Not for me

Exclusion and self-exclusion from democracy

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ABSTRACT

NOT FOR ME: EXCLUSION AND SELF-EXCLUSION FROM DEMOCRACY

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Disinterest and feelings of alienation from politics keep many citizens away from active participation in the democratic process. Based on interviews with inhabitants in Skogås, a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden, and on participant observation at local meeting places, this thesis explores various aspects that shape people’s willingness and ability to exert power in the democratic political system, and identifies the political culture as well as personal encounters with fellow inhabitants and political representatives as two key factors. The study presents the perspectives of various inhabitants - teenagers, single moms, senior citizens, local leaders of associations and other locals with different backgrounds and lifestyles - as well as places and practices that foster political interest, know-how and solidarity, such as a tenants union and a dog park started by local dog-owners. Because politics is often studied through influential and organized agents such as activist groups and public officials, this study intends to offer an alternative approach by examining politics from the point of view of ‘ordinary citizens’ and their immediate vicinity.

Keywords: democracy, political participation, representation, voluntary associations, exclusion, Sweden.
I dedicate this thesis to the one who created this wonderful universe we live in and endowed humans with the faculties to study our surroundings, acquire knowledge and wisdom, and the ability - and responsibility - to deliberate together and contribute to our own betterment. I also want to thank my parents for striving to provide me with good opportunities in life, my loving husband for supporting and encouraging me, my tutor Asta Vonderau and my thesis opponent Christina Henriksen for their valuable feedback, and everybody else that contributes to making the society a place where people are able to reflect upon and pursue a better and more harmonious existence.
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Introduction

Democracy is arguably one of the most widespread political concepts today, and one of the most powerful. It is used to denote a wide array of political structures and practices, ranging from a form of government in which people choose leaders by means of free and equal elections and majority rule, to any decision-making system where everyone is treated equally and has equal rights. It is associated with an ideal and fair distribution of power and readily offered as a means of achieving political justice worldwide. In reality however, even the most celebrated democracies such as Sweden have not yet succeeded in eradicating the inequalities of access to political power.

When I started this study I wanted to learn more about why some people are interested in politics and others not, and how politics between elections looks like from the perspective of different inhabitants in a democracy. In Sweden, the political system of democracy entails direct elections every four years by universal suffrage, for three levels of government: national, county and municipal - and elections of the European Parliament every five years. While only Swedish citizens can vote in the national elections, in the county, municipal and EU elections, even non-nationals with a permanent residence permit have the right to vote. When learning that the voter turnout in Sweden is 85.8 percent (Statistics Sweden n.d.) one might explain away the remaining 14.2 % as a voluntary self-exclusion, reflecting a normal variation of interest in politics among the population. However, looking closer at the statistics, some areas in Sweden stand out with a voter turnout to municipal elections lower than 60 percent and these areas are characterized by high unemployment as well as lower levels of education and income. On the other hand, areas with the highest electoral participation are inhabited by the economically powerful. This pattern of participation shows that what may be seen as a variation in interest or ‘taste’ is at a closer look an expression of social class (Bourdieu 1979). When the least powerful in a society are also the least active in political decision-making, the political system serves into the hands of the dominant class and contributes to the maintenance of existing power inequalities (ibid). Therefore, a society that wants to strive for political equality among its citizens needs to pay more attention to why people do or do not consider politics to be something ‘for them’.
In this thesis I direct attention at the activities and contexts that shape the political community between elections, and at what political scientists refer to as between-election democracy (Narud & Esaiasson 2013) - that is the contacts and information flow between citizens, political representatives and the political system between elections - and ask the question: what are the conditions that shape people’s willingness and ability to exert power in the democratic political system? By examining the everyday lives of people living in Skogås, a suburb of Stockholm, I argue that two key factors that impact political participation are the political culture and the personal encounters with fellow inhabitants and political representatives. This inequality is sustained both by individual agency - as those with more political power promote their interests and those with less power abstain from participation - and by the structure in terms of the political culture that makes participation less appealing for some, as well as in terms of the lack of platforms of interaction where more solidaristic political goals could be deliberated upon by citizens of various backgrounds. The study also discusses how the perceived lack of trust for political representatives makes people less interested in keeping up-to-date on politics and taking part in dialogues, and thus contributes to less political participation - and therefore less political power - even among those who do vote.

The choice of the ethnographic field is based on a personal ‘aha moment’. When I after many years of living a quite anonymous and isolated life in Skogås became a dog owner, overnight I became connected to the local dog owners and gradually became more and more acquainted with the local community. I got to know new people through their dogs, and became more familiar with the neighbors that I already knew because of the irresistible puppy by my side and because I started spending much more time hanging out outdoors. These daily interactions in shared space provided me with a heightened sense of belonging and a greater insight into the lives and lifestyles of other people. The experience opened my eyes to the powerful role of personal encounters and the places and contexts that enable them, which is an awareness that I hope to be able to share through this thesis.

Skogås is an interesting place to study because of the diversity of its inhabitants in terms of professions, income and ethnic backgrounds, but also because it contains residential areas where voter turnout is among the lowest in Sweden. Among the inhabitants of Skogås there
are considerable differences in access to economic resources, political know-how and attitudes towards political participation, and these differences inescapably enable some people to have more political power than others. While some inhabitants maintain that they “know nothing about politics” and that they have never participated in the elections, others have a lot of opinions and are interested in politics but have little faith in the political system. Yet others actively exert influence through the political system, either as individuals or through a political party. During my fieldwork I got to hear about how different people reason when they vote in elections or why they choose not to vote, how they get knowledge about politics and whether they engage in politics in other ways aside from the elections. I also looked at places where people can meet and possibly engage in political dialogue, such as the local voluntary associations but also the playground, the open nursery center and the dog park. I participated in a local political dialogue arranged by the municipality and visited a municipal council meeting as well.

By presenting how some people have much better access to the power that democracy has to offer than others I argue that existing inequalities in the Swedish society are recreated through the democratic political system. The title of the thesis, ‘not for me’, refers both to the phrase that several of my informants used when describing their attitude towards politics, and what ensues when parts of the population are excluded from participation, namely policies that do not to serve these citizens’ interests.

One of the most emphasized elements in a representative democracy is the democratic election. This focus on elections is at the core of both narrow definitions of democracy and broader ones that acknowledge social and economic conditions and/or processes (Coles 2004). There is an assumed egality between citizens that takes place during democratic elections, where each person that qualifies as a citizen has a single vote, regardless of how rich, powerful or influential they are. But this great focus on elections contributes to a distorted picture of democracy, because the poll that thus acquires an “importance that has no basis in either democratic theory or practical politics” (Elklit & Svensson 1997:34), casts a shadow over the social and political interactions before and after the election day that are of great importance. While elections arguably serve to reinforce values of inclusion and equality among citizens (Kertzer 1988), political activities among the citizens in between elections
reflect the prevalent inequality and differences in access to power within the social community.

By producing ethnographic material about the local, everyday activities and dispositions that underpin political community life, I want to shed some light on the context of political participation, the dynamics of the political community, the key factors that influence people’s ability and motivation to engage in democracy and the role of agency and structure in the recreation of the political hierarchy - which I refer to as exclusion and self-exclusion. I thus hope to contribute with a deeper understanding about participation in large-scale political systems and in the Swedish democracy in particular.

Outline of the thesis

This introduction is followed by seven chapters. The first of these introduces the reader to the anthropology of democracy, its history within the discipline, as well as specific theories relevant to this thesis. The second chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the field of this research and a discussion of the methodology. Chapters 3-5 are devoted to the presentation and analysis of my ethnographic data according to three different themes. In Chapter 3 I identify everyday places that function as platforms of the local community, in chapter 4 I turn to various ways that people in Skogås exercise political power and the obstacles that keep certain people from active participation, and in chapter 5 I look at some perceptions of the political representatives from the point of view of the represented. In chapter 6 I connect the three themes discussed in the thesis and in chapter 7 I discuss some general implications and make some suggestions for future research.
1. Anthropology of democracy

In this chapter I provide the theoretical framework of the thesis. I begin by discussing why the anthropological approach to the study of democracy is particularly useful for gaining a better insight into democracy as a political system, and then present a short history of the anthropology of democracy as well as some key features of how anthropologists approach the concept of democracy as opposed to political scientists and sociologists that have dominated this field of research. I then give a brief overview of some main theoretical perspectives on democracy within anthropology and conclude the chapter with a presentation of some of the reoccuring themes and analytical tools applied in this thesis, namely public space, practice and representation.

In contemporary usage, democracy is synonymous with ‘the good society’, and invoked by nationalist and alter-globalization movements, by governments and anti-government protestors alike. As a highly multivalent and loaded concept and a site of contestation, it is used to both legitimize and challenge practices of power. On the global scale, there is an implicit expectation that all governments should be democratic and countries that fail to live up to this ideal are seen as backward and risk being shunned in the international community. International aid too is often conditioned by terms related to democracy through organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), both of which also account for a great portion of the financial support of anthropological research.

Although anthropologists regularly encounter ideas and practices related to democracy in their fieldwork, there has been relatively little anthropological research or explicit theorizing on democracy (Paley 2002). A great deal of the anthropological contributions have focused on the interpretation and implementation of democracy as it is imported to places such as South America (Grisaffi 2013), Africa and Asia (Paley 2002) and the former-Soviet states (Hann & Dunn 1996) and there has been a large amount of funding available for this type of research provided by international development agencies promoting the spread of liberal democracy. However there is also a smaller but growing body of research examining democracy in North
America and West and Northern Europe\(^1\) - places that are commonly seen as exporters of liberal democracy - and the aim of this thesis is to contribute to this latter category.

Sweden and its neighboring countries in Northern Europe are ranked as the world’s leading countries with regard to quality of democracy, by various influential organizations\(^2\). Such rankings are indicators of Sweden’s status within a global discourse of democracy, as a model of success, or a full democracy. Leading anthropologists studying democracy such as Julia Paley (2008) argue that while political scientists and policy makers largely focus on what democracy is and what it should be, anthropologists place an emphasis on the inherently open-ended construction of democracy and how it develops in diverse ways depending on the context.

Ethnographic studies of model democracies can be valuable for several reasons. On the one hand they can offer insight into the crucial everyday processes that are necessary to sustain the political participation of citizens. On the other hand, ethnography can also facilitate critical analyses of liberal democracy as an international export, and situate it in the specific environments and ideologies that produce it. Studying how citizens relate to democratic participation in their everyday lives can also cast light on deficiencies in the model democracies and provide insights into how political inequalities are produced and reproduced. By examining how people in their everyday lives relate to their political rights and how taken-for-granted everyday processes influence their participation, anthropologists can shine light on the empirical complexity of citizenship and democracy. They can demonstrate how the power of the people is not limited to formal elections and how individual action plays an important role in the daily reproduction of the existing system (Pardo & Prato 2011:18). A closer attention to everyday processes can lead to a fuller understanding of issues ranging from political participation and crises of legitimacy, to the development of new forms of democracy.

\(^1\) See for example Greenhouse in Paley (ed.) 2008 and Garsten, Rothstein & Svalfors 2015

\(^2\) Some examples are the Democracy Index published annually by The Economist Intelligence Unit and the Democracy Ranking published by the Democracy Ranking Association
A brief history

Although political life has been an area of interest in modern anthropology since the very start of the discipline, democracy and citizenship have only become its objects of inquiry in the past fifty years. This is partly due to the fact that in the early days of modern anthropology, there was an informal division of labour between anthropologists who focused on ‘primitive’ societies, and sociologists, political scientists and others who studied ‘modern’ societies (Lewellen 1983). In the spirit of their time, early anthropologists such as Sir Henry Maine and Louis Henry Morgan looked at human political life through evolutionist lenses, whereby observed alternatives to modern Western citizenship appeared as earlier primitive versions of social organization.

This distinction became increasingly blurred by the 1960’s when classifying societies as primitive and modern proved to be more and more untenable. The people depicted as living in isolated primitive political systems had actually since the beginning of anthropology been connected to the colonial political systems and situated in specific power-relations which most anthropologists failed to address adequately (Paley 2002:472). By the 1960’s and following post-colonial independence many of the former colonies became liberal democracies - making the distinction between primitive and modern societies even more problematic for anthropologists.

Another related change that occurred after the 1960’s is that anthropologists became increasingly interested in studying their own societies (Lewellen 1983). Although these had been present in anthropology as implicit or explicit comparative baselines serving as a contrast to the lives of the ‘other’, in more recent decades a growing number of anthropologists have produced thorough ethnographies of European and North American societies, immersing themselves in fields previously investigated mostly by sociologists.

The crossing into familiar yet new territory has presented anthropologists with new challenges. While early anthropologists usually found themselves in an advantageous power-relationship with the people they studied in colonial settings, gaining access to places and information in Western societies has proven to be more difficult (Lewellen 1983). In certain contexts where it is not possible to conduct participant observation some anthropologists
instead use non-participatory methods such as interviews, questionnaires and studying documents. The important role of written and visual media in Western societies combined with challenges of access lead others to conduct their research mainly through official documents (de Pedro 1998) and media discourses (Fernandes & Morte 2011).

**Anthropological approaches to democracy**

Although the ideas of democracy and citizenship have existed for millennia, the concepts as they are used today have strong links with discourses of modernity. In the post-World War II period democracy was seen as a universal political form - even by anthropologists - signaling progress towards modernity (Paley 2002:472). Post-modernist anthropologists have instead focused on democracy’s circulation, constructedness, discursive nature and implication in power-relations. By identifying the modernist roots of the discourses of democratic citizenship, anthropologists have been able to challenge the universalist assumptions of Western democratic practice, that are generally promoted by Western political agencies (Paley 2002:474). Through ethnographic accounts anthropologists can cast light on the numerous ways in which democracy is hybridized as it is appropriated and reinterpreted through other ideologies, such as post-modernism (Paley 2002:485), or local traditions and religious views (Werbner 1998:9), and point out discrepancies between the modernist ideas and the local practices of citizenship and democracy (Hann & Dunn 1996:6). On the one hand democracy makes room for political participation and the challenging of authority - but on the other hand it covers over political realities (Paley 2002) and is used by governments to legitimize that which by itself would be seen as illegitimate and an unacceptable domination (Pardo & Prato 2011:11). In this thesis I argue that the perceived egality of the democratic right to elect the government obscures how some groups in the society have more power to influence the political fate of the community than others, through higher electoral participation in the elections and a higher involvement in the shaping of policies.

Liberal democratic citizenship is based on the premise of a direct relationship between individual citizens and the state (Holston & Appadurai 1998). Volitional and consensual rather than natural, the idea of nation-state citizenship is founded on an idea of sufficient similarity among the citizens and a common purpose supported by ideals of commonwealth, participation and equality. Where a common purpose is not present, the protection of
individuals’ rights is instead emphasized as the central tenet of citizenship, and elevated so that the rights can neither be sacrificed for utilitarian or communist ends nor for general welfare. As such, liberal democratic citizenship can be seen as a highly individualistic form of social organization. However, critics of this aspect of citizenship argue that without prior formative attachments such as the family, religion, culture, ethnicity, and the like, people cannot develop the moral depth and personhood required by liberal citizenship (ibid:7). These prior formative attachments build trust in society and foster citizens, and while citizenship is dependent on these vital building blocks of community, it also undermines them. Since they are the very thing that endow the obligations of citizenship with meaning and virtue, Holston and Appadurai argue that the detachment of citizenship from prior formative attachments produces passive citizens, or “spectators who vote” (ibid).

Holston and Appadurai problematize the idea of citizens as autonomous and individualistic, and highlight the crucial role of other attachments in the fulfillment of democratic citizenship. In addition, while countries such as Sweden are considered to have a high voter turnout, voting in itself is not a true indicator that the citizens are active and participate in the democratic decision-making. Although associations based on various forms of identifications can in some cases lead to separatism, they can also serve as platforms for encountering people with different identities, developing trust, and acquiring the knowhow, confidence and motivation to participate in the shaping of policy. Furthermore, religious and ethnic identities are crosscut by other identifications such as gender, class and political commitment (Werbner 1998:7) that give rise to transversal alliances (Yuval-Davis 1997), enabling the development of solidarity and joint political mobilization among otherwise divided groups. In this thesis I discuss how the abstract idea of being citizens in a political community is not enough to stimulate political participation, and emphasize the importance of tangible shared interests and experience of fellowship as the driving forces behind the cultivation of solidarity and communication that are necessary for the pursuit of the common political good.

Public space

Space plays an important role in the creation and recreation of alliances in society, as it conditions social interaction but also becomes defined by it. Public encounters play a major role in political deliberation as well as in acquiring political information and know-how. The
idea of public space also raises some important questions with regard to membership in a community. Can a place be called public if not everybody feels welcome? In his study of Beirut, Genberg (2002:242) noted that despite the intentions of the architects, places become public or private through their use rather than their intended purpose. Something privately owned such as a café or a bar can function as a public space, and public spaces can be ‘privatized’ if people feel uncomfortable or victimized when occupying them. During the civil war in Lebanon, fighting in Beirut made public places inaccessible and instead private homes and other protected places became places for meeting and discussion (ibid:242). However, as Genberg contemplates, if the definition of a public place is that everybody should feel welcome there, then one can wonder whether such places exist at all? And in turn, it is questionable whether persons that cannot be present in the places in a community that are supposed to be public without feeling discomfort and experiencing harassment can be regarded as citizens at all (Painter & Philo 1995:115). At the same time, even though individuals may be excluded from formally recognized public life they can still engage in political activism and participate outside the formally recognized public sphere (Genberg 2002:241).

While anthropologists studying democracy find the idea of public space useful (Genberg 2002), they are also aware of the problems with the distinction between public and private (Poluha & Rosendahl 2002:28). Because it can be traced to different strands of Western thought, both the dividing line between the public/private dichotomy and the contents of the concepts can vary in different contexts (Weintraub 1997), so that ‘public’ can refer to the solidarity and obligation of citizenship and active participation in collective decision-making - as opposed to the private interests of the household -, but also to the authority of the state as opposed to the formally voluntary relations of free market or voluntary associations. Although not unproblematic, the public/private distinction can be a useful analytical tool when studying the relationship between the individual, the community and political power. By contrasting public space with consumption space, Ritty Lukose (as cited in Paley 2002:487) casts light on how political public space is removed and an apolitical “civic public” is produced through “spaces of consumption” in a college in Kerala. Per Ståhlberg (2002:232) applies Habermas definition of the public sphere to study Indian debates concerning journalism and examine the
relations of power as well as how access to the public sphere through media means having access to the consciousness of the public.

The centrality of a place where citizens can come together and deliberate about the common good to the concept of democracy can be traced back to the *agora*, the central meeting spot of Ancient Greece. According to Richard Sennett (1994:33), the *agora* contributed to a visible, accessible and transparent political process and enabled citizens - which albeit included only free ‘native’ men - to meet, find out what is happening and discuss it. The movement made possible in simultaneous space and the casual participation in legal matters that it thus enabled encouraged the participatory element of democracy often found lacking in contemporary political systems. In addition, in ancient Greece the assemblies where citizens could directly participate in election or legislation occurred at least ten times per year (Manville 2014:182). Nevertheless, democratic citizenship in ancient Athens entailed membership in a much smaller, more immediate and comprehensible community - the city - as opposed to the more abstract community of the nation-state. In addition, the democracies of ancient Greece involved individuals who had a narrow shared identity of being free, male citizens. Although the citizen population of many Swedish cities and municipalities are comparable in size to ancient Athens, the identities, places and culture of citizenship are very different.

The space of citizenship in ancient Greek democracies is not only relevant to studies of contemporary democracies because it refers to a formative point in history, but also because ancient Greek democracies serve as a myth of the foundation of democratic citizenship (Beilharz 1996). In this thesis I look for places and practices that fulfil the function of the *agora* for the inhabitants in Skogås and discuss how they condition inhabitants’ access to democratic power and political equality. Some of the political activities that in ancient Athens played out in the *agora* take place today in the various types of media (Genberg 2002:240). Statements of politicians are encountered through the television or internet news, and political discussions are carried out through Twitter or Facebook. However, despite the advances in media technology, encounters in public space are still fundamental to the political community. Many people do not read the news or participate in social media and physical space remains an important arena for political communication such as demonstrations, protests, political messages and posters (Genberg 2002:241).
Practice

Relationships and places in everyday life are the cornerstones of politics because it is through them that norms, values and conceptual schemes are reproduced in an interplay between structure and agency (Poluha & Rosendahl 2002). Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory is a good analytical tool for describing this complex dynamics and understanding how ‘the system’ is produced and reproduced. Instead of merely studying political inequality, practice theory focuses on the ways in which individuals enable its endurance. Practice in this sense is anything that people do that has political implications and shapes relations of domination (Ortner 1984:149).

According to practice theory, individuals develop certain dispositions while acting in relation to the conditions available for them, and through their actions themselves reproduce these conditions. Individual action according to Bourdieu is neither merely the result of mechanical determinism, nor of unpredictable conscious calculation, but rather the product of an unconscious practical logic (Bourdieu 1979:55). In contrast to theoretical schemes, practical logic - stored in and performed by the body and shaped by conditions and habit - seeks to understand only in order to act (Bourdieu 1990:91). People pursue their interests without necessarily reflecting upon or consciously applying the rules that condition their field of action, and therefore what appears to be instrumental action is better understood as a “choice of the necessary”, a habitual acting out of objective constraint (Widick 2004:203). In a given situation, certain actions appear to the individual as reasonable and common-sense, while behaviors that would be negatively sanctioned appear through the logic of practise as “not for the likes of us”, and are thereby excluded “without violence, art or argument” (Bourdieu 1979:55).

The system of dispositions which Bourdieu calles the “habitus” generates socially distinct practices among individuals living under similar conditions and provides a means of classifying these practices that distinguish them from the practices of other life-styles (Bourdieu 1979:170). This cultural classification in turn provides a justification for the existence of economic classes and legitimizes political and economic domination (ibid:386). By studying a French national survey on people’s political opinions, and the questions that were least likely to be answered, Bourdieu discovered that having opinions about politics
depends on an individual’s ability to recognize and treat a political question as political on the basis of specifically political principles rather than ethical (ibid:399). The more a question in the survey was constituted as a political question in both subject and language and without direct reference to the experience or interests of the group concerned, the greater the gap was in the frequency of answers between the least and most educated (ibid:405). “Political language” which is related to the culture of the dominant class stands in contrast to “working class language” leaves those who do not master it with a feeling of incompetence and objective and subjective exclusion (ibid:399), and legitimizes a division of political labour leaving no choice but delegation from those who “do not know to speak” to those who “speak well” (ibid:414). Bourdieu emphasizes that political language creates a distance between political spokesmen and those they are supposed to represent and gives an impression of artificiality which also fosters apathy among the dominated:

“Everything combines to reinforce the deep distrust - not incompatible with an equally deep form of recognition-which the dominated feel towards political language, broadly identified, like everything symbolic, with the dominant, the masters of the art of packaging and of fobbing off with words. This suspicion of the political ’stage’, a ’theatre’ whose rules are not understood and which leaves ordinary taste with a sense of helplessness, is often the source of ’apathy' and of a generalized distrust of all forms of speech and spokesmen.” (Bourdieu 1979:464-465)

Thus according to practice theory political domination is not the immediate product of material conditions such as the distribution of wealth, but of the habits that arise from these conditions that make political domination appear as objectively necessary.

Representation

In liberal democracies most of the political decision-making in between elections is done by elected representatives whose decisions are in turn implemented by public officials. Although the public officials are supposed to be servants of the people - through the mediation of elected politicians - a great deal of anthropological studies of democracies have been written on the unequal power relations between officials and local people, that are upheld by the differential access to resources and the various forms of punishments and sanctions that officials can use. However, according to David Nugent an accessive focus on the state’s autonomy and coercive power as opposed to legitimacy as the basis of rule obscures the fact that the relationship between officials and people is also characterized by interdependence and
co-operation (Nugent 1994). In his analysis of the interactions between the regional population in Peru and the Peruvian state, Nugent demonstrates how the relationship is characterized by both conflict and cooperation depending on whether they enable or disable the propagation of specific material-political interests and cultural conceptions of the other.

The role of responsiveness in the establishment of legitimacy in representative democracies is extensively discussed by Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato (2011). The concept of citizenship that has emerged from the nineteenth century idea of the nation, as people living in a common territory under the same government and laws is based on a formal, not substantive definition, granting political rights while claiming to maintain a “superior ‘neutrality’ of values and lifestyles” (Pardo & Prato 2011:11). However, the morality of the rulers is expected to be in agreement with the fundamental requirements of the people, and failure to achieve this results in the failure of the democratic process (Pardo 2000:5). Because political authority in a democracy is not established and maintained through brute force, the strength of the rulers’ authority is dependent on how legitimate they are perceived to be, from both a legal and a moral perspective (Pardo & Prato 2011:12), which is why it is important for politicians to be in tune with the people that they represent.

Thus it is not enough for a political and economic action to be inscribed in legislation, it must be seen as legitimate, otherwise governance comes to be seen as unreliable and untrustworthy, and people either start to disregard the laws that they see as illegitimate or they start to distrust the institutions in their entirety. However, lack of trust for politicians does not always result in low electoral participation. In her ethnography of the high voter turnout in West Bengal, Mukulika Banerjee (2008) finds that disillusionment with politicians is not incompatible with a high reverence for the democratic process. Indeed the vote can be seen as the “people’s weapon” (ibid:78) and a means of keeping politicians from falling into deeper corruption. Other factors such as the experience of equality and empowerment through the democratic elections as well as peer pressure and a sense of duty can also contribute to high electoral participation (ibid:77) and even though politicians in general may be perceived as dishonest, citizens can still exert their influence by rewarding the most responsive party with their votes (ibid:92).
In representative democracies, political parties are supposed to serve as a bridge between the representatives and the ‘ordinary people’ whereby citizens are able to directly shape policies through membership in political parties and participation in party meetings and congresses. However, in recent decades there has been a general decline in membership in political parties across Europe (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012), and therefore less and less citizens are directly involved in the deliberation and formulation of policy in political parties. Instead, citizens are increasingly merely choosing between the ‘finished products’, that is the party programs whose shaping they were not involved in, while deliberation on various policies instead increasingly plays out in everyday encounters, relationships and discourses that shape public opinion and that politicians pick up on through opinion surveys and media discourse. This type of political dynamic together with the growing complexity of political issues and the rise of policy-professionals in the development and communication of political agendas (Garsten 2015) contributes to a growing gap between the people in whose hands democratic power ultimately lies and the representatives that are supposed to administrate that power. In such a political landscape ordinary people’s ability and motivation to participate in the development of policy can decrease drastically which not only decreases the political parties’ perceived legitimacy but also cripples their ability to produce political visions (ibid:288). This growing gap between the electorate and the representatives is likely to be a main source of concern for liberal democracies in the foreseeable future and an important phenomenon for social scientists to continue to shed light on.

Applying anthropology

The concept of democracy is highly influential and ubiquitous, and has been extensively explored by political scientists with an emphasis on theory and the formal processes of democratic institutions. The methods that anthropologists use - such as ethnography, relationships with people outside of formal and elite political institutions, attention to alternative world-views and circulating discourses - bring to the study of democracy a much needed examination of local meanings and experiences related to democracy. Anthropology is particularly well suited to provide a deeper understanding of the practical dynamics of democracy and make a contribution to normative debates about democracy, such as the discussions related to deliberative and direct democracy within political science. Rather than making the exotic familiar, the role of anthropologists who study ‘Western-style’ democracies
is to exoticise the all-too-familiar ideas of democracy and citizenship (Werbner 1998). To study a field in relation to concepts such as democracy and citizenship can entail forcing empirical data into ethnocentric frameworks, however by doing so anthropologists can also unsettle and contest these frameworks (Poluha & Rosendahl 2002:10). Despite the positive connotations related to these concepts in global politics, anthropologists demonstrate that they are in themselves neither good nor bad, and that they can be used both to enable the achievement of greater welfare and to legitimize oppression and injustice.

Anthropological studies of democracy intersect and interact with the work produced by various other academic disciplines such as political science, sociology, and cultural geography. The contribution of the anthropologist in this shared endeavor is to capture and communicate the richness of local subjectivities, to explore the social relations and contradictions and situate them in the particular historical and local contexts (Wilson 1997:15). Ethnographic studies of democracies such as the Swedish can thus provide a much-needed scrutiny of the democracies that are regularly taken as unexamined standard-bearers for the rest of the world (Gledhill 2000:7-8). The unraveling of both the expectations that are vested in the concept of democracy as a powerful symbol of political legitimacy, and the reality of how it is implemented in everyday life can offer academic insights and inspiration for how current political challenges can be met.

In this chapter I have discussed the strength of the anthropological approach when studying democracy and provided a brief account of how anthropologists have approached this topic historically as well as in more recent times. I also presented the main analytical concepts that I apply in this thesis: public space, practice, and representation. These three are also the themes of the three ethnographic chapters in this thesis, following the next chapter where I give an overview of the ethnographic field and of the methods that I have used in my research.
2. Studying Skogås

“Are you going to write about Skogås being a white-trash area?”

Lena, inhabitant in Västra Skogås

The purpose of this section is to give background information about Skogås - the residential area that I chose as the field of this study -, and account for how I conducted my research. Skogås is a place where I have lived for several years, and this has facilitated my field work in many ways but has also required certain methodological and ethical considerations on my part, which I discuss towards the end of this section.

Skogås is a Swedish suburb with approximately 13,000 inhabitants. It lies a 20-minute commuter train ride away from central Stockholm and belongs to Huddinge, the second largest municipality in Stockholm county. The railway track cuts Skogås into two distinct areas, Östra Skogås (East Skogås) and Västra Skogås (West Skogås). Östra Skogås is made up of private villas, row houses and co-operative flats, that are generally owned by middle- and high-income residents. Västra Skogås consists mainly of leasehold flats, housing middle- and low-income residents, and it is one of Sweden’s 23 so called LUA-districts (Regeringskansliet 2008). LUA stands for lokala utvecklingsavtal (local development contracts), and is a government instrument for improving conditions in urban districts where the living standard, employment rate and level of education are considered to be significantly lower, and the perceived alienation among inhabitants higher compared to the rest of the country.

Once every four years, eligible inhabitants of Skogås are invited to a nearby school or church to cast a vote for representatives in various decision-making institutions. There are three levels of governance in Sweden - the municipality, the county and the parliament - and different rules apply on different levels as to who is qualified to vote. In the election of the municipality and county councils adult Swedish citizens, adult EU citizens who are registered in Sweden, and adult non-EU citizens that have been legally registered in Sweden for at least three years are qualifies to vote. In the elections for the Riksdag, only Swedish citizens are qualified to vote. In recent decades the European Parliament has gradually become a new
level of governance, with Swedish representatives being elected every five years by Swedish citizens and EU citizens registered in Sweden.

Ideally, all qualified persons should participate in the election of representatives, thereby granting legitimacy to the political bodies. Sweden is considered to have a large voter turnout by international comparison, with over 80 percent of the population participating in the national elections, however the differences between areas with different demographies are striking. In 2010, during the last national elections preceding my fieldwork, 82 percent of the mostly middle- and high income residents of Östra Skogås participated in the elections for the national parliament, compared to 72 percent in Västra Skogås, which is inhabited mostly by middle- and low income residents (Valmyndigheten n.d.). In the elections for the municipal council, the differences were even bigger with an average participation of 80 percent in Östra Skogås compared to 65 percent in Västra Skogås. In one electoral district in Västra Skogås electoral participation for the municipal elections was as low as 54 percent. The voter turnout for the election of the European parliament was much lower in general, ranging between 24 percent in one district of Västra Skogås to 47 percent in a district of Östra Skogås. There are also striking differences in terms of which parties are most popular. In the 2010 national elections, the most popular party among the voters of Östra Skogås was the conservative Moderate Party, while the most popular party among the voters in Västra Skogås was the Swedish Social Democratic Party. At the time of my fieldwork in 2014, the ruling coalition in the municipality was right-wing with the Moderate Party having the chairmanship of the municipal government.

Although I have lived in Västra Skogås for over five years before I began my fieldwork, and suspected that it was a low-income residential area, I was not aware that it was statistically among the bottom 23 districts in the country in terms of the standard of living. Since my family moved to Sweden 15 years ago we have lived in various types of neighborhoods and I have felt most at home in Skogås. I was well acquainted with the area prior to the fieldwork to a certain degree, but just like many of people who live in Skogås, I did not know much about the local civic life and I barely ever talked to my neighbors, which made me feel very alienated. Then two years ago I got a dog and things changed practically over night. Neighbors and strangers would come up to me and the new puppy in the street, both dog-
owners and dog-lovers and we would have a brief chat. I started spending a lot of time walking my dog and was getting to know more and more people, while my relationship with my neighbors started evolving beyond mere polite greetings. This experience sparked a great interest in me to find out more about the circumstances surrounding how people become involved in their community and how that in turn impacts their means of exercising their political rights. I therefore decided to study dog ownership as a form of community involvement, and at the same time explore the broader context of local civic and political participation in Skogås.

**Studying the field**

On 16th October 2013 I attended a local democracy event hosted by the municipality’s *demokrati och mångfaldsberedning* (the advisory committee of democracy and diversity). This served as a prelude for the interviews and participant observation that I conducted between 4th November 2013 and 8th January 2014. During this time I interacted with people of diverse backgrounds, some that are leading figures in the local civic life and some that are quite isolated, some that have lived in Skogås for all their lives and some that have immigrated to Sweden only a few years ago. I talked to locals that were born in Sweden and do not trace their family roots to other countries and also to local residents that identify themselves as Serbian, Iraqi, Turkish, Finnish, Polish, Greek, Russian and Moroccan. I made contact with politicians and people living outside of Skogås but involved in the civic life here through various organizations. My informants have been between the ages of 14-70 years, and the majority have been women. I chose to focus my fieldwork on Västra Skogås, although I also talked to people living in Östra Skogås. Because some of my informants’ reflections and statements about political preferences can be sensitive I have chosen to use pseudonyms in this paper.

Since I wanted to explore the diversity of the local public places and not just focus on one particular location - within the limited scope of the thesis -, and since in many of the local meeting places people only gather once a week or once a month, a lot of the data in my analysis of public places in Skogås come from conversations with locals and their experiences. Being a dog-owner provided me with a good way to engage with people. I spent a large amount of time on the streets and nearby nature areas where people walk their dogs.
and also at the dog park. I visited neighbors and invited fellow dog-owners to my house for coffee which allowed us to have deep conversations about their experiences and views in a relaxed setting. To find out more about the local community life, I visited places that I knew from before but had never entered, such as the local library, the art gallery Lyktan - where I took part in the knit-club - and the retirement home Serenaden. I looked more closely at places already familiar to me, such as the shopping mall and the church, and found out more about places that I had seen but had no idea what purpose they served, such as The Trail Local Meeting Premises (Träfflokalen Stigen), a meeting place primarily for psychological rehabilitation. I also discovered new places that I have passed by hundreds of times but had never noticed, such as the meeting premises of the Swedish National Pensioners’ Organisation (PRO-Pensionärernas riksorganisation) and the Workers’ Educational Association (ABF-Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund). I have also made use of personal experiences acquired before the study about the residential area where I live and the local association of the Swedish Tenants Union (Hyresgästföreningen) where I continued to participate as a board member during the fieldwork.

I also attended local political events held outside of Skogås: a municipal council session as well as an event organized by the local branch of the Swedish Green Party that was advertised in the local newspaper, both of which took place in the center of the municipality, Huddinge centrum. I had never attended a municipal council session or an event organized by a political party before and anticipated that it would be a good way to get an insight into the local politics and also to see how many and what types of inhabitants these open meetings attract.

In addition to my main method of participant observation, I made extensive use of interviews, as well as written and electronic sources, including a lot of statistics. The interviews allowed me to reflect together with my informants on my observations and interpretations and find out more about their practices and views. During the interviews I was able to explore relevant information that I could not directly observe such as things that have happened in the past, or in environments where I could not follow my informants. I often conducted unstructured or semi-structured short interviews while out in the street or at the dog park, and also longer semi-structured interviews at my apartment, my informants’ apartments, at the local café and at the facilities of local associations. In addition to the people that I came into contact with
through my visits to public spaces in Skogås, I also directly contacted and interviewed leaders of several local associations.

I also read local newspapers, especially *Mitt i Skogås* (In the Middle of Skogås), a weekly newspaper that comes out in local versions in several districts around Stockholm. Many of my informants said that they used this newspaper to find out about local crime, culture and politics. I looked at brochures that I found at the municipality’s service center, located in the library. There I found interesting leaflets containing community information for parents, senior citizens, pool owners, new residents and maps of local nature reserves.

My personal identity of being a woman, immigrant, a Muslim and an academic inescapably influenced my interactions with my informants and my interpretations. I had deeper conversations with my female informants, since it felt more appropriate to invite women home to me or be invited home to them, although I did conduct deep interviews with male informants as well. The fact that I was born in Serbia and speak the language made it easier for me to interact with several Serbian neighbors, as some of them speak very little Swedish. However, I lot the people in my fieldwork have been ‘ethnic Swedes’ which has been very interesting for me since during the 15 years that I have lived in Sweden I have only had three friends that did not have a recent family history of immigration.

**Neutrality**

During my interactions in the fieldwork I strived to be as neutral as possible, knowing that things I said unavoidably influenced what my informants would say. This was particularly challenging when my informants expressed quite harsh opinions about Arabs, Turks or Africans, Muslims or Christians. Many of my informants did not know that I consider myself to be Muslim or that I have many close friends that are Arabs, Turks and Africans and even those that did were at times quite open with their negative ideas about certain ethnic or religious groups. Sometimes it felt hard to remain neutral and not say anything when I heard what I perceived as gross generalizations. In most of the cases I chose to keep silent, and in some cases I tried to very discreetly challenge such statements. When I interviewed a politician from a large political party who had very negative generalizations about all religions I chose to politely challenge some of these ideas after the interview. I felt an ethical
obligation to say something since this person was a local policymaker and I believed that it would not harm the fieldwork.

On the other hand, when some of my informants expressed sympathy for the Sweden Democrats, described by its adherents as a party outside of the left-right spectrum that stands for security and tradition, and by its opponents as a right-wing populist and even racist and islamophobic party, I chose not to challenge their views. This party is very controversial in Sweden and its sympathizers are hated and ridiculed by many, so I made the decision to be very discreet and allow my informants to feel free and express their opinions and views.

**Insider anthropology**

Being a local resident came with certain advantages since I had a lot of background knowledge, knew a lot of people already and had built up trust and intimacy with many of them. At times I used myself as an informant, observing the changes in my perception as I came into contact with new people, information and events. However some people perhaps did not open up to me as they would have opened up to an anthropologist that would be gone after the fieldwork. A neighbor that I had asked for an interview replied “maybe you will dislike me if you hear my opinions”, which showed me that some neighbors definitely saw the interview as a risky situation. Another response I got when I explained that I was a social anthropology student was “are you going to write about Skogås being a white trash area?” This comment was referring to the way a successful young social entrepreneur that grew up in Skogås described the area in an interview with the local newspaper Mitt i. This reaction showed me the potential hazard that informants perceived in being interviewed by a researcher, and in this regard I was more harmless to open up to because I would continue living in the area after the end of the fieldwork and could be held accountable for what I had written.

Although I myself have been a local in Skogås for many years, stepping into the well-known field with a specific goal and research questions made me see and experience the community in new ways. I had many times seen a very old man slowly walking around the mall in Skogås, as a human billboard, carrying on his back and front an advertisement of the local Lyktan cultural association with a kind smile on his face. The gallery of the association is on
the top floor of the mall, but even when it was on the ground floor a couple of years before I never thought about visiting it. I had never been particularly interested in art and besides, I barely had time to meet my own friends and family. This fieldwork provided me with an opportunity and an incentive to be curious about the people and places in Skogås for a whole month and visit the Lyktan cultural association as well as numerous other local meeting places. The knowledge and insights that I have gained have greatly increased my sense of competence and belonging with regard to my home community, and the political community in general. The empowerment that results from knowing one’s community and ‘what is going on’, I argue in this thesis is something that participation in public places can greatly contribute to.

My fieldwork has presented the view from one specific window, and there is a lot of information that has been inaccessible to me. My background and personal views have inevitably influenced my interpretations even though I have strived to genuinely understand my field and be neutral and fair in my descriptions. My goal has not been to provide an all-embracing, objective picture of Skogås, but a glance through the window that has been made available for me from my particular viewpoint. I thus wish to point to a particular truth about Skogås, unique and valuable, but without claiming superiority over other truths that could be told.

In this chapter I have presented some relevant background information about the ethnographic field and discussed the methods of my research. The next chapter is the first of the three ethnographic chapters that discuss the three central themes of this thesis: public space, practice and representation. In the first of these three chapters I present the various places in Skogås where inhabitants encounter each other and interact and discuss their implications for the political community. In the following chapter I discuss the practices that impact the locals’ ability and inclination to attempt to influence policy, and in the final ethnographic chapter I discuss questions pertaining to the legitimacy of political representatives, before resuming the thesis with a discussion that connects the different themes and a conclusion.
3. Spaces of community

“When I got children, I became a part of Skogås.”

Thana, inhabitant in Västra Skogås

Although everyday interactions occur in various places, including people’s homes or their working environments, in this thesis I have chosen to focus on the encounters that happen in the local suburb, exclusive of people’s homes. For this purpose I have explored the various places where locals encounter one another, such as the mall, meeting places operated by the municipality, voluntary associations, places of encounter among dog owners and parents of small children, as well as the immediate vicinity of a residential neighborhood. These spaces of interaction I argue can be seen as partially public spaces, because they are not accessible to all, but nevertheless provide a tangible experience of the community and opportunities to socialize and cooperate in addressing shared concerns. Instead of a central common political space such as the ancient Greek agora, I argue that the local community of Skogås has scattered spaces that serve as crossroads for encounters and intersections of different identities in the community, with varying levels of accessibility depending on one’s identity and social relationships.

The physical community

The residents of Östra Skogås and Västra Skogås are connected by the commuter train station and by the mall where the two large grocery stores are, which gives Skogås an atmosphere of being a ‘mixed’ area where people of different social backgrounds encounter one another and coexist. The attractive café in the middle of the mall is frequently visited by the various inhabitants of Skogås who are seen sitting with their friends and talking enthusiastically. The indoor benches inside the mall are also usually occupied. After the café closes at 7 o’clock in the evening, its chairs and cushions continue to be used, mostly by a group of local teenagers when the youth center across the mall is closed. Although most people rarely engage in political dialogue at the mall and the commuter train station, these places are nevertheless central for public life, because they give people an experience of being part of a larger community (Genberg 2002).
However, the commuter train station and the mall not only unite inhabitants but divide them as well. The train tracks divide Skogås into two socially distinct areas, and when people get off the train they make an exit towards different realities, while the two large grocery stores in the mall divide inhabitants according to their consumer identity. ICA belongs to the most common grocery store franchise in Sweden and also has a large selection of organic products, while Matrix is considered to be a budget store and specializes in food items for immigrants from Turkey, Poland, Iraq, etc. While some people regularly shop at both ICA and Matrix, many people only shop in one of them. Similarly to the commuter train station, the mall is a place where people’s paths cross, as much as it is a place that demonstrates differences in the society. Consumer behaviors at the mall cut across the Östra/Västra Skogås divide. Västra Skogås has a larger population of people who have immigrated from countries whose ‘ethnic’ ingredients Matrix specializes in, but there are also more well-off residents in Östra Skogås who have immigrated from such countries and regularly shop in Matrix. The overwhelming majority of the customers in Matrix can be regularly heard speaking foreign languages in the shop, and people even come from other areas by commuter train because of the low prices and wide assortment of ‘ethnic foods’. From among the people that prefer ICA, some of the reasons are that Matrix “is badly organized and too chaotic” and that ICA has a much larger selection of organic products. The differences between Matrix and ICA are not only seen as representing different ethnic consumer identities but also cultural traits that people feel more or less comfortable with. ICA is seen as more organized and orderly, while Matrix is seen as more chaotic but also less uptight.

The differences in consumer behavior are related to a categorization that most of the people I talked to during my fieldwork referred to, and that cuts across the social classes, namely the categorical differentiation between ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’. Especially in Västra Skogås there are many immigrants and descendents of immigrants from a lot of different countries, such as Finland, Turkey, Poland, Serbia, Morocco, Chile, Gambia. Although many people that have immigrated to Sweden can be found among the customers and staff of ICA, foreign languages are not heard nearly as often in ICA as they are in Matrix. The shopping habits at the mall also create different images and identities among the ‘immigrant’ population depending on how much their consumption behavior resembles those of ‘regular Swedes’. Some people might be classified as ‘immigrants’ based on their complexion and hair colour
but are wearing clothes that comply with prevalent fashion standards, speak Swedish and shop ‘Swedish’ food items. Other people shop exclusively at Matrix, wear clothes that are perceived as foreign and speak a foreign language with their friends and family while they go about their business in the mall. The two grocery stores cater to two different consumer identities, but they also provide two different social contexts. A headscarf-wearing Muslim woman who has recently immigrated to Sweden may feel more drawn to Matrix because she can find halal ceritifed meat there, but she may also feel less out of place in a store where she can hear people speaking her language and see other women wearing a headscarf. Similarly, a person may feel uncomfortable to be in Matrix where she does not recognize most of the products and where even the staff often speaks Turkish among themselves. However, I also came across a man in Matrix who lives in Östra Skogås and would based on his appearance and way of speaking be considered a ‘typical Swede’, that started talking to me while assessing which fruits are ripe, and told me how he likes shopping in Matrix and likes people from ‘other countries’ because they are more sociable.

Although the mall provides inhabitants with a physical experience of the community and an opportunity to observe the heterogeneity of their community, when they enter it they are first and foremost consumers and not citizens (Sorkin 1992). Streets and parks on the other hand bring people together as inhabitants, however, while the mall provides a sense of belonging to Skogås, streets and parks generally give a sense of belonging to a smaller community, such as Västra Skogås, or one’s neighborhood. Although they are accessible for all inhabitants and at all times of the day, the streets and parks are nevertheless not the ideal platform for interaction between locals. For more than half of the year, the weather in Sweden is quite cold, but even when there are a lot of people outside, most locals do not spontaneously start to interact with each other. Some elderly locals sit around together on benches near the mall greeting many by-passers that they seem to know well. Groups of young people who seem to be good friends also hang out in front of the mall, near the youth center, although, as I learned, their presence intimidates other adolescents and makes them avoid this area. For other locals, especially those who have lived in the area for a long time, Skogås is “loving [kärleksfullt]”, as Ender, a leading figure in a local association in his thirties declared, “I have lived here for a long time and can say hi to everybody”.
It is not enough however to only live in the area for a long time in order to get access to the ‘loving’, familiar side of Skogås, people need a means to get to know others. While the outdoors, the train station and the mall only provide opportunities for seeing other inhabitants, there are many ways that people can get to know each other in Skogås. People that share interests or have similar lifestyles use similar places, such as the gym, the small shop in the mall where people bet on horses, the football field, the badminton court, the pub or the church’s café. A common interest or lifestyle provides a shared identity, and this together with regular physical encounters makes the other person appear more familiar and less of a stranger, making it easier to start a conversation and even get to know one another.

Some people however have very little time for such interactions. When passing by one of my neighbors, Milena, on the way from the shopping mall in the late afternoon, as we exchanged a few quick polite words, she described to me with a friendly smile on her face that “I go to work in the morning, then I come home to make food for the family and then go back to work; I will take a holiday soon but then I will have family visiting from abroad”. Ratko, another neighbor complained to me while drinking coffee in their small kitchen that also serves as a bedroom for the recently immigrated couple with two small daughters, that he has worked in several countries in Europe and that unlike in Sweden people find the time to meet even if they work a lot. “In Germany people meet in pubs in the evening and hang out and they have many festivals in different cities,” he explained. His wife also added that she found it strange that her friends that have lived in Sweden for a longer time want to talk on the phone for hours instead of meeting up, which she did not like at all. Pirjo, another neighbor however expressed to me that she deliberately avoids interacting with others simply because of lack of interest, saying “I don’t meet people, I don’t like people”.

Municipal meeting places

The municipality provides meeting places for citizens that are seen as needing extra support, such as senior citizens, people with psychological difficulties, young people and parents with babies. Senior locals can meet at the municipal retirement home Serenaden, which has open meetings for all senior citizens four days a week. For people who have suffered from psychological problems the municipality operates The Trail Local Meeting Premises (Träfflokalen Stigen), where they can occupy themselves with cooking, gardening, crafts and
various courses. For young people between the ages of 13-19 the municipality offers two separate recreational facilities, The Square (Torget) for the younger ones and the Sluice (Slussen) for older youth. The open nursery school that the municipality provides is a place where parents and their babies can meet. These places are public in the sense that they are run by the municipality, they are however with the exception of The Trail Local Meeting Premices only accessible for a specific group of people. Still, although The Trail is supposed to be a place where any local inhabitant can come and hang out, in reality it is almost exclusively visited by people undergoing rehabilitation according to a visitor that I talked to.

All three places are located in the center of Skogås. I had passed by The Trail before and had wondered what kind of place it is but had never stopped to look. It is a few meters from the mall but in a part of the center area where not many people pass by. “It is a really nice place, I don’t live so close to here but I still come here often,” a visitor revealed to me gladly. The youth center lies on a corner facing the mall’s exit towards Västra Skogås and can be recognized by the groups of young people hanging out, smoking and laughing loudly outside its large windows and glass doors. The open nursery school is a few meters further down from the mall, in front of a big playground. The retirement home, Serenaden, however lies in the more quiet part of the central area, in Östra Skogås, facing the district health care center.

Although places run by the municipality are public, private commercial places such as cafés and shops can often seem more inviting and easier to enter - at least for those who can afford to be their customers. People need an excuse to enter a place, a signal about what they can do there and that they are welcome. They need to see that the place is for them, that they are not encroaching on someone else’s territory and that are not “out of place” (Painter & Philo 1995:115). The municipal youth center is an example of how places that are meant for everybody -within a certain age group - can be in reality only welcoming for some. As Mona, a 14-year old girl told me, she does not feel comfortable going there because she feels that the girls that hang out there are aggressive and mean to her. Places can thus become ‘privatized’ through their use when they make some people feel uncomfortable and victimized (Genberg 2002:242). As the case of the youth center shows, the sheer presence of certain individuals can make other people feel unwelcome, especially when these individuals ‘occupy’ the place in question. Mona did not for example avoid going to the grocery shop fearing that the girls
she felt uncomfortable around could be there. The shop is a place individual customers are not able to dominate as easily and where everybody with money to spend is equally welcome. The youth center is however, despite the efforts of the staff, easily appropriated by a specific group of individuals. The atmosphere at the youth center that gives a feeling of walking into a living room is supposed to make young people feel welcome, however it can have the opposite effect when that living room is seen as belonging to individuals that one does not get along with.

**Voluntary associations**

In contrast, a voluntary association centered around a specific activity can more easily bring together those who would otherwise avoid each other. During an interview, Okan, a member of the board of the local football club was telling me about the way the club has been working with integration between youth in East and Västra Skogås:

> “Before we had separate teams for Östra Skogås and for Västra Skogås, but now it’s mixed, for the last two years. It’s working well and they are learning from each other, many also go to the same school. Some didn’t want to be in mixed groups because they were scared of the language and the cultural clashes, like immigrants versus Swedes. Mostly kids from Östra Skogås wanted to play with others from their own neighborhood. There are advantages in playing with your neighbors because parents can cooperate in dropping their kids off, but we considered it important to mix them.”

Unlike the youth center, where the unstructured atmosphere leaves more room for one particular group to dominate the space, in the athletic club the sport provides an incentive and also a common interest which makes it easier for different groups to mix. Similarly to the local schools, this structured environment can more easily function as a bridge between Östra and Västra Skogås, and contribute to the construction of a shared identity and community feelings. Such encounters can lead to conflicts but they provide a platform for dealing with the tension related to antagonistic identities.

There are many voluntary associations in Skogås based on various interests and identifications, and a lot of them have their own meeting premises. Associations that do not have their own premices - such as the local branches of political parties - are members in the Associations center (*Föreningscenter*), an ‘association of associations’ that has a second hand shop in the mall and a small meeting room that can be used by its members. The associations
that have their own premises in Västra Skogås are key hubs for local civic life, like the Lyktan Cultural Association that has a gallery in the mall, the Skogås Turkish Cultural Association (Skogås Turkiska Kulturföreningen), the Swedish National Pensioners’ Organisation (Pensionärernas Riksorganisation) and the Swedish church that all are situated close to the mall, and the two mosques known locally as the ‘Turkish mosque’ and the ‘Moroccan mosque’, of which the former lies close to the Skogås Turkish Cultural Association, and the latter lies at a couple of hundred meters’ distance from the mall.

The gallery of the Lyktan cultural association organizes a local knit café once a week, that although open for both men and women is frequented only by women, of various backgrounds and ages, who come to work on their own individual handcraft together, some of which they sell at the Associations center. When I first entered the knit cafe one Tuesday evening, the women barely looked up from their knitwork and did not react much when I explained the purpose of my fieldwork. I was however very quickly accepted into the conversation as I started knitting with them and was readily offered help and technical advice. The tea and coffee available for purchase at a very reasonable price added to the sociable atmosphere. The participants said that they liked to see new people at the club, especially younger people because the Lyktan cultural association generally attracts older visitors. The women present during my visits were a mix of various identities, some ‘ethnic Swedish’, others immigrants with good Swedish skills and strong accents, from South America, Finland, Poland and the Balkans. Some were from Östra Skogås and some from Västra Skogås, and one of them, Päivi, travelled every week from her home in a remote part of the municipality to the knit club because “it is such a nice atmosphere”. While they exchanged knitting patterns and ideas, they also talked about their lives and various experiences and opinions, including politics, jumping quickly from one topic to another. This knit cafe is an example of a platform of “transversal alliances” (Yuval-Davis 1997) and political deliberation. Since many of the women present are also members in other associations, the knit cafe is also a bridge between different social spheres.

Agneta, of the participants in the knit cafe is also an active member of the association running the allotment gardens in the outskirts of Västra Skogås which locals can rent to grow vegetables. This, she told me is also a good place to meet other people, even though it does
not offer as much opportunities for political deliberation since the members are usually busy with their own lots. However they still have a political function in the way that they foster community sentiments and counter social segregation between different groups. “We have around 20 nationalities, and we don’t have to talk about where you come from, but about what we are growing, or art,” Agneta explained.

While the allotment gardens and the knit-café bring together people of various ethnic identities, other associations may appear much more homogenous. However at closer inspection ethnic and religious organizations such as the Skogås Turkish Association and the mosques are also heterogenous, albeit in a different way. While the knit-café and the allotment gardens only attract people above 30 (with the majority of the members being over 50), churches, mosques and ethnic organizations bring together people of various ages - from small children to senior citizens. The various associations in Skogås form a web of social contacts, function as crossroads for the intersection of various identities on the common ground of a specific, shared identity or interest, and facilitate communication among the inhabitants.

Meeting through dogs

However, it is not only associations that function as a common ground in the local community. Skogås is home to a large number of dogs, therefore when locals walk their dogs they inevitably come across other dog owners with their pets. Although strangers walking without dogs normally pass by each other without eye contact, this is almost impossible when walking with a dog. The dogs are namely not as good as people at ignoring one another, and they usually make eye contact or try to pull their owners towards the other dog. If the dogs seem like they want to greet each other then sometimes one dog owner asks the other “can they say hello?” and while the dogs are sniffing each other and playing, the owners also exchange a few polite words or start discussing dog-related topics. The next time the dogs meet they will want to greet each other again and this leads to the owners also slowly becoming more familiar with one another. When two strangers have been caught up several times in such meetings then they often start discussing other topics, such as the weather, or something about the neighborhood. Some dog owners eventually become friends, exchange phone numbers, or add each other on Facebook, and take their dogs together to nearby forests,
the dog park or on long walks. There is even a local group that walks their dogs together early in the morning on weekends.

Even if the dogs do not get along, the dog owners can interact nevertheless. Two of my neighbors have dogs that do not get along with my dog, but because we got to know each other when out dogs first met, when we meet we stand and chat anyway even though the dogs do not greet each other. The presence of dogs can be an icebreaker and since dog owners are used to seeing each other often in the street, many greet each other and exchange a few words even when their dogs are not with them. Even people that do not have dogs occasionally come up to dog owners and ask if they can pet their dog or ask what breed the dog is. Dogs also enable their owners to get to know people who live in other parts of Skogås, for example in the local dog park in Västra Skogås or in the nature area known as Mossen in Västra Skogås, where people usually walk their dogs. Being out with dogs gives people a reason to talk and leads to people bumping into each other often because dogs have to be walked several times a day.

The dog park in Skogås is run by Skogås Dog Friends (Skogås Hundvänner), a very informal association that is not registered, has no meetings and no board of directors. It does however have a group on Facebook with over 100 members. Next to pictures of dogs, greetings, and funny dog videos, members can find out the times of regular daily group visits to the dog park, announcements about holes in the fences and when to come and help fix them. While the dog park is a place where many locals can meet and get to know one another, I also encountered dog owners that avoided coming to the dog park because they did not like the people who came there or they did not like how these people treated their dogs. Some people only visited the dog park after dark, because their dogs did not get along well with other dogs.
Dogs give people an excuse to interact in an environment where the social norm is to ignore one another. In Skogås it is not easy to get to know people. Sanna, a fellow dog owner told me about a neighbor that appeared lonely and always wanted to talk to others but there was nothing to talk about. “He has fish, but he should get a dog instead,” Sanna said “then he would have lots to talk about with others”. Dogs give people a reason to meet and provide a topic of conversation. They can produce new friendships and a lot of new acquaintances. The interaction can lead to conflicts and antagonism, but it can also lead to useful bonds, that enable people to exchange information and political know-how. When Sussi, a dog owner who had been politically active earlier in her life succeeded in getting the approval from the municipal council to turn the old football field into a dog park, the story spread among the dog owners and they thus learned about how they can influence municipal decisions.

Although the streets, nature areas and the dog park are public places, dog owners have a special opportunity to interact that is not available in the same way for people who do not have dogs. Dog ownership transforms the outdoors from a place where you can see your community to a place where you can meet your community, as I got to experience first hand. However dog ownership can also make a public place more private. On the association’s Facebook group there has been a lively discussion about dogs that do not get along well with other dogs and need to be alone in the dog park. Since the old football field has been remade into the park some dog owners spend several hours there every day, especially people that earn money taking care of other people’s pooches, and many of them are of the opinion that dogs who do not get along well with other dogs should not be allowed to come to the park because it hinders others from being there. Other dog owners however maintained that the park is for everybody and that unsociable dogs also need to be able to run off-leash.

The dog owners that spend a lot of time at the dog park also complained to me about people hanging out there at night, leaving cigarette butts behind them and destroying the plastic chairs that dog owners have brought from home to make the park more pleasant. One time I participated in a ‘clean up’ where we went about picking up chewed up toys and trash around the park and some people drove away the garbage in their car. There is no trash can set up at the park that trash can be disposed into since the municipality did not assume responsibility for the park, but instead of carrying the waste to the nearest waste bin, many visitors simply
leave it on the floor near the entrance of the park. Unlike in dog parks in other districts which are maintained by the municipality, the visitors actively involved in taking care of the park in Skogås invest a lot of their effort by cleaning it up, making it cozy and by bringing in garden furniture, and they in turn also feel more entitled to the place and can make other dog owners feel more unwelcome.

People that come to the dog park without a dog are also viewed with suspicion. Once when a dog owner found a piece of meat with nails in it that seemed to have been placed on the street so that it may cause damage to a dog that eats it, suspicion was raised against an unknown man that had been seen walking around the dog park without a dog and then crouching down, which made people suspect that he may have put something similar in the dog park. Even though the dog park belongs to the municipality and is open for all inhabitants, it has to some extent become ‘privatized’ by the Skogås Dog Friends association. In the absence of municipal regulations and a formal board in the association, the dog park is informally run by the dog owners who occupy the dog park the most and feel they have the most legitimacy because they take care of it by fixing the fence and carrying away the trash, and because they spend a lot of time there. Since the Skogås Dog Friends association is so informal, and the municipality has not made any specific rules, they are negotiated and discussed continuously at the dog park and on the Facebook group.

Meeting through children

Getting a dog in Skogås means entering into a highly social space where people constantly encounter one another and always have something to talk about. Another such space is made available for people with children. Thana, a neighbor of mine and a mother of two in her early thirties who had been living in Skogås for over five years described to me how she and her husband all of a sudden got to know a lot of other parents in Skogås when they got kids.

“When I got children I became a part of Skogås,” she explained while rocking her daughter back and forth in the swing, at the big new playground in Skogås. “We are all gathered here, and the children are playing with the same equipment, and you feel a sense of community,” Thana explained. Small children are usually left at the day care center during the day, and parents can only briefly get acquainted with one another while dropping them off and picking them up. However, when they run into each other at the playground there is much more time
to talk and get to know one another while the kids play. Especially during the warmer months, the many playgrounds in Västra Skogås are the main meeting places for parents with small children. Although playgrounds that are close by are usually more practical to visit, some also attract people from further away, like the newly renovated large playground in central Skogås. One of the most common ways that parents come into contact with each other is when a child hurts or in some other way transgresses against another child and the parents step in to resolve the situation. Thana explained it like this:

“It is like meeting people in general, it’s not like you talk about all kinds of things at once, but you start talking about the children at first and then other topics can arise.”

According to her however, in large playgrounds such as the new central playground people are more anonymous:

“But I think I talk much more than others, many don’t speak Swedish that well and keep more to their own corner, they answer my questions if I ask them something, but it’s difficult to conversate. Some keep more to their own groups and then it becomes more difficult to approach them and talk. It is like any other gathering, but you always have something to talk about because you have the children in common.”

There is also a meeting place in central Skogås run by the municipality called the ‘open nursery school’ (öppna förskolan) where parents can take their children so that they can play with other children, while they get the opportunity to meet other parents. The open nursery school is especially intended for small children that are not yet enrolled in the day care center and is meant to encourage contact and a sense of community among the parents and caregivers and to act as a platform for contact with the municipality’s social services and the child welfare center (barnavårdscentral). There is also a voluntary association called Swedish with baby (Svenska med baby) that has a weekly activity at the open nursing school led by local volunteers from among the visitors, where parents who do not speak Swedish well can practice their language skills by talking to other parents. Aside from a counselor that parents can talk to, the role of the ordinary staff is to merely surveil and make sure that everything is in order. The open nursery school is visited by parents from various parts of Skogås and serves as a place where people with diverse backgrounds and social classes can meet and interact, although the conversations mostly center around the children.
The church has an activity similar to the open nursery school where parents can come with their children once a week called ‘church-open’ (kyrköppet). At church-open parents and children play, sing and mingle. The songs are often religious but “they are about god in general and not about Jesus”, as Thana who is a Muslim explained. She attended the church-open because of the “warm atmosphere” and because it provided her with an opportunity to meet other moms and “learn a lot about how the society works, talk about the day care center, the rules concerning parental leave and other related topics”. Although the open nursery school was bigger and had more place for the children to play, parents needed to go to the kitchen in order to drink coffee or tea and talk, she explained, while at the church parents could do this in the same facility where the children played. The smaller facility at the church also made it easier to come into contact with and talk to other parents, because everybody was gathered in the same place. Thana added:

“Parents that participate in the church-open often visit the church’s café afterwards and take part in other activities at the church, such as the Easter celebrations and the Christmas tree plundering.”

The local group of the Swedish Tenants Union (Hyresgästföreningen) also organizes neighborhood events in connection with traditional holidays such as Easter and Christmas, where traditional ways of celebrating are reenacted for the children. These events focus more on tradition rather then religion and although they attract very few children and parents, their purpose is similar to that of the church. They are meant to provide a platform for children to be entertained, for grown-ups to get an opportunity to meet and talk and to increase locals’ participation in the organization. The local library also has a section for small children with books, mattresses and stuffed animals where parents can sit and read for their children and this is also a place where parents get the opportunity to meet and talk to each other. As Thana explained, having children brings you into contact with people that you would never otherwise meet and brings you to places that you would never otherwise visit. The children need to be stimulated and meet other children, which brings parents of various backgrounds together.

The conversations between parents usually revolve around their children’s progress and behavior, although occasionally related political topics such as pre-school policy are also discussed. But meeting with people that one would not normally get to know offers an
opportunity to get a better insight into how the people that pass by on the street are, how they live and think. This is especially true for places that are visited by parents with different backgrounds and from different parts of Skogås, such as the open nursery school. While the playgrounds and the meetings organized by the tenants’ union attract only people living in the same area, and some people may avoid visiting the church because of their religious views, places such as the open nursery school allow people with different social classes and identities to encounter one another and engage in conversation. The church is however a place where people of all ages can easily socialize with one another, as Thana described it: “people are totally different in the church, Swedes are known for being cold and distant, but at the church they are very warm and friendly”. The playground on the other hand is a public place that is physically accessible for everybody, but while parents with children have a common topic, adults without children going to the playground would seem suspicious.

**Neighborhood encounters**

The shared places of residence offer many opportunities to come into contact and interact with neighbors, especially in densely populated apartment areas. Such contacts can lead to new friendships and useful acquaintances that can serve as a source of information and support, but they can also be sources of conflict. Many locals spoke about the frustration over neighbors keeping the entrance door to the building from closing, driving in the narrow streets leading up to the apartment entrances and not disposing their trash properly. The trash is a particularly great source of frustration, as one of my neighbors, Katharina, expressed:

> “I want us to work towards the same direction, because we live in the same block. I don’t want you to throw your household trash into the street trash can outside. Then the rats will come, Huge [the municipal landlord] has had problems with that before.”

In every block there is a building for throwing out household trash and for recycling, and there are also smaller street trash cans scattered around the block. These trash cans are not suitable for throwing out a bag of household trash because if tenants throw a bag of household trash there then the can cannot be closed. As a result of this, birds rip open the bag of trash, and scatter everything from used diapers and leftovers around the trash can in search of edibles. Some tenants also throw left over food out on the lawn for the birds to eat, which attracts rats. On the announcement board at the entrance of the apartment buildings there is a
poster saying that tenants should not throw food out on the ground because it attracts rats, and including other instructions about being respectful towards neighbors, but before my fieldwork I had never noticed this announcement. I myself used to throw left over food out on the ground because I thought that it was better to let the birds eat it than to throw it into the trash. It was only after I got a dog who one day sniffed out a rat in the neighborhood, and after I heard the frustration of many dog owners over their off-leash dogs eating the leftovers and getting diarrhea, that I realized that throwing leftovers on the ground is a bad idea. On the other hand, having dogs off leash is not allowed on the streets, and the fact that many people have their dogs off leash anyway is also source of frustration among tenants. As one neighbor expressed it, “you have to put up with a lot of things when you live in an apartment area.”

The tenants union

In areas with rented apartments neighbors can also come together and organize around common issues through a local group of the Swedish Tenants Union (Hyresgästföreningen), a democratically run voluntary association consisting of 528,000 households that protects and promotes the interests of tenants on a local and national level. The local groups of the Swedish Tenants Union are also intended to contribute to a good neighborhood environment, by organizing activities where neighbors can meet and by operating local meeting premises. Although members pay a reduced rental fee, these premises can be rented by both members and non-members in the neighborhood to throw parties and various gatherings. Therefore, in addition to the membership fees, the local group receives 4 kr per month from each household in its operating area, which is collected by the landlord. As I found out, not many tenants were aware of this fee that is simply named ‘leisure time capital’ on the invoice for the rent, or what it is and where it goes. The local group of the tenants union organizes events and gatherings, but since the turnout to these events has been very low, the group has a lot of money that is not being spent. “We organized a grill party where you only had to pay 40 kr per family, and there was both pork and lamb”, Rita, a member of the board explained to me, “but only one person showed up aside from the board members”. There have also been several initiatives to start various activities to get people to meet and reach out to marginalized residents. A leader of a local association suggested that the premises be kept open during the day for free for women that are at home and isolated, but according to Rita there was no one who could be there and take responsibility for the activity. One time they started an activity where women
could make necklaces, but nobody showed up. “One cannot go on hatching ideas, we are not getting anywhere”, Rita explained.

The three reasons that I observed why people come to participate in the activities organized by the tenants union is to complain about the landlord and the neighbors, to provide children with pastime, and to partake in the greatly discounted excursions to recreational attractions across the country. The tenants union regularly organizes activities for children in connection with traditional holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. When I participated in the ‘Christmas tree plundering’ (julgransplundring), a Swedish tradition when children sing songs and grown-ups drink coffee, only two families showed up, plus the board members of the tenants union. The atmosphere was quite stiff and we, the adults danced around a pole with the three children that were present, while the chairman led the singing of songs. Most people left within an hour or two. Many years ago such activities used to give rise to large neighborhood gatherings, according to the board members that I talked to. Before this event I never even heard about this tradition or any of the songs we sang, which I suspect may be one of the reasons why it did not attract the participation of the many immigrant residents in the area that have as little knowledge about Swedish traditions as I do.

Organizing attractive activities is dependent on the local group having board members who know what activities would be popular and are good at getting the word out. At a members’ meeting that I attended, two women showed up who had many complaints about the residential area and the landlord. Worn-out arbors with dangerous loose planks on the courtyard had not been fixed despite formal complaints to the landlord two years ago, no climbing plants had been planted next to the new pergola and the women also complained about the landlord’s plans to demolish a popular grilling house in the courtyard, which they insisted “only needs some renovation”. The also argued that more grilling places and bicycle stands should be put up by the landlord. At the meeting however they learned about how the local tenants union had quite a lot of money to arrange activities for the members but had difficulties organizing successful events and they both immediately started eagerly suggesting new ideas. The suggested activities turned out to be very successful and the two women were later also elected into the board of directors.
There are several democratic functions that public spaces can serve in a local community. By encouraging sociability, they can foster mutual understanding, social harmony and community sentiments. By bringing people into contact with the views and experiences of others, they can promote solidarity and increase political dialogue in a community. By facilitating the spreading of information and know-how, they can provide people with a sense of competence to partake in politics and a moral incentive to do so. However, if by public space we mean a space that is accessible to all inhabitants, we might come to the conclusion that the only true public spaces in Skogås are the mall, the commuter train station, the streets, squares, parks and nature areas. The democratic function that these places arguably have is that they offer inhabitants the opportunity to encounter their local community - at least visually - but they also serve to remind of the social differences in the community as people exit towards Östra or Västra Skogås or got to shop at ICA or Matrix. As opposed to the ancient Greek agora, squares in the Swedish democracy are only used for political purposes during demonstrations and when politicians set up small cabins before the elections every four years.

While the mall and the commuter train station are visited by most locals, they do not provide opportunities for engaging in dialogue and deliberation, other than with people that one is already acquainted with. On the other hand, the spaces that I have described in this chapter I argue can be described as partially public spaces, where locals can meet and get to know one another in separate groups built on shared interests, lifestyles, political ideologies, ethnic and religious identifications and stages of life. Voluntary associations bring people together based on common interests and provide a platform that enables both socialization and cooperation in addressing shared concerns. They serve a purpose similar to that of the ancient Greek agora in the sense that they connect inhabitants and create a common ground where they can discuss issues of common concern. However, they only connect people who share a specific similarity, such as liking art or gardening, or being Muslim, Turkish, a social democrat or a senior citizen and do not serve as a platform where a greater good of the whole community is the primary concern. The municipal meeting places that are available in Skogås are directed at specific social groups, as a form of social care, rather than a platform for political participation. Young people, senior citizens, parents with small babies and persons who have had psychological difficulties are offered a place to meet and socialize with others who find
themselves in the same situation. Nevertheless, these places can also enable political deliberations, especially concerning common issues, such as child-care policy that was discussed at the open nursery school.

Partially public spaces offer a middle ground between the personal relations of the home and the collective, impersonal community of citizenship. Municipal meeting places, voluntary organizations and encounters through dogs and children provide locals with a basis of equality and a significant similarity that is personal and easy to relate to, in contrast to the abstract idea of citizenship. As my neighbor Thana phrased it, “children are something that we have in common and in that way we are equal”. That two people are merely inhabitants of the same political community is not enough as a conversation starter. Dogs and children provide people with a legitimate reason to interact with strangers, which I found out first hand when I got a dog and all of a sudden complete strangers could easily approach me and comment or ask about my dog. Such meetings can easily break the ice between strangers and open up for familiarization and socialization, and while not all such acquaintances lead to deliberations about the public good, they nevertheless open a window into other inhabitants’ world-views and experiences.

Partially public spaces also create overlapping areas of interaction, because people may be both dog-owners and pub-visitors, or interested in both art and growing vegetables. Anthropologists have noted that although a community may be divided according to religious and ethnic identities, these are crosscut by other identifications such as gender, class and political commitment (Werbner 1998:7) that give rise to “transversal alliances” (Yuval-Davis 1997). Partially public spaces similarly crosscut various identifications and allow for greater interaction across social groups. For example the allotment gardens are used by both people from Östra Skogås and Västra Skogås, by both ‘immigrants’ and ‘ethnic Swedes’, while the mosques and the church connect people who belong to different age groups. Dog owners may go for walks together although they live in different parts of Skogås or have very different world-views and opinions, while the tenants union creates a platform where people with different lifestyles are gathered around their common interest in their residential area.
This is not to say that partially public spaces automatically build bridges between people that have negative attitudes towards one another, because as the examples of the youth center and the dog park show, people will avoid the spaces that are occupied by someone who they have a problem with. Although they can be used to build bridges, as in the case of the athletic association where the leaders consciously used the club to promote integration, partially public spaces provide the opportunity for interaction for those inhabitants that want to interact with one another. The fact that partially public spaces are established on a specific similarity, such as owning a dog or having an interest in art however means that those citizens that do not have much in common with others around them will not have many partially public spaces to participate in, and they will not have access to the advantages that partially public spaces provide in terms of citizenship and knowledge about politics and community life.

According to Painter and Philo (1995:115) it is questionable whether citizens that cannot occupy public spaces without feeling uncomfortable and ‘out of place’ can be regarded as citizens at all. While public places managed by the municipality that are open for everybody such as the library, the mall and the outdoors do not offer much opportunity to engage in political deliberation, the partially public spaces that are better suited for interaction and dialogue are only accessible to parts of the population. They are also more easily ‘privatized’ by some individuals that dominate the atmosphere, making these places less welcoming for others, as in the case of the dog park or the youth center. Many associations create an environment that builds bridges between people, like the Swedish Church that avoids songs about the divinity of Jesus during church-open, offering an atmosphere more accommodating to Muslim visitors, or the football association that insists on having a mixed team with players from both sides of Skogås. Still, they will only attract participants who sympathize with their fundamental purpose such as religion, football or knitting. Being excluded from formally recognized public life does not prevent people from engaging in political activism (Genberg 2002:241), and people who do not participate in partially public spaces can still engage in political dialogue with friends and family or through the social media. The fact that a lot of community contacts and exchange of thoughts and experiences take place within partially public spaces however means that communal political deliberation is fragmented and scattered, as well as unequally accessible for different inhabitants.
Common ground

Political communities are mainly administrative units and living in a big municipality such as Huddinge does not mean that people actually live and move about in the same space or that they ever come into contact with one another. It is not surprising then that during a local dialogue with politicians that I attended, when people were asked to come with ideas for things that would make the municipality a better place, they put a lot of emphasis on physical meetings between distant parts of the political community. “There should be football matches arranged with other youth centers in other parts of Stockholm or Huddinge, for example I don’t know anybody in Flemingsberg [another part of Huddinge],” said an enthusiastic teen. Another person suggested a marathon around Huddinge, “which would tie us together”, so that people would get to know both each other and the physical places, which in turn would contribute to a stronger community. These ideas show that despite the advances in media technology, physical space is still fundamental to the question of membership in a society (Holston & Appadurai 1998), especially in political communities that are defined primarily with reference to physical space. To feel as part of one physical community, it does not suffice that people have the same postal code, they need to encounter one another in space, in a shared activity. Being present in the same physical space, for example by passing by each other in the mall, is one step in this direction, however it is interaction - or at least participation in a common activity - that transforms people from strangers to acquaintances. Although the liberal democratic model is established on a direct relationship between the individual and the political administration, individuals cannot in isolation arrive at what kind of community they want to live in and how this community can be accomplished (ibid:7). Moreover, the more they come into contact with the needs and perspectives of others, the better equipped they are to make decisions for a greater good.

While many come into contact with various people through their job or family, for others partially public spaces can be the only link into the highly individualistic community. Partially public spaces provide a common ground where members of a political community can engage with and get a real-life experience of each other and the shared space. Instead of one main common ground such as the ancient Greek agora, the local community of Skogås has various spaces that serve as crossroads for the intersection of different identities in the community. Many of them enable political deliberation on shared topics of interest. A prime example of
this is the dialogue that the ‘Turkish mosque’ hosted at the rented lecture hall of a local school, inviting the chairman of the municipal directive board, who is also the group leader for the local branch of the Moderate Party. Most of the time however the political dimensions of such places are subtle. For the most part, party politics is only discussed in more private settings and smaller groups of people who are comfortable with one another. Perhaps because party politics is seen as divisive - a view that I encountered often in my research -, discussions about it are reserved for social contexts where there is no perceived risk of conflict, except at the approach of the elections when such discussions are more justifiable.

In this chapter I have identified various places in Skogås where locals encounter one another and interact and discussed the ways in which they function as platforms of the local political community. Although they are either only intended for specific groups - such as young people, tenants of rented apartments or people with a Turkish background - or ‘privatized’ by certain groups who make others feel unwelcome, partially public spaces are ‘as good as it gets’ for locals in Skogås when it comes to face-to-face common deliberation with the local community. These seemingly unpolitical, mundane, everyday platforms of interaction offer a middle ground between the personal relations of the home and the collective, impersonal community of citizenship and by gathering people around a common purpose and serving as crossroads for the intersection of various identities partially they hold a potential for enabling and facilitating democratic participation and promoting pluralism and solidarity. In the following chapter I turn to the ways inhabitants in Skogås engage in politics and the obstacles that keep them from exercising their political power.
4. Political practice

“I don’t know anything about that, I am just a taxi driver”

Mahmud, inhabitant of Västra Skogås

In the previous chapter I presented several places where local inhabitants encounter members of their community and concluded that none of these places allow for a democratic encounter comparable to the Greek agora, where citizens who are entitled to vote could all gather to engage in the political development of their society. In this chapter I begin with an account of a local event which was an attempt by the municipality to create an agora-like meeting place. I then discuss obstacles that keep certain people from active participation in deliberating on or influencing policy, and analyze various ways that people in Skogås exercise political power, such as developing voting strategies, staying informed, influencing policy outside of the electoral system and influencing society outside of the political system.

The very first activity that I participated in as part of my fieldwork was an event that the municipality organized in Skogås as part of the European Council’s Local Democracy Week. This, I presumed, would be the kind of event that much like the agora of ancient Athens gathered local citizens in a dialogue and joint deliberation. The purpose of the event was to organize a “co-creating dialogue” about the municipality through the World Café method, which is basically a setting where groups of 4-5 persons discuss by a table and then share their conclusions with the other groups. The event had been announced through a newsletter that all inhabitants received by mail and described as an occasion to meet the local elected representatives and discuss the development of the municipality. This event, I anticipated, would bring me into contact with the active citizens of Skogås. The meeting was hosted at the local youth center in order to attract more young people. In addition to the four teenagers - who I later found out were among the most frequent visitors of the youth center - to my great surprise the only people present were politicians, public servants and youth leaders that work in the youth center. I was astounded: how come not a single adult that was not directly involved with the organization of the event showed up? But then I thought about it: had it not been for my study, would I have attended this meeting? Although I am very interested in politics and democracy, the reality is that I probably would not. But why? Because of lack of time? Or because attitude towards municipal politics? As I found out through the many
conversations during my fieldwork, there are a whole lot of people living in Skogås that are interested in politics. So how come none of them showed up to the dialogue?

When I asked locals about why they didn’t attend and what they thought was the reason behind such low turnout I got different answers. Some people said that people probably did not see the information or did not understand what it was about. A member of the board of the tenants union suggested:

“The information has to be sent in an enveloped letter, because if it is a flyer people will think that it is commercial and it will be thrown out in the trash. I would have absolutely attended had I known about it, I would want to talk to them [the politicians] all.”

The fact that the dialogue was named the ‘World Café’ could also have contributed to people not understanding that the event was a dialogue with municipal politicians public servants. For people who often participate in conferences the ‘World Café’ method might be very familiar, but it is not an expression that is common place among locals in Skogås. In his analysis of political language, Bourdieu (1979:479) applies the concept of allodoxia, a cultural misinterpretation or misapprehension that is related to the expression of social class, to the way the experts or the dominant class - in this case the politicians and public servants - produce discourse that the laymen or dominated class have no relation to and are bound to misunderstand. Instead the ‘fine words’ of those in power discredit and destroy the spontaneous political discourse of the dominated, and this dominant language “unable to express anything true, real or “felt”, disposessses the speaker of the very experience it is supposed to express” (ibid:480). The choice of ‘World Café’ as the name for the political dialogue could thus be an example of the cultural differences between the politicians or public servants who came up with the name on the one hand and the local people that they represent on the other. In their invitation, instead of using a description that locals will readily recognize as a political dialogue, the organizers chose a name that was descriptive for them.

In contrast, many local associations use a language that is rooted in the everyday discourse of their members, which is not so surprising given that the leaders of local associations have a much closer contact with their members than local politicians have with the local population. “We do not say ‘civil society’ (civilt samhälle), we say ‘leisure time’ (fritid) or ‘club
activities’ (*föreningslivet*), we have to speak a language that our members understand,” explained Okan, the leading figure of the local football association when I asked him a question about the civil society during an interview.

“*Politics is not for me*”

A consequence of the differences between the discourses of the public officials and the local population is also that it creates a feeling of incompetence among the latter. As Monica, a fellow dog owner explained what she thought was the reason behind the low turnout at the political dialogue: “people think: ‘this is not for me, I don’t understand what they are talking about anyway’ but the thing is you can always ask”. Monica here is referring to people’s dispositions towards dialogue with municipal politicians. Although political decision-making directly impacts their lives, many people do not participate because they see it as something that requires a certain competence that they do not possess. Indeed, many people that I met claimed that they are ignorant when it comes to politics. Barbro, that I got to know because our dogs liked to play with each other told me with enthusiasm about how the municipality is going to pay to fix her teeth that she explained had become destroyed after a lifetime of neglect because of substance abuse. Although this benefit that means a lot to her is based on a municipal policy, when asking her about politics, Barbro insisted that she does not know anything about that, and that I should instead talk to one of her family members who knows more about “those things”. Mahmud, who I also got to know through our dogs, similarly said “I don’t know anything about that, I am just a taxi driver” and explained that he has never participated in the elections because politics has no impact on his life. After a moment of reflection however he said:

“They actually since I live on taxes entirely because I work exclusively for the public sector, politics does influence my life. The big question is taxes, and how much one should pay, but it’s important because it’s from taxes that schools and healthcare is paid from.”

The links between social class and lack of engagement in political questions can also be seen in the voting statistics. The voter turnout among the largely high- and middle class inhabitants of Östra Skogås are roughly 10% higher compared to the less economically privileged inhabitants of Västra Skogås. Similarly, most of the people who do not have citizenship in Sweden seem to abstain from voting, even though many (those who have lived in Sweden for
at least three years or are citizens in another EU country) have the right to vote in the municipal and county political elections. I first suspected that this may be the case when I saw the big differences between voter turnout in the national elections compared to the municipal and county elections. These elections take place during the same day, but in 2010 during the last elections preceding my fieldwork voter turnout in Västra Skogås for the municipal elections was 7% lower compared to the voter turnout for the national elections. Although the number of people who are eligible to vote in the latter elections was a couple of hundred more, the number of people who voted was almost exactly the same as for the national elections, which indicates that most of the people who were only eligible to vote for the municipal and county representatives (i.e. people without citizenship) did not vote at all. A local woman that worked as a receiver of votes at the elections confirmed this conclusion, saying that in her experience the people who participate in the elections always vote for all the levels that they are eligible for (national, county, municipal), and that therefore the “extra” percentage of people who abstained from participating in the county and municipal elections were most likely the inhabitants without citizenship.

According to a report published by the Swedish Election Authority (Statistics Sweden 2014:22) the differences in voter turnout between municipal/county versus national elections were negligible before 1976 when foreign nationals resident in Sweden got a right to vote in the municipal and county elections. Foreign nationals participate in elections significantly less than Swedish nationals. One popular explanation for this is that many foreign nationals have been brought up in countries where democracy is not well developed and where it is not common for people to vote. However, the lowest voter turnout for municipal and county elections in Sweden is in Haparanda, which happens to be also the municipality with the highest percentage of residents that are foreign nationals (Migrationsinfo.se 2016), but most of these are Finnish nationals and Finland has a relatively high voter turnout (Statistics Finland 2015) so the lack of participation cannot be explained by the inhabitants. Another possible explanation could be that foreign nationals choose to participate in the politics of their home countries instead. However since only 10 percent of the Finnish nationals living abroad participate in the Finnish elections (ibid.), this also does not seem to be an accurate explanation.
Instead, I argue that the disposition to participate in elections largely depends on individuals’ perception of their own competence to participate meaningfully, which in turn is influenced by factors such as language skills, access to information, and a feeling that one’s participation can bring about positive results. In his analysis of why people abstained from answering questions about politics in a survey, Bourdieu (1979:417) concluded that the capacity to engage in political discourse is dependent on a more or less strong feeling of being competent, and being “socially recognized and entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them, or even modify their course”. Because the majority of the people whose disposition towards political questions are “that is none of my business” and “that doesn’t interest me” is made up of the less powerful citizens of the society, Bourdieu (1979:416) argues that this phenomenon is no mere coincidence, but a condition of the functioning of the liberal democratic system, that serves to maintain the established social hierarchy.

In the 2010 national elections, the most popular party among the voters of Östra Skogås was the right-wing Moderate Party, while the most popular party among the voters in Västra Skogås was the left-wing Swedish Social Democratic Party. Since voter turnout was much lower in Västra Skogås - and given that voting patterns are similar in other areas of Huddinge - it is not so surprising that the municipal council has for many years been right-wing, elected by the high- and middle class inhabitants of Östra Skogås and other similar areas of the municipality. The low political participation among the less economically and socially powerful in Huddinge thereby directly contributes to the greater influence of the more economically powerful.

Formal education is often though to be necessary for the ability to engage in political discourse (Bourdieu 1979:407). The family member that Barbro referred me to which she claimed “knows much more about politics then her” is the only one in the family with a university degree. According to Statistics Sweden, people with tertiary education participate in political discussions and vote much more than people with only primary school education (Statistics Sweden 2016). The link between political competence and education can also be seen in the way members of the Sweden Democrats party are represented in popular discourse. Although the Sweden Democrats get a lot of votes, they have a hard time recruiting active party members and that is perhaps one reason why they offer a lot of people without
political experience important roles in the party. Although they can thus be seen as offering empowerment to working class individuals who otherwise would not be seen as competent to participate in politics, those who join the party are ridiculed - especially by middle-class journalists and activists - as being uneducated and are called “peasants” (bönder).

However Bourdieu (1979:427) suggests that the “technical” competence that is cultivated through education - such as the ability to understand, reproduce and produce political discourse -, is dependent on the social competence of being able to apply a specific political culture that is required by the liberal democratic model, and the corresponding sense of being entitled to participate in politics. The requirement of a specific political competence is thus not as much a technical necessity as it is a social necessity, requiring people to exhibit the appropriate cultural traits of the ruling class in order to be entitled to political participation. Therefore the apparent indifference that is much more prevalent among the working class is in fact a manifestation of impotence on the part of people that are objectively and subjectively excluded from politics on the basis of lacking political competence (ibid:423). Although the right to participate in the liberal democracy is by definition intended for all citizens, to engage in politics beyond merely voting is perceived as requiring a specific political competence, which is actually a social rather than a technical requirement.

The Sweden Democrats

According to Bourdieu (1979:427), political competence in a liberal democratic system has to do with being able to apply explicitly political principles of classification and analysis, instead of ethical principles, and this is a mechanism whereby working classes are dominated. However, the Sweden Democrats, which is generally considered to be a populist, nationalist party, deliberately position themselves as speaking the language of the ‘people’. During the later part of my fieldwork, when the elections for the European Parliament were approaching, inhabitants in Skogås received a flyer by mail from the Sweden Democrats that my neighbor Thana, who dislikes the Sweden Democrats party, reflected upon with great surprise:

“They really know how to communicate with the ‘people’, the language is clear, the message is clear, you can really relate to it. They keep it simple. I think they are going to get a lot of votes.”
By using a discourse based on layman rather than political language, the Sweden Democrats succeed in communicating their message better than the other parties. Even though Thana is an academic, she too found the more ‘simple’ discourse of the Sweden Democrats more appealing - although she “would never vote for them” for ideological reasons. In fact, the same failure to comply with ‘political correctness’ that results in the Sweden Democrats being shunned by other political parties and the mainstream media in Sweden is what brings them closer to the local everyday discourse of ‘everyday people’. Many of my informants for example - both ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’ - have freely expressed things that one would never hear in the mainstream media or from parties other than the Sweden Democrats, such as:

“The government should not allow so much immigration based on family re-unification. Many women suffer from that, they are pressured into marrying a relative from their home country and when the husband comes they don’t have money to support themselves, which leads to conflict and then divorce. Many women suffer from this.”

“Swedish men bring women from Thailand here and then the women are in hell until they get their permanent residence permit.”

“I feel sorry for people that come from war and are sent back, while those who do crime can stay.”

“We need to stop the immigration for a while so that we can take care of those that are already here.”

“I heard in the news that 7 out of 10 immigrants have a job, how do you think that feels for a Swede that is sitting at home unemployed?

“Somalis have 14 kids, but there is no room, I can’t work for their sake.”

“When I told my friends that I was going to move to Skogås they said that it is the worst, most criminal place, and that there are a lot of blacks here, but it isn’t like that.”

Among its adversaries, the supporters of the Sweden Democrats are usually depicted as ignorant and uneducated. According to Anders Sannerstedt (2013) the party is indeed most popular among working class citizens with lower levels of education. Many adversaries readily draw a conclusion that people vote for the Sweden Democrats because they are not educated enough to form a more correct political disposition. However, according to Bourdieu (1979), there is a more complex mechanism behind the forming of opinions and political
attitudes. According to Bourdieu, people form their opinions in accordance with the contexts they find themselves in, so that people that are active in circles where politics is discussed theoretically and in relation to explicit political ideologies will have different political opinions than people who are in milieus where politics is discussed in relation to morality and without reference to political theories (ibid:423). It is therefore not surprising that academics will often distance themselves from the discourse of the Sweden Democrats, while people with little theoretical education will feel more in tune with the way the Sweden Democrats describe the challanges in the society and feel more alienated by the discourses of the other political leaders. Having been less habituated to the norms of what is considered to be acceptable vs. inacceptable discourse in official public dialogue, some people find the language of the Sweden Democrats to be more ‘sincere’, and also because as one of my informants phrased it, “they are the only ones that dare to talk about immigration”.

By studying ethnonationalism and collective violence in South Asia, Stanley Tambiah (1996) demonstrates how the reliance on crowds and mass mobilization within the democratic electoral process opens the door to the propagation of collective slogans and ideologies in terms of divisive codes organized around ethnicity. The connection between popular elections and ethnic violence can be traced to the election of Hitler, Milosevic and many others and democratic political elections can become “a major contributor to collective violence” (ibid: 262). Although the Sweden Democrats can be perceived as more genuine because they describe society in a way that many people talk in their everyday lives and not according to the ‘political correctness’ that the other major parties generally adhere to, they affirm and amplify social divisions within the society and antagonism between different groups.

Although the Sweden Democrats get a lot of votes, they have a hard time recruiting active party members. One reason behind people’s reluctance to be active within the party is that people who are open about being “Sweden Democrats” or even sympathizing with the party are often stigmatized in public contexts and risk verbal and even physical abuse. As 14-year old Mona whose Finnish mother was offered a key position in the party told me “I would never let my mom openly associate with the Sweden Democrats, and absolutely not the Party of Swedes [Svenskarnas Parti, a neo-Nazi political party that has since been dissolved]. I know of a girl who was kidnapped and beaten only because she was a member of the Sweden
Democrats”. Although people can speak openly about their sympathies with the politics of the Sweden Democrats in private settings, they feel restricted to speak openly about their views in public and this fear and the actual risk that such individuals face hinder their ability to participate in public dialogue.

**Voting strategies**

While many people that I talked to expressed that they could never vote for the Sweden Democrats (or one of the other established parties), most people exhibited a quite fluid and strategic attitude towards voting. Although some people that I talked to - mostly from the older generation - said that they are “social democrats” or “left-wing”, many of them also expressed that they are nevertheless open to voting for another party. “Even if I am a social democrat I want to hear what the others stand for, and maybe in the future I will be a green-party-sympathizer”, said the leader of a local association during an interview. Lasse, a neighbor that I interviewed explained to me in great lengths his views on the various political parties, the current political issues and how he thinks when he votes. “Sometimes you vote against certain parties by voting for their opponent”, he said and asserted that he is very sceptical to all parties. “I hold my nose and vote for the Swedish Green Party”, he then concluded. Lasse also had a lot of knowledge about democracy and when I asked him about what he thought about voting for a small party or even starting a new party he explained that in the Swedish national elections, the system is disadvantageous to small parties because if the party does not get 4% of the votes then it does not get any seats in the Riksdag (the Swedish national legislature) and one’s vote has been waisted. He explained that the rank voting system in Australia creates much better opportunities for small parties, because people can vote for several parties in a ranked order and if their first choice does not get enough votes to make it to the parliament then their second or third choice is counted instead.

Many people use their right to vote to protect or promote their private interests. Monica, a fellow dog owner explained it this way:

“The party I voted for instituted a right for single parents to have a nanny without charge at the evenings and night if they work night shift. That benefits single parents like me. You have to think a little egoistically. If the municipality would not provide that assistance, I would not be able to work night shift as I do now.”
Monica had been having difficulties finding a job and this particular policy increased her opportunities which in turn greatly effected her ability to provide for her family. The fact that she in the previous elections voted for the Sweden Democrats did not stop her from voting for the socialist Left Party when they understood her needs and offered a solution. This relationship between the politician and the voter is nevertheless a momentary transaction based on the protection or promotion of self-interest rather than trust, where voters “purchase” a particular policy that can personally benefit them by giving a vote to the politician who is promoting it. In her analysis of the high electoral turnout in West Bengal, Banerjee (2008:92) found that perceiving politicians as providors of benefits can have a positive impact for political participation and even stimulate responsiveness for their electorate among political parties. While many people undoubtedly vote based on ideological reasons, several people that I talked to said that they vote based on a specific interest that impacts their life or the life of a person close to them. In the myriad of political messages, ideologies, and the powerful rhetorics of the politicians, it is not uncommon for people to cast their vote according to one question which they find is most relevant and important for them. Many people described that they cast votes for particular policy proposals or particular interests that the party is seen to represent, such as “the protection of the family” or “workers rights”. Some people explained the absence of an ideological loyalty to a certain party or party-block by saying that “all parties are the same” and that they cannot identify with any party in particular because they all have certain ideas that are totally against their own. Although for most people there is usually some party that is out of question, because it is “racist” or because “the party leader is so incompetent”, many people are generally ready to cast their vote on any political party that seems to be most beneficial to them, especially when they offer solutions that have a very positive impact on their lives or the lives of someone very close to them.

During a short interview in the park, Ragnar, a fellow dog owner told me that he has been voting for left-wing parties for all his life, because he had been a “working class man”, but now that he is retired however, he chooses to vote for the Moderate Party. The reason for this, as he explained, is that his daughter and son-in-law own a business and “although they work very hard, a very large amount of their profit goes to taxes”. “I am old now”, he said, “but at
least I can do something for my daugther”. The reflections of my informer show that the protection of personal interests also encompasses close family members.

However, if people primarily vote based on self-interest - people who are richer vote for right-wing parties, while people who are poorer vote for left-wing parties (Bourdieu 1979:456) - and if many of those with the least power in society abstain from voting, then this will have great consequences for the political system. Self-interest in voting strategies in combination with lack of participation among the working class contributes to the recreation of social hierarchies and brings to doubt the legitimacy of the liberal democratic model which is supposed to be based on the ideals of commonwealth, participation and equality.

_Solidarity through encounters_

The interests that people promote through politics are not always related to themselves or their family, but they can also be based on something that a person has experienced in their life that has made a big impact on them. Monica, a single mother, told me about how she had never been interested in politics before, but that at the latest elections she voted for the Sweden Democrats after she had been living in a women’s shelter and got first hand experience of what she perceived as Sweden’s dysfuntional immigration policy that does not provide adequate support to immigrant women. She described how a woman at the shelter who had recently immigrated to Sweden after getting married to a man that has lived in Sweden for many years had been physically abused by her husband, and he would not let her see her children until she withdrew the charges she pressed against him. She had contacted the social services but they did not help her and finally Monica went with her to the police because she “knew that it was ‘obstruction of the course of justice’ [övergrepp i rättssak]”.

Contact with people and immersed interaction foster the solidarity that makes a person take into consideration the implications for others in their choice of political representatives. For example, Monica told me that she would not vote the Sweden Democrats again, because after she worked together with a group of men with Turkish background, she got a different perspective of “immigrants”. She told me many stories about how well she got along with her colleagues and how they had a very similar humor and way of behaving. Speaking about one of her Turkish colleagues, she told me of a time when he slapped her on the butt and a female
elderly Swedish colleague got really outraged and said that it was sexist behavior. My informant however explained with a smile “I didn’t mind, I know that it’s just a joke”. “I cannot vote for the Sweden Democrats again, because I have my Turks,” Monica explained. This shows that personal relationships have an important role in the fostering of political solidarity and that partially public spaces such as a woman’s shelter or the working place can be effective platforms for the creation of such relationships. On the other hand, people that are unemployed or do not frequent partially public spaces have less opportunities for making such acquaintances.

**Political communication**

Aside from real-life knowledge about other members of the community, effective decision-making in the democratic system also requires that citizens have a certain amount of knowledge and understanding of the decisions to be taken and what the various political candidates stand for. There are various ways that people in Skogås get knowledge about politics, and various degrees as to how much they try to “stay informed”. Only a few of the people that I talked to said that they get information about local politics directly from the municipality’s governing committees or boards. One person said that he gets such information through his job, while another person kept informed in order to know about opportunities of getting financial support for local cultural initiatives. However most people said that their main source of political information is the media, such as the two largest daily newspapers in Sweden, *Dagens nyheter* and *Svenska dagbladet*, the teletext because it is “brief and good”, and news sites on the internet because they can be accessed “whenever you want”. Two popular online news sites that were mentioned are aftenbladet.se, the online version of an established newspaper, and blocket.se which is an online marketplace that has a news section.

When it comes to knowledge about local current events and politics, the main source of information is *Mitt i Skogås* (In the Middle of Skogås), a weekly newspaper that is distributed for free directly into people’s mailbox in local versions in 31 parts of Stockholm. The newspaper is owned by a private equity investor, financed by commercials and provides news about crime, traffic, residence, health care and schools. Both young and old read *Mitt i Skogås*, especially the front page articles. This paper provides information about municipality politics, although it is mostly the scandals that are read and not the short articles about various
mundane municipality decisions. However, *Mitt i Skogås* also publishes debate contributions as well as short texts with positive and negative reflections and comments about the local community life and politics, sent in by local inhabitants. Because they are published on the second page of the newspaper they are given good exposure, and in this way, *Mitt i Skogås* functions as a platform whereby inhabitants can make their voice heard in their local community. In the last couple of years, the new local newspaper *Södra Sidan Huddinge* (South Side Huddinge) has emerged that is very similar to *Mitt i Skogås* but is more explicitly presented as a platform for discussion and deliberation among local inhabitants about topics related to the political community. I have found it quite interesting that this new local newspaper writes regularly about the local associations and meeting places which I have studied during my study, publishes quite a lot of articles written by ‘regular locals’ - teachers, children, senior citizens and others - and encourages its readers to discuss on its Facebook group. Various platforms in the social media have also become important places for reflection and reaction, especially Facebook groups, ranging from groups for local dogowners to the groups of political parties and the municipality’s official Facebook group. Social media such as Facebook also play a big role in the spread of news material, as a lot of traffic to Swedish media sites comes via Facebook (Bäck, Bäck & Gustafsson 2015:662).

![Facebook ad](image)

> 2. Readers are encouraged to discuss about the future of the municipality on the Facebook group of the newspaper Södra Sidan Huddinge

Because people have unique knowledge about the functioning of the political system based on their various positions in it, dialogue among citizens is important. My neighbor Ratko who has lived in Sweden for a few years and works as a carpenter renovating houses told me about the difficulties he encountered with the government’s ROT program, which is a tax reduction...
that people can get when they hire someone for a job that involves repairs, conversion or extension of their residence. He told me in detail about how difficult it is to work with ROT-services, especially because it takes more time and effort for him to get paid, since he has to apply for a part of the sum from the Swedish Tax Agency after receiving payment from his client. Many people who claim that they are not interested in politics actually like talking about those political issues that have a direct impact on their life, although they may not be interested in discussing these questions when they are formulated in political language (Bourdieu 1979:402). These people can have important insights that have the potential to solve key problems and challenges in the society, and problems that create difficulties in their own lives. If their perspectives are not brought to the deliberations of the decision-makers, their needs will not be taken into consideration in the development of the society.

There are many places where an exchange of political opinions and perspectives can take place. Aside from work and in conversations with friends and family, political topics can be discussed at voluntary associations, religious organizations and even with local entrepreneurs. “My clients often talk about politics and are in favour of different political parties and when I listen to them I think that they all have valid arguments”, said a woman whose service-providing business in Skogås I visited. To discuss with supporters of the Sweden Democrats however is where many people draw the line, because they see them as representing a far-right nationalistic agenda, so detestable that they do not want to discuss it. My neighbor Lasse, a Muslim ‘ethnic Swede’ who is married to a woman from the Middle East and studying in a professional training program declared during an interview at his home: “I talk to my classmates about politics, but only up to the point where they turn out to be supporters of the Sweden Democrats”.

When it comes to young people especially, one of my informants explained that many of them get a lot of political information and perspectives through music, for example hip hop groups such as Kartellen and Labyrint. These groups rap about segregation, racism and the difficulties of the working class in Sweden, and also directly criticise politicians, although 14 year old Mona that I interviewed said that Kartellen only “dwells in the problems and doesn’t come with any solutions”. Speaking about a member of the group called Sebbe Staxx she continued, “I know people that know him and he is very intelligent, but if he started talking
about voting strategies and starting your own political party he is holding young people by would break”. Sebbe Staxx has made a song where he makes a death threat against Jimmy Åkesson, the party leader for the Sweden Democrats. She also added, “I hope that he will come up with a way to teach young people about politics”. Although music artists can successfully formulate criticism towards the existing system most such critical songs discourage people from participating in the system which they depict as fundamentally corrupt, and they thus reinforce the isolation of the marginalized groups.

**Community involvement outside of party politics**

Alex, an active local inhabitant who has lived in Skogås all his life, works in the area and knows a lot of people was telling me about the various ways in which he is engaged in the development of the local community. When I brought up the topic of politics however, he said that he does not know anything about that. He told me however that people have urged him that he should get involved in politics, because since he knows so many people, he could easily get a lot of people to vote for him. However, he said that he feels that it is not appropriate for him because he works in the school system:

> “Maybe if I worked with something else. I feel that people like me, and that it would not be worth it that people should think differently about me because of my political views, for example if they sympathized with an opposing political party.”

Alex described involvement in a political party as an obstacle, which would deprive him of the good relationships that he enjoys within the local community. It is not only affiliation with the Sweden Democrats party that can effect the way people are perceived, but people that are outspoken members of any party will be associated with the negative image that many people have of that party in particular or party politics in general. My informant nevertheless has a lot of influence in the local social life, and when there were youth riots in Stockholm and cars were set on fire in the center of Skogås, he used his network to do something about it:

> “We wanted a change and because we as an association have a lot of members and parents involved we could use that to mobilize people and organize night walking (nattvandring). I have lived here very long so I have a big network of contacts. We felt that this is our duty, we want good things for Skogås”.
In contrast to the ideological divides between political parties, activism through the civic community emphasizes togetherness and the wholeness of the community, therefore to act outside of the political system can be a more effective way to influence the society. Another example of such community action is when many years ago a young man of Turkish origin was murdered in Skogås with racist motives, and the local civil society started the Network for Dialogue and Tolerance to promote harmony in the community and neutralize any antagonism that may have been triggered by the murder. A man that was one of the organizers explained:

“We organized a celebration for the national day and people could paint their flags. We wanted to show the diversity of the local community, that ‘this is Sweden’. Our logo was two hands holding each other - one white and one black.”

Party politics on the other hand signals division and competition for dominance within the community, and party representatives’ claims of acting out of solidarity and community concern is often perceived as inauthentic. Because of such negative connotations, party politics also fails to enroll many key local figures and loses out on their drive and energy.

Another non-partisan way to exercise political power is to use the available channels in the public administration. One day when I was looking around for traces of political participation on a billboard at the entrance of the mall I ran into a neighbor who is also a dog-owner. Upon hearing that I could not find any signs of local political initiatives, she said “the dog park is a good example of political participation”. Until recently the only fenced-in area for dogs had been a park belonging to a kennel, and they were not happy about all the dogs in Skogås using their park. Since the ground became very muddy and many people did not pick up their dogs’ feces, the kennel took down the gate so that the area was no longer fully enclosed. Recently however a large neglected football field that had many holes in its fence, and that previously only dog-owners with obedient dogs had used, had been turned into a dog park. I did not think much of it when I first saw that the fences had been fixed and that a note was posted saying that the field was designated as an exercise yard for dogs. But as my neighbor explained to me, this was the result of the efforts of Sussi, a dog owner that had been politically active earlier in her life and knew how to get things done. When I later interviewed Sussi, she told me how she made a petition to a public official who denied her request, but that she knew that
she could then go directly to the municipal assembly - which she did. The assembly approved the proposal to turn to the old football field into a dog park, at least until the area is allocated for another purpose, although the dog owners would have to fix the fence and maintain the park themselves.

**Influence over one’s residence**

In apartment areas, the building where people live is shared with strangers, as well as the front and back yard, the trash house and the laundry room. These places can be either owned by the residents, as in a housing cooperative (*bostadsrätt*), or by a private or municipal landlord if one is living in a rented apartment (*hyresrätt*). The common premises in a housing cooperative are governed by the board of directors, which is elected and made up of the residents. Governance here is very tangible, since the governing board is made up of the neighbors who one can run into on a daily basis and the decisions that are taken concern one’s immediate living-space. The situation is similar for people living in houses, even though they share their living space with their neighbors to a lesser degree. In Sweden, house owners typically have responsibility for the roads leading up to their houses, the so called private roads (*enskilda vägar*). Owners living on the same street therefore form community associations, where the board of directors is also elected and comprised of residents. Among the residents that own their common premises the level of commitment varies a lot. Some are very active and even members of boards, others only participate in the yearly election of the board of directors, while some keep participation to a minimum, that is merely paying the costs for the common premises.

For tenants living in rented apartments the common premises are governed by the landlord. Whether the landlord is a private company or a company owned by the municipality, it is not governed democratically by the tenants. If the landlord is a company owned by the municipality, tenants can indirectly exert influence through the municipal politicians, although this is a long and complicated channel of exerting influence. Instead, many tenants living in rented apartments organize themselves in the Swedish Union of Tenants. The reasons why people become members in this association are various. Some are members because the tenants union negotiates the periodic increase of rent with landlords, some are members because “it’s like the trade union, it’s good to be a member just in case” and they give legal
aid to its members if they have problems with their landlords and some people are members because the association lobbys for the construction of more rental apartments and for the renovation of existing ones. Although the tenants union has a lot of members, the local groups in Skogås have a hard time finding people that want to be members of the board of directors. A few years ago, one local group was merged into another local group because it did not have enough people in its board of directors.

Shared places of residence can be sources of conflict, which in a housing cooperative can be dealt with by the board of directors. However in a rental apartment area complaints are submitted to the landlord, either individually or through the tenants union. The latter can also try to influence residents directly, as when an event was organized in order to do something about people throwing their trash into wrong bins at the recycling cabin. The local group of the tenants union invited the tenants in the neighborhood for coffee and cakes and to receive information from the recycling company that takes care of the recycling cabin. Children were also invited to paint on the walls of the recycling cabin. However, as a board member of the local tenants union explained, very few people turned up.

Other people joined the board of the local group because they had certain private interests that they wanted to promote. One board member told me that he only joined because he wanted the local group to renovate a sauna which had been available for tenants before, and since nothing happened after three years, he chose to leave the board. The sauna had been in a facility that was flooded and the local group of the tenants union had been trying to get the landlord to sanitize and renovate the facility but without success. This facility had belonged to the local group that eventually merged into another group because there were not enough people who could form a board of directors. Because the facility belongs to the landlord, the local group could not renovate it themselves, but neither could it get the landlord to fix it, so the board decided to release the facility. The local group of the tenants union has periodic meetings with the landlord where they put forward complaints and requests but this process is quite slow and unsatisfactory according to several board members that I talked to. In Stockholm getting a first-hand contract to a rental flat can take over a decade of standing in line and therefore tenants do not have much leverage over their landlords. Although there are laws regulating the obligations of the landlords and many tenants are members in the tenants
union, since only very few members are active, the union’s pressure on the landlord is not particularly powerful.

*The practice of influence*

The dynamics of tenants exerting influence over their residential area is a lobbyism, where willing locals endeavor to influence and put pressure on the landlord with the support of the Swedish Tenants Union. The way residents that own their own apartment or house exert influence over their residential area on the other hand is a democratic participation. The connection between attitudes towards political participation and the form of residence was first brought to my attention by Annika, a woman who does not live in a apartment building but a house, while we were talking at the dog park. When I brought up the differences in voter turnout between areas consisting of largely rented apartments and areas with owned apartments and houses, Annika did not find it surprising and said:

“Maybe when you live in an area with houses where everything is neat and pretty - and it is not like somebody else does it for you, we all have to do it ourselves - but when it is neat and pretty then you tend to engage more, while if you live in a high building and it is ugly and not well taken care of then you maybe feel that you do not want to engage.”

The differences in voter turnout may depend on many different factors, however the experiences of the ways in which people can or - cannot - influence their residential area are very likely to influence the way they see politics and their own political agency. Owners of houses are more used to being able to directly influence decisions through a right to vote, while tenants are more distant from the decision-making process and are used to being excluded from decisions that greatly impact their everyday lives. When the municipality is planning to build something in the area, tenants are not informed in advance, while owners of houses and flats are informed by direct mail. Landlords can also decide to renovate apartments and raise the rent drastically, which is something that many tenants fear. Thus the experience of impotence among tenants with regard to their residence is also an element that can contribute to a “class habitus” of exclusion from decision-making and political life (Bourdieu 1979:423), and result in the lower voter turnout at elections among people in Västra Skogås that is largely made up of rental apartments.
Carrying the load

While the experience of being a tenant can influence people’s political agency, it by no means determines it. During my fieldwork I came into contact with many very active local personalities - from both Östra Skogås and Västra Skogås. Some influence local life through party politics, while others are active through nonpartisan voluntary associations. One prominent example of a local leader is Agneta, who is a key figure in several associations: a political party, a cultural association, the association running the allotment gardens and a group that organizes local activities. When I asked her what motivates her to be so active in the local civic life, she told me that she “likes all kinds of people and having a wide network of acquaintances”. “I have opinions,” she added, “and I want to know how people think and if I can influence something”.

Some local leaders complained that because other people are too passive, those who are active have to carry a heavy load. One woman who has been active in the tenants union for a very long time decided to leave the board, and explained to me her frustration:

“People don’t care. The board meets 4-6 times per year, and although we book the board meetings in advance, it happens that people cancel in the last minute. They come with a bunch of excuses.”

She also complained about the tenants who expect a lot from the association but are not willing to invest their time and energy: “people are complaining about the meeting premises, but nobody wants to engage in its development”.

Another local woman who has been active in a political party many years ago explained that she had to quit her commitment, because she did not have the time to be a mother and a politician at the same time. “Especially when there are not many committed people in the party, those who are involved get a lot of work to do,” she explained. She however continued to be an active figure in the local community, and became a leading member of a non-partisan voluntary association.

As opposed to commercial and municipal meeting places, voluntary associations are based on the driving force and self-organization of the participants. For an organization to function there has to be at least one, but preferably several driving figures who make things happen.
People that are members in many associations get a better picture of the local community and they can also receive and spread more information. Ideally, voluntary associations are supposed to foster democratic citizens, since they are required to be democratically run in order to get municipal funding, which means that they are required to have a board that is elected by the majority of the members, and the board is supposed to make decisions through majority rule. Because associations are encouraged to function according to a representative democratic model, they usually have a core of spirited members *(eldsjälar)*, who have the interest, know-how and time to govern, and a body of more passive members whose power is largely limited to the election of the board - although many members of associations abstain from using this right.

*Participation as protest*

Many people that I encountered are motivated to political participation - either through the political system or voluntary associations - when they want to protest a certain situation. They do not see political development as something that they can partake in constructing, but as something that they have to safeguard their rights against. For example the two women that joined the tenants union and turned out to have a lot of good ideas only came to the first meeting to complain about the residential area and the landlord. Another man that I talked to said that the reason why he is a member of the Tenants Union is because it is “like the labour union, it is good to be in it just in case”. Also the example of Monica who was not interested in politics until she witnessed how the system fails to protect the rights of immigrant women shows that many people being politically active is a reaction to a perceived malfunction in the system. Because the running of affairs is delegated to politicians and public servants, many people seem to associate political activity with protecting one’s rights *against* the politicians or the public officials.

Mahmud, who during the 30 years he has lived as an adult in Sweden has not voted a single time explained that “in my native country we did not even have freedom of religion, in Sweden you are free to say what you want, and that is enough for me”. He also added that he felt that “the political situation in Sweden is good enough regardless of the ruling party”. Ratko similarly described that in his home country, unlike in Sweden, “you had to pay attention to politics”, because of the unstable political situation. Alike to the findings of
Banerjee (2008:78) in West Bengal, this shows that people on the passive end of the political division of labour see the democratic system as a way to protect themselves from negative developments potentially brought about by those who are in power.

Using one's power

In this chapter I have analyzed various ways that people in Skogås exercise political power and discussed obstacles that keep certain people from active participation. Most of the people that I talked to during my fieldwork participate in the political system to varying degrees and thereby protect and promote things that are of personal significance for them. Their strategies for promoting self-interest can be a threat to the political ideal of promoting a greater good, however they can also be a way to keep political representatives responsive to their needs. Encounters with people of different social positions and identities can however promote political solidarity and partially public spaces that I discussed in the previous chapter play an important role for the development of such relationships. Some inhabitants abstain from exercising their political power however, asserting that politics is ‘not for them. However as Bourdieu (1979) reminds us, we should be careful to dismiss such attitudes as disinterest, because when the least powerful in a society are also the least active in the political system, it serves into the hands of the dominant class and contributes to the maintenance of the status quo.

Citizens have very differing experiences in their everyday lives - some own and decide over their own residence while others rent their home and have to lobby in order to gain some influence over it - and these experiences shape their dispositions towards public decision-making. The perception of party politics as inauthentic and divisive, as well as the political language and political competence that are closely linked to formal education and the culture of the dominant classes also hinder people’s interest in politics. On the other hand, the Sweden Democrats that are tapping in to the everyday discourse of the ‘working-class Swedes’ and abandoning the facade of political correctness reinforce divisive codes based on identities.

There are various ways in which the inhabitants of Skogås strive to influence the political community. While some people focus on electing representatives that promote their interests
in policy-making, other people strive to promote social harmony and counter social divisions by means of voluntary associations and activities in the community. Such efforts can be very powerful, as local leaders use their social network and the trust that people have for them to mobilize the local community in a way that is unattainable for public officials. These activities, and the conceptions of the community that the organizing local leaders project, provide a sense of togetherness and unity for the community that would otherwise risk being torn along the lines of identity politics. It seems that the potential conflict inherent in the identities based on ‘prior formative attachments’ such as religion, ethnicity and social class cannot be easily overridden by an abstract identity of liberal democratic citizenship, but needs a ‘genuine’ common ground that is based on experienced togetherness. Speeches from politicians and activities organized by public servants do not have the kind of legitimacy and authenticity that non-partisan, voluntary initiatives have, and it is therefore not surprising that many influential local leaders that want to make a difference in the local community choose to disassociate themselves from party politics.

In the following chapter I examine more closely the question of legitimacy of political representatives, how they are perceived by their electorate and how this creates problems for the mechanisms of political deliberation.
In the previous two chapters I have focused on the inhabitants in Skogås and the ways in which they encounter their local community and exercise political power. In this chapter I turn my attention to how inhabitants of Skogås relate to the political leadership and explore reasons behind the perceived gap between the two. I examine how the political leadership appears as a theatre and how this creates problems of legitimacy for the elected officials.

Since Huddinge, the municipality that Skogås is located in lies on a very large area divided by lakes, getting to central Huddinge where the council meetings are held, from Skogås takes 30 minutes by bus. In comparison, it takes only 20 minutes from Skogås by public transportation to get to the city hall and center of Stockholm. Nevertheless, in order to get a better picture of local politics, I decided to visit a council meeting. The municipal council is the most local democratic decision-making organ in Sweden. The council is elected every four years and meets every month, with the exception of July and August. The meetings are held in a large aula with an overlooking balcony for the audience, where there are about 30 places available for visitors and about 30 places reserved for stand-in representatives that can for replace elected politicians if they have to leave early, come late to the meeting, or cannot attend. Anyone is welcome to sit in the audience of these meetings, and the event is also filmed and aired in real time on the municipality’s homepage. Although the meetings are open for the public, according to politicians that I talked to, usually not many inhabitants attend, except when there is a current issue that affects a local association in which case very many people can show up to put pressure on the elected representatives.

Finding the balcony to be an extremely stuffy place, with very little legroom and very bad ventilation, I decided to take a break and went out into the hall where I saw many people sitting in front of a large TV screen showing the meeting in real time. As I later found out, most of the people sitting there were elected politicians or the stand-in representatives that found the television screening to be much more pleasant then the balcony. “It’s too stuffy and tight up there”, one person explained. Since I saw people going back and forth with cups of
tea and coffee, I asked one of the stand-in representatives in the lobby where I could get some coffee and he eagerly jumped up to show me. On the first floor there were free-of-charge warm beverages, biscuits and fruit for all visitors to take. Instead of returning to the balcony I decided to watch things from the screen, where the stand-in politicians sat.

During the evening I talked to several politicians and observed their interactions ‘backstage’. There I could observe how members of the ruling coalition and the opposition who appeared to be fierce enemies inside the council meeting, stood and laughed together out in the hall. Nils, a local politician explained to me that although they are political opponent and go at each other in debates, in private they may be good neighbors, or even friends. As I sat there I saw the two representatives for the Sweden Democrats walking past the elected representatives that were all familiar and courteous with each other, completely shunned by the other politicians without any greetings or eye contact. “Those two are from SD [the Sweden Democrats],” Nils pointed and whispered to me.

There was also a man sitting there who I lated found out had been active in a big political party before but had come into some kind of conflict with the leaders. While I was talking to him he made many critical comments about the representatives of all the parties and told me that he attends these meetings just for fun, because it is entertaining - like TV programs. “It is so predictable, that it’s almost like theater,” he said. And in fact, he could predict many of the
responses of the politicians that according to him played out in line with the established and often repeated discourses of the various parties and politicians. “Now she is going to reply that the riding sport is underfinanced and that it’s a gender issue because sports where boys are more active receive much more funding,” he said right before the municipal group leader for the Green Party stood up to give a speech which turned out to be about the funding of the riding sport.

As a political meeting place, the municipal council is very different from the *agora* of the participatory democracies of ancient Greece. In the *agora* thousands of citizens could move freely alongside elected representatives through the open and accessible space that contributed to a transparent political process (Sennett 1994). By contrast, the municipality council in Huddinge offers only 30 stuffy places for visiting citizens and situates them as spectators, offering a ‘theatrical’ performance where antagonisms are exaggerated and masks are taken on and off as politicians enter and exit the scene. Since people can easily run into politicians in the hall, the placement of visiting citizens cannot be explained based on security concerns. Indeed Nils, the local politician told me how security was not an issue at all, since the worst thing that ever happened is when many years ago members of a small neo-Nazi political party stood in rows by the entrance, but nothing happened and according to him “people were not even scared”. The physical organization of the municipality council is in a way a representation of the relationship between citizens and representatives. The stuffy balcony space shows that the participation of citizens is not prioritized - or at least not of great concern - while the theatre-like setting hints at that which many people view politics as: a show.

*Politics as theatre*

Many people that I talked to in Skogås explained their lack of interest in politics by the apparent insincerity of politicians. In the analysis of Bourdieu (1979:464), the perception of politics as a stage or a theatre whose rules are not understood leaves ordinary people with a sense of helplessness and is often a source of a generalized distrust of all forms of speech and spokesmen. Even though she felt trust for the current prime minister, Ludmila, a woman in her fifties that I interviewed told me that politics appeared to her as a game, and when politics appeared on TV, she changed the channel. While she found it interesting to discuss politics with her clients, the appearance of politicians on TV made her feel like “no I don’t want to
watch this”. When we started comparing Swedish politics with politics in Russia where she
grew up, she said “Russian politics is very negatively depicted in the Swedish media, but even
in Sweden I feel that politicians are dishonest”. Some other people I talked to expressed
similar opinions. “Politics is pie-throwing”, said Lasse, “it’s all about rhetorics and winning
the argument, it’s insincere”. He described contemporary politics in Sweden as a “boring
show” and suggested jokingly that had it at least been entertaining then he would maybe
watch it, but “it would not solve the problem because what is lacking in politics, is not
entertainment, but sincerity”. Another word people used to describe politics is “theatre”,
whereby politicians play their part according to a predictable script, but in the background, the
ardent enemies of opposing parties are actually best friends. Such comments resonated with
my experience at the municipality council.

The “World Café” dialogue that was organized in Skogås had a similar atmosphere. Even
before I found out that most of the people present were either politicians, or there as part of
their job at the municipality or the youth center, I sensed it from the way they talked. Their
calculated and professional statements appeared to be a show for the young people who were
present. Some of the participating politicians sounded more like ‘ordinary people’, but many
of them had a grandiose rhetoric and way of talking. At the end, all participants were asked
to say a few words about what they will take with them from the meeting and one of the
young participants said:

“I thought that our voice is not heard and that our ideas do not come through, but now I know that we can
get in touch with ‘the big ones’ [de stora], the politicians who will take the questions that we take up
further”.

Another young participant said that he learned that you can get in touch with politicians so
they can implement the ideas that one has. However, almost two years later, no football
tournament between different youth centers in Huddinge, and no marathon connecting
different parts of the municipality had been organized. While the comments of the young
participants were very optimistic at the end of the dialogue, several older people were more
sceptical and said things like “a follow-up would be good so that it won’t be just good ideas
that stay on the paper” and “I am happy that the politicians are here and listening, I just hope
that something is done also from that which has come up during the conversation”.
At the dialogue I also signed up to get the summary of the discussions sent to my email, but I did not receive anything. When I later wrote to the municipality information centre and got the notes I saw that there was no mention of how few locals showed up. Although most of the suggestions presented in the report had come from local politicians and professionals - many of whom do not live in Skogås, but in other parts of the municipality - they were presented as the opinions of local inhabitants. Although the dialogue had been organized as part of the European Council’s Local Democracy Week, the report had totally masked over one of the greatest challenges of the local democracy in Skogås - the failed communication between public officials and the public. The way that the public officials presented the dialogue in their documentation also shows the “masked” feature of politics, whereby failures can be masked as success and real challenges can be brushed under the carpet.

The importance of participation

Despite scepticism towards politicians and public officials, most people that I talked to held electoral participation in high esteem, which explains why voter turnout on the whole is high despite a widespread disillusionment with politicians. Similarly to the findings of Banerjee (2008) in her study of high voter turnout in West Bengal, many people I talked to expressed a sense of duty with regard to political participation. A leader of a local association complained to me in an interview about people that do not participate in politics, saying that they “just don’t take the time, and they don’t understand how important it is”. She also added that “those who do not think and take a stand, it is their problem, but it is also a problem for the society because everyone has an important voice, and something to bring”. Despite the perceived insincerity of the politicians, several of my informants even expressed guilt over not being active enough in the political system. “I know it’s stupid,” expressed Mahmud with embarrassment about the fact that he does not participate in the elections, while Ludmila who admitted to me that she changes the channel every time there is something about politics said: “I know that it is important, unfortunately it is a character flaw in me that I am only interested in literature, not politics”.

One local woman explained in an interview why she thinks people are not interested in attending dialogues with politicians:

“It depends if you have the time, but it’s not so interesting. It would be more interesting before the elections, if they would have organized it two months before the elections. That’s how I feel anyway, that before the elections you start thinking ‘wait now, how should we choose’. I feel that they are only lying anyway, not much happens from that which they promise. At the elections you choose for the moment, I for example did my research one month before.”

Interest in politics is closely related with a sense of power to influence it, and even though politicians in general may be perceived as dishonest, citizens can still exert their influence by rewarding the most responsive party with their votes. Many people become interested in politics a few months before the elections, but to engage in a dialogue with politicians a year before the next election does not seem as interesting. During the few months prior to the election people feel that they actually have the power to influence and then it becomes more relevant to listen to what different parties have to offer. One of the reasons why the agora of ancient Greek democracies was much more popular than modern-day platforms for political dialogue is that the agoras were actual sites of decision-making. In ancient Greece, the assemblies where citizens could directly participate in election or legislation occurred at least ten times per year (Manville 2014:182) which made political dialogue always relevant and connected to the actual ability to influence decisions.

**Worlds apart**

The distance between politicians and the people they represent results in a lack of knowledge among political representatives about their electorate, and also in the lack of knowledge among the electorate about ongoing political issues and debates. Mona and her mother who I invited over for an interview were telling me about how good horseback riding is for young people and that it would be very good if the municipality subsidised the sport because many people cannot afford to send their children to a private riding school. They however had no idea and were surprised to hear that this topic was widely discussed in the municipal council and that there was a political party that was pushing for more funding for riding sports. This example shows how far removed many local citizens are from the discourses of politicians and the public debates at the municipality council.
Meeting politicians in person and attending the municipal council meetings in person can make politics appear more near. When I read about local politicians and politics in the local newspaper after I had attended the municipal council meeting I remembered the politicians’ faces, the dynamics of their interaction, the words they used, and thus the information in the newspaper became much more relevant and interesting for me. This experience made me reflect upon how having personal experiences and relationships can make political participation more meaningful. But because of the theatrical element of municipal politics, becoming acquainted with the local political scene can also lead to a cynical attitude, like that of the man who watched the municipal council meeting on the TV-screen with me outside in the hall and described the council meetings as a comical, predictable TV show.

The local Drevviken Party that focuses on promoting the interests of Skogås and the neighboring area Trångsund - which it claims are neglected in the large municipality -, draws advantage from being closer to the local community in Skogås. Because all of their politicians live in and near Skogås, they are well known among many locals and have good knowledge of the local life. One of the leading members is a dog owner and knows well that the nature areas where people walk their dogs are important public places. Therefore it is not surprising that prior to the elections the Drevviken Party was the only party that put up a political banner at a specific junction in a nature area where many people pass by with their dogs with the slogan “Dog park and dog beach - in our part of the municipality too”. Participating in the local public life can thus make politicians more responsive to their electorate by providing them with important insights as to what is important to their electors and how they can communicate with them in the best way. Representatives that are out of tune with their electorate risk being perceived as illegitimate and in violation of the democratic process (Pardo 2000:5). The decline in membership in
political parties and loyalty to parties widens the gap between the politicians and the people that they are supposed to represent, and places greater emphasis on interactions outside of party meetings for the achievement of mutual understanding. The municipal dialogues that are arranged by public officials and the council meetings that are open to the public also fail to create an environment of political deliberation and contemplation, partly because they do not offer the participants a tangible opportunity to exert influence.

In this chapter I have looked at some perceptions of political representatives from the point of view of the electorate, and discussed how the theatrical appearance of party politics as well as the physical distance and infrequent elections sustain a gap between the representatives and the represented. In the next chapter I connect the three themes of the thesis in a general discussion about the dynamics that leads to the exclusion and self-exclusion of citizens from political participation.
6. Exclusion and self-exclusion

“A ballot is like a bullet. You don’t throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket.”

Malcom X (1990:38)

Citizens in Sweden enjoy the rights to free and fair elections, public access to official documents and access to municipal meetings that are often even streamed through the internet. Still many people feel alienated from politics and quite a lot of people abstain from participating in elections, especially among groups that are underprivileged in the society and in theory should benefit the most from democratic enfranchisement. As opposed to ancient Athens where ‘foreigners’ had no right to participate in the democracy, non-nationals in Sweden that have permanent residence permits have the right to vote in the municipal and county elections, but still most of them abstain. Despite extensive rights to political participation the least powerful are excluded from politics - and seemingly by their own will. That fact that a part of the population abstain from voting, keeping informed or running for office does not appear to be problematic if their self-exclusion is explained as a lack of interest. However, when the non-participant citizens are overwhelmingly found among the least privileged members of the society then the disinterest cannot be attributed to personal preference but causes must be looked for in the dynamics of the political culture.

As Banerjee’s (2008) study of high voter turnout among illiterate and poor people in West Bengal, voter turnout is not a direct result of one’s economic status or level of education, but rather along the lines of Malcom X’s quote above, having a target within your reach. However, by quoting Malcom X I do not imply that self-exclusion is a conscious, rational strategy on behalf of those who practice it. Instead I propose in Bourdieu’s (1979:55) line of reasoning that to refrain from participating in a system where you do not see a possibility of achieving your political goals is a practical response. The ensuing political inequality is sustained both by individual agency - as those with more political power promote their interests and those with less power abstain from participation - and by the structure in terms of the political culture that makes participation futile for some, as well as in terms of the lack of platforms of interaction where more solidaristic political goals could be deliberated upon by citizens of various backgrounds. When politicians are responsive enough to propose a
policy that makes a big difference in people’s personal life, as in the case of offering child care for single parents working night shift, it makes participation in the elections worthwhile, even if it does not do away with the general disillusionment with the political system.

Nevertheless, voting is not the only measure of one’s participation. In Western liberal party politics there is a political division of labour between the electorate and the elected representatives. Citizens have the opportunity to join parties and formulate the political visions that the representatives help realize. With the recent decline in party membership (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012) as well as the increasing influence of policy professionals (Garsten 2015) - experts who are not elected but hired to develop and communicate policy -, the role of the electorate is increasingly to be “spectators who vote” (Holston & Appadurai 1998:7). Not mastering the political language, not having the time to keep up to date or take an active role in a political party, as well as seeing how party politics creates divisions between people and is perceived as a theatrical show are all factors that discourage people from deeper political involvement and contribute to a disposition that it is ‘not for them’.

As an idea stemming from modernist roots, liberal democracy is often portrayed as a universal formula that leads on a straight path to political justice - in reality however democracy is appropriated and interpreted through other ideologies as well as local practices and developments and can result in more or less desirable political systems (Hann & Dunn 1996:6). Almost forty years ago Bourdieu (1979:462) described a political landscape where even the spokesmen of political parties representing the working class were distanced from their members in regard to their higher level of education and the political language that they were “condemned to use”. The growing influence in today’s political landscape of policy professionals who are even less representative of the electorate, possibly indicates that the elitistic element in the representative democracy is growing at the expense of the political equality (Garsten 2015:284). While citizens can vote, political language obscures the deliberations on policies, and while citizens have the right to demand transparency, public officials have more and more communication experts by their side to help them handle the scrutiny and present information in a more favorable light. A situation where officials and representatives are increasingly beyond reach and out of tune with ‘ordinary citizens’ also jeopardizes the quality of the policies, political visions and programs (Garsten 2015).
On the other hand, self-exclusion from party politics is also a practical disposition for many citizens who are very active and successful in community development through associations and networks and want to avoid being associated with the inauthenticity and divisiveness of party politics. As many key community figures are staying out of politics to maintain credibility and influence, politicians and public officials struggle to have that kind of role and legitimacy as the dialogues they organize such as the World Café in Skogås fail to mobilize the public.

Social capital is a prerequisite for a political career (Bourdieu 1979:122) and ideally this demand reflects the need for political representatives to be responsive to the electorate. Partially public spaces offer opportunities for “ordinary people” to increase their social capital and thereby also their possibilities to engage in politics. Especially since dialogues arranged by officials generally fail to attract citizens, encounters in the local public life can also be important opportunities for politicians to build a relationship with the electorate. When political representatives participate in partially public spaces they get a better access and a more familiar way to interact with their electorate, and perhaps this also gives more power to the electorate to influence the agenda. Similarly to the way the ‘Turkish mosque’ invited the highest political official in the municipality for a dialogue, associations can be platforms for deliberation and influencing policy.

However, since political representatives are overrepresented among the more privileged groups in society, informal day-to-day meetings that happen within the politicians’ immediate vicinity risk giving even more influence to already empowered social groups - although partially public spaces where people with different backgrounds meet provide an opportunity to break from this pattern. If political parties are less and less representative of the electorate, then representatives rely more on everyday encounters and partially public spaces for their face-to-face contact with the electorate, and it arguably becomes even more important that representatives be present in all geographical and social parts of the society.
Especially young people are growingly disinterested in party politics and instead attracted to other forms of activism such as protests and manifestations, often disconnected from traditional organisations (Bäck, Bäck & Gustafsson 2015:657). Developments in the social media have enabled a more individualistic and direct form of mobilization around issues of interest to the extent that researches are questioning whether this new way of participating in political life may take over the role of political parties as a link between the political representatives and the citizens (ibid.). In spite of the growing role of social media in political deliberation and mobilization, physical encounters remain central. The partially public spaces that I explored in this thesis, and the meetings that occur in them endow the abstract political unit with real life encounters where solidarity, mutual understanding and a sense of community can be fostered between people that would otherwise not interact. This also explains why young people at the World Cafe democracy dialogue called for football tournaments between different neighborhoods and a marathon that takes people across the municipality.

Although liberal democracy is envisioned as a community of autonomous individual-citizens, personal experiences and relationships make participation more meaningful, build trust in society and foster citizens (Holston & Appadurai 1998:7). Partially public spaces also increase people’s political know-how. By coming into contact on the street with a person who has political experience and shares their interest, dog owners were able to succeed in getting permission to establish a dog park, and learn about how motions can be advanced within the municipality. Local contacts on the other hand provided the politically experienced woman with the popular support of other dog owners, granting legitimacy to her proposal in front of the municipal council. By inviting the chairman of the municipal council to a dialogue, the ‘Turkish mosque’ helped increase the political understanding and influence of their members, many of whom live in the part of Skogås where voter turnout is lowest. Partially public spaces within the community thus increase people’s confidence and competence to actively participate in the shaping of policy.

In Skogås there is no single public place where local citizens can regularly encounter each other’s opinions and experiences, as well as their political representatives. Unlike the Ancient
Greek *agora* where simultaneous movement in shared space served participatory democracy well (Sennett 1994:33) and elections were held several times per year, the municipal council meetings are characterized by a separation and disconnection between the electorate and the elected. Council meetings are open for spectators but they do not succeed in making politics accessible and enabling community deliberation. When associations want to protest a proposal that has consequences for them, large groups can show up the council meetings, but very few people regularly attend and those that do are merely silent spectators. People can get an experience of their local community and deliberate upon political issues of concern in partially public spaces, however since these places are not explicitly intended for political discussions, the possibilities for community deliberation is quite limited, with the exception of the months prior to the elections.

Even if an *agora*-like place for political participation was introduced, it would not necessarily usher in a new era of participatory democracy. Such a place would perhaps become monopolized by certain groups, and some people might avoid going there because they would feel incompetent to successfully engage in its activities. Others may feel that it is not worth their time because it does not have any substantial links to political power - like the World Café dialogue -, while people with politically incorrect opinions might feel at threat to speak openly. A man that I interviewed expressed concerns about such a place:

> “Most people are too ignorant to be able to take good decisions, while politicians get paid to keep informed about the issues at hand. A problem with big democratic assemblies for dialogue among citizens would be that some people can’t keep to the topic and insist to talk and talk about unrelated issues or their personal opinions.”

A successful culture of political deliberation cannot be achieved by a physical place alone. The *agora* of the Ancient Greek democracy was a platform for the participation of individuals who shared a sufficient similarity of being free, male, Greek citizens - the elite of the ancient Greek society. A contemporary version of the *agora* would have to be made suitable for the common deliberation of a very diverse electorate. In order to meet the complex challenges they are facing, democracies cannot afford to miss out on the unique perspectives and experiences of the less powerful members of the society. In Sweden, politicians have been struggling to come up with viable solutions for the so called *LUA* urban districts where the
living standard, employment rate and level of education are considered to be significantly lower, and the perceived alienation among inhabitants higher compared to the rest of the country, but in recent years the amount of violence taking the lifes of especially young men in these neighborhoods has increased dramatically. The populations of these areas also exhibit the lowest electoral participation in the country and to involve them in the formulation of sustainable policies despite the existing obstacles is likely to be a challenge in the near future.

In this chapter I have discussed how despite political rights, underprivileged members of the Swedish society are still excluded from political power, by various factors that lead to their disassociation from politics and self-exclusion. Not having a political objective that seems possible to realize makes voting impractical, while feeling aversion towards party politics and the accompanying political language that create divisions and obscurity discourages citizens from attempting to influence policy through active party membership. Some citizens instead strive to influence society through non-partisan associations and activism, while others are reduced to “spectators who vote” (Holston & Appadurai 1998:7). This self-exclusion has serious consequences for the Swedish democracy and risks undermining the system of political representation as we know it. As elitistic culture grows in the political parties through the increasing influence of policy professionals (Garsten 2015), the citizens’ political deliberation continues through face-to-face everyday encounters as well as in social media, in a more individualistic and less organized form. These new developments may be the beginning stage of a new type of democracy with more active citizens and a more direct participation or merely the first symptoms of further alienation and powerlessness in relation to the elite. However, any attempts to create a more inclusive democracy will have to explore ways to make the political culture and the political language more genuine and accessible.
7. Final words

The legitimacy of a democratic government stems from the citizens’ ability to participate in its election on equal terms. However, research on the topic has generally underemphasized the social and political interactions before and after the election day (Coles 2004). While citizens are equal at the poll, political inequalities are sustained between the elections. There has been relatively little anthropological research or explicit theorizing on democracy (Paley 2002) and most of it has focused on the interpretation and implementation in new or fragile democracies, however there is a growing body of research examining democracy in ‘Western’ countries that are regularly taken as unexamined standard-bearers for the rest of the world (Gledhill 2000:7-8).

In this study I have found that lack of confidence and opportunities to engage in political deliberation, physical and social distance from political representatives, as well as alienating political language and political culture all contribute to a disposition that politics is a futile endeavor and ‘not for me’. The result is a resignation to the political division of labour either as “spectators who vote” (Holston & Appadurai 1998:7), or as non-voters. The exclusion of the underprivileged from politics leads to policies and political visions that are formulated without a consideration for their reality and thus fail to address their problems, which affirms their disillusionment and further motivates their self-exclusion - and so political inequality is reproduced. In this study I have argued along the lines of Bourdieu (1979) that what may be seen as a lack of ‘taste for politics’ is at a closer look an expression of one’s political impotence.

I have also argued that casual personal encounters and relationships through shared interests and lifestyles, such as dog ownership, parenthood or religion connect people to the wider community and increase their political competence and confidence. Being members of the same political community is seldom enough reason for people to approach each other and interact. Therefore these partially public attachments and the spaces where they are fostered play an important role in the realization of active citizenship.
Because I intended to map out and compare different spaces of encounter, I have not explored any single place in-depth, and I believe that such a study would reveal further valuable insights with regard to the dynamics of everyday political deliberation. This thesis has focused largely on physical meetings and not addressed the role of social media which has been indicated as a new platform for political participation and has already received a lot of attention by anthropologists. The role of social media in facilitating the electorate’s influence over policy between elections is an interesting topic that deserves further exploration. Political parties as platforms of political participation is also an important field that needs to be understood better, regardless of whether political parties are to continue to have a central role in ‘Western’ democracies or to be replaced by more individual and unorganized forms of participation.

Hopefully this thesis is useful for academics and practitioners interested in the transformation of the current system and the development of new forms of democracy. It is also relevant for anyone interested in the understanding and improvement of political equality, such as political parties that are set on improving their relationship with the electorate, public servants organizing dialogues, agencies working to strengthen democracy globally as well as activist groups seeking to empower the public. Many of my conclusions - such as the need to transform the political language so that underprivileged citizens are not made to feel incompetent as well as the importance for representatives to go out of their comfort zone and make themselves receptive to the perspectives of the underprivileged citizens - are but reminders of long-established insights that have still not been sufficiently accommodated. My hope is that this thesis will contribute to a greater appreciation of these factors and a deeper understanding of how they can be pursued.

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3 For an interesting discussion and overview of this topic see article “Role of social media in social movements: Egyptian Revolution and Occupy Wall Street” by Poredoš, M.
References


Electronic sources:


