"Save our school!" What kinds of impact have protests against school closures in Swedish local politics?

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People have opposed the closures of local schools in many municipalities all across the Sweden. While some campaigns succeed in stopping or post-postponing the decision, other actions fail and pupils are sent to new school. The impact of citizens' participation on policy-making is a core issue for democracy, but it has been little studied. How and in what conditions some local groups succeed and other fail in stopping the school-closures? Is protesting in the rich, urban or native-Swedes dominated areas more successful than the struggle in the poor or immigrant dominated communities? Does it matter who participate in such actions and what kind of strategies they use? This project will answer these questions by combining the theories of policy-process and social movement outcomes. The empirical analysis will use data on all Swedish municipalities that have discussed the question of school-closure during the last twenty years.

Goals and motivation

"*Visst lönar sig protesterna – ibland. ...men det är som att slåss mot bomull*"[2], noted Göteborgs Posten's journalist. She was writing about the school-closure in Tynnered, and how protesting parents and the change of the leading party influenced the municipal decision-making (Skoog 1994). Opposition to closings of public schools is not new in Sweden, but it has spread from rural areas to suburbs and become more visible since the early 1990s. According to the newspapers, about three or four protests against school closures in a month take place all across the Sweden. Some of the campaigns succeed in stopping or postponing the closure (e.g., Gräsö skola in Östhammar, Linnéskolan and Gläntanskolan in Uppsala), while other protests fail and pupils are sent to another school (e.g., parts of the Hobyskola in Ronneby or Järbo school in Färgelanda).

The consequences of school closures are, in general, shown to be negative for pupils, teachers, and the local community (Egelund & Laustsen 2006; Magnusson & Berg 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that there is such a protest mobilization against the school-closures. On the other hand, local decision-makers argue that the decreasing number of children and economic difficulties of the municipalities make the closures inevitable. This, however, does not say why, how and in what conditions some local groups succeed in stopping the closure.

Democratic principles require that citizens have equal opportunities for political participation and influence on decision-making. Hence, it is important and interesting to ask whether protests against school closures in a resource-rich, urban or mainly native-Swedes dominated area are more successful than the struggle in a

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2   "It is surely worth to protest...sometimes...but it's like fighting against the cotton" (author's translation).

poor or immigrant dominated community. What kinds of protest activities (contentious or non-contentious) are more efficient for saving the schools? More simply, under which conditions are protests against school-closures successful (school remains as it is) and when these actions fail (school is closed despite the protests)? This project aims answering these questions.

Scholars who study the outcomes of protests suggest that the success of mobilisation is mainly related to power-relations and socio-economic situation of a community (Amenta 2006). In particular, we can expect that local political parties and bureaucrats influence citizens' opportunities to make their voice heard. Thus, by assessing the influence of protest mobilisation we can also learn more about the role of "common people" in policymaking i.e. in functioning of a democratic society. Prior studies that have examined the protests against school closures provide good insights into the particular cases in Sweden (Thelin and Solstad 2005; Pestoff 2008), Denmark (Nielsen 2002) or elsewhere (Berger 1982; Basu 2007). However, these studies do not answer the above stated questions. Even numerous analyses of political activism in Sweden (e.g., Petersson et al. 1998) have not discussed the impact of citizens' mobilisation on policy-making.[1]

An answer to questions raised above requires a systematic long-term analysis. It should take into account proposed and implemented plans of school-closures, protests related to the closures, changes in

the local power-relations, as well as demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the municipality. The proposed study will be based on data from official documents, secondary sources, and news reports about the campaigns against school closures in all Swedish municipalities that have attempted to close a school during 1992-2011. This extensive, large-N approach will be complemented with two strategically selected case studies (two municipalities) that would be useful for examining the causal relationship between protesting groups, formation of party-coalitions and local-level decisionmaking in a detail. Interview-data and close observation of a case would improve our understanding of the mechanisms that explain how protests become significant for the making of local politics.

The results of the project will be published in international peer-reviewed journals and in the special web-page. The last is of vital importance for increasing public knowledge about the mobilization and outcomes of local school-related political mobilisation in Sweden. For instance, it could be useful knowledge for Swedish "stand-by citizens", who are still interested and participate in politics, though are decreasingly members in political parties (Amnå 2008).

Theoretical framework

The number of studies on social movement and protest outcomes i.e. failure and success, has increased constantly since the 1990s. The focus has mainly been on economic (welfare, taxes, labour) and civil right issues in the U.S. (Uba 2009; Burstein and Linton 2002). The few studies of protest outcomes in the Western Europe focus rather on environmental/antinuclear and foreign policies (Kriesi

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1   The only study on protest outcomes in Swedish context the author is aware of was initiated by Björn Åkerberg, doctoral student at Karlstad University in 2007. Unfortunately, there is no further information about the development of the project.

1995, Giugni 2004, Kolb 2007, Rootes 2007). The only education or school policy related study the author is aware of has been made by Sidney Tarrow, who examined the impact of French students' struggle on educational reform in 1968 (Tarrow 1993). Moreover, the majority of the research focuses on the national level policy-making although there is growing interest in the U.S. state-level policies (e.g., Amenta et al. 2005; Soule and King 2006). With the interest in the impact of protests on local level school-policies, this study serves to enlarge the current empirical focus of the research on social movements in general and on protest outcomes in particular.

The major concern of the research on social movement outcomes is the definition and measurement of the impact of mobilisation. It is common to talk about the direct, indirect and conditional impact of social movements, where the first refers to the impact of mobilisation after considering other variables that could also affect policy change (Burstein and Linton 2002). The indirect effect refers to the options that mobilisation could affect public opinion, media reporting, representative of political parties etc., who in turn could impact policy-making. Finally, recent studies have shown that the impact of mobilisation depends on the particular social setting i.e. it is dependent on socio-economic or political context (Uba 2009). All these aspects will also be taken into account in the proposed study, especially as a few studies still argue that mobilisation has only a marginal impact on policy-process (e.g. Giugni 2004).

Although prior research has no full agreement upon the factors that explain in what conditions protests would influence policy-making (Amenta & Caren 2004), one could differentiate between (1) the variables that are under the control of mobilising group and (2) exogenous factors that are not controlled by the group. The first refers to group's leadership, organisation, size of the mobilisation, and action repertoire (e.g., strike, demonstration or negotiation) (Piven and Cloward 1979; McAdam and Su 2002). This also means the direct impact of mobilisation. The role of exogenous factors is often related to the indirect effect of mobilisation and refers to the importance of supportive political parties i.e. allies (Lipsky 1968, Soule 2004) and public opinion (Soule and Olzak 2004). Contextual factors like the party or political system (Amenta et al. 2005) are seen as important for conditional impact of mobilisation. The empirical results, however, show varying effect of different factors. For instance, some studies show how protests that disrupt public life influence policy-making more than relatively calm actions (Gamson 1975; Uba 2007). Other studies argue that the political impact of mobilisation depends on the presence of public support for activists' goals (e.g., Agnone 2007) while several studies do not support this view (see review in Uba 2009). The same applies for the role of influential political allies (i.e. political parties), which is of particular importance for the proposed project. As the majority of previous empirical analyses are done in the context of two-party systems (U.S.) the study of protest outcomes in a multiparty system with coalition governments (i.e. Sweden) provides us new opportunities for understanding the role of political allies.

The importance of different political ideas/parties has been more often examined in the frame of studies on policy process (e.g., Sabatier 2007). These authors argue that the policy change is mainly related to the change of ideas shared by

actors' networks or coalitions. Studies in this framework have not, however, considered the importance of citizens' protest mobilisation or decision-makers' strategic action as criteria for policy change (see example of Swedish nuclear energy policy in Nohrstedt 2009). The proposed project will combine the policy process approach to the research on social movement outcomes with an expectation of contributing to both of the schools. The empirical focus on Swedish municipalities provides an excellent opportunity for studying how political party alliances and citizens' mobilisation influences local decision-making. There have been numerous protests against the school closures and political parties also form numerous coalitions across the traditional party-blocks (Bäck 2005).

Moreover, the analysis of local level policy-making aids us to account for another problem in social movement research– the lacking focus on mechanisms that explain how protests actually influence policy-making. Andrews (2004) suggests that there are three possibilities: negotiations, persuasion, or threatening. Some recent studies have focused on the last two mechanisms, but little attention has been paid to negotiations between interest groups or social movements, bureaucrats and policy-makers. The last is, however, an especially important part of the process of closing schools in Scandinavia and elsewhere (Nielsen 2002; Witten et al. 2003; Woods 2006; Basu 2007). For instance, the authorities of the Örebro municipality initiated a citizens' deliberative dialogue for discussing the closure of a school (Pettersson 2008). Although previous studies on school-closures do not apply the framework of social movement analysis, the connection is easy to make. For instance, Wood (2006) shows

how Australian rural communities combined their traditional negotiation strategies with more militant protest tactics for hindering the closure of local schools. A scholar of social movements would say that actors changed their action repertoire and thereby increased the probability of a successful struggle (McAdam 1983). Similarly, Basu (2007) shows how the cooperation between parental groups, trade unions and some top-level politicians stopped the closure of four schools in Toronto. One could also say that their struggle succeeded due to the presence of influential political allies and co-operation between social movements (e.g. trade unions and parents). The empirical goal of the project is to see whether the similar patterns hold also in a Swedish context.

The set-up of the study

As noted above, the theoretical approach of the project combines social movement and policy process theories with the aim to develop further the understanding of factors and mechanisms explaining the impact of citizens' mobilisation on public policy. Previous research emphasizes the importance of political allies and coalition-building for the success of interest groups and social movements. Thus, I expect that the co-operation between groups opposing the school-closure groups and municipal political parties would play a significant role for deciding over school closures and affects the impact of protests. One could also hypothesize that the impact of mobilization depends on the strategies of action (e.g., disruptive mobilisation in a form of demonstration and strikes versus negotiations), presence of general public opposition to school closures, and socio-economic characteristics of the mobilising group

and the municipality (rich versus poor; rural versus urban; ethnically homogenous versus heterogeneous groups and municipalities). Certainly, these hypotheses and mechanisms explaining the relationships will be developed further in the beginning of the project.

Equally to the theoretical framework, the empirical and methodological set-up of the project follows the research on social movement outcomes and policy-process. First, the municipal proposal to close the entire or the part of a school is taken as a unit of analysis. Second, a mobilisation against school closure is defined to have an impact if local authorities respond to the actions by withdrawing the proposal or postponing the decision on school closure for a certain time-period (cf. Schumaker 1978). The impact is a direct one if the effect remains after accounting for other factors, but the presence of indirect and conditional impact of mobilisation will also be searched for. A quantitative event history analysis[1] allows isolating the impact of the protests on policy-process from the effects of political allies, demographic and socio-economic factors. It also allows us comparing the impact of all hypothesised contextual factors (allies, coalitions) and differences of action strategies. This method with some variations has been common in the studies of social movement outcomes (al-

so applied in Uba 2007). The complementary qualitative analysis allows focusing on the causal relationships in a detail.

Due to the lack of prior studies on protests and decision-making regarding the school closures in Swedish municipalities it is necessary to collect some new data. Although there have been school closures before 1992, the proposed project will focus on the period 1992-2011 for two reasons. First, Swedish municipalities have reassessed the importance of voluntary sector and citizens' participation in policy-asking since the early 1990s (Wollmann 2006). Second, the rules for financing the school-system changed in 1992. These rules gave municipalities a right to decide over school-financing and opened the system for competition, i.e. allowed formation of non-municipal schools or "*friskolor*" (Bergström & Sandström 2001). Thus, we could expect that the changes in the Swedish school-infrastructure became more frequent after 1992. The proposed project would last for three years and therefore the final year of the analysis is 2011.

The data necessary for this study could be divided into four groups:

1. Information about the proposals and plans of school-closures of all Swedish 290 municipalities will be gathered from their official documents (propositions and reports). The dates of when the authorities initiated the process and the dates of final decision by the municipal council are of particular interest here because we aim to measure the duration of the decision-making process.

2. Data on mobilisation against the school closures will be collected from the reports of national and local news-media (newspapers etc.), as well

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1   The "event" refers to the fact that this analysis is used for studying whether and when some event of interest takes place. The synonyms — "survival" and "duration" analysis imply that one could apply the method to examine how long one process survives before it terminates (dies). Here we could examine how long the process of school-closing would take place, depending on the protest intensity and other relevant factors (see more about the method in Box-Steffensmeier & Jones 2004).

as from the web-pages of the "threatened" schools. News-reports are accessible via two electronic searchable media archives (Mediearkivet, Presstext) that cover major national and regional newspapers, and radio news since the 1990s. They also include many local newspapers since 2000. The process of searching for relevant news and coding the events follows the conventional methods of protest event analysis (Koopmans & Rucht 2002). This usually involves the triangulation of the data-sources, which allows minimizing the selection and description biases (Ortiz et al. 2005). The first bias refers to the problem where the news-industry reports only larger and violent events, while the second one indicates the problems of inaccuracy in media reporting. Combining the national and local media sources allows me to minimize these biases. Moreover, media data will be complemented with the information from the internet. For instance, the activists' websites like "*Bevara Västbodaskolan*" (Keep the Västbo-school)[1] would be of great importance. Additional data on citizens' mobilisation will be collected from the records of teachers' trade unions (e.g., Lärarförbundet) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).

The compiled protest-data will be carefully coded, paying particular attention to event date, size, mobilising groups and their demands, target and to attitudes of political parties and the public. An exam-

ple of a protest is taken from the recent radio report about the school closure protest in Klippan municipality in Skåne. It reported:

> *About 200 parents* [protest size and mobilising group] *demonstrated* [a form of action] *against the closure of Antilopenskolan in the front of the municipality council* [target and location] *on 27th of April 2009* [date]. *Parents handed over the list of 1700 signatures* [another protest action and size] *and demanded that authorities put the question on referendum* [demand]."[2]

The small pilot study of such protests suggested that a regional newspaper – "Göteborgs-Posten" reported about 10 similar kinds of actions in 1995. Thus, one could expect to find rather big number of actions, especially during the more recent years where school-closures has become more frequent.

The "protest-database" that is used in this project will be made publicly accessible via project-webpage. To examine the impact of these protests, the events will be connected to the data on proposals and decisions on school closures. It is important to recall that in order to evaluate the effect of mobilisation, we need to have information about the cases of school closures where no parental, pupils' or teacher protest was mobilised.

3. Socio-economic statistics of municipalities, as well as information on coalition-building in local politics will be gathered from the secondary sources (e.g., SOU 2001:48; Bäck 2003; Wohlgemuth 2006; Eriksson 2007), and from the reports of public agencies

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1   See http://www.ffweb.se/vastbodaskolan/ vastboda_skolanFrameset.html.

2   "Högljudda protester mot skolnedläggningar", Sveriges Radio P4 Malmö, author's translation, see http://www.sr.se/cgibin/ malmo/nyheter/artikel.asp?Artikel=2797938, accessed latest 01.05.2009.

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(e.g., Skolverket). For example, the report "Skolan mitt i byn" (2009) from the Glesbygdsverket[1] discusses the problems and process of school closures in Swedish rural areas.

4. Quantitative analysis will be complemented with case studies in two municipalities, which will be selected on the basis of the results of the quantitative analysis. I.e. a case where all hypotheses find support and an outlier. This part of the project follows the process-tracing approach and will make use of interviews with local parental groups, teachers, bureaucrats and municipal politicians. Such a data provides details about the school closure related decision-making and informs us about the subjective (perceived) effectiveness of citizens' groups.

Project organisation

The project will be conducted by Katrin Uba, whose PhD thesis examined the impact of anti-privatisation protests in India and Peru (Uba 2007). During 2007-8, she participated in a study on protest mobilisation and outcomes in the European Union (co-ordinated by Fredrik Uggla, funded by Riksbanken). These two projects gave her experience of setting up protest-datasets and testing the theories of social movement outcomes – both highly relevant for the proposed project. Her current involvement (until June 2010) in an interdisciplinary project which examines the renewable energy policies in Sweden and Spain involves the use of policy-proc-

ess theories. Considering that the process of data-collection and coding for this proposed study is very time-consuming, a few research assistants will also be involved in the work of this project.

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