross-country comparison of stratification.

For each dimension of stratification, we first illustrate and exemplify stratification in civil society using the qualitative interview material. We then present a comparison of civil society in our four country contexts. Finally, we summarise and discuss the patterns of stratification in relation to all three dimensions.

High-profile careers and board membership in civil society

By examining the collective career trajectories of civil society leaders, we gain insights into how they reached their elite positions. This approach draws on the tradition of prosopographic studies of elites developed by C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu (Ellersgaard and Larsen, 2020). The focus on career trajectories has previously been used to study civil society elites both at the national level (Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2021) and at the EU level (Lindellee and Scaramuzzino, 2020), and to distinguish between careers that are confined to civil society on the one hand and careers that span different social sectors on the other (Ivanovska Hadjievska and Arvidson, 2025). To assess stratification within civil society, we focus on

mapping the career trajectories of civil society elites. This involves identifying high-profile positions, that is if individuals have held a leadership or board position in highly influential and resource-rich organisations leading up to their current elite position. In our interviews with civil society elites, we find several stories that refer to internal career paths. Giovanni is the president of an Italian federation of civil society organisations (CSOs) at the national level, whose career path is almost ideal for an upward trajectory within the same movement. Giovanni started at the local level:

> I entered [the movement] through the front door because my experience in the movement started in what was then the provincial branch of the organisation. After a few years, 5 years inside the organisation, I joined [another organisation within the movement] […] as a person in charge of development. […] However, the first years of administration were very important for me, because in that role you have the opportunity to see the organisation […] in all its aspects, which was very useful later on. So I started as a development manager and stayed in the organisation until the 70s.

Taking up an administrative position seems to have been essential for Giovanni to get to know the organisation and then to become a development manager. It was from this position that Giovanni was able to enter the national federation:

> After this experience, I went to the national federation of the movement. […] I was at the national level until

> 1990, after which the organisation I came from merged with three others, giving life to an important organisation that occupied the north-west of Italy as a territory, and I returned to be the CEO of that organisation […] I stayed there until 2014, the year in which the then president of the movement was appointed to [a political position]. And so in February 2014, overnight […] the organisation found itself without a president, because this appointment was sudden and took immediate effect. Then an important period of discussion and research began. For the record, […] I think I'm the first president of the organisation who wasn't born in the rooms of a political party.

Before becoming the president of the national federation, Giovanni therefore returned to the regional level in a management position. The opportunity to become national president was created by the sudden appointment of his predecessor to a political position. In this sense, the move to the top of the organisation is both unexpected and a break with the past. For the first time, the president did not come from politics.

A career like Giovanni's presupposes a well-structured organisation with extensive operations, offering several leadership positions at local, regional, and national levels. Another example of a career trajectory limited to civil society as a sector is illustrated by Jennifer, the chair of a large umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector in the UK, focused on supporting and strengthening the sector's infrastructure. Jennifer began her career in a youth charity where she rose to the position of CEO. Since then, she has held further CEO positions in increasingly

well-resourced and high-profile organisations, moving into an elite position in the sector. Interestingly, her career progression was accompanied by an advanced university course in voluntary sector management, which combined the demand for management expertise with the demand for 'street credibility'. Jennifer's career illustrates that an internal career trajectory does not necessarily mean moving up within the same organisation or movement as Giovanni. It can also involve transitions between CSOs within the civil society sector, particularly in influential and resource-rich organisations where such career moves are becoming more common.

Whether one moves up the hierarchical ladder of leadership positions within a (consortium of) organisations or within the sector, we argue that this phenomenon illustrates that the sector as such is well-structured, professionalised and integrated, representing a system of social positions related to each other on the basis of a hierarchical order of power. We therefore understand high-profile careers in civil society as a sign of stratification in civil society, as this type of career is often reserved for a small group of individuals. A relatively larger share of leaders with high-profile careers in civil society in one country would suggest that access to elite positions is primarily reserved for people who have already risen through the ranks of civil society organisations as a form of selection.

In Table 3.1, we present the degree of stratification in our four countries, measured by the proportion of leaders with high-profile careers, both in terms of previous employment and board positions within civil society. The measures used are percentages. For each measure, we

Table 3.1 High-profile career and board membership

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Previous executive position in CS (%)	57.3	30.7	32.7	47.1	708***
	1	0	0.07	0.62	–
Previous board position in CS (%)	25.6	20.7	35.7	32.5	728**
	0.33	0	1	0.79	–
Normalised mean score total	0.66	0	0.53	0.70	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

normalise the figures on a scale between 0 and 1, where the lowest figure among the four countries is given 0 and the highest 1. The figures in between (i.e. two countries in the middle) are placed proportionally on this scale. This method of normalisation is consistent with our aim of comparing the degree of stratification between countries: in other words, we do not measure stratification within a given country in absolute terms, but in relative terms.

We find the most stratified civil society in the UK, followed closely by Italy and Sweden, in terms of the extent to which civil society elites have high-profile careers and board positions within civil society. Polish civil society is by far the least stratified in this respect. Italy has the highest proportion of leaders with high-profile careers within the sector, closely followed by the UK. Sweden has a much lower proportion of leaders with high-profile careers, and Poland has the lowest. These patterns are consistent with a more

professionalised civil society sector in the UK and Italy (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024), characterised by an organisational landscape that allows for career advancement within civil society, which can be seen as a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden (Arvidson et al., 2025). Although these figures do not say much about career patterns, based on previous studies, we would expect Italian career paths to be comparatively more internal, that is, within the same organisation or movement (Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2021), while British career paths would involve movement between different civil society organisations. Indeed, according to our survey data, Italian civil society leaders had spent an average of twenty-one years in the organisation they were leading at the time of the survey, compared with an average of eleven years for British leaders (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024).

The extent to which civil society elites in different contexts have held previous board positions within the sector reveals a slightly different pattern. Here, we find that Sweden is the country with the highest proportion of leaders who have served on the boards of other CSOs, closely followed by the UK. Italy has a lower proportion of leaders with this background, while Poland has the lowest. These findings are in line with previous research showing a more integrated civil society through social networks created by interlocking board positions in the UK and Sweden compared with Italy and Poland (Lee, Platek and Scaramuzzino, 2024). Moving between board positions in different civil society organisations and/or holding multiple board positions in different civil society

organisations turns out to be a more common practice in Sweden and the UK, a practice that can be linked to the way in which the civil society field is coordinated. This way of coordinating civil society allows some leaders to occupy central positions in the network, thus accentuating the internal stratification of civil society.

Privileged backgrounds and high achieved status

Next, stratification in civil society is measured by how exclusive the elites are as a group, by looking at their composition. This dimension includes characteristics related to the family background of leaders (Reeves and Friedman, 2024) and the professional status achieved through their careers (Daloz and Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). The assumption here can be related to the 'law of increasing disproportion' (Putnam, 1976), which implies that the higher the social status of a position, the higher the proportion of individuals from high-status families who would occupy that specific position. This dimension of stratification can be related to unequal social structures, such as inequality of educational opportunities, which is defined as: 'a universal pattern based on the inequality of cultural, social, and economic capital that increases the chances of children from families with higher social status to achieve higher education and to enjoy better chances of entering a successful career' (Daloz and Hoffmann-Lange, 2018: 463). It can also be linked to practices of recruiting individuals to leadership positions who have a similar profile to the current leadership (imitation or cloning), as well as practices of discrimination

against individuals who have the 'wrong' characteristics (ibid.). In other words, it is not a given that a person with the right formal qualifications – such as education, training or proven expertise – will get the job. Cristiano, the director of an Italian umbrella organisation, describes a process whereby younger leaders are systematically prevented from taking up positions of power:

> There is a lack of young leadership. There is a lack of leadership training. Leadership training means you want to kill your father. The father is the president, often he has been in that position for many years, maybe he is the founder. No one questions his status and role. Training new leaders is a sign of a movement that is confident […] Competence is a sin! The young leaders, if there are any, are killed young! It is therefore difficult for young people to take up leadership positions. Leadership in the third sector mirrors leadership in politics, with few young people and few women.

What Cristiano describes is a practice of holding on to leadership positions for as long as possible. It is a patriarchal system, not least by describing the president as a 'father'. This system is maintained by not preparing the organisation for succession by training future leaders. Age and gender are mentioned as important categories for reaching the pinnacle of power in Italian civil society. Cristiano illustrates how appealing to merit as a means of challenging charismatic leaders is proven to be a difficult task in the Italian context. The following quote from John, a British civil society leader, illustrates another mechanism at play contributing to a specific social composition

of civil society elites – a certain distinguished elite status can be attractive to civil society organisations:

> When I think about it, there's no doubt that if you come from a certain background, if you've got, if you've got 'Sir' or 'Lady' in front of your name, that counts for quite a lot, it's, you know, it's a sort of badge, it's basically a badge of entry.

John's description of the appeal of 'a certain background' for access to elite positions suggests a classist society in which status can be based on family background and title. But it can also be achieved through specific educational and professional pathways, as in the following quote from Peter, a civil society leader in the UK. Peter illustrates how a degree from a prestigious university can compensate for an ordinary background:

> I guess I came from quite a poor family, but I was privileged to be able to go to grammar school, and as a result of that I think it helped me to get into Cambridge University, which obviously as a prestigious university sets you on a good course. But I wasn't privileged in any way in my background, so it was a journey of a lot of hard work.

Peter's account suggests that while a degree from a prestigious university can compensate for an ordinary background, a combination of more privileged attributes is still an advantage in the British context. Whether we look at it from Cristiano's point of view, with a patriarchal system where older, male leaders have a clear advantage,

or from Peter's point of view, where upper class and university degrees give you access, it is clear that individual attributes linked to certain socio-demographic backgrounds and social status are important in achieving elite positions, especially in combination. These attributes can be seen as resources that provide access to the pinnacle of power in civil society.

It is important to note that we are not interested in the distribution of resources within civil society leadership. Stratification in this dimension is understood in terms of the extent to which the composition of civil society elites in each context reproduces the inequalities and hierarchies present in the wider social context. We compare the degree of stratification in civil society in different contexts by looking at the proportion of civil society leaders who come from privileged backgrounds and the proportion of leaders who have achieved what is generally considered to be high social status (see Chapter 2).

In Table 3.2, we present the degree of stratification in our four countries, measured by the proportion of leaders with privileged backgrounds and high achieved status. The first is socio-demographic background, and we look at the proportion of leaders who have at least four of the five attributes of privileged background among the variables of age, gender, country of birth, social class and parental leadership position (see Table 2.7 in Chapter 2 for a detailed description of the operationalisation). The results show that a larger proportion of British leaders have a privileged social background, closely followed by Italian leaders. However, the patterns differ slightly between the two countries. The Italian civil society elite

Table 3.2 Privileged background and high status among the civil society elites

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Socio-demographic background (% 4–5)	40.4	26.4	28.3	41.2	709*
	0.95	0	0.12	1	–
Achieved status and position (% 4–5)	7.7	9.4	17.1	17.6	655***
	0	0.17	0.95	1	–
Normalised mean score total	0.47	0.08	0.53	1	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

is more male-dominated than the British, with more than 70 per cent of leaders in Italy being male compared with 60 per cent in the UK. This suggests the relevance of gender 'glass ceilings' in the Italian civil society sector. In contrast, British leaders are more likely than Italian leaders to have come from a family where the leader's parents held a leadership position. More than 50 per cent of British leaders had parents in leadership positions during their upbringing, while only 40 per cent of Italian leaders come from similar backgrounds. This suggests a stronger pattern of inherited status and privilege among British civil society leaders.

Polish civil society has the lowest proportion of leaders from privileged backgrounds, closely followed by Swedish civil society. Again, we find slightly different

patterns when it comes to concrete attributes. In contrast to Italy, Swedish civil society elites appear to be particularly inclusive in terms of gender, with almost 60 per cent of leaders being female, while in Poland the proportion of female leaders is just under 50 per cent. On the other hand, Polish civil society elites appear to be inclusive in terms of age, with less than 20 per cent of leaders at the end of their careers, compared with 26 per cent of Swedish leaders in this age group. Polish civil society leaders are generally younger than those in the other countries, which may be related to a younger civil society sector (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024).

When it comes to the characteristics of civil society elites in terms of leaders' achieved status, we again find that the British civil society elite has the highest proportion of leaders characterised by high social status, this time closely followed by the Swedish civil society elite. We also find slightly different patterns in terms of status achieved. The British civil society elite stands out in terms of income level, with more than 80 per cent of leaders having a high income. Among Swedish leaders, less than 60 per cent have this level of income. In terms of educational attainment, the UK has a higher proportion of leaders with tertiary education than Sweden (88 per cent in the UK and 77 per cent in Sweden). The privileged position of Swedish leaders is more related to living in the capital (46 per cent in Sweden and 34 per cent in the UK) and leading organisations with extensive resources (17 per cent in Sweden and 3 per cent in the UK).

The least privileged civil society elite is found in Italy, closely followed by Poland. In Italy, the lower status

compared with Poland is linked to a much lower proportion of leaders with higher education. In fact, less than 80 per cent of leaders in Italy have higher education, compared with 95 per cent in Poland. The lower status of Polish leaders can instead be linked to their income. While less than 50 per cent of Polish leaders have a high income, we find that almost 60 per cent of Italian leaders have this attribute (see Table 2.8 in Chapter 2 for a detailed description of the operationalisation).

In conclusion, our analysis of the characteristics of civil society elites reveals the most stratified civil society in the UK and the least stratified civil society in Poland. The British civil society elite is characterised by a privileged socio-demographic background and high achieved status, while the Polish civil society elite is characterised by the lowest proportion of leaders who are characterised as coming from a privileged background or having achieved high status. Italy and Sweden appear to be placed in between, but each follows a different pattern. The Italian civil society elite is highly stratified in terms of leaders' socio-demographic background, while the opposite is true in terms of status and position achieved. This suggests an exclusionary pattern of selection of leaders, where certain characteristics are important elements for becoming part of the elite, compared with Sweden. However, being part of the civil society elite in Italy does not confer the same high status and position as in Sweden. For Sweden, we have the opposite pattern, where a low level of stratification in terms of the socio-demographic background of leaders suggests a more inclusive selection process than in Italy. However,

members of the civil society elite are accorded a higher status and position than their Italian counterparts.

Social distance between elites and the grassroots

Our final dimension of stratification draws on a particular strand of research in elite studies that focuses on the 'elite-mass gap'. This dimension relates to the basic assumption that elites are different from the rest of the population, not only in terms of their composition but also in terms of their attitudes and values towards societal issues of general interest. These differences have been formulated as the 'elite-mass gap' (Müller et al., 2012), the 'elite-citizen gap' (Dellmuth et al., 2022) or the 'elite-public gap' (Kertzer, 2020). To study and measure this gap, it is common to compare the composition and attitudes of an elite group with those of the general population (e.g. Dellmuth et al., 2022; Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2023; 2024). We build on this tradition by comparing the composition of the civil society elite with that of the grassroots, understood as the population engaged in civil society.

It is important to place the concept of the elite-grassroots gap in a theoretical context. The gap is created by differences in resources and skills, linked to the sociodemographic backgrounds of privilege. This translates into opportunities and expectations of what professional life has to offer, which in turn paves the way for particular kinds of career trajectories. Both the starting point and subsequent formative experiences – professional and private – through socialisation with individuals of similar

socio-economic status, are expected to create a strong group affiliation. As group closure increases, social distance is created between those in the group and those outside the group: the gap becomes both cognitive and material. One effect of this is that recruitment is guided by demographic homophily (Cook, Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). In some of our many interviews with civil society elites, we find direct evidence of the effects of social distance. Individuals who have the right qualifications and/or talents for leadership positions, but lack the self-confidence and language that a specific social background provides, refrain from applying or exclude themselves from the opportunity to take a leadership position. Instead, the already privileged take access to elite positions for granted and seem to think that there is no quid pro quo for access to elite positions in civil society. The effect of expectations and established structures and norms are noticeable:

> I had these five years in charities in the UK and I had been frustrated by what I perceived as mission drift and just a level of comfort of mediocrity […] so I saw mediocre white men chuntering along and I thought why are they occupying these roles, why can't we have a more open system that really identifies and nurtures talent?

'Mediocre white men' take for granted that they have access to senior positions in CSOs, while others – women, ethnic minorities, individuals with an upbringing in marginalised areas – do not. The interviewee above further reflects that behind such patterns lies 'whole white

saviour syndrome', meaning that the privileged feel obliged to engage in charity work. Another comments that the prospect of being knighted for giving their time to a good cause is an important motivation for taking on the role as Chair of charity boards.

The gap in experience, skills and know-how between this group of elite leaders and others involved was expressed in a brutally honest way by another chair discussing the value of drafting elites into the board of trustees: '[He] can make speeches and influence government more than Joe Bloggs, who is a bus conductor'. However, the confidence that comes from a particular social background and from an elite position in another context does not necessarily translate into complacency once you have taken a leadership position in a high-profile CSO, though. Reflections about 'how much I deserve to be here' and constant 'imposter syndrome' worries were expressed by several elite leaders. One interviewee had doubts about what he had to offer, but then realised the unique skills he had that the organisation he was now leading could take advantage of: 'I know how to write the kind of letter that one politician would send to another'. What is emphasised in some of these interviews is that the competences necessary for CSOs to be successful are not evenly distributed in the population or among the people who populate the sector, and the competences are not easy to come by. They build on formal skills, attained through, for example, management training, but also a know-how only attained through access to elite-related settings. Once a distance is established, it becomes reinforced.

In the following analysis, stratification is measured by the social distance between the civil society elite and the grassroots in each context, in terms of the extent to which the social composition of the elite differs from that of the population active in civil society at the grassroots level. The rationale is that the more closed the civil society elite is in terms of its social composition, the more stratified it is.

Table 3.3 compares the proportion of individuals in the civil society elite with the characteristics that can be considered privileged with the corresponding figure among the grassroots. A positive value means that the

Table 3.3 Social distance between the civil society elites and the grassroots

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
Age (% 56–65)	20	9	15	28
	0.58	0	0.32	1
Gender (% male)	29	4	−8	11
	1	0.32	0	0.51
Level of education (% higher education)	50	48	18	22
	1	0.93	0	0.12
Country of birth (% native)	0	0	3	4
	0	0	0.75	1
Normalised mean score total	0.64	0.31	0.53	0.66

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey and European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.1. Bergen: NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2022. https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020

civil society elite is more privileged than the grassroots, while the opposite is true if the value is negative (see Table 2.10 in Chapter 2 for a detailed description of the operationalisation).

With regard to age, we find the greatest difference in the UK, followed by Italy and Sweden. In all three countries, the difference is quite large, between 15 and 28 per cent. Only Poland shows a small difference of 9 per cent. The smaller difference in Poland is largely explained by a larger share of young leaders in the elite, as explained above. In terms of gender, we find the largest difference in Italy, followed by the UK. For Poland, we find a small difference, while Sweden has a negative score. The large difference in Italy is explained by a much more inclusive composition of the grassroots (57 per cent female) in terms of gender compared with the elite, which is very exclusive in terms of gender, as discussed above. The negative score in Sweden is explained by the fact that the grassroots is more gender-equal (50 per cent female activists) than the elite, which is dominated by women.

We find the greatest difference in educational attainment in Italian civil society, closely followed by Poland. The difference in these countries is large, between 48 and 50 per cent. This is because the proportion of highly educated people in the grassroots is much lower than the (relatively) high proportion in the elite. The difference for Sweden and the UK is much smaller, at 18 and 22 per cent, respectively, due to the high proportion of highly educated activists, employees and volunteers at the grassroots level. Although the difference for the UK is small,

civil society leaders are still characterised by a high level of education. We suggest that this is explained by a relatively high entry threshold for grassroots involvement, possibly related to professionalisation, an issue we will return to later.

Finally, the difference by country of birth is highest in the UK, followed by Sweden. Italy and Poland have no difference at all between the civil society leaders and the grassroots. Overall, the differences in this category are quite small due to the small proportions of foreign-born in both groups. This is particularly true for Poland, where a full 98 per cent of the elite were native-born, the same figure as for the grassroots. The most diverse elite is found in the UK, where the grassroots are even more inclusive in terms of the proportion of foreign-born (17 per cent, compared with 13 per cent among the elite). Sweden has the second largest difference. While 87 per cent of the grassroots are native-born, 91 per cent of the civil society elite are native-born.

In conclusion, if we look at the distance between civil society elites and the grassroots in terms of social composition, we find the greatest distance in the UK, followed closely by Italy, Sweden and finally Poland. It is interesting to note that the differences between countries in the socio-demographic composition of the elite tend to confirm the differences in the distance between the elite and the grassroots. Sweden and Poland, which have less privileged patterns in terms of composition, tend to have smaller gaps than the UK and Italy, which have less privileged patterns in terms of socio-demographic composition. In fact, looking at the grassroots across country

contexts, we find much smaller differences than looking at the elite, leading to larger gaps where the elite is more privileged and exclusive. Table 3.4 provides an overview of the measures of stratification we have used and shows the overall mean of elite stratification (last row).

Conclusion

In this section, we present a summary of our analysis of the stratification of civil society elites in the four contexts using the three dimensions of stratification. Figure 3.1 illustrates how the patterns of stratification in civil society in the four countries relate to the three different dimensions we measure (based on the scores presented in Table 3.4). The larger a triangle, the more stratified civil society is in a given country (indicated by different types and shades of line in the figure). The shape of the triangles indicates how civil society in a given context is characterised by stratification in relation to the three different dimensions: high-profile careers (employment and board positions within civil society), social composition (privileged socio-demographic background and achieved high status) and elite-grassroots distance (distance between the civil society elite and the grassroots).

Overall, civil society in the UK is characterised by the highest degree of stratification (0.79). The UK scores higher than the other countries on all three dimensions, but the differences are most pronounced on the second dimension, the social composition of the civil society elite. The UK civil society elite is characterised by the highest proportion of civil society leaders with privileged

Table 3.4 Stratification in civil society measured in three dimensions across countries

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
High-profile career and board membership among the civil society elites					
Previous executive position in CS (%)	57.3	30.7	32.7	47.1	708***
	1	0	0.07	0.62	–
Previous board position in CS (%)	25.6	20.7	35.7	32.5	728**
	0.33	0	1	0.79	–
Normalised mean score total	0.66	0	0.53	0.70	–
Privileged background and high status among the civil society elites					
Socio-demographic background (% 4–5)	40.4	26.4	28.3	41.2	709*
	0.95	0	0.12	1	–
Achieved status and position (% 4–5)	7.7	9.4	17.1	17.6	655***
	0	0.17	0.95	1	–
Normalised mean score total	0.47	0.08	0.53	1	–
Social distance between the civil society elites and the grassroots					
Age (% 56–65)	20	9	15	28	–
	0.58	0	0.32	1	–
Gender (% male)	29	4	−8	11	–
	1	0.32	0	0.51	–

(*Continued*)

Table 3.4 (Continued)

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Level of education (% higher education)	50	48	18	22	–
	1	0.93	0	0.12	–
Country of birth (% native)	0	0	3	4	–
	0	0	0.75	1	–
Normalised mean score total	0.64	0.31	0.53	0.66	–
Measure of elite stratification (mean)	0.59	0.13	0.53	0.79	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

socio-demographic backgrounds and high achieved status compared with the other contexts.

The Italian civil society elite is also characterised by a relatively high degree of stratification (0.59). Here, however, the pattern is different in that it is in relation to the first dimension, i.e. high achieved status, that we find the highest stratification score for Italy, but also in relation to the gap between the elite and the grassroots. Civil society in Italy can be said to be quite inclusive when it comes to the broader base of civic engagement, but advancement to the higher elite positions in civil society organisations seems to be restricted to people from privileged backgrounds.

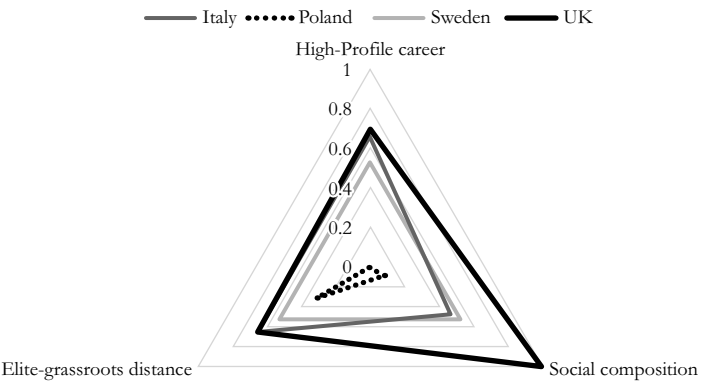

Figure 3.1 Patterns of stratification in civil society

The Swedish civil society elite comes in third place in the overall stratification score (0.53). In all three dimensions (career progression within civil society, privileged background and status achieved and distance between leaders and grassroots), Swedish civil society can thus be considered moderately stratified compared with the other three country contexts.

Finally, Polish civil society stands out on our relative stratification scale with the lowest score (0.13). In terms of the distance between the civil society elite and the grassroots, there is a tendency for civil society leaders to be much more highly educated than the grassroots. However, with regard to the first two dimensions, the Polish civil society elite does not seem to be characterised by accumulated executive/board positions within

civil society or privileged background/high achieved status.

The analysis presented in this chapter reveals that the civil society leaders who occupy the top of the hierarchy often embody characteristics – high-profile careers, privileged backgrounds and social distance from grassroots participants – that suggest the emergence of an internally cohesive and exclusive group. Yet this phenomenon is not merely descriptive; it raises urgent questions about the future direction of the sector. What does it mean for civil society to retain a democratic ethos when access to power increasingly mirrors broader societal inequalities? Our findings suggest that civil society's promise of representing diverse constituencies is at risk of being filtered through the lens of selective gatekeeping. This poses a paradox: while many civil society leaders are motivated by civic values and progressive causes, the very structures that elevate them may contradict the ethos they are tasked with upholding.

4

Crossing boundaries: civil society leaders at the nexus of power

Civil society is not a closed sphere. Its leaders do not operate in isolation from the broader structures of power and influence in society. On the contrary, many of them move across boundaries – between sectors, roles and institutional arenas – bringing with them resources, status and strategic networks. This chapter examines the ways in which civil society elites are integrated with elites in other sectors, such as politics and business. If stratification concerns the vertical distance between elites and their own constituencies, integration speaks to the horizontal ties that link civil society elites with other centres of power.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, elite integration is a central concept in elite theory, pointing to the formation of cross-sectoral alliances that potentially compromise autonomy while enabling influence. In civil society, this tension is particularly pronounced. The sector is normatively constructed as being independent from government and business, rooted in collective

identities and civic ethos. Yet, many of its top leaders exhibit career trajectories, board memberships and social networks that suggest significant overlap with other elite groups. Integration, then, is not merely a technical matter of inter-sectoral collaboration: it is a key process in the elitisation of civil society itself.

Below, we unpack the level of elite integration of the civil society elites in our four countries: Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. The aim is to systematically compare the extent to which they are integrated with the political and economic elites. The integration of civil society elites is operationalised through three different dimensions. First, integration is measured by the extent to which civil society leaders in each country context have held and currently hold leadership positions in the public or business sectors. This dimension is referred to as 'boundary crossing'. Second, integration is measured by the extent to which civil society leaders' social networks include individuals from the public and business sectors. Third, integration is measured by the proximity of the social composition of the civil society elite to the political and business elite.

As in Chapter 3 on the stratification of civil society elites, the analysis is based on a comparison of the four countries using questions from the Civil Society Elite Survey and the European Social Survey (more on operationalisation and data in Chapter 2). The analytical contribution lies in the systematic comparison of four countries defined as representing different civil society regimes. For each dimension of integration, we first illustrate the integration of civil society elites using our

qualitative material. We then show how civil society in our four country contexts compares in terms of the degree of elite integration. Finally, we summarise and discuss the patterns of integration across all three dimensions.

Boundary crossing

Starting from the assumption that elite integration takes place through interactions between different elite groups, our first dimension of civil society elite integration concerns the phenomenon of 'boundary crossing'. The boundaries we refer to are the demarcations between societal sectors – public, business, civil society and politics. These boundaries are shaped by financial regulations that determine how each sector operates, as well as by policies that define their expected roles and interactions within the welfare state (Etzioni, 1973; Lipsky and Smith, 1989). They also represent different value communities related to leadership, work motivations and what creates status and legitimacy (Lewis, 2012; Niendorf, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2023; Van der Wal, 2013).

While the sectoral boundaries discussed in the literature are based on theoretical demarcations between different societal fields, it also appears that elite boundary crossers experience the presence of these boundaries as they seek to change the location of their careers. Ralf, for example, has a background in the commercial world. His elite status stems from a successful career in which he has worked in senior positions for highly respected companies. He also holds a degree from Cambridge University. His professional influence extends beyond the

organisations he has worked for, as he has championed banking for ordinary citizens, not just the wealthy elite, and pioneered online shopping in grocery stores. Early in his career, he looked for opportunities to work with charities, not just to help with emergency funding, but 'to actually work out what needs to change structurally and then invest and make those changes'. He continues:

> I got to a point in private equity where I felt I'd done enough, you know, I wanted to do something that really had greater social value. So, my conscience decided that my gig in a big multinational was going to be my last private equity gig, and I was going to dedicate the rest of my, you know, career to working in the social sector, which is really what I'm doing now.

Despite his deep commitment to values of solidarity and equality – and a distinguished career that equipped him with rare experience, networks and skills – he struggled to find a charity willing to bring him on board:

> So, some charities say 'never been in the charity sector, cross off the list'. Yes, so there are certain charities that I have approached that I have basically got a flat 'no' from. But there are some charities that sort of say 'actually we need new perspectives, new skills' and because this charity was so focused on driving social change [...] the trustees who were running the organisation really wanted someone who could bring new ideas, new perspectives, commercial skills to our organisation and therefore to the sector. And so I was sort of, yes, they wanted me to come, I wanted to come.

Ralf reflects on the differences between the private equity world and a charity:

> Because clearly in private equity, people are paid to deal with a lot of change and that becomes part of working life. […] But you have to take people [in the charity sector] more carefully along with any changes you're making. […] People in the sector aren't paid that well compared to the commercial sector, and certainly compared to private equity [and] there's a lot of expectation that goes with that lower pay, around personal wellbeing.

At the time of recruitment, both parties were aware that there were question marks about how Ralf's leadership would be valued by others in the organisation. It would take a process of socialisation to fit in, as the following quote illustrates:

> and then of course the bigger challenge is probably […] how do you get those who've been in the industry maybe all their lives into what are some quite, in some cases, different approaches.

Ralf talks about having to learn the implications of a 'servant leadership' approach as a leader, finding ways to 'corral people' in a particular direction rather than giving orders, and ensuring that conversations about his leadership and the organisational changes that were to come were in dialogue with, rather than in opposition to, that leadership.

Another aspect of boundary crossing that we consider concerns the paths that civil society leaders take after becoming leaders in the sector. The case of a leader of an Italian cooperative organisation serves as an example. Having spent most of his working life in the sector, including a significant part at senior and then executive level, Mario recounts how there was an expectation that he would follow the path of previous leaders:

> the path of my predecessors was always, I would say almost without exception, [that] they made a mandate that 'in the middle of the next term you will be elected to parliament'. […] So there was, there is this history that repeats itself.

The organisation has long-standing links with a political party, so the career move would be to move into the political sphere. There was a distinction between the organisation and the political party: the boundary in terms of a difference in responsibility and mandate as a leader was clear.

Both Ralf's and Mario's stories illustrate how the notion of sectoral boundaries is relevant for elite leaders. In Ralf's case, boundaries are perceived at the point of recruitment and transition and influence how elite leaders consider how sector-specific values and practices are intimately linked to their status as leaders. For Mario, the historically close ties between civil society and a political party meant that a transition would not involve a challenge to the leader's status and legitimacy.

In Table 4.1, we present the degree of civil society elite integration in our four countries, measured by the

Table 4.1 Elite integration through boundary crossing

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Current and previous board membership (%)	18.3	15.0	32.6	55.2	719***
	0.08	0	0.43	1	–
Previous employment (%)	36.1	22.4	43.1	60.0	702***
	0.36	0	0.55	1	–
Predecessor moving to other sectors (%)	13.5	10.2	10.9	21.5	599*
	0.29	0	0.06	1	–
Normalised mean score total	0.24	0	0.34	1	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

proportion of leaders who crossed the sectoral boundaries. For each measure, we normalise the numbers on a scale between zero and one, where the lowest number among the four countries is given zero and the highest one. The numbers in between (i.e. the two countries in the middle) are placed proportionally on this scale. This method of normalisation allows us to compare the level of integration of civil society elites across countries. In other words, we are not measuring integration within a given country in absolute terms. This way of presenting our results is consistent with the way we presented the results in the stratification chapter (see Chapter 2 for details).

We find that civil society leaders are most integrated with the general elite via board membership in the UK (55.2 per cent), followed by Sweden (32.6 per cent), Italy (18.3 per cent) and finally Poland (15 per cent). The differences are somewhat smaller when it comes to boundary crossing measured by previous employment. However, the pattern is repeated here, with the United Kingdom having the highest proportion of leaders with previous executive-level employment in the public and business sectors (60 per cent), followed by Sweden (43.1 per cent), Italy (36.1 per cent) and then Poland (22.4 per cent). In the case of boundary crossing through employment, we find that the differences between Sweden and Italy are rather small and that the two countries lie between the two 'extreme' cases of the UK and Poland. Our analysis also shows that boundary crossing from the business sector (both in terms of employment and board membership) is more common than boundary crossing from the public sector in all country contexts, except for Sweden, where the opposite is true, albeit with small differences (see Arvidson et al., 2025). On the third measure of boundary crossing, the United Kingdom remains in first place among the four countries, with about a fifth of leaders reporting that their predecessors had moved on to other leadership positions in the public or private sector. in the other contexts, this seems to be a more marginal phenomenon and there is no clear differentiation between countries (between 10 and 14 per cent).

It is interesting to note a high degree of consistency in the results of the three measures of boundary crossing, whether we look at past and present boundary crossing

through boards or employment, or whether we look at the career trajectories of civil society leaders after leaving office. The normalised means summarise the extent to which the integration of civil society elites through boundary crossing is salient across the four countries. This pattern suggests that the UK civil society elite is much more integrated with the elite of the public and business sectors, in that they tend to share similar experiences of leadership positions. The UK civil society elite would, by crossing boundaries, to a greater extent than their Italian, Swedish, and Polish counterparts, occupy elite positions in the public or private sector during their careers and thus potentially become part of a political and business elite. This would reasonably lead them to interact more with members of these other elite groups. Instead, Polish leaders are the least integrated with other elites when it comes to boundary crossing. Sweden and Italy are in between.

Personal and professional networking

The second dimension of civil society elite integration concerns professional and personal networks that extend across sectoral boundaries into the public and business sectors. The notion of personal networks epitomises integration, which is defined as the interconnectedness of a person with the world around them. In the previous chapter, we discussed networks within the sector, whereas here we focus on cross-sectoral networks. To illustrate a network within the sector, we can again refer to Mario, whose network is based on his long-term involvement

in a civil society organisation. He entered the cooperative movement as a young man with few formal qualifications. He worked for years as an accounting assistant in a local office before moving on to work at the regional level, this time in a senior strategic position. His career includes a number of positions at different levels – local, regional, national – which have allowed him to build a network within the movement, across the country and at different levels. His connections undoubtedly include people outside the movement, but a characteristic feature of Mario's network is that it forms a vertical integration within the organisation. In contrast, in this chapter, we want to identify horizontal integration across elite communities in different sectors. Naomi's story describes how such extensive networks were created and what they meant for her career.

Naomi describes her career as defined by her work in civil society organisations. Fresh out of university, she wanted to work for social change, to influence the world, to address the various injustices she saw around her. She had an appetite for activism, and although she started out in a political youth party, she gave up on a political career because she felt that the work was controlled by party politics. She became involved in activism in the peace movement, the anti-nuclear movement, through civil society organisations that were considered a little 'dangerous'. Through early friendships made at university, as an activist and in youth politics, her network has grown to include a number of influential people. Her friends are in leading positions in politics, the media and think tanks. In her own words: 'I've got friends a bit all over,

that's how it is'. She explains that you naturally stay in touch with such people over time, referring, of course, to ongoing discussions on issues that concern her, where the input of these well-informed individuals is highly valued. Her network has also meant that she has been headhunted for senior positions within the government and the European Commission. In other words, the network was both actively used and maintained by Naomi, and it benefited her by making her visible in circles beyond her immediate and personal connections. After several years of working in political and public elite circles, she returned to civil society activism and founded what is now a high-profile organisation working for women's rights through a network of international partners.

Naomi's story of networks is echoed in many other interviews. Members of the civil society elites often talk about the snowball effect of a few critical contacts with influential people, and how the combination of their own ambition and a network that is paying attention to their work has helped them land senior positions of responsibility and influence. This network of friends and acquaintances is maintained and expanded to serve the purpose of the organisation and sometimes their own individual ambitions to move on and try new things. In individual stories, important connections seem to have happened by chance, and interviewees describe how they seem to have come across influential individuals who, in one way or another, have opened up opportunities for them. From an aggregate perspective, however, these resources appear to be unevenly distributed, as illustrated by the data presented below.

In Table 4.2, we present comparative figures for elite integration as measured by personal and professional networks. We find that integration through personal and professional networks is a common phenomenon in all four country contexts. However, the breadth of these networks, understood as the number of institutions in the public and business sectors that leaders can count in their network, varies across country contexts (see Chapter 2 for more details on operationalisation). We observe that, on average, civil society leaders in the UK have the highest number of public and business connections in their network. Almost one in three UK leaders report having personal or professional networks that include individuals representing eight or more public and business institutions. Italian leaders are close behind, with 30 per cent of leaders having such large networks that include eight or more public and business institutions. Fewer Swedish leaders reach this threshold (23 per cent), while Polish leaders can be said to be the least integrated, with only 14

Table 4.2 Elite integration through personal and professional networking

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Breadth of social network in the business sector and public institutions (% 8–15)	30.1	13.7	23.2	32.5	702***
Normalised mean score total	0.87	0	0.51	1	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

per cent of their leaders having such a wide personal and professional network.

In general, civil society leaders are more likely to have connections to the public sector in their network than to the business sector. Institutions at the national level seem to be particularly important in Sweden and the UK, especially compared with Poland. Italian and Polish leaders are more likely to have networks with county and local authorities than their Swedish and British counterparts. Networks with EU institutions are particularly important for Italian leaders compared with other contexts. Connections with institutions related to the business sector seem to be most relevant for the civil society elite in the UK. Banks and financial companies are also highly relevant for Italian civil society leaders' networks.

This dimension of integration tends to confirm the findings on boundary crossing. While Polish leaders do not move into elite positions in other sectors, they also tend to have fewer links to the public or business sectors. The opposite might have been expected to compensate for the lack of mobility. Instead, these dimensions appear to be linked. The UK shows the opposite pattern, where the civil society elite tends to be both more mobile across sectors and better connected to other elites through their social network. This correlation is also present at the level of individual leaders. Leaders who have crossed sectoral boundaries through previous employment tend to have larger networks than leaders who have not done so (5.7 vs 5.0 institutions on average, ANOVA sig. 0.011). We find an even greater difference in the reach of the personal and professional network among boundary crossing leaders

by board (6.6 vs 4.7 institutions on average, ANOVA sig. <0.001). This correlation is actually quite intuitive, as on the one hand, moving across sectoral boundaries makes it possible to establish links with representatives of other institutions, and on the other hand, a large overarching network makes leaders relevant for various appointments and recruitments in other sectors as well.

Proximity to the general elite

The third dimension of integration focuses on the social composition of civil society elites. While our earlier discussion of stratification examined the distance between elites and the grassroots, here we shift the lens towards the proximity between civil society elites and other elite groups – particularly political and economic elites. In this context, integration is not about direct interaction or networking, but rather about belonging to similar social strata. It refers to structural similarity, i.e. the extent to which civil society elites resemble other elites in terms of background characteristics such as gender, age and education. The more alike they are, the more integrated they can be considered in terms of social composition.

Among the indicators used to examine how elite composition compares across elite groups, educational background is of particular interest. Elite studies make a strong connection between educational systems and the formation of a social elite. A status-based, hierarchical educational system is a precursor to a social system of elites. In the UK, for example, only 1 per cent of the population attends one of the two elite universities, Cambridge and

Oxford (based on 2018 undergraduate data, The Sutton Trust 2019: 15). This bias interacts with the hierarchical system of society at large, as a degree from an elite university paves the way to a career that is available to only a few (Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

A powerful example of this is Martin, the CEO of a leading charity with a national reach. Martin graduated with a law degree from a top university and landed a job as a solicitor in a prestigious law firm. This opened the door to a successful career travelling the world as an expert in international business law. After a decade, he began a career as a deputy director in a number of public authorities before becoming involved in the charity sector as a CEO. He has been awarded a CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) and a knighthood. Martin's story illustrates how a first-class degree from a top university can lay the foundations for an impressive career. His trajectory is indicative of what is considered valuable as civil society connects with the wider world.

Behind the kind of merits mentioned above, we find an admittedly long and successful career. But merit is also a sign of a highly stratified social system based on a broader configuration of social advantages related to education, gender and ethnic background. The prestige attached to certain credentials and titles stems from the fact that they are exclusionary. The fact that a degree from an elite university is also valued within civil society suggests a process of mimicry, reinforcing the alignment between a civil society elite and other elites. The following quote from the head of a British charity highlights another aspect of the proximity dimension:

> People also think that if somebody has a title it shows that it's a respectable charity, quite often when I get requests for money, which I get from charities every day, you'll see patrons and vice-patrons and long, long lists of people and they don't do anything but they have their names listed and allow their names to be listed to give credibility to the organisation. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't know, but it works.

The respectability of the title is not only a resource for the individual in terms of access to a leadership position, but also often valued as a resource for the organisations, for example, in terms of access to funding. The endorsement of an organisation by high-status individuals can signal legitimacy and open doors to financial support that might otherwise be out of reach. In the UK context, this dynamic is especially evident in the role of patrons, who often serve as symbolic connectors across elite domains. Notably, it is patrons – especially members of the royal family – who most frequently link the boards of Britain's elite civil society organisations (Lee, Platek and Scaramuzzino, 2024). To paraphrase social movement researcher Mario Diani (2015), such figures act as the 'cement' of civil society elites, reinforcing ties between them and powerful actors in the political and business spheres.

For this third dimension of elite integration, we compare the similarity and difference between the general elite – individuals who hold high-level positions of responsibility and oversight in organisations (see Chapter 2 for more details) – and the civil society elite. In Table 4.3, we indicate for each country the difference

Table 4.3 Elite integration as proximity to the general elite

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*
Age (% 56–65)	17.8	2.9	13.8	30.0
	0.45	1	0.60	0
Gender (% male)	11.3	−8.7	−11.8	−9.4
	0.16	1	0	0.77
Level of education (% higher education)	45.1	47.0	18.1	19.2
	0.07	0	1	0.96
Country of birth (% native)	−3.4	−2	1	−9.5
	0.71	0.88	1	0
Normalised mean score total	0.35	0.72	0.65	0.43

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey and European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.1. Bergen: NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2022. https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020

in the proportion of leaders with specific characteristics among civil society leaders on the one hand and among the general elite on the other. The difference is expressed in percentage points. Since closeness, understood as the smallest difference between the elite groups, is the sign of integration, the normalised scale assigns higher values to smaller differences and lower values to larger differences (see Table 2.12 in Chapter 2 for more details on operationalisation).

In terms of age, Polish civil society leaders are closest to the general elite, while in Italy, Sweden, and the UK, the civil society elite differs from the general elite in

this respect. Polish leaders are on average fifty-one years old, while the average age of the general elite is fifty. The civil society elite in the other three country contexts is on average older than the Polish elite (fifty-seven in the UK and Sweden and fifty-nine in Italy). In all countries, the share of people aged fifty-six to sixty-five – the age group we assume to be dominant in the elite population in terms of 'peak of career' – is larger for the civil society elite than for the general elite, and the difference is largest in the UK, followed by Italy and then Sweden.

In terms of gender, we find that the Polish civil society elite is closest to the general elite, closely followed by the UK. In Sweden and Italy, we find larger differences in the gender distribution of the civil society elite compared with the general elite. In all countries except Italy, the civil society elite is characterised by a higher proportion of female leaders than the general elite.

With regard to the share of highly educated leaders, it is in Sweden and the UK where we find that the civil society elite and the general elite are more similar, while the differences between the groups are greater in Italy and Poland. However, the pattern is identical in all countries in that the civil society elite tends to be more highly educated than the general elite.

Finally, with regard to the proportion of native-born, only in Sweden is the proportion of native-born higher among the civil society elite (91 per cent) than among the general elite (90 per cent, a difference of only 1 percentage point). In Poland, there are virtually no foreign leaders among the general elite, and civil society differs only slightly from the general elite (100 per cent and

98 per cent, respectively). In the UK and Italy, civil society elites are more diverse in terms of the proportion of foreign-born compared with the general elite.

All in all, in terms of the proximity of the civil society elite to the general elite, in the sense of how similar their social composition is, we can conclude that the Polish leaders are the closest to the general elite in their social composition, followed by Sweden, the UK and then Italy. It is interesting to note that although the Polish civil society elite is the least integrated elite group in terms of the first two dimensions, it is the most similar to the general elite and therefore the most integrated in this respect. This is not necessarily a contradiction, as proximity is not only an internal measure of civil society but also takes another group as a point of comparison. Just as the gap between the civil society elite and the grassroots depends on the social composition of the latter group, the proximity of the civil society elite to the general elite depends on the composition of the general elite.

Conclusion

The pattern of integration of civil society elites, taking into account all three measures of integration, is that civil society elites are most integrated with the political and economic elite in the UK, followed by Sweden and Italy with almost the same score. The least integrated seems to be the Polish civil society elite. Table 4.4 provides an overview of the measures of integration we have used and presents the overall mean score of elite integration (last row).

Table 4.4 Integration in civil society measured in three dimensions across countries

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Elite integration through boundary crossing					
Current and previous board membership (%)	18.3	15.0	32.6	55.2	719***
	0.08	0	0.43	1	–
Previous employment (%)	36.1	22.4	43.1	60.0	702***
	0.36	0	0.55	1	–
Predecessor moving to other sectors (%)	13.5	10.2	10.9	21.5	599*
	0.29	0	0.06	1	–
Normalised mean score total	0.24	0	0.34	1	–
Integration through personal and professional networking					
Breadth of social network in the business sector and public institutions (% 8–15)	30.1	13.7	23.2	32.5	702***
Normalised mean score total	0.87	0	0.51	1	–
Integration as proximity to the general elite (ESS10)					
Age (% 56–65)	17.8	2.9	13.8	30.0	–
	0.45	1	0.60	0	–
Gender (% male)	11.3	−8.7	−11.8	−9.4	–
	0.16	1	0	0.77	–

(*Continued*)

Table 4.4 (Continued)

	Italy	*Poland*	*Sweden*	*UK*	*N*
Level of education (% higher education)	45.1	47.0	18.1	19.2	–
	0.07	0	1	0.96	–
Country of birth (% native)	−3.4	−2	1	−9.5	–
	0.71	0.88	1	0	–
Normalised mean score total	0.35	**0.72**	0.65	0.43	–
Measure of elite integration (mean)	0.49	0.24	0.50	0.81	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

In Figure 4.1, the shape of the triangles indicates how the civil society elite in a given country context is characterised by integration with the political and business elite in relation to the three different dimensions. The larger a triangle, the more integrated the civil society elite is with the general elite in relative terms (indicated by different types and shades of lines).

Our results show that the level of integration of the civil society elite is highest in the UK (with an average score of 0.81). This is the case both for the measure of integration in terms of crossing sectoral boundaries and for the measure of integration in terms of social networks that extend far beyond the civil society sector. However, when it comes to the measure of civil society integration in terms of proximity to the general elite in its social

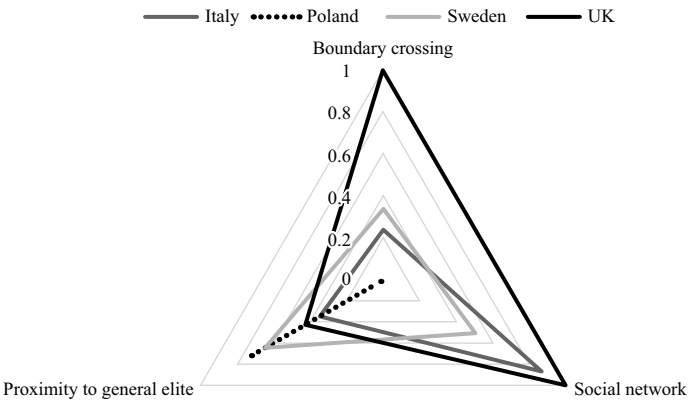

Figure 4.1 Patterns of integration in civil society

composition, British leaders are not the most integrated, but only the third most integrated.

The Swedish civil society elite ranks second in our comparison in terms of elite integration (mean score 0.50). It is mainly in terms of integration through proximity to the general elite that Swedish leaders are integrated. Integration through personal and professional networks is also relevant for Swedish civil society elites. The level of integration in terms of boundary crossing is much lower compared with the first two dimensions.

Italian civil society ranks third in our comparison in terms of elite integration, but with almost the same score as Sweden (mean score 0.49). While the difference between Sweden and Italy in the level of integration is marginal, the pattern between the two countries is markedly different. In Italy, civil society leaders are integrated with the general elite mainly through social networks,

while the degree of boundary crossing and proximity in social background is rather low.

Finally, in our comparison, the Polish civil society elite is the least integrated with the general elite (mean score 0.24). It is only in terms of common social background that we can observe the integration of the civil society elite, while the other two dimensions – boundary crossing and social networks reaching out to other sectors – are comparatively negligible.

This chapter's exploration of elite integration highlights how civil society no longer stands apart from the established centres of power. Through cross-sectoral careers, expansive networks and shared social attributes, civil society elites are embedded in broader elite constellations. This connectivity provides opportunities for influence, access to resources and political relevance. But it also provokes a fundamental question: can civil society remain autonomous when its leaders are deeply interwoven with those in business and government? The answer is neither straightforward nor uniform across contexts. Integration does not inherently negate independence. However, our findings suggest that there is a pressing question about whether civil society elites can navigate the nexus of power without diluting the sector's commitment to democratic accountability and civic ethos.

5
Comparative patterns of elitisation

This chapter brings together the two core dimensions of our theoretical framework – stratification and integration – to identify broader patterns in the formation of civil society elites. While the preceding chapters examined these dimensions separately, here we move beyond isolated measures to explore how they intersect. By comparing the four countries studied, we uncover distinct configurations of elites and reflect on how varying degrees of stratification and integration, that is, degrees of elitisation, shape the character and composition of civil society elites across national contexts.

As outlined in the Introduction and Chapter 2, our case selection was not intended to isolate independent variables that explain levels of stratification and integration. Rather, the goal of our research design was to select diverse cases that would likely exhibit distinct patterns of elitisation. This approach allows us to assess the capacity of our theoretical framework to capture cross-national variation. Once its explanatory power is

established, we can turn to interpreting the patterns that emerge and examining how they relate to broader contextual dynamics.

Comparing four civil society elites

To position our four countries within the stratification–integration model, we begin by revisiting the findings from Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 revealed that elite stratification is most pronounced in the UK, followed by Italy and Sweden, which display comparable – though slightly lower – levels of stratification, with Italy just ahead. Poland, by contrast, stands out with significantly lower levels of stratification. Chapter 4 similarly showed that the UK exhibits the highest degree of integration between civil society elites and other elite groups. Italy and Sweden again cluster closely together with moderate integration, while Poland trails with a much lower level of elite integration. Taken together, these results allow us to map the distinct configurations of civil society elites across the four national contexts (Figure 5.1).

A number of observations can be made. First, it appears that our model can highlight meaningful differences between countries. These also make intuitive sense, given, for example, the general level of stratification in the UK and the active repression of Polish society under the rule of the Law and Justice Party and the short history of the sector. Used in this way, the stratification–integration model functions as a descriptive tool that highlights differences between elite groups.

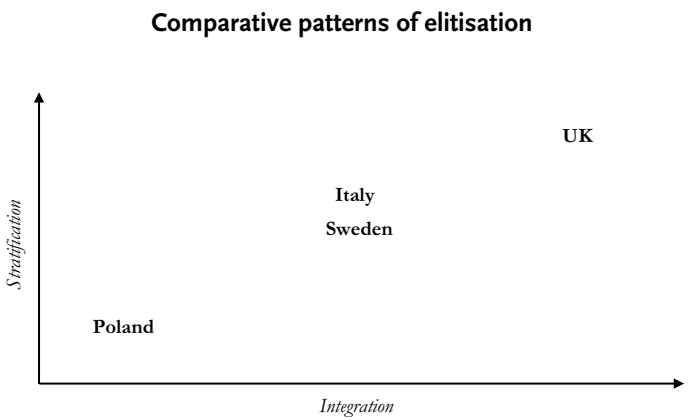

Figure 5.1 Civil society elite patterns

Second, Italy and Sweden are placed close together in our model. We do not assume that this is the result of similar conditions, as there can be many factors that drive stratification and integration. However, as we will discuss below, it is relevant to ask to what extent corporatism, which is prominent in both countries, is likely to produce this kind of elite pattern.

Third, it is worth remembering that our measures of stratification and integration are relative to the cases in our sample. Thus, Poland could have ended up with high levels of elite stratification and integration if the sample had included three other countries with even lower scores. Thus, it is worth noting that our selection of cases includes both countries with high levels of social stratification and countries that are markedly egalitarian, as well as countries where the third sector has a long history and plays an important social role, and cases where civil society is less consolidated.

Finally, the positioning of the cases suggests a potential correlation between stratification and integration: the more civil society elites are stratified from their grassroots base, the more likely they are to be integrated with other societal elites. To confirm whether this relationship holds more broadly, further research, including a larger set of countries, will be necessary. With our current data, however, we can examine this relationship at the individual level – specifically, whether individuals who score high on stratification also tend to score high on integration. This analysis will be the focus of Chapter 6. First, though, the remainder of this chapter explores the three distinct national-level patterns of civil society elites that our study identifies.

Three patterns of civil society elites

The civil society elites across the four cases can be categorised into three distinct patterns. While various factors may contribute to why elite groups align differently, our objective here is not to offer a universal causal explanation. Instead, drawing on the extensive literature that explores both the specific contexts and the broader dynamics of civil society, it is valuable to examine these patterns in greater depth.

High stratification, high integration

The first pattern is characterised by a high degree of stratification and a high degree of integration, i.e. the position of the elite group has both considerable distance

from the civil society base and considerable proximity to the general elite. In light of elite research, it makes theoretical sense that stratification and integration are positively correlated. Research on elite integration has described networking with members of other sectors as an elite phenomenon, for example, through revolving doors (Clausen and Can, 2011) or top-level networking (see Mizruchi, 1996; Moore et al., 2002). Indeed, some scholars have suggested that network centrality is the defining characteristic of elites (see Ibsen, Ellersgaard and Larsen, 2021) and thus serves as a driver of stratification.

The general development of professionalisation in civil society can be expected to contribute to this (Hwang and Powell, 2009; Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024; Maier et al., 2016). While civil society has historically relied on volunteerism, an increasing number of paid professionals are now managing the operations of large civil society organisations (CSOs). This is widening the gap between grassroots and university-trained professionals who occupy senior positions in organisations. This trend is likely to be reinforced by, for example, an increased focus on lobbying and advocacy work in civil society (Dür and Mateo, 2013; Mellquist, 2022a). It is also reinforced by CSOs taking on service delivery roles, competitive environments that require results-oriented organisations and organisations that rely on external funding, all of which require increasingly bureaucratised organisations run by professional administrative staff (Brandsen and Karré, 2011; Jonsson and Lagerlöf Nilsson, 2007).

Incremental changes in the UK civil society sector are related to all of the above. The sector is following a trend

towards professionalisation, and the civil society elite has the highest degree of stratification compared with Italy, Poland and Sweden. The sector employs nearly one million people, equivalent to 3 per cent of the UK workforce, and has grown faster than both the public and private sectors over the past decade (The Almanac, 2023). The sector is also heavily reliant on voluntary work (The Almanac, 2023; Harris, 2010), which means it is characterised by a gap between a large base of volunteers and a highly professionalised cadre of campaigners, fundraisers and lobbyists (Hilton et al., 2012). Stratification takes different forms in the sector, and the UK stands out from the other countries in our study in that there is an awareness of the large gap between small, often financially struggling organisations and a small group of large and extremely well-resourced organisations (see The Almanac, 2023; see also rankings published by www.civilsociety.co.uk such as the Charity Finance 100 Index; www.yougov.co.uk various rankings of charities). In recent years, the sector has also come under scrutiny for the composition of its workforce, for example, in a campaign led by #Charitysowhite, which highlighted stratification through a lack of diversity in the workforce in general and in the sector's leadership in particular.

Our understanding of the high degree of stratification of the UK's civil society elite also calls for a reflection on British society more generally. The socio-economic structure is characterised by a division, a disconnect, between the ruling elite and the general population. Compared with OECD averages, the UK has relatively low social mobility and high levels of poverty (Friedman

and Laurison, 2019; Friedman and Savage, 2017). Although social mobility has been a political concern for some time, there is little evidence of significant change in equality of opportunity (Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Friedman and Savage, 2017; The Sutton Trust, 2019). The country's elite education system is an important factor here (Green and Kynaston, 2019). Individuals with significant decision-making power tend to have private educational backgrounds and degrees from elite universities (Friedman, Laurison and Miles, 2015; Savage, 2015), where they form networks that become important assets in their professional careers (Reeves and Friedman, 2024). A significant proportion of CSO leaders in top organisations have degrees from elite and top-ranked universities (Ivanovska Hadjievska and Arvidson, 2025). This provides an important basis for how stratification and integration also interact in civil society.

The relationship between the so-called non-profit sector and the state has gone through a number of stages. While some argued in the early 1990s that the sector had never been independent of the state, but was rather 'intricately linked by royal charter, patronage and networks of elite kinship' (Lewis, 1999: 257), since the second half of the twentieth century there have been concerted efforts by key organisations either to distance themselves from the state (Harris, 2010) or to define more clearly the specific nature of the sector vis-à-vis the public and corporate sectors (Alcock and Kendall, 2011). Nevertheless, there is close interaction between the sectors. The reliance on private donations means that contacts with wealthy funders and private companies are a valuable asset for

CSO leaders. The size and status of high-profile organisations, and their ability to influence key policy debates in a number of areas, have probably made the sector an attractive environment in which to operate, even for elites from other sectors.

This specific elite pattern in civil society, characterised by considerable stratification and elite integration, is likely to create a legitimacy dilemma for the leadership at the top of the sector. Are CSO leaders capable of representing their constituencies, given that in many ways they have more in common with other elite groups than with the grassroots they represent and work for? The ongoing debate in the UK around diversity and representation in civil society (Dean, 2016; Mohan, 2012) can be seen as a reflection of this. Here, the umbrella organisation the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, (NCVO), has suggested that both informal and formal barriers have made it difficult to enter the higher echelons of civil society, and that there is a growing gap between well-funded and large CSOs and less established and much smaller community groups that are not professionalised to the same extent (Alcock and Kendall, 2011). This means that access to policymakers and the media is unequally distributed. Our finding supports these descriptions.

Low stratification, low integration

Our second elite pattern involves civil society elites with low levels of stratification and integration. As our discussion above suggests, an elite group following this pattern is likely to be characterised by a low level of

professionalisation. Professionalisation is described as a result of the societal functions the sector is supposed to serve and as an expression of close and compelling relationships with surrounding sectors. It is therefore likely that in countries where the third sector plays a less important social role, an elite pattern of low stratification and low integration will emerge. Leaders in the sector will have little access to policymakers, as contacts between politics and civil society are not institutionalised. Instead, temporary citizen mobilisation, grassroots campaigning and community engagement, rather than commitment to a formal organisation, are more likely to dominate civil society in such countries.

Poland is a case in point. Civil society has a chequered history, with ever-changing positions and relationships with the surrounding political institutions. Under state socialism, the sector could be described as an 'imperfect civil society' (Kubik, 2007). Associations were largely state-controlled at the top, but at the local level, there were opportunities for civic engagement separate from the politically controlled state (Buchowski, 1996). Polish civil society is often associated with the mass mobilisation united in Solidarity that challenged the socialist regime and led to its fall in 1989. This was followed by a wave of independent organisations and networks, but progress towards an independent and established civil society has been slow.

The fact that the civil society elite ranks low in terms of stratification compared with other countries in this study does not, however, preclude a lack of structure, which tends to be hierarchical. There is an abundance

of organisations (120,000 in 2015, Adamiak et al., 2016), including important umbrella organisations such as the National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP). There are also capacity-building initiatives providing legal advice and research that support civil society in general (Klon/Jawor Association), and an established leadership training programme (Szkola Liederow). This suggests a structure that could potentially support career development in the sector.

Some pockets of civil society can be identified as strong, for example, in relation to education (Adamiak et al., 2016). However, the short history of the sector means that there are fewer large organisations with established contacts with the state (Gawin and Gliński, 2006; Kościański and Misztal, 2008). The country is characterised by low levels of social trust, which hampers the potential for social mobilisation. The political and public sector, as well as citizens in general, seem to have an ambivalent relationship with the sector. Although civic engagement played an important role in the opposition to communism and, more recently, to the authoritarian tendencies of the Law and Justice government, the third sector has not developed a social role comparable to that in the other countries we have studied. During the years in which our empirical data were collected, the Polish government actively repressed human rights, feminist and pro-democracy organisations. Thus, Polish civil society can be characterised by a resurgence of grassroots activism against established actors and politicians, exemplified by the mass demonstrations organised by the Committee for the Defence

of Democracy in 2015–2016 (Jacobsson and Korolczuk, 2017).

In this context, it is not surprising that we do not find a highly stratified and integrated civil society elite, since there is a lesser need for political experts and fewer positions of power. In fact, most organisations in Poland do not employ staff: only 35 per cent had any staff (56 per cent of which were based in Warsaw), and of these, only 10 per cent employed twenty or more people (Adamiak et al., 2016). The positive side of this may be that the grassroots movements that have emerged against Law and Justice, the abortion ban and the shrinking civic space may not suffer from legitimacy problems to the same extent as civil societies with consolidated elite groups. Since stratification and integration seem to be mutually reinforcing, we can also assume that a lack of integration – for whatever reason – interacts with stratification, and that although elite structures exist in society at large, they have not become embedded in Polish civil society.

Moderate stratification, moderate integration

The last pattern we find lies between the ones discussed above. In Italy and Sweden, we find similar levels of stratification and integration, lower than in the UK but significantly higher than in Poland. It would be tempting to conclude that there is a common cause that explains why these countries are placed next to each other. The elite groups associated with both civil society regimes are characterised by being relatively stratified, i.e. with some social distance between the elite and the grassroots, and

by being moderately integrated with other elite groups. However, the reasons for these similarities are likely to be complex and multifaceted.

There are indeed important similarities between the two civil society regimes that may be relevant here. To begin with, both Italy and Sweden have strong corporatist traditions, although these differ in some respects. In Italy, relations between the state and civil society have been shaped and reshaped several times since the 1990s. It seems clear that the representation of civil society vis-à-vis the state has been influenced by political developments at the national level. In particular, there is a cultural-ideological affinity between centre-left governments and the third sector, while the opposite is true of its relationship with the political right. Civil society representation at the national level is shaped by corporatist structures of interest representation as well as more direct lobbying of public institutions (Antonucci, 2014). The relationship between the Italian public sector and third sector organisations at the regional and local level is institutionalised through processes of subsidiarisation of service provision (Kazepov, 2008; Scaramuzzino, 2012).

The corporatist tradition in Sweden, on the other hand, has primarily created forums for policy influence at the national level. Through the labour movement and other popular movements, integration between civil society and political elites has a long history in Sweden. It is still very common for political leaders, especially on the left, to be recruited from trade unions, and the broader understanding of the third sector in Sweden emphasises that CSOs promote democratic citizenship (Amnå, 2006; Olsson et

al., 2009). As a result of the need for representation in corporatist arrangements and governance networks, most popular movements in Sweden have developed into large national federations that rely on a multi-level associational structure with representation at local, regional and national levels and a broad membership base across the country (Einarsson, 2011; Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag, 2017). In turn, state policy has been quite consistent in encouraging this development, not least through the public funding system (Lundström and Svedberg, 2003).

Further similarities relate to the fact that the third sector in both countries is characterised by a centralised organisational structure in networks at different levels, following both specific policy areas and ideological pillars (Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2021). Umbrella organisations are important in both countries, coordinating the common interests of the sector and, in Italy, even recognised and sanctioned by the state.

In both cases, therefore, we find two guiding principles of the sector. In both Italy and Sweden, corporatism has meant that there is an expectation that CSOs should contribute to political processes, creating a need for umbrella organisations and national secretariats responsible for contacts with the state. At the same time, corporatist traditions also mean that there is an expectation, both within and outside the sector, that CSOs have an important role to play in representing their constituencies in policymaking processes. It seems reasonable that these common features create a need for civil society leaders who are integrated with other sectors, either through more traditional corporatist arrangements or in the form

of governance networks. The expectation that CSOs will influence policy drives professionalisation, which in turn is likely to affect the degree of stratification within the sector. Some key features of the way sectors are structured – centralised, network and umbrella organisations at the national level – also contribute to professionalisation and the development of career opportunities in the sector. On the other hand, if leaders are to be seen as legitimate representatives, they must not become too detached from the grassroots.

The civil society regimes in Italy and Sweden thus share common features in the way the sectors have developed: in close relationship with the key actors that have shaped the welfare state. However, the various actors involved in shaping this relationship are quite different, which over time has led to differences in the internal structure of civil society, as well as in its position and role in society at large. One of the main differences between the civil society sectors in these two countries is the service orientation of Italian civil society and the voice orientation (advocacy-focused) of Swedish civil society (Salamon, Sokolowski and List, 2003), a striking difference that contributes to the placement of the two countries in different civil society regimes.

Mechanisms of stratification and integration

Although the above arguments are tentative, they allow us to make some suggestions about the sectoral and societal structures that underpin the characteristics of civil society elites in relation to the different country

contexts. First, the social role and status of civil society seem to be important. A civil society sector whose role is downplayed, whose activities are not perceived as having a major impact on national policy and citizen opinion formation or whose role as a service provider is not significant, is less likely to access arenas of influence or attract power players in other areas. In a sector characterised by informal engagement and grassroots organising, with activities that ebb and flow without stability over time, skills in grassroots mobilisation and activism are likely to be favoured over professional skills associated with the formalisation of organisations that tend towards bureaucratic structures. Civil society is also likely to operate with fewer resources. As a result, civil society becomes a less appealing pathway for career advancement, which means its leaders are less likely to be drawn from – or connected to – other elite groups, and are also less likely to form distinct status hierarchies within the sector itself.

However, where CSOs have an institutionalised role in policymaking, through corporatism or expectations of professional advocacy, this is likely to drive professionalisation, leading to both stratification and integration. In contexts where CSOs are expected to represent a large membership base, there is a strong expectation that leaders will act as legitimate representatives. This is likely to inhibit the recruitment of leaders on the basis of general professional merit, in favour of sector-specific experience that ensures a sense of affinity between leaders, members, volunteers and clients alike.

Finally, it seems pertinent to understand the stratification and integration of civil society elites in the context

of wider social structures of inequality, concentration of power and elite structures. In the UK, we find a pattern of civil society elites that reflects a society characterised by divisions based on social status, economic background and inequality of opportunity. An important function of civil society is to provide poverty relief to groups suffering from this inequality, which means that volunteering and giving are central to its functioning.

Conclusion

In terms of civil society's structure and function, professionalisation, funding and relations with surrounding social institutions, we can think about how different civil society contexts create different conditions for the formation of civil society elites. Our findings support the notion that a structure that promotes career progression, a hierarchically organised sector and well-established relations with influential institutions are aspects associated with the emergence of an elite that is distinct from the grassroots civil society and relatively well-integrated with the general social elite. At the same time, it is clear that elite formation depends on a complex and intimate interaction between these dimensions, which may not be easy to capture in a model. Nevertheless, we believe that our analysis, grounded in carefully selected dimensions, offers a nuanced account of how civil society elites both reflect the broader context in which they emerge and serve as a lens through which that context can be better understood.

The preceding discussion sheds light on the foundations of a hierarchically organised civil society sector,

how such a structure fosters elite stratification and how stratification and integration tend to reinforce one another. Returning to our definition of elites as individuals who hold leadership positions in resource-rich organisations, it is not surprising that the total resources wielded by the sector in a given country context correlate with the degree of stratification and integration. Indeed, inequality presupposes a certain level of resources that can be distributed unevenly, thereby creating positions of power within the sector. It is also worth noting that both the diversity of resources and the power exercised by civil society organisations can contribute to the conditions necessary for elitisation. This is particularly evident in the cases of Italy and Sweden, where different configurations of civil society sectors correspond to a remarkably similar pattern of elite formation. This suggests that national-level elitisation can be driven by either an advocacy function, as seen in Sweden, or a service-oriented function, as in Italy. What appears to be crucial is that the sector is recognised by other sectors and elites and possesses the resources needed to exert influence in its broader environment.

The question of influence brings us to an issue that we can only speculate about based on our findings. Specifically, the discussion has so far left little room to consider how different types of agency may actively shape elite stratification and integration. As a result, the processes and relationships we have described risk being interpreted as natural or inevitable. A brief comment on the role of actors is therefore warranted. In reality, a range of actors – differing in type and motivation

– actively contribute to elite integration and, by extension, to elite stratification. Civil society organisations play an active role in elite integration by recruiting elite leaders from outside. Research on civil society suggests that the recruitment of board members clearly reflects an effort to bring in influential people from surrounding institutions to strengthen the organisation (Abzug et al., 1993). Interaction with the elite through board work lays the foundation for legitimacy and, hopefully, access to resources of various kinds. Moreover, a sector that has gained recognition as an actor to be reckoned with in the political arena is an attractive place for elites from outside. Civil society not only provides opportunities to expand networks and deepen relationships, which are beneficial for both the individual and the organisation, but it also has symbolic value for the individual, as it signals altruistic commitment to social issues (Dean, 2020).

In addition to civil society organisations as actors, we must also consider civil society elites themselves as actors who may be acting to reproduce their power and also certain value systems. The extent to which civil society elites are able to act beyond or even outside the organisational mandate and thus shape their own preconditions of power is an interesting question, unfortunately beyond the scope of this volume. These are only tentative reflections derived from our empirical findings. In Chapter 6, we turn to discuss the relationship between stratification and integration from the perspective of individual members of civil society elites and how the interplay between stratification and integration affects their attitudes.

6

Values at the top: the ethos and attitudes of civil society elites

The patterns of elite stratification and integration in civil society in four country contexts identified in the preceding chapters reveal a correlation: civil societies with lower levels of stratification tend to have weaker integration with other elite groups, while those that are more stratified have stronger integration. This pattern raises fundamental questions about the internal dynamics of civil society and its relationship to broader fields of power. These sector-level observations, however, also raise deeper questions about the role of individual leaders within civil society. Are the same leaders who occupy the top rungs of the civil society hierarchy also those who are most closely linked to business and political elites? Or is integration with other elite groups excluded for those who climb the ranks of civil society? And what are the implications of these dynamics for the values and attitudes that civil society leaders bring to their organisations?

These questions go to the heart of civil society as a distinct sphere, challenging us to ask whether it is an autonomous field or nested in larger, interconnected networks of political and economic power. Our inquiry in this chapter focuses on whether the dynamics of stratification and integration observed at the sectoral level are reflected in individual leadership patterns. We also explore how these dynamics shape leaders' attitudes and values. Do highly stratified and integrated leaders embody the progressive 'civil society ethos' (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2025), or does closer alignment with political and economic elites dilute their commitment to equality and justice?

Using survey data (see Chapter 2 for more details), we explore the links between stratification, integration and individual leader characteristics, such as socio-demographic background, career trajectories and social networks. We also examine how these dimensions intersect to influence leaders' political preferences, ideological orientations and attitudes towards societal challenges. We will show that not only is there a correlation between stratification and integration at the level of individual leaders, but that stratification in particular is relevant to the attitudes of civil society elites. We will also show that different dimensions of stratification and integration correlate in different ways and that their effect on attitudes is not clear-cut.

Civic capital and civil society ethos

Understanding the intersection between stratification and integration of civil society leaders requires

a theoretical framework that captures both the internal dynamics of civil society and its interactions with broader fields of power. Building on our theoretical model (see Chapter 1), we are also inspired by Bourdieu's theory of fields and symbolic capital, as well as recent advances in understanding civil society elites centred on the concept of 'civic capital' (Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024). Civil society can be conceptualised as a relatively autonomous field, distinct from but interdependent with other fields such as politics, economics and culture. Within this field, elites compete for and accumulate a unique form of capital: civic capital. Unlike economic or political capital, civic capital derives its value from symbolic investments in activities perceived as serving the public good. It is embedded in ideals of altruism, solidarity and self-sacrifice, and is legitimised by social recognition of its moral and symbolic value (Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024: 936–937).

However, civic capital is not evenly distributed; it is concentrated among a small group of leaders who occupy dominant positions within the civil society hierarchy (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020). This elite wields considerable power to consecrate certain practices, actors and narratives as legitimate, thereby shaping the moral and symbolic boundaries of civil society (Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024: 943). The ability to effectively manage civic capital is central to the leadership of civil society elites, yet this role is fraught with inherent tensions. Leaders must navigate dual loyalties: representing grassroots constituencies while engaging with other elites to secure resources and influence.

This dual role underscores the paradoxical position of civil society elites as both 'of the people' and separate from them, which has been highlighted in previous research. It has implications for the expected role of leaders, their legitimacy and the values they embody. Social movement theory argues that there is a tension between presenting oneself as someone who can mobilise activists and the grassroots to drive social change, and presenting oneself as a reliable interlocutor with social institutions who can ensure that the social order is not challenged by the more radical elements, for example, through violent demonstrations or riots (see Wooten, 2010). Elite studies also emphasise a similar role when discussing trade union leaders and their role as 'managers of discontent' in the words of Mills (1971). The ability to accommodate conflict in order to achieve compromise and consensus is also emphasised in studies of civil society leaders' access to decision-making at the EU level (Uhlin and Arvidson, 2023).

In terms of attitudes, civil society elites are expected, on the one hand, to embody the egalitarian ethos of civil society and represent their grassroots constituencies. On the other hand, they are expected to use their positions to engage with business and political elites and transform civic capital into resources that benefit their organisations. This expectation is based on the idea that certain types of capital that are valuable within the civil society sector can be transformed into other valuable forms of capital outside the sector.

Previous studies show that civil society elites tend to be more progressive than other elite groups, as well as

compared with the general population (see Göransson, 2007; Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024; Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2024). This 'civil society ethos' (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2025) could be seen as an expression of civic capital, with stratification and integration threatening to dilute or reorient this ethos through concentration of power and 'contamination' by political and economic values. Civil society elites, who often embody a progressive ethos centred on democratic accountability, equality and advocacy for marginalised groups, may face significant challenges in maintaining these values when navigating the stratification–integration nexus (Baxter et al., 2024).

The interplay between stratification and integration

Robert Michels' (1962) Iron Law of Oligarchy posits that all organisations, regardless of their democratic ideals, tend towards oligarchic governance as they grow in complexity. This framework provides a compelling lens through which to analyse the attitudinal implications of stratification and integration among civil society elites. Michels' theory suggests that as civil society organisations become more hierarchical and stratified, power becomes concentrated in a small elite group. Following this line of thought, stratification may result in a scenario where civil society elites occupy positions of significant authority and influence, using these positions to further distance themselves from grassroots movements and constituencies. In other words, oligarchic structures promote social distance between leaders

and the broader organisation. Elite integration can exacerbate this by encouraging alliances with other elites whose values may differ from those of the civil society grassroots. As a result, leaders may adopt more technocratic or market-oriented priorities, undermining the egalitarian principles that civil society organisations represent. The implication of such a divergence in attitudes is that the core function of civil society as a voice for equality and the rights of disadvantaged groups, and as a watchdog over the state and the market, can be undermined in the longer term. Michels posits that consolidation of power, regardless of intention, can perpetuate hierarchical structures and erode democratic accountability over time (see also Higley and Burton, 2006). While civil society leaders often begin with progressive ideals, the structural realities of power consolidation and integration with other elites may challenge their ability to maintain these values.

What would be the underlying dynamics of the civil society elites' attitude formation in the process of elitisation? Stratification and integration interact in a dynamic and potentially reciprocal manner, each shaping and reinforcing the other over time. One theoretical expectation is that stratification drives integration. Leaders at the top of the civil society hierarchy who have accumulated significant civic capital may attract the attention of political and business elites who see them as valuable partners or intermediaries. Conversely, integration can reinforce stratification, as links with other elites provide leaders with additional resources and opportunities to consolidate their positions within civil society. Furthermore,

close integration with other elites can create a distance between civil society leaders and the grassroots, thereby reinforcing the pattern of stratification within civil society. From this perspective, a stronger presence of boundary crossers in civil society (through having held leadership positions in the business sector or in politics) leads to an influx of civil society leaders, who in turn increase the distance between the grassroots and the leadership strata of civil society (Arvidson et al., 2025). This dynamic suggests that stratification and integration can be mutually reinforcing, creating a feedback loop.

Based on the discussion so far, we can envisage two ideal types of civil society elites. Below, we illustrate them with the help of our interview data. A first type illustrates the individual who scores high on both stratification and integration:

Brian has a degree in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) from Oxford University and a master's from Queen's University. The PPE is a prestigious degree that has attracted a number of notable graduates over the years, including prime ministers, and has laid the foundations for promising careers in banking, finance and politics. Brian's career has included senior roles in the public sector, including research institutes, as Director of the Number 10 Policy Unit and as an adviser to the prime minister. In recent years, he has served on the boards of a number of charities, including as chair. He also spent over ten years as CEO of a think tank for the social sector. Brian believes that the skills he has gained from his education and experience in senior public sector roles are extremely valuable to the charities that recruit him.

His administrative and management skills, as well as his social networks in politics and public administration, can be used to enhance organisational capacity and influence in policy processes.

A second ideal type illustrates the individual who scores high on (some of the) stratification dimensions and low on integration. For this type, loyalty to the civil society ethos is crucial, and interviewees speak of 'taking the long way' to the chief executive position. This ideal type has had a continuous career in civil society organisations. Rebecca's career is a good example of this type. Rebecca has profiled herself as a skilled leader by participating in training programmes and taking on increasingly senior positions in different civil society organisations (CSOs). She represents a leader with strong management skills, focusing on staff and member management, governance, legal and financial issues related to the specifics of running a civil society organisation, including volunteers. After graduating from university, Rebecca started her career in a local CSO. She continued her career in the sector, progressing to senior positions in increasingly influential civil society organisations. Having previously held the position of deputy chief executive, Rebecca took on the role of chief executive for a high-profile network organisation based in the capital. Rebecca's long experience in civil society gives her the kind of civic capital that allows her to move up and between organisations, as long as their mission fits her profile.

Depending on the type of organisation, we would find one of the two ideal types as the dominant pattern in leaders' career trajectories (Arvidson et al., 2025). In

fact, some organisations place particular emphasis on commitment to the same organisation, especially when the organisational profile is defined by a specific ethos, such as in the temperance movement. Both members and leaders are required to commit to personal sobriety, and leaders are usually expected to have a track record of involvement in the organisation. Other organisations may allow leaders to move between organisations as long as they are within the same movement (e.g. labour) or the same policy area (e.g. human rights). Other organisations would instead welcome leaders with experience and networks from the public and business sectors, not least for the skills they bring.

Using our survey data (see Chapter 2 for details), we next explore which aspects of stratification and integration are correlated at the level of individual leaders, given that our indicators for operationalising both dimensions capture different aspects such as career, socio-demographic background, achieved status, social network and so on. Lastly, we explore which specific aspects of the stratification and integration dimensions explain differences in the attitudes of civil society leaders and discuss the implications of our findings.

How are stratification and integration correlated?

Table 6.1 shows the individual-level variables that we used in our analysis of the correlation between stratification and integration. These variables represent different dimensions of stratification and integration at the level of the individual leader. The first two rows and four

Table 6.1 Individual level variables

Analytical dimension	*Stratification*	*Integration*
Careers and boards	Boards	Boards
	Employment	Employment
Types of capital	Socio-demographic background	Social network
	Achieved status	–

Source: Civil Society Elite Survey.

variables can be related to career paths and work experience. For both stratification and integration, we have a high level of board membership and employment. The last two rows and three variables represent different forms of capital. Two variables are related to stratification and signal distance from the base in terms of privileged socio-demographic background and achieved status. The third variable is related to integration and signals interaction with other elite groups through social networks in the public and business sectors.

To explore possible correlations between the dimensions of stratification and integration at the level of individual leaders, we looked at the binary correlation (Pearson) between the four stratification-related variables (in the rows) and the three integration-related variables (in the columns). In this way, each combination of stratification and integration-related variables was examined. The results are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Correlation between stratification and integration

	Integration board	***Integration employment***	***Integration social network (0–15)***
Stratification board	0.106** (719 N)	n.s. (693 N)	0.139** (692 N)
Stratification employment	n.s. (690 N)	−0.109** (671 N)	0.218** (675 N)
Stratification background (0–5)	0.215** (689 N)	0.178** (673 N)	0.114** (675 N)
Stratification achieved status (0–5)	0.169** (640 N)	0.082* (623 N)	0.239** (627 N)

Note: Pearson correlation Sig. **0.01 level (two-tailed); *0.05 level (two-tailed). *Source:* Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

Overall, Table 6.2 shows mostly significant positive correlations between stratification and integration at the level of individual leaders. In other words, the results of our analysis confirm our expectation that the higher up the hierarchy a civil society leader is in the sector, the more likely he or she is to be better integrated with the economic and political elites. For example, leaders with larger social networks that extend beyond civil society into other sectors tend to have more privileged socio-demographic backgrounds and higher status. We also find that leaders with board experience in business and politics are more likely to have held important board positions in civil society: boundary crossers tend to be at the

top of civil society. This suggests that leaders with higher status are more embedded in cross-sectoral networks, supporting the theory of mutual reinforcement between stratification and integration.

Although the general pattern is clear, we still find varying degrees of correlation between the variables, as well as a few outliers, i.e. no correlation or even negative correlations, which makes it relevant to discuss them in more detail. To do this, we distinguish between types of variables or dimensions: career-based and capital-based variables. Their intersections are highlighted differently in the table. The first two variables in the rows and columns relate to leaders' career paths, and their correlations are coloured dark grey in the table. In the dark grey area, we can see the extent to which previous high-level positions in civil society by boards and employment correlate with previous high-level positions by boards and employment in business and the public sector. The last two variables in the rows represent different forms of capital that can be related to stratification in terms of privileged social background and high achieved status. The last column also represents a form of capital that can instead be related to integration. It can be understood as a form of social capital that crosses sectoral boundaries between the business and public sectors. The correlation between stratification and integration in terms of different forms of capital is shown in the lower right-hand corner of the table in the white area. Finally, the light grey areas represent correlations between career paths and types of capital.

Career-based stratification and integration

The relationship between career-based integration and stratification, shown in Table 6.2, is less straightforward than the other two sets of correlations. At board level, there is a clear correlation between these two dimensions. Leaders who have crossed boundaries by serving on multiple boards are more likely to have held significant positions on civil society boards. This is not particularly surprising, as holding multiple board positions simultaneously is feasible and a relatively common practice in CSOs (Lee, Platek and Scaramuzzino, 2024).

On the other hand, there is a negative correlation between boundary crossing through employment and having a high-profile career in civil society. This negative correlation between employment-based integration and stratification can be explained by the nature of career paths. Achieving an elite position takes time, as evidenced by the high average age of most elite groups (see Carboni, 2016, for Italy, Göransson, 2007, for Sweden). Simultaneous employment in different organisations is more difficult to manage than serving on multiple boards, suggesting that leaders may face a trade-off between pursuing a high-level career in civil society and advancing in other sectors. The two significant but opposite correlations, each around 10 per cent, suggest that while there is a clear link between boards and career integration, employment-based career paths may follow a different logic. Furthermore, there is no correlation between stratification through board service and integration through

employment, or between stratification through employment and integration through board service. This suggests that employment and board service tend to operate through different mechanisms, with neither significantly influencing the other.

Capital-based stratification and integration

In the bottom right-hand corner of the table, we observe the relationship between capital-based stratification, such as privileged background and high achieved status, and capital-based integration, which refers to the breadth of an individual's social network. The strongest correlation in this area is between a high achieved status and a cross-sectoral social network, where almost 24 per cent of the variation in one variable is explained by the other. This suggests that leaders with extensive cross-sector social networks are more likely to have achieved high status. High status is understood in terms of five factors: 1) higher income, 2) residence in the capital, 3) higher education, 4) perceived influence in society and 5) leadership of well-resourced organisations.

It remains difficult to determine whether a large cross-sectoral social network is an outcome of high status or a means of achieving it, or both. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring which of the five high-status variables is most strongly correlated with such networks. Importantly, there is no negative correlation between the five status-related variables and the size of one's social network. However, we do find that certain variables – such as higher income (0.197**, 675 N) and influence in

society (0.218**, 661 N) – are more strongly correlated with social networks. This makes sense, as connections to key figures in the public and business sectors are likely to enhance one's ability to influence societal outcomes. Leaders who live in the capital (0.107**, 699 N) also have stronger social networks, likely due to their proximity to key public and business institutions in such areas. In addition, leaders with broader networks tend to come from privileged socio-demographic backgrounds, characterised by five key factors: 1) male, 2) aged 56–65, 3) native-born, 4) upper or middle class and 5) having parents who held leadership positions. These characteristics are often 'inherited' and associated with various forms of social inequality, shaped by factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and class. It is possible that social networks are also partly inherited, or that access to these networks is influenced by the socio-demographic profiles of leaders, through mechanisms such as mimetic behaviour, where individuals interact more with others who share similar characteristics.

Interestingly, while there is no negative correlation between socio-demographic variables and boundary-spanning social networks, the strongest correlation is found for leaders whose parents held leadership positions (0.125**, 698 N). This suggests that inherited networks may play a key role in one's career trajectory. We also find a significant correlation with leaders from upper- or middle-class backgrounds (0.103**, 695 N). This may be explained by both inheriting a large network from parents and the fact that leaders from privileged backgrounds are more likely to engage with other elites. These findings

highlight the importance of social class and parental status in the formation of cross-sectoral networks, while gender, age and ethnicity seem to play a lesser role.

Intersection of career-based and capital-based dimensions

Table 6.2 also explores the intersection of career-based integration and capital-based stratification (bottom left) and career-based stratification and capital-based integration (top right). The first area focuses on the extent to which integration through board positions and employment correlates with privileged socio-demographic backgrounds and high achieved status. Leaders from privileged socio-demographic backgrounds are significantly over-represented among boundary crossers, both in terms of board service and employment. Among the variables associated with privileged backgrounds, gender (being male) and age (56–65) show a clear correlation with boundary crossing through both board positions (0.122**, 713 N; 0.105**, 707 N) and employment (0.108**, 696 N; 0.117**, 690 N). This suggests that male leaders, particularly later in their careers, are more likely to move between sectors, which could be seen as a form of 'glass wall' that hinders women's horizontal mobility. Furthermore, those who cross boundaries via board positions are more likely to have had parents in leadership roles (0.147**, 714 N), suggesting that parental status may facilitate such career trajectories across sector boundaries.

In terms of high achieved status, boundary crossers tend to have higher incomes (0.206**, 691 N; 0.217**,

674 N). This is likely to reflect higher levels of pay in the business and public sectors and the fact that these experiences often translate into higher pay in civil society. In addition, boundary crossing through board roles is correlated with a greater perception of societal influence (0.113**, 674 N), underlining that board positions can serve as platforms for influence beyond one's own organisation.

The second area examines the relationship between boundary crossing social networks and internal stratification within civil society through boards and employment. The strongest correlation is with employment stratification (22 per cent), suggesting that individuals with high-profile civil society careers are attractive to elites in other sectors. It is also possible that connections to leaders in public and business institutions are rewarded in civil society careers. A significant correlation with board stratification may stem from similar dynamics, where networks and influence play a role in career advancement.

In conclusion, while a positive correlation may hold for different forms of capital, it is easier to see a possible trade-off effect between stratification and integration if we instead look at career paths and different work–life experiences. For the civil society sector, long internal careers and 'street credentials' may be important for gaining legitimacy within specific organisations and in front of members and constituencies (Meeuwisse and Scaramuzzino, 2023; Suarez, 2010), while work–life experiences from other sectors may rather undermine their legitimacy as civil society leaders. Having held positions

of responsibility in politics or business may become more of a disadvantage within a sector that is supposed to be independent of other social spheres and possibly a counterweight to other elite groups (Etzioni-Halevy, 2001). The trade-off could also be a consequence of 'life being too short', in the sense that it may take time to access different high-status positions, and a long career path within a CSO is likely to preclude a long career in other sectors. These links between stratification and integration provide a basis for understanding their impact on leaders' attitudes, which will be discussed next.

Elitisation and civil society ethos

What are the implications of the findings above for the role of civil society and civil society elites? Tensions between different value systems belonging to different institutional logics can become apparent when civil society elites are integrated with political and business elites (Niendorf, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2023). Previous comparative studies of the attitudes of civil society elites have found that there appears to be a core set of values shared by civil society leaders in different country contexts that distinguishes them from the general population (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024). This is characterised, for example, by higher levels of social trust, left-wing orientation, lower levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and progressiveness towards minority rights. Civil society elites often embody values linked to their mission of advocacy for marginalised groups, which may be at odds with broader societal trends. This ethos is characterised

by a critical stance towards existing power structures, including scepticism about growing economic inequality and a commitment to egalitarian principles that may not be shared by other sectors of society. This shared ethos suggests a distinction from the general population that is consistent with the mission-driven nature of CSOs (Baxter et al., 2024; Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2023, 2024).

The following analysis takes this a step further by examining the attitudes of civil society elites. While previous studies have looked at civil society leadership strata as an aggregate group and compared the attitudes of leaders with those of population averages, here we zoom in on the different fractions of civil society elites in terms of individual leaders' positions in the intersections of different dimensions of stratification and integration. This is done to see if there are significant patterns of value congruence or conflict within civil society elites. Using our survey items measuring stratification and integration, and attitude questions capturing key policy preferences, we conducted regression analyses to empirically unpack the relationship between civil society leaders' attitudes and the process of civil society elitisation.

The seven predictors of integration and stratification are tested for their impact on attitude formation. As we know from previous research that attitudes tend to differ across the different country contexts to which our respondents belong (Lee and Scaramuzzino, 2024), we also control for differences in country context. The attitudes examined in the analysis include three questions: ideological positioning on the left–right scale, satisfaction with democracy and views on the 'real' political

influence of ordinary people. We consider attitudes to be at odds with a 'civil society ethos' when leaders position themselves to the right on the ideological scale, are more satisfied with the way democracy works in the country (ergo, less critical) and do not problematise/acknowledge differences in political influence between the top strata of society and the general population. The results are presented in Table 6.3 in three different models, one for each dependent attitude variable.

Our findings suggest that stratification-related variables explain more of the variation in attitudes than integration-related variables. For example, stratification affects ideological positioning on the left–right scale. Leaders from privileged backgrounds tend to lean to the right, suggesting a potential dilution of the progressive ethos. At the same time, leaders with a high profile in civil society tend to lean left. Stratification thus both supports and undermines a civil society ethos. Stratification also affects satisfaction with democracy, particularly for leaders with higher achieved status, who tend to be more satisfied with democracy. This suggests that higher status may undermine a civil society ethos. In terms of political influence, a high-level civil society career promotes a less elitist view, as these leaders are more likely to acknowledge the gap in political influence between elites and the general population. However, leaders with privileged backgrounds or higher status tend to hold more elitist views, reflecting similar patterns to ideological positioning. Here, career-driven stratification supports a civil society ethos, while capital-driven stratification undermines it.

Table 6.3 Elitisation of civil society leaders and key attitudes

	Left–right position		*Satisfaction with democracy*		*Too large differences in political influence*	
	Std. error	***t***	***Std. error***	***t***	***Std. error***	***t***
Country context (control variables)						
Italy (Poland ref.)	0.283	−5.630***	0.303	7.108***	0.148	0.376
Sweden (Poland ref.)	0.218	0.688	0.244	11.111***	0.117	2.176*
UK (Poland ref.)	0.274	−1.888†	0.307	3.038**	0.147	−0.127
Stratification						
Stratification boards	0.182	−0.641	0.194	−0.139	0.94	−1.040
Stratification employment	0.174	−2.278*	0.188	−0.85	0.091	−1.896†
Stratification background	0.180	3.836***	0.195	−0.614	0.96	2.390*
Stratification achieved status	0.235	0.858	0.251	2.127*	0.123	3.021**
Integration						
Integration boards	0.195	−0.220	0.214	1.674†	0.104	0.113
Integration employment	0.178	1.264	0.192	0.644	0.094	0.719

(*Continued*)

Table 6.3 (Continued)

	Left–right position		*Satisfaction with democracy*		*Too large differences in political influence*	
	Std. error	***t***	***Std. error***	***t***	***Std. error***	***t***
Integration social network	0.205	1.423	0.219	0.493	0.107	1.251
Model summary						
Constant	0.197	21.977***	0.223	14.463***	0.106	19.391***
Adjusted R-squared	0.102		0.237		0.046	
Number of observations	512		522		524	

Note: three dependent attitude values: left–right ideological self-positioning (0–10; high=right); satisfaction with democracy (0–10; high=satisfied); too large differences concerning real political influence between the societal elite and the rest of the population (1–5; high=less critical). *Source:* Civil Society Elite Survey. (Sig. †: P=<0.1 *: P=<0.05 **: P=<0.01 ***: P=<0.001)

While different aspects of stratification shape attitudes, elite integration plays a lesser role. Only one integration-related variable affects satisfaction with democracy: leaders with multiple board positions outside civil society are more satisfied with democracy, suggesting the influence of cross-sector integration on this attitude – a potential alignment with technocratic priorities over grassroots accountability. Country variables also significantly influence the variation in attitudes, confirming the need to control for national contexts.

In conclusion, elitisation involving different processes of stratification and integration influences the attitudes of civil society leaders, with stratification having the strongest impact. However, there is a distinction between career-driven stratification, which is consistent with a civil society ethos by promoting egalitarian attitudes, and capital-driven stratification, which promotes more elitist views. Integration has a smaller but notable effect and, when relevant, tends to promote more elitist values.

Discussion and conclusion

While civil society elites are uniquely positioned to advocate for marginalised groups and challenge societal inequalities, their increasing stratification and integration with other elites may threaten to undermine these roles. In this chapter, we have shown how stratification and integration tend to go hand in hand. This is particularly true when we look at how capital-related variables tend to interact with each other and with career-related variables. It is clear that high levels of capital, whether in

terms of socio-demographic background, achieved social status or social capital, tend to be mutually reinforcing. We have already seen in Chapter 3 that there is a degree of social determinism in which a privileged background correlates with high achieved status. Now we can add that both are also correlated with extensive networking across sectoral boundaries. This dynamic illustrates how different forms of capital accumulate, creating a stratified hierarchy that reflects wider social inequalities. It is also clear that all these forms of capital are relevant to stratification and integration. However, we have also seen that it is more difficult to combine employment-related stratification and integration. There seem to be barriers to combining high-level positions in civil society and in the public and business sectors, especially when it comes to employment.

Interestingly, we also find a difference in the way in which career-related and capital-related variables affect attitudes when looking at stratification. Leaders recruited from privileged backgrounds or with high social status tend to have less progressive and less critical attitudes. This is consistent with Michels' observation that organisational elites often prioritise stability and their own interests, which may be at odds with democratic or egalitarian ideals. Interestingly, however, internal career paths within civil society seem to counteract this tendency. Leaders who rise through civil society's internal hierarchies appear to be more aligned with its progressive 'civil society ethos', which emphasises social trust, advocacy for marginalised groups and democratic accountability. These dynamics raise an important question: is

this alignment the result of deliberate recruitment and promotion strategies within CSOs, or does the culture of civil society itself shape the values of leaders over time? In contrast, integration with other elites – especially through career paths – tends to produce more conservative values. This effect may reflect the pressures and priorities of political and business elites, whose goals often diverge from the progressive ideals of civil society. Capital-based integration, however, appears to have less of an impact on the attitudes of leaders.

Drawing on the concept of civic capital (Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024), we can interpret the over-representation of people with high resources and capital at the top of organisations as a distortion of the symbolic foundations of civil society. Civic capital, which derives its legitimacy from altruism and public service, is compromised when it is concentrated in the hands of leaders whose values may be more aligned with other elites. This dynamic reinforces Michels' claim that the centralisation of power within elite groups undermines the democratic ideals on which organisations are founded. Despite these risks, there appear to be structural features within civil society that act as a counterweight to the oligarchic tendencies identified by Michels. The limited prevalence of revolving doors, particularly in professional employment, limits the extent to which civil society leaders become entangled in political and economic power structures. In addition, the emphasis on internal career progression within CSOs may serve as a mechanism to preserve the progressive ethos of civil society by ensuring that leaders remain accountable to their constituents.

Taken together, our analysis shows how stratification and integration interact, not only reinforcing each other but also influencing leaders' attitudes and values. While capital-related variables consistently reinforce stratification and integration, we observed barriers to employment-related integration. High-level positions in civil society do not often overlap with equivalent roles in the public or business sectors, particularly in terms of professional employment. By limiting the movement of leaders across sectors, civil society maintains a degree of autonomy, strengthens civic capital and mitigates the risks of over-integration into other elite networks. Whether the internal career path of CSOs, which favours and/or shapes attitudes closer to a 'civil society ethos', is a deliberate strategy to compensate for the skewed representation of privileged people in the leadership stratum of civil society is, however, difficult to say with our data. Nevertheless, the findings in this chapter underline the complexity of civil society as a field of power, shaped by the interplay of stratification, integration and attitudinal dynamics.

Conclusion

Roger is the Swedish secretary general of a renowned international civil society organisation. During our interview, in which we discussed what it means to lead such an organisation, he took the opportunity to share some general thoughts about his career. After graduating in economics from a prestigious university, he quickly rose to a senior position at the Ministry of Finance. A few years later, he became a minister. Following his political career, Roger has held multiple board positions and has been the secretary general of several civil society organisations. Reflecting on his exceptional career, he acknowledged that access to power and influence had perhaps been a central motive, albeit unconsciously, throughout his professional journey.

> I've always been interested in being in the so-called corridors of power. So, I want to be able to influence, I want to be able to see where decisions are being made, how they are being made and how I can be part of that.

This is not necessarily problematic. More or less all worthwhile social changes rely on individuals who are committed to making a difference. A recurring theme in our interview with Roger, as well as with other people in positions of equal importance, is that members of the civil society elite are attracted by the opportunities to influence matters affecting their members and wider society. Indeed, leading a highly regarded and influential civil society organisation provides access to resources and networks that can rival the authority of political and business leaders in the established spheres of power. However, as stated in the Introduction, the top segment of civil society has rarely been studied as an elite group.

Roger's quote can also be considered in light of what we termed the 'paradox of the civil society elite' (see also Sevelsted and Johansson, 2024). While the power that Roger and other leaders are attracted to may be used for good, it nevertheless exists in a tense relationship with the ethos of civil society. The people we have studied are often characterised by the kind of personal ambition Roger expresses: a desire to gain access to the corridors of power. At the same time, leaders in civil society are expected to adhere to an ethos of civil society that proposes collaborative decision-making and radical agendas formulated in the name of the causes fought for and the groups represented. Thus, personal ambitions must be tempered.

The paradox of civil society is further reinforced by the fact that reaching the top requires exclusive attributes, and the selection criteria result in a lack of diversity among leaders of the most resource-rich civil society

organisations (CSOs). The civil society elite is truly an elite within a sector with distinct anti-elitist values and norms.

In this concluding chapter, we will address the question of what we should make of this. To advance this discussion, we will first recap our key arguments and build the case that the civil society elites we have analysed raise important questions about the function and future of the sector. Although elite structures may vary, it is undeniable that civil society elite groups sometimes have more in common with top business and political leaders than with the grassroots of their own organisations. We then discuss the contributions and limitations of our study in the hope that other researchers will continue our efforts to study civil society elites. In the final pages, we offer our concluding remarks.

Elites and the purpose of civil society

We started our examination from the proposition that civil society elites can be characterised by the level of stratification between the sector's elites and its members, as well as by the level of integration between the civil society elite and other elite groups. We empirically examined this in four countries representing corporatist, post-communist, social democratic and liberal civil society models. Elite stratification and integration are prevalent in all of these models, albeit to varying degrees. Furthermore, the empirical evidence suggests that the elites of all countries are relatively homogeneous. Despite all the talk of diversity and inclusivity, these

values are not reflected in the composition of the top segment of the sector.

One could even speak of a degree of social determinism, given that a privileged socio-economic background correlates with a high status within the sector. This dynamic goes against meritocratic principles and potentially reproduces inequality within civil society. Not only are top-level leaders more likely to come from privileged backgrounds and achieve higher social status, but they are also more likely to be integrated with other elites. This potentially undermines the autonomy and independence of civil society, which is often stressed as an essential feature of the sector in civil society studies. From this perspective, we can add elite stratification and integration to the usual threats to civil society autonomy, such as the general professionalisation of managers and resource dependence.

However, we also find significant differences between the countries we study. The empirical evidence we provide reveals three patterns of elitisation. The UK emerges as having the most stratified and integrated civil society elite, reflecting its deeply entrenched class system and professionalised, service-oriented civil society, which is highly regarded in wider society. Poland stands out with the lowest levels of both stratification and integration. This reflects the comparatively recent development of an independent civil society sector and low levels of institutionalisation and professionalisation, as well as a recent history of tensions between governments led by right-wing populist parties and civil society as a whole. Despite their different historical trajectories and

recent developments in their civil society sectors, Italy and Sweden show similar levels of stratification and integration.

These results suggest that stratification and integration are interlinked at the country level. As previous elite research has also emphasised, stratification and integration tend to reinforce each other (Gulbrandsen, 2012; Hartmann, 2015; Mills, 1959). The same pattern emerges when examining individual elite members: the higher civil society leaders are positioned in the hierarchies, the more likely they are to share attitudes, networks and demographic characteristics with other elite groups. However, this does not mean that all leaders who reach the top are integrated with other elites, or vice versa. Nor does this mean that all top-level leaders are more likely to be integrated with other elites than those lower down the hierarchy. To understand these processes more in depth, we must look beyond the specific findings of our study and consider the logics of elite reproduction and leadership recruitment (Abbink and Salverda, 2012; Abzug and Galaskiewicz, 2001; Sessler Bernstein and Fredette, 2023). For instance, elite research suggests that homophily and social reproduction influence the recruitment of individuals to senior positions (Cook, Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Once an elite group's internal cohesion is established, it begins to live a life of its own, driven by a logic of reinforcing what is already familiar and a reluctance to deviate from the ideal of what a successful leader should be like (Reskin, 2003; Shaiko, 1996).

These considerations raise pertinent questions regarding the future of the sector. If processes of

professionalisation and stricter requirements for efficient advocacy involving larger civil society organisations engaged in service provision reinforce elitisation, then there is a significant risk that the distinctiveness of civil society as a sector driven by the ethos of diversity and grassroots participation will be undermined. We raised this possibility in the introductory chapter. Given the empirical evidence, there are good reasons to believe that we are already in the midst of a process in which integration and stratification reinforce each other. Future research may therefore need to examine whether a legitimacy based on representation and inclusiveness may be in crisis and how the sector might seek a new rationale for justifying itself, given that it forwards a leadership ideal that seems to deviate from such a legitimising ethos.

In the final stage of our empirical analysis, we investigated whether elite status is associated with particular values. One potential threat to sector autonomy is that stratification and elite integration could undermine the commitment of civil society leaders to the sector's ethos. Our findings show that elitisation can work in both directions here. While a socio-demographic background suggesting elite status and achieved status tends to make leaders' attitudes more conservative, internal career paths work in the opposite direction. However, the effect of integration with other elites on leaders' attitudes is quite small, suggesting that civil society elites can integrate with other elite groups without losing sight of the civil society ethos. Although the elitisation of civil society is a fact, this does not necessarily imply a loss of independence or autonomy with regard to leaders' values.

Therefore, it is not overly naïve to believe that civil society leaders can use their status and power, as well as their proximity to other elites, to advance their organisations' progressive policy agendas.

This prompts us to consider what, in the context of civil society research, we mean by the sector risking its independence and distinctive character. Leadership recruitment increasingly characterised by ideals based on attributes held by a small, exclusive group can threaten an ethos advocating inclusivity, diversity and equal opportunities. From that perspective, elitism poses a risk. However, when we consider that even elite leaders advocate values that underpin progressive agendas and structural social change, the risk of the sector losing its distinct political character seems exaggerated. The integration of the civil society elite with other elite groups does not necessarily occur at the expense of civil society's identity or its prioritisation of constituencies or members. This relates to the broader question of whether it is possible or desirable for civil society to withstand elitisation. In many countries, civil society is under pressure. Financing is tighter, particularly in contexts where civil society organisations rely on state funding. Membership bases in several countries are eroding, and the media landscape through which organisations communicate with their existing and potential constituencies is changing rapidly. There are good reasons to believe that such pressures contribute to elitisation by creating demand for specialist skills. It is therefore not particularly surprising that many civil society organisations see the advantages of recruiting

shrewd business leaders or high-profile politicians to address these challenges.

We leave it to other studies to address the challenges facing civil society. With this book, we aim to demonstrate that questions about the future and function of the sector require an understanding of the elitisation of civil society – namely, how elites are formed and the impact this may have on the sector's opportunities and challenges.

Contribution and avenues for future research

We conclude by presenting what we consider to be the book's key contributions. At the conclusion of a long research project, we are left with a number of issues and problems that we hope will be addressed in future research.

First, in contrast to previous research examining leaders and hierarchies in civil society, we have conceptualised the top segment of the sector as an elite, drawing on the extensive theoretical tradition of elite studies. This conceptual shift is significant. It encourages an understanding of how the sector, through exclusionary selections of leaders, reproduces hierarchies. The elite perspective is therefore a welcome addition to civil society studies.

Regarding elite research, we were struck by the glaring omission of civil society as a distinct sphere capable of harbouring its own elite. Although the sector

occasionally features in some elite research, it is rarely considered a societal sector on a par with politics, culture or business. We hope that our analysis will convince elite researchers that leading positions in powerful civil society organisations deserve more scholarly attention.

If elite and civil society researchers agree that there is a need to study civil society elite groups, we hope that this book will provide valuable guidance on how to carry out such analyses. Regarding our overarching approach, we believe that our theoretical model of stratification and integration is useful far beyond this study. While existing comparative elite studies often focus on specific aspects of elites, such as composition, networks or attitudes (e.g. Best et al., 2012), our framework integrates these elements to identify broader elitisation patterns. This framework could also potentially be extended to analyse other elite groups or applied longitudinally to explore how stratification and integration evolve in response to global crises or political transformations.

We also believe that identifying degrees of elitisation rather than viewing elites and non-elites as a fixed division provides a dynamic understanding that captures differences between elite groups and how they evolve over time. While all leaders in our study are defined as part of a civil society elite, we anticipate that some leaders may attain a higher position with greater opportunities to influence beyond their positional mandate than others, and that some leaders may be more integrated with other elites than others. Stratification within civil society, as measured by the career trajectories, socio-demographic

backgrounds and achieved status of its leaders, creates a distinct elite that operates at a considerable distance from grassroots participants. Leaders with privileged backgrounds and extensive networks often rise to the highest ranks, further consolidating their positions of power. Integration with elites from other sectors adds another layer of complexity. Civil society elites who establish connections with political and business figures gain access to resources, influence and legitimacy. Our stratification–integration model provides a valuable heuristic for understanding these dynamics.

Regarding our methodological choices, our research employs tools inspired by elite studies, adapted to the distinctive dynamics of civil society. The Multidimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil Society (MMRSC) is a robust and flexible approach for identifying resource-rich CSOs and their leaders. This facilitates comparisons across contexts (Scaramuzzino and Lee, 2024). Based on the question of which resources confer status and potential influence within civil society, the MMRSC integrates both internal and external indicators to map the most resource-rich organisations. Consequently, it identifies elites as those who occupy leadership roles within these organisations. By systematically identifying a new elite group beyond the political and economic elites that have been traditionally studied, this methodology represents a major advance in elite studies.

We would also like to highlight some limitations of our study that we hope will be addressed in future research. First, our approach to identifying leaders of resource-rich

organisations favours large, well-established formal organisations, while overlooking social movements with looser structures. Similarly, excluding regional and local organisations narrows the scope of the analysis, which is particularly relevant in contexts where sub-national actors play a critical role. Furthermore, alternative resources, such as social media influence or grassroots mobilisation, are not considered in our analysis.

Regarding our comparative approach, the interpretive strength of our typological framework lies in the relationships it establishes through comparison. For instance, the relatively low stratification of Polish civil society elites only becomes meaningful when contrasted with the high stratification of British civil society elites. Extending the framework to non-European contexts could reveal broader similarities or differences, thereby increasing its applicability and depth. Such extensions would address a common limitation of regime typologies while broadening the geographical and cultural scope of the framework.

Lastly, our research approach does not consider that civil society elites can operate both within and outside national spheres, raising concerns about possible methodological nationalism. To address this, our analytical framework could be modified to include variables capturing transnational elements of elite behaviour, such as participation in international networks or cross-border career trajectories (i.e. crossing borders across different sectors and geographical areas). This would ensure that the framework accounts for the activities of civil society elites beyond their national contexts while maintaining

a focus on how these transnational engagements interact with and shape national patterns of elitisation.

Concluding remarks

It may seem that our analysis of the civil society elite is intended to cast doubt on the sector's ideals and democratic functions but this is not how we view things. Rather, the elite perspective provides an essential component for how we understand the processes affecting the realisation of these ideals.

Ideally, civil society provides citizens with opportunities to engage with meaningful issues and develop social engagement skills – an essential component of democratic consolidation. Civil society also serves as a vehicle for discontent, sounding the alarm when welfare services are oppressive, insufficient or distributed unfairly, or when those in power fail to fulfil their responsibilities towards vulnerable populations. It is also an arena where social innovation leads to new approaches to, and perspectives on, social problems.

In order to address the sector's ability to meet these expectations, we must consider its internal structures and the processes that shape them. If, as civil society studies often suggest, civil society actors can be co-opted by public authorities and big enterprises, they could also be co-opted by a civil society elite pushing its own interests rather than the organisations' missions. As our findings show, climbing the civil society hierarchy often requires exclusive attributes, making power increasingly

inaccessible. In this sense, civil society elites mirror broader elite structures in society as a whole.

The idea that civil society fosters democratic citizens through inclusive participation is called into question when access to power is obstructed by barriers such as class and gender. Research on elite integration suggests that closely connected elites may prioritise the interests of their own group over those of their constituencies. Coupled with the homogeneity of civil society elites in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, and their ease of interaction with other societal elites, this tendency raises concerns about the autonomy of the sector and its ability to represent neglected societal interests.

The very idea of a civil society elite is therefore controversial. During our research, we engaged with practitioners and academics, many of whom were sceptical of the concept – perhaps because it challenges the values that civil society claims to uphold. Civil society organisations and researchers often underestimate the reproduction of inequality in a context that ostensibly opposes exclusion and discrimination. As Roger, who was introduced earlier in this chapter, noted after some initial hesitation:

> of course there is an elite […] I think it exists in all sectors in some way. And I don't know how to get away from it, and it mustn't mean that it's like that, that you, that you achieve all sorts of things without any form of competence or anything, but just by scratching each other's backs. Then it becomes problematic, so it's important to have an insight into these processes and so on, […] But I would like to say that there is an, there is an elite, I think so.

Roger acknowledges the existence of elites but emphasises that their privileged position is often self-made rather than inherited. We are hesitant to agree, as there are issues regarding equality of opportunity in reaching positions of power. Roger's extensive network, cultivated in a variety of contexts, has served as a springboard for his rise within the civil society hierarchy. Reflecting on this, he remarked, 'Once you reach a level like that, there are usually bridges that make it easier to progress. I certainly benefited from that'.

While Roger actively supports social mobility by mentoring younger employees and advocating inclusive practices, his narrative also reveals a certain naivety within the sector. Inclusion cannot be based on benevolent elite leaders acting as gatekeepers. The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion often falls short when confronted with the empirical realities of stratification and exclusivity.

This emphasises the importance of viewing civil society as an arena of power. As civil society moves towards professionalisation, centralisation of resources and cross-sectoral integration, its leaders must balance these demands while staying true to the egalitarian principles that define the sector. This requires remaining true to the original missions of civil society actors while enabling individuals from less privileged groups to access positions of power. This balancing act is crucial to ensuring that civil society fulfils its potential as a force for equality, justice and democratic accountability.

This is of particular importance given the multiple socio-economic and even planetary crises that the world is currently facing. We are entering a period of profound

and daunting transformational processes that will impact civil society. Our opportunities to respond may very well require civil society to be able to fulfil its democratic functions.

While it is important to discuss the capacity of the current civil society elites to fulfil their democratic function in these turbulent times, we should also consider the civil society sector as a breeding ground for new generations of elites. The way in which civil society actors nurture participation, the values promoted in leadership training and the qualities, merits and characteristics rewarded in career advancement will impact the future civil society elite.

The approach presented in this volume enables the social sciences to explore the development of civil society elites and to understand changes in their constitution and attitudes over time and in different contexts. We argue that this approach is a missing piece in our understanding of civil society and its role in broader society.

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Index

advocacy 5–6, 31–32, 125, 135, 137, 156
  see also lobbying
advocate to 7, 161

capital 58, 79, 141, 148, 150, 155, 161–162
  civic 141–144, 163–164
  cultural 25
  social 150, 162
  symbolic 141
CEO
  business elites 1, 2, 39
  civil society elites 47, 56, 75, 111, 145
chair 47, 56, 75, 88, 145
  see also president
corporatism 29, 32–33, 123, 135
  Sweden 14
corporatist
  civil society model 167
  entanglements 30
  Italy 12, 38, 132
  Sweden 132–133
  system 31
  see also regime, corporatist

decision-making 9, 41, 142, 166
  internal processes 7
  political 20
  power 127
democratic
  accountability 119, 143, 162, 178
  aspirations 176
  citizens(hip) 132, 177
  consolidation 176
  egalitarianism 18
  function 2–3, 176, 179
  ideal(s) 4, 29, 143, 144, 162–163
  see also legitimacy, democratic
democracy 4, 6, 20
  see also liberal democracies
democratisation 4, 13

diversity
of CSOs 39
lack of 9, 126, 166
rhetoric of 178
talk of *or* debate around 128, 167

equality 19, 100, 144, 178
commitment to 140
of opportunity 127, 178
see also inequality
ethos 5, 96, 139, 143, 147, 156–157, 170–171
centred on equality 143
civic 98, 119
civil society *or* of civil society 53, 140, 143, 146, 156, 158, 161–162, 164, 166, 170
democratic 28, 33–34, 96, 119
of diversity 170–171
egalitarian 11, 34, 142
progressive 143, 158, 163
executive 47, 56, 63, 95, 102, 104, 146

funding 9, 14, 100, 112, 125, 136
private 31
state *or* public 31, 40, 133, 171

governance 26, 45, 133–134, 146
oligarchic 143

homogeneity 58, 177
homogeneous 167

inequality 3, 16, 17, 69, 136–137, 153, 168
of capital 79
economic 157
of educational opportunities 79
reproduction of 177
see also equality

legitimacy 9, 99, 102, 112, 138, 142, 155, 163, 170, 174
of *or* as civil society leaders 7, 155
democratic 5, 20
dilemma 128
problems 131
liberal democracies 4, 12, 28
see also democracy
lobbying 29, 31–33, 125, 132
industry 21
see also advocacy

management 14, 30, 31, 34, 76, 146
position 75
skills *or* expertise 8, 14, 76, 146
training 30, 88
media 4, 15, 106, 128, 171
companies 65
social 46, 175
strategy 32
membership 39–40, 135, 171
based organisations 14
board 21, 55, 57, 62, 73, 98, 104, 133, 148
representation 30
structure 45
Michels, R. 18–19, 143–144, 162–163

Mills, W. C. 19, 39, 73, 142, 169
mobilisation 129, 130, 135, 137
mobility 109
  between elite groups 18
  horizontal 154
  social 10, 126–127, 178
  upward 72

non-profit
  leadership 10
  organisations 9, 60
  sector 127
  see also service providers

oligarchy *see* Michels, R.

president 47, 56, 74–75, 80
  see also chair
politicians 2, 13, 32, 130, 172
professionalisation 2, 6, 9, 29–35, 91, 125–126, 129, 134–136, 168, 170, 178

recruitment 8–9, 24, 52, 87, 101–102, 135, 138, 163, 169, 171
regime 38, 175
  civil society 29, 33, 38
  corporatist 38
  elite 53
  liberal 38
  post-communist 38
  social-democratic 38
representation 32, 128, 132–133, 170
  descriptive 72
  group(s) 12, 28
  interest 132
  over- *or* skewed 163
  political 39
  see also membership, representation
reproduction 169
  elite of 52, 169
  leaders of 172
  see also inequality, reproduction *and* voice, representative

service 33
  delivery 125
  -oriented *or* orientation 14, 134, 168
  production 13
  provider(s) *or* -providing 34, 39, 41, 135
  provision 6, 12, 29, 35, 43, 46, 132, 170
  users 39
social trust 130, 156, 162

training 80
  leadership 179
  programme(s) 8, 30, 130, 146
  see also management, training

voice(s) 33, 46, 54
  critical 15
  orientation 134
  representative 45
  to *or* to give a 2, 34