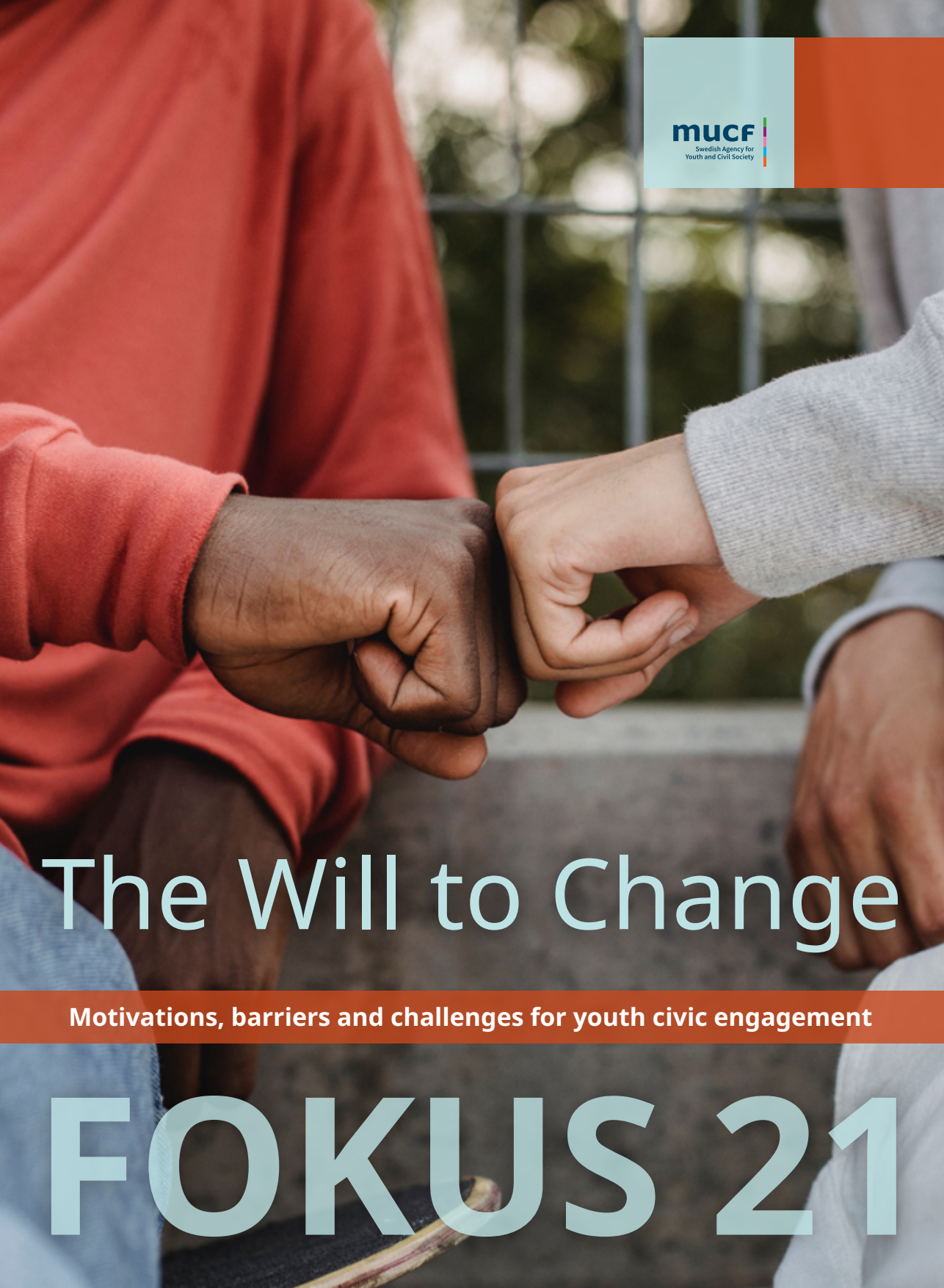

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Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society

The Will to Change

Motivations, barriers and challenges for youth civic engagement

FOKUS 21

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Fokus 21

Introduction

This year marks the 100th anniversary of democracy in Sweden. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) wants to draw attention to and investigate youth civic engagement. Youth engagement is crucial for democracy – today and in the future.

Today's youth are a committed generation. Young people are interested in social issues and politics, and many try to influence their immediate surroundings and society at large in various ways. They are active on social media, sign petitions and try to make change by forming associations. This report shows that young people's interest and engagement in social issues is stable over time. Yet we also see some changes. Social media plays an increasingly important role in youth engagement.

However, there are challenges. The results show that a group of young people with a low level of interest in social issues and politics is less likely to try to influence social development through different types of actions. We also see that levels of engagement differ between different groups of young people. Boys, young people of foreign descent, disabled youth and young people living in rural areas are groups of young people with lower levels of civic engagement. This is troubling. The report highlights a number of thresholds and barriers that prevent youth engagement. It is important that this knowledge be used to create opportunities for more young people to develop a sense of engagement, and to help shape the development of society. We also see that concerns about being subjected to threats and hatred can affect young people's willingness to participate in civic debate. This is extremely serious.

Together, we must encourage and nurture the power and the will of young people to influence and change society. The aim of youth policy is for all young people to have decent living conditions, the power to shape their lives and influence over developments in society. The engagement of young people is fundamental to the realisation of this objective and to the empowerment of young people.

The Agency would like to thank all the young people who shared their views and experiences in interviews, as well as the organisations and officials who helped us recruit participants. We would also like to thank researchers Niklas Bolin and Anders Backlund, who contributed a chapter on young people in political youth organisations, and the research group at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, who generously shared the results of their population study.

The report has been prepared by Amanda Nielsen (project manager), Emma Neuman, Emma Tornström, Heli Villanen, Petter Holmgren and Sara Gille.

Lena Nyberg
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TO
DARITY

Content

Summary

Every year, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) produces a thematic report on the living conditions of young people. The aim of this year's report is to contribute to a deeper understanding of youth civic engagement. Youth civic engagement is important for the realisation of the youth policy goal of all young people having decent living conditions, the power to shape their lives and influence over developments in society.

The report is based on the results of several surveys. Young people's attitudes towards and experiences of different forms of civic engagement are examined on the basis of three major surveys carried out on a representative sample.[1] The report also includes an analysis based on a survey of members of political youth associations carried out as part of a research project. Finally, youth engagement is analysed on the basis of interviews conducted by MUCF with around 100 young people.

The report shows that there is a strong and stable interest in politics and social issues among young people. Many young people are interested in social issues, politics and events in other countries. Interest has increased slightly over time, especially among young girls. Many young people also have experience of various political actions. Seven of ten young people have taken some political action in the past year. The most common is to express support for opinions on social issues on the internet or social media. However, many young people say that they could never imagine takes a range of political actions. Boys show more reluctance in this regard than girls. The results also show that six out of ten young people are members of associations, and one out of ten is a member of an association with an explicit focus on social issues. Every other young person volunteers.

[1] MUCF's National Youth Survey from 2021, MUCF's Attitudes and Values Study from 2018 and results from Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College's population study from 2019.

A high level of interest in society and politics is often linked to active participation in the form of political action. In-depth analysis of young people based on their level of engagement shows that just over one in ten young people (14%) are highly engaged, having both a high level of interest (in social and political issues) and a high level of participation (in political activities). A slightly higher proportion have low-level engagement (19%); they have low interest and low participation. Girls are engaged at a higher level compared to boys, and young people of Swedish heritage are slightly more likely to be engaged than young people of foreign heritage. LGBTQI youth are the group most likely to be engaged at a high level, and the proportion is about twice as high compared to hetero-cis individuals. We also see that youth whose parents have a post-secondary education are more likely to be in the highly-engaged group than those whose parents are less educated. Young people living in metropolitan municipalities have higher levels of engagement compared to young people in rural municipalities. Civic engagement among youth also increases with age. Finally, a higher proportion of disabled youth are engaged at a low level compared to young people without disabilities. MUCF's interviews with young people show that youth civic engagement takes many forms. The most common arena for young people's engagement is social media, which many young people use as a platform to adopt a position or try to exert influence on various social issues. The interviews also show that young people's motivations for engagement are complex. Most are driven by a desire to change and make a difference. Many also report that engagement brings well-being, community and opportunities to get to know people with similar interests. The interviews reveal numerous aspects that enable or hinder young people's engagement. Interest and time are fundamental to young people's willingness and ability to get engaged. Young people's living conditions – including their health and finances – also affect their chances of getting engaged. An active and engaged environment is an important facilitator, and conversely, a lack of knowledge and networks can create thresholds for young people to channel their engagement. Conditions for engagement may also differ according to where young people live.

The range of organisations to get involved in is often smaller outside large cities, which can make it more difficult to find a context in which

to be active. The results also show that lack of accessibility can create thresholds and barriers for some young people with disabilities. The report further provides an in-depth understanding of young people's interest in engaging in party politics. Around five percent of young people are members of political youth associations or parties, a proportion that is stable over time. The results of the survey of political youth association members show that the desire to influence and change is the most common motive for membership. Most plan to continue their involvement in the principal party. However, only slightly more than half say they are interested in being candidates for the party. The results also show that the majority became members on their own initiative, and that only a small proportion were recruited. It is also common to have experience with political involvement in their immediate environment. Almost half of the members of the youth organisations say they have parents or siblings who have been members of a political party.

The interviews show that many young people are opting out of party politics in favour of involvement in other arenas. Many find politics difficult, feel unable to identify with a particular party, or find it easier to get involved in single issues. Other young people have a negative image of politics or politicians.

The overall results of the report show an engaged youth generation. There is no evidence that interest or participation among youth has declined over time. However, challenges do exist. One is the differences in engagement between different groups of young people that emerge in the analysis. The presence of threats and hatred in the civic debate is also a cause for concern. The interview study shows that many young people were aware of the risk of being harmed, and some said they adapted by avoiding taking a stand on certain issues, or staying away from certain types of engagement. There is also a need to monitor the ability of political parties and youth organisations to recruit young people. Although the results indicate that the number of people engaged is stable, it is concerning that many young people do not find this form of engagement attractive. The report's indications that young people are not being offered sufficient entry points to party political involvement is also of concern.

Civic engagement: a definition

Civic engagement is a term lacking an established definition, and which is used in different ways. The difficulty of defining its meaning is compounded by the fact that several related – and partly overlapping – concepts are also contested.

Social engagement

The term social engagement, like civic engagement, is often used as an umbrella term for a set of actions and activities. For example, social engagement (medborgerligt engagemeang) is used in this way by the research team behind the population study (Svedberg et al. 2020).[2] The study examines four forms of social engagement:

- volunteer work
- informal efforts
- donating and
- political participation.

This use is in line with a broader definition of social engagement that includes both informal acts in the private sphere and formal acts in the public sphere. In other words, this includes everything from helping neighbours and joining various associations, to political participation in the form of voting or being active in a political party (Adler & Goggin 2005; Ekman & Amnå 2012).

[2] The population study is a survey conducted by researchers affiliated with Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College. The survey has been conducted on eight occasions since 1992.

Volunteer work is a term used to describe the various types of work and tasks that people carry out voluntarily, either unpaid or for a token payment. Such activities are often carried out within the framework of a non-profit organisation. The terms **volunteering** and **voluntary work** are often used synonymously with volunteer work. Examples of volunteer work include holding a position of trust or leadership in an association, participating in campaigning or fundraising, or engaging in direct assistance to individuals.

Informal social support is a term for unpaid support or assistance provided on a regular basis. These activities usually take place outside the household, and are different from volunteer work because they take place outside an organisational context. This may include providing care or help with household chores, or just being in touch with someone.

Donating is a term for voluntary donations for non-profit purposes.

Political participation is a term for various types of activities aimed at influencing political processes.

Source: Svedberg et al. 2020

Political participation

Political participation is thus a form of action and activity that is often included under the umbrella term of social engagement. At the same time, political participation is itself an umbrella term. The notion of political participation has undergone a gradual expansion in recent decades, from being more or less synonymous with electoral participation to encompassing a range of activities and actions aimed at influencing political decision-making processes. These include, e.g., contacting decision-makers, signing petitions, participating in demonstrations or being active in social movements (Ekman & Amnå 2012).

Civic engagement as a specific form of participation

Political scientist Erik Amnå has written about civic engagement and related concepts in a number of articles and books. As part of a major research programme on youth and civic engagement, he and his research colleagues have developed a classification that relates different types of political participation to other forms of participation as well as non-participation. This is based on a combination of the factors of interest (an attitude) and participation (an activity). The classification is an attempt to "capture the full range of political attitudes that citizens actually represent" (Amnå et al. 2016, p. 88). The breakdown consists of three broad categories – non-participation[3], latent political participation and manifest political participation – which in turn are divided into sub-categories. Within these sub-categories are attitudes and actions that take both individual and collective forms.

Non-participation		**Participation (latently political)**		**Participation (manifestly political)**	
Active forms of non-participation	Passive forms of non-participation	Civic involvement	Civic engagement	Formal political participation	Activism

Figure 1.1 Different forms of participation.
Source: Based on Amnå et al. 2016

The classification distinguishes between forms of participation that are considered manifestly political and those that are considered latently political. The latter include different attitudes, stances and activities which, in a given situation, may turn into manifest political participation. The category of manifest political participation includes various forms of political participation, ranging from electoral participation to various forms

[3] The classification makes a distinction between active (anti-political orientation) and passive forms (apolitical orientation) of non-participation. The difference between these is that people with an anti-political orientation actively avoid politics while people with an apolitical orientation passively avoid it. The former are driven by disgust, the latter by disinterest. Both abstain from voting, but the motivations are different.

of extra-parliamentary participation. The category of latent political participation includes both interest in politics and social issues and various types of activities. The former is referred to as civic involvement while the latter is referred to as civic engagement. Here, then, civic engagement is reserved for a more limited set of activities that are distinguished from various forms of political participation. These activities include writing letters to the editor and blogging about social issues, donating money and volunteering (Amnå et al. 2016). This definition is much narrower than the one used in the present report.

Our definition: civic engagement as an umbrella term

In this report, civic engagement is rather used as a broad umbrella term that includes attitudes and approaches as well as activities.[4] It includes all the elements contained in the concept of social engagement[5] but is at the same time somewhat broader, because it also includes an interest in society, what Amnå, et al., call civic involvement. Figure 1.2 summarises what is included in the Agency's understanding of civic engagement. Our starting point is that civic engagement can be expressed in both attitudes and actions. Engagement in terms of attitudes can involve, e.g., interest in social issues and people's living conditions. Engagement in the form of action encompasses various forms of activities that are undertaken with the aim of influencing society and people's lives for the better. These activities, which we call civic, can take place in more or less organised settings and can be done both individually and collectively. Collective activities can take place in the framework of different types of organisations, such as associations, political parties and networks. Our starting point is that the concept of civic engagement captures:

[4] In other words, our definition encompasses both types of participation (and its subcategories) in the Amnå et al. classification. 5 To the extent that the activities are civic, see discussion below.

[5] To the extent that the activities are civic, see discussion below

- A broader engagement than political engagement.
- A narrower engagement than volunteerism.[6]

Political engagement falls under what we call civic engagement. However, based on the definition we start from, civic engagement is a broader concept that captures a wider range of attitudes and actions. At the same time, by speaking of civic engagement, we are making a delimitation that does not include all forms of volunteerism, but only those that are civic in nature. Our definition of civic engagement thus does not include young people's involvement in sports, hobby and cultural associations to the extent that these do not have a clear civic agenda in their activities. This means that by civic engagement we do not mean all forms of volunteerism or association involvement. In summary, we believe that civic engagement can take the following forms:

- Interest in social issues and living conditions.
- Activities aimed at influencing society, either the development of society as a whole or a more limited immediate community.
- Activities aimed at improving conditions for people and groups in society.

[6] The term political engagement is used here synonymously with political participation. The term 'volunteerism' refers to various forms of unpaid engagement, including volunteer work and informal activities.

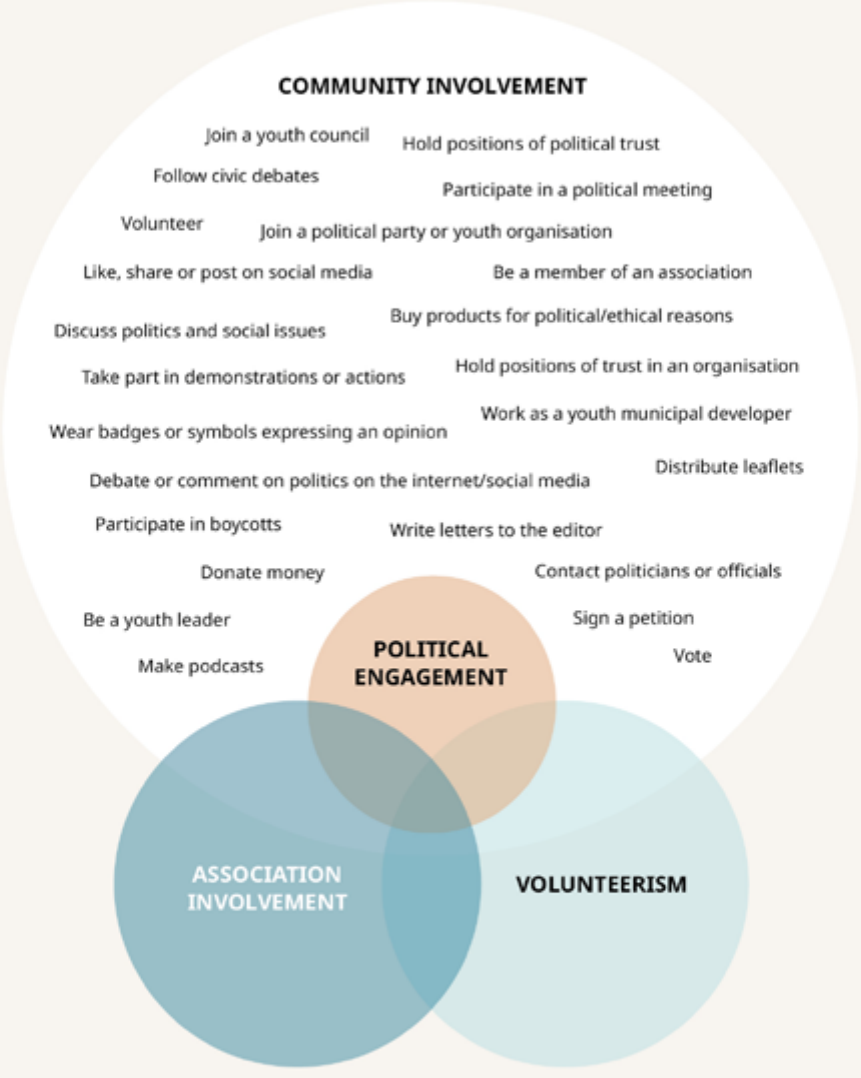

Figure 1.2 The report's conception of civic engagement


VOLUNTEER

Definitions

Disability

Disability means a limitation of a person's physical, mental or intellectual ability to function. A disability can mean many different things. It may be congenital, or may have arisen during a person's life. A disability can be visible or invisible, and it can affect a person and their life to varying degrees.

LGBTQI

The term LGBTQI is an acronym encompassing six different terms: lesbian/gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex. The first three terms refer to a person's sexual orientation, i.e., to whom a person is attracted and falls in love with. The term 'trans' refers instead to a person's gender identity, i.e., the gender a person identifies as. It also refers to gender expression, i.e., how someone expresses their gender through clothing, make-up and body posture, among other things. The term 'queer' can refer to a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. Intersex is used to refer to a condition in which physical development is not unambiguous in terms of gender.

Hetero-cis

The term hetero-cis is used in this report to refer to people who are not LGBTQI. The first part of the term is an abbreviation of heterosexual, and refers to sexual orientation. The latter part is an abbreviation for cisgender and refers to gender identity. Cisgender is a term used to describe people who are not transgender. It is a person whose legal sex, biological sex and gender identity are and always have been linked in accordance with the prevailing social norm.

Swedish/foreign heritage

Swedish heritage refers to persons born in Sweden, with at least one parent born in Sweden. Foreign heritage refers to people who were born abroad, or who were born in Sweden of two foreign-born parents.

Knowledge overview

In this chapter, we briefly describe the state of knowledge in relation to a number of areas related to youth civic engagement. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive review of the literature, but to give the reader a brief background to frame the findings presented in the following chapters.

The chapter begins with a discussion of how youth civic engagement develops, and the role of schools in fostering the emergence of civic interest and engagement. This is followed by a section on different forms of engagement, and how young people's engagement has evolved over time. The remaining sections of the chapter discuss different groups' various conditions for engagement, and challenges related to the presence of threats and hatred.

How does civic engagement develop?

The emergence and development of civic engagement, and its various dimensions, have been the subject of a long series of scholarly studies. In many of these, socialisation is a key concept. In sociology, the term socialisation is used to describe the process by which individuals acquire the values, habits, and attitudes of a society (Merriam-Webster). Political socialisation is about how knowledge, values, skills, emotions and activities develop (Amnå et al. 2016). In this context, we are primarily interested in the processes through which young people develop (or fail to develop) civic engagement and are shaped into democratic citizens.

Youth political socialisation

Political socialisation often occurs unnoticed in daily life, but can also take place in more explicit and directed forms. In line with this, two forms of socialisation can be distinguished.

- **Direct** socialisation, an explicit and conscious process aimed at achieving a particular outcome. One example is explicit civic education.
- **Indirect** socialisation, an unconscious process through which people are coloured by their environment and experiences. One example is the influence of parents and friends (Anckar et al. 2013).

Early socialisation research often started from an understanding of children as passive recipients of adult influence, whereas more recent research often places greater emphasis on young people's own actions (Amnå et al. 2016). Research has identified parents, friends, school, and the media as important actors in political socialisation. Political socialisation in the family may involve parents consciously attempting to transmit political norms and values during upbringing, but need not be conscious or explicit. Even small running comments related to society and politics help to shape an individual's understanding and approach. The same applies to socialisation processes in schools. These may consist of teaching elements explicitly aimed at educating pupils to become citizens. However, socialisation in schools also takes place through the influence of the views and values of teachers and other students (Anckar et al. 2013). Modern education also considers students as active co-creators of knowledge and skills. The learning of, for example, civic skills is thus a process in which students have an active role (Strandberg 2017; Säljö 2014). Researchers have identified several factors that are important for young people's political participation. Interest in social issues and politics is often a prerequisite for participation. Furthermore, conversations and discussions about society and politics have been shown to promote political participation (Amnå et al. 2016). Other factors that may be important are belief in the future (Lalander & Johansson 2007) or hope/anxiety about the future (Ojala 2007).

The school's democratic mission

Schools have an important mission to impart and anchor both knowledge and democratic values in order to educate conscious and competent citizens (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012). The democratic mission

has been enshrined in the Education Act and curricula since the post-war period. The latest Education Act (2010:800) reinforced this. The curriculum for Swedish primary and lower-secondary schools, preschools and extramural recreation centres includes a mission to promote pupils' development into active, creative, competent and responsible citizens (SKOLFS 2010:37).

The the ability of schools to fulfil their democratic mission has been monitored through various forms of monitoring and studies. In an evaluation of 17 schools' work with democracy and values carried out almost ten years ago, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate found several shortcomings in the work of the schools under review. Inter alia, the Inspectorate found that civic education was not sufficiently pervasive in education. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate also called for more training of pupils in influence and participation, and a better overall view of the school's work with influence and democracy (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012).

The knowledge and attitudes of Swedish students are regularly examined within the framework of the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (ICCS). It involves 14-year-old students in a number of countries, and aims to examine how young people are prepared to participate as citizens in a democratic society.

The last study was conducted in 2016. It shows that Swedish students have very good knowledge of civic, democratic and social issues, and that students' knowledge has improved since 2009. Swedish students speak more about political and social issues and what is happening in other countries compared to previous years. Confidence in one's own ability as an active citizen (e.g., to understand a TV debate, take a stance on a controversial issue or stand in school elections) has also increased over time. The study also gives a positive picture of Swedish students' future participation in elections. However, Swedish pupils are less likely than pupils in other countries to say that they believe they will actively participate in politics in the future, for example by joining a political party or standing in a municipal election (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017).

However, there is some uncertainty about the importance of schools. A research overview commissioned by the Living History Forum (2019) concluded that, based on the current state of knowledge, it is not possible to conclude that education actually strengthens democratic competence. This is because many studies do not include childhood circumstances and personal characteristics. Educational attainment correlates strongly with political views, knowledge and behaviour, but exactly what leads to democratic competence is a matter of different opinion. The research overview also notes that instruction methods, e.g., an open classroom climate, are a factor influencing students' development of democratic competence. However, different studies show different results of an open classroom climate for political knowledge, political interest and democratic values. Among students with lower socio-economic status[7], the amount of civics education, rather than an open classroom climate, appears to be important for increasing future political participation. Education thus has a levelling function (Forum for Living History 2019). knowledge and behaviour, but exactly what leads to democratic competence is a matter of opinion. The research overview also notes that instruction methods, e.g., an open classroom climate, are a factor influencing students' development of democratic competence. However, different studies show different results of an open classroom climate for political knowledge, political interest and democratic values. Among students with lower socio-economic status8 the amount of civics instruction, rather than an open classroom climate, appears to be important in increasing future political participation. In this way, education has a levelling function (Living History Forum 2019).

[7] Socio-economics is a concept that includes various economic and social factors. Socio-economic background refers to the social position or status of an individual or group. Socio-economic background is often measured by combinations of an individual's education level, income level and/or occupation. For young people, socio-economic background is instead measured by parents' education, income and/or occupations.

What is youth civic engagement today, and how has it evolved over time?

Youth civic engagement takes many forms. It can involve anything from taking an interest in politics and social issues, being involved in an association or party, or voting. In this compilation, we have chosen to highlight the following forms of civic engagement:

- political interest
- news consumption
- association involvement
- volunteer work
- political participation
- political representation.

As we discussed in the introductory chapter, not all forms of associational or volunteer work fall within the scope of what we have chosen to call civic engagement in this report. However, it is difficult to find studies that explicitly separate these particular forms of engagement, and we therefore provide a broader discussion of these forms of engagement in this chapter. Moreover, some of these forms of engagement overlap: for example, associational engagement may involve volunteer work.

Many young people have an interest in society, and more and more participate in political discussions

In MUCF's latest Attitudes and Values Study, 66 percent of young people said they were interested in politics or social issues in Sweden. This is slightly less than the older comparison group, where 81 percent said they were interested (MUCF 2019b). This is in line with studies showing that political interest increases as individuals socialise into society, and interest in politics among young people is lower than among the population as a whole. Previous studies show that there is a stable interest among youth since the 1960s. Until 2012, a slight upward trend can be observed, with increased interest concentrated in election years (SOU 2016:5).

Results from Statistics Sweden further show that many young people are also active in political discussions. In Statistics Sweden's most recent Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (2018/2019), 38 percent of young people aged 16-24 said that they usually participate in political discussions. The percentage who never participate in such discussions is 23 percent. The share of non-participants has decreased slightly compared to 2008-2009, when it was 30 percent (Statistics Sweden 2021).

Differences in news consumption between young and old

A number of studies have shown a relationship between news consumption and political interest, but different studies have assumed that the relationship has gone in different directions. A Swedish study of young people's political socialisation concluded that news consumption and information-seeking have positive effects on young people's political interest, democratic values, engagement in political discussions and, to some extent, political participation (Amnå et al. 2016).

The results of the 2017 national SOM survey show that a strong interest in politics and social issues often contributes to more frequent news consumption, and that the level of engagement is particularly important for young adults. Among young people, the difference between those with a low level of civic engagement and those with a high level of civic engagement is greater than in other age groups. This relationship is particularly true for public service media and newspapers, but not for news consumption on social media. Social media news seems to help even out differences between different groups of young people (Andersson 2018). The results of the SOM survey also show large differences in the consumption of news by young adults and older people. Among young adults aged 18-34, only one in ten access print journalism at least three days a week, whereas almost seven in ten young people access social media news with the same regularity. Among the elderly population, this distribution is reversed (Andersson 2018).

Fewer young people involved in associations

Several surveys show a decline in the proportion of young people joining associations over the last three decades. Studies also show that involvement in associations has changed over time, including an increase in occasional association activities while traditional participation has decreased (SOU 2016:5). In *Statistics Sweden's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* (2018/19), 59 percent of young people aged 16-24 reported joining at least one association, compared to 75 percent for the whole population. 41 percent of young people said they had attended at least one association meeting, and 23 percent said they were active[8] (Statistics Sweden 2021). Results from the SOM Institute show a similar pattern. Among young people aged 16-29, 59 percent were members of an association in 2020. This is slightly less than the population as a whole, where the proportion was 68 percent. In the SOM survey, young people (aged 16-29) and the elderly (aged 65-80) are the groups with the lowest levels of association membership. SOM surveys also show that the proportion of young people who are members of an association has decreased over time, from 76 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in the latest survey. The proportion of association members has declined in the whole population since 1998, but the decline is greater among young people (Sandelin 2021).

The trend is different in different age groups and different types of associations. In a previous report, MUCF noted that although youth participation has declined in recent decades, both in terms of membership and elected representatives, there have been areas of growth (MUCF 2014). These include, e.g., associations linked to hobbies such as video games and role-playing games.

[8] Membership can take different forms. Active membership is characterised by active participation in the association's activities, as a participant, leader or elected representative. Passive membership means that you are a member but do not actively participate in the association's activities.

Youth volunteer work stable over time

Studies show that the proportion of the Swedish population performing volunteer work has changed very little over time. The population study, which has been conducted several times since 1992, shows that the level of volunteer work in the population is stable at around 50 percent (von Essen 2020). The distribution of volunteer work between different age groups is also relatively stable over time. Among young people aged 16–24, the proportion performing volunteer work has varied between 41 and 54 percent since 1992. Over the same period, the amount of time young people spend on voluntary work has increased. In 1992, young people aged 16–24 spent an average of 9 hours per month on volunteer work, but by 2019 the average time had more than doubled to 20 hours a month. The population study also shows that it is relatively common to have several non-profit commitments.

The population study also examines the relationship between volunteer work and membership. Around 85 percent and 88 percent of volunteers from 1998 to 2014 were also members of the organisation in which they worked. In the most recent survey, in 2019, the share has decreased to 78 percent. People of different ages are members in roughly the same proportion. Sports and leisure organisations bring together most of those doing volunteer work (von Essen 2020). There are various reasons why people volunteer. There is a strong correlation between doing volunteer work and growing up in a home with parents who are active in associations. The link is also strong with university and higher education (von Essen 2020). A survey by *Volontärbyrån* shows that young people under the age of 25 often get involved with other young people. Furthermore, the majority of people in this age group say that they do volunteer work to influence society in a positive direction. The survey also reveals other motives. Many young people (40% of respondents) cite the desire to add credentials to their CV as a reason for getting involved (*Volontärbyrån* 2020, 2021).

Changing forms of youth political participation

Political participation can take many forms. Perhaps the most common form of political participation is voting in general elections. Other forms of political participation can range from political party membership or membership in another interest group to various types of activities aimed at influencing political developments in society. Examples of such activities include debating politics, sharing on social media, signing a petition or contacting a politician.

A positive trend can be seen in the participation of young people in the electoral process, with a steady increase. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, 86 percent of young people aged 18-24 voted, compared to 71 percent in 2002. The share of young people voting in regional/county and municipal elections is slightly lower, but has also increased over time. Turnout in the European Parliament elections is significantly lower than in other elections among young people. Only 44 percent of young people voted in the last European Parliament elections, which is about the same as in the previous elections in 2014 (MUCF 2021a).

In recent decades, the proportion of the population that is a member of political parties has declined. This trend is also visible for young people, but the decline is less marked compared to older age groups (Bäck et al. 2015). In the latest survey by Statistics Sweden (2018/2019), 5 percent of young people aged 16-24 said they were members of a political party, which is similar to the figure for the population aged 16-84. One percent of young people said they were active members, and 7 percent said they had attended a political party meeting in the past year (Statistics Sweden 2021).

As regards participation in several other types of political activities, studies show that different age groups engage in different activities. For example, one of the background reports to the Democracy Study (*Demokratiutredningen*) found that a higher proportion of young people (aged 16-29) said they had signed a petition, demonstrated or contributed to political debates compared to older comparison groups. The same report also notes that young people's activities are increasingly taking place on social media (Bäck et al. 2015).

Social media: a new arena for civic engagement

Over the past two decades, the internet – and social media in particular – has become an increasingly important arena for information dissemination, advocacy, discussion and organisation. In the wake of these developments, several studies have considered different forms of participation and social media. Research has, inter alia, considered how social media activities promote people's interests, values and political participation (Amnå et al. 2016).

A study of young people aged 13–17 shows that political information and political interaction – commenting, debating and sharing – are the most common forms of online political participation. Over half of all young people engage in these activities, and the proportion has increased in the 2010s. Fewer (between one and two in ten) create content, organise protests or the like. These forms have also increased over time. The study also shows that most are not constantly engaged (Ekström & Shehata 2018). The same study finds weak support for several hypotheses regarding how the impact of social media is changing the conditions for political engagement, including that digital media has created more porous boundaries and lowered thresholds for different types of political engagement, and that social media has led to a shift away from more conventional forms of political engagement. On the contrary, the study shows that only a small group of online activists engage in various forms of political activity. The results further suggest that online engagement supplements, rather than replaces, other forms of engagement, and that online activities can serve as a gateway to off-line participation (Amnå et al. 2016).[9]

Another study examines how young people reason and behave on social media. Among other things, it shows that personality plays a role in the willingness to express engagement in civic issues online. Individuals who are less sensitive to rejection are most active in expressing opinions on social media. More sensitive individuals, on the other hand,

[9] For adults, the study finds opposite results, i.e., that off-line activity may serve as a gateway to online participation (Amnå et al. 2016).

often refrain for fear of lack of acknowledgement or rejection from others (Bäck et al. 2019). Similar conclusions have been drawn in other studies. An interview study of around 100 young people found that many refrain from expressing opinions or participating in discussions on social media due to fear of social punishment, discomfort with high levels of conflict and a feeling that political discussions in this arena are meaningless. This is also true for some politically active young people, who say that they avoid this particular arena for participation (Fjellman et al. 2018). In conclusion, younger people are more likely than older people to use the internet and social media as an arena for expressing civic engagement. At the same time, several studies show that not all young people use these venues for this purpose, and that use varies. Research also shows that similar patterns recur in terms of who is active online and off-line. Whatever the arena, propensity to participate is influenced by factors such as political interest and educational level (Bäck et al. 2019; Fjellman et al. 2018).

Few young people elected to parliamentary assemblies

Parliamentary assemblies[10] constitute another arena for civic engagement, albeit one by nature reserved for a smaller group. The proportions of young people nominated and elected to parliamentary assemblies were both lower than the proportion of young people in the overall population in the last elections. The proportion of young people nominated was 5 percent in the 2018 Parliamentary elections. The proportion has decreased slightly compared to the 2010 and 2014 Parliamentary elections. In elections to the county and municipal councils, the share was 4 percent. The proportion of young people nominated is smaller than the proportion of 18–24 year-olds in the population. A slightly larger proportion of boys than girls are nominated at all levels. This has been the case throughout the period 2002 to 2018 (MUCF 2021a).

[10] That is, elected decision-making bodies. In this case, the Parliament, the regional council and the municipal council.

The proportion of young people elected to parliamentary assemblies increased at all levels during the 2000s, but in 2018 this trend reversed and the proportion of young people elected decreased at all levels. In 2018, there was an under-representation of elected representatives in the 18–24 age group, compared to the proportion of eligible voters of the same age, at all levels. The proportion of boys elected was higher than the proportion of girls at all levels relative to the gender distribution within the age group (MUCF 2021a). Analyses from Statistics Sweden also show that fewer young people have more significant political assignments (e.g., chairmanships), and that a higher proportion of young elected representatives are alternates (Statistics Sweden 2013, 2016).

Young people are more likely to leave office early than older elected representatives. During the 2014–2018 term of office, about four in ten young members at municipal and regional level resigned. The corresponding figure in the 30–64 age group was two in ten. At both levels, a higher proportion of girls than boys resigned during the term of office.

Statistics Sweden has investigated the reasons why elected representatives at municipal level leave office. Young elected representatives are more likely to give personal reasons for leaving office than older ones. One explanation is that young people move away from the municipality in greater numbers. However, this explains only part of the difference between young and old. For example, young people are also more likely to say that changes in the labour market influenced their decision to leave. The study also shows that fewer young people seek re-election compared to older people (Statistics Sweden 2013, 2016).

Youth: a group with different approaches

The review of different forms of civic engagement carried out in this chapter shows that the proportion of young people participating in different arenas differs. It also shows the big difference between the proportion of young people interested in politics and social issues and the proportion of young people participating in political discussions or actively trying to exert influence by participating in different types of political activities. In-depth analyses also show that it is possible to distinguish groups of young people whose attitudes and participation differ.

Political scientists Erik Amnå and Joakim Ekman have identified four groups of young people – **active, standby, disengaged** and **disillusioned** – based on analyses of political interest, political participation, institutional trust and attitudes to democracy, among other things. Young people who participate in political activities are found in the active group, while the other three groups include young people who are passive in various ways (Amnå & Ekman 2013; Amnå et al. 2016).

In their study, the smallest of the four groups is the active, to which 6 percent of young people belong. The largest group is the one the researchers have chosen to call 'standby', which includes almost half of young people. This group is made up of young people who are politically interested and have knowledge about politics and a high level of political self-confidence. These young people are also satisfied with democracy and have a high level of trust in both political institutions and their fellow citizens. They are currently not politically active, but are open to participating in political activities in the future. This group of passive young people differs from the young people in the disengaged and disillusioned groups. Unlike the young people in the standby group, they are not interested in politics, and have both less knowledge and less political self-confidence compared to the young people in this group. The main difference between these two groups is that the disengaged have an **apolitical** approach, while the disillusioned have an **anti-political** approach. The difference between these is that people with an anti-political orientation actively avoid politics, while people with an apolitical orientation passively avoid it. The former are driven by disgust, the latter by disinterest.

Active (6 procent)	Standby (46 procent)
• Participate in political activities • Politically interested • Positive image of politics • Trust in political institutions, but less trust in fellow citizens • Often dissatisfied with the way democracy works • Moderate knowledge of politics • High political self-confidence • High consumption of news	• Not involved in political activities • Politically interested • Positive image of politics • Trust in political institutions and fellow citizens • Satisfied with the way democracy works • High knowledge of politics • High political confidence • High news consumption
Disengaged (26 procent)	**Disillusioned (21 procent)**
• Do not participate in political activities • Low political interest • No positive image of politics • Low trust in political institutions, but high trust in fellow citizens • Fairly satisfied with the way democracy works • Lower knowledge of politics • Lower political confidence • Low news consumption	• Do not participate in political activities • Low political interest • Low trust in political institutions and fellow citizens • Dissatisfaction with the way democracy works • Low knowledge of politics • Low political self-confidence • Low news consumption

Figure 2.1 Four groups of young citizens.
Source: Utifrån Amnå et al. 2016

As shown in Figure 2.1, young people in the four groups differ in terms of knowledge, interest, trust and assessment of how well democracy works. In line with this, the researchers argue that non-participation can be explained in several ways. For some young people, it may be a matter of being satisfied and confident and not feeling the need to get involved, while for others it may be based on mistrust and feelings of alienation (Amnå et al. 2016). The results of the study add nuance to the picture of youth engagement. Although few young people are actively involved, in the sense of participating in political activities, more than half are interested in politics and have a high level of knowledge.

Does everyone have the same opportunities for civic engagement?

A number of studies have shown that different social groups participate in democracy to different degrees. Similar patterns emerge when looking at association membership, volunteer work or various forms of political participation (including electoral participation). Several studies also show differences in attitudes and approaches between different groups. This fact is highlighted, e.g., by the Democracy Study, which in its report notes a gap between different population groups regarding democratic participation. This gap is visible both in terms of involvement in civil society organisations and in political parties. There are also clear differences between voter turnout and other forms of political participation in different parts of the population. The report concludes that this divide – between the democratically active and the passive – largely coincides with other social and economic divides in society (SOU 2016:5).

Socio-economic conditions affect civic engagement

The Democracy Study highlights socio-economic conditions as a factor that greatly affects democratic participation. It is found that people with higher incomes and education participate to a greater extent, both in terms of electoral participation and other forms of political participation (SOU 2016:5).

Similar findings emerge from a report by Delegation Against Segregation (*Delmos*) that examines democratic participation in different areas. It shows that democratic participation is generally lower in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.[11] For example, the report shows that voter turnout is lower among residents in these areas[12] and that a smaller proportion are involved in civil society organisations. The report's

[11] The *Delmos* study compares residents of socio-economically disadvantaged areas with the national population as a whole, residents of non-disadvantaged areas, rural areas and urban areas.

[12] An interesting difference, however, is that young people aged 18–25 vote at a higher rate than those aged 26-44. This differs from the pattern seen in all other areas, where voter turnout is increasing in this age group (*Delmos* 2020:35-36).

findings are more mixed when it comes to participation in different forms of political activities. Overall, the results show that participation in various political activities is as high or higher for residents of areas with socio-economic disadvantages. However, residents of these areas report a lower interest in politics and less confidence in their ability to exert influence compared to people in the country as a whole and those living in areas without socio-economic disadvantages. However, there are no significant differences between residents of these areas and residents of rural and urban areas. Delmos' report also shows that geography, in the form of residential area, has an independent effect. Differences in participation between residents of different areas thus persist even when background variables such as gender, age, country of birth and education level are taken into account (*Delmos* 2020).

Difference in conditions for women and men

A number of studies have shown that gender differences exist both in terms of the conditions for civic engagement and the ways in which engagement is expressed. For example, MUCF's latest Attitudes and Values Study showed that young girls have less political self-confidence, i.e., believe they have less influence, compared to young boys (MUCF 2019b). When it comes to different forms of participation, some differences based on gender exist. A report from the Swedish Gender Equality Agency shows that a higher proportion of men say they often participate in political discussions, and that a higher proportion of men are involved in volunteer work. At the same time, voter turnout is higher among women. In terms of membership in political parties, there have been no major differences for the last few years (Gender Equality Agency 2021).

Statistics regarding those nominated and elected in general elections indicate that conditions for women and men differ. The proportion of young girls nominated and elected is lower compared to young boys. Furthermore, a higher proportion of young girls leave office prematurely compared to young men (MUCF 2021a). The Gender Equality Agency's report indicates several possible reasons for these differences. The report presents findings from studies showing that women are discriminated against in politics, must perform better than men to be politically

successful and have more difficulty reaching high positions of power. The report also notes that women experience more threats and hatred, and that exposure to violence increases for women higher in the political hierarchy (Gender Equality Agency 2021).

Foreign-born individuals participate less

Country of birth is another factor shown to influence civic engagement in a number of studies. Foreign-born individuals have a lower turnout compared to native-born people (Statistics Sweden 2019a). Turnout is also lower among people of foreign heritage, i.e., born abroad or with two parents born abroad (*Delmos* 2020). Foreign-born individuals are also underrepresented among elected representatives (Statistics Sweden 2020). Studies also show patterns similar to those described above with regard to gender. In one of the background reports to the Democracy Study, it is concluded that foreign-born individuals from non-Nordic countries are strongly underrepresented in positions of high trust, such as chairman of a board or municipal council (Folke and Rickne 2015). Studies also show that a lesser proportion of foreign-born individuals do volunteer work or join associations compared to native-born people (*Delmos* 2020).

Disabled persons face barriers to civic engagement

In general, disabled persons have both a lower voter turnout and less democratic participation compared to the rest of the population (SOU 2016:5; Statistics Sweden 2019a). However, disabled people are a heterogeneous group, and there is a wide variation both in terms of their ability to participate and their actual participation. Statistics Sweden's analyses show, for example, that voter turnout is slightly lower among people with visual impairments, people with mobility impairments and people with neuropsychiatric diagnoses. On the other hand, no differences are observed between people with hearing impairment and people without this disability (Statistics Sweden 2019a).

Accessibility is a fundamental prerequisite for the participation of young people with disabilities in society. However, accessibility means different things depending on whether the disability concerns physical,

mental or intellectual functioning. In several reports, the Swedish Agency for Participation (MFD) has highlighted thresholds and barriers to engagement and participation for people with disabilities. The Agency's monitoring of the 2018 general elections shows a lack of accessibility in and around polling stations. These include lack of physical accessibility, unavailable ballot papers and lack of electoral integrity. The monitoring also points to a lack of access to information in easy-to-read Swedish (MFD 2019).

In another report, the MFD specifically highlights the conditions for people with mental disabilities. It notes that many in the group lack resources that can be considered essential for participating in between-election democracy. This group has a lower level of education, a weaker position in the labour market, poorer self-perceived health and poorer economic conditions than the population as a whole. The report also identifies a number of barriers to participation. For example, social support, such as personal assistance and mobility services, is not always sufficient to enable participation. Meeting formats are also highlighted in the report, and MFD emphasises the importance of cognitively-accessible meetings, i.e., meetings with clear information, structured meeting formats and breaks at regular intervals. At the individual level, barriers include lack of energy and stamina and low self-esteem (MFD 2016).

Threats and hatred: a growing challenge

In recent years, there has been increased attention paid to the growing incidence of threats and hatred linked to the expression of opinions. In the civic debate, threats and hatred are often mentioned as a challenge to democracy. This conclusion is shared by a Government-appointed committee[13] which in its 2020 report states that online hate "disturbs democratic discourse and thus constitutes a threat to the functioning of democracy in Sweden" (SOU 2020:56, p. 166). The report links the rise

[13] Commission for Media and Information Literacy and Democratic Dialogue

in threats and hatred to a trend where an increasing proportion of public debate is taking place on social media.

How widespread are threats and hatred?

There are agreed definitions of threats and hatred. Often, threats and hatred refer to some form of online hate. At the same time, online hate is a broader concept, and captures other forms of threats and hatred than those relevant to this report.[14] The forms of threats and hatred that are of interest in this context are primarily those that take place in the context of a person expressing an opinion or otherwise engaging to influence societal developments. In many cases, threats and hatred can also constitute a crime and fall under different criminal classifications, such as unlawful threats, defamation, or agitation against an ethnic or national group (Svensson et al. 2021).

The prevalence of threats and hatred linked to civic engagement is difficult to measure. In recent years, several studies have examined the prevalence of online hate and other forms of intimidation and hatred in different ways. These show that both experiencing threats and hatred, and the fear of being exposed, are common.

In the 2017 national SOM survey, 13 percent of respondents said they had been threatened, harassed or subjected to violence at least once in the past year when expressing an opinion on a social issue. Seven percent said they had been victimised in connection with expressing an opinion on the internet. The proportion of people who report being victimised is highest in the 16–29 age group, where 22 percent report being victimised (Tipple & Carlander 2018).

Elected officials are a particularly vulnerable group. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (*Brå*) measures elected officials' experiences of harassment, threats and violence in the *Politicians' Safety Survey* (PTU), to which elected officials in municipalities, regional/county councils and the Parliament respond. In the 2018 election year, 30 percent of respondents reported experiencing harassment, threats or violence. This is an increase compared to previous surveys. Of those who

[14] E.g., cyberbullying or sexual harassment.

have been victimised, 84 percent say it has happened more than once. Among young people aged 29 or under, the proportion was higher, with 44 percent reporting that they had been victimised. Younger people are also more worried about being exposed to hatred, and are more likely than older people to say that they have been affected in some way because of vulnerability and anxiety (*Brå* 2019).

Other studies show the vulnerability of volunteers. For example, in a survey by *Volontärbyrån*, approx. one in ten report experiencing threats and hatred related to their engagement (*Volontärbyrån* 2020). An LSU survey of threats and hatred also shows that vulnerability among the organisation's member organisations has increased in recent years. In the 2017 survey, 20 percent of respondents reported that someone in their organisation had been victimised, while the corresponding figure in 2020 was 45 percent (LSU 2020). The latest MUCF survey on the state of civil society also shows the prevalence of threats and hatred among associations. In this survey, approx. one in ten associations reported being subject to threats and hatred. Interest groups are the most common victims (MUCF 2021b).

Who is threatened and hated, and what are the consequences?

Threats and hatred affect certain groups particularly hard. These include elected officials, opinion leaders, journalists, researchers, artists and people active in civil society. Threats and hatred are also more common in relation to people expressing positions on certain political issues, such as gender equality, discrimination, migration, integration and climate/environment (SOU 2020:56).

Those who are more visible in the public arena are more likely to be affected. Brå's survey shows, for example, that elected officials subjected to threats and hatred were more active on the internet and in social media, and were more talked about in the media (Brå 2019). The LSU survey shows that it is mainly elected officials who experience threats and hate, with 55 percent of respondents stating that elected officials in their organisation have been exposed to threats and hatred (LSU 2020).

Studies also show that women and minorities are more vulnerable. A survey of threats and hatred against LSU-member organisations shows that hatred, threats and harassment of a racist, sexist or homophobic nature are common. Representatives who are women, or who deviate from a norm by their appearance, name, sexual orientation, religious belief or disability, are affected (LSU 2020). Similar results emerge from *Brå*'s survey, which shows that elected officials of foreign heritage were more vulnerable than those of Swedish heritage, with 38 percent of the former group reporting being exposed, compared to 30 percent of the latter. The differences based on gender were smaller, with 32 percent of elected women stating that they had been exposed, compared to 30 percent of men (*Brå* 2019).

Other studies have looked at how many people refrain from expressing opinions to avoid threats and hatred. In a *Delmos* survey, more than a quarter of respondents (aged 17–85) say they have refrained from expressing an opinion because of fear of threats, hatred, violence or harassment in the past year. The proportion is higher in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. One fifth report refraining from participating in politics because of fear (*Delmos* 2020). Among young people aged 16–26, 30 percent said they refrained from expressing political views online to avoid criticism, hatred or threats during the recent election campaign (Swedish Internet Foundation 2018). Furthermore, in a 2021 survey, as many as 66 percent of respondents (all ages) said they are somewhat worried about taking a stand on social issues due to concerns about online hate (Insight Intelligence 2021).

Concluding discussion

The report examines several aspects of youth civic engagement. Taken together, the analysis in the three results chapters shows the wide range of civic engagement that exists among today's youth. In this chapter, we discuss the main findings of the report, and the challenges identified by the Agency, in the light of these findings.

High and stable level of youth civic engagement

The report shows that many young people are engaged in society, and that engagement is relatively stable over time. The results of MUCF's latest national youth survey, conducted in spring 2021, show that many young people are interested in social issues, politics and what is happening in other countries. There is also a high proportion of young people – seven of ten – who report taking some form of political action in the last year. Political action can mean many different things, ranging from engaging in civic debate to contacting a politician. The most common thing young people do is to support an opinion on social issues online or on social media, as almost six of ten have done. In general, more young people say they have done things that have lower thresholds for participation–i.e., which require less time, knowledge or long-term commitment.

The proportion of young people joining associations has decreased over time, but membership in associations with an explicit focus on social issues has not become more or less common among young people since 2006. Around six of ten young people are members in an association. One in ten say they are members of associations with an explicit focus on social issues.

The results also show that a high level of interest in social issues and politics among young people is often associated with active participation, in the form of having taken many political actions. The report provides in-depth analyses of groups of young people with different levels of engagement. The results show that just over one in ten young people

(14%) are highly engaged, i.e., have both a high level of interest and a high level of participation. A slightly larger proportion (19%) are slightly engaged, i.e., have low levels of interest and participation. These analyses reinforce the picture of a group of young people neither interested nor participating.

Although young people's interest is stable, and many young people have experience with political participation, we see some challenges. Among other things, we see that a group of young people is not interested, do not participate or cannot imagine participating. We also see relatively large differences between the proportion of low- and high-engagement in different groups of young people.

Groups that do not participate are important to study further in future studies. The report shows that young people belonging to the low-engagement group feel less involved in Swedish society compared to highly engaged young people. Furthermore, slightly engaged young people rate their physical health as poorer than highly engaged young people. However, MUCF's analyses show no differences between the two groups in terms of trust in democracy, self-rated mental health and life satisfaction.

MUCF has also carried out in-depth analyses on young people who indicated in the Agency's Attitudes and Values Survey that they did not vote in the last elections, or do not plan to vote in future elections. These show that interest is an important factor. The most common reason given by young people for not voting is lack of interest in politics. Furthermore, we find that young people who report having a slight interest in social issues and a slight interest in various political actions are less likely to vote. Our analysis also shows that young people who feel that politicians do not listen, and that their own opportunities to influence are limited, are more reluctant to vote in future Parliamentary elections. The same applies to young people who are dissatisfied with life, and to young people who are pessimistic about the future. These results provide some insight into the factors that influence young people's engagement and political participation. However, the Agency sees a need for further and more in-depth studies of young people with low levels of civic engagement.

Young people involved in numerous ways

MUCF's interview study of around 100 young people provides a complementary and in-depth picture of the forms young people's engagement takes. The interviews reveal that young people are active in a variety of ways and in different arenas. The degree of engagement – i.e., the proportion of life taken up by engagement – also differs. The main arenas for youth engagement that emerged in our study were school, social media and associations.

Social media emerges in the report as by far the most common arena for young people. The results of the National Youth Survey show that social media activities – taking a stand on social issues and debating and commenting on politics – are among the top five actions of young people. This pattern also emerges in the interview study. An overwhelming majority of interviewees talk about social media as an arena for civic engagement.

Many young people describe social media as a place where they access news and political opinion. The interviews suggest that other forms of media, such as newspapers, radio and television, are less important for young people's information gathering. However, some young people were critical of social media as a source of knowledge, as it is easy to fall into a "filter bubble" and only receive one-sided information.

For many young people, social media is also an arena for taking a stand and making an impact by writing and sharing posts, participating in campaigns or being active in discussion and action groups. For some young people, social media is the main arena for engagement. For others, social media activity is one of several ways to be active. Many young people interviewed are also active in various organisations or volunteer. For them, social media engagement is often seen as a complement or a tool in the organisation's work.

Several modes of civic engagement emerge from the interviews. Some are primarily engaged in the sense that they are interested in social and political issues, and keep up to date by reading news and advocacy. They follow the public debate, and have opinions on social issues. Many also

participate in discussions with those around them, and express their opinions on social media. Other young people are more actively involved, and seek to contribute in different ways to change society at large or their communities. This can range from volunteer work or social support to advocacy and lobbying.

Young people's conditions for engagement differ

The interview study also provides an in-depth understanding of how young people's engagement develops, and how young people find – or do not find – ways to channel their engagement.

The interviews suggest that access to social networks and an environment of civic engagement is conducive to young people developing their own engagement. A common route to engagement among interviewees is through family and friends. Many describe an engagement that developed early among other engaged individuals, which creates interest and inspires. A number of young people talk about their involvement in associations, which began in childhood and continued in other forms. For others, engagement emerged later in life, and several report that particular events or individuals were instrumental in triggering or enabling engagement.

Most young people say that their engagement is mainly motivated by a desire to change society. At the same time, many testify that their engagement creates well-being. In interviews, many young people emphasise the importance of social context, a sense of community and meaningfulness. In this respect, it can be concluded that civic engagement in many cases contributes to providing young people with meaningful leisure time.

The interviews also highlight some thresholds and barriers that prevent young people's engagement. A fundamental barrier raised by many young people is the lack of time. Many felt that there was no room for more active civic engagement because school work takes up a lot of time and energy. Several stated that, based on these conditions, they prefer to prioritise other activities in their free time. Some young people also

emphasised that mental illness can lead to less energy for engagement. For young people with disabilities, lack of accessibility can also create difficulties and prevent certain forms of engagement.

The analysis also shows that young people's economic circumstances have both direct and indirect effects. This may be because the cost of travel and activities gets in the way of engagement. In a previous report, MUCF showed that four of ten young people gave up a leisure activity because it cost too much money (MUCF 2021a). Economic circumstances may also influence young people to give up volunteerism in favour of a job.

Another type of barrier mentioned in several interviews was the lack of knowledge about democratic processes and civil society. Young people expressed that they did not know how to make an impact, or how to channel their engagement within civil society. This barrier is closely linked to the lack of an environment where there is experience with association involvement. For other young people, the lack of relevant venues for collective organising is a barrier. In the interviews, several mentioned loneliness in their engagement, and that they had difficulty finding collaborators because there were no organisations to join where they lived. Obstacles of this kind are raised above all by young people growing up outside of larger cities. However, an interesting aspect emphasised in some interviews was that the digitisation of association activities that took place in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic created greater opportunities for engagement for some young people. This shows that digitisation has a potential to counteract thresholds and barriers.

In conclusion, the report shows that there are a number of factors that promote or hinder engagement. These are not static either, but change over time as young people's living conditions change. The interviews also clearly showed that young people's engagement is influenced by other aspects of their lives. Many young people discussed how their engagement had varied over different periods of their lives, and had been a greater or lesser part of their leisure time.

Differences between groups of young people

Young people are a heterogeneous group, and one of the ambitions of this report has been to examine and illustrate differences between different groups of young people. The report's findings show that both interest and participation differ between groups.

Young girls more engaged, but face greater obstacles

The report reveals large differences between boys' and girls' civic engagement. Girls are more likely to be highly engaged, while boys are more likely to be slightly engaged. Young boys are more likely to say that they could not imagine performing several of the political actions explored in the survey. These gender differences are interesting to contrast with what emerges in other parts of the report. The knowledge review shows that girls are less likely to be nominated and elected to political office. This could indicate that, despite a high level of engagement, girls are opting out of this arena. Another possibility is that girls are discriminated against and face greater barriers. Both possibilities find some support in the report's findings. The analysis of youth in political youth organisations shows that boys are generally more interested in pursuing a political career than girls. At the same time, some young people in the interviews emphasise that girls are treated differently from boys, and that they are not taken seriously or listened to as much as boys.

Young LGBTQI people more civically engaged

Young LGBTQI people are more interested in politics and social issues than other young people. They are the most likely of all young people to belong to highly-engaged group. The proportion is almost twice as high as for cisgender people. At the same time, the interview study shows that young LGBTQI people face particular challenges in their engagement. In the interviews, the group appears more vulnerable to threats and hatred. It also appears that some people experience vulnerability in getting involved in LGBTQI issues, and feel that the involvement can be very personal and disclosing.

Geography matters

The report also reveals differences in levels of civic engagement between young people living in rural areas and those living in metropolises. Young people in metropolitan municipalities have the highest level of engagement, and young people living in rural areas have the lowest. The interview study also shows that young people living outside major cities have experienced difficulties in finding like-minded people and contexts to engage with others. Young people report a lack of organisations to join in their local area, and long travel-times and limited public transit can be barriers to participating in association activities further afield.

The results of the National Youth Survey cannot be broken down below the level of municipalities. However, we know that interest and participation also differ between areas with different socio-economic make-ups. Previous studies have shown that both interest and participation are lower for residents in areas with socio-economic challenges (Delmos 2020).

More young people with disabilities are low-income

Young people with disabilities are less likely to say they are interested in politics and social issues, and are more likely to be in the low-income group than young people without disabilities. However, young people with disabilities are a heterogeneous group, and the conditions for engagement are likely to differ according to the type of disability. Such differences also emerge in the interviews with young people. Some young people with disabilities do not mention any specific barriers to engagement related to functionality. Others state that lack of accessibility and support is a barrier to participation in, e.g., meetings and demonstrations.

Young people of foreign heritage slightly less engaged

The report also shows some differences in civic engagement between people of Swedish or foreign heritage. A slightly larger proportion of young people of Swedish heritage are highly engaged compared to young

people of foreign heritage. On the other hand, a larger proportion of young people of foreign heritage say that they want to influence society and improve conditions for others in their free time. Based on this, we can conclude that young people's motivations for engagement, as well as the forms this takes, are likely to be influenced by their heritage. Several thresholds and barriers emerge from the interviews that can be assumed to affect the conditions for engagement of young people of foreign heritage. These include language skills and access to knowledge and an environment with experience with engagement. At the same time, young people of foreign heritage are also a heterogeneous group. We interviewed several young people who said that their parents' engagement – in and beyond Sweden – had stimulated their own engagement.

Parental education-level matters for youth involvement

Socio-economic conditions can also affect youth civic engagement. In the report, we have measured the socio-economic status of young people using the educational level of their parents. The results show that young people whose parents have a post-secondary education are more likely to be highly engaged compared to young people whose parents are less educated. Young people whose parents have only primary or upper-secondary education are also more likely to be low-income, compared to young people whose parents have post-secondary education. These differences can also be linked to some of the thresholds and barriers identified in the interview study. It is likely that young people of lower socio-economic status are more restricted by economic factors. It is also possible that socio-economic background influences young people's access to knowledge and their entry points for engagement.

Schools play an important role in levelling the playing field

The mission of schools includes creating the conditions for youth civic engagement. According to the Education Act and the curricula for primary and secondary schools, schools have a special democratic mission.

This mission entails a responsibility to impart democratic knowledge, values and skills (SOU 2016:5). Schools are particularly important for levelling out differences in preconditions. Young people lacking contact with people who have knowledge of or experience with engagement can be compensated for this.

Monitoring shows that the schools' work with the mission is going well in many respects. For example, the results of the latest ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) 2016 show that Swedish students perform very well in the study's knowledge tests compared to students in a number of other countries. At the same time, the survey shows differences in outcomes for young people from different backgrounds. Both young people of foreign heritage and young people with fewer socio-economic resources perform less well (National Agency for Education 2017).

The Agency's interview study reveals wide differences in how young people perceive schools to be working on the democracy mission, suggesting variation between schools and teachers. Some particularly emphasise the importance of a school in sparking their engagement, for example through teaching, guest lecturers, theme days or individual teachers. Others say they wish they had received more knowledge from school, e.g., regarding how to exert influence, or about associations and political parties. The interviews also reveal that lack of knowledge can be a barrier to engagement, especially among young people growing up in an environment where there is a lack of experience with engagement. For this group of young people, schools play a key role in showing ways to channel engagement. This ranges from knowledge about political decision-making processes and how to go about changing society, to what ways one can be active and create change through civil society.

Against this background, MUCF wishes to stress that schools have a central role in promoting youth civic engagement. This includes imparting the knowledge and skills necessary for democratic participation, and providing an arena where students can practice discussing controversial and difficult social issues in a safe environment. Many schools already fulfil this role, but some schools would need resources, support and skills development to get there.

The challenge of threats and hatred

The existence of threats and hatred is a challenge to the democratic system. In its Strategy for a Strong Democracy, the Government notes the risk that threats and hatred lead to conformity, self-censorship and non-participation in public discourse or non-engagement in social issues (Ministry of Culture 2018). This challenge is evident in the interview study. It shows that some young people deal with the anxiety and fear of being subjected to hateful or even threatening comments online when they express an opinion. This agrees with the findings of the report's knowledge overview, which discusses several survey studies showing that many people refrain from expressing opinions or engaging in discussions on social media.

Among the interviewees, several emphasised threats and hatred linked to engagement as a growing problem. Only a small proportion of the young people interviewed had experienced threats and hatred, but even more knew of someone around them who had. Examples of threats and hatred reported by young people range from threats made through social media and emails to verbal and physical harassment and attacks at demonstrations and public events. Among the victims, several discussed perceived shortcomings in reporting threats and hatred.

Young people who had not experienced threats or hatred also felt themselves at risk. Some reported adapting by not expressing opinions on certain topics perceived as sensitive, or by adapting how and in which channels they are active. These results are troubling. They show that threats and hatred also indirectly affect young people's opportunities and possibilities to express their opinions, which in turn affects their influence and ability to affect social development.

The report also shows that some young people refrain from taking a stand for fear of the reactions from those around them. These cases do not involve a fear of threats and hatred in the narrower sense. Rather, they involve fear of criticism, condescending comments or rejection by friends or family. Several young people say that civic engagement is perceived as lame, and that they fear being judged by those around them. Particularly in relation to involvement in party politics, young people express a reluctance to take a stand because they do not want to be labelled.

Party politics rejected by many

The report also highlights another challenge, namely that relatively few young people see party politics as an attractive arena for civic engagement. The National Youth Survey shows that around 5 percent of young people are members of a political youth organisation or party. This is in line with previous surveys, and does not differ significantly from the proportion of members in the population at large. The survey results also show that joining a political organisation is one of the political actions that most young people – more than half – say they would never do.

The interview study reveals some reasons why young people are not interested in party politics. The reasons differ slightly between young people with different levels of engagement. Among less-engaged young people, not engaging in party politics is less reflective, and ties in with why they are less actively engaged in social issues more generally. This may be due to a lack of interest, or a perceived lack of time or knowledge. Young people who are actively involved in non-partisan organisations often express more specific reasons related to this particular way of organising and being active. Many perceive politics as difficult and demanding, and believe that it is easier to choose other forms of involvement that are perceived to require less prior knowledge.

Many also point out that they find it difficult to fully identify with a party, and find it easier to get involved in individual issues. Some young people have a negative image of politics. This ranges from a low level of trust or a distrust in politicians to the association of politics with conflict, antagonism and a harsh and polarised climate of debate. The interviews also reveal that some young people fear taking a political stand because they do not want to be labelled, questioned or rejected by those around them.

Some young people's responses reveal a lack of knowledge about what political engagement can mean. Many do not know anyone who is politically involved, and have no clear idea of what one does within a political party. The interviews indicate that some young people do not come into contact with representatives of either political parties or other civil society organisations. Schools can be a place where young people can meet and connect with civil society actors or political parties. However,

the interviews indicate that some schools choose not to invite organisations. For example, several active members of associations say that they have been refused access to schools to inform about their activities.

In relation to this, it is also interesting to note the results of the research project on young people in political youth associations. The survey shows that the majority of young people in political youth organisations have become members on their own initiative, and contacted the party or youth organisation themselves. It was also much more common for young people to join at the suggestion of a family member or friend than to be recruited. The survey also shows that almost half of the respondents have a family member who is or has been a member of a party. In the light of the findings of the Agency's interview study, this result is not surprising. One of the most common entries to engagement reported by young people in the interviews is friends, family members or acquaintances in their immediate surroundings. At the same time, the result is worrying, as it suggests that there may be high thresholds for engagement for young people lacking personal access to party politics in their surroundings. In the National Youth Survey, approx. one third of young people say they would consider joining a political party or youth organisation. This can be interpreted as a potential for youth organisations to recruit more members.

In conclusion, we can identify two different challenges in relation to engagement in party politics. On the one hand, many young people do not find this form of engagement attractive, and on the other hand, young people are not offered sufficient opportunities to engage. Political parties play a central role in representative democracy. It is the parties that nominate candidates for the general elections, and it is they who are supposed to channel the will of the people. It is therefore essential that political parties are perceived as an attractive arena for influence, and are able to recruit members and people willing to stand for parliamentary office, and that they are representative of the population. Although the report shows that the extent of engagement in party politics is stable, it can be a democratic problem if the recruitment base of political organisations is narrow. Against this background, the Agency wishes to underline the importance of inviting political parties to visit schools.

Conclusion

The overall results of the report show an engaged youth generation. There is no evidence that interest or participation among young people in general has declined over time. It is also in line with previous studies and reports that have pointed to changes in the forms rather than the extent of engagement (see, for example, Amnå et al. 2016; SOU 2016:5). The Democracy Study found that young people's political participation differs in some respects from that of previous generations, but that there is no evidence that today's young people are less interested, less involved or more likely to have anti-democratic attitudes. The study concluded that there is a long-term downward trend in some traditional forms of engagement – including association membership, party membership and some forms of political activity. At the same time, the study notes an increase in other forms of activities, and that there is thus reason to believe that young people's engagement has partly shifted to new arenas (SOU 2016:5). This report's findings point in the same direction. At the same time, some problem areas emerge in the form of:

- Differences in engagement between groups of young people.
- Threats and hatred.
- The ability of party politics to recruit young people.

Unequal conditions in society reflected even in different opportunities for engagement. Many of the differences observable between different groups of young people are likely to be due to different living conditions and growing up in circumstances that promote or hinder the development of civic engagement to varying degrees. At the same time, they also indicate that some young people are not given sufficient opportunities for engagement. This may be because they lack knowledge, or because they have not been offered access to associations. Here, both public-sector activities – not least schools and open leisure activities – as well as civil society have an important role to play in giving more young people the opportunity to get involved.

We can also see that the presence of threats and hatred in civic debate to some extent shapes young people's engagement. To ensure that young people in the future dare and seek to express their opinions, threats and hatred need to be countered.

Finally, we wish to emphasise the importance of young people's presence in party politics. It is crucial for the future of the political system that some young people choose to direct their engagement in this way. Against this background, it is important to create more opportunities for young people to be engaged.


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