

Article

Inviting politics in: When and how school party visits matter for democratic learning

Niklas Bolin & Joel Jacobsson

Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

Highlights:

- Political party visits prompt students to interpret and evaluate their openness to politics.
- Students' experiences are shaped by classroom climate, group dynamics, and personal relevance.
- Authentic dialogue and balanced representation increase students' trust in politics.
- Poorly structured visits may reinforce cynicism and political disengagement.

Purpose: This article examines how upper secondary students in Sweden experience political party visits to school, and how these encounters can be understood in relation to democratic learning.

Design/methodology/approach: Based on seven focus group interviews across three schools with varying exposure to party visits, the study adopts an inductive thematic analysis to explore how students experience and make sense of these encounters.

Findings: Students experienced the visits as social encounters rather than lessons, assessing politics as a practice. Engagement was shaped by relational dynamics and visit design, with well-prepared and balanced encounters fostering credibility and interest, while poorly planned visits had the opposite effect.

Research limitations/implications: Due to a relatively small sample, caution is warranted when generalising the findings. Future studies should examine broader contexts and use complementary methods.

Practical implications: Schools should ensure equitable access, prepare students, and create respectful settings to maximise the educational value of party visits.

Keywords: civic education, political engagement, youth and democracy, democratic learning

Corresponding author:

Niklas Bolin, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, SE-851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden.
E-Mail: niklas.bolin@miun.se

Suggested citation:

Bolin, Niklas, & Jacobsson, Joel (2026). Inviting politics in: When and how school party visits matter for democratic learning. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 25(1).
<https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-8085>

 Open access



1 INTRODUCTION

Schools play an indispensable role in shaping the democratic citizens of tomorrow (Sant, 2019). Previous research shows that teaching methods that invite students to take an active role – through, for example, classroom discussions, small-group work, application assignments, civic projects, and democratic decision-making exercises – can influence different aspects of students’ democratic competencies and democratic learning in a positive way (Teegelbeckers et al., 2023). However, while a great deal of research has focused on how classroom dynamics and teaching strategies help develop students’ democratic competencies (Wallin et al., 2022), we still know surprisingly little about how experiences outside the classroom shape students’ democratic development as part of broader learning processes and their relationship to politics and political engagement over time. Many schools tend to organise activities beyond the regular curriculum that can foster students’ democratic development and learning. Previous research has, for example, highlighted initiatives such as student councils (Andersson et al., 2019; Keating & Janmaat, 2015) and student mock elections (Borge, 2017; de Groot & Eidhof, 2019; Larsen et al., 2016; Öhrvall & Oskarsson, 2020). Another form of such activity that has received relatively little scholarly attention is political party visits to schools – a practice that is very common in several Nordic countries (Bolin, 2023; Borge, 2017). Such visits are often seen as very important, both because they help schools fulfil their democratic mission by strengthening democratic values among students, and because they serve as a key recruitment channel for party youth wings – and ultimately for political parties themselves. And at a time when overall party activism is on the decline, and concerns about young people’s disengagement from traditional forms of politics are growing, visits to schools have become increasingly significant (Bolin & Backlund, 2021; McDonnell et al., 2024).

Despite the long-standing tradition of party visits to schools and their often-assumed positive effects, their impact on students remains poorly understood and researched. The absence of rigorous studies leaves open the question of how students perceive these encounters and how such experiences can become meaningful learning opportunities. Against this background, this article explores students’ perceptions of political party visits to schools. More specifically, we draw on focus group interviews with upper secondary students from three different schools in a medium-sized municipality in Sweden. Our study approaches political engagement as one important dimension of democratic learning, understood as an orientation rather than as a directly observable outcome. Here, orientation refers to students’ interest in politics, how much they trust political actors, their desire and openness to participate, and their sense of political efficacy. These orientations are early, formative dimensions of engagement rather than direct and observable political action.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do students experience political party visits to school in relation to democratic learning?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: first, we situate political party visits within the broader concepts of democratic learning and political engagement; second, we review research on the social and interactional conditions of democratic learning and on students’ active participation; third, we describe data and method; fourth, we present the empirical findings; and finally, we discuss the results in light of previous research and offer some concluding remarks.

2 DEMOCRATIC LEARNING AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Schools are often perceived as institutions that are key when it comes to supporting students' development as democratic citizens (Biesta, 2007; Sant, 2019). Democratic learning as a concept is frequently used to capture the ways in which education seemingly contributes to this task. It includes not only knowledge about democratic institutions and processes – but also the development of values that enable participation in decision-making. Because of this, democratic learning can be seen as a broad concept that combines both cognitive and formative dimensions.

Political engagement can arguably be understood as a consequence of democratic learning (Kiehl, 2022). Though the meaning of political engagement is broad, it usually refers to things such as interest in politics and willingness to discuss it, and perceived or actual participation in political life (Galston, 2004; Quintelier, 2010). Since these experiences often serve as early steps toward democratic participation – political engagement naturally becomes a focus in civic education research (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). In this article, we study democratic learning and conceptualise political engagement as part of a process linked to political interest – as knowledge arguably fosters interest. Political interest is a well-established precursor to participation, yet little is known about how it develops (Levy et al., 2016).

While there certainly are other aspects of democratic learning that are important, our focus here is specifically on how school-based encounters with political parties as a form of democratic learning can shape students' willingness to learn about and engage with politics.

Schools are not only places that transmit knowledge, but they are also formative environments for democratic learning – and civic education in schools contains both education in political institutions and the cultivation of democratic values and behaviours (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Within this framework, political party visits can be seen as representing a type of activity that gives students the opportunity to actually encounter politics in real life. This is a long-standing and widespread tradition in upper secondary schools in Sweden (Bolin & Backlund, 2021; McDonnell et al., 2024), though similar practices – such as mock elections or invited guest speakers – can be found in other countries as well (Borge, 2017; de Groot & Eidhof, 2019; Hess, 2004a; Larsen et al., 2016; Öhrvall & Oskarsson, 2020).

The format of political party visits can take different shapes, especially in different schools and areas, but most commonly tends to take the form of organised debates or information stands. And they are especially common during election years. These visits are usually carried out by the parties' youth wings – which research shows tend to see school visits as a crucial recruitment channel (Bolin & Backlund, 2021). Although these activities usually occur outside the formal social science curriculum, they are often framed by schools as something that adds to the civic and democratic mission outlined in the actual national curriculum (Bolin, 2023). Social science education thus holds a central position in fulfilling this mission as it functions as the primary arena for civic education in Swedish schools (Sandahl et al., 2022).

The regulatory framework governing political visits to schools in Sweden emphasises political neutrality. Since a legislative amendment in 2018, school principals have been responsible for deciding on party visits based on objective and non-discriminatory criteria. The ambition here is to make sure that all major parties are given equal opportunities to participate and reach students, and for the student to come into contact with several different political viewpoints. At the same time, many schools decide not to invite political representatives at all (Bolin, 2023). This has created

concerns about unequal access to political education and the missed democratic learning opportunities that these visits could provide to certain students. Proponents argue that political visits can function as learning opportunities, spark curiosity about politics and serve as an important gateway for political engagement and party recruitment (Bolin & Backlund, 2021). However, at the same time, uncertainty still exists regarding how such encounters are perceived by students and how they become meaningful in relation to democratic learning. This ongoing debate highlights the need for empirical research into how students experience political party visits in the school setting.

3 RESEARCH REVIEW AND INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES

This review situates the study within existing research on democratic learning and civic education and informs the findings in the discussion.

Research on civic education has examined a wide range of both extracurricular and classroom-based initiatives designed to strengthen students' democratic competencies. Much of this work has shown that democratic learning is shaped not only by what students are actually taught in the classroom, but also by the conditions under which learning takes place. Studies of mock elections and participatory classroom practices show that opportunities for student engagement are often associated with higher levels of political interest and political efficacy (Andersson et al., 2019; Borge, 2017; de Groot & Eidhof, 2019; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Larsen et al., 2016; Öhrvall & Oskarsson, 2020). Political party visits, on the other hand, have received surprisingly little attention in the literature – despite it being a well-established and long-running practice in the Nordic countries (Borge, 2017; McDonnell et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, the literature points to the social and interactional climate in which civic learning takes place as being of importance for democratic learning. Large-scale surveys such as the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), for example, show that students who experience their classrooms as inclusive – where they are encouraged to speak up and engage in respectful dialogue – tend to report higher levels of civic knowledge and political efficacy (D. Campbell, 2008; Hoskins et al., 2021; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Democratic learning depends not only on what is said, but also on whether students feel safe and respected in their learning environment (Theobald et al., 2017).

Within this broader research, this is often discussed using the notion of an open classroom climate. Rather than treating democracy as something that is mainly taught through ordinary teaching, this perspective stresses the importance of the social climate and conditions of interactions as being of central importance. When students are encouraged to express their opinions and listen to others, the classroom can become a place where democratic norms and ideas are actually enacted (D. Campbell, 2008; Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

An open classroom climate is also linked to positive civic outcomes. There are, for example, several studies that present findings that show that students who experience an open classroom climate often tend to score higher on civic knowledge and report greater political interest than students who do not experience an open climate (Hoskins et al., 2021; Schulz et al., 2010). However, the effect does not seem to be immediate. Instead, an open climate can provide the foundation upon which democratic attitudes and political engagement may develop over time.

A key issue – especially in relation to students encountering political party representatives – is whether students feel free to express their opinions. One-sided or biased situations may discourage

involvement, while fair and impartial facilitation, on the other hand, can support democratic learning (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Möllenberg, 2023). However, this does not require strict neutrality. Teachers and others can share their own views or structure discussions without undermining balance as long as space is made for competing perspectives to also express themselves (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Students tend to be more likely to develop stronger civic competencies and greater interest in politics when they are encouraged to engage with different viewpoints rather than being presented with just one single position (Hess, 2004b; Levy et al., 2016; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

There are also large meta studies that suggest that contact perceived as authentic and meaningful reduces social distance – provided that people meet as equals and have institutional support behind them (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Even when simulated, such interactions can increase people’s basic willingness to engage with each other (Crisp et al., 2009; Crisp & Turner, 2012). In line with this, findings in educational contexts show that when students meet political actors and politics – and the students perceive those meetings as being open and between peers – trust is formed, and a greater sense of one’s own political identity can develop. On the other hand, if the meetings are perceived as staged or not between peers, they can seemingly have a negative effect (Borge, 2018; Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Kiess, 2022). This is important because it has been shown that trust that develops in open classroom climates and other participatory learning environments may persist into adulthood (Sun & Janmaat, 2025).

Similar to the social and interactional conditions discussed above, research on civic education has also highlighted the importance of students taking an active part in the learning process (D. Campbell, 2006; Conway et al., 2009; Hendrickson, 2021; Quintelier, 2010).

This emphasis on active participation is closely aligned with research on experiential civic learning, which puts an emphasis on the importance of action and reflection. When students are given time to think and reflect about what they have experienced, their understanding often deepens (Kolb, 1984). Studies of service-learning point in a similar direction – showing that active involvement can strengthen both civic responsibility and political awareness (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Larger studies also support these patterns. Interactive civic learning activities have, for example, been linked to higher political interest (Kahne & Sporte, 2008), and more school-based civic activities have been shown to have effects that can last beyond the activity itself (Keating & Janmaat, 2015).

Political party visits can be seen as one way in which these kinds of active learning opportunities enter the school setting. By bringing political actors into the school, students are given the chance to interact directly with politics. This can make somewhat abstract democratic processes feel more concrete and easier to relate to. How these encounters are organised, therefore, seems to shape how students experience them. Time to prepare before and reflect afterwards can make a difference, while rushed or poorly planned visits risk feeling distant or forgettable (Lo & Tierney, 2017). Students who engage with real political questions become more willing to actually participate and more often feel that their own views and ideas matter (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Miklikowska et al., 2022).

It is also important to note that different types of activities naturally offer different opportunities for participation and active learning. Workshops and small-group discussions have shown to often make it easier for many students to participate, especially those who are less comfortable speaking in larger settings. More informational types of formats, on the other hand – such as hallway information stands – can attract more students at once, but that usually also leaves little room for

personal dialogue. More participatory formats are linked to stronger gains in political interest, although participation on its own does not automatically lead to engagement (Borge, 2017; Conway et al., 2009; de Groot & Eidhof, 2019; Quintelier, 2010; Öhrvall & Oskarsson, 2020). This suggests that the democratic learning potential of civic activities depends less on their mere presence than on how their format creates meaningful opportunities for participation.

4 DATA AND METHOD

To investigate how political party visits to schools are experienced by students, and under what conditions such encounters may contribute to students' orientation towards political engagement as a part of democratic learning, we conducted seven semi-structured focus group interviews with upper secondary students in a mid-sized municipality in Sweden. In this context, political party visits refer to activities such as structured debates, hallway information stands and talks in the classroom by party representatives. These types of visits are most often organised in connection with national or mock elections. The focus group method was chosen for its ability to explore group norms and elicit reflections that emerge in dialogue with peers, which is crucial when studying social and political phenomena in school settings (Barbour, 2018; Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups work especially well for exploring how attitudes form among peers, since they bring the social interaction and shared sense-making to the forefront (Morgan, 1997). The interviews, therefore, aimed not only to understand individual perceptions but to see how political visits were talked about and made sense of by the students collectively.

We drew participants from three upper secondary schools, using purposive sampling to reflect variation in school type (public and independent), program orientation (social science and natural science), gender composition, and exposure to political party visits. Two of the schools had hosted both debates and party information stands during the most recent election cycle. The third school, by contrast, had not arranged any political visits during the students' time in upper secondary education, except for a brief appearance by a single Member of the European Parliament. This was an event that only one focus group recalled fully. Some participants also reflected on experiences of party visits from earlier stages in their schooling – providing additional comparative insights.

By selecting schools with varying levels of exposure to political visits, the study could capture differences in both frequency and format. This variation was a deliberate choice, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how encounters shape students' perceptions (S. Campbell et al, 2020). This selection of schools and students was also driven by the desire to investigate the processes through which party visits influence students' democratic learning rather than to achieve statistical representativeness or to measure direct effects (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

A total of 21 students participated (12 male, 9 female). Focus groups consisted of 2-4 participants and were held in a quiet room on school premises. The sessions lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Given the sensitivity of political discussion in peer groups, ethical approval was sought and granted, and particular care was taken to ensure confidentiality – this includes anonymisation of all transcripts and secure data handling. As participation was voluntary, the sample might reflect self-selection with potentially slightly higher interest in politics among those who chose to participate.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol covering eight thematic areas: (1) students' participation and prior experiences, (2) political knowledge and expectations, (3) visit format and delivery, (4) inclusion and potential challenges, (5) perceived learning and impact, (6)

reflections on long-term political engagement, (7) integration into teaching and classroom discussions, and (8) suggestions for improvement. The questions were informed by the insights from the research review, but the protocol was intentionally broad in order to capture students' experiences of democratic learning in a wider sense. The interviewer also tried to adopt a facilitative stance during the focus groups to encourage open dialogue and peer-to-peer interaction (Barbour, 2018).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an inductive approach involving an iterative movement with the aim of identifying recurring patterns in how students talked about and made sense of political party visits.

First, we read through the transcripts in full to gain an overall impression and to identify recurring topics in the students' discussion. Second, we carried out open coding line by line and marked relevant passages. Third, codes were compared and gradually refined, merged, and differentiated as similarities and differences became clearer. Fourth, broader themes were developed. Discrepancies were discussed between coauthors, and interpretations were refined throughout the dialogue. In the final stage of the analysis, we related the themes to previous research in civic education to make sense of how students' experiences of party visits fit into broader processes of democratic learning. Here, rather than treating political engagement as something that emerges immediately from these encounters, we approached it as an orientation that develops over time as part of broader processes of democratic learning. More specifically, we define orientation toward political engagement as students' interest in politics, their trust in political actors, their sense of political efficacy, and their perceived openness to participate.

5 FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the focus group interviews. The analysis is based on a thematic reading of the material and is organised into two main parts for clarity. Part one focuses on how the students experience the interaction and the social dynamics of political party visits, and the second part addresses their opportunities to participate and learn.

5.1 Experiencing the political party visit

5.1.1 Respect, inclusion and freedom to express opinions

In the focus group discussion, students often returned to how political party visits differed from their normal, everyday encounters with politics and how they usually learned about democracy in school. Many students emphasised that the visits worked best when it was perceived to be a mutual respect between student and politician and when participation wasn't forced. At the same time, students were clear that such engagement did not happen automatically. The visits were experienced as most meaningful when interactions were characterised by mutual respect and when participation felt voluntary rather than expected. When politicians engaged in ways that were perceived as genuine, several students described feeling more engaged themselves. "So, they're very nice and all that. And they don't pressure you to join the party. It's more like, well, it's voluntary if you want to know more about this and that. So, I think that's pretty good," one student noted (Focus Group 7, Speaker 2). Such engagement became particularly meaningful when

politicians were perceived to fully listen. “One actually heard my question and explained it straight-up. I respected that,” another student said (Focus Group 3, Speaker 2).

The varied formats of the party visits – ranging from public debates to intimate chats – also appealed to different kinds of students, matching their personalities and comfort levels. When these interactions worked well, they contributed to a greater connection to politics – something that went beyond surface-level exposure and allowed students to see themselves as contributors rather than observers in the interaction. This made engagement seem more desirable.

Yet, this freedom and inclusion were not guaranteed or universal. Social pressures and more structural problems during the visit were often described by the students as something that limited their willingness to engage. The feeling of inclusion was perceived as faltering when discussions were overtaken by dominant voices and political representatives that focused more on their own agendas than on dialogue. As one student put it: “It’s uncomfortable to stand there when they try to influence what you think” (Focus Group 2, speaker 1).

Findings like these indicate that true freedom of expression and inclusion during party visits demand more than just formal opportunities – it requires an environment and social climate where students feel safe and valued. The strength of the party visits lay in their ability to accommodate different ways of taking part. More reserved students could remain relatively anonymous, while those who felt more comfortable could engage directly. Beyond that, the success of the visits also appeared to hinge on the social fabric of the classroom. When social fears entered the room, that energy made it harder for everyone to be involved.

Inclusion didn’t just happen on its own – it took effort. The politicians who really listened, who paused and showed that they cared about what students said, created moments that felt genuine – and when that happened, interest grew. But when politicians talked over students or dodged their questions, that sense of openness faded fast.

5.1.2 Authenticity

Political party visits also affected students’ sense of trust and interest in politics in both positive and negative ways. When politicians came across as authentic, trust grew and made politics feel more approachable. One student observed:

I think it becomes a little easier to understand their side when they get upset. Because it just shows that they get so ambitious about that topic. So, I think it becomes easier to follow. And just, oh, this party really thinks like that. (Focus Group 7, Speaker 1)

And continued: “If they’re really passionate about something, like the environment, it feels credible, and you believe what they say”.

Several of the interviewed students also expressed how debates and personal encounters made sometimes abstract political ideas seem a bit more tangible, which in turn made them more inclined to explore party positions further.

On the other hand, a lack of trust was often expressed when politicians strayed from what students considered to be real and genuine dialogue that saw them as equals. Students also frequently voiced frustration with what they perceived as manipulative tactics. This was especially prevalent when the type of visit was in the form of information stands. Several students described how the interactions felt transactional: “You nod, take the stuff, and go. You’re not really listening” (Focus Group 7, Speaker 1). Tactics perceived as overly aggressive seemingly also alienated

students: “They shout: ‘Come here!’ and it’s awkward, so you just keep walking” (Focus Group 6, Speaker 1). These impressions show that the students sometimes experienced the politicians as not very interested in actual dialogue, which negatively impacted their sense of trust.

Evasive responses and personal attacks also reinforced this sense of disillusionment. Some students said that politicians appeared more focused on winning arguments rather than listening to each other or the students: “It was like they were there to win over each other, not to answer our questions. It didn’t feel like we were important”. Or as another student noted: “It got childish after a while – they just accused each other instead of explaining things, and I zoned out” (Focus Group 1, Speaker 4).

In other words, when politicians behaved immaturely, students started to view politics as performative, not constructive. Such behaviour painted politics as a game rather than a collaborative and open process. Seeing politicians prioritise self-interest over engagement made students question the value of getting involved, especially if they were already wary of politics.

5.1.3 Balance and impartiality

In focus groups where students had seen all parties represented and treated equally, they described feeling more interested and more trusting of the school as a neutral space. Many said that having all sides of the political spectrum represented made it feel like everyone’s voice mattered: “All the parties had to answer that question too. And then you could really hear the differences” (Focus Group 7, Speaker 1).

When students saw that all parties, rather than just one or a few, had been invited, it reinforced their perception that the school valued political diversity and unbiased debate. Achieving balance was not only about who showed up, though – how the interactions with the parties played out in practice also mattered. Students were very aware that practical factors, such as where the information stands were placed in the school, could skew attention toward certain parties over others: “The Moderates¹ weren’t there, so it was a bit sad because you wanted to hear what they had to say too” (Focus Group 2, Speaker 3). A broader simultaneous presence was voiced by several students as something they desired more of: “It would have been fun if there were more parties there at the same time, because then you could really compare them” (Focus Group 7, Speaker 1).

This view was also shared by the students who did not have any visits except for a brief appearance from a member of the European Parliament.

A lack of representation from all parties – whether this was because of scheduling issues or because someone chose to prioritise certain parties – threatened the school’s credibility as an impartial platform. When some parties seemed marginalised or overlooked, students felt that they did not get the full picture.

This tension highlights why political party balance is pivotal. A fair and balanced environment helps students understand democracy and see politics as something worth engaging with. When visits worked well, they contributed to curiosity by letting students explore different ideas with the different parties. But when party balance was lost – when parties were missing or engagement uneven – politics felt fractured and less appealing.

¹ The Moderates refers to *Moderata samlingspartiet*, a major centre-right political party in Sweden.

5.1.4 Group dynamics

The students described how the social climate in the classroom often shaped how they experienced the party visits – sometimes boosting and sometimes dampening their interest and engagement. In situations when the climate felt open and lively among the students themselves, the students became more curious and engaged. “Right after the debate, I think I talked a bit with friends about what they said. Maybe not really debating with each other, but we brought it up. They thought this was interesting or weird or crazy”, one student said (Focus group 6, speaker 4). A good dynamic between the students could even sometimes result in spontaneous exchanges long after the visit: “You start talking politics during math class”, the same student explained.

But group dynamics could also constrain. Some students explain that they hesitated to engage fully because they were worried about how their peers might perceive them. One student confessed:

And within the EPA culture, it was cool to vote for SD². So, then everyone went around like this “Aren’t you going to vote for SD?” (...) If someone said something other than SD, then it wasn’t real... You did not want to express that you thought something else. (Focus Group 4, speaker 1)

There was a fear of being judged, particularly when it came to interacting with parties perceived as controversial. “If you go there with your friends and that group of friends has a very clear political opinion, then maybe I wouldn’t dare go and talk to another party because you might get a little looked at” (Focus Group 2, Speaker 4). This type of hesitation expressed by the students in the focus groups reveals that even in settings that are designed to encourage expression, invisible norms can still silence voices.

Statements like these suggest that unspoken fears of standing out can greatly impact how the visits are perceived. Even classrooms that are thought of as open by some may not necessarily be perceived as such by everyone. Because of that, conversations often stayed within tight and like-minded circles. Though one should note that in some groups, too much familiarity between peers could seemingly get in the way of real engagement: “Some people just joked about it, and then it became less serious” (Focus Group 4, speaker 2).

5.2 Participating in political party visits

5.2.1 Quality of the encounter

In the focus groups, several students talked about how the organisation of political party visits mattered for their democratic learning. When the interactions went well, they created curiosity and a sense of agency, but when they did not – because of, for example, poor planning – they created disillusionment, leaving students wary rather than inspired.

Logistical hurdles limited the potential and quality of the visits. Rushed hallway encounters, unannounced visits, or crowded settings made exchanges difficult. “You’re dodging crowds to get to class. There’s no time to chat,” a student said in relation to information stands as a form of visit (Focus Group 5, Speaker 2). Similarly, poor planning left some students feeling unprepared: “It’s just that we didn’t know they’d be here. You just stumble into them and don’t know what to ask” (Focus Group 6, Speaker 4). Short time frames during debates further decreased the perceived

² SD refers to *Sverigedemokraterna* (the Sweden Democrats), a radical right-wing political party.

quality, as politicians' rushed answers often were interpreted as lacking depth – and that left little room for meaningful engagement: “They only had a minute each to answer, and it was rushed, no depth, just quick points” (Focus Group 5, Speaker 3).

Missteps such as these turned potentially promising visits into forgettable encounters that created scepticism. The focus group interviewees suggest that these rushed encounters didn't just make interaction more difficult – they also sent the message that the students' time and attention weren't really valued, which in turn weakened their engagement.

It was important for the meeting between students and parties to feel genuine and not rushed because it made the students grow more trusting and engaged. For instance, when students felt that there was actually enough time for politicians to listen, it gave them a sense of being taken seriously – which, in turn, made them more willing to engage with politics. “It would be better if it [the visit] was in a classroom, where you could sit down and have a proper discussion” (Focus Group 6, Speaker 1).

5.2.2 Type of activity

Among the different types of political party visits in school, debates stood out as the most engaging for students. As one student put it: “The debate was cool because you could see how they argued, like, who sounded convincing and who didn't” (Focus Group 4, Speaker 3). By comparing arguments, students were prompted to think more critically. Debates sometimes also invite participation, for example, when students could submit their own questions. One student recalled: “We wrote questions before the debate, and they actually answered some. Mine was about taxes, and I liked that they took it seriously” (Focus Group 5, Speaker 2).

This type of inclusion, having the students' voices shape the discussion, was perceived as making debates feel personal, as if their concerns matter in politics. A common theme across the focus groups was that debates were often described as highlights, because then the students started to evaluate different arguments and consider why they trusted some political actors and not others. Debates made them feel active.

On the other hand, voluntary interactions such as information stands – meant to spark political curiosity – often failed to do so amidst the chaos of everyday school life. Placed in hallways, information stands disrupted rather than invited, clashing with tight schedules and crowded corridors. One student said:

It feels a bit like you're being pulled in. “Come talk to us.” And maybe you don't feel like it. And it's like, “No thanks.” Or you feel like it's just kind of annoying. Because it's a bit like, I don't want to have to go up to an information stand and stand there talking to them if I'm not super interested. (Focus Group 1, Speaker 2)

Other students dismissed them as “just noise” while rushing past between classes: “They're standing there with their pamphlets, and it's like, I don't know, I'm trying to get to lunch or something. I don't want to stop and talk politics” (Focus Group 3, Speaker 2).

It should be noted, however, that interactions at information stands are not perceived as all negative. As one student said:

It can create a conversation, and of course, between friends when you walk past “like this” – “that's the Sweden Democrats, that's the Social Democrats.” It can create a public interest to talk more about politics because it becomes more close and personal. (Focus Group 5, Speaker 2)

In short, while information stands can create curiosity, their impact appears to be limited when they are not supported by structure from the school. Apart from debates and information stands, few other types of visits were reported.

5.2.3 Classroom preparation and integration

Students across the focus groups often described party visits as more engaging and exciting than ordinary classroom teaching.

I think that's really important. Not just learning about it or seeing it on the news. We actually got to see it in practice and physically watch it and socially engage with a person who talks to us about some of what we're actually learning about. I think that's important, and it was great. (Focus Group 4, Speaker 2)

Hearing politicians speak and watching debates live made democracy feel more real to the students, and not as abstract. And importantly, preparing for the visit helped with this. "The teacher went through the parties beforehand, so we knew their policies before the debate, and it made the debate clearer" (Focus Group 7, Speaker 3). When teachers set the stage with background knowledge, visits were interpreted as becoming more dynamic extensions of the classroom, turning dry facts into an interactive and active dialogue that resonated.

Still, visits didn't always outshine traditional teaching. Many students still valued the structure of the classroom, which some encounters lacked. "The school wants critical thinking and to compare sources, but the visits didn't encourage that," one student said (Focus Group 4, Speaker 4). The classroom's focus on questioning and analysis set a high standard that brief encounters often failed to meet. Despite that, some students saw potential in political party visits and suggested improvements: "It would've been good to have an assignment to compare what we learned with our prior knowledge, so we could understand better" (Focus Group 4, Speaker 2). Without such follow-up, visits risked becoming fleeting learning opportunities.

Unlike textbooks or regular classes, the visits made politics feel real – something was happening, it was not just something you read about. Yet the visit's success seemed to depend on context. When teachers prepared students by explaining the parties or framing the issues beforehand, the encounters gained both clarity and weight. Unprepared visits, on the other hand, often felt confusing – as one student said: "It's just that we didn't know they'd be here. You just stumble into them and don't know what to ask" (Focus Group 6, Speaker 4). This lack of grounding seems to have lessened the impact of the visit, leaving students intrigued about politics but adrift.

Visits proved to be most impactful when they were thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum – especially when they complemented ongoing classroom studies. As one student noted regarding a debate: "It felt like a lesson because it was compulsory, so people came and listened, but it wasn't boring" (Focus Group 5, Speaker 3). Students also said they wanted a clearer link to the curriculum – tasks that tied the visit to what they were learning. Without clear links back to classroom lessons, the visits faded fast – engaging in the moment, but without the grounding that helps new insights stick.

5.2.4 Personal relevance

Across the focus groups, students expressed that they liked it when the political representatives brought up issues close to their own or the students' hearts. It transformed politics into something tangible. One student said: "When they discussed local politics, things like our town, what affects us, it hit home and made me think more about my vote" (Focus Group 4, Speaker 3). Another student found political clarity in a debate: "It's important to me, abortion, because I'm a girl, and it sparked some interest when they talked about it, and I realised a party shared my views" (Focus Group 7, Speaker 2). These moments anchored politics to students' realities – whether local concerns or deeply held values – and according to the student, created curiosity.

When personal relevance was absent, however, engagement with the activities tended to decrease. "I don't remember what they said... it wasn't for me, I guess", one student remarked (Focus Group 7, Speaker 3). Others felt adrift during more impersonal talks: "They talked about big stuff, not our lives, so I tuned out after a while" (Focus Group 3, Speaker 4).

Several students in the focus groups also said that reaching voting age made politics feel more personal and urgent: "Now that I'm 18, it feels more real to think about voting and what's happening" (Focus Group 6, Speaker 4). For many students, this marked a shift in how they related to politics and learning about democracy. "I have to learn. Because it's actually time, now. Because it feels so far away when you're younger. It feels like you get there right when you turn 18. Because it's just, oh, I can vote this year" (Focus Group 3, Speaker 3).

In short, when visits addressed issues tied to students' realities, they significantly contributed to the desire to learn about and engage with politics. But when topics drifted to "big stuff" detached from the students' personal daily life, students disengaged, seeing politics as someone else's domain: "If I'm not really interested in healthcare policy, for example, then maybe I don't care very much if they stand there and talk about it for 20 minutes" (Focus Group 3, Speaker 4).

6 DISCUSSION

The findings presented above describe how students talk about and make sense of political party visits in school. In this section, these empirical patterns are interpreted analytically in relation to democratic learning and how these experiences can be understood as part of broader processes through which young people may form orientations toward political engagement over time.

Across the focus groups, it becomes clear that political party visits seem to function less as teaching events and more as moments in which students assess politics itself – both its credibility and also its relevance – and perhaps most importantly, how open the students themselves are to participating and learning about democracy. In line with interactionist socialisation theory that suggests that political engagement is shaped through formative experiences rather than regular classroom instruction (Kiess, 2022), the political party visits here appear as events where students evaluate if politics is something they feel invited into, and whether it is worth their time.

From this perspective, political party visits differ from ordinary classroom teaching. While much civic education research has focused on how knowledge and skills are transmitted (Hendrickson, 2021; Isac et al., 2011; Teegelbeckers et al., 2023), the students in this study were more concerned about what these encounters revealed about politics as a practice. How politicians behaved arguably mattered as much as what they actually said. When politicians answered questions seriously and appeared genuinely interested in having a discussion with the students as equals –

and not as someone they wanted to “sell” politics to – the visit and politics came across as more approachable and worth the students’ time. On the other hand, when encounters felt rushed or the representatives appeared shrewd, students were less inclined to engage. This suggests that the significance of political party visits does not lie as much in the transmission of information as it does in the quality of the interaction itself – particularly in how open and respectful they are (D. Campbell, 2008; Malak-Minkiewicz & Torney-Purta, 2021).

While much previous research discusses the idea of an open classroom climate primarily in terms of teaching practices (Hendrickson, 2021; Isac et al., 2011; Schuitema et al., 2018), our findings point to the importance of social and relational conditions when it comes to shaping students’ willingness to engage and learn about politics. At first glance, many of the party visits described in the study seemed to offer such openness – participation was often voluntary, and students were formally invited to ask questions and actively participate. However, openness was not experienced in the same way by all students. Even when formal opportunities for participation were present, the relational climate and group norms often determined whether students felt comfortable speaking up. A fear of standing out played a central role in shaping who felt that they wanted and could engage with the political representatives. As a student, you did not want to be the only one in the group who talked to a representative of a party that your friends saw as a part of the out-group. Therefore, we argue that an open climate should not necessarily be understood as something fixed in a teaching setting but rather as something that is constantly negotiated socially (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015; Theobald et al., 2017; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). This also resonates with Borge (2018), who, just as we do, notes that students feel more connected to political representatives who are closer to them in age and talk about things that matter to them. If the difference between the student and the political representative is too large, the interaction can come across as if the representative is speaking a different language.

But this does not mean that how the visit is organised is unimportant. Different types of party visits were perceived as more rewarding than others. Debates, in particular, were generally experienced as more engaging than other common visit types such as information stands. Similar patterns have been discussed in research on participatory learning and civic education (Borge, 2017; Conway et al., 2009; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; Quintelier, 2010). But unlike other simulated civic activities, political party visits confront students with politics as something real and living beyond the classroom that they will have to engage with later in life – at least to some extent – arguably making questions of trust and credibility more salient.

Many students were also frustrated by poor planning, saying that visits often did not allow enough time or space for meaningful interactions. The way the visits were integrated into teaching was key here. Students often just “stumbled” upon political representatives in the hallway and were not given any proper prior introduction in class about political parties or democracy. This made it hard for the students to engage with the representatives in a proper way. Opportunity for follow-up in the classroom and reflection afterwards was also perceived as limited, resulting in the students losing interest over time and not wanting to engage in the moment. Just as Lo and Tierney (2017) note, preparation and reflection are key to learning. Expecting students to engage and learn without preparation is inviting them into a discussion without giving them a shared frame of reference.

Another key finding is the importance of balance and impartiality. Students paid close attention to which parties were present, and how they were treated, and when balance was perceived as lacking, this was noted, and the credibility of the visit took a hit. One significant feature of

democracy is allowing for multiple perspectives. But what happens if you only get one perspective? If only one party shows up, it makes it very hard to teach democracy and politics effectively (Hess, 2004b; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

This is closely related to the issue of authenticity. Political representatives who appeared sincere were often described as credible and made students want to engage with them and their politics more. Students also said they became more interested when the political issues discussed felt close to their own lives and experiences. This matters because political trust influenced by these types of direct encounters in open and participatory learning environments can persist even into adulthood (Sun & Janmaat, 2025). We can also see how these findings align with Sandahl's (2019) observation that students meet politics not only as something to be studied, but as political beings themselves – which in turn points to the importance of linking knowledge with lived engagement for learning.

Finally, our study also supports the view that political engagement develops gradually rather than all at once (Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Kiess, 2022; Sun & Janmaat, 2025). Few students described immediate changes following a political party visit. Instead, they spoke about becoming more curious and aware of politics – especially if they had reached voting age. This indicates that political party visits should not be understood and evaluated in short-term effects alone. Instead, their importance lies in how they may contribute to longer trajectories of democratic learning, shaping how students learn and relate to politics and to their own role within it through experience.

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article explored how students experience political party visits in school and what these meetings can mean for democratic learning. Rather than being remembered as ordinary lessons, party visits are described as moments where students get a feel for politics itself – for the actual people involved, and whether politics seems open or closed to them.

Our findings also connect to broader discussions in civic education about what makes political learning feel real and trustworthy. Unlike simulated activities such as mock elections (Borge, 2017; de Groot & Eidhof, 2019), party visits involve real political actors and not just the idea of them. This immediacy brings questions of trust and sincerity to the forefront. When students feel that politicians listen and take them seriously, politics can start to feel more relevant, blurring the line between school life and the greater society.

The study also shows that simply arranging political visits is not enough. While inviting political parties into schools goes hand in hand with the democratic mission of Swedish education – as outlined in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2010) and in guidelines from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) – the value of these encounters depends on how they are handled. When students meet political representatives, they need to be prepared before the meeting and given space afterwards for reflection. Party visits also need to feel balanced and inclusive. Without this, the encounters risk becoming brief and somewhat forgettable moments rather than meaningful learning experiences.

Political party visits are neither a simple solution to declining political engagement nor a neutral activity. They are a resource in democratic education that can matter – but only under the right conditions. When schools stop simply hosting guests and instead create room for dialogue and reflection, the encounters can become engaging events that gradually make the students understand politics and how to engage with it as democratic citizens.

This means that schools need more thought-out ways of working with political party visits as a part of the learning process – not just during the visit itself, but also before and afterwards. Otherwise, these moments risk turning into only empty meetings.

There is also a need for future research, and it would benefit from exploring political party visits in a broader range of school contexts – such as vocational programs and schools in rural and urban areas. Quantitative studies could also complement our qualitative insights by measuring long-term effects on political interest, efficacy, and participation. So, while much remains to be learned, our findings clearly suggest that party visits can play an important role in the democratic education and creation of political engagement among students

FUNDING

This study was funded through a collaboration agreement between Mid Sweden University and Sundsvall Municipality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2025 UMepop workshop. The authors thank all commentators for their helpful suggestions. The authors are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Social Science Education* for their helpful and constructive comments on this manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

- Andersson, K., Persson, M., & Zetterberg, P. (2019). *Är skolan demokratiframjande? Kopplingen mellan utbildning och demokratiska färdigheter: En forskningsöversikt* [Is school promoting democracy? The link between education and democratic competencies: A research overview]. Forum för levande historia. <https://www.levandehistoria.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Ar-skolan-demokratiframjande.pdf>
- Barbour, R. S. (2018). *Doing focus groups*. SAGE.
- Biesta, G. (2007). Education and the democratic person: Towards a political conception of democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 109(3), 740–769. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810710900302>
- Bolin, N. (2023). Politiska partiers skolbesök [Political parties' school visits]. In MUCF (Ed.), *Skolval 2022 i samband med riksdagsvalet*. Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor.
- Bolin, N., & Backlund, A. (2021). De politiska ungdomsförbundens medlemmar [Members of the political youth associations]. In MUCF (Ed.), *Fokus 21 - Vilja Att Förändra. Drivkrafter, Hinder Och Utmaningar För Ungas Samhällsengagemang* (pp. 97–130). Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor.

- Borge, J. A. O. (2017). Tuning in to formal politics: Mock elections at school and the intention of electoral participation among first-time voters in Norway. *Politics*, 37(2), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716674730>
- Borge, J. A. O. (2018). “Am I a politics person?” A qualitative study of students’ perspectives on mock elections as political education. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 17(3), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-876>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Campbell, D. E. (2006). *Why we vote: How schools and communities shape our civic life*. Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, D. E. (2008). Voice in the classroom: How an open classroom climate fosters political engagement among adolescents. *Political Behavior*, 30(4), 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9063-z>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Claes, E., & Hooghe, M. (2017). The effect of political science education on political trust and interest: Results from a five-year panel study. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 13(1), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2016.1171153>
- Conway, J. M., Amel, E. L., & Gerwien, D. P. (2009). Teaching and learning in the social context: A meta-analysis of service learning’s effects on academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36(4), 233–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986280903172969>
- Crisp, R. J., Stathi, S., Turner, R. N., & Husnu, S. (2009). Imagined intergroup contact: Theory, paradigm and practice. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00155.x>
- Crisp, R. J., & Turner, R. N. (2012). Chapter three: The imagined contact hypothesis. In J. M. Olson & M. P. Zanna (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 46, pp. 125–182). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-394281-4.00003-9>
- de Groot, I., & Eidhof, B. (2019). Mock elections as a way to cultivate democratic development and a democratic school culture. *London Review of Education*, 17(3), Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.17.3.11>
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where’s the learning in service-learning?* Jossey-Bass.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Galston, W. A. (2004). Civic education and political participation. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 37(2), 263–266. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004202>
- Hendrickson, P. (2021). Effect of active learning techniques on student excitement, interest, and self-efficacy. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 17(2), 311–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2019.1629946>

- Hess, D. A. (2004a). Beyond guest speakers. *Social Education*, 68(5), 347–348. <https://www.socialstudies.org/social-education/68/5/beyond-guest-speakers>
- Hess, D. A. (2004b). Controversies about controversial issues in democratic education. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 37(2), 257–261. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004196>
- Hess, D. A., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. Routledge.
- Hoskins, B., Huang, L., & Arensmeier, C. (2021). Socioeconomic inequalities in civic learning in Nordic schools: Identifying the potential of in-school civic participation for disadvantaged students. In H. Biseth, B. Hoskins, & L. Huang (Eds.), *Northern lights on civic and citizenship education* (pp. 93–122). Springer.
- Isac, M. M., Maslowski, R., & van der Werf, G. (2011). Effective civic education: An educational effectiveness model for explaining students' civic knowledge. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 22(3), 313–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2011.571542>
- Kahne, J. E., & Sporte, S. E. (2008). Developing citizens: The impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitment to civic participation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(3), 738–766. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27667149>
- Keating, A., & Janmaat, J. G. (2015). Education through citizenship at school: Do school activities have a lasting impact on youth political engagement? *Parliamentary Affairs*, 69(2), 409–429. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv017>
- Kiess, J. (2022). Learning by doing: The impact of experiencing democracy in education on political trust and participation. *Politics*, 42(1), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395721990287>
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups. *BMJ*, 311(7000), 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299>
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Knowles, R. T., & McCafferty-Wright, J. (2015). Connecting an open classroom climate to social movement citizenship: A study of 8th graders in Europe using IEA ICCS data. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 39(4), 255–269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsr.2015.03.002>
- Larsen, E. G., Levinsen, K., & Kjaer, U. (2016). Democracy for the youth? The impact of mock elections on voting-age attitudes. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 26(4), 435–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1186031>
- Levy, B. L. M., Solomon, B. G., & Collet-Gildard, L. (2016). Fostering political interest among youth during the 2012 presidential election: Instructional opportunities and challenges in a swing state. *Educational Researcher*, 45(9), 483–495. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16683402>
- Lo, J. C., & Tierney, G. (2017). Maintaining interest in politics: “Engagement first” in a U.S. high school government course. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 16(3), 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-843>

- Malak-Minkiewicz, B., & Torney-Purta, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Influences of the IEA civic and citizenship education studies: Practice, policy, and research across countries and regions*. Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71102-3>
- McDonnell, D., Ammassari, S., Valbruzzi, M., Bolin, N., Werner, A., Heinisch, R., Jungar, A.-C., & Wegscheider, C. (2024). Inside party youth wings: The YOUMEM project. *Party Politics*, 31(6).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688241310349>
- McKinney, M. S., & Chattopadhyay, S. (2007). Political engagement through debates: Young citizens' reactions to the 2004 presidential debates: Young citizens' reactions to the 2004 presidential debates. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50(9), 1169–1182.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207300050>
- Miklikowska, M., Rekker, R., & Kudrnac, A. (2022). A little more conversation a little less prejudice: The role of classroom political discussions for youth's attitudes toward immigrants. *Political Communication*, 39(3), 405–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2032502>
- Morgan, D. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. SAGE.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287>
- Möllenborg, E. (2023). *Diskurser och dilemman i gymnasieskolans samhällskunskapsundervisning* [Discourses and dilemmas in upper secondary school civics teaching]. Linnaeus University Press.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>
- Quintelier, E. (2010). The effect of schools on political participation: A multilevel logistic analysis. *Research Papers in Education*, 25(2), 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802524810>
- Sandahl, J. (2019). Studying politics or being political? High school students' assessment of the welfare state. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-900>
- Sandahl, J., Tväråna, M., & Jakobsson, M. (2022). Samhällskunskap (social science education) in Sweden: A country report. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 21(3).
<https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-5339>
- Sant, E. (2019). Democratic education: A theoretical review (2006–2017). *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 655–696. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862493>
- Schuitema, J., Radstake, H., van de Pol, J., & Veugelers, W. (2018). Guiding classroom discussions for democratic citizenship education. *Educational Studies*, 44(4), 377–407.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1373629>
- Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D., & Losito, B. (2010). *ICCS 2009 international report: Civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among lower-secondary school students in 38 countries*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).
- Sun, R., & Janmaat, J. G. (2025). The lasting influence of an open climate of classroom discussion on political trust: Results from a seven-year panel study among English youth. *British Educational Research Journal*, 51(2), 629–645. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4091>

Swedish Ministry of Education. (2010). *Skollag (SFS 2010:800)* [Education Act].

https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800

Theobald, E. J., Eddy, S. L., Grunspan, D. Z., Wiggins, B. L., & Crowe, A. J. (2017). Student perception of group dynamics predicts individual performance: Comfort and equity matter. *PLoS ONE*, *12*(7): e0181336. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181336>

Teegelbeckers, J. Y., Nieuwelink, H., & Oostdam, R. J. (2023). School-based teaching for democracy: A systematic review of teaching methods in quantitative intervention studies. *Educational Research Review*, *39*, 100511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100511>

Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

Wallin, P., Manneh, I., Jonsson, L., Melin, C., Olson, M., & Persson, M. (2022). *Att lära demokrati – lärarens arbetssätt i fokus* (Systematisk forskningsammanställning 2022:03) [Teaching democracy: teachers' working methods in focus (Systematic research compilation)] . Skolforskningsinstitutet. <https://www.skolfi.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Att-lara-demokrati.pdf>

Öhrvall, R., & Oskarsson, S. (2020). Practice makes voters? Effects of student mock elections on turnout. *Politics*, *40*(3), 377–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395719875110>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Niklas Bolin is a Professor of Political Science at Mid Sweden University. His research focuses on political parties and elections, with an emphasis on party organisation, leadership selection, intra-party democracy, youth wings, and campaigns. His recent work has been published in journals such as *European Journal of Political Research*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Party Politics*, and *West European Politics*.

Joel Jacobsson is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Mid Sweden University. His research lies at the intersection of political socialisation, political behaviour, and democratic learning. He studies how institutional arrangements in schools influence young people's civic competence and engagement with politics.