Abstract
This paper critically examines two explanations for why people participate in politics: social capital theory and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s Civic Voluntarism Model. The two approaches are outlined, and it is argued that they in fact share several key characteristics and therefore, also fall victim to some of the same fallacies. These similarities include the focus on non-political institutions as the determents of political activity and the idea of resources or capital being part of the process leading to participation. Both theories neglect the importance of political institutions and state structure in creating opportunities for and influencing the nature of political participation. The example of study circles in Sweden is examined in an attempt to link political participation to political context.
Introduction

Various theories have been used to explain political participation, two of which will be examined in this paper. Social capital theory argues that participation in non-political contexts is an important determining factor in the quality of political institutions and for explaining the possibility of political participation. According to its proponents, social capital—networks of associations, trust, and norms of reciprocity—enables people to achieve goals that would not have been possible in its absence.1 Similarly, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady (VSB) contend that political participation is largely shaped by citizens’ involvement in non-political institutions such as work, voluntary organisations, and church.2 VSB argue that certain resources—especially time, money, and civic skills—are necessary for political participation. Most crucial is the acquisition of civic skills which, according to the theory, takes place in the non-political institutions outlined above. While these two approaches to explaining political participation do offer a number of valid points, they fall short in several key aspects. This paper argues that both social capital theory and the model of VSB disregard the importance of formal political institutions and state structures when it comes to answering the question of why people participate in politics.

The paper proceeds by first outlining a number of difficulties with the definition(s) of social capital. James Coleman’s definition is contrasted with that of Robert Putnam and it is argued that the latter confuses elements of human capital in his use of social capital. Furthermore, in Putnam’s analysis, social capital is transformed from the value-neutral concept found in Coleman’s work to a normatively loaded term used to describe and explain ‘good’ civic engagement.

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In undergoing this change, the concept looses much of its explanatory and analytical power. A third critique is that Putnam’s work, as well as much of the work that follows him, muddles cause and effect, dependent and independent variables, thereby obscuring further an already enigmatic concept.

These definitional problems inevitably lead to difficulties in measuring social capital. The paper looks at the work of Putnam and several others who follow his lead, and concludes that the indicators of social capital employed in these studies—almost always associational membership—often measure individual rather than relational trends. Moreover, much of the work on social capital largely disregards the wider political setting in which it is created. That is, the creation of social capital is conditioned by the particular political institutions and settings that make up the environment where secondary associations exist and where trust operates.

The paper then goes on to examine the explanation for political participation found in VSB—what they call the Civic Voluntarism Model. The different elements of the model are outlined and the process by which they are argued to lead to political participation is critiqued. The similarities between the Civic Voluntarism Model and social capital theory are examined and I contend that the former falls short on several of the same points as social capital.

In an attempt to move beyond the notion of social capital as context independent, I will offer an argument about the importance of politics and of institutions to the study of social capital. Finally, the institutional structure of Swedish study circles (studiecirklar) and their potential impact on social capital creation is briefly explored.

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3Ibid.
The Problem of Defining Social Capital

It has been argued that social capital is important because it enables people to achieve ends that in its absence would not be possible. In the wake of work by Coleman and, more recently Putnam, social capital has come to be seen as something of an elixir, its absence or existence being used to explain a myriad of ails and wonders. This paper critically examines the social capital concept, arguing that its usefulness in the social sciences is at risk due to problems of definition as well as problems of measurement arising from the confusion over definitions.

For Coleman, social capital is a capital resource that comes about in relations between persons. Several different aspects of social relations can constitute social capital. These include trust, obligations, and expectations; information channels; and norms and sanctions. Coleman defines social capital as follows:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence. Like physical capital and human capital, social capital is not completely fungible, but may be fungible with respect to specific activities. . . . Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons.

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5 Coleman, 1988, S102-5.
It is lodged neither in individuals nor in physical implements of production.  

Coleman goes on to describe a number of examples of social capital. These include the development of radical student activism in South Korea, the growth of which was facilitated by social capital in consisting of social relations or networks. Social capital in the form of normative structures or trust is behind the fact that parents are more willing to let their children play unattended in Jerusalem than in Detroit. The former city has a larger stock of social capital in the form of normative structures that ensure that other adults will look after children. In a Cairo market, social capital in the form of obligations and expectations between merchants enables them to fulfil several roles at once, in this way making commerce more efficient. The intricate network of relations between the merchants constitutes a type of capital resource that can be drawn on to facilitate business. Social relations in the Cairo market make commerce more flexible and, therefore, presumably more profitable than it would be if merchants were operating in isolation from one another.  

Two important aspects of Coleman’s definition need to be stressed. First, social capital is to be found in the relations between people and does not dwell as a trait within individuals. Thus, social capital is specific to just those relations in which it resides and does not transfer outside these. The question of whether or not social capital transfers outside of closed settings is a fundamentally important issue in the literature. It is necessary here to offer some conceptual clarification. Human capital, simply put, refers to a person’s skills, education, knowledge, health etc. and as such is explicitly individual. Human capital differs in important ways from financial or physical capital. As Gary Becker points out, ‘... you cannot separate a person from his or her knowledge, skills, health, or values the

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7 Ibid., p. 303-304.
way it is possible to move financial or physical assets while the owner stays put." Social capital, as mentioned earlier, resides in the relations between people. In the same way that you cannot separate a person from their human capital, you cannot take social capital out of the specific relations where it resides. That is, there is no reason to believe that the social capital in the form of trust among merchants in the Cairo market can be transformed into some form of generalised trust. The trust is not carried from situation to situation by individuals but rather, is unique to the relations among merchants in that setting. As Coleman puts it, ‘A does something for B and trusts B to reciprocate in the future. This creates an expectation in A and an obligation on the part of B.’ A and B act within a closed system and thus A’s expectations of future reciprocation cannot reasonably be expected to be fulfilled by some actor C. In contrast, human capital does transfer from setting to setting since it is a resource held by individuals. Putnam’s definition and subsequent operationalisation of social capital, to which I will return shortly, falls victim of this misinterpretation.

What ought to be stressed is the relationship between social capital and human capital. If A and B have a relationship, it is probable that the two will acquire skills and knowledge of how to act toward one another in various situations (human capital). Either A or B might then be able to employ some of these skills and knowledge in trying to build up relationships with others. That is, relationships with social capital may facilitate the creation of human capital that is transferable to other relationships where social capital may or may not develop. While the terminology per se is not important, it becomes quite difficult to systematically study a social phenomenon when its meaning is constantly muddled. There will of course be disagreements over the proper use and meaning of concepts, however it is useful to try to differentiate between these meanings if one is to avoid comparing apples and oranges.

10 Coleman, 1988, S102.
Second, like other forms of capital—financial capital for instance—social capital is value neutral. That is, Coleman is not concerned with the nature of the end for which social capital used but rather with the fact that it constitutes a resource of some kind that facilitates a goal that would not be possible in its absence. Whether this is a neighbourhood interested in cleaning up a pond or a group of revolutionaries set on a violent overthrow of the government is irrelevant. Social capital is neither good nor bad in and of itself.

Putnam on the other hand, argues that social capital is a key ingredient, indeed in the Italian case (which will be examined in more depth later in the paper) it is the key ingredient, for successful democratic government. That is, Putnam takes it for granted that social capital is a good thing and in this way, by linking it to the quality of democracy, he burdens the concept with a host of values. This normative conceptualisation of social capital poses a myriad of problems. As Putnam defines it, social capital is equal to participation in voluntary associations, ‘norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement.’\(^\text{11}\) Secondary associations are a source of social capital in the form of norms, trust, and networks. This definition of social capital is problematic for two reasons. First, it limits the scope of the concept to what Putnam considers good democratic governance. Social capital, like other forms of capital is neither evenly distributed nor is it necessarily for the good of all in society. The social capital that facilitates the pond clean up is positive for that neighbourhood but may constrain the actions of industry. It helps in cleaning up the pond but at the same time it takes resources away from other goals. Likewise, the social capital used by the revolutionaries in their overthrow of the government clearly impedes the behaviour of some of the population. Second, the definition waters down the relational character of the concept by conceiving of norms and trust as individual traits. In this way, Putnam falls victim of confusing social capital with human capital.

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\(^{11}\)Putnam, 1993, 167.
The Problem of Measuring Social Capital

Putnam is not alone in conceiving of social capital along individual and psychological lines. Paul Whiteley’s study for example, sets out to improve on the Tocqueville/Putnam model of social capital arguing that associational membership and participation are inadequate as a model for social capital creation.\textsuperscript{12} In its stead, Whiteley suggests a model ‘rooted in psychological variables associated with the personalities and moral codes of individuals….’\textsuperscript{13} Three components of the model are discussed: (1) that social capital is created by the individual’s personality characteristics; (2) that social capital is created by the ‘normative beliefs and moral codes of individuals’, which are developed early in life; (3) that the creation of social capital takes place through ‘membership in “imaginary” communities.’\textsuperscript{14} All of these alternative explanations explicitly deny the relational nature of social capital and thus the ways of measuring them are also individual-level measures. Measuring the relationship between life satisfaction and trust tests the personality argument. The moral code argument goes as follows: people who have a strong moral sense which causes them to be empathetic and fair are predisposed to trust other people while those who lack this moral sense are not. Whiteley, following Richard Dawkins’ idea of the \textit{meme}, goes so far as to suggest that this moral sense is universal and that it has developed in the evolution of the human species, that moral traits have evolved as a result of natural selection.\textsuperscript{15} Whiteley’s imaginary communities argument is tested by measuring people’s identification with the nation: the more patriotic an individual is, the more trusting they are, goes the argument. Whiteley finds a strong correlation between his indicators and trust, which leads him to conclude that the creation of social capital is better explained by these psychological models than by Tocqueville’s and Putnam’s focus on associations. A strong

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 8.
correlation there may be, but whether this means that the Whiteley indicators are accurate measures of social capital is another matter.

Whiteley has measured people’s propensity to trust others in an attempt to discover the origins of social capital. Leaving aside the definitional problems and the fact that this runs contrary to the relational nature of social capital, it is instructive to ask the question, why investigate the concept in the first place? That is, why is it important? Whiteley never explicitly states what social capital would be used for. He does hint at the notion that social capital facilitates a better functioning democracy. This is problematic for the reasons outlined above. Having a large stock of social or any other type of capital is one thing, but the more interesting question is what do we use it for? To use the example of financial capital, most would agree that having a certain amount of it is beneficial. The reason for this being that one can purchase objects or services that one feels one needs or wants. That is, financial capital has no inherent value in and of itself. It is only useful if we either spend it to get something else, or if we invest it in order to increase our financial capital in order to be able to purchase pricier services or better quality goods. Capital does very little just sitting in the bank and even less rolled up under one’s mattress. The same can be said of social capital. Social capital is only interesting in so far as it is a resource capitalised upon in order to attain an end. One explanation for the confusion over the meaning and value of social capital—one that is admittedly somewhat (but not entirely) impudent—is that researchers have misinterpreted the word social in social capital. That is, social refers to social relations, relations in society, not to sociable, friendly, or necessarily positive connotations.

These problems of definition and measurement become more apparent when examining Putnam’s study in more detail. In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam sets out to explore the origins of effective government by looking at institutional performance in the regions of Italy, asking the research question: Why do some regional governments perform better than others? The aim was to evaluate ‘(1)
policy processes; (2) policy pronouncements; and (3) policy implementation.\textsuperscript{16} Twelve indicators of institutional performance were employed: cabinet stability; budget promptness; statistical and information services; reform legislation; legislative innovation; day care centres; family clinics; industrial instruments; agricultural spending capacity; local health unit expenditures; housing and urban development; and bureaucratic responsiveness.\textsuperscript{17} Thus the initial question was not, What makes democracy work? But rather, What makes government effective? These are two vastly different questions. Effective government need not have anything to do with the democratic quality of government and conversely, democratic governments are not necessarily effective governments. Despite this shortcoming, Putnam draws inferences from the Italy study and makes claims as to what can make democracy qualitatively better.

Following Alexis de Tocqueville’s writing, Putnam claims that the lessons learned from participation in secondary associations fosters the ‘habits of the heart’ necessary for a functioning democracy.\textsuperscript{18} The analysis relies heavily on associational participation as the catalyst for the development of social integration and the individual behaviour necessary for sturdy democracies:

Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government. . . both because of their ‘internal’ effects on individual members and because of their ‘external’ effects on the wider polity. Internally, associations instil in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity and public-spiritidness. . . Externally. . . a dense network of secondary associations both embodies and contributes to effective social collaboration.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16}Putnam, 1993, 65.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 67-73.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 89-90.
It is argued that those regions that are characterised by a rich civic community also have well functioning democratic institutions. Conversely, regions where distrust and fragmentation are present display poor institutional performance. The reasons for the differences in levels of ‘civinness’ are to be found in medieval Italy, the time during which the foundations for civic engagement and participation in that country where laid. Putnam attributes the strength of civic life in the northern regions to the ‘flourishing communal republics of the twelfth century’ and the ‘cooperatives and cultural associations and mutual aid societies’ of the nineteenth century. Putnam suggests that social capital can explain why these civic bonds have lasted for centuries and how it is that they come to play such a crucial role in the performance of government. It is argued that social capital is ‘self-reinforcing and cumulative’ because its features (norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement) ‘reduce incentives to defect, reduce uncertainty, and provide models for future co-operation.’ In other words, communities that have high levels of trust, civic engagement, and co-operation tend to reproduce those same qualities over time. Following the same logic, uncivic communities tend to remain distrustful and fragmented. What Putnam is saying in effect is that either you are lucky enough to have social capital—in which case your institutions will function well and democracy will be harmonious—or if your community lacks social capital, it will continue to lack it thereby causing distrust, atomisation, and poor government performance. I contend that social capital can be fostered through top-down institutional arrangements. I will return to this point in the last section of the paper.

Putnam has faced some criticism for his focus on associations and the seemingly non-political context within which he sees social capital developing. Gerry Stoker and his colleagues for example, take issue with the nature of Putnam’s analysis of associational life (horizontal associations) being the ingredient for successful government—that is, Putnam’s argument about bottom-

\[20\] Ibid., p. 162.
\[21\] Ibid., p. 177
up social capital. However, the problem is not so much Putnam’s way of analysing associations, but rather it is the focus on associations itself that is problematic. Putnam and Stoker argue different angles of the same incorrect assumption. Namely that activity in secondary associations is a good indicator of social capital. Again, this study seems to confuse cause and effect. That is, it is unclear wherein the capital in social capital lies. It is argued that social capital facilitates collective action but at the same time collective action seems to be a form of social capital. It is difficult to distinguish between the dependent and independent variables in the study. Putnam’s work suffers from the same defect.

I agree with Putnam’s analysis on a number of points. The concept of democracy is a complex one but at its centre is the citizen. There is no doubt that citizens matter in democracies and that civic participation can be an important aspect of a healthy democracy. Putnam correctly identifies a sense of disengagement and unconnectedness among people in modern western democracies. However, both historical and contemporary evidence points to the fact that the very ‘civiness’ which Putnam praises as the ingredient for successful democracy can lead to very undesirable and decidedly undemocratic results. Organisations such as militia movements in the United States, for example, exhibit many of the features that Putnam includes in his ‘civic community.’ Trust, social connections, co-operation, and common goals are all features of modern militia movements; features that Putnam feels are important for the promotion of civic-mindedness. Similarly, the increase in so-called ‘gated communities’ in America points to the fact that citizens are joining together in community groups to achieve common ends—however in this case, citizens are joining together to exclude others. It is not at all obvious that militias or ‘gated communities’ are particularly conducive to well functioning democratic institutions. Yet they do seem to display many of the characteristics of organisations that, according to Putnam’s analysis, ought to do just that. As

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mentioned above, a value-neutral conceptualisation of social capital can account for these-to us perhaps unsavoury-ends. Putnam’s version of social capital, linked as it is to the quality of civic life and democracy, runs into difficulty in the face of examples like these. Therefore, it is important to place the study of social capital within a broader context of political institutions. Putnam argues that a vigorous civic community leads to well functioning institutions. I would add that the character of political institutions shapes the way that people participate and the way social capital is formed and used.

Social capital in the form of generalised trust may in fact lead to less participation and, in some cases it may be a lack of trust that prompts people to participate. Consider the following example of a parent who has the choice to participate or remain absent from the meetings of the PTA in his or her child’s school district. If the parent has confidence in the ability of the teachers and other parents to make informed decisions about the curriculum or whatever issue may be on the agenda, there is no reason for them to attend the meeting beyond the purely social function it serves. If I trust that other people are going to make correct decisions, or at least similar decisions to those I would make myself, I am better off letting others decide. If, on the other hand, the parent suspects that his or her fellow PTA members cannot be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of their child, they would do well to attend the meeting in order to ensure that their interests are taken into account. Thus, it is not clear that social capital in the form of trust leads to increased participation.

A further problem with Putnam’s study is that it does not adequately address the issue of how people become active participants in a civic community. Put in another way, Putnam does not address the institutions that promote participation and the acquiring of participatory tools. Neo-Tocquevillians like Putnam, ask the question: What standards of competence can and must we realistically require of citizens? This question is important but it is only half of the problem. We must also ask: How is this competence generated and how do we uphold it over time? That is, what are the background conditions and institutional frameworks that lead
to democratic skills? These questions bring us back to the earlier discussion of human capital.

**The Civic Voluntarism Model of Political Participation**

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady examine the process of political participation in America. The theoretical framework they develop shares several features with the social capital concept that has been discussed in the paper so far. Being similar in several ways, VSB's model of political participation also suffers from a number of the same fallacies that social capital falls victim to. Before examining these problems, it is useful to briefly outline the model that VSB propose.

In order for citizens to become active in politics, they need a certain level of motivation—that is, they must want to participate. Citizens also need the capacity to be active—they must be able to participate. Individuals who are both motivated and capable of participation are more likely to become active if they are part of recruitment networks where requests for participation take place. From this starting point VSB analyse how these three factors—resources for participation, engagement in politics, and mechanisms for recruitment—lead to political participation in what they refer to as the Civic Voluntarism Model.23 The authors claim that both motivation and capacity for active involvement in politics have their roots in non-political settings. Early in life, individuals develop these traits in the family and in school. In adult life, the job, non-political voluntary organisations, and the church confer opportunities for developing ‘politically relevant resources’ and these institutions also contribute to feelings of psychological engagement with politics. The direction of causality in the model goes from involvement in non-political institutions to political activity.24 As in the case of social capital, there may however, be another factor that is prior to these non-political institutional involvements—the structure of political institutions that condition opportunities for participation in non-political contexts. If, for

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24 Ibid., 270-3.
example, activity in voluntary organisations is crucial for political participation, then we must examine how different political systems effect the development of such organisations. An open political system will probably entail more associations having the chance to develop.

The elements that lead to political participation can, according to VSB, be stockpiled over the life time of an individual and these factors often continue to privilege those who were initially advantaged. Also in this sense, the Civic Voluntarism Model is comparable to the social capital concept. The components of the model act as an asset that can be drawn upon in order to participate in politics just as social capital enables people to achieve goals. The ‘capital’ found in the Civic Voluntarism Model is also developed in similar ‘networks of relations’ as those of social capital:

We discover that activity frequently takes place in the context of rich interpersonal networks…. [It] seems that personal connections among acquaintances, friends, and relatives—often mediated through mutual [non-political] institutional affiliations—are still crucial for political recruitment.25

Moreover, similarly to social capital theory, the Civic Voluntarism Model argues that advantages incurred early in life are often maintained over time. Thus, those individuals that gained this asset in school and at home in childhood are more likely to be able to continue to develop it further at work, in voluntary organisations, and in church as adults.

As mentioned above, the Civic Voluntarism Model includes resources, engagement, and recruitment networks. The model places special emphasis on recourses because they are considered prior to the other two factors in the process that leads to political participation. As such, resources are less likely than engagement and recruitment to be the result rather than the cause of political

25 Ibid., 17.
activity. Resources, in the Civic Voluntarism Model refers to money, time, and civic skills. Citizens use money to contribute to parties, candidates, political organisations or causes, and time is a resource that is used in virtually every act of participation (beyond simply signing a cheque). Civic skills are defined by VSB as, ‘the communications and organisational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life.’

Civic skills are measured by asking respondents whether they had engaged in specific ‘skill acts’ in the non-political spheres of work, voluntary organisations, or church-namely, if during the past six months, they had: ‘written a letter, gone to a meeting where decisions were made, planned or chaired a meeting, or given a presentation or speech.’ According to the Civic Voluntarism Model, ordinary, non-political activity in these three spheres can lead to the development of skills that are politically relevant and therefore, can ease political participation. The chances to gain resources in the form of civic skills in non-political contexts depends on several factors. First, is the individual connected to an institution-do they have a job, are they active in church or in voluntary organisations? Second, the type of institution has a bearing on civic skills formation. That is, working in a law firm will more likely lead to civic skills than will working in a cafeteria. What is important for the development of civic skills, according to the authors, is how the institution provides opportunities to choose to exercise these skills. Finally, the characteristics of the individual are important. Some people are more likely than others to take charge and engage in skill acts voluntarily.

In explaining how involvement in non-political institutions leads to political participation, VSB present an array of statistically sophisticated evidence. They take as their dependent variable an overall scale of political participation. The scale includes voting in the 1988 election, working in a campaign, contributing money to a campaign, contacting an official, taking part in a protest, working informally with others in the community on a community issue, membership on a local governing board or regular attendance at the meetings of such a board, and membership in an organisation that takes political stands. This is an additive scale where each of the above count as one act. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady,
explanatory variables are measures of involvement in the three non-political institutions mentioned above—having a job or not, involvement in non-political voluntary organisations, and attendance at church. Two further measures are added: amount of education and citizenship. VSB find that affiliation with these non-political institutions is positively related to political activity. When controlling for education, the positive relationship remains because, according to VSB the non-political institutions have their effect through the development of resources. Adding resources to the analysis alters the effect of institutional affiliation. Indeed, when civic skills are added, involvement in the three non-political institutions become insignificant as a predictor of political participation. As the authors put it: ‘Simply being involved in an institution does not foster participation. What matters for participation is what happens in the institution—the acquisition of civic skills.’

While the evidence for the link between involvement in non-political institutions, the development of civic skills, and political participation is rather compelling, it does not adequately answer the question of why people participate in politics. That is, the elements of the Civic Voluntarism Model are important for political participation—indeed they may be necessary for political participation to take place—but they are not a sufficient explanation. The shortcoming is somewhat akin to asking the question, where do apples come from, and getting the answer, apple trees. It is not incorrect, but at the same time the answer begs the question, what makes apple trees grow. The step from having resources to participating in politics is not all together apparent. As with social capital, it would seem that in the case of the Civic Voluntarism Model, there is a potential gap in the process, a step missing. Even if people possess the resources of time, money, and civic skills they still may be non-participants. These resources may not be sufficient for participation to take place.

1995, 188.
30 Ibid., 338-9.
31 Ibid., 340.
There are a number of possible reasons why people-even in the possession of these important resources, and even when resources are coupled with the other two factors of the model, engagement and recruitment-do not participate. The political institutions-the setting where political participation takes place-may be such that they do not readily allow for high levels of participation. As mentioned above, both social capital theory and the Civic Voluntarism Model beg the question of how these non-political contexts are formed since they still occupy a space within a political system. That is, the effect of state structure and political institutions needs to be accounted for. Moreover, the Civic Voluntarism Model’s overall scale of participation is problematic. In order to adequately answer the question of why an individual participates, there needs to be an analysis of the different goals individuals have when they engage in political acts and an examination of the choices they make, both choices between various modes of participation, and choices between who they support.

**Institutional Context and Social Capital**

Returning to the issue of institutional context, it is interesting to examine the example of Sweden in this instance. As Rothstein points out, the fact of Social Democratic hegemony in Sweden during the post World War II decades (the party has been in power fifty-five of the past sixty-six years) has lead to Sweden standing out in a number of respects. Sweden is at the top of OECD countries in public spending and taxation, for example. Sweden has also consistently been at the top in terms of voter turnout.\(^{32}\) The character of Swedish society has in the past often been referred to as ‘the Swedish Model’, pointing, among other things, to the unique way that conflicts between parties on the labour market have been regulated and a special method for collective decision-making, a central element of which is that all concerned parties are given a say and the possibility of being heard. This also means that decisions are arrived at through a process of
negotiations and bargaining—taken to extremes, this leads to a situation where everything is negotiable.\textsuperscript{33} This model was marked by high levels of civic engagement in a wide variety of organisations, clubs, and associations, both private and public.

Studies of political participation in Sweden have not yielded any conclusive answers to the question of whether rates of participation are in decline or not. What can be said is that the forms of participation are changing. When it comes to political participation, Petersson et al. found that it is predominantly the more simple and less time consuming forms such as petition signing and monetary donations that are increasing while more complex and demanding acts including party activity and contacting media, politicians, or organisations are decreasing.\textsuperscript{34} Sweden is still very organised when it comes to membership and activity in voluntary organisations. Bo Rothstein cites data from 1992 that shows that 92 percent of adult Swedes are members of a voluntary organisation. The average number of memberships per person is between 2.9 and 4.0, depending on the measure. Fifty-one percent of the population consider themselves active members and 29 percent serve as an elected representative in organisations.\textsuperscript{35}

Returning to the question of the background conditions and institutional frameworks that lead to democratic skills it is instructive to look at one specifically Swedish institution that has played a vital role in this respect: the so-called study circles (\textit{studiecirklar}). These groups have been the preferred educational method in Sweden, and are more specifically related to the popular adult education movement (\textit{folkbildning}).\textsuperscript{36} Study circles are small groups of

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\item\textsuperscript{36}See for example: Arvidsson, Lars, 1991. \textit{Folkbildning och Självuppförande: En Analys av Oscar Olssons Idéer och Bildningssyn}. Eskilstuna: Tidens Förlag; SOU 1996:47, Cirkelsamhället:
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adults who usually meet one evening per week to educate themselves on a specific subject. Unlike other educational forms, study circles are democratically organised. That is, they are an educational form with a non-authoritarian structure, where to a large degree, it is the participants—not the leader or instructor—who set the agenda and determine how the work is to be organised. The study circles are organised by the associations for popular adult education and can cover areas as diverse as popular mechanics, foreign languages, EU membership, or nuclear energy use. A recent study has shown that 75 percent of adult Swedes have attended a study circle at some point in their lives and that 10 percent report participating regularly. Each year, roughly 40 percent of the adult population attend a study circle.

The figure represents the population 15 years and older. Since 1991, participants in study circles are allowed to be younger than 15 years.


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37Ibid., p. 35.

As mentioned above, many of the indicators of political participation that demand skills and knowledge are in decline. That is, participation such as party activity and contacting—activities demanding time commitments and communications/social skills—have declined. Several other studies have pointed to a strong positive relationship between participation in study circles and other forms of civic participation and voluntary activity in general. Participants in study circles are more likely to feel able to participate politically, and in fact do engage in political participation more than those who do not attend study circles.\textsuperscript{39}

The cited study does not, however, explicitly set out to correlate participation in study circles with individual indicators of political participation, but simply finds a positive relationship between the former and political participation in general. Thus, it would be of great interest to analyse the specific types of political participation engaged in by participants and non-participants in study circles. I would hypothesise that those individuals who participate in study circles will be more likely to engage in more complex and demanding forms of political participation than those individuals who do not participate in study circles.

Study circles are an interesting case for several reasons. First this activity is important in generating the types of skills that lead to active citizenship in other arenas. Second, study circles are horizontally organised. That is they are egalitarian and non-hierarchical in structure. This would seem to support the claim that individuals involved in organisations and institutions that are egalitarian are more likely to generally participate politically. Third, study circles are an example of active state involvement in the creation of what has been referred to as social capital. Study circles are seen as a cornerstone of democracy in Sweden. As such they are actively supported by the state. Roughly half the funding for study circles and the associations for popular adult education comes from the Swedish state.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39}SOU 1996:44, p. 236-237.
to foster top-down social capital, as opposed to the bottom-up cultural explanations for social capital formation offered by Putnam. That is, study circles have come about in Sweden as a result of the explicit supported of the state.

I have argued against studying social capital in terms of individual-level psychological variables and mere associational membership, contending that if framed in this way, social capital loses much of its explanatory power. Coleman’s original concept, while in some ways underdeveloped, placed the emphasis on social structure and closed networks as the venues for social capital creation and utilisation. Future research would do well to focus attention on these aspects in order to get a more textured picture of how the structure of associations and other participatory arenas relate to social capital. An important step is to take into account the influence of institutional context on social capital.
References


