Chapter 8. Unemployment, workplace democracy and political participation

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Hypothesis

Many political theorists have seen a great democratic potential in the world of work. By organising this part of society in the right way, several desired effects have been expected. In my dissertation, 'Arbetslöshet, arbetsplatsdemokrati och politiskt deltagande' (Adman, 2004), which translates from the Swedish into 'Unemployment, workplace democracy and political participation', I investigate how citizen involvement in the political process is affected. The main arguments and findings are summarised in this chapter.

Two hypotheses are discussed in my dissertation. The first concerns unemployment. The claim is that unemployment has strong and negative effects on political participation. The second hypothesis focuses on the degree of democracy in the workplace. It is assumed that more democratic workplaces increase political activity among citizens.

Both hypotheses have been presumed to be valid by many researchers as well as by participants in public debates. I maintain, however, that previous research is deficient in several ways, and that the hypotheses are in need of further empirical investigation (ibid, 2004, p. 9-12). Further, Sweden is a particularly interesting case. Previous studies mainly consider the US, but Sweden and the US differ in several important respects. Sweden is characterised by less social and political inequality, less individualised politics, and more pronounced class mobilisation. I argue that, if similar results are obtained for both countries, the results can be generalised to several other countries that resemble two such different countries as Sweden and the US. Therefore, it was justifiable to test the hypotheses using Swedish data in my dissertation.

Unemployment and political participation

Ever since the 1930s, unemployment has been believed to have strong and negative effects on political participation (ibid, 2004, p. 9-11, p. 29). The origin of this belief is to be found in the seminal study 'Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community' (1933). The authors, Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel, reported very low political engagement among the unemployed in the small Austrian town of Marienthal. In Sweden, high levels of unemployment occurred in the 1990s, which renewed interest in the hypothesis. For instance, in a recent Swedish Government bill on strengthening democracy,

adopted in 2002, the government expressed concern about the unemployed. The Bill concluded that measures had to be taken in order to avoid political alienation among these citizens (Regeringens proposition 2001/02:80, p. 35).

However, I argue that the findings of Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel might not hold for modern welfare states (Adman, 2004, p. 29). In Marienthal social and economic life practically collapsed when its sole industry closed down. Further, in the 1930s, loss of work had major financial consequences for most citizens, in Marienthal and elsewhere. It is not evident that unemployment has equally negative effects on political participation in contemporary Sweden. On the other hand, over the last decades many studies have found negative effects with regard to several aspects of the well-being of the unemployed (see, eg, Nordenmark, 1999; Alm, 2001; Samuelsson, 2002). For example, the unemployed often refrain from social life, and experience nervous problems, insomnia and depression. From this perspective, negative effects on political activity seem likely.

What then does contemporary research actually tell us? Studies undertaken over the last decades mainly focus on the American case, albeit to some extent on the British and Danish cases. They report lower levels of political activity among the unemployed than people who are working (see, especially, Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Parry et al., 1992, p. 121-4; Marshall et al., 1988; Goul Andersen et al., 2003, Chapter 10; for further references, see Adman 2004, p. 29-31). But no causal effect has been found. The correlation disappears when controlling for socioeconomic status. In other words, most studies undertaken thus far do *not* support the hypothesis. Political activity is more or less unaffected by unemployment, it is concluded. The results have obviously not influenced debates in either the academic or the political arena.

For my dissertation, an empirical test of the hypothesis was undertaken using the Swedish Citizen Survey. This survey encompassed a representative sample of 1,460 residents aged 16 to 80, and was carried out in 1997 (for further presentation of the data, see Adman, 2004, p. 12-13).[1]

In line with previous studies, I found the unemployed to be less politically active (ibid, 2004, Chapter 3). But I also found unemployment to have a negative effect on political participation. The correlation is weakened but a negative effect still remains when controlling for socioeconomic status. In other words, the results support the hypothesis. To be more precise, the following modes (or dimensions/forms) of political participation are affected:

- voting (in the Swedish local elections of 1998);
- contacting politicians, government officials, etc;

[1] Principal investigators were Anders Westholm and Jan Teorell, both at the Department of government, Uppsala University. Statistics Sweden carried out the fieldwork, which was mainly undertaken as face-to-face interviews averaging about 75 minutes. The response rate was 74.3 percent. Funding was provided by the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (HSFR) and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

- manifestations (activities aimed at calling attention to an issue, such as signing a petition); and,
- internal political efficacy (perceived possibility of affecting political institutions and political decision-making).

Activity in political parties (being a member, attending political meetings, and holding office) is the only participation mode that is not affected. I discuss why the results are not in line with previous research, and argue that it is not likely that the effects of unemployment are more negative in Sweden than in the US (ibid, 2004, p. 11, p. 130-131). Social and political exclusion should not occur as easily in Sweden, since the welfare state provides relatively high levels of unemployment benefits and is characterised by active labour market policies.

Instead, it is suggested that the difference in results depends on the way political participation is analysed. First, in previous research, different modes of participation have often been treated together (ibid, 2004, p. 31, p. 45-46, p. 131). This approach is not satisfactory, since separate modes of participation have been shown to have somewhat different explanatory factors. In the few studies where modes have been separated, not all the modes have been investigated. It is possible that the effects of unemployment on, for instance, voting and activities in political parties differ (as they do in the Swedish case), but that these differences have not been discovered. Second, when it comes to contact activities and manifestations, I have found that unemployment creates a 'threshold' for political participation (ibid, 2004, p. 38-47, p. 131). To find out whether or not thresholds existed, political participation had to be analysed in special ways; otherwise, the effects would have been underestimated. This is something previous research has not considered.

The hypothesis is in need of further research (ibid, 2004, p. 131). It is still uncertain whether unemployment causes political inactivity in other contexts. Future studies should consider countries that differ notably from Sweden, such as conservative welfare states or the US with its liberal welfare system (cf Esping-Andersen, 1990). An important task is to investigate whether threshold effects exist in such countries too.

The next step in the dissertation involved explaining the effect of unemployment (Adman, 2004, Chapter 4). Previous research has mainly proposed motivational factors, such as internal political efficacy, as causal mechanisms (for an overview of proposed mechanisms, see Schlozman and Verba, 1979). My approach was different, since I used the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), introduced by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady in 'Voice and Equality' (1995). CVM is a general model, which aims to highlight the most important factors causing political activity. The model states that political inactivity is due to a lack of relevant resources (time, money, and civic skills), or a lack of psychological engagement (political interest, party identification, politi-

cal knowledge, and political efficacy), or that the inactive person lies outside any recruitment network. In other words, the reason for inactivity may be that one 'can't', 'won't', or 'nobody asked'. So far, CVM has mainly been applied to American data.

In my empirical analysis CVM performed rather well (Adman 2004, p. 52-70). The model is quite successful in explaining why the unemployed are less politically active. Three modes of political participation are considered here, and CVM explains most of the effect on two of them – namely, voting and contacting – and also some of the effect on manifestations. Further, resources and recruitment are shown to be the most potent explanatory factors; the unemployed become less active in organisational life, fall outside the recruitment networks where people are asked to participate in politics, and experience a decrease in income. Surprisingly, the engagement factors are of little importance. In other words, what explains political inactivity among the unemployed is not a lack of motivation as previous research suggested; the reason is instead that they 'can't' and that 'nobody asks'.

Briefly, I also discuss why CVM is less successful in explaining the effect of unemployment on manifestations (ibid, 2004, p. 68-70). I tentatively suggest that the mechanism involved lies in a motivational factor not included in the model. In Sweden the norm is that people do paid work. Those who are not working are likely to be stigmatised, ie experience strong feelings of shame. This might prevent them from identifying themselves as unemployed, something that makes mobilisation of this group more difficult. Manifestations are particularly expressive, compared with other political participation modes; therefore, processes of stigmatisation are likely specifically to affect this activity dimension. Greater attention should be paid to this issue in future studies.

I also investigated whether unemployment has positive effects on political participation, alongside the negative effects discussed above (ibid, 2004, p. 67-68). Most unemployed people want to work, and are discontent with the way unemployment agencies respond to their needs. Accordingly, the unemployed have good reasons to protest and raise their political voice. From this perspective, unemployment would be expected to lead to strengthened motivation to perform political acts. I have analysed whether or not this is the case. The results actually lend some support to the hypothesis; unemployment has a positive effect on political participation, which is explained by increased dissatisfaction with one's own 'working life conditions'. However, this positive effect is much weaker than the negative effect discussed above. Hence, unemployment increases willingness to take part in politics but also leads to a significant drop in politically relevant resources. The latter process is much more powerful, and therefore the total effect of unemployment on political participation is negative.

The section on unemployment ends with a discussion on political equality (ibid, 2004, p. 15-18, p. 135-139). To what extent do the results indicate political

inequality? Two normative theories are discussed – a self-protective model of democracy and a procedural model of democracy. I argue that the interests of the unemployed probably receive less attention, due to political inactivity among unemployed individuals. Therefore, according to the self-protective model, the fundamental norm of political equality is likely to be violated; the norm declares that everyone's interests should be given equal weight. For the procedural model the causes of unequal participation are crucial. Unequal participation is accepted if it is caused by differences in engagement but not by differences in resources. As was mentioned above, my analyses show that the unemployed are less active mainly because they have fewer resources (given that recruitment networks are considered as a resource alongside income and organisational affiliation). Hence, the empirical results also point to inequality when considered from the perspective of the procedural model.

I conclude that the situation for the unemployed is critical (ibid, 2004, p. 141). Individuals who are already less politically active – due to factors such as low level of education and low work status – find themselves unemployed more often than others. And, as unemployed, they become even less active; the voice of the weak becomes even more hard to hear.

Workplace democracy and political participation

Ever since the days of John Stuart Mill, theorists have emphasised the importance of what goes on in the workplace (ibid, 2004, p. 71-75). This is especially true for participatory democrats, among whom Carole Pateman is perhaps the most discussed in contemporary research. In 'Participation and Democratic Theory' (1970), Pateman suggests that experiences at work have strong effects on political participation. Further, she suggests that the key to this process is the distribution of power and influence. Work should be organised in ways that allow for the maximum amount of employee influence. According to a fundamental hypothesis within the theory, an increase in influence and participation at work will strengthen people's belief in opportunities to affect politics, which eventually will lead to an increase in political participation. In this way, participatory democrats place great hopes on a democratic working life, which they see as the starting point for a more participatory society at large. Further, political inactivity is widespread among citizens with low occupational status, and a more democratic working life is especially likely to increase participation among them. Thus, in Pateman's view, democratisation at work can not only increase political participation among citizens in general but also reduce political inequality.

Several scholars claim that satisfactory empirical evidence exists in favour of the hypothesis (see, eg, Greenberg et al., 1996). However, in my view, it is far too early to draw any final conclusions of this kind (Adman 2004, p. 75-81; see also Adman, 2003). There are three reasons for this. First, many of the empirical

studies performed so far are deficient. For instance, some studies lack controls for relevant background factors, such as education (for an example, see Elden, 1981). Second, a close examination of previous studies reveals that the evidence is far from convincing. To be precise, only one particular dimension of employee influence and participation (at work) has been found to increase political participation (Sobel, 1993; Greenberg, et al., 1996). This dimension, which is labelled 'direct participation' or 'face-to-face participation', deals with influence over and participation in decisions within a person's immediate working group (or sector within the workplace). 'Job autonomy', the other dimension that has been studied, concerns the level of control an individual has over his or her job; this dimension does not seem to affect political participation. Third, the effect of influence and participation at work is likely to have been estimated with bias in previous studies (even in studies where controls have been made for socio-economic-status factors, such as education). Since the analyses are based on cross-sectional data, it has been difficult to pay sufficient attention to self-selection and two-way causality, ie the possibility that political participation affects participation and influence in the workplace. As a consequence, the effects of workplace participation are probably overestimated.

Here, the hypothesis is put to empirical test using the Swedish Citizen Survey conducted in 1997, and a follow-up mail survey conducted in 1999.[2] When combined, the two surveys allow for panel-data analysis. This approach is virtually absent in previous research, but allows the methodological problems just mentioned to be handled with greater care (which is done by controlling for previous political participation, 'the lagged dependent variable'; see Adman, 2004, p. 103-107, p. 120-123). The surveys also permit empirical studies of the two dimensions of influence and participation in the workplace just mentioned.

The way face-to-face participation is measured is worthy of comment (cf ibid, 2004, p. 85-92, p. 113-116). In previous studies, this dimension of workplace participation has mostly been measured using one single interview item, concerning whether the respondent participates in decision-making during meetings (formal or informal) at work. However, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) have shown that this activity is closely related to other activities at work, such as to give presentations, and to plan or chair meetings. Employees who often participate in decision-making during meetings also perform these other activities to a great extent. And all of these activities increase political participation, accor-

[2] The mail survey was conducted in the spring of 1999 as a short mail questionnaire. It was distributed to the same sample as the Swedish Citizen Study 1997, and the response rate in 1999 was 61.9 percent. Fifty-two percent of the original sample (1,054 individuals) took part in both waves. Principal investigators were Anders Westholm and Jan Teorell, both at the Department of government, Uppsala University. Statistics Sweden carried out the fieldwork. The 1999 mail questionnaire was provided by the government Commission on Swedish Democracy.

ding to the findings of Verba and colleagues (based on an American survey). I believe this approach to be fruitful; employees who are more involved and active during meetings are more likely to experience an increase in political participation. Therefore, face-to-face participation is measured by an index that encompasses interview questions concerning all of these different workplace activities.

Still, the analyses I have undertaken do not confirm Pateman's hypothesis. As for the dimension of job autonomy, no substantial effects are discovered, in either cross-sectional or panel-data analysis (Adman, 2004, Chapter 6). When it comes to face-to-face participation at work the picture is a bit more complex; significant effects are found in cross-sectional analysis, but not on the basis of panel-data analysis (ibid, 2004, Chapter 7). I suggest that the effects are overestimated in the cross-sectional analysis due to two-way causality and self-selection, and therefore the results from the panel-data analysis are more compelling.

All in all then, I do not find support for the hypothesis. In other words, the results contradict the findings of most previous research. I conclude that the differences in results are likely to be attributable to differences in research design, specifically the lack of panel data in previous studies. However, a word of caution is necessary (ibid, 2004, p. 108-109, p. 124, p. 134). The period of time between the two surveys may not match the lag of the effect; more influence and participation at work perhaps increases political participation after such a long time that it could not be registred using the 1999 follow-up survey. Thus, it is possible that the true effect is somewhat underestimated. In future studies, other lags should be considered.

For future research, I argue that three further tasks are particularly important. (ibid, 2004, p. 133-134). First, participation in company level decisions – yet another dimension of influence and participation at work – has rarely been investigated (not studied in my dissertation either). According to Pateman, this dimension might be expected to have the strongest effect on political participation. In reality, employees rarely participate in decisions at that level. Still, studies of this kind of participation are necessary in order to evaluate the empirical relevance of the theory. Second, the theory includes yet another hypothesis. It is not only positive effects on political participation that are predicted. A more democratic working life is also expected to have positive influences on political interest, political knowledge, and tolerance (so-called 'educative' or 'self-development' effects). It has rarely been investigated whether this additional hypothesis has empirical validity (but, see Adman, forthcoming). Third, the theory should be put more thoroughly to test from a gender perspective. In a recent American study, face-to-face participation in the workplace is found to affect political participation among women but not men (Schlozman et al., 1999, p. 46-47). Whether this holds in other countries, and why this might be the case, should be investigated more thoroughly (on this topic, see Adman, forthcoming).

All in all, there is a great need for further research, and it is still too early to draw any final conclusions about the empirical relevance of Pateman's theory. But, the empirical results so far do not live up to the great expectations many participatory democrats have expressed. The claim that democratic workplaces function as the starting point for a more participatory society at large is not supported. In addition, the influence of a factor such as education seems to be much stronger (see, eg, Nie et al., 1996).

This part of my dissertation ends with a discussion from the perspective of normative democratic theory (Adman, 2004, p. 15-18, p. 139-141). Even though workplace democracy is not found to affect political participation, it is argued that the results reveal political inequality. Individuals who seldom participate in decision-making in the workplace – and who have little influence over their situation at work – are less politically active, even though no causal effect occurs. As a result, their interests are probably being set aside, thereby violating the norm of political equality according to the self-protective model of democracy. From the perspective of the procedural model, the results also indicate political inequality. Background factors, such as education and work status, explain much of the correlation between participation at work and in politics. Political inactivity among those who have little influence in the workplace is thus a reflection of basic social divisions, ie the result of a lack of relevant resources (such as education).

Other arguments and findings

In my dissertation I also present some other arguments and findings. Here, I mention four of them. First, I discuss the definition of political participation (ibid, 2004, p. 18-25). According to the traditional approach, the term refers to activities undertaken by private citizens aimed at influencing the government (see, eg, Verba and Nie, 1972). In other words, activities are only classified as political when they are directed towards institutions that traditionally are considered as political. I argue that this definition is too narrow. Many activities are aimed at influencing society, though they are not directly targeted at political institutions. One example consists of boycotts of a certain company's products. Therefore, I suggest a wider definition of political participation; acts should be considered as political when they are designed to bring about improvements or counteract deterioration in society. In accordance with this wider definition, some further activities (such as boycotting) are included in my measure of political participation.

Second, I discuss the normative role of the concept of political efficacy (ie one's perceived possibilities to affect politics; see Adman, 2004, p. 15-18). In previous empirical studies both the self-protective model and the procedural model, ie *both* the normative theories in the dissertation, have been applied –

using political participation as an indicator to evaluate the degree of political inequality between different social groups (see, eg, Rothstein et al., 1995; Petersson et al., 1998). I argue that these theories can be examined in better ways if information about the respondent's political efficacy is also considered. Therefore, along with political participation, special attention was paid to political efficacy in the dissertation.

Third, I also, albeit briefly, discuss the concept of work status ('class'; see Adman, 2004, p. 47). Previous Swedish research has shown that this concept is multidimensional; for a complete picture of how occupational status affects political participation, it is not sufficient just to distinguish between white-collar and blue-collar workers (Petersson et al., 1989, p. 164-190). According to previous studies, several other dimensions must also be analysed, eg employment sector ('public' or 'private'). My findings suggest that yet another dimension of occupational status should be considered. Attention must also be paid to whether a citizen is employed or unemployed, in order to get a fuller understanding of how work relates to political activity.

Finally, in the light of my empirical findings, I discuss the relevance of the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) to the Swedish case (Adman 2004, p. 134-135). I conclude that the model performs rather well, though it needs to be modified when it comes to which resource factors should be considered. CVM focuses mainly on individual factors, ie money, skills, and free time. However, collective resources, such as access to networks and organizations, are important determinants of political participation in Sweden. Therefore, these factors should play a more prominent role in the model when adapted for the Swedish case.

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