

## Political Conflicts

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Dissent and Antagonism Among Political Parties in Local Government



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**SCHOOL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

PhD Thesis in Public Administration  
School of Public Administration  
University of Gothenburg

Distribution  
School of Public Administration  
University of Gothenburg  
Box 712  
405 30 Gothenburg  
[www.spa.gu.se](http://www.spa.gu.se)

Political Conflicts  
Dissent and Antagonism Among Political Parties in Local Government  
© Louise Skoog  
Cover: Christian Lindholm Thorsén  
Print: BrandFactory, Kållerød, 2019  
ISBN: 978-91-984547-6-5 (print)  
ISBN: 978-91-984547-7-2 (online version)  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/58103>

*Dedicated to my mother  
Kaisa Skoog (1957-2018)*



## Abstract

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Political conflicts arise out of, or are at least nourished by, divisions and tensions in society over how resources are distributed between citizens and social groups. In the parliamentary arena, these conflicts are manifested by political parties representing the interests of their voters. However, even though we may agree that political conflicts are essential for politics and democratic systems, there is no consensus on what political conflicts are, what causes conflict and what their effects are. This thesis develops a theoretical framework for political conflicts that is productive in relation to studying causes and effects of political conflicts in local governments. A multi-method approach is applied in the studies. The first three papers and a literature review that is included in the introductory text focus on causes of political conflicts. The literature review, as well as the first paper, centres on structural and organisational explanations. The literature review focuses on the research question: How did Swedish local governments develop into party politicised forms of government, with the first paper dealing with the research question: What are the causes of political conflicts identified by earlier scholars and what effects do they have on local politics? The second paper focuses solely on organisational explanations and examines the research question: How does the organisation of political systems affect how and where political conflicts are expressed? The third paper uses explanations at the individual level and deals with the research question: How do ideology, partisanship and trust affect how political conflicts are perceived? The fourth and final paper focuses on the effects of conflicts and answers the research question: To what extent does party political conflicts affect the influence of political leaders? The findings show that there are at least two forms of political conflict of relevance for parliamentary arenas – political dissent and antagonistic behaviour – and that it is important to distinguish between them. They have different characteristics, are caused by different factors and produce different effects. Manifestations of political dissent clarify differences between political actors and are thus of great importance to a democratic system. However, an overinflated amount of antagonistic and disrespectful behaviour, on the other hand, will create a problematic political working environment. When antagonism turns ugly, democratic institutions and the actors working within them may lose their legitimacy.





## List of papers

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This thesis is based on the following papers.

- I. Skoog, Louise & David Karlsson (2018) “Causes of party conflicts in local politics.” *Politics*, 38(2), pp. 182-196.  
Copyright © 2017 The Authors DOI: 10.1177/026339571667878
- II. Skoog, Louise “Where did the party conflicts go? How horizontal specialisation in political systems affects party conflicts” (submitted)
- III. Skoog, Louise & David Karlsson “Conflicting estimations of conflict - How politicians’ perceptions of party conflicts are explained by ideology, partisanship and trust” (submitted)
- IV. Skoog, Louise & David Karlsson (2015) “Politiska konflikter och marknadsiering – utmaningar för politiska ledare?” In Aarsæther, N. & K. Mikalsen, *Lokalpolitisk lederskap i Norden* (pp. 112-147). Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.  
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## Acknowledgements

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This thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my principal supervisor, David Karlsson. He has supported me throughout this process, continually providing insightful comments and generously sharing his knowledge and thoughts on research and academia. And at times when I have been tired and about to call it quits; he has pushed me forwards and encouraged me to try again – to try harder. But thanks to his infectious enthusiasm for research and all things related to local government, I have always left our meetings with a sense of excitement, even when I have been at my most weary. These are all qualities I have come to greatly appreciate and I could not have asked for a better supervisor. For this, and for so much more, I thank you!

Many thanks also go to my assistant supervisors, Stig Montin and Signy Irene Vabo, for their encouragement, interest, and for always providing me with their absolutely spot-on comments. I am very grateful to my trio of supervisors. Special thanks also go to Jo Saglie, who has followed my research project from the beginning and who provided a constructive and systematic review of my manuscript in the mock viva. Jo's comments and our discussions gave me the chance to further enhance the manuscript.

I have been fortunate to find myself in an inclusive and supportive academic environment, and for this I would like to extend a collective thank you to all of my colleagues at the School of Public Administration. A special thank you to Malgorzata Erikson for her confidence in me and for supporting me when I first expressed an interest in applying for the PhD programme. Special thanks also go to our head of department, Björn Rombach, for giving me the opportunity to broaden my horizons by involving me in the collaborative work of the department. So many of the politicians and executive officers I have met from the municipalities in the Gothenburg region and from the Västra Götaland Region have shared their experiences with me and offered me their reflections on my research. I am very thankful for their openness, which has helped me to better understand the context that is the focus of this thesis. I would also like to thank the PhD candidates, new and old, with whom I have shared this journey. Whilst we have had different research interests, the community and support we have shared is a large part of what has made the research process so gratifying for me. Above all, I would like to thank my friends Oskar Svärd, Johanna Selin and Petra Svensson for all their support, guidance and laughs, and for being the rocks on whom I could always lean.

I would also like to thank the Nordic community of local government scholars who gather each year at the NORKOM Conference. Many of you have critiqued my papers with encouragement and precision and helped me hone both my arguments and my texts. I look forward every year to seeing you all, and it makes the grey month of November that bit brighter. A special thank you to Katarina Roos for her helpful guidance regarding how the multi-level analysis could be improved. And also to Signe Bock Seggaard, who has provided astute and constructive comments on so many of my papers.

Finally, there are those who did not contribute to this thesis, but who instead reminded me that there is more to life than research, and thank you all for not asking too often about when it would be finished. I would like to thank my parents Bengt and Kaisa, to whom I owe so much. Their wise words and unwavering support have always been a source of strength for me. My mother passed away shortly before this thesis was completed, but her compassion and the Finnish “sisu” she instilled in me will always stay with me. Thanks also to my brother Joakim and my sister Sofia, for all of our late night discussions about everything from hiking to movies and for our joint interest in Tierp. A big thank you to my dear friends Moa and Jessica, for all our countless coffees and deliberations on wardrobe dilemmas and for their invaluable support throughout this process. Last but certainly not least; Daniel, I simply do not know what to say. You brighten my life and constantly help me to look forwards, not backwards. Without you, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for everything.

THANK YOU!

Louise Skoog  
Stampen, December 2018



# 1

## Politics and Conflict

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“Politics arises out of conflict, and it consists of the activities  
(...) by which conflict is carried on”

*Banfield & Wilson, 1963:7*

Political conflicts arise out of, or are at least nourished by, divisions and tensions in society over how resources are distributed between citizens and social groups. Such divisions exist to a varying degree in all societies. In some societies conflicts are long lasting, run deep, and divide citizens into groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In others, there are fewer cleavages and the groupings on either side shift over time depending on the issue at hand (Banfield & Wilson, 1963: 33). The allocation of valuable resources leads to conflicts of interest between individual citizens and social groups. In the parliamentary arena, these conflicts are manifested by political parties representing the interests of their voters. Political representatives are expected to use their mandate to represent their voters in future conflicts.

*The overall aim of this thesis* is to broaden our understanding of political conflicts by studying what conflict is and in what way it is related to other social phenomena.

Conflicts are an inevitable part of politics and society, and have consequently been studied within many fields of research. However, even though political conflict has been the focus of numerous studies, there is no consensus on what the phenomenon actually is. Mack and Snyder even describe conflict as a “...rubber concept, being stretched and moulded for the purposes at hand” (Mack & Snyder, 1957: 212). Earlier studies teach us that the phenomenon is complex and may take on many forms. Different fields of study focus on different aspects of conflict, use different definitions of what a conflict is and have different ideas on how it is expressed (Lan, 1997). One reason for the diversity of the field is, of course, that it is a complex social phenomenon that does not easily lend itself to explanation. But it is most likely also due to the fact that researchers can have very different conceptual understandings of what political conflict is (Coser, 1956). In order to learn more about political conflicts, a definition that encompasses the complexity of the phenomenon needs to be developed.

## SECTION 1

What decision-makers know and believe is partly determined by their organisational context and position. Earlier scholars of democracy teach us that even though conflicts are essential for democracy, their role and character vary depending on how political and administrative systems are structured (Lijphart, 1999). The political bodies and the administration are interconnected institutions where the framework for how political conflicts are to be expressed and managed is established, thus defining how political decisions are to be implemented. Political conflicts and their manifestation may vary depending on how we organise our administrative systems and the welfare state, its degree of centralisation and decentralisation. In a decentralised welfare state, such as Sweden, where the local level plays a vital role in the realisation of welfare services, there is major interplay between politics and administration. This means that studies of the relationship between central and local government, local self-government, size of local government, degree of specialisation, political leadership, as well as the relationship between politicians and administrators, are all of importance for administrative research and for understanding policy-making and politics.

The literature on public administration includes studies that have described how public organisations manage conflicts (Simon, 1957; Lipsky, 1980). However, there is a lack of explicit attention to conflict (Lan, 1997), and when it is addressed the focus is generally on its negative or problematic aspects (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2018). According to Wolf and Van Dooren (2018), the negative view of conflict is most often based in a Weberian approach to public administration. From such a perspective, conflicts are appropriate during political discussions leading up to a decision. After politicians have agreed on a policy, the policy moves on to an implementation phase where public administrators neutrally execute what the politicians have decided. Although it is not news that restriction of political conflicts to a single phase is incorrect (Lipsky, 1980; Svava, 1985), the continuing influence of the Weberian model means that conflicts are still regarded as of little relevance for administrative research.

There is no denying that there are negative or problematic aspects of conflicts and that they may have dire consequences. Conflicts are most often assumed to block efforts to cooperate and to instigate political deadlocks. They can even be associated with increased animosity towards opponents (Barber & McCarthy, 2015; Hetherington, 2009), and when they escalate in a society it can, of course, result in damage, destruction and suffering. However, much human progress can be attributed to struggles among people, for example the raising of living standards and the furthering of equality. Conflict also fulfils vital social functions such as drawing members of a group together in solidarity, thus establishing group identities and fostering loyalty (Coser, 1956).

It can also be a source of human betterment (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017), as well as preventing tunnel vision and stimulating innovation (Coser, 1956; Carnevale, 2006; Cuppen, 2011; Coppens, 2014). And for those worried about political apathy, conflict can signal engagement (Hajer, 2003; Mouffe, 2008) and thus serve as a reminder that people care about public issues. This suggests that there are positive sides to conflict as well.

Political parties represent the conflicting interests and ideologies of their voters and of different social groups, and the conflict between the parties is at the heart of politics and of political systems at all tiers of government. The significance of political parties and party conflicts in contemporary Western democracies is so great that some even speak of party democracy, “partocracy”, and party government (Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 1997). However, some scholars paint a bleak picture of the future for political parties, arguing both that voters are out of touch with parties (Achen & Bartels, 2016) and that parties have lost their relevance to voters (Mair, 2013). For example, parties are now used as platforms for political activities and engagement to a lesser extent, they suffer from a declining membership base, and they are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit electoral candidates. Voter volatility has also increased, with citizens now shifting their allegiances more frequently and regarding themselves as supporters of a particular party to a lesser extent. Moreover, Lipset and Rokkan observe that the political cleavages between the parties, with few but significant exceptions, reflect the structures of the 1920s (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967: 50), and it is uncertain how relevant these still are. Recent studies of Sweden also show that over time, political parties have grown more similar to each other in the eyes of both voters and political representatives, and that both groups would like the parties to present more polarised positions on policies (Hagevi, 2018). But even though the opinions of political parties are perceived to be closer than ever, their ability to cooperate with each other is at an all time low (Lindvall et al., 2017). These developments may prove to be immense challenges for democratic systems as a whole and for the political actors working within the system.

Political parties need to channel the central political conflicts of society into the political institutions. If this function is not performed satisfactorily, it could generate a political vacuum with ensuing frustration among citizens (Bjereld et al., 2018: 17ff). This brings the risk of political populists becoming the only political alternatives (Mair, 2013:18ff). Mouffe (2008) argues that democratic institutions and political parties need to overcome this vacuum and return social tensions and passions back into the political institutions and display political conflicts openly. However, even though we may agree that the link between political parties and citizens should be strengthened, and that political conflicts

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are essential in this regard, more knowledge is needed in relation to party political conflicts in order to learn how political parties can become relevant again. In turn, if political actors had more knowledge and a greater understanding of the mechanisms behind party conflicts, some of the political tensions between political opponents might perhaps be mitigated, thus encouraging better understanding among political adversaries.

The literature on democracy and political behaviour shows that earlier scholars have studied party political conflicts. For example, it is at the core of Joseph Schumpeter's theory of democracy (Schumpeter, 1942) and of Anthony Downs's economic theory of democracy (Downs, 1957). These are theories where democracy is regarded as a mechanism for competition with political actors competing against each other in a quest for votes (Manin, 1997). In this sense, democratic elections are a means to legitimise government and to hold rulers accountable to the people. However, not everyone agrees that political conflicts are desirable. Other models of democracy emphasise the importance of consensus and of cooperation. From such a perspective, it is important to endeavour to bridge conflicts and find common ground (Lijphart, 1999; Premfors, 2000).

Several scholars have also tried to determine *causes* of party political conflicts in elected assemblies. Some studies have found that the political situation in the parliamentary arena is linked to diversity and social fragmentation in a society (Aistrup, 2004; Koetzle, 1998; Sullivan, 1973), to the size of the democratic unit (Bäck, 2000; Gerring et al., 2015; Karlsson, 2013), to fiscal stress (Lantto, 2005), or that the presence of a protest party is a sign of societal conflict that the established parties have failed to channel (Erlingsson, 2005). There is also a stream of literature suggesting that political competition and contestation stimulate political conflicts (Adams et al., 2004; Adams & Merrill, 2009; Downs, 1957; Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher et al., 2013). It is also highly likely that the inherent differences between individuals and among political actors in how political conflicts are assessed are due to differences in how we perceive the social world (Huddy et al., 2013).

In recent decades, there has been an increasing emphasis on the role of political leaders (Steyvers et al., 2008), and scholars have stressed the importance of understanding the context of political leadership (Lowndes & Leach, 2004). Political conflicts are an inevitable part of this context and may have *effects* for the administration, political operations (Houlberg & Holm Pedersen, 2014), for relations between political actors, and for the ability of political leaders to exert influence (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Political leaders are at the top of their parties and need to interact with representatives of other parties and respond to their positions (John & Cole, 1999).

Political representatives are expected to use their party political mandate to represent their voters in political decision-making processes and in the parliamentary arena. But even though political conflicts are an element of political processes, they could be viewed as a potential distraction or disturbance for political leaders. Political conflicts could block their ability to cooperate with other political actors and to direct administrative operations.

A study like this, aimed at studying what political conflict is and in what way it is related to other social phenomena, demands units of analysis (different political systems) where the indicators of political conflicts are as similar as possible. However, it is challenging to assess complex social phenomena such as political conflicts. This is partly due to differences in how we perceive the social world, but it is also due to social and cultural differences between countries. For example, what may be seen as highly antagonistic in one country may be viewed as normal in another. However, studies at the local level within the same country overcome these issues, as differences in cultural and legal contexts between cases are easier to control (John, 2006). The multiplicity of local political systems also allows for many kinds of statistical analyses, and even though European local authorities today are essentially units of representative democracy (Loughlin et al., 2012; Schaap & Daemen 2012; Egner et al., 2013), local politics has predominantly been studied from a perspective on politics where politicisation of local governments is associated with developments at national level (see for example, Sundberg, 1989). From this perspective, politicisation of local governments has been dependent upon national politics, and hence also – subordinated – to this tier of government (Forsell, 2014). A result of this is that studies of democracy and political conflicts have primarily focused on the national level, with the emphasis on national organisations and parties, and that local politics is an understudied phenomenon. Concomitantly, this means that a study of party conflicts at the local level would make an important contribution to broadening our understanding of local politics.

In order to increase the potential to generalise findings from the local level to politics at the national level, it is necessary to find a case where party politics plays a major role in municipal governance. Sweden is such a case. Compared to other countries, Swedish local politics has a high level of party politicisation (Denters & Klok, 2013) and the system is based on parliamentary principles (Skoog, 2011).

## Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of political conflicts in general by developing a theoretical framework that will be productive for studying causes and effects of political conflicts in local governments. In order to do this, it is necessary to have a background understanding of how Swedish local government became party politicised. However, as this history has not yet been written, it needs to be described in order to fulfil the aim of this thesis. It is also important to assess the implications of party political conflicts for local governments as well as their normative aspects. Three main research questions, with related sub-questions, are derived from this aim:

- I. What is political conflict?
  - Is political conflict a uniform phenomenon or are there different forms of conflict?
  
- II. What causes party political conflicts in local politics?
  - How did Swedish local government develop into party politicised forms of government?
  - What are the causes of political conflicts and what effects do they have on local politics?
  - How does the organisation of political systems affect how and where political conflicts are expressed?
  - How do ideology, partisanship and trust affect how political conflicts are perceived?
  
- III. What are the effects of party political conflicts in local politics?
  - To what extent do party political conflicts affect the influence of political leaders?

This thesis is based on data from a range of sources; a survey conducted in 2012 among all local councillors in the 290 municipalities of Sweden and a comparative case study of three municipalities that is based on interviews with leading local politicians and administrators conducted in 2016, as well as minutes from assembly meetings in 2009 and 2016.

## Outline

The thesis is structured as follows: section 2 examines theoretical perspectives on political conflicts and discusses how they might relate to one another. After reviewing the work of earlier scholars and systematically categorising their definitions and perspectives on what political conflict is, the section ends with a presentation of two forms of political conflicts that are theoretically derived. This section is part of answering research question number 1, i.e. what is political conflict. Section 3 elaborates the research design and methodological considerations of the thesis.

Fulfilling the aim of the thesis and developing a theoretical framework that is productive for studying party political conflicts in local governments requires a background understanding of how Swedish local governments became party politicised. However, in the absence of such a historical account from this perspective, a portrayal is required in order to fulfil the aim of the thesis. A systematic historical review of the party politicisation of Swedish local government is consequently presented in section 4. This section is also part of answering research question number 2, i.e. what causes party political conflicts in local politics, but it also serves as a presentation of the Swedish case. Section 5 presents the findings of the papers included in the thesis. Section 6 discusses the contributions of the thesis. The structure of this section is based on the research questions at hand and the papers' results are presented thematically according to how their respective findings answer the research questions. Section 7, which is the last and final section of the thesis, constitutes a discussion of the implications of the findings for local governments. This section, and the thesis as a whole, concludes with a discussion on the implications of political conflicts for democracy and its normative underpinnings.

An overview of the titles, research questions and methods for each paper or study included in this thesis is presented on the following page.

**Table 1. Thesis Overview**

<b>RQ I, What are political conflicts?</b>					
<b>RQ II, What causes political conflicts in local politics?</b>					
<b>Title</b>	<b>Section 4</b>	<b>Paper 1</b>	<b>Paper 2</b>	<b>Paper 3</b>	<b>Paper 4</b>
<b>Aim / Research question(s)</b>	Systematic review of how Swedish local governments developed from being non-partisan arenas towards an informal majority rule based on parliamentary principles	Study of causes of party political conflict and their effects on local politics	Where are party political conflicts expressed in political systems with different degrees of horizontal specialisation? What mechanism causes party political conflicts to be expressed in an institutional arena?	To what extent do ideology, partisanship, and levels of trust affect perceptions of political conflict among local councillors in Sweden?	Effects of party political conflicts and marketization on the influence of local political leaders
<b>Design / Method</b>	Literature review	Quantitative analysis of survey data (Multiple OLS-regression)	Comparative case studies	Quantitative analysis of survey data (Multi-level analysis)	Quantitative analysis of survey data (Multiple OLS-regression)
<b>Level of analysis</b>	Structural level	Municipal level	Municipal and committee level (within the municipal organisation)	Individual level	Municipal level

*Note.* Papers 1, 3, and 4 are co-authored with David Karlsson. Paper 2 is single-authored by me. With regards to the co-authored papers, we have collaborated during the research process. However, as is also indicated by the order of the authors on the papers in question, I have taken a greater responsibility for development of research problem, theoretical framework, design, and interpretation and analysis of the data



# 2

## Conflict, Consensus and Contestation

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There are different models of democracy, each of which carry with them different perspectives on the role of political conflict in democratic systems. I will present these models in this section and discuss their views on conflict. I will then discuss whether, from a theoretical perspective, there are different forms of political conflict or if it is a uniform phenomenon. This section concludes with a discussion of how political conflict is related to contestation between political parties.

### Perspectives on Political Conflict in Democracy

The conflict- and consensually-oriented views on democracy are today associated with Arend Lijphart's two models of democracy: majoritarian and consensual democracy (Lijphart, 1999). Although the distinction between the models has been critiqued (Coppedge, 2018), it remains widely used and accepted. Where majoritarian democracy is similar to majority rule, it has competition at its core and the primary motive for this model of democracy is the importance of accountability. It is about being clear who is responsible and having the possibility to elect new leaders if voters are dissatisfied. Another vital component is the importance of an active opposition. It is the role of the opposition to formulate clear alternatives for voters, and for this reason it is important that the opposition openly displays the cleavages between the parties (Lijphart, 1999). The majoritarian model of democracy also enables the largest possible number of citizens to live under the rule they have chosen. Protagonists argue that the will of the majority is as close as we can get to the will of the people as a whole (Dahl, 2007: 213ff).

If competition is essential to the majoritarian model of democracy, then reflection or mirroring is central to the consensual model (Lewin, 2002: 91). Arend Lijphart is an advocate of the consensual model. Theoretically, the consensual model means that a majority should not monopolise political power. Lijphart argues that even though a consensual model of democracy accepts majority rule as a minimum requirement, the goal is to maximise the size of the

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majority in order to get as wide participation as possible. Democracy in this sense is to realise the will of the people, not only the majority, but as many of the people as possible should have the possibility to influence the contents of policies, either directly or through elected representatives. The consensual model is also associated with striving for cross-party compromises, where party differences are toned down (Lijphart, 1999).

The majoritarian model of democracy emphasises concentration of power, while the consensual model stresses division of power (Lijphart, 1999). If, from a majoritarian perspective, democracy is tantamount to being responsive to the majority, then every division of power means that it is tougher to realise the will of the majority. Division of power is thus a step away from this ideal. Concentration of power also facilitates accountability, as it is clear where responsibility lies. Clear political alternatives enable voters' choices on Election Day, and democratic accountability is muddled if political representatives avoid taking a stand on politicised issues (Lupu, 2015). For similar reasons, division of power is in line with the consensual model. Division of power can force a majority to negotiate with minorities. The majority thereby needs to compromise and seek solutions across party lines. From a majoritarian perspective, it is not desirable to include the opposition in decision-making as it makes their role unclear (Lijphart, 1999).

The two models of democracy are similar in that they are both in favour of having different political alternatives and that political leaders should represent the will of the people. This means that what separates them is not whether political conflict exists or whether it has a legitimate place in a democratic system, but how political conflicts are to be managed, with the majoritarian model embracing conflicts and displaying them openly, and the consensual model emphasising the bridging of conflicts through compromises.

In contrast with these two models of democracy, a deliberative model of democracy discusses political conflicts more implicitly. It is a model that adopts features of both consensual and majoritarian democracy. It differs from representative democracy in that it is deliberation, not voting, that is the primary source of legitimacy for democracy. Some use the term when referring to deliberation between political representatives, while others use it solely when discussing decision-making by citizens. Two of its defining characteristics are that those who participate in democratic processes are open to changing their minds and that their preferences are the result of reflection and deliberation (Dryzek, 2002). Proponents of deliberative democracy argue that there is a greater opportunity for widespread consensus to emerge after deliberation has taken place, and that those who participate in democratic processes are also expected to become more considerate of what is best for society as a whole, not

only for themselves as individuals. Criticism of deliberative democracy often concerns the potential for the most skilled rhetoricians to sway opinion in their favour, and that it represses inherent differences and conflicts between individual social groups (Dryzek, 2002).

Beyond these discussions on what role political conflicts play in democratic systems, there are also those who argue the opposite position – that conflicts are not an essential component for governing. Advocates of communitarianism express resistance towards a neutral state and maintain that it should be abandoned in favour of a politics that works towards the “common good” (Kymlicka, 1990). In a society based on communitarian values, what is regarded as the common good is shaped by community and shared traditions (MacIntyre, 1981). For communitarians, there is an impetus towards unity (Dryzek, 2002), and the common good is not to be adjusted according to individual preferences; instead their preferences are to be gauged according to how well they fit with the values of a community. This means that to some extent the common good is given precedence over needs or claims by individuals (Sandel, 1998).

## What Is Political Conflict?

Conflicts are an inescapable part of the social world and have thus been the object of study within various fields of research, including international relations (see for example, Henderson, 1998), peace research (see for example, Galtung, 1969; Kreutz, 2010; Wallensteen, 2015), sociology (see for example, Collins & Sanderson, 2015; Coser, 1956), political theory (see for example, Mouffe, 2008), planning science (see for example, Hillier, 2003; Pløger, 2004), organisation studies (see for example, Bélanger et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2011; Pondy, 1967), etc. Whilst there have been numerous attempts to define conflict, it is, however, hard to define as it is a complex social phenomenon that can refer to many different aspects. Additionally, even though scholars may use the same term, i.e. conflict, it is apparent when reviewing their work that they operationalise it in different ways.

Some scholars use the term when referring to situations where there are difficulties in reconciling different interests or when there are differences of opinion or disagreements over objectives (Bush & Folger, 1994: 56; Gurr, 1980; Pondy, 1967; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972). For example, researchers who study political parties often use conflict to signify ideological differences or disagreements on policies between political actors (see for example, Oscarsson, 1998). Others have used the term when referring to behaviour – where actors behave in a confrontational way to promote their interests and

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attempt to block other actors from achieving their objectives (Deutsch, 1973; Fink, 1968; Mack & Snyder, 1957). Analytically, there are different characteristics between, on the one hand, differences of opinions or disagreements between political actors and, on the other hand, how actors behave towards each other. But despite this, it is common for scholars to use the term conflict without specifying the characteristic to which they are referring. There is also a tendency among researchers to confuse one form or aspect of conflict with another, or even to treat the different characteristics of conflict as a uniform phenomenon. Some have noted this tendency and stressed the need to differentiate between different forms of conflict (Blalock, 1989; Coser, 1956). As scholars use the term “conflict” while, often implicitly, referring to different aspects, there is no consensus on whether there are different forms of conflict, what causes conflict, or what the effect of conflict is.

Moreover, conflicts also entail a set of actors and opponents. For example, Coser argues that conflict “[...] is a struggle between opponents over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources” (Coser, 1956). Others argue that entering into conflict is to enter into a relationship – to establish opponents – even where there were none before (Mouffe, 2008). There are an infinite number of political actors that can be said to represent a position or interest that therefore may find themselves in conflict with actors representing an opposing interest. However, not all conflicts are reflected in the party system – they are not “party politicised”. Conflicts that are not party politicised may still be present in the parliamentary arena, but these conflicts may then be found *within* political parties rather than *between* parties. The focus of this thesis is on party political conflicts, meaning conflicts that are found between political parties or between the political majority and the opposition. Relationships between political parties in terms of political conflicts have long been objects of discussion for scholars (see for example, Atina, 1990; Axelrod, 1970; Coleman, 1997; Hix et al., 2005; Kreppel, 2000; Patterson & Caldeira, 1988). However, these studies have not defined what they mean by the term political conflicts, instead they have primarily studied the relationship between parties in terms of perspectives such as party cohesion, coalition formation, how parties relate to the ideological left/right dimension, etc. In order to study what political conflicts are and how they are expressed, there is a need to build on the knowledge obtained from earlier scholars, but also bring in new perspectives.

## Two Forms of Political Conflict

Despite it being common for earlier scholars to disregard the complexity of political conflicts, their work does indicate that both disagreements and the behaviour of political actors are of importance for understanding political conflicts. This means that in order to create a definition of political conflict that is productive for studying party political conflicts, it is necessary to differentiate between different forms of conflict. Having reviewed the work of earlier scholars, I argue that it is reasonable to suggest that there are at least two forms of political conflict that may be of relevance when studying party political conflicts – political dissent and antagonistic behaviour. *Political dissent* refers to the different positions which political actors take on political issues on a scale between agreement and dissent; *antagonistic behaviour* refers to the way political actors act towards one another on a gradual scale between harmony and antagonism in order to reach their goals. However, whether or not it is fruitful to use these two forms of political conflict for analysis is an empirical question.

Political parties in western democracies were created to represent different political alternatives and programmes. From this perspective, the conflicts between political parties that entail disagreement over political principles and issues (compare Oscarsson, 1998) are referred to here as political dissent. The parties may disagree on political objectives and on what constitutes a good society, and the parties may also have similar objectives, but they have differing views on how these should be pursued (Bakker et al., 2012; DiMaggio et al., 1996). A high degree of political dissent between the parties means that they have positions on political issues that are theoretically a long way apart, whereas a low degree of political dissent means that their positions are similar to each other or that they may even be in consensus. The degree of dissent is not static and may vary over time and from one issue to another. Some issues may be peripheral to the political debate and are hence politicised less frequently by the political parties. Other issues may be closely related to a party's ideology or principles, and are therefore more easily politicised by the parties.

Antagonistic behaviour refers to how the political actors perceive the climate among the parties and how they act towards each other. A high degree of antagonistic behaviour refers to acts of open critique of other political parties, an emphasis on their differences, and disrespectful strategic action to stop other actors from exerting political influence. In contrast, a low degree of antagonistic behaviour means that the parties downplay party differences and endeavour to achieve harmony and cooperation across party lines (Lantto, 2005).

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Are the two forms of political conflicts related? Policy-based studies on coalition formation reveal that there is a greater likelihood of cooperation between parties with similar positions on political issues. Conversely, parties that are further apart will have trouble cooperating (Adams & Merrill, 2009; Axelrod, 1970; Bäck, 2003a; Desposato, 2006; De Swaan & Rapoport, 1973; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2013). Proponents of this theory, for example De Swaan and Rapoport (1973), challenge assumptions that all parties are of equal interest when it comes to cooperation or forming a coalition government. Instead, policy-based theories argue that it is parties with similar positions on policies that are more likely to collaborate or form a coalition government. At the core of the policy-based model is the conviction that it is policy decisions that are the primary motives for political parties, and that this is what characterises representative democracy (Walther, 2017: 30ff). But, the dimension of antagonistic behaviour is a wider phenomenon: comprising the relationship between all parties, not just the partners in a coalition. However, in the light of these studies, one could expect political dissent among political actors to be accompanied by an increase in antagonistic behaviour in terms of political work, but this effect is by no means automatic. It is possible that cooperation, a low degree of antagonistic behaviour, is a product of a series of compromises and that the positions of the parties on policies have not changed. This means that cooperation can be compatible with political dissent (Lantto, 2005: 32) in the same way as major political dissent does not necessarily lead to antagonistic behaviour. This could be due to the fact that political parties are unaware of their policy differences (Karlsson, 2003), or that they are aware of their inherent differences but endeavour to bridge them through cooperation or deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 1998). From this we learn that antagonistic behaviour may occur in political arenas, even though there is a low level of political dissent on policies. In such cases, the political debates are often filled with matters of formalities or with attempts to amplify minor differences between political parties (Lantto, 2005).

The concepts of cooperation and consensus are often used synonymously in everyday language. However, there is an analytical difference between them. Consensus refers to a similarity of opinion or like-mindedness, while cooperation refers to behaviours such as joint action or collaboration. This means that it is possible for political actors to collaborate even when they experience a mutual lack of consensus, and it is also possible for political actors to have trouble cooperating even though their positions on political issues are not that far apart (Lantto, 2005).

In this thesis, the focus is on party political conflicts between political parties and between the ruling majority and opposition in Swedish local governments. However, all forms of political conflict can be observed in society, i.e. citizens, social groups, organisations and political parties can all have interests that conflict with the interests of others, they can have different opinions and behave in a more or less confrontational manner.

## Contestation Between Political Parties

There are different perspectives in the scholarly literature on the role of political parties. On one hand, some stress the importance of the internal democracy of parties and the importance for party leaders to represent their parties rather than follow their own judgment in order for representative democracy to function (Müller & Strøm, 1999). On the other hand, there are those who consider contestation between parties to be sufficient for democracy to function (Schumpeter, 1942). According to the first tradition, political parties should represent the policy preferences of their voters, and according to the second tradition, parties should maximise their power and influence. From this emerges a concept that is related to political conflict and to the different models of democracy – contestation. It is central to representative democracy and in this perspective democracy is realised through contestation or competition between political parties and leaders in their quest to maximise their votes for a forthcoming election. Schumpeter argued that democracy is a mechanism to create a contest between political representatives. Downs is of a similar mind, arguing that both political representatives and voters are rational actors, putting their self-interest as objective and making rational choices between different alternatives in order to maximise their interests. For political parties, the objective is vote maximisation and for voters' the objective is the fulfilment of their material interests, which are usually their economic interests (Downs, 1957; Lewin, 2002: 88). The level of contestation is low when a dominant party captures most of the votes and seats. Conversely, contestation is at a high level when there are more challengers than there are available seats. Shifts of power are common, leading to a tight race among political parties for seats (Gerring et al., 2015).

Studies on electoral contestation often argue that their focus is the degree of political conflict between political parties. They do this by studying distribution of seats between political parties, which may affect what policies parties deliver (see for example, Adams et al., 2004; Adams & Merrill, 2009; Downs, 1957; Ezrow et al., 2011; Gerber & Lewis, 2004; Schumacher et al., 2013). From the perspective of this thesis, contestation and conflict are

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related phenomena but analytically separate, where contestation refers to the degree of competition between political parties in a political system. Contestation is thus not a form of conflict – though it may affect political conflicts, for example, how parties behave towards each other and what policies they might deliver.



# 3

## Design and Methodology

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This thesis is based on four papers: three articles and one book chapter. The papers all focus on the same topic – political conflicts – but on different levels of analysis, and they are answers to different research questions. Where paper 1 focuses on the causes of party conflicts at both organisational and structural level, paper 2 focuses on how the organisational structure has an influence where party conflicts are expressed, paper 3 focuses on what influences individuals’ perceptions of political conflict, and paper 4 focuses on effects at the municipal level of party conflicts on the influence of local political leaders (organisational level) (see Table 1, p. 8). This section presents the research design and methodology.

### Why Study Swedish Local Governments?

In order to increase the potential to generalise findings from the local level to politics at the national level, it is necessary to find a case where party politics plays a major role in the governing of municipalities. As Swedish local governments are genuinely party politicised (Denters & Klok, 2013), Sweden is such a case. Moreover, in an international comparison Sweden has large municipalities with extensive political organisations as well as major political responsibility for welfare services (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991; Sellers & Lidström, 2007). The local governments in Sweden manage issues across the whole political spectrum and are responsible for service provision at all stages of its citizens’ lives, from childcare to elderly care. This means that the same lines of conflict that can occur between political actors at national level endure at local level as well and that the work within the local public administration affects the lives of practically all Swedes.

Swedish municipalities are governed by an assembly, council committees and an executive board. The assembly consists of at least 21 members, with the exact number of members related to the number of local residents entitled to vote. The members of the assembly are directly elected, but nominated by the political parties. The assembly decides on principal issues or matters of great importance for the municipality. The executive board is often referred to as the “government” of the municipality (Montin, 2015). An informal practice of ma-

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majority rule has been established in Swedish local governments and the political system is based on parliamentary principles. This version of informal majority rule is sometimes referred to as “quasi-parliamentary democracy” (Bäck et al., 2000), which means that after local elections, winning parties form a ruling majority in all municipalities. The ruling coalitions, which can vary greatly in size and composition, normally govern the municipality for the entire mandate period. The members of the executive board are proportionally elected by the council according to the principle of assembly government, which means that the board comprises members of both the majority and the opposition. The chair of the board – the Swedish equivalent of a mayor – invariably represents a party in the ruling majority, as do the chairs of the council and council committees (Bäck, 2003b; Skoog, 2011; Karlsson, 2006). The main task of the executive board is to direct and coordinate municipal activities as well as to supervise the activities of the council committees and municipal enterprises (Montin, 2015).

In addition, Swedish municipalities have long been subject to policy shifts where various organisational changes have succeeded each other. The organisation of local government in Sweden is based on different institutions with different organisational functions. The Local Government Act (*kommunallagen*) regulates relations between these institutions, but nowadays this law leaves the field open for municipalities to structure their own organisations. This has also led to a great variation in how Swedish municipalities have chosen to structure their organisations. However, even though the organisational structure differs, they all share the same system of party-based representative democracy (Montin, 2015). Using the Swedish municipalities as cases enables conclusions to be drawn about the conditions in different institutional arrangements that affect political conflicts.

A commonly argued difference between democracy at local and national levels is that the local level is dominated by consensus and the national level is characterised by party conflicts and polarisation. From a historical standpoint, Swedish local politics was indeed characterised by consensual democracy until the 1950s and 1960s. However, there has subsequently been a gradual increase in party polarisation and local politics has now adopted ideals of majority rule and moved away from the ideals of consensual democracy that traditionally dominated local democratic practices (Gilljam et al., 2010a; Lantto, 2005). There is also now a great variation in degrees and forms of political conflict among Swedish municipalities (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014).

## Studying Political Conflicts

Data on political conflicts is scarce and scholars interested in the phenomenon thus often use data such as election results, distribution of mandates between parties and frequency in shifts of power. However, such data is more likely to be related to the level of competition or contestation between political parties (as in paper 3) than to actual party political conflicts. Conflict and contestation are related phenomena, but theoretically distinct from one another. Where contestation refers to mandate distribution or starting position for political parties and is therefore closely related to Downs's theory on vote maximisation and the median voter hypothesis (Downs, 1957), political conflicts refer to the stances taken by political actors in relation to parties' policies and behaviour, which can be affected by contestation but is analytically distinct.

A fertile approach is to base estimations of political conflicts on subjective assessments held by the actors (see for example, Bäck, 2000; Lantto, 2005). This can be done through surveys and interviews, both of which have advantages over other indicators commonly used for studying views and perceptions of political actors. In particular, they provide information reported by the actors themselves. This means that researchers need to rely to a lesser degree on indirect information such as voting data that may be problematic if one is interested in studying views and ideas held by political actors (Bailer, 2014).

Earlier scholars have sometimes used conflict markers and voting data from parliamentary arenas in relation to party behaviour and party relations. Conflict markers refer to specific behaviour during parliamentary meetings such as alternative claims, reservations, call for votes, etc. This form of analysis is sometimes referred to as "roll-call analysis", and it has a long history within political science (Carroll & Poole, 2014). It started with analysis of voting data from the American Congress in the 1950s and quickly spread within the social sciences. Even though it is still frequently used in American studies and in studies of the European Parliament, with some exceptions this tradition seems to have stalled in Sweden since the 1970s (Lindvall et al., 2017). Studying conflict markers provides several benefits, such as the opportunity to study behaviour without attending the meeting in question, and to have a unit of analysis that is readily comparable and easily accessible. It also enables the researcher to get an indication of whether there have been any change in conflict levels over time. However, as conflict markers teach us little about the compromises and agreements that political parties make outside the parliamentary arena, this means that there is reason to be cautious regarding drawing conclusions on political conflicts solely based on such

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markers. It is also problematic to use such information when studying views and ideas held by political actors. On the other hand, conflict markers and voting data can support or complement findings in interviews or other forms of data (as in paper 2).

### A Multi-Method Approach

This thesis employs a multi-method approach in which I combine quantitative and qualitative methods for analysis depending on the research question at hand. The main empirical data for this thesis consists of subjective assessments (survey data and interviews) of political conflicts held by political actors. In one of the papers the subjective assessments have been complemented with a more objective measure of political conflicts (conflict markers). The quantitative analysis of survey data consists of multiple-OLS regression analyses when the aim is to study political conflicts at a structural or municipal level (papers 1 and 4), and when the aim is to study perceptions at an individual level a fixed-effects linear multilevel regression model is used in order to distinguish individual factors from factors at municipal level (paper 3). As some of the individual independent variables may persist at both individual and contextual level, aggregated versions of the variables (i.e. for gender, the proportion of women in the council, for socialist ideology, the proportion of socialists in the council, etc.) have been included in the analysis as well (compare Eriksson, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, all of the causes of political conflicts that are proposed in paper 1 are included in the multi-level analysis of paper 3 and this analysis confirms the results of paper 1. Both interviews and conflict markers are used when the aim is to study how organisational structure affects where and how conflicts are expressed (paper 2). Combining interviews and conflict markers in this manner enables me to not rely solely on indirect information when studying subjective assessments held by political actors, but at the same time to utilize conflict markers in a way that complements such assessments.

Furthermore, the null model analysis included in paper 3 shows that 8 per cent of the variation in perceived political dissent is found between the 290 municipalities in which representatives are clustered (intraclass correlation), while 92 per cent of the variation is found among individual representatives. About 21 per cent variation in perceived antagonistic behaviour is found at the municipal level, while 79 per cent is found among individual representatives. The

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<sup>1</sup> I would like here to extend a special thank you to Katarina Roos, senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Umeå University, for her advice regarding the multi-level analysis and how to control for the independent variables at municipal level. Her guidance has been invaluable for the analysis in paper 3.

variation among representatives within the municipalities is thus much greater than the variation between municipalities. This means that it is important to study political conflicts at structural, organisational and individual level in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

This is a multi-method approach where techniques for data gathering and analysis are combined from at least two methodological traditions (Seawright, 2016). A common argument for multi-method research is to apply “triangulation”, which means asking the same question but answering it using different methods. The perspective in this thesis is rather to integrate than to triangulate, meaning that all the articles focus on the same topic, but both the methods and the research questions vary. This is in line with Seawright (2016), who argues that qualitative and quantitative methods can-not be used to answer the same question as there are fundamental differences between the methods “...and so it is essentially useless to ask whether the answers are the same”. Instead, the idea is to use each method to answer questions for which it is especially suitable.

## The Survey – KOLFU

Data used in papers 1, 3, and 4 derives from a survey of all councillors in the 290 municipalities of Sweden: the KOLFU survey that was carried out in 2008-2009 and 2012-2013. KOLFU stands for “Kommun- och Landstingsfullmäktigeundersökningen”, which translates to the Local and Regional Councils Survey. KOLFU was conducted for the first time in the winter of 2008/2009 and for the second time in the winter of 2012/2013. There were 9,890 respondents in 2008 and 10,491 in 2012. A team of researchers at the University of Gothenburg conducted both KOLFU 2008 and KOLFU 2012. The surveys included questions regarding social background, opinions on political issues, views on democratic procedures, and the political work in their respective municipalities/counties. The surveys were mainly carried out electronically, however a postal survey was sent to those councillors who either did not have an active e-mail address or who specifically requested it. The response rate was 70% for KOLFU 2008 and 79% for KOLFU 2012. The high response rates increase the potential for a good representativeness of the survey in relation to the total number of councillors in Sweden. Overall, there are no major differences between the response rates of representatives from different political parties and the gender balance is also closely matched with the total number of councillors. The responses are also very well distributed geographically (Karlsson & Gilljam, 2014). The response rate is high in practically every municipality, which means that the survey can be used for analysis of relations and attitudes at municipal level.

## Measuring Political Conflicts

There are several challenges to overcome for those interested in measuring political dissent and antagonistic behaviour between political actors. In a book chapter from 2014 (“Politiska konflikter i svenska kommuner” by David Karlsson and Louise Skoog in the book “Svenska politiker”), we discussed these challenges and explored different ways of operationalising political conflicts based on survey data. As the discussions and results of this preliminary study were used as a foundation for methodological considerations in the papers included in the thesis (for example choice of indicators for the two forms of conflict), these considerations are of major relevance here as well.

### *Political Dissent*

In the book chapter (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014), we discussed the differences between subjective and objective estimations of levels of political conflicts, where a fundamental issue is that the actors themselves have different subjective perceptions of conflict and are not in agreement regarding what is a major or a minor conflict. Some of the most heated conflicts on policies occur between political actors that might seem to an outside observer to have relatively similar positions. And in addition, if the issues on which the conflicts are focused are of symbolic significance, then the disagreements can be perceived to be even greater.

For example, with regard to objective measures of political dissent, we used the KOLFU survey to estimate what positions political representatives have on 8 different political issues. This information was used to generate an index, which constituted the basis for an objective measurement of how opinion was distributed for each municipality, between all political parties and between the majority and the opposition. For each political issue, we used the average deviation from the median party’s position to estimate dissent between the political parties (compare Karlsson, 2013b). We also estimated the differences for each political issue between representatives of the majority and of the opposition in each municipality. Similar patterns emerged when comparing political dissent in relation to the 8 different political issues between, on the one hand, the political parties, and on the other hand, the political majority and the opposition. It is in issues regarding privatisation and taxes where the differences between left and right wing parties are the greatest, and the same goes for differences between the majority and the opposition. It is only with regards to the migration issue where differences between the parties are greater than between the majority and the opposition. It is likely that this is caused by the presence of the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist populist party that is in opposition in every municipality where they have

seats in the council. Notably, there was a strong correlation between levels of dissent between political parties on the one hand, and the level of dissent between majority and opposition on the other hand, revealing that a sizeable portion of the dissent between the political parties is captured by the dissent between the political majority and the opposition (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014).

However, using an index of this kind has its limitations. The questions in the survey have a general or principal characteristic, and there are of course important differences between parties in a municipality that a measurement of this kind cannot apprehend. We therefore also used the question in KOLFU 2012 where the political representatives assessed how great or small the political differences are between the main political opponents in their municipality; the majority and the opposition. This gave us a subjective estimation of degree of political dissent for each municipality. Moreover, we found a clear and statistically significant correlation between the objective and subjective estimations of conflict. However, it was only possible to explain a limited amount of the subjective estimations of dissent through the objective measures (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014). This clearly showed that respondents also based their assessments of political differences on factors other than the political issues included in the index. It is the subjective assessment of political dissent between majority and opposition that have been used in the following papers that are included in this thesis.

### *Antagonistic Behaviour*

The optimal way to estimate antagonistic behaviour in a political system would be to base estimations regarding confrontational or cooperative behaviour on assessments created from independent observations, such as conflict markers, roll-call analysis or patterns of friendship/socialisation between representatives from different parties. However, as observations of this kind are not accessible on the sort of scale that would be required for statistical analyses across all municipalities, we need to rely on information provided by the political representatives themselves. Several questions were asked in the KOLFU survey regarding the relationship between political parties and the representatives of different parties. Two questions are related to the objective (rather than subjective) behaviour of the politicians. On the personal or private side, they responded to a question regarding whether they had friends in other political parties, and on the professional side, they answered a question regarding the extent to which they consulted with representatives from other parties when formulating political proposals. In the book chapter from 2014, the results showed that 38 per cent of local representatives state that one of their closest friends is a representative of another political party. Overall, politi-

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cians of the centre-right parties and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet) have more friends in other parties (40-49 per cent) than representatives of the Social Democrats and Left Party (32-35 per cent). The Sweden Democrats have the lowest proportion of friends in other parties (23 per cent) (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014). When it comes to the responses to the question of how often politicians consult with politicians from other parties when formulating their political proposals, there are similarities with the results relating to friendships. The centre-right parties consult with others to a higher extent (40-34 on a scale from 0 to 100) than do representatives from the Social Democrats, Green Party and Left Party (29-38). The Sweden Democrats consult with representatives of other parties least of all (17).

The questions regarding friendship and counsel describe behaviour and relations between political parties. However, there are obvious flaws in these measurements. For most politicians, there are political parties that hold neighbouring positions to their own party; and cooperation and friendship with representatives of those parties is not necessarily a measurement of what their relationships are like with political parties in general. And as it is not uncommon for smaller political parties to only have a handful of representatives in some municipalities, it is not surprising if they coordinate their efforts with representatives of political parties that have positions on political issues that are similar to their own party. These measurements are interesting and address one aspect of antagonistic behaviour, but as they are unreliable they have not been used in the papers within this thesis.

Respondents were also asked in KOLFU 2012 to make their own assessment of the relations between the political parties and between the majority and the opposition in their municipality. The question was: "Is politics [in your municipality] primarily characterised by consensus or by party conflicts?", with the degree of antagonistic behaviour in each municipality measured as the mean value of the councillors' responses. The councillors responded on an eleven point scale and the answers were coded on a scale from 0 (primarily consensus) to 100 (primarily party conflicts). The mean value among all the municipalities is 46 and the municipalities with the highest and lowest perceived antagonistic behaviour were Älvdalen (87) and Ydre (14). In connection with the question on overall level of antagonistic behaviour in their municipality, the politicians also responded to a similar question regarding the council committee(s) where they have assignments. The mean value on the same scale was 30, illustrating that the level of conflict in their respective council committee is clearly perceived to be lower than in the municipality overall (confirming findings from paper 2).



Furthermore, the politicians were also asked to consider the statement “Relations between the majority and the opposition [in your municipality] are good”. This relates to how politicians perceive the relationship between the parliamentary alternatives. They answered the question on a scale from 0 (Entirely incorrect statement) to 10 (Entirely correct statement). This was recoded on a scale from 0 to 100, with the mean value of the relationship between the majority and the opposition in Swedish municipalities according to this measurement being 53. Responses to this question reveal a difference between politicians belonging to the majority (59) and the opposition (46), meaning that politicians in the majority are more satisfied with the relationship than politicians in opposition (in line with findings from paper 3) (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014).

Regarding correlations between different ways of estimating antagonistic behaviour, the results in the book chapter showed a positive and significant correlation between friendship and the exchange of counsel between political parties. However, there were no correlations between these estimations and how beneficial the politicians perceives the relationship to be between majority and opposition or between the political parties in general, indicating that friendships are formed over party lines regardless of the overall political climate in a municipality. The results also showed that there is a very strong correlation between what politicians perceive the relationship to be like between, on the one hand, the majority and the opposition, and the overall political climate on the other hand, indicating that these two measures of perceptions to a great extent measure the same thing – that politicians make no great distinction between antagonistic behaviour in their municipality in general and between the majority and the opposition in particular (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014). The indicator for antagonistic behaviour that is used in the following papers included in this thesis is local council members’ perception of the overall political climate.

## Comparative Case Studies

There are different ways to learn about a phenomenon. It is possible to study a large number of cases and then focus on a small number of select dimensions, or study a few selected cases and then have a broader focus. The analysis in paper 2 is based on a comparative case study, meaning that a few selected cases were chosen for this study. Case studies can never be representative of all cases in a statistical sense, which means that the cases chosen cannot represent all details of the population as a whole. However, the ambition or underlying logic of case studies is instead to draw conclusions or to find aspects

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that are relevant for a theory (Gerring, 2017). Three municipalities were examined in paper 2 and the selection of cases was based on the logic of a most-similar cases design. This means that the municipalities selected were chosen because they are as similar as possible in terms of potential influencing factors, except when it comes to the phenomenon of interest, i.e. organisational structure, where they vary. This design enables many of the independent variables that could influence the phenomenon studied, i.e. size of demos or type of political rule, to be kept constant (Gerring, 2017; Peters, 1998). As representatives of different organisational structures, the municipalities included have a high, and low, degree of horizontal specialisation (i.e. number of council committees). In other aspects the cases are as similar as possible. For instance, they are of similar size (around the median population for Swedish municipalities) and have similar tradition of political rule (similar composition of the political majority and oppositional parties). A comparison of municipalities with different organisational structures enables conclusions to be drawn on how the structure affects where and how political conflicts are expressed. Additionally, minutes from Assembly meetings have been collected from two points in time (2009 and 2016) for all the municipalities included, and most of the interviewees have also held leading positions in their municipalities for at least a decade, which has also enabled comparisons across time.

A common bias in case selection is that cases are often selected due to their historical importance or because of their accessibility (Bennett & Elman, 2006). However, for a study of local governments in Sweden, the bias concerning accessibility (i.e. that our ability to study a phenomenon is limited to what we have access to) is relatively low. All municipalities in Sweden are subject to the Transparency Act (offentlighetsprincipen), which means that they have a high degree of transparency and that most of what they do is accessible to the public. Furthermore, the focus was not on finding historically important cases, but rather to find municipalities that in one way or another can be said to represent average Swedish municipalities and thereby increase the validity of the study.

The analysis in this study is based on both documents and interviews. Firstly, minutes from all assembly meetings during 2009 and 2016 for all three municipalities have been used in order to study antagonistic behaviour in the assembly. In total, 668 matters have been analysed, with different forms of antagonistic behaviour, so called conflict markers, noted for every matter during the years selected. This enables a comparison across municipalities as well as over time. 2009 was chosen, as it was the year before Municipality C removed their council committees. 2016 was chosen as it is

the same year as the interviews were conducted. 2009 thus serves as an important point of comparison in drawing conclusions as to whether there has been a change to the behaviour in the assembly and, if so, the direction in which such a change has taken place. For every decision-making matter in the minutes, the focus has been on whether it gave rise to so-called conflict markers. The classification of the markers was such that each alternative claim, reservation and call for vote has been noted in a spreadsheet. If the same alternative claim or a reservation has been made by several councillors or by entire parties, this has also been noted.

Interviews were also conducted with 11 local politicians and chief executive officers from three municipalities. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that some of the questions and topics were decided on beforehand, but there was also an opportunity to ask supplementary and follow-up questions. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. An interview guide was used, with the questions concerning themes generated from the theoretical framework. This means that a range of questions was asked regarding their background, how they would characterise the political culture of their municipality, the relationship between the political parties (as well as between the majority and opposition), whether this relationship varies in the different institutional arenas of the municipalities, etc. The interviews were transcribed, resulting in hundreds of pages of text. This material was then analysed in the software program NVivo where the material was structured into codes. The codes were based on the theoretical framework and research questions on which paper 2 focused.

Table 2. Municipalities Included in Paper 2

	Political rule	Political organisation	Local characteristics	Unemployment rate	Population
Municipality A	Centre-right	Specialised structure	Mixture of public and private service sector. Local businesses are mainly based on agriculture, tourism and sports.	Slightly below the average for Sweden	Just above the median for Swedish municipalities
Municipality B	Centre-right	Specialised structure	Mixture of public and private service. Local businesses are mainly based on fishing and tourism.	Slightly below the average for Sweden	Just below the median for Swedish municipalities
Municipality C	Centre-right	De-specialised structure	Mixture of public and private service. It also has a relatively large non-governmental sector. Local businesses are mainly based on agriculture.	Slightly below the average for Sweden	Just below the median for Swedish municipalities

Note. Information relating to the municipalities derives from Statistics Sweden (SCB) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).

# 4

## Party Politicisation of Swedish Local Governments

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In this section I will present a systematic review of how Swedish local governments developed from being non-partisan arenas based on deliberation towards an informal majority rule based on parliamentary principles. This historical review will serve as a presentation of the Swedish case and contributes to answering research question number two: what causes political conflicts in local politics? Scholars have previously studied the history of Swedish municipalities and local politics from various perspectives, for example dynamics of local communities and political culture (Aronsson, 2001), municipal reforms (Aronsson et al., 2002; Erlingsson et al., 2010; Strandberg, 1995; Wångmar, 2003), construction of the welfare state (Ekström von Essen, 2003), as well as forms of political governance (Bäck, 2003a; Wångmar, 2006). These perspectives are highly relevant to understanding political conflicts in local politics and they are related fields. However, as of yet there is no systematic historical review focusing on party politicisation and political conflict, which means that although this section is descriptive and based on the work of other researchers, it nevertheless brings something new to the field of research on Swedish municipalities.

### Time Line and Reforms

The first Swedish Local Government Act (Kommunallagen) was passed in 1862, laying the foundation for both the current municipal system and for local self-government. It also entailed the introduction of an institution with an elected, though not democratically elected, council. These assemblies were mandatory for cities with more than 3,000 inhabitants, i.e. one-third of Swedish cities were affected. However, it was also possible for smaller towns and rural municipalities to voluntarily introduce a representative system. Over the next fifty years, nearly every larger city formed assembly governments, but only one per cent of the smaller towns and rural municipalities took advantage of this opportunity. By 1917, five per cent of all municipalities had established elected councils, with the remaining ninety-five per

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cent having general councils or municipal meetings as their highest-ranking decision-making body (Strömberg, 1974). The electoral system was reformed in 1918-19, making elected assemblies compulsory for cities with over 1,500 inhabitants. The regulation was also made mandatory regardless of type of municipality (Strömberg, 1974).

The right to vote was initially tied to land ownership and payment of taxes, which generally meant that for each “riksdaler” (a coin in the early Swedish currency system) of taxes paid, the taxpayer (individuals as well as private businesses) got one vote. As subsidies meant the poorest paid no taxes, it resulted in them having no right to vote (Bäck et al., 2005). With the first Local Government Act of 1862, a single holder of votes had a majority of the votes in approximately 50 municipalities (Aronsson, 2001). The difference in voting rights reflects the social power structure of Sweden at the time. In 1869, the number of votes per voter was restricted to 100. The voting reform of 1909 reduced this number to 40. The system of graded voting rights was completely abolished in the electoral reform of 1918-19, simultaneously extending the right to vote to women and introducing universal suffrage (Strömberg, 1974).

The voting reform of 1907-1909 also stipulated that a qualified majority (a 2/3 majority) was needed for every political decision that entailed expansion of municipal activities. However, the requirement for a qualified majority for such decisions also meant that a minority could veto policy proposals that were deemed to be undesirable. Guarantees of intervention by central government were present in the Local Government Act of 1862. These guarantees were initially passive, but were activated in conjunction with the reforms of 1918. Those that were activated mainly concerned limitations on the activities of local governments, emphasising local governments’ position as subordinate organisations with tasks delegated to them from central government (Östberg, 1996: 103). A commission appointed by the Liberal Party (Liberalerna) and the Social Democrats at national level in 1917 clearly defined the limitations on municipal activities in order to circumscribe the political majority that was about to come into power in many municipalities – the labour movement. The aim was not only to limit expansions of municipal activities, but to prevent so called “irresponsible democratic governance” by what were seen as the lower, uneducated, social classes. Using representative democracy as a way to protect a small and comparatively wealthy group from majority rule may seem surprising. However, through a well regulated system of proportionally elected drafting and executive bodies combined with slow moving social structures, the aim was to ensure a nondramatic transition to a new political era (Östberg, 1996).

## PARTY POLITICISATION OF SWEDISH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

In smaller municipalities, where municipal meetings were the highest-ranking decision-making body, a form of direct democracy was in use. However, these practices came to be considered undemocratic since many citizens did not attend the meetings and it was not uncommon for “coups” to occur at municipal meetings, with disgruntled citizens mobilising their supporters prior to decisions being taken (Ekström von Essen, 2003). To stop this development, representative democracy was introduced in 1938 for all municipalities with more than 700 inhabitants (Fredriksson, 2015).

Proportional elections were introduced in 1910 for cities with assembly governments, which opened up an opportunity for the Social Democrats to begin party politicising local elections in order to force the right wing parties to also enter into elections with separate party lists. No such party politicisation occurred in rural municipalities until after the voting reform of 1918-19. In 1919, local elections with separate lists for each political party were held in 28 per cent of rural municipalities. Even up until 1938, council members were still elected from a single list, a so-called “joint municipal list”, in 14 per cent of the rural municipalities with a Council (Östberg, 1996).

In 1939, the idea of enforcing an amalgamation reform was presented in a parliamentary bill from members of the Social Democratic party. The main proposal of the bill was an expansion of municipal social services in combination with a high degree of local self-government. Equity was at the core of these arguments; i.e. that citizens should have the same quantity and quality of public services regardless of where they lived (Ekström von Essen, 2002: 30). A government committee was subsequently appointed, which concluded its work in 1945 (Wängmar, 2003), and in 1946 Parliament decided to enforce a reform of the municipal structure. The aim was to merge small rural municipalities into units of at least 2,000 citizens, resulting in the amalgamation of as many as 78 per cent of all rural municipalities. The main arguments for the reform were; 1, too many municipalities had become dependent upon financing from central government, 2, the differences in resources and conditions between the largest and smallest municipalities were too great, thus fostering inequality, 3, the increase in inter-municipal cooperation was seen as a threat to local self-government, 4, if municipal tasks were to be forcibly transferred from a municipality to county or central level of government, this too would be a threat to local self-government (Erlingsson et al., 2010). The motives to reform thus did not explicitly concern local political institutions, and effects caused by the reform to these institutions were side effects and not the primary aim.

These discussions were put into effect in 1952, with the number of municipalities being reduced from 2,498 to 1,037 as a part of the Great Municipal Amalgamation Reform (Storkommunreformen). There was a shared under-

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standing among the political parties in the national parliament regarding the necessity to reform. However, the initiative to reform came from national level. At local level, especially among smaller municipalities, there was some resistance towards the reform (Erlingsson et al., 2010; Wångmar, 2003: 166), and even though the reform was extensive, the rapid urbanisation process meant that just seven years later it was deemed insufficiently ambitious. A new amalgamation reform, the so-called Municipal Block Reform (Kommunblocksreformen), was consequently implemented in the period 1962-1974, reducing the number of municipalities to 277 (Erlingsson et al., 2010). Even in international comparisons, such a reform to the municipal structure is exhaustive (Lidström, 2003).

According to Wångmar (2006), the Great Municipal Amalgamation Reform had two distinct effects on the party politicisation of local politics. First, all municipalities (except one) implemented assemblies as their highest-ranking decision-making body. Previously, only municipalities with more than 700 inhabitants had to form assembly governments. However, this new development meant that the use of municipal meetings as the primary decision-making model had had its day. This new democratic practice was formalised in the Local Government Act of 1953, coming into force in 1955. This law also stated that municipal meetings were not to coexist with assemblies, as had previously been the case. Furthermore, there was now a sharp decline in municipalities where assembly members were elected from a joint municipal list. There were 146 municipalities that applied joint lists in 1946, and by 1950 there were only 3.

There was no cohesive resistance from actors at central level regarding the amalgamation reforms. Instead, resistance came from local actors within the Right Party (Högern) and the Agrarian Party (Bondeförbundet), with their arguments concerning loss of history, tradition, identity, and community. Arguments concerning losses for democracy were not used. Ekström von Essen (2003) points out that the political parties were not unaware of the potential effects for local democracy. Problems such as the risk of a reduction in the number of elected representatives per citizen, and thereby an increase in distance between citizens and political decision-making, were discussed within all parties. However, the two largest parties at the time, the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party (Liberalerna), had a shared conviction that the advantages outweighed the negatives and that losses for democracy would be negligible. They also argued that if other criteria for the reforms were to be met, the reforms would even have positive effects for local democracy (Ekström von Essen, 2003: 363ff). The most important condition was representative democracy. Assemblies were viewed as more democratic than municipal



meetings, with the former constituting representative democracy and the latter direct democracy. Political parties were now to formulate local party programmes, thus defining their visions for their localities, which would produce political alternatives from which citizens were then to choose. At this point in time, joint municipal lists and “ad hoc-solutions” were deemed outmoded and old fashioned (Ekström von Essen, 2002: 49f). As predicted, the amalgamation reforms caused the number of elected officials per citizen to drop radically (Gidlund, 1983), and the increased size of the democratic unit made it more pluralistic and diverse – economically and culturally, as well as ideologically.

### Informal Party Politicisation of Local Politics

The gradual introduction of party politicisation of local elections through constitutional reforms in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not mean that local electoral campaigns were conducted with party programmes or that party affiliation came to structure local decision-making processes at the same pace. Party politicisation of municipalities in an informal sense was an even slower process, the foundation for which had been laid through the introduction of council institutions and equalisation of voting rights (Bäck, 2000). Strömberg and Westerståhl argue that the breakthrough for “real” party politicisation was the amalgamation reforms of 1952-74. An indication of this is that in 1979 almost all of the local party organisations presented separate party programmes. This means that party politicisation of local electoral campaigns occurred almost 20 years after formal party politicisation of local elections was introduced (Strömberg & Westerståhl, 1983), and that informal institutions have had a strong influence over local democratic practices in Sweden.

Local election campaigns increasingly came to focus on local issues rather than national matters, thereby manifesting party politicisation. An important component of this development was that nearly every political party established local party programmes where they stipulated what they wanted to achieve in the coming term of office. Another important difference was that the degree of political conflicts in the assemblies increased, and to a greater extent than before came to involve issues based in party political differences (Ekström von Essen, 2003). Traditional assembly government dominated local politics during the 1950s and 1960s. However, the 1970s constitute a breaking point where many municipalities transitioned from assembly government to a form of government involving displays of conflict in the assembly and where the majority appointed all seats as chair of committees and boards. A cleavage between the political parties at the local level was established post-1973, and from this point

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it was either the centre/right or the left-wing parties that formed ruling coalitions. Broad coalitions consisting of both right- and left-wing parties occurred but were considered uncommon (Wångmar, 2006). From a historical perspective, the main difference between national and local democracy in Sweden is that while national politics has been filled with party political conflicts and polarisation between the political parties, local democracy has been characterised by ideals of pragmatism and consensus (Sanne, 2001). However, from the 1970s new norms were established for how local politics was to be practiced. With the election of 1994, another breaking point was imminent. From 1994, it was less common for the centre/right- or the left-wing parties to be able to uphold majorities on their local council on their own. A contributory factor in this development was that the Green Party (Miljöpartiet) had a national breakthrough, with their success resulting in the need for cooperation across the left-right divide in almost 30 per cent of municipalities (Wångmar, 2006). This emphasises the increased fragmentation and complexity of the party system that occurred in parallel with the large structural reforms. In 1980, the average number of parties represented in local councils was 5.6 and in 1993 this number had increased to 7.3, leading to increased difficulties in forming coalitions holding a majority of seats in a council. The Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party cooperated at national level in the 1990s. Wångmar (2006) argues that this cooperation might also have inspired representatives of these parties to cooperate at the local level, thereby making broad coalitions a more widespread practice and decreasing the divide between centre/right and left-wing parties.

Earlier scholars have sought to estimate the level of party political conflicts at local level in Sweden in various ways. The different surveys and studies that have been produced tell us that the level of party political conflicts in an average sized municipality in the 1980s was the same as the level of party political conflicts in large cities in the 1960s (Wallin et al., 1981). Studies have also shown that these levels have continued to increase throughout the 1990s (Bäck, 2000) and that there is now no major difference in party politicisation between local and national level in Sweden (Gilljam et al., 2010b).

### **Advocates of Party Politicisation of Local Politics**

Although local governments today are units of representative democracy, they were not initially viewed as political units at all in Sweden. During the 19th and early 20th century, it was more important to solve local issues satisfactorily than to display ideological differences (Fredriksson, 2015). They were organisations that utilised volunteer and non-profit resources in order to manage concerns that members of the municipalities had in common. Mu-

nicipal activities were limited and they were not party politicised (Gidlund, 1983). Neither did the form of government that was applied at the time, municipal meetings with direct democracy, foster party politicisation. Towards the late 1930s, direct democracy was still applied in about 30 per cent of all municipalities (Gidlund, 1983).

In many municipalities, the Social Democrats let the right wing parties retain many seats as chair, despite the fact that the Social Democrats were in the majority. Östberg (1996) argues that this was due to the fact that local politics was long viewed as something separate from party politics. Instead, there was an emphasis on expertise and 'know-how', and since right wing parties were more experienced they were often deemed to be better suited to rule.

From the late 1940s and during the 1950s, there was an increase in party politicisation of local politics. The Social Democratic Party worked extensively in the 1940s to change local political norms and practices. Adolf Wallentheim, head of the Social Democratic Party's information office and leader of the efforts to change local practices, wrote newsletters and travelled around the country encouraging local representatives to be more active and to formulate their own proposals on important issues. The Social Democratic Party thus initiated new practices in local politics and ideas of party politicisation in municipalities started to spread. These efforts were part of an extensive project within the party with the goal of establishing new norms and standards for local politics (Ekström von Essen, 2002: 42ff). The strategies employed by the Social Democrats to foster and aid their local representatives in their efforts to be more active and to politicise local issues produced patterns that were copied by other political parties. The other parties formed their own offices with similar tasks not long after the Social Democratic party established their central information office to assist their local representatives (Ekström von Essen, 2002). However, politicisation of local politics was not merely a top-down process. These ideals were disseminated and shared between actors in a two-way process (Ekström von Essen, 2002; Forsell, 2014).

The emergence of municipalities and the expansion of their responsibilities within the Swedish welfare state are closely linked to the Social Democratic Party and their view of what function the municipalities should play in society. Their position was that municipalities were vital for the construction of a functioning welfare system and they should be the backbone of welfare and service provision. This point of view was not controversial as local actors had played a prominent role in the delivery of welfare services long before public provision of welfare services was formally established (Sellers & Lidström, 2007). Neither the Social Democratic Party nor the other parties wanted to change this. At

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this time, the political parties were unanimous that the municipalities were fundamental for a nation that was to be modernised – made more efficient and equitable (Ekström von Essen, 2003).

As previously mentioned, Strömberg and Westerståhl argue that party politicisation did not take place until the 1970s. Separate ballots for local parties were produced before then, but this development was not accompanied by a change in political culture and practice (Strömberg & Westerståhl, 1983). However, based on the propaganda materials that all political parties produced, Ekström von Essen argues that it is evident that the parties had started to push their members and representatives at local level to formulate their own policies long before this. The ambition to engage in separate party politics began as early as the 1920s within the Social Democratic Party, and these efforts gained momentum in the 1940s (Ekström von Essen, 2003: 361). However, it was after the Municipal Block Reform of 1971, where rural and small municipalities were merged into larger units, that party affiliation became more important for local democratic practices in general (Fredriksson, 2015), indicating that party politicisation may have been politically important internally long before it came to structure interactions between parties.

### Institutional Conditions for Party Politicisation

Comparative studies of local government reveal that Nordic local governments stand out when compared to other nations. Local governments are the main providers of welfare services in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. They also have strong local self-government, as well as viable financial strength (comparatively). Citizens of these countries also trust their local authorities more than citizens of other countries do (Hendriks et al., 2011). Furthermore, party politics is very important for the work of Swedish and Norwegian councillors while it only plays a lesser role for councillors in other European countries, for example France and Poland (Egner et al., 2013).

Today, local politics in Scandinavia has political parties at its core. They are central actors for local elections, organising the work in local councils and shaping local politics as a whole. Studies of party affiliation also show that in comparison with other European countries, Swedish councillors are at the top of the list with 99.6 per cent of councillors being party members. In comparison, party affiliation in Poland is only 29.5 per cent (Razin, 2013). Local councillors in Scandinavia also regard themselves as representatives of their parties to a greater extent than do councillors in most other European countries (Karlsson, 2013b). However, party politicisation has been a slow

process. Advocates of party politicisation of local politics played a vital role in both Sweden and Norway in shaping the conditions for the emergence of political parties at local level (Ekström von Essen, 2003; Hjellum, 1967). Formal regulations regarding local governments' positions in the political systems and the foundation for their internal organisation, general and equal elections, and proportional elections have also been instrumental for party politicisation. Bäck, Offerdal and Aars (2005) argue that the authorisation to arrange proportional elections may even be the most important factor for party politicisation of local elections in Norway. Comparably in Sweden, it is the implementation of assemblies for all municipalities that is often regarded as the pivotal factor for party politicisation of municipalities. However, as mandatory assemblies and proportional elections were implemented simultaneously, it is not possible to say whether the effect of proportional elections was as important for party politicisation of Swedish municipalities as they were in Norway.

Party political conflicts and informal majority rule were common in Swedish cities and larger municipalities as early as the 1960s (Strömberg, 1965). The implementation of the Municipal Block Reform constituted an ideological awakening as well as an increase in political conflicts for Swedish municipalities (Wångmar, 2006). This reform, taken together with the expansion of the welfare system and of local governments' service provision, the implementation of assemblies for all municipalities, and the role of the Social Democratic Party, meant that local politics was given a greater role in society as a whole. With greater values at stake, competition between the parties became stiffer.

## Strengthening the Local Executive

Mayors and political leaders across Europe are experiencing a shift in the balance of power in local governments, in which the political executive has gained political leverage over the assembly. According to the mayors themselves, the assembly is now the least influential of all political actors in local democracy (Denters, 2006). In Sweden, there has been a sharp reduction in the number of politicians over time, which may have instigated this shift in the balance of power. The decrease in the total number of politicians is partly due to the municipal amalgamation reforms that were completed in 1974, following which, a debate was triggered on how democracy at the local level could be improved, or rather how a "vitalisation of local democracy" – a popular term in this debate – could be achieved. This has been one of the items subject to investigation by various governmental committees, municipalities,

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counties, as well as by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, SKL), all of which have suggested ways of improving democratic practices.

Swedish local democracy is not alone in dealing with this dilemma. Some of the reforms that have been implemented, or suggested by different investigations, can be viewed as part of an international trend for local governments to strengthen the local executive. This trend is manifested in various ways depending on context. For example, there have been reforms aimed at enhancing the role of political leadership (Bäck et al., 2006), some countries have introduced direct popular election of mayors (Borraz & John, 2004), for others it has meant a more general strengthening of executive leadership (Heinelt et al., 2018), the introduction of formal parliamentary democracy (at least on a trial basis), and a reduction in the total number of local politicians, etc.

For Sweden, this tendency is especially clear when considering the role of the assembly. According to the Local Government Act (*kommunallagen*), the assembly is an important arena for political representatives. However, today the assembly is informally regarded as “a stop en route”, with the primary mission being to legitimise decisions that have been made elsewhere in the municipal organisation and to make decision-making processes transparent. Assembly meetings are often viewed as well-directed theatre performances, where local leaders of party groups give reasons for the positions of their respective parties. This tendency is also reflected in a survey from Statistics Sweden (SCB), where the representatives themselves specify that the position and/or political body with most influence over local politics is the Chair of the executive board or the Executive Board itself – not the assembly (SCB, 2013). This means that the leading politicians, and the Chair of the executive board in particular, have leading positions both within their municipalities (Karlsson, 2006) and towards external actors (Johansson, 2005).

The trend among Swedish local governments to remove most of their council committees (*nämnder*) (as detailed in paper 2) can also be viewed from such a perspective. When implementing such reforms, decision-making processes are to be centralised on a small number of strong leaders within each municipality. This is a reform that its advocates have argued has both enhanced democratic ideals and facilitated shorter and more efficient decision-making processes. It is popularly claimed to “vitalise the Assembly”, and thus implies a diagnosis of assemblies as not dynamic enough. But the assembly’s lack of vitality is most likely a consequence of having a strong local executive.

As indicated in this literature review, informal majority rule was established in the 1960s in the larger municipalities – long before it was common in the smaller municipalities (Strömberg, 1965). Along with the amal-

gamation reforms and the subsequent increase in average size of municipalities, there was also a general increase in level of political conflicts in local politics. This development illustrates the significance of municipal size for party political conflicts. Moreover, this literature review also shows that how Swedish local governments organise their political bodies is an important aspect for the relationship between political parties and how political conflicts are expressed and managed. The effects of these two factors, municipal size and organisational structure, will be further investigated in the papers that are part of this thesis.

### *Quasi-parliamentary democracy*

A related challenge faced by Swedish local governments is the growing gap between formal regulation and democratic practices. The Local Government Act (kommunallagen) states that local councils appoint seats proportionally in council committees and boards. Formally, this means that local elections do not produce political “winners” and “losers”. Instead, all political parties that are large enough are granted seats in the political bodies, i.e. executive boards, council committees and municipally owned corporations. Moreover, members of these bodies are collectively accountable to the assembly for their political decisions and for the administrative operations they control. In a system where all political parties are accountable for everything, it is difficult for voters to hold political parties accountable – to reward or punish them through electoral processes. Such circumstances also entail a risk that oppositional parties are “co-opted” by the ruling parties and made jointly responsible as well as accountable. This tendency has been observed in Norwegian local governments (Mikalsen & Bjørnå, 2015: 180ff), and it is likely to occur in Swedish local governments as well. The fact that formal majority rule is not possible in Swedish local governments means that Swedish local democracy is best characterised as *assembly government*. There has been a reoccurring debate since the 1960s regarding the introduction of formal majority rule in local governments (SOU 1972:32; SOU 1993:90; SOU 2012:30; SOU 2016:5).

In lieu of formal regulation, an informal practice of majority rule has been established in local governments since the 1960s. This informal version is sometimes referred to as “quasi-parliamentary democracy” (Bäck et al., 2000), which means that the chair of council committees and boards is appointed by the ruling majority, or coalition, of the local council. A change towards formal majority rule would in practice entail the introduction of a municipal parliamentary system. Beyond making the Executive Board dependent on the active, or passive, support of the assembly, there are different

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views on what such a reform would entail. Some of the expected benefits are that political accountability would be strengthened as it would clarify who the political “winners” and “losers” are, political governance would be made more efficient, and the difference between political alternatives would be clarified – which could lead to an increased frequency in changes of power. One of the possible negative side effects is that the oppositional parties may find it difficult to voice their opinions; this would be especially hard on smaller parties (Montin 2004: 93f; SOU 2012:30). This informal version of majoritarian democracy that is practiced means that among the 290 municipalities of Sweden there is a variation in how political conflicts are expressed and managed, and therefore also in how democracy is practiced.



# 5

## Findings of the Papers

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This section presents the findings of the thesis' four papers as short summaries.

### Paper I. Causes of Party Conflicts in Local Politics

This article shows how the two forms of party conflict – political dissent and antagonistic behaviour – are related but explained by different factors, with political dissent mainly explained by the size of demos, while social fragmentation, fiscal stress and party contestation increase antagonistic behaviour. Presence of a local protest party inflates both forms of conflict. Surprisingly, electoral contestation has less impact on conflict levels than earlier studies have suggested. The study is based on data from the KOLFU survey conducted among all councillors in the 290 municipalities in Sweden.

### Paper II. Where Did the Party Conflicts Go?

Reforms aimed at strengthening the local executive have been implemented in recent decades. Some of the reforms affect the degree of specialisation in local governments. This article shows that, depending on degree of horizontal specialisation in a political system, political conflicts are expressed in different arenas and between different actors depending on the degree of horizontal specialisation in a political system. In political organisations with a low degree of horizontal specialisation, party conflicts can be clarified in the local council. However, more issues are also depoliticised and the administration has increased discretion. One factor that instigates political conflicts is prioritisation between policy fields, rather than within fields. The study is based on an analysis of minutes from assembly meetings as well as interviews with leading local politicians and chief executive officers in three Swedish municipalities.

### Paper III. Conflicting Estimations of Conflict

This study reveals how politicians' perceptions of conflict are affected by ideology, partisanship and trust. The results show that the effects differ depending on the type of conflict. Socialists perceive political dissent as of a higher magnitude, while politicians who have higher levels of generalised and specified political trust perceive the level of antagonistic behaviour as lower. To be a political winner (in a ruling party coalition) or loser (in opposition) constitutes a social identity that fosters partisanship, which affects politicians' perceptions. Politicians who are winners tend to perceive levels of both political dissent and antagonistic behaviour as of a lower magnitude. More insights about how and why political actors perceive the same situation differently could potentially foster a greater understanding – a political empathy – among political combatants, facilitating their interactions. Moreover, if increased empathy generates more mutual political trust, this could in turn further reduce the perception of potentially damaging conflicts such as antagonistic behaviour. The study is based on data from the KOLFU survey.

### Paper IV. Political Conflicts and Marketization – Challenges for Political Leaders?

[Politiska konflikter och marknadisering – utmaningar för politiska ledare?]

A trend in many European countries is the strengthening of mayoral power. However, other trends are creating new challenges for mayors. The aim of this study is to investigate if, and to what extent, the two forms, political conflicts and marketization of the local administration, are challenging the influence of political leaders. Theoretically, these trends pull in different directions; according to the former, there is an increase in party politicisation and according to the latter, political decision-making is moved away from the political arena. The results of this study show that political dissent inflates influence, and antagonistic behaviour decreases influence. These effects are true not only for political leaders, but for all the actors involved, even citizens. The results also show that effects of marketization were the reverse of what we expected – these reforms may even strengthen the influence of political leaders. The study is based the KOLFU survey from 2008 and 2012.

# 6

## Contributions

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I will now discuss the results of the papers in relation to the research questions postulated. In this section I will answer research question number I (What is political conflict?), number II (What causes party political conflicts in local politics?) and number III (What are the effects of party political conflicts in local politics?). This section builds on the papers included in this thesis, and the different results are summarised and presented thematically.

### What Is Political Conflict?

There is no lack of definitions of conflicts among earlier scholars. However, even though there are many definitions available, it is common for earlier scholars to either use the term “conflict” without defining to what they are referring, or to treat all forms of conflict as uniform. Regardless of which, they have openly disregarded the complexity of political conflicts. A point of departure for this thesis is the idea that there are different forms of conflict and that studies where the different forms are included will enable a broadened understanding of what conflict is, what causes conflict, and what the effects of conflict are. A distinction between two forms of political conflicts – political dissent and antagonistic behaviour – has been made in the theoretical discussions in this thesis. These forms of conflict are theoretically derived and analytically distinct, but whether they can be found empirically and are forms of the same essence, i.e. aspects of one phenomenon, or different empirical phenomena that may or may not be causally related, are empirical questions. The theoretical assumption of the papers included in this thesis regarding their possible relation is that political dissent could have an effect on antagonistic behaviour; i.e. the greater the degree of political dissent, the greater would be the antagonistic behaviour. Based on the results of the papers in this thesis, we can now confirm that the two forms of conflict are indeed interrelated. The papers show that the two forms of conflict are explained by different factors (papers 1, 2, and 3) and that they produce different effects (paper 4). If it were not possible to separate the two forms of conflict in the analyses of the papers included in this thesis, then the argument that these two forms of conflicts exists would fall. We can therefore

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also conclude that they are separate forms of conflicts. In papers 1, 3 and 4, we could also confirm that political dissent has a positive effect on antagonistic behaviour, and this supports the theoretical assumption that higher levels of political dissent produce an increase in antagonistic behaviour.

What does this mean? Based on the results of the papers included in this thesis, we now know that the forms of conflict are separate phenomena, and it is likely that they have different contributions to a political system. Political dissent refers to the substance of political programmes and policies, and clarity towards voters in relation to the parties' positions and on where the parties' political views differ may facilitate the voters' choice on Election Day. Political dissent may consequently be seen as a facilitator in this aspect and therefore a necessary element in a representative democracy. Antagonistic behaviour, however, refers to the political climate and to how the parties behave towards each other. A limited amount of antagonistic behaviour might enable a clarification of the difference between parties. However, a high degree of antagonistic behaviour refers to situations where the parties actively try to stop other parties from exerting political influence, which may ultimately lead to a negative and disrespectful climate among the political representatives. Other than producing a negative work environment for the political representatives, an excessive amount of antagonistic behaviour may serve little purpose in a democratic system. This means that it is important to distinguish between the varying forms of conflict. Political dissent and antagonistic behaviour have different characteristics, are caused by different factors, play different roles in a democracy and produce different democratic effects.

### What Causes Party Political Conflicts in Local Politics?

In this thesis, three of the articles and the section on politicisation in the introduction have focused on this research question. These results are summarised and presented thematically in this section, and their effects on the two forms of party political conflicts are discussed.

#### *Social Fragmentation*

Political conflicts between individuals and different social groups can be found at all levels of society and politics. However, when there is a widespread fragmentation of society it becomes more difficult for a single political party to effectively represent the plurality of views held by voters (Sullivan, 1973). Allocation of a society's shared resources may involve favouring one social group or interest over another, leading to a conflict of interest between social groups. Such situations would provide opposing parties with potential divisions to use

in their favour. This is in line with Bartolini and Mair (1990), who argue that a politicised division is comprised of three elements. The first is empirical, with a social structure where different social groups are stratified. The second element is normative, where those belonging to a social group share values that shape a common identity. The third element is organisational, where organisations such as political parties represent the different interests of social groups. This means that some of the conflicting interests in society are manifested within the party system. Earlier studies have shown that diversity and social fragmentation in society are linked to the political situation in the parliament (Aistrup, 2004; Koetzle, 1998; Layman et al., 2006; Sullivan, 1973). Consequently, in paper 1 we hypothesised that the conflicting interests in society are manifested in political dissent between political parties in the parliamentary arena. Furthermore, it is argued that social fragmentation could also influence antagonistic behaviour among political representatives. If there is a causal relationship between the two, it is more likely that a higher degree of social fragmentation may lead to increased antagonistic behaviour; as social fragmentation in a society makes political issues related to different social groups more contested.

The results of the analysis of party conflicts in Swedish municipalities, paper 1, is that social fragmentation in the locality increases antagonistic behaviour among political actors, and that the degree of political dissent also has a strong effect on antagonistic behaviour. However, there was no evidence to support the hypothesis that social fragmentation in the locality has any effect on political dissent. These results were also confirmed in paper 3. It is surprising that a more heterogeneous locality does not produce wider political dissent. Given the results and the effect that social fragmentation has on antagonistic behaviour, it is likely that social fragmentation affects local politics by other means than through the parties' positions on political issues. Perhaps it is not primarily the social composition of the locality that affects the political beliefs of local political actors, but rather social aspects of the region or the nation as a whole.

A common assumption among earlier scholars is to associate size of demos with an increase in diversity and social fragmentation, but this effect is not automatic. Just as there may be large democratic units that are homogenous, there may be small units that are heterogeneous. For this reason, there were separate indicators for social fragmentation and size of demos included in the analysis of paper 1.

### *Size of Demos*

One of the most decisive aspects of political life is the size of the democratic unit, with the search for the ideal size of demos engaging scholars ever since the birth of the concept of democracy. Studies have also shown that many circumstances that vary with size of demos are of great importance for democratic practices (Denters et al., 2014). A classic assumption in democratic theory is to associate good democratic performance with smaller units (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Democratic participation between elections is also higher in smaller units. However, as the size of the democratic unit increases, so does the demand for democratic practices that to a lesser extent are based on individual engagement and more on practices where citizens rely on collective action and join organisations (Houlberg, 2003; Mouritzen, 1991). Additionally, a larger demos also fuels the creation of political alternatives – leading to a wider range of challengers (Karlsson, 2013a), increasing political distance between political parties (Saglie, 2002), as well as tougher competition and conflict among political parties, which would pave the way for better-qualified representatives (Padovano & Ricciuti, 2009). In larger democratic units, party organisations are larger and more professionalised, whereas party organisations in smaller units are often more dependent on the engagement of individuals and on personal relationships, meaning that size of the demos would shape the party political dynamics in the parliamentary arena. Earlier studies have also found that larger democratic units encourage political conflict and contestation (Bäck, 2000; Gerring et al., 2015; Karlsson, 2013a). As the size of a democratic unit increases, it is likely to become more pluralistic and diverse – economically, culturally, ideologically etc. – which paper 1 hypothesised would be positively related to both political dissent and antagonistic behaviour among political parties.

The comparison of municipalities in paper 1 showed that size has a clear effect on political conflict. These results were also confirmed in paper 3. A common assumption would be that the effect of size is due to increased diversity and fragmentation in society, but the results showed that the effect of size does not seem to be related to the indicators for diversity and social fragmentation. A possible explanation is that the size of democratic unit is related to the dynamics of party politics – rather than to diversity. In big municipalities, party organisations are larger, which could mean that dissent between parties is more easily produced. A surprising finding of the effect of the size of the demos is that it primarily regards political dissent and not antagonistic behaviour. The effect of size actually disappears when political dissent is introduced into the analysis. This implies that the effect of size is channelled, in some way, through political dissent. These findings are supported by the

findings in section 3, party politicisation of Swedish local governments, where we were able to observe that in larger cities and municipalities, party political conflicts and informal majority rule were common as early as the 1960s (Strömberg, 1965), long before it spread to the smaller municipalities, and as a consequence of the amalgamation reforms, where the average size of Swedish municipalities drastically increased, the general level of political conflicts in the local governments was inflated. This indicates that the more the size of demos has increased in Sweden, the more heightened the level of political conflicts has become. And from a historical perspective, size of demos has been a crucial factor for party politicisation of Swedish municipalities.

### *Fiscal Stress*

Another factor that it can be argued influences levels of party political conflicts is fiscal stress. Earlier studies have shown that there is a relationship between the political situation in the parliament and fiscal performance (Besley et al., 2010; Padovano & Ricciuti, 2009; Solé-Ollé, 2006). Some scholars have also noted that fiscal stress is a potential source of political conflicts (Lantto, 2005). This is based on the observation that a lack of economic resources would make it harder for the ruling majority to satisfy demands from their voters and from different social groups. Also, in a strained financial situation, it becomes all the more important for the ruling majority to coordinate their actions and cooperate in order to get policy proposals through a parliamentary arena (Lantto, 2005). Fiscal stress could therefore cause tension between political parties and between the ruling majority and the opposition, leading to an increase in antagonistic behaviour as each party strives to satisfy their respective voters in a harsh economic climate. Conversely, times of low fiscal stress would increase the potential for political cooperation (Brorström & Siverbo, 2008).

The results of paper 1 show a clear effect of fiscal stress on political conflicts. However, the effects of fiscal stress on political conflicts identified were related to internal factors. These results were confirmed in paper 3. The expectation might be that it is the economic situation in society that would have the greatest effect, but economic growth and prosperity in the locality as a whole had no effect. Instead, the effect came from the municipalities' internal fiscal situation – their solvency. Solvency is the ability of local governments to meet their long-term financial obligations. However, the degree of stress that is caused by such long-term factors is arguable; it is plausible that a measurement of short-term fiscal stress would lead to an even more stressful situation for local governments. More research is needed to ascertain whether this would have a greater effect on political conflicts. But as a subsequent comparison of local governments across Europe has confirmed this

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finding, showing that fiscal stress affects levels of political conflicts regardless of local government system (Navarro et al., 2018), this means that these results do indicate that times of strained financial resources and budgets fuel antagonistic behaviour among political parties.

### *Presence of Protest Parties*

The party system is also based upon political cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) and is dependent on voters' perceptions of how well the political parties relate to fundamental and relevant societal conflicts. Political actors need to uphold the vitality of the relation that exists between citizens and political parties (Demker, 2015). When new political cleavages arise, or if the established political parties are seen as inflexible to changing values and opinions of voters, this could lead to the formation of new political parties (Lawson & Merkl, 1988). The presence of a protest party in a parliamentary arena could also be seen as a manifestation of voters' discontent with the established parties and their inability to represent their views and ideas (Erlingsson, 2005). This means that a protest party is likely to have positions on policies that differ considerably from the positions of the established parties, thus increasing the overall political dissent in a parliamentary arena. Furthermore, a protest party is likely to make it its mission to not only represent its voters' view on policies – but also to channel their discontent with established parties. It is therefore likely that the antagonistic behaviour in the parliamentary arena also increases.

The results of paper 1 show that protest parties are indeed associated with a heightened degree of both political dissent and antagonistic behaviour. The presence of a local protest party was also included as a control in paper 3, and the results of this paper showed that it is not the representatives of local protest parties that perceive political conflicts as greater. Instead, it seems to be the other representatives in a parliamentary arena that experience an increased level of conflict when local protest parties enter into that environment.

In relation to Swedish politics, it is interesting to note that the results also showed that the presence of the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist populist party, had no significant effect on the political conflicts in the assemblies. From an empirical perspective, one would have expected the Sweden Democrats to rally discontented voters under their flag and to heighten the level of political conflicts in a parliamentary arena. But it seems to be the local protest parties who are more successful in this regard. This could indicate that the role of the Sweden Democrats in Swedish politics is either misunderstood or that the presence of this party brings the established parties closer together, leaving the overall level of political conflict unaffected.



### *Political Contestation*

Electoral contestation is often held up as a cause of political conflicts between political parties. There is no doubt that political parties may have different objectives; they might, for example, seek to attain office or implement certain political ideas or programmes (Adams & Merrill, 2009; Müller & Strøm, 1999). But even in situations where a party falls above or below what is required for a seat, a high number of votes are nevertheless viewed as desirable (Stigler, 1972). Having retained a high number of votes can be used as a sign of strength or appeal in the contest with other political parties. This means that all parties, regardless of their main objective, have an incentive to be responsive to shifts in public preferences in order to attract more voters. Political contestation is the degree of political competition in a political unit. Contestation is low when there is little organised opposition and the dominant party captures most of the votes and seats, and contestation thrives when there are more challengers than there are available seats and frequent shifts of power occur which lead to a tight race among the political parties for seats (Gerring et al., 2015). In a situation with a high level of political contestation, political parties or candidates become fearful of losing office and will then, in an effort to sustain their votes, deliver policies closer to the ones preferred by the median voter (the so-called median-voter hypothesis) (Adams et al., 2004; Adams & Merrill, 2009; Downs, 1957; Ezrow et al., 2011; Gerber & Lewis, 2004; Schumacher, De Vries et al., 2013). A high degree of political contestation may thus cause a decrease in political dissent between the political parties, and as a high degree of contestation means that there is an even division of mandates between the majority and opposition, this would also force them to coordinate their efforts among themselves in order to realise their political agenda, thereby increasing antagonistic behaviour between the opposing sides (Lantto, 2005).

However, contrary to previous studies, the results of paper 1 show that political contestation is not nearly as important for political conflicts as suggested. There is a stream of literature arguing the importance of contestation as a way of understanding the behaviour of political parties and representative democracy. But the analysis in paper 1 shows that the relationship between contestation and political conflicts in the form of political dissent and antagonistic behaviour is far from clear. Heightened political contestation is not associated with a lower degree of political dissent. These results were also confirmed in paper 3, and a possible explanation for these results is that the anticipation that high levels of contestation would produce less dissent emerged from the median-voter hypothesis, and many of the scholars advocating this hypothesis base their studies on two-party systems. Perhaps these

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results should not be expected to occur in multi-party systems, where the concept of political contestation is inherently unclear. Moreover, as only two of the five indicators for contestation were accompanied by a positive effect on antagonistic behaviour, this means that the relationship between contestation and antagonistic behaviour is more complex than expected.

### *Horizontal Specialisation*

Political systems are dependent upon specialisation with division of labour into units and sub-units. Horizontal specialisation is an expression of the number of specialised sub-units at the same administrative level (Bezes et al., 2013; Egeberg, 2012). As organisational structures are normative, constituting rules and roles specifying who is expected to do what and how (Scott, 1981), this means that political institutions (electoral systems, parliament, executive bodies etc.) help shape the rules for the parliamentary arena and consequently, how these institutions are designed affects the politicians' behaviour and how they perceive their role (see for example Bukve & Saxi, 2014; Bäck, 2003b; Carey & Shugart, 1995; Hagen & Vabo, 2005; Vabo, 2000;). Lijphart's work also shows that the way in which political institutions are organised influences the character of political conflicts (Lijphart, 1999). The political bodies and their design sets the framework for how political conflicts are expressed and managed. This means that it is crucial to understand the organisational setting of political actors as they can have great influence over the behaviour and interactions of political actors.

Depending on degree of horizontal specialisation of a political system, party conflicts can be expressed in different arenas and between different actors. Paper 2 shows that in political systems with a high degree of horizontal specialisation, conflicts in the form of antagonistic behaviour can be found between council committees as they act as advocates for their respective policy sectors. They therefore often find themselves in conflict with politicians from their own political party who are advocating for other policy sectors. In political organisations with a low degree of horizontal specialisation, we can see that work in the parliamentary arena is different. As there are now no council committees with decision-making powers, there are now more unresolved issues from a range of policy fields directed towards the parliamentary arena. This development has triggered political conflicts in the parliament with the result that in organisations with a low degree of horizontal specialisation, political dissent has been clarified in the parliamentary arena and antagonistic behaviour has also intensified. Based on the results of paper 2, the cause or mechanism behind this revitalisation is twofold; 1, the parliamentary arena now has the discretion to debate and decide on policies

that were not previously agreed in other arenas, and 2, along with their increased discretion, they have the ability to make priorities between policy fields, fuelling political conflicts between political actors. For it is in the arenas with authority to make priorities between policy fields that chances for political conflicts to be expressed are greater.

On the basis of these results, it could be argued that political systems where there is a low degree of horizontal specialisation are favourable. Political representatives in such systems are more frequently able to make priorities between values, which instigate political conflicts between political actors, and when conflicts are accentuated, the chances of democratic accountability are improved. However, as the results also show, in organisations with a low degree of horizontal specialisation, more cases are depoliticised and delegated to the administration. De-politicisation of cases gives rise to a democratic dilemma; political representatives are responsible for all matters addressed by their administration, but when the discretion of the administration increases due to de-politicisation, the ability of citizens to hold their representatives accountable is diminished. This could result in a zero sum game where the chance of democratic accountability is heightened at one end of the political system, but concurrently foreshortened at the other.

### *Political Psychology*

The behaviour and attitudes of individual political actors varies with, and in response to, differences in political institutions, political cultures, leadership styles, social norms, etc. Our behaviour, attitudes and perceptions are shaped by a complex mix of culture, context and individual psychology (Huddy et al., 2013). Beyond structural and institutional explanations of political conflicts, actors can also experience them differently. Parts of what constitute political conflicts may be visible, observable and formal. We can see positions taken by the political parties, which are in agreement and which are in disagreement. We can know which parties cooperate as a ruling majority and who constitute the opposition. But some aspects of political conflicts are informal, subjective and obscured. Many scholars have engaged in studying what factors affect and reinforce individuals' perceptions and political behaviour (Huddy et al., 2013). Based on earlier studies within the field of political psychology where the focus is to understand the behaviour of individuals within political systems, it is likely that whether a political conflict is perceived to be major or minor, it is likely to have a great influence on the behaviour of political actors. Perception is the manner by which individuals receive and process sensory impressions in order to make sense of the world around them. Based on our life experiences, we all have different outlooks on life and those differences contribute to variations in

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our perception of situations. While a group of people may be looking at the same simple object, each person has their own perception of what the object is. This means that each individual has a different perception of any given situation. Such differences may be due to a number of factors that create filters influencing our responses to a situation (Jervis, 2017).

Paper 3 focused on three factors that are of distinct relevance for perception of political conflicts: ideology, partisanship and trust. Ideologies constitute the core of politics, composing belief systems that provide individuals with an interpretation of the social world. Partisanship and trust are also distinct aspects of inter-group relations and social features that affect how we perceive our relationships, political institutions as well as ourselves. These are central properties of political practices, and have effects on how political conflicts are perceived.

### Ideology and Political Orientation

Ideology is the shared beliefs, opinions and values of a group, class or society. Though not all values and beliefs in an ideology are unanimously acknowledged within the group, they are widely shared and spread (Freeden, 2004; Jost et al., 2009;). In ideologies with a collectivist perspective on society, such as socialism and feminism, individuals are seen as members of different social groups and as such they have different interests that gives rise to power struggles and conflicts between them (Liedman, 2012). As socialists tend to view political parties as manifestations of societal conflicts, for example between labour and capital, we hypothesised in paper 3 that socialist politicians will perceive party relations as more conflicted than politicians that follow more individualistic or conservative ideologies.

The results of this paper showed that being a socialist has a directly positive effect on the perception of political dissent. But it only has a weak and indirect effect on perception of antagonistic behaviour – via political dissent. A reasonable conclusion is that perception of political positions is affected by ideology while perception of behaviour is not.

### Partisanship

Being a political representative is more than devotion to an ideology – it is about being member of a group and identifying with it, thus building psychological attachments to that group. Social identity is the manner in which individuals incorporate group membership into their self-concept (Huddy, 2003), which may foster partisanship (Greene, 1999, 2004). Supporting a team may alter one's perception of events, indicating that partisanship can have significant effects on both behaviour and attitudes. Studies of how people react to

experiencing the defeat of their sporting team serve to illustrate the mechanism at work in relation to partisanship. Where loyalty to a group, or team, involves emotional reactions where supporters share both pride in victory and bitterness in defeat, it also involves mechanisms of rationalisation in which defeat is often attributed to external factors or foul play by the opposing team. Such rationalisations serve to protect the group's standing – and by extension one's own sense of pride (Mann, 1974).

Earlier scholars of political behaviour have analysed the effects of being a political winner or loser, where winners are those supporting the parties in government and losers are parties that are out of government. These studies demonstrate that electoral “winners” and “losers” differ with respect to many different attitudes. For example, there is a tendency to prefer practices that are beneficial for the party and to interpret situations in a way that puts the party in a favourable light (Holmberg, 1999; Karlsson, 2017). This illustrates that being a winner seems to put many things in a more positive light. Based on this, we hypothesised that being a winner or loser creates a distinction between political actors, and their differing experiences of political work shape their perceptions of conflict in such a way that representatives of parties in the ruling majority (“the winners”) perceive political conflicts as of a lower magnitude than representatives of parties in opposition (“the losers”).

The results of paper 3 showed that partisanship does indeed have a negative effect on perception of levels of conflict, and also that the effect on perception of antagonistic behaviour (but not that of political dissent) is closely related to specific local trust.

## Trust

Trust can refer to specific political institutions and actors (i.e. political trust: Newton, 2007) as well as institutions and people in general. Generalised trust is trust in strangers (Uslaner, 2002), and it is often claimed to be an intrinsic part of personality characteristics where people displaying high levels of generalised trust have a confident, optimistic and cooperative disposition (Allport, 1961; Newton, 2007; Uslaner, 1999, 2000, 2002), indicating that trust is part of shaping one's worldview and establishing a framework for how we assess events and situations. People with low levels of generalised trust tend to have a critical or negative view of the world and its people. They are also more inclined to perceive behaviour of others as contrarian and disingenuous. Conversely, it is argued that high levels of trust are conducive to cooperation (Deutsch, 1958; McKnight et al., 1998) and behaviours that are inclusive towards new members (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Fukuyama, 1995; La Porta et al., 1997; Putnam, 1993), those with high-levels of generalised trust are also

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more inclined to have an understanding view of the intentions of others. We therefore hypothesised that people with high levels of generalised trust perceive political conflicts to be of a lesser magnitude than people with lower levels of trust.

However, trust is not merely part of one's personal characteristics; it is also based on life experiences, with personal involvement in a situation or event becoming part of shaping one's perception of the world (Jervis, 2017). Political representatives are not merely observers of political events – they themselves participate in political processes and those experiences are likely to shape their trust. This means that there is a specified local trust that is based on the trust one has in specific local actors and institutions, and we considered that political conflicts would be perceived as having a lesser magnitude among those with a high level of specified trust in local actors and institutions.

The results of paper 3 suggest that politicians who have higher levels of both generalised and specified political trust perceive the level of antagonistic behaviour as lower. But there were no effects of either generalised or specific local trust on perception of political dissent, a result that refutes the hypothesis that we postulated. This means that politicians' trust in both political institutions and in other people has stronger correlations with how they perceive their colleagues and their behaviour than with their perceptions of their colleagues' positions.

### **What Are the Effects of Party Political Conflicts in Local Politics?**

One of the papers in this thesis answers the research question regarding what the effects of party political conflicts are. It focused specifically on how political conflicts affect the influence of local political leaders. This section summarises the results of this paper and discusses the effects of the two forms of party political conflicts on the influence of local political leaders.

#### ***Influence of Political Leaders***

The influence of mayors varies over time between countries with different systems of local government, between municipalities within the same country, and within the same municipality. Formal and informal factors at structural, organisational and individual level enhance and weaken the position of the mayor (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006). Who the mayor is and the institutional context in which leadership is exercised are crucial for their ability to implement their political programmes. Local polit-

ical leaders in the Nordic countries play an important role in their municipalities (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004). The equivalent of the Swedish mayor is the chair of the Executive Board. Even though they have always had a leading position in local politics, due to a gradual reduction in the number of local representatives, political power has become even more centralised on the leading political actors (Karlsson et al., 2009). Another change that strengthens the influence of mayors is the increased emphasis on majoritarian democracy and party political cohesion within the ruling majority (Skoog, 2011).

In the section on party politicisation of Swedish local governments that is included in this thesis (section 4), I argued that in recent decades Swedish local government has been transformed into a veritable competitive democracy. Increased party politicisation means that issues that used to be solved in a consensual manner are now to a greater extent objects of political dispute. This development has brought with it new challenges for the local political leaders as they now need to navigate in a local context that is increasingly party politicised.

The display of political differences between political representatives and the fact that they enforce policies that may clash with positions of other actors is essential for representative democracy to function. However, even though political conflicts are important for democracy, they can sometimes be depicted as an obstacle to political processes and have effects for municipal operations (Houlberg & Pedersen, 2015). As Swedish local politics has become more party politicised over time, this has most likely become more challenging. It may, for instance, make it more difficult for political leaders to cooperate with other actors and to direct local government administration. If emphasis is placed on political leaders' ability to direct administrative operations, politicians should strive towards putting party differences aside and to cooperate in exercising strong leadership in relation to the administration. From such a perspective, political conflicts are a distraction or even an obstruction to the ability of political leaders to oversee the implementation of political decisions. The more political conflicts are intensified, the more they can be expected to diminish the influence of political leaders. And conversely, their influence can be expected to increase the more conflicts are reduced.

In paper 4, our expectations were that an increase in both forms of political conflict would lead to a decrease in influence for political leaders, and a strengthening of citizens' influence. However, it is only antagonistic behaviour that has such effects. Instead, political dissent might even have the effect of strengthening political influence. These effects were true for all categories of political actors – even for citizens. This means that it is important

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to make a distinction between the two forms of conflict; they have different characteristics, produce different effects and may consequently also have different contributions to a political system.

A cornerstone of representative democracy are the political representatives and political parties that represent different ideologies, social groups and interests, and who because of this may find themselves in conflict with each other. Exercising political leadership is a balancing act between the values of collective processes and the values of effectively enforcing political programmes – even in situations where there is widespread disagreement between political parties. Political conflicts are often depicted by scholars, as well as in social debate, as a problem or even as the culprit. But the results of paper 4 show that this is a myth. Political actors need to manage the challenge of expressing their positions clearly and displaying their inherent political differences, and simultaneously acting with respect towards those who represent different positions. Paper 3 suggests that politicians, depending on their political orientation, partisanship, and levels of trust, might perceive political conflicts differently. Taken together, this knowledge might help to build greater understanding among politicians, and foster an environment based on political empathy. An environment where trust in others is strengthened could even entail antagonistic behaviour among political actors being perceived as less problematic. Such an environment is no threat to democracy, but may even serve to strengthen democratic ideals and make way for the focus to be placed on the political dissent that is a necessity for democratic systems.



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## Political Conflicts – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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This thesis provides a contribution to the theory of political conflicts as well as to our empirical understanding of the phenomenon. The studies included show that a nuanced view of political conflict is fruitful and that political conflicts involve several aspects: individuals may have different perceptions of conflict, how we organise political systems will affect where and how they are expressed, and the size of the demos, social fragmentation, fiscal stress, protest parties, and contestation will all affect the levels and form of political conflicts. The two forms of conflict may also have different consequences for the influence of political leaders.

This section discusses the results of the studies included in the thesis. The first section reflects on the implications for local government, and the second section addresses implications for the theory of political conflicts and their role in a democratic system from a normative perspective.

### Implications for Local Governments

In multi-level political systems such as the Swedish system where local governments have a high level of autonomy – and according to the opening paragraph of the Swedish constitution, Swedish democracy is *realised* through municipal self-government – the national parliament and government is dependent upon local governments to implement their policies. This means that studies such as these, which concern municipal size, degree of sectorisation, and the institutions for political decision-making have important implications for local governments.

Municipal size is a crucial institutional factor in determining the range of municipal activities, organisational structure and possibilities for citizen participation. The discussion in Sweden regarding municipal size and democracy has been on-going for well over half a century, and this has led to two major amalgamation reforms (Erlingsson et al., 2010). These reforms were radical, and with the number of Swedes doubling over the same period, the municipalities have consequently grown in size, both in population and in range of

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services, while the reduction in municipalities has also decreased the total number of local politicians. Based on the results of this thesis, we now know that municipal size is an important institutional aspect with regards to both level and form of political conflict. Municipal size can have a major impact on the dynamics of local politics, with political work in smaller municipalities often more informal and reliant on engagement of individuals, while political work in larger municipalities tends to be focused around the political parties. We now also know that size, controlled for social fragmentation, has a separate effect on levels of political dissent and the smaller a municipality is, the lesser is the chance for political dissent between political parties. This means that how we organise our municipalities – for example how small or large they are – will have a major impact on the character of political conflicts, and, depending on whether we view political dissent between political parties as desirable or not, we may have different positions regarding how small or large municipalities should be.

Swedish municipalities traditionally organise their administration into local branches according to different policy areas, with matching council committees where members elected by the assembly are responsible for the activities undertaken by the administration within a specific policy area (for example education or environment). However, a growing number of municipalities have chosen to redesign their political organisations and remove most of the council committees where many local politicians are engaged (Karlsson et al., 2009; Siverbo, 2014). Reformists have argued that it is not only possible but also necessary for politicians to refrain from day-to-day involvement in administrative operations. It is argued that politicians neither have the right level of expertise nor the ability to understand the administrative operations well enough to make decisions that are necessary for such a level of involvement. The reforms implemented have hence sought to fundamentally change the traditional role of politicians. In implementing these reforms, politicians are to be encouraged to devote themselves to issues of broader ideological relevance rather than the details of administrative operations. However, as political and administrative bodies are interconnected institutions, it is reasonable to assume that such reforms to the political system will have effects on relations between political parties and between politics and administration. As it is most often smaller or average sized municipalities which choose to reform their organisation in this manner, this is also associated with the size of municipalities.

Based on the results of this thesis, we know that depending on how we structure our political systems, political conflicts will be expressed in different institutional arenas and between different political actors. It could therefore be

argued that political systems with a low degree of horizontal specialisation are favourable. In such systems, political representatives more often have the ability to make priorities between values, which instigate political conflicts between political actors. And when conflicts are accentuated, chances for democratic accountability are improved. However, as the results also show, this organisational reform has meant that more cases are depoliticised and delegated to the administration. What this implies in particular for Swedish local governments is that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has become more influential. It is to a great extent the responsibility of the CEO to determine what issues are to be managed by political bodies, and what issues are to be delegated to the administration. Administrators are servants of democracy, and in this function they are formally subordinate to the local political decision-making power. They are employed to implement the policies, decisions and priorities that are set by political representatives. However, a recent study shows that public administrators in Sweden would now to a great extent like the influence of political representatives to be weakened (Johansson et al., 2018). This development, in combination with the results of paper 2 where the position of the CEO has been accentuated in centralised political systems, indicates a worrying future for the state of local democracy.

In addition to the risk of increasing the influence of the unelected administration over political issues, there is also a risk that the administration is now faced with the challenge of managing unresolved political conflicts. Issues that would have been managed by council committees in a political system with a high degree of horizontal specialisation are perhaps issues where the dimension of conflict is at a low level – but not non-existent. When these issues are delegated to the administration, it becomes the task of the administration to manage these conflicts. More research is needed for us to ascertain what types of issues are delegated to the administration, and in turn, how the administration handles this challenge and how the CEOs manage their increased influence over political issues in centralised political systems.

## Implications for the Theory of Political Conflicts

In political systems based on representative democracy, political parties are important at all levels of government for the articulation, representation, and manifestation of the different social interests they represent. They contribute to democratic decision-making processes by displaying what political alternatives there are. The Swedish system is based on representative democracy and, even though the political institutions at local and regional level versus the national level are organised differently, they are all based on principles

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from representative democracy. This also means that they should adhere to the same democratic ideals. Despite this, while national politics are seen as arenas for polarisation and party political conflicts, local politics are sometimes described as consensual or non-political (Karlsson, 2003). For example, Sanne (2001) argues that local politics is characterised by deliberation and joint discussions towards what is regarded as “the common good” for the municipality as a whole. One explanation for the description of local politics as consensual in nature is that it has fit together with the idea of municipalities as “service providers” (Strandberg, 1998). In line with this interpretation of local politics, it is sometimes argued that local governments manage non-political matters or administer welfare services for which decisions have already been made at national level (Lantto, 2005: 37ff). But even though local democratic practices have changed and moved away from consensual ideals, and instead adopted practices of majoritarian democracy, we can still find examples of the different norms for local and national politics. For example, they are evident in governmental inquiries (see for example, SOU 2000:1; SOU 2012:30; SOU 2016:5), where, as a response to the debate on “vitalising local politics” and to counter the risk of a “party decline”, several reforms aimed at developing additional forms of citizen participation and citizen dialogues have been suggested. Many initiatives are also being implemented and citizens are now often invited to influence local politics via channels other than through political parties and electoral processes (Montin, 2006). But why are there different norms for democracy at national and local level?

Local governments work in close proximity to their citizens and as such it is often argued that this should lead to a democracy based upon widespread participation and dialogue between decision-makers and citizens. It is also at local level that most citizens engage in politics, and many local governments are making great efforts to organise arenas for citizen dialogues. However, in a decentralised welfare state such as Sweden, the same dimensions of conflicts that exist at national level persist at local level as well. Local governments are responsible for provision of welfare services, but also for many of the decisions related to these policy areas. This includes issues such as privatisation, marketization, sustainability, nationalism etc. These are highly political matters, and it is not surprising that there are political conflicts concerning these issues – regardless of tier of government. Based on the historical development of local politics over the past century, there have also been dramatic changes to local democratic practices. Formations in parliamentary majorities were previously an informal and imprecise practice, and broad coalitions where both left and right wing parties collaborated were common.

But over time, majoritarian democracy has been established in numerous municipalities and the political parties now mobilise their work into a ruling and an oppositional side over the whole term of office. Based on earlier studies of representational styles, it is evident that local councillors now primarily regard themselves as party representatives (Gilljam et al., 2010a; Skoog, 2011).

As shown in the studies included in this thesis, political conflicts among political parties in Swedish local government are now an inevitable part of local democratic practices. This means that there is a discrepancy between the discourses suggesting local politics is void of conflicts and the practices of local democratic work where conflicts are a regular element. It could also be that disagreement and lines of conflict are concealed underneath what may appear to be consensus in local politics, a tendency that has been found in Norwegian local politics (Aarsæther & Bjørnå, 2016). Correspondingly, earlier studies have also shown that given the choice, Swedish local councillors favour practices based on ideals of representative democracy over participatory practices (Gilljam et al., 2010b).

Democracy is perhaps the most widely respected form of political system, but it is also difficult to uphold. Democratic systems are by their nature systems of institutionalised competition for power. If there is no competition and no conflict, there is no need for democracy. But when political conflicts are sanctioned, they come with the risk of growing too extreme and generating a society so ridden with conflict that political stability is threatened. This means that political leaders must encourage conflict, but still retain the ability to act and enforce policies. This implies a contradiction between representing the many and putting power in the hands of the few. Inherent within democratic systems is the tension between democratic ideals based on representation and conflict and managerial ideals of governability and ability to act (Diamond, 1990).

As seen in the results of the studies included in this thesis, and as earlier scholars have also argued, norms related to majoritarian democracy have gained ground in local politics. Consequently, a gap has been created between, on the one hand, formal regulations, and on the other hand, local democratic practices. But is this development desirable? As was illustrated in section 2 of this thesis, there are various perspectives on political conflict and its role in a democratic system. Given these perspectives, there are a range of answers to this normative question.

If one adheres to a consensual model of democracy, the adoption of majority rule in local politics may be viewed as troublesome. The focus here is on bridging conflicts and seeking solutions across party lines. But this does

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not necessarily mean that political opponents should be in consensus, even if an exaggerated political dissent could be problematic. Instead, the importance of political actors striving towards cooperation in order to get as wide collaboration as possible could be stressed. If political actors become too focused on emphasising their differences, on openly critiquing political opponents, and on stopping other actors from exerting political influence, the ability to bridge political conflicts may diminish. This means that it is mainly antagonistic behaviour that is an obstacle to an unconditional search for political solutions that fit with the common good. Exaggerated political dissent could also be problematic, but the main focus would be on how actors handle the challenge of cooperating in such situations.

For proponents of majoritarian democracy, this development may be less problematic. Within this model of democracy, it is important for political actors to display their inherent differences openly and to be clear on who is responsible, and if voters are dissatisfied it should be possible to elect a new leadership. This means that it is vital for voters to be able to differentiate between the ruling majority and the opposition. From this perspective, an emphasis on political dissent coupled with a limited amount of antagonistic behaviour is positive. An environment where political differences between political opponents are displayed openly is not a threat to democracy – it is a mechanism. However, this does not mean that an excessive amount of antagonistic behaviour is welcomed. If it turns ugly, grows extreme, and entails acts of disrespectful behaviour, this could threaten the legitimacy of the political system.

But for advocates of deliberative democracy, a model of democracy that sometimes is argued to foster an understanding and consensual political climate among those who participate (Cohen, 1989; Hermansson et al., 2008; Gutmann & Thompson, 2009; Premfors, 2000), this development would not be regarded as desirable. However, in recent years the concept of consensus has seen a number of reformulations among deliberative democrats that are more compatible with political struggle and conflict (Bächtiger et al., 2018:19ff). Conflict and the airing of disagreements are now more often argued to be important for decision-making processes in deliberative democracy (Mansbridge et al., 2010: 69). This means that putting forth arguments, and counter arguments, in the public sphere is the means by which political decision-making in deliberative processes develops a logic that can be assessed and evaluated by those who are affected by the decision (White & Ypi, 2011). It is thus important for participating political actors in a deliberative model of democracy to voice their opinions and allow for political dissent to be displayed openly during the process. From this it follows that it

is mainly antagonistic behaviour, both in an exaggerated form but perhaps even in a limited amount, which might be problematic. If participants are not open to cooperation and making compromises across political divides, this might risk damaging deliberative processes.

Scholars, experts, and practitioners have argued that conflicts are either positive for democracy and should be embraced, or a negative feature that is to be rejected. Possibly both perspectives are valid, but in relation to different forms of political conflict. Perhaps it is political dissent, to clarify the differences in political actors' positions on policies, which should be embraced and displayed openly. Dissent brings with it characteristics that are of great importance to a democratic system, and as an added bonus, as shown in paper 4, may even serve to strengthen the influence of political actors. For those who adhere to a majoritarian perspective, a moderate level of antagonistic behaviour is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. It may prevent exaggerated cooperation across party lines, which muddles voters' chances for democratic accountability. An overinflated amount of antagonistic behaviour may create an inferior working environment for political representatives in the short run, while in the long run, bad conflicts can turn ugly – filling the political arena with acts of disrespectful behaviour which could delegitimise democratic institutions and the actors working within them. Democracy, regardless of whether it is consensual or majoritarian in nature, must be regarded as legitimate in the eyes of those governed – the people. In order to uphold its legitimacy, it needs to manage social and economic problems, and achieve this while maintaining a measure of respectful behaviour for political adversaries.

This highlights a paradox – conflict is a prerequisite for democracy, but conflict needs to be managed and restrained. Thus, in the words of Larry Diamond: “cleavage must be tempered by consensus” (Diamond, 1990). Herbert Tingsten was of a similar mind, arguing that: “A balance between community and division, between cooperation and war, is a prerequisite for a democratic system” (Tingsten, 1960: 90). In this perspective, political conflicts are a necessity for democracy, but can also be an obstruction blocking political actors from making compromises and from cooperating (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009). These tensions are not easily managed, but every political entity striving to uphold democracy is likely to face this dilemma. This illustrates that there is a normative aspect to political conflicts, where they may be viewed as either good or bad depending on point of view. However, as the results of this thesis show – it may also vary depending on the form of political conflict that is in focus.

### *The Case for Political Conflicts*

This thesis focuses on political parties in local governments, highlighting what conflicts are, what causes political conflicts, and what their effects are. However, even though its results may be of particular relevance for local governments, the implications of the findings are more far reaching. The results of this thesis in relation to the theory of political conflicts implies that there may be reason to have a nuanced view of political conflicts, where they may be neither always good nor bad, but where their contributions to a political system may depend on their different characteristics and on how they are to be managed. From this, we find three arguments in favour of political conflicts.

*First*, it may not be possible for democratic systems to avoid political conflicts – or deny their existence. Political conflicts are at the core of politics. This rests on the democratic ideal of an inherent equality between people: that all people are equal and that every person has the capacity to perceive what is in his or her interest. Or, if we reverse the argument, that no person is superior to another and that no claim or interest is superior. Thus, no-one can legitimately subject another person to his or her will or authority. This is the foundation of democracy. When a decision is to be made, no citizen's interest or demand is to be regarded as more worthy than that of another citizen (Dahl, 2007; Mansbridge et al., 2010).

In any given society, there are a plethora of interests that may be in conflict with the interests of others. But shying away from and concealing political conflict will obscure the chances of openly displaying political alternatives, and when lines of conflict are disguised, there is a risk that not all interests are given equal consideration before a decision is made. When only some interests are to be taken into account, it raises the question of whose interests are deemed to be more deserving than others of such consideration. Such a situation might, in extreme cases, entail a rejection of the democratic principle of an inherent equality between people.

If we are to fully accept the idea of an inherent equality, that within a demos we will find different interests which may conflict with the interests of others and that all interests have a rightful claim to be given equal consideration, then we must also accept that there are political conflicts that by definition lack rational solutions. Politics almost always involves a choice between conflicting alternatives, where a decision may lead to a favouring of one interest over another. It is not always possible to base solutions to political conflicts on reason or 'common sense', or to reduce them to technical issues best handled by professionals. Solutions or outcomes of political decisions can, however, be the result of discussions or compromises where each political actor



is made aware of the consequences of each choice (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009). As conflicts also have productive qualities, such as preventing tunnel vision and spurring innovation, attempting to avoid conflict might also mean losing out on reaping their benefits.

*Second*, if we accept that political conflicts are a part of politics, then we must also allow issues to be politicised. People are not isolated individuals, we live together in societies and we form both individual and collective identities. These identities have a vital function in politics, where establishing an identity is to distinguish oneself from another and to define group boundaries is to make a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, thus paving the way for pluralism and diversity. The role for democracy is not to overcome this in order to establish consensus, it is to shape these identities in such a way that conflicts between collectives can be managed legitimately (Dahl, 2007).

For centuries it has been argued that democracy required a small and homogenous demos to function. But many modern democracies are large-scale, heterogeneous, pluralistic and diverse, proving that homogeneity is not a prerequisite for democracy (Dahl, 2007). However, in order to mobilise the citizenry to engage in politics, issues need to be politicised, and in turn, politicisation requires the social world to be allowed to appear divided into opposite camps to which people can associate. In an era where much is said about consensus and disregarding conflicts, it is no wonder that citizens are less engaged in politics (Mouffe, 2008). However, in order to take a stand on political issues and to engage in politics, it would be beneficial if political issues were polarised and political alternatives were offered during political discussions or debates. Whether it should be the role of political parties to politicise issues, or whether arenas should be organised where citizens can discuss different sides to a policy may vary depending on the model of democracy to which one adheres. But when a people actively engage in the democratic idea, this usually leads to the best possible political system (Dahl, 2007). If we instead were to refuse the chance to politicise issues, how can the people then be expected to take a stand on political issues, to engage in politics, if they find it difficult to grasp what political alternatives there are? If there is no space given to debate political issues, they have instead become depoliticised, which could be a threat to the democratic quality of policy-making (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2018).

*Third*, if we accept that political conflicts are a part of politics and that this involves sanctioning polarisation, then – in order to be perceived as legitimate – there is a need for political conflicts to take on a form that does not threaten to eradicate political stability. To acknowledge the conflictual nature of the social world is not to undermine democracy, on the contrary, it is through such efforts that we can manage the challenges faced by democratic

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systems (Mouffe, 2008). In order to mobilise the citizenry in a democratic direction, conflicts must be allowed legitimate forms of expressions. This could be achieved through political dissent between political parties, but it could also be accomplished through forums for deliberations or via participatory mechanisms, and in order to stop bad conflicts from turning ugly, antagonistic behaviour must be tamed and political adversaries at all levels of society need to learn to acknowledge and respect each other, to regard political rivals as opponents – not enemies. When there is a lack of legitimate outlets for political conflicts, they can turn ugly or even violent. Through a functioning democratic system where political conflicts are sanctioned and given legitimate forms of expressions, ugly conflicts such as excessive antagonistic behaviour may be tempered. Democracy, in this sense, is a mechanism that can be used to establish a political culture where people are encouraged to engage in politics, and where political conflicts are endorsed but held within carefully defined boundaries.

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