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What Explains Local Party Success? Evidence from Sweden

2024

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Abstract

The last decades have seen a large increase in local party studies – that is, political parties that run in local elections, but not in national elections. Previous studies have identified factors that influence whether a local party will be successful or not. However, these factors cannot alone explain whether a local party will succeed or not – they are at best necessary, but not sufficient conditions. This is because most studies have conducted a quantitative approach with large-N studies, resulting in that the specific factors that explain local party success have been overlooked. This thesis hypothesizes that three important factors that can explain variances in local party success have been overlooked, and that these three factors can explain if a local party will be successful or not. These three factors are (1) issue ownership, (2) campaigning & media and (3) leadership, membership & resources. The thesis makes use of a most-similar case study design, comparing two local parties with different grades of success, but in very similar settings. By conducting semi-structured interviews with prominent members of each party and by using thematic analysis on their answers, themes related to the three hypotheses were investigated. The results indicate strongly that issue ownership is important for success. The results also indicate that campaigning strategy is important. There were no results indicating that media presence or leadership, membership or resources have any effect. Moreover, a fourth theme that is important for local party success was found, and that is adaptation to incumbency. The study implies that being able to own and relate to mobilizing issues and having well-thought campaigns in election times can reap great electoral success for the party. Moreover, being able to change from being an oppositional party to being a governing party in the case of eventual incumbency is also important for the longevity of the parties' success. The thesis shed light on specific factors that is important for local party success and leaves room for further endeavours in the topic.

Keywords: local parties, Sweden, issue ownership, campaigning, media, leadership, membership, resources, incumbency

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1. Introduction

Reiser & Holtmann (2008a) show in their book about local lists and parties that throughout the last three decades, local parties with genuine local ambitions have increased greatly in many European countries. Sweden is not an exception to this. In the 2022 elections, a total of 138 local parties (parties running for representation in the municipality and not in the national parliament) ran in 129 municipalities (Schwartz et al., 2022). This means that in little less than 45% of all municipalities, the national established parties not only competed with each other, but also with at least one local party. In comparison with after the election of 1973, when only one fifth of municipalities had parties with no existing or prior parliamentary mandates represented in the local council, this increase is substantial (Erlingsson, 2005, p. 13). The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR) clearly state in their report following the Swedish 2022 elections that genuine local parties – that is, parties with only votes in one specific municipality, have successively increased through time (SKR, 2023a, p. 24). Between 1991 and 2006, local parties increased from 88 to 157, which is almost a doubling (Wörlund, 2008, p. 196).

Figure 1

Increase of local parties in Sweden since 1973.
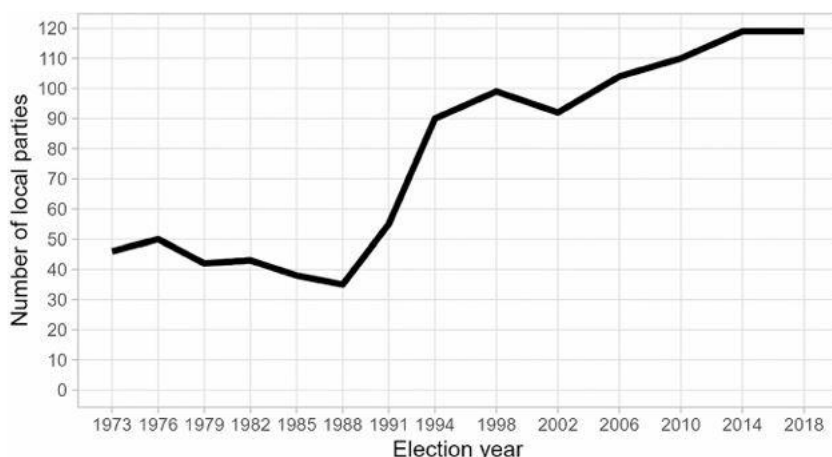
Note. The figure shows the increase in local parties since 1973, when the last major municipality reform was made. The figure is adapted from Erlingsson et al., (2024, p. 7).

Despite this, local parties have been severely understudied. Wörlund (2008) hypothesizes that this could be related to their marginal political role they traditionally have had, and that their short-liveness makes it hard to conduct coherent research on them (p. 196). Moreover, local

parties have long been perceived as political anomaly and relics of the old system (Wörlund, 1999, 2008; Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015; Holtmann, 2008). The last decades have however seen an increase of studies conducted on the local level. However, our understanding of and insights into local elections are still incomplete (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022, p. 3). The interest in studying local parties seems to be increasing, and today the literature on local parties in Europe is quite rich and covers many countries.

Notwithstanding an increase of interest in local party studies, there remain large questions about which specific mechanisms and factors that can explain if a local party will succeed in its political endeavours and remain relevant and successful through a longer period of time, or if it quickly will perish from the political landscape. Also, more than longevity, there are also uncertainties of why some parties manage to mobilize voters and gather a large number of votes, while other parties seem to struggle more with this. While this is regrettable, it is not strange. More than the reasons lifted above (short-liveness of local parties and their traditional marginal impact), it is not as easy to find information about local parties as it is to find information about established national parties. Many times, local parties are driven on a voluntary basis by a few invested actors. This means that information about specific local parties is many times sparse. Many times, they do not have a website (or the website hasn't been updated in a long time), their presence in social media is limited, and it can be unclear how to contact the representatives. More than this, local parties are not a homogenous group. Different countries have different political and historical pasts as well as different political systems, meaning that local parties in different countries may have different characteristics and therefore also different potential explainers for their success. These realities of local parties have led to that one specific type of research has mostly been conducted, and that is large-N quantitative studies that look at local parties' success during longer periods of time. The reason for this is probably that there is reliable data from the countries' election authorities on the results of local parties, many times coded as "other parties". Indeed, many of these studies have provided the scientific community with persuasive and useful inputs to our understanding of local parties, mostly being focused on trying to establish patterns of in which settings local parties are particularly thriving. Therefore, we generally have a good understanding of where and when we can expect local parties to be successful. Moreover, a great deal of literature has also investigated why local parties are in the first place founded. This thesis will however aim to investigate, through making use of a qualitative approach, which specific factors that can explain the difference between more or less successful local parties in Sweden. In other words, when two very similar

local parties stand for election in very similar municipalities, and one of the parties succeed better than the other party, what can explain this difference in success? By focusing on only two parties, one can with great detail and sophistication investigate what it is that differentiates the parties, and thereby come closer to an understanding of what more successful parties do better than less successful local parties, and vice versa. The research question for this thesis is as follows: **What explains local party success?**

This thesis, making use of semi-structured interviews with local party leaders of parties with varying electoral success, investigates which factors that can explain these variations. Drawing from previous literature, I hypothesize that previous explainers for local party success are in best case necessary, but not sufficient conditions of local party success and that three factors in particular – (1) *issue ownership*, (2) *campaigning & media* as well as (3) *leadership, membership & resources* have substantial impact on whether a local party will be successful or not. Following this, my three hypotheses for this thesis are as follows:

H1: How parties strategize around which political issues to focus on, greatly impact their electoral success.

This first hypothesis focuses on how local parties relate themselves to political issues in the municipality and whether they are successful or not at focusing on the correct issues that mobilize the voters. More than finding the correct issues to focus on, they also need to position themselves correct on the right side of the issue, as well as successfully persuade the voters that they are the best choice for that said issue.

H2: How parties conduct their campaigns during election times and how their presence in media- and social media looks like during and between elections greatly impact their success.

The second hypothesis relates to how the local parties campaign and how good they are at being visible in different types of media. In local elections, which are much smaller in scope compared to national elections, the potential impact of innovative campaigns and having a great local outreach in media outlets can have a substantial effect on the success of local parties.

H3: Having prominent party members and/or a leadership that is well known and liked or can provide resources, greatly impact the success for local parties.

The third and last hypothesis is that if a local party has a leader, or other prominent members that are well-known in the municipality, they are more likely to get a greater result than if they

do not. It could for example be that the party has members with large social networks, or that they engage in perhaps a large and well-known company in the municipality. Moreover, if the party has members or leadership that can provide special resources, such as perhaps money or expertise, this might also increase the success for the party. Also, more than the proposed hypotheses, the chosen method will also allow to eventually capture other potential factors that has not yet been considered.

This thesis will be structured as follows: In chapter 2, I will provide essential background information about local parties in Sweden, the political structure of the municipalities as well as describing how the local election system is constructed. The purpose of this background chapter is to clearly explain, define and demarcate exactly what it is that I aim to study, as well as put the reader into the context of local elections- and parties in Sweden. In chapter 3, the state of the art of the contemporary scientific literature will be described in a very detailed manner. The purpose of chapter 3 is to lay out all so far proposed explainers of local party success, divided into four categories: *institutional*, *contextual*, *push* and *pull*-explanations. It is in the last category (pull-explanations) that I also will add what I believe are the important factors that have not, according to me, been sufficiently lifted in the previous literature: (1) issue ownership, (2) campaigning & media and (3) leadership, membership & resources. In chapter 4, the methodology will be laid out. I will here describe the motivation of choosing a most-similar case study design. I will also in detail describe how the sampling process looked like and how I came to choose the particular parties that I chose for this thesis. I will then in close detail describe the parties that I have chosen to study in order to show that they are indeed most similar, and to give a context and background to them. I will then present the municipalities in which the parties are based in, in order to show that these as well are indeed similar. Furthermore, I will explain why I chose semi-structured interviews as my data collection method, and also describe how I analysed the gathered data with thematic analysis. After briefly touching upon ethical considerations, I will move on to chapter 5, where I present my findings and discussion about whether they proved any of my hypotheses, and if there are other unaccounted factors that came up during the interviews that potentially could explain local party success. Lastly, I will finish the thesis with concluding remarks.

2. Background

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out all relevant background information that is important to know in order to understand the design and context of the thesis. This includes defining local parties and giving a background on important concepts and relevant information, such as information on municipalities and municipal elections in Sweden. This chapter will outlay the foundation for the literature review, research design as well as the empirical analysis.

2.1. Local Parties in Sweden: Definition and Demarcation

Some important clarifications and definitions about exactly what type of parties I am interested in is warranted. This is firstly because the previous literature and research spans several different countries with different electoral systems. In these previous studies, there are many terms describing local parties depending on the electoral system. One example is the term *independent lists*, which is used in many countries where, for example, there are independent candidates that are not tied to any party organization (e.g. Aars & Ringskjøb, 2005). However, a party label is required in order to candidate for the municipal elections in Sweden. Since this thesis will only touch upon Sweden, only the term local party will be used.

Secondly, even in the context of Sweden, local parties are not a homogenous group. There are several different types of local parties. Some local parties have particular group interests in mind, for example a specific age group or an indigenous population group (e.g. the Samis in northern Sweden, or senior citizens). Other local parties might be of a single-issue nature, focusing on a specific and infected local question, such as, for example, the closing down of a school or the construction of a controversial infrastructural project. These parties are not the types that I am interested in this thesis. The type of local party that I am interested in, are the kind that are the most prevalent in Sweden and also seemingly in other European countries. These are parties that Wörlund (1999) refers to as "welfare-populistic parties" (pp. 57-59). For this reason, a clarification exactly of what type of local parties I am looking at is warranted.

In Swedish local politics, an initial, rough and dualistic categorization of parties can be made: local extensions of established national parties, and truly independent parties. The former are simply branches of the established national parties, competing for influence in the local councils. There are many rationales for established parties to invest in their local branches more than simply vote- and power maximizing: Local party branches increase the mobilisation capacity of the national parties and also transfer conflict lines from the national to the local arena, exerting influence on local politics (Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen, 2013, p. 779).

Moreover, a strong local presence can sustain and reinforce the parties' links to society, reaping potential electoral rewards. Moreover, it can help to create a solid base of membership, and also an arena for future representatives and talents to grow. These parties usually operate as two "different" parties at the same time: as political parties in the local arena, but also as local representatives of the mother party. The other type, the truly independent parties, have no formal or informal ties with any established party. They are based only on the local level, and represent only themselves (Rahat & Kenig, 2018, pp. 73-74).

This thesis will focus on truly independent local parties in Sweden, which in essence are parties that are bound to the lowest tier of the Swedish political system and are not represented in the national arena. However, further distinction is warranted. For local parties, I will use the definition that Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) use in their article: "When speaking of local parties, we refer to parties without formal ties to established national parties, as a rule uniquely preoccupied with local issues, and expressing aspirations to distance themselves from national political cleavages, particularly the left-right divide" (p. 1). The local parties run only in local elections and do not compete for representation in the national assembly. Following the words of previous authors, they are "solely locally organized; compete in "one single local jurisdiction" and they are attentive to local issues only (Boogers, 2008; Boogers & Voerman, 2010; Holtmann, 2008, p. 11). Typically, local parties understand themselves as "protectors of a harmonious factual political style" and that local politics is not compatible with party politics (Reiser & Holtmann, 2008b, p. 7). Moreover, as argued by Angenendt (2015), one identifying feature of almost all local parties, despite their heterogenous nature, is their promotion of factual politics on the local level, instead of party politics. In many cases, they emphasize the contrast between municipal interests and national interests of the established parties, and that local party representatives are better at promoting local interests, to be more responsive to local demands and to promote questions and interests that otherwise would be ignored (pp, 133-136). In this thesis, I will only look at parties that compete in the municipality elections and not in the regional elections. However, even further distinction can be made in order to capture the parties of interest in this thesis. As Wörlund (1999, pp. 57-59) states, Swedish local parties can not all be grouped into one homogenous group. To make his case, Wörlund groups local parties into four groups:

Firstly, there are "single-issue parties" which are parties that are focused on only one local question. This could for example be the building of a new road or the shutdown of a municipal high school. One example of these parties is Karlstadspartiet Livskvalitet (The Karlstad Party

Life Quality) in Karlstad municipality that received 3,42% in the 2022 election (Valmyndigheten, 2024a). This party was founded due to Karlstad municipalities' plans to commercialize a specific outdoor area in the municipality (Karlstadspartiet Livskvalitet, 2024). Many single-issue parties also have other issues on their agenda, but what relates them is that they were founded on, and that their main focus still is on, one specific and isolated challenge or issue.

Secondly, we have "group-interest parties", which are parties that have the needs and welfare of specific groups in mind. An example of this party is Samernas Väl (The Sami's Well-Being) in Jokkmokk municipality that received 7,43% in the 2022 elections (Valmyndigheten, 2024a). Thirdly, we have parties with national ambitions. These parties are too small to run for national representation, so instead they are trying to get as much support as possible in the municipalities. An example of this kind of party was the Sweden Democrats (SD) before they got into the national parliament in 2010 .

Fourthly, we have what Wörlund refers to as "welfare-populistic parties". More than emphasizing local matters, they usually build their political platform on exploiting local unhappiness, usually related to the local welfare. They care only about the local area and they do not have any connections to bigger parties. While "populistic" might sound of negative nature, there is nothing inherently and normatively undesirable with these parties. What is meant is simply that the local parties put forward appeals that differentiate between a homogenous and virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Wörlund, 1999; Mudde, 2004, p. 543). In the Swedish context, there are many local parties that started out as single-issue parties but then changed into broader welfare-populistic parties. There are several rational explanations that could be considered to explain this. Infected issues in the municipality such as the shutdown of a school or the building of a road can work well to gather many votes, but when the issue is resolved, the party might need to broaden its focus in order to survive. Moreover, only focusing on one question might not, from the perspective of the voters, be of enough importance to earn one's vote. However, in many cases, single-question issues seem to work very well as initial mobilizers of voters and also as a sort of spine for the party. One example is the very successful party Folkinitativet Arjeplog (The People's Initiative Arjeplog) that received 28,97% of the votes in Arjeplog municipality in the last election (Valmyndigheten, 2024a). As told by the party leader right after the election, the party was founded to protest the shutdown of the only municipal upper secondary school (Flores & Nyman, 2022). However, looking at the party's website, one can see that the party actually is more of a classic welfare-populistic party (Folkinitiativet Arjeplog, 2024). Welfare-populistic parties are similar to what Reiser (2008)

refers to as "municipal lists": long-term party-like groups, focusing on general municipal interests and support the notion that good local politics should non-political and pragmatic (p. 292). Aars & Ringskjøb (2005) also lift up local parties that are covering a territory inside the municipality (p. 175). An example of this is Tullingepartiet (The Tullinge Party) in Botkyrka municipality, which puts the well-being of Tullinge, a part of Botkyrka municipality, firsthand (Tullingepartiet, 2024).

This thesis will concentrate solely on welfare-populistic parties. The rationale for this is that these are the most common and most prominent type of local parties in Sweden. Another thing that is also pleasurable with welfare-populistic parties when it comes to conducting this thesis, is the non-distinctiveness of their political programs that are very broad, open and very often not tied to specific single issues, but rather the welfare of the municipality in general. Many of these parties have very similar political programs, regardless of where they are situated geographically in the country. This results in that they are very comparable and fitting for research purposes. On the other hand, to compare single-issue parties might be too dependent on the specific issue at hand. One type of issue, for example the closing of a school, might work better for mobilizing voters compared to another type of issue, for example the closing of a municipal bathhouse. Also, even when comparing single-issue parties that are both lifting the same issue, finding parties that have issues that are similar enough might be hard and lead to a poor pool of case selection. Similar objections can be made when it comes to group interest parties. There are not as many of them as there are welfare-populistic parties, and the specific interest groups that the parties are representing might differ when it comes to how well they can get mobilized. Looking at welfare-populistic parties means that one has a much greater pool of cases to select from, which means that the quality of the comparisons can be higher. For this reason, from this point, local parties will be synonymous with welfare-populistic parties.

Indeed, when one look closer on the different parties belonging to this group of parties, many patterns emerge: They are usually referring to themselves as ideologically unbound, willing to cooperate with any party as long as the local welfare improves and they often refer to themselves as pragmatic parties. Usually, they explicitly voice unhappiness with the state of affairs in the municipality. Comparing the political programs of these parties shows that they are in many times almost copies of each other, with the only differing factor the actual municipality in which they are active in. Åberg & Ahlberger (2015) bring up the nature of these parties well: They are concerned with any local issues, no matter if it is from a traditional left or right perspective, as long as it is related to the welfare of the municipality, and they also

stress cross-party cooperation (p. 815). Almost by definition, local parties appeal to place-based politics and attempt to look beyond ideological concerns and instead put emphasis on local pragmatism (Fridolfsson & Gidlund, 2001). To give an illustration of how homogenous welfare-populistic parties actually are, three welfare-populistic parties with varying electoral size have been compared:

Figure 2

Comparison of party programs of three different welfare-populistic parties.

Party Name	Väsbys' Best	The Engelholm Party	The Village Party
Municipality	Upplands Väsby	Ängelholm	Leksand
2022 Election Results	12,5% (+3,34)	3,39% (-1,54)	18,85% (+12,33)
About the Party from Respective Website	"Väsbys' Best is your voice in Väsby ... Our focus is Väsby and Väsby only ... We do not follow the direction of any mother party ... Our focus is solely on questions that the inhabitants of Väsby want to improve..."	"Independent from the traditional, ideological and political groupings or blocs that exist, we take stand on the issues that affect Ängelholm municipality ... We listen and take unto us the best, regardless of where or from whom the idea comes".	"The Village Party is a local and independent party that strive towards a positive existence throughout Leksand municipality. We have no party whip or any directives from above, which means that we can put all our focus on improving the opportunity for people and businesses to live and develop in our unique municipality

Note. The information was gathered from respective parties' website and were translated by the author. (Väsbys Bästa, 2024; Engelholmspartiet, 2024; Bygdepartiet, 2024). The election results were gathered from Valmyndigheten (2024a).

2.2. Swedish Municipalities

The purpose of this section is to give a brief background on municipalities in Sweden. The rationale for this is that it is important to understand how the relationship between the municipalities and the state is constructed due to the fact that some explanations of unhappiness for established parties (leading to electoral increase for local parties) has to do with changes in the relationship between the state and the local (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015). Therefore, it is

important to lay out just a brief notion on how the municipalities and the state are related. Moreover, due to the fact that much literature lays great weight in using contextual explanations for local party success, such as for example municipality size and socioeconomic factors, it is important to illustrate variances between municipalities in Sweden.

Municipalities are after regions, the third tier in Swedish local government. There exist, as of February 2024, 290 municipalities in Sweden (SKR, 2023b). The municipalities have constitutional autonomy from the state, which in practice means that the municipalities have a wide range of responsibilities concerning local welfare and societal development as well as the responsibility to make sure that local democratic institutions function well. However, even if the municipalities have great autonomy and room for manoeuvre, they are still partly steered by the state. The municipalities are responsible for most welfare functions, including education (up to upper secondary schools), social welfare and elder care. Moreover, the municipalities are also responsible for physical planning, infrastructure, fire services as well as cultural and leisure activities. The municipalities have the right to tax its citizens according to its preference in order to finance its expenditures, and taxes are the main source of income for municipalities. There also exists an equalization system to redistribute resources from the wealthy to the neediest local governments (Lidström, 2022, p. 62, SKR, 2023c). The Swedish local government system is classified as belonging to the Northern European or Scandinavian group, characterized by extensive welfare responsibility, high autonomy and strong traditions of party-based representative democracy (Lidström 2022, p. 62; Sellers et al., 2020). The municipalities have, as a result of the expenditure of the welfare state in the 20th century, seen a large expansion and professionalisation of the municipalities. With more than half of all public servants working in the municipalities, Sweden is one of the most decentralised countries in the world (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 11), and was in 2019, according to the Local Autonomy Index, the fourth top-rated country when it comes to autonomy of the municipalities. (Ladner et al., 2019). Generally, citizens trust in local public authorities is high, and 7 out of 10 citizens are happy with the democracy in their municipality (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 15). The power in the municipality is distributed between the council and the committees. There are no mayors in Sweden – the closest to this position is the indirectly elected chair of the municipal board. The number of members in the council is determined by the councils themselves, but in the span of 21 to 101 members (Lidström, 2022, p. 64). The municipalities are self-governing political units, but also a part of the public administration. However, the day-to-day decisions of municipalities are to

a large extent predetermined by the national government and parliament (Regeringskansliet, 2024).

There are large variances in the size, geography, demography and income level between the different municipalities. Stockholm, the largest municipality (inhabitants) had in December 2023, 988 943 citizens (9,4% of the total Swedish population at the time), while Bjurholm, the smallest municipality, had 2 348 inhabitants (0,02 % of population at the time) (SCB, 2024a). Kiruna, the largest municipality (area) is 19 163 km^2 (3,63% of total country area), while Sundbyberg is only 9 km^2 (0,0017% of total country area) (SCB, 2020). Moreover, in 2022, in the richest municipality, Danderyd, the median yearly income was 530 800 SEK (142,88% of population median income). In Perstorp the median income was 312 700 SEK (84,17% of median income) (SCB, 2024b). There are also more factors, such as citizen density, annual increase or decrease of citizens in the municipality or number of densely populated areas (tätorter) inside the municipalities' border and due to this, the conditions under which the municipalities carry out their tasks differ greatly, and the citizens views on how to conduct the politics in the municipalities also differ (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 18). This means that in Sweden, like in many European countries, there are large variations between municipalities. Further in this thesis, the potential impact of some of these variations on the success of local parties will be discussed.

2.3. Municipal Elections in Sweden

In this section, Swedish municipal elections will be briefly described. The reason for this, is that different electoral systems translate to different challenges for parties (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012, p. 237). Therefore, it is in the interest of the understanding of this thesis to lay out the fundamentals of Swedish elections.

Sweden is, since the election year of 1970, the only country in Europe in which national and local elections are held on the same day (Lidström, 2022, p. 63; Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 45). The elections are held on the second Sunday of September every fourth year. In order to vote in the municipality election, one needs to be at least 18 years of age on the election day, and you can only vote in the municipality in which you are registered. Different from national elections where a Swedish citizenship is required to vote, one is allowed to vote in the municipality election if one is a citizen in another EU country (or Norway and Iceland), as long as one is registered in the municipality. Similarly, citizens of other countries or stateless people can also vote if they have been registered in Sweden for at least 3 years on the election day.

However, they also need to be registered in the municipality. There is also no need to register before voting. The elections are in a proportional multiparty fashion, held in a semi-open list format, which means that more than voting for a party, the voters are also able to cast a vote on individual candidates of the party. There are no independent runners – a party label is required. This also means that the local elections are highly politicised – the eight largest parties held 95% of all votes in the local councils in 2018. If the municipality has more than 36 000 eligible voters, the municipality may be divided into two or more voting districts. In order to qualify for the distribution of seats in the council, a party needs at least 2% if the municipality only has one district, and 3% if it has got two or more. Voter turnout for local elections is generally high in Sweden, which is often party explained by the fact that all elections are held on the same day, reducing the need to separately go to the voting booth on different election days. However, voting turnout is slightly lower in smaller municipalities. In 2018, local parties ran in 71% of the municipalities and received at least one seat in 48% of them. Therefore, in the majority of municipalities, local parties ran but failed to secure any seats. (Lidström, 2022, p. 67). The largest local party when it comes to number of votes in 2022 was Demokraterna (The Democrats) in Göteborg municipality and they received 21 535 out of 350 709 votes (6,14%). The largest local party when it comes to share of votes was Oberoende Realister (Independent Realists) in Hagfors and they received 3 084 out of 7 374 votes (41,82%) (Valmyndigheten, 2024a; SKR, 2023a, p. 24). In 2022, the voting turnout for municipal elections was 80,5% which is 3,7% lower than in the national election (SCB, 2023). The formal barriers of registration in Sweden are extremely low, which means that it is quite easy to start and register a new party for local elections (Wörlund, 2008, p. 201).

The purpose of this chapter was to lay out relevant background information about the context that I will investigate in this thesis. Therefore, a brief overview on how local parties are to be defined has been laid out, as well as background information on municipalities and local elections in Sweden. What now follows is a thorough literature review, where I will present what previous literature has said about local parties. In the end of the chapter, I will also in more detail describe the three factors that I, in my hypothesis, believe to affect local party success: issue ownership, campaigning & media as well as leadership, membership & resources.

3. State of the Art – Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to present a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on explanators of local party success in order to lay out the theoretical foundations underlying my investigation. The chapter will be organized as follows: I will discuss previous literature, divided into four sections. The four sections each deal with what the contemporary literature say about determinants for local party success. Previous literature on determinants of local party success can be divided into specific groups, depending on their focus. I have identified four distinct groups: Institutional explanations (factors related to the electoral, party- and voting system as well as barriers and thresholds of party formation and council entry); contextual explanations (which contexts are good or bad for the flourishing of local parties); push-factors (how do actions and/or strategies of the established parties in the municipality affect success for the local parties); and pull-factors (how do the actions and/or strategies of the local parties themselves affect success for the local parties). I hypothesize that it is in the pull factors one can find the answers to what separates more successful and less successful local parties, specifically factors relating to issue ownership, advertisement & media as well as leadership, membership & resources. These three factors have not been sufficiently investigated in previous local party literature, mainly due to the fact they are hard to investigate with a quantitative approach. The factors before these three factors have all been very much investigated by previous authors, but they are according to me, <u>at best necessary but not sufficient factors</u>. Therefore, they will be controlled for in the case selection, and therefore not assumed to explain the differences in the outcome variable of interest (local party success).

To summarize, the purpose of the literature review is to present what factors previous scholars have suggested to influence local party success. Since these factors, according to me, are not sufficient to explain local party success when one looks at two most similar cases, these previous factors will therefore (as good as possible) be controlled for when selecting cases. By doing this, one can investigate whether the hypothesized factors (issue ownership, advertisement & media and leadership, membership & resources) differ between the local parties with different level of success, and therefore potentially be explainers of local party success.

3.1. Institutional Explanations for Local Party Success

Institutional factors related to local party success encompass aspects of the political system's nature, including laws and structure, which affect the chances for local party success. According

to the many entries in Reiser & Holtmann (2008a), institutional settings are important when looking at local parties. The first institutional factor related to local party success is how challenging it is to actually form a party in Sweden and what the barriers of entry into council are.

Since a party name is required in order to compete in municipal elections, there are no independent runners in the municipal elections. While there are no formal regulations that demand that one needs to register their party label to the electoral authority, this is something that most parties do, because it protects the party label from plagiarism and/or that other parties register a similar party label. Moreover, registering the party label is required in order to present the candidates on the ballot. If one wishes to register a party label, this needs to be done before the last February of the election-year. The party also needs to register its candidates. In order to complete the registration at the electoral authority, the party also needs to submit the statues of the party, proof that the register is a certificated representative of the party, which elections the party wish to participate in and finally at least 50 signatures from citizens that are eligible for voting in that specific municipal. The registration process is free, and anyone can register a party (Valmyndigheten, 2024b). When it comes to barriers of entry to the municipal council, a new law introduced prior to the 2018 elections made it so that there is a 2 or 3 percent threshold to enter the municipal council, depending on the number of constituencies in the municipality (before 2018 there was no such threshold). While it was argued that this new law would make it harder for local parties to enter council, a professor of political science from the university of Gothenburg stated in an interview that the impact of the law, if any, would be marginal. The reason for this is that even before the law was instigated, there existed a natural threshold of between 2,5 to 3 percent for parties to enter the council (Jangali, 2018). Wörlund (2008) concludes that the institutional barriers of party formation and of local council participation are to be considered low (p. 201).

Another institutional factor that might be of importance is whether local parties receive financial support from the state or the municipalities. In Norway for example, where the party system allows for independent runners, only registered parties receive financial state support. This means that independent runners are at a financial disadvantage. Moreover, this financial support is per vote, which means that more established parties with more organizational strength have an advantage compared to local registered parties, which are usually electorally smaller (Aars & Ringskjøb, 2005, pp. 166-167). In Sweden, it is the municipalities that decide if they want to give support to the parties. However, all municipalities do. All local parties that have at

least one mandate gets financial support from the municipalities (SKR, 2024a). This support is usually very sufficient for the local parties to run their organization on, something that will be touched upon in the results. This means that in Sweden, as long as the local parties have at least one mandate, they have more than enough financial resources to conduct their business. However, for parties that have not yet reached entry into council, the financial situation can be tough. Therefore, it can be argued that it is absolutely crucial for local parties that they manage to get representation after the first election, so that they can finance their future operations.

Another institutional factor that could have an impact on the electoral results for local parties is whether the elections for the national, regional as well as the municipal arena take place on the same day. As written beforehand, Sweden is the only country in Europe that consistently holds local elections on the same day as the national election. A practical consequence of a joint election day is that the municipal sphere gets overshadowed by the national sphere, due to the fact that most media coverage and attention will be directed towards the national election (Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023, p. 3). However, the voting turnout gets a large boost from having the elections on the same day. Whether the joint election day is better or worse for the success of local parties is debatable. When the elections are held on the same day, it could be argued that established parties benefit from this more than local parties. The reason for this is that voters simply vote for the same party in all three elections, due to the fact that they might be uninformed and/or uninterested in politics. Since local parties are not electable for the national election, but national parties are, the national parties also get the vote in the local election. However, as Lidström (2021) points out, in Sweden, even with a conservative estimation, half of the electorate actually make an informed decision when voting in the municipal election, meaning that they do not automatically vote for the same party in the different elections (p. 139).

One last institutional matter that could have an impact on local party success, is the electoral system (e.g. Copus et al., 2012; Aars & Ringskjøb, 2005). The proportional semi-open list system of Sweden makes it easy for local parties to get their foot into council (Erlingsson, 2005, p. 55). Many studies have focused on countries that have different electoral systems based on how large the municipal is (e.g. Soós, 2008; Dudzińska, 2008). In Hungary, for example, in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants, party formation and organisation of new parties are systemically discouraged while the electoral system in larger municipalities gives better chances for local parties (Soós, 2008, p. 73). In Sweden however, the electoral system

across the three different spheres is the same, and there are no differences between municipalities.

To summarize, the institutional factors in the Swedish case are very low: Barriers of party formation and thresholds of representation are low and the joint election day does not present itself as a barrier for local parties, and the electoral system is allowing for local parties. The financial support that local parties receive is high and satisfactory, as long as the local party was represented in the council in prior election. This means, that for completely new parties that are yet to compete in their first election, the absence of financial support can be a disadvantage. However, in this thesis, the two investigated parties both have an almost 30-year-old history and have been in the council virtually since their formation. Therefore, they both receive financial support and have been for some time. The electoral system does not differ between different municipalities and it is allowing for small parties. Moreover, institutional barriers, even if they were high, would be unlikely to explain differences in electoral outcome for local parties, since the barriers are the exact same for all parties. It can therefore be concluded that in the case of Sweden, one needs to look beyond the institutional barriers in order to find the explanation of variances in local party success.

3.2. Contextual Explanations for Local Party Success

Much of the literature on the success of local parties deal with identifying and explaining local conditions tied to the specific municipalities in which the local parties are based in that are either good or bad for the success of the parties. The reason behind this is that quantitative large-N studies, which are the ones that usually have been conducted in local party research, are very well fitting for conducting research on this type of information. These contextual explanations include but are not limited to geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors. Some of these factors are almost unanimously argued for by almost all scholars, while some are more debated and ambiguous. In this subsection, I will present the most ordinary factors that have been proposed by previous research to affect local party success.

3.2.1. Municipal Size, Municipal Type, Socioeconomic Factors, Demographics and Participation

Municipal size is one of the most proposed and researched factors when it comes to contextual explanations for party success. The majority of literature clearly states that local parties are usually stronger in small municipalities, something that is underscored by Simon Otjes in his article from 2018: "In the literature on independent local political parties, one thing is

specifically clear: the smaller municipalities are, the stronger independent local political parties are and conversely the weaker national political parties are" (Otjes, 2018, p. 309). This pattern is found in many different European countries, such as in Italy (Vampa, 2016), Denmark (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010), Norway (Aars & Rinskjøb, 2005; Arstein, 1997), Germany (Angenendt, 2015); Belgium (Dodeigne et al., 2021), Austria (Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen, 2013), Hungary (Soós, 2008), Croatia, (Koprić, 2008), Poland (Dudzińska, 2008), Portugal (de Almeida, 2008) and the Netherlands (Otjes, 2018).

Many explanations for this pattern have been presented by the different authors. In many countries, the established national parties are more active in larger municipalities and in some cases, they are not active at all in some municipalities (Reiser & Holtmann, 2008a). This can for example be due to organisational capacities in the smaller municipalities (easier for local parties with ties to the community to organize a local party), as well as the in many cases bigger strategic importance of larger municipalities. This leaves more room for local parties to thrive and take the votes of the voters that would otherwise vote for any of the established parties (Otjes, 2020; Vampa, 2016). However, in Sweden it is rare that a party does not run in a municipal election and it is easily controlled for. Moreover, large municipalities tend to be more heterogeneous, leading to more complex cleavage structures (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010, p. 437). A more complex cleavage structure means that there usually also is a bigger market for established parties to gain votes (Dodeigne et al., 2021, p. 104). Moreover, local parties can make use of personal network and door-to-door campaigning in small municipalities – a better evolved infrastructure is needed in larger municipalities (Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen, 2013, pp. 778-779). Lastly, as ideologically loaded conflicts increase with size of municipality, this is better suited for local branches of established national parties (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 98).

While many authors have made the case that smaller municipalities are better for local parties, in the case of Sweden, most authors seem to downplay the importance of municipality size. In their annual report, the Swedish Council of Democracy (Demokratirådet) stated that the prevalence of local parties is in Sweden not tied to certain geographic areas or municipal sizes (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 136), and this was argued for already 25 years ago by Wörlund (1999, p. 55). Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that the effect of municipal size on local party success can be dependent upon other factors. Åberg & Ahlberger (2015) for example find that local parties are more prevalent in large and sparsely populated municipalities in the north as well as in small and densely populated municipalities in the Stockholm urban area (pp. 815-816). Since these two types of areas are to be considered opposites, in this thesis, municipal

size is nothing that is projected to affect local party success. However, since it is easily controlled for, it will nonetheless be considered when selecting cases.

Another thing that might affect local party success is municipal type and socioeconomic/demographic factors within the municipal: Is the municipal urban or rural, and how is the socioeconomic well-being of the municipal? Does the demographic of the population matter for local party success? Just like municipal size, this could also be considered to be something that impacts whether local parties have better chances at thriving. When it comes to whether the municipal is of rural or urban nature, studies have shown that local parties are more successful in rural environments (e.g. Otjes, 2018, p. 321; Gradus et al., 2023, p. 91). However, the opposite has also been argued for: that local party success is not related to rurality (e.g. Angenendt, 2015, p. 132; Göhlert et al., 2008, p. 134). Wörlund (1999, p. 55) argues that the location of the municipal and the employment structure (in which sectors are the citizens employed – see also Arstein (1997), have no impact on the prevalence of local parties. However, Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) find that local party voters are more prevalent in rural Swedish municipalities. However, this is not related to the fact that the municipality is rural, but rather that the municipality has a shrinking population that opens up for dissatisfaction, and therefore also emergence and success of local parties. Moreover, the authors stress that local parties can in no way be referred to as a rural phenomenon – they exist in the entire country (pp. 4, 10). Therefore, that a municipal is rural is not necessarily something that makes it so that local parties thrive better there. Instead, it might be more logical to assume that prevalence of local parties in rural municipalities are more related to other factors, such as population shrinkage (see above), economic development (Vampa, 2016; de Almeida, 2008) or absence of national parties running (something that will be discussed later in this chapter).

Regarding socioeconomic and demographic factors, this is also something that differs very much between different countries. Vampa (2016) shows that in Italy, local lists are more prevalent in less developed areas (p. 2). In Netherlands, however, local party success is not whatsoever linked with gender, age and/or education level (Otjes, 2018, p. 321), even if Gradus et al., (2023) found weak evidence that old age is correlated with increased success for local parties, an effect that however disappeared when they altered their model. Moreover, the authors find no impact of ethnicity, income (per citizen) or level of unemployment (pp. 91-92). This general pattern of non-impact of demographic and/or socioeconomic factors is also echoed in the Swedish studies. Wörlund (1999) investigates whether grade of unemployment, employment structure and/or share of citizens living on welfare increases or decreases support

for local parties and finds no support for this (p. 55). This is underscored by Lidström (2021) who also finds no differences between gender, education, duration of residence/home ownership and municipal attachment when it comes to voting on local parties (p. 138). However, not only is it interesting to see if any particular socioeconomic factors in and of themselves affect local party success. What also is important, is whether socioeconomic inequality affect local party success. This was investigated by Dodeigne et al., (2020), who indeed found that local parties are more successful in more socioeconomic homogenous municipalities – that is, in municipalities where the socioeconomic inequality is lower (p. 10).

Even if there seems to be no connection between socioeconomic/demographic factors and local party success, there are a few specific factors that have been argued in the literature to increase local party success. These are civic engagement and voter turnout. Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) hypothesize that civically engaged citizens are more knowledgeable about what is happening in the municipality, and also tend to be more exposed to party campaigns. Civically engaged people are also more likely to be exposed to local issues, and also more likely to get in touch with local political candidates. In their article, the authors find that civically engaged inhabitants in a municipality are much more likely to vote for local party, and they argue that civic engagement is a watershed between voting for local parties and voting for other anti-establishment parties, such as the Sweden Democrats. However, this notion of civic engagement as an indicator of voting local is not shared by some other authors, both in Sweden and in other countries. In Italy for example, Vampa (2016) draws the conclusion that the success of local party lists is not at all linked to civic engagement, as local party lists are more prevalent in less developed areas. Moreover, also in a Swedish setting, Lidström (2021) finds that civic engagement does not in fact explain local party success (p. 136).

One last potential factor that will be discussed here is participation in the local elections, measured as voter turnout. For starters, the voting turnout for the municipal elections is high in Sweden. This is because the voters need not go to the ballots on separate days. The turnout has increased every year since 2002 (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 15). In the 2022 elections, the turnout for the municipal elections was 80,5%, and 84,2% for the national election. Looking at the history of voting turnout in Sweden, starting in 1973, one can see that the difference in turnout between the municipal and national elections has increased some. In 1973, it was almost the same turnout in the two different elections (90,8% in national elections and 90,5% in the municipal elections). Moving towards the 2022 elections, this difference has increased, culminating in the 3,9% difference in 2022. However, an 80,5% turnout in the municipal

elections is to be viewed as very high. The Netherlands, another country that has a rich literature on local parties and elections, had for comparability a 51% turnout in 2022. In Norway, the turnout for 2023 was 62,4% (SCB, 2023; SSB, 2023; Statista, 2023).

The literature presents various results on what effect voter turnout has on the success of local parties. In 1997, Arstein, against expectations, found that in Norway, the voting turnout in municipalities without local parties were lower. This result was evaluated two years later in a Swedish setting by Wörlund, and he found the exact opposite results – that voting turnout is higher in municipalities with no local parties (Arstein, 1997; Wörlund, 1999, p. 56). Eight years after Arstein's findings, Aars & Ringskjøb (2005, p. 178) concluded that local parties increase turnout while, Erlingsson et al., (2024, p. 1) found that it did not (however, the authors argued that this is because the Swedish case is a particular one). Therefore, it is not perfectly clear whether local parties benefit from low or high voting turnout.

In this section, factors related to how the nature of the municipality and the citizens within could be thought to influence local party success has been summarized. Municipality size has clearly shown to have a negative relationship with local party success, which will be considered when selecting cases, even if most studies in the Swedish setting have shown that it does not have any large effect. The same thing goes for the rurality of the municipality: The selected cases will be similar in this manner, as will the other explanations related to rurality (e.g. population shrinkage). When it comes to socioeconomic factors, the literature has not found any clear patterns that would explain an increase in local party success. However, most of the proposed socioeconomic factors have been controlled for when selecting cases, in order to reduce their potential impact. The same thing goes for socioeconomic differences, as proposed by Dodeigne et al., (2020) – they will also be considered and controlled for. When it comes to civic engagement, this will also fairly be touched upon. Lastly, voting turnout will also be controlled for, in order to control away its potential impact.

3.2.2. Political Culture/History and Support of Established Parties

In this section, factors related to historical and cultural characteristics of the specific municipalities in which the local parties are active in will be discussed, since it has been argued that these also might affect local party success. Moreover, this section will also touch upon how the political arena looks in the municipality, not least when it comes to the presence of anti-establishment parties.

Many countries in Europe have dramatic variations in local party support, and it is many times hypothesized that these variations are due to different cultural/political history of the different municipalities. It is not unlikely that different histories and different backgrounds of different regions in Europe bear with them consequences for local parties in the contemporary. In Italy, Vampa (2016) investigates if variation of local parties (called local lists in his article) can be affected by political traditions, derived from long-term rule of certain parties or coalitions, referring to these traditions as "political subcultures" (p. 9). The author, however, finds that this effect is negligible and does not explain local party success. Otjes (2020) also in his article look if Catholicism, which he hypothesizes for historical reasons to increase voting for local parties, can increase support for local parties and finds a strong and significant effect in all run models (p. 104). Arstein (1997) also looks at counterculture in the context of Norway, to see if it affects local party formation, and finds that it does not. In Germany, one example of how political culture and history can affect local party success, is how the negative experience with the SED regime in eastern Germany fostered negative feelings towards political parties. Moreover, the author also relates the huge difference in success of local parties in Bayern and Baden-Württemberg compared to local parties in Nordrhein-Westfalen and Saarland (Angenendt, 2015, pp. 131-133). The same goes for Austria, where local parties are incredibly strong in the Western parts of the country, such as Vorarlberg and Tyrol, while the rest of the country sees more modest success of local parties. Vorarlberg for example, in the provincial constitution of 1984, established itself as an "autonomous state", and after the first world war, almost 80% of all inhabitants wanted to attach at least a part of the state to Switzerland (Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen, 2013, p. 787). This could potentially explain why local parties seem to be particularly successful in these regions.

Authors have also hypothesized that that certain historical or cultural aspects of the municipality can affect the success of local parties. One thing to bear in mind is that there are no linguistic or ethnic cleavages in Sweden (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015, p. 816). Sweden is a homogenous land, without the types of cleavages found in many countries, such as for example Switzerland and Belgium. Åberg & Ahlberger (2015) talk about localistic sub-cultures of self-reliance and independence, and how "they provide the foundations of political mobilization and help trigger party formation when socioeconomic differentiation and discontent with the welfare state reach a critical level" (p. 818). In other words, in specific municipalities that have a history of, what the authors call, a localistic sub-culture, certain setbacks can activate large positive effects for local parties. The authors identify how in the south and in the south-west, there are particular

regions in which there exists these traditions of local dissent, related to previous administrative reforms (Åberg & Ahlberger, p. 818, 2015; Wångmar, 2003, p. 213, 222 - 225). However, the authors still remark that local lists are not all tied to these types of municipalities. As an example, the authors also mention how for example large parties also are prevalent in north, and also in municipalities in the Stockholm area (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015). The conclusion of the authors is that macro level institutional and structural changes (more about this in next section of the chapter), in combination with certain historical legacies lead to support for local parties.

Another thing that might potentially influence the support of local parties is how the contemporary political structure looks like: that is, what the largest and most popular parties in the municipal are. Berg et al., (2019) for example show that the combination of voting for the Moderate Party (M) in the national election and an *other* party (which mainly includes local parties) for the municipal election is the seventh most common combination of voting in the election, making up 3,1% of the entirety of the electorate (p. 102). However, in 2023, Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) conclude that local party voters were roughly evenly distributed when it comes to which parties they voted for in the national election, when looking at the three biggest parties (the Social Democrats (S), the Moderate Party and the Sweden Democrats), which can be interpreted as local parties being able to garner support across the entirety of the political spectrum. However, in respect to the sample share, the Social Democrats were underestimated and the Sweden Democrats were overestimated (p. 6). Lidström (2021) suggests that the reasons for the Social Democratic voters being less willing to split their votes in the municipal elections, are due to collectivist traditions and stronger party attachments compared to parties to the right (p. 131). Looking outside of Sweden, Vampa (2016) also finds an impact of historical support of specific parties on local party success. In regions where the Christian Democratic Party has historically been stronger, the support for local lists is bigger than in regions that historically has been more to the centre left. However, in Italy, the author differentiates between *politicised* and *independent* lists, where independent lists are, just like the local parties of interest in Sweden, parties that have no ties to established parties. When just looking at the independent local lists, there was no effect of this (pp. 12-13). Due to this, one can expect that in municipalities with a big Social Democratic hegemony, local parties might have a slight disadvantage. Therefore, this is something that will be taken into consideration when selecting cases.

Closely related to this is, the question about other anti-establishment parties. In Germany, Jankowski et al., (2022) make use of a difference-in-differences approach that is possible due to the fact that the German right-wing party Alterative für Deutschland (AfD) entered only some municipalities, to see if their presence was damaging to independent lists. The authors find that their presence and success indeed have a negative and significant impact on the success of local lists (p. 134). This finding is also found by Gradus et al., (2023) in the Netherlands, but the effect is weaker than in Germany (p 94). It is argued that local parties compete with the votes of anti-establishment parties. In many cases the rationale for voting on local parties seems to be anti-establishment and anti-party notions (more on this in the chapter about push-factors). Therefore, local parties and other anti-establishment parties might compete for the same voters, meaning that if the anti-establishment parties are successful in a specific municipality, this might be damaging to local parties in said municipality. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats have grown in every election since they entered the national parliament in 2010 and is as of April 2024, the second largest party after the Social Democrats (Demoskop, 2024). The Sweden Democrats is the largest anti-establishment party in Sweden (Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023, p. 2), gathering 20,58% present of the votes in the 2022 elections, and is now ruling the country together with the Moderates, the Christ Democrats (KD) and the Liberals (L) (however, while the Sweden Democrats do not have any ministers in the cabinet, they do have a very large impact on the formation of the politics) (Valmyndigheten, 2024a). Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) find in their article that there is a slight negative correlation between the support for the Sweden Democrats and support for local parties, but that in some municipalities the support for both parties go hand in hand (p. 6).

In this section, factors related to political history and the dominance and support of other parties have been discussed. Although Sweden is a fairly homogeneous land without large ethnic and linguistic cleavages, there might be some municipalities where local traditions of defiance towards the state in combination with altered relationships between the state and the local can better the prosperity of local parties. For this reason, resources will be put into investigating the specific historical context of both municipals in which the parties that I am interested in are active in, since the parties are actually in the south-west as well as the south-east parts of the country. The contemporary and historical popularity of other parties, in particular the Sweden Democrats, the Moderates and the Social Democrats, will also be controlled for.

3.2.3. Administrative Factors (Mergers)

The last section of this part of the chapter will revolve around administrative reforms that might affect the prosperity of local parties, in particular municipal mergers but also other top-down administrative changes that could increase the support for local parties. In the Netherlands, local parties were formed in order to defend the interests of villages that were being merged into larges entities (Otjes, 2018, p. 320; Janssen & Korsten, 2003). In Finland, Saarima & Tukiainen (2016) found that voters in municipals that were merging are more likely to vote on strong local alternatives than voters living in municipalities that were not merging (p. 44). In the Netherlands, regions that recently had experienced mergers showed to house successful local parties (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015, p. 815). However, Gradus et al., (2023) investigated the effect of municipal mergers on local party prevalence in the Netherlands and found no evidence for its effect (p. 91). The same thing was done by Aars & Ringskjøb (2005) in Norway, but no strong effect of mergers on local party prevalence was found (p. 170). In the light of this, it will be interesting to look at how mergers might have had an effect on local party prevalence in the Swedish setting, since there has been quite an extreme reduction of municipalities historically:

In 1952, a reform reduced the number of municipalities with almost half, cutting the number down from 2498 to 1037 municipalities with many direct consequences: professionalization of the municipal management, and less citizens had any connection to the local politicians. However, the politicians didn't find that the reform was enough. Between 1962-1974 a large municipal reform was taken place in Sweden, in order to create a municipal structure that could be more uniform, related to elementary school, social care and elder care. After the reform was completed in 1974, the number of municipals had been drastically reduced with almost 90 percent compared to before 1952. After 1974, all municipals were also, no matter size, shape or nature, uniform entities, governed by the same legislation. The reforms were not very popular, and it is estimated that roughly 800 municipalities were merged against their will. The municipalities were perceived to have become less democratic and less accessible for the citizens. Municipals that before the reform had been independent municipalities but now instead had become a part of the larger municipalities, protested that they received less money back on their taxes, and how little the politicians in the central parts of the municipalities listened to their wishes. (Erlingsson et al., 2021; Erlingsson et al., 2022, pp. 33-36).

It is not unthinkable that these administrative reforms of the municipal landscapes led to dissatisfaction of citizens, even if the evidence from other European countries have been ambiguous. According to Åberg & Ahlberger (2015), a pattern of local party success can be

identified in certain areas in Sweden that has been historically dissent towards these administrative reforms. According to the authors, this historical resistance to these administrative reforms by the citizens could create an arena of growth for local parties. This could be because citizens in a municipality are almost always negatively attuned to changes when it comes to the borders of the municipality (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 208). Therefore, it could be relevant to control that the municipalities in which the local parties of interests are based in have not been subjected to coercive municipal mergers.

Coercive mergers are not the only administrative reforms that could have a potential impact on local party success. Other top-down administrative reforms in the municipality could also impact local party success. Simply an altering of the relationship between the municipality and the state could be enough to create tensions, which could potentially lead to increased voting for local parties. De-regulation, privatization and cuts in government spending and reduction of welfare in the municipalities are all matters that could impact local party success in the municipality (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015, p. 817; Wörlund, 1999, p. 53). Since Sweden has a "Northern" type of local government, with a small number of local authorities, and with large responsibility for welfare matters (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012, p. 237), changes related to the functioning of the welfare might also have a potential impact on local party success, since dissatisfaction with the state of the municipality is one of the main drivers off local party success (more on this in the push-chapter).

Administrative changes such as mergers and cutbacks in the welfare could bear potential impact on the success of local parties. Therefore, these things have been considered in the case selection.

3.3. Push Factors as Explainers of Local Party Success

What push factors are can be found in the name. Push factors are factors that push voters towards voting on local parties instead of established national parties. One could also think of push factors as negative factors – they are not related to positive opinions about local parties, but instead to negative opinions about the established parties. Naturally, local parties are not able to completely control these push factors – unsatisfaction with established parties is not something that the local parties necessarily can steer over. However, there are some aspects of push factors that the local parties have control over. What united the previous potential factors of local party success were that they were not possible to influence for the local parties themselves. While the previous described factors that likely could affect the electoral success

of local parties, it is very unlikely that the local parties could have any impact on the factors themselves. Push (and pull factors) are either completely or partly factors that the local parties themselves could influence and these two last sections of the literature review, starting with push-factors, will investigate what previous research have said in these regards. Two specific push factors have been identified: Political dissatisfaction/distrust and absence of established parties. According to Otjes (2018), push factors are better explainers for local party success than pull factors (pp. 321-322). Therefore, I will begin with laying out the literature on push factors.

3.3.1. Political Dissatisfaction/Distrust

In the literature, distrust and dissatisfaction towards established parties are the main arguments for why local parties succeed. However, the terms are somewhat used interchangeably with each other. In this section, I will therefore try to address them both according to how they are related to in the literature, starting with political dissatisfaction.

Gissur Erlingsson asks in his dissertation why local parties even are founded and sets out with the notion that it is not logical. He brings up a paradox of party emergence: when it comes to founding a party in order to address dissatisfaction, when viewed upon from a rational-choice perspective, the founding of a local party from the perspective of the entrepreneur is always a suboptimal decision. He explains this by showing that if the support for creating a new party exists, the optimal decision is to wait for others to create the party in order to exhaust as few resources as possible. Likewise, if the support for creating a new party does not exist, then creating the party is a suboptimal decision, and the resources put into creating the party will have been wasted (Erlingsson, 2005, p. 14-15). However, local parties are a reality in Swedish politics. The author concludes that local parties are founded when the entrepreneur's demands within the already existing political arena are either ignored or unheard by the established parties. This leads to feelings of wrath, helplessness, disappointment and a feeling of revenge for the entrepreneurs, who found the party due to these reasons (Erlingsson, 2005, p. 240-255).

Figure 3

The cooperation-paradox.

Other dissatisfied citizens

The dissatisfied individual	Forms a new party	Abstains from forming a new party
Helping to form a party	Prefers second most (2)	Prefers the least (4)
Abstaining from forming a party	Prefers the most (1)	Prefers second to least (3)

Note. The figure illustrates the cooperation-paradox. It illustrates how it never, out of a rational choice perspective, is logical for individual citizens to form a local party. Adapted from Erlingsson, (2005, p. 14).

While Erlingsson in his dissertation brings up several other reasons for local party formation, these feelings of disappointment and helplessness are perfect examples on how push factors can create opportunities for the flourishing of local parties. What Erlingsson describes is also one of the most ordinary explanations for local party success in general: Dissatisfaction with the contemporary political situation. Already in 1996, a Swedish Government Official Report (SOU), stated that the increase of local parties can best be described as a protest against "the large parties' strong national character" (SOU 1996:169, p. 113), something that Jankowski at al., (2022) agrees with almost 25 years later in Germany: They represent a clear alternative to established parties (p. 128). A quarter of all Dutch local parties were found to be "protest parties" (Boogers & Voerman, 2010, p. 85). When Otjes (2018) summarizes the potential explainers for local party success, dissatisfaction with established parties is the one he finds most support for. According to the authors, this dissatisfaction does not differentiate between local and national politics. When it comes to what it is specifically that that breeds dissatisfaction, there are different proposals by different authors. According to Erlingsson (2005), the dissatisfaction comes in the form of dissatisfaction with the established politicians and dissatisfaction with that, in their opinion, the established parties are failing in getting things done. Another specific reason for dissatisfaction is that citizens are dissatisfied with the arrogance of the established system (Otjes, 2018, p. 307). According to many authors, this dissatisfaction goes hand in hand with populism and anti-politics and is one of the reasons that anti-establishment parties (such as the Sweden Democrats and Alternative für Deutschland) many times compete with local parties for the same voters (e.g. Angenendt, 2015). In Sweden, Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023), drawing from previous research, draw the conclusion that

unhappiness and discontent derived from real or perceived failures of the established parties have proven to be the main and most important explainer of local party success. The established actors are being criticized for being deaf to certain demands and failing in one way or another (p. 2).

In essence, political dissatisfaction is linked to specific (perceived or real) shortcomings and failures of the established parties. In that sense, they are related to dissatisfaction with political parties and not with politics as a whole, something that Gendźwiłł (2012) finds in Poland (p. 511). Therefore, political dissatisfaction may wary, largely depending on the context of the municipality and the political landscape. Political distrust, however, is much more general.

According to Wörlund (1999), local parties should best be seen as a function of the failures of the established parties through reduced trust, reduction in members and increased volatility of the voters (p. 51). In the introductory chapter of their book, Reiser & Holtmann (2008b) argue that the reason for an increase in local parties in all of Europe – even in fully politicised countries, has to do with a general decline in trust for established parties and politicians (p. 7). Growing lack of confidence drives away voters from the established parties. Also, the development of allocation of state support for parties has made it so that the established parties are no longer dependent on mobilizing members since their financial wellbeing is secured through state support (Wörlund, 2008, p. 195). Also, looking at voter behaviour gives a good indication of the proof for the impact of distrust. According to Otjes (2018), in the Netherlands, those who have most trust in national politics are 93-95% less likely to vote on local parties compared to those that have the lowest trust (p. 318). In 2020, the same author concludes that having the highest level of political trust cuts the chances of voting for local parties in half (Otjes, 2020, p. 103). Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023) find that when it comes to political distrust, local party voters and voters for the Sweden Democrats share many similarities but also some differences. While both type of voters have a lot of political distrust, the political distrust of the local party voters are directed solely towards local political leadership, while SD voters distrust is far more general and directed towards other citizens in general as well as actors of the national political sphere (p. 10). Therefore, it is easy to hypothesize that distrust towards the local political system and its actors is a great mobiliser for local parties in Sweden. However, something very important to note is that political distrust has actually not increased in Sweden (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015, p. 815). Therefore, it is actually not plausible that local distrust is a great explainer for the increase in local party support in Sweden (the same goes for the Netherlands, see Otjes (2020).

Figure 4

Trust in Swedish politicians through time .

Confidence in Swedish politicians

Share of very/quite high (percent)
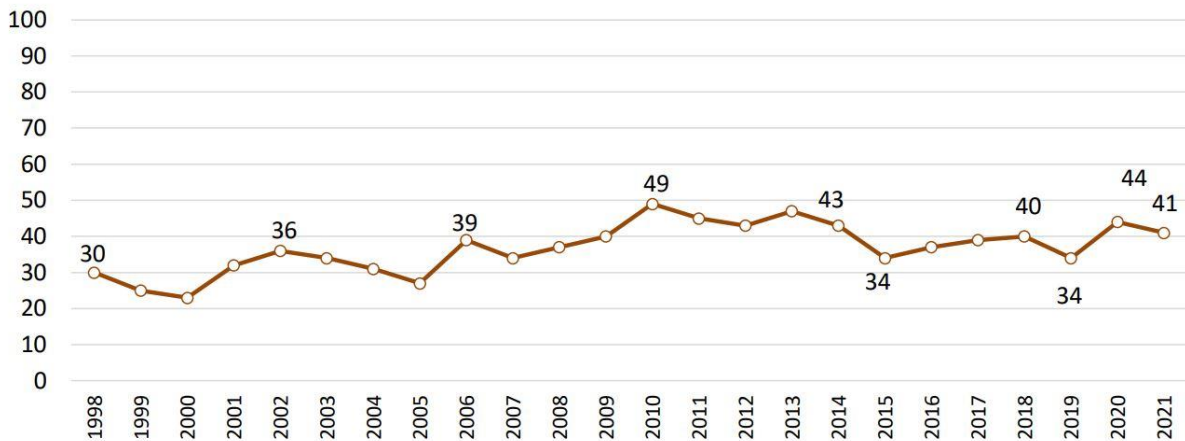
Note. The figure shows how large share of asked citizens have responded "very high" or "quite high" to the question: "Generally speaking, how big is your confidence in Swedish politicians?" The results are from the Swedish national SOM-surveys 1998-2021. The figure is adapted from a presentation held by the SOM-institute in 2023 (SOM-Institutet, 2023).

This section has discussed political distrust and dissatisfaction as explainers of local party success. Both are regarded in the literature as proven and great explainers of local party success. Since both terms have been used in the literature quite interchangeably, this subsection has tried to point out the differences between them. While political dissatisfaction and political distrust are seen as main mobilisers of local party success, it is unlikely that at least political distrust can be seen as sole explainer of local party success. If one looks at measurements in Sweden of dissatisfaction with democracy and trust in politicians and parties, one finds that the satisfaction with democracy as a whole and with politicians is stable, and that the trust for politicians has actually increased over time (but with a dip after 2010) (SOM-Institutet, 2023). Therefore, it is questionable if political distrust/dissatisfaction are the main drives of local party support in Sweden. There is however, one more push-factor that is often brought up in the literature that now will be discussed: Absence of established parties in some municipals.

3.3.2. Absence of Established Parties

Another push-factor, that according to many European authors on local parties is likely to have a large impact on local party success, is simply the fact that some established parties do not run in some municipalities. According to Otjes (2018), not being able to vote for one's first choice in the municipal election many times drives voters to instead vote for local parties simply as a second choice (p. 322). One might ask why established parties are absent in some municipalities. First of all, established parties are more likely to compete in larger municipalities, since their electoral niche might not be large enough to sustain them in smaller municipals (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010, p. 437). There might also be a problem of recruitment: the parties might not have sufficient members to organise themselves in smaller municipals (Vampa, 2016, p. 8). Holtmann (2008), Otjes (2018) and Gradus et al., (2023) have all found strong evidence that local parties work as surrogates when established parties do not run in the municipal and Angenendt (2015) also finds this effect in Germany, especially in smaller municipalities.

When it comes to absence of established parties, however, it is not relevant for Sweden. In Sweden, it is very rare that established parties do not run in a municipal and if a party has no candidates in a municipal, it is almost exclusively a very small party, such as the Greens (MP) for example. In 2022, for example, there were in total 71 municipalities in which the Greens did not have any candidates (almost one fourth of all municipalities) (Pettersson, 2022). In December 2021, there were in total 36 empty chairs (out of 12 700 chairs in total) in the municipalities in Sweden. This means that in these 36 chairs, a party received a vote even if the party did not have any representatives in the municipal. Out of all these empty chairs, not all of them are the result of candidates receiving votes without representation – some of them were also due desertion of the seat from the council member (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 123). Therefore, the problem of absence of established parties in municipals is not a big problem in Sweden. However, when selecting cases, it will still be controlled for.

To summarize this section regarding push factors, it is unlikely that they explain individual local party success in Sweden. However, I do believe it is safe to say that political distrust and/or dissatisfaction are necessary preconditions for the existence and success of local parties. If there are no dissatisfaction or distrust towards status quo, then it is hard to conceive why local parties would be able to garner support. Dissatisfaction and distrust towards the established parties are therefore something that unlocks the market for local parties, but it is not enough to mobilize voters – the local parties need to do more than just exist. Of course, if there are large variations

in political dissatisfaction and distrust between municipalities, there exists a possibility that these factors could explain the varying degree of success for individual local parties. If the dissatisfaction is great in one municipality, and very small in another, they could potentially explain some of the eventual differences in local party success. However, it is not obvious that this difference in satisfaction with local parties would translate into an increase for local party success – instead the support could be picked up by other parties, such as for example the Sweden Democrats (which in turn, however, could affect the success of the local parties). While there is regrettably no data that investigates variations in political distrust/dissatisfaction on a municipal level in Sweden, the cases that are selected in this thesis are similar in almost all regards and I therefore feel secure that the political distrust and/or dissatisfaction do not differentiate to the degree that it could explain the different party success. Therefore, I conclude that political distrust/dissatisfaction, while being a necessary condition for the existence and success of local parties, is not sufficient, and can therefore not explain the difference in local party success between the cases. Therefore, one needs to look further in order to find potential and specific explanations for local party success. According to my hypothesis, one can find the explainers for difference in local party success in the next section, which will deal with pull factors.

3.4. Pull Factors as Explainers of Local Party Success

The last section of the literature review will deal with what in the literature is referred to as pull factors. Different from push factors, pull factors are not at all related to the established parties and their presence in the municipalities. Instead, pull factors can be described as all factors that the local parties themselves affect and utilize in order to attract voters. To clarify: support stemming from push factors can be described as negative support – they are the negative reactions stemming from the established parties' actions. Pull factors on the other side, can be described as positive support – it is the positive reaction stemming from the local parties' actions that makes up the support. In the literature, the most distinguished pull factor has to do with *localism*. However, there are three more pull factors that have not yet been, in my opinion, adequately explored in the local party literature. These factors have to do with issue ownership, advertisement & media as well as leadership, membership & resources. It is of my opinion that, while all explainers before these three pull factors (institutional, contextual, push- as well as localism factors) are <u>at most</u> required but not sufficient explainers of local party success, these three last explainers, starting with issue strategy, are three factors that I hypothesize separate successful local parties from less successful local parties.

Since localism is basically the only pull factor that exists in the literature, I will start with describing its nature and also why I do believe that it in and of itself cannot explain differences in local party success.

3.4.1. Localism

One might ask oneself what it is that makes local parties so desirable. No matter how big the dissatisfaction with the established parties is, the local parties need to be able to attract voters. By many authors, it has been proposed that the main thing that local parties can offer is an alternative way of conducting politics, far away from the ideologically boundness of the established parties – a more localistic way of conducting local politics. An exact definition of localism is hard to pinpoint, as authors use different definitions. Some authors describe it as a set of practices, while others go as far as calling it an ideology. In this subsection, I will first lay out exactly what is meant with localism, and then how it can be utilized for the local parties' advantage.

Chou et al., (2022) offer a very good starting point when understanding exactly what localism is:

> We construe of localism as a set of practices, claims, and discourses that render 'the local' politically salient; that is, an ideational politics of place (Malpas, 1999). This definition allows us to engage the various meanings attributed to localism, including a 'positive disposition to the decentralization of power' (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013), the devolution of responsibility to local government or local actors (Katz & Nowak, 2017), and people's feelings of attachment to their local communities as a source of identity, pride, or belonging (Fitzgerald, 2018). It also draws on political geography approaches that regard 'the local' as a contested category designating different forms of place- based activity (Featherstone et al., 2012; Cochrane, 2016) (p. 131).

In essence, localism puts the local in focus and brings not often with-it certain beliefs and preferences, such as decentralization and the local community as a source of identity. Copus & Wingfield (2014) present a more specific definition: They conceptualize it as supporting the interest of the municipality and support for more autonomy (p. 664). While it is true that many local parties are formed as anti-establishment parties, that is not the entire picture. Boogers & Voerman (2010) differentiate between protest parties and local parties. Protest parties are driven by dissatisfaction and/or opposition (push factors). Local parties on the other hand, instead focus on the quality of local administration, the uniqueness of the municipality, and they generally have an apolitical character (p. 85). Instead of attracting voters by channelling dissatisfaction with established parties, local parties can also use this more positive notion of

localism to attract voters. For example, Copus & Erlingsson (2012) argue that local parties seldom take ideological stances since many local questions are not dependable on ideological stances (p. 240). Local parties, which usually are smaller in size compared to established parties, have the capability to open up the local democracy and provide alternative voices for local citizens, increase democratic accountability, provide space for public political discourse, challenge the established parties and change the political focus to deal with the local (Copus et al., 2012, p. 225). These reasons can all be seen as preferable to voters in the municipalities. Since local politics and national politics are in many cases very different – what is important in the national elections might not at all affect the local sphere, local parties can often profile themselves as champions of pragmatism, effectiveness and common sense, things which established parties are naturally unable to do, since they are tied to the whip of their national mother organization (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Local parties ascribe to another logic compared to established parties. Party ideology and block identities are not of importance, making it possible for them to put the interest of the enhancement of the municipality first, independent of a notion of right and left (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015, p. 815). In essence, local parties can act as mobilizers of voters when the established parties do no longer represent the interests of the municipality (Arstein, 1997).

So, what does the literature say about localism as an explainer for local party success? According to Otjes (2018), pull factors are less important than push factors when explaining local party success. According to Åberg & Ahlberger (2015), however, it is one of the most important explainers for local party success. Therefore, it is not perfectly clear whether how much localism matter for party success. One thing that is clear however, is that all local parties (that I focus on in this thesis) in Sweden are localistic. Their self-description as well as their party programs align very well with what it is that constitutes localism: local matters are put first; pragmatism goes before ideology and preservation of the municipalities' autonomy and uniqueness is of importance. It is understood that localism, while not necessarily an ideology, at least is a set of practices, discourses and beliefs that unite all welfare-populistic local parties in Sweden. However, as is clear by the very mixed results of the local parties, localism is not sufficient to explain local party success.

One thing to have in mind, is that not only local parties can be localistic – voters can also be more or less localistic. Perhaps, could local parties in municipalities where voters are more localistic see better local party success? This is something that was investigated in a Swedish context by Lidström (2021), and he found that localist orientation (duration of residence, home

ownership and municipal identification and strong attachment to the municipality) did not have any effect when it comes to vote-splitting (which is required if you want to vote for a local party).

To conclude, localism is something that unifies all local parties in Sweden, and it is something that many authors have proposed to be an explainer of local party success, even if there are disagreements on its effect. One could conclude of this that localism is a necessary condition to reach local party success – the localism is needed to mobilize dissatisfied voters that are unhappy with how the politics is conducted in the municipality. However, it is clear that more is needed to reach electoral success, hence localism cannot be seen as a sufficient condition. Essentially all local parties that are of interest for this thesis have very similar level of localistic traits. The next three sections will deal with pull factors that I hypothesize the local parties can utilize further in order to increase electoral support. To be perfectly clear, it is these three following factors that I believe are the most important factors when explaining local party success, and they are all pull factors. These three factors have been severely understudied in the literature. The first one has to do with party strategy.

3.4.2. Issue Ownership

While it can be argued that essentially all local parties are somewhat anti-establishment, and that all local parties are localistic, the parties might differ when it comes to tactical strategy. Issue ownership is a very broad category, encompassing the specific actions that local parties take in order to garner votes, relating to specific and mobilizing issues. In the local party literature, the focus on the specific strategies of the local parties has been understudied. The reason for this is that most studies have had a quantitative outlook on local party success, usually looking at a large number of observations during a prolonged period of time. Using a quantitative approach has its advantages: for example, it allows to investigate patterns of where and when local parties seem to thrive and it can compare many different countries and settings. However, quantitative methods fail when it comes to identifying specific mechanisms and strategies that differentiates successful local parties from more unsuccessful. Therefore, these matters have been overlooked when it comes to research on local parties, simply because they are incompatible with quantitative methods. Because of this, previous literature from which one can draw hypotheses of what specific political strategies that influence local party success, is scarce. Moreover, it is not obvious that the rich literature on party strategy related to national established parties are relevant for local parties. Firstly, citizens view and relate to local politics and national politics in different ways. A few differences between local and national politics,

from the eyes of the voters, are for example that the social interaction is denser and more intensive, the citizens are more familiar with public problems, the desire for social harmony is bigger than in national matters and there are many times an emotional tie to the local arena (Holtmann, 2008, p. 14). Moreover, when it comes to campaigning, in local elections, matters such as the character of the candidates, constituent services, personal connections and networks and deliverance of patronage are much more important than in national elections, where national, party platforms and party leaders are more important (Fox, 2018, p. 1900). For these reasons, there are different rationales for voting in the different elections. As a sign of this, Lidström (2021) has for example shown that as much as two thirds of the electorate in the local elections actually make an informed decision when they vote in the municipal elections – they do not automatically vote for the same party as they vote for in the national election. This shows that local politics clearly is separate from national politics, and that this is something that the voters recognize.

Due to the nature of local elections and local election campaigns, I propose that issue ownership and in particular how great the local party is at (1) identifying mobilizing issues, (2) positioning themselves correctly on said issues and (3) persuade the voters that they will handle the issues better than the other parties greatly can impact their electoral results.

One of the advantages of local parties is that they can focus on local questions. Their willingness to work across the board, as well as being ideologically unbound, as well as not having ties to established parties, gives them great opportunity to choose exactly which questions to focus on. For these reasons, local parties are also able to come up with new and radically different solutions to political issues in a way that established parties may not (Wörlund, 2008, p. 200). Boogers & Voerman (2010) summarize it well when they name four characteristics that differentiates local parties from established parties: (1) They focus on local issues,(2) they find national politics meaningless (when it comes to the local sphere), (3) they are dissatisfied with established parties and (4) they are independent from national political trends (p. 78-80). Issue ownership is the idea that voters associate certain issues with certain political parties. Parties that are associated with said issue, hold an advantage over these issues since they are perceived to be better suited to handle them (Lefevere et al., 2015, p. 755). When it comes to local politics, it is absolutely clear that local parties have an advantage when it comes to questions related directly to the well-being of the municipality, since their unique selling point is that they exclusively focus on these matters. However, this focus on local matters is something that all local parties have in common and yet some of them are more successful than others. Therefore,

it is logical to assume that some local parties are better than others at convincing voters that they are the best option for the municipality. There are, according to me, three stages that a local party needs to do correctly in order to mobilize voters, when it comes to issue ownership. I will call these three stages *identification*, *positioning* and *persuasion*.

Firstly, they need to be able to actually <u>identify</u> which local issues that will mobilize the voters. According to Lucardie (2000), it is key that new parties address social problems regarded as urgent by a large part of the electorate, and that these social problems need to be translated into political problems with political solutions (p. 2). In some cases, this can be very obvious and easy to do. In many municipalities, there are infrastructural projects or controversial building projects that are obvious hotspots for political mobilization (as for example the case of the closing down of a school in Arjeplog municipality). However, in many municipalities, these issues are not that clear. In these cases, the local parties might have a bigger challenge to identify which questions that will mobilize the voters: Is it perhaps the elder-care situation in the municipality, or maybe school-questions? Finding the correct issues to focus on, is the first challenge for local parties. However, to have a sufficient political project is not enough.
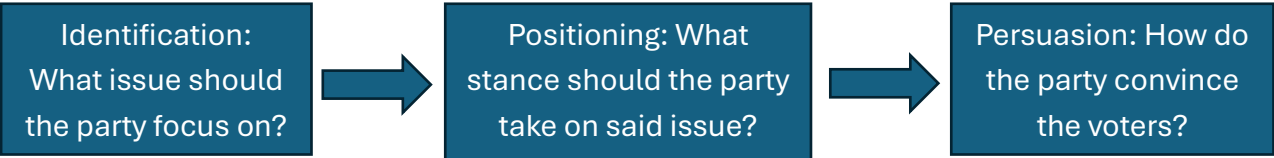
Secondly, when the parties have identified what they believe are the correct issues to focus on, they need to <u>position</u> themselves on the correct side of the issue. In other words, the parties need to choose to be either for or against a position in the way that best aligns with that most voters think is correct. Just as with identification, positioning can be either easier or more challenging. If one, for example, takes the local party of Karlstad Party Life Quality in Karlstad municipality that were formed in order to protest the building of a theme park in the municipality, it was for them quite obvious that most citizens in the municipality were against it, which made their positioning against it very logical (Värmlands Folkblad, 2018). In other cases, however, positioning might not be so simple. There might be very divisive questions, and sometimes it is not obvious what most voters think.

This leads us to the third and last step. When the local parties have positioned themselves in what they have perceived are the relevant issues, they need to be able to successfully <u>persuade</u> the voters that they are best alternative to best resolve these issues. In the absolute best of worlds, the local parties manage to identify a very mobilizing question in which all other parties in the municipality have positioned themselves opposite of what most voters think is correct. In this very unlikely case, the local party can simply position itself on the correct side. In this case, persuading the voters will be extremely easy and almost automatic. However, in most cases, this is not the reality. There might be many more parties that have positioned themselves correctly. In this case, the local party needs to persuade the voters that they are indeed the better

choice, either because their stance on other issues, or because they propose better methods to tackle the issues. When the established parties also manage to position themselves correctly on mobilizing issues, they might even gain the upper hand vis-á-vis the local parties, because the unique selling point that the local party has (the undivided interests of the municipality) might get reduced to nothing if the established parties also share their view. Therefore, it is important for local parties to be flexible and creative when arguing that they are the best alternative.

Figure 5

Three steps of issue ownership.

Identification: What issue should the party focus on?	→	Positioning: What stance should the party take on said issue?	→	Persuasion: How do the party convince the voters?

Note. Figure describing the three stages of issue ownership.

To summarize, I believe that specific local party strategies, in particular on how they relate to important issues in the municipality, is very important if the local party wants to be successful. Even if the local party has much going for it – the contextual factors in the municipality might be good, there might be a great deal of political distrust and dissatisfaction towards the status quo and the party might have a good localistic nature that is attractive in the eyes of the voters, the party needs to be able to successfully find the correct issues to focus on and do it in a way that convince the electorate to vote for them.

3.4.3. Campaigning and Media

Another thing that might differ greatly between local parties, is how they make a name for themselves by advertising and being accessible, in particular during the election campaign. Moreover, between elections, how good are the local parties at showing what they have accomplished during the mandate period? Do they have a good presence on social media and/or are they often participating in local media? Not enough studies have paid attention to how local parties advertise and campaign for themselves, and I hypothesize that these factors are important when explaining local party success.

When it comes to campaigning, much literature highlights the importance of conducting campaigns to mobilize voters (e.g. Gerber & Green, 2000; Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2009). These studies often highlight that personalised campaigning, such as for example door-to-door

and other face-to-face campaign methods seem to be the most efficient ways of mobilizing voters. In local parties – especially in smaller municipalities, the chances to reach out to a large share of the electorate are particularly good. The cutbacks of personalized campaigning in general are that they are time-and resource consuming, but in smaller settings these costs go down. Therefore, in municipality elections, the parties have great chances to reach out effectively to a large portion of the electorate at a relatively low cost, compared for example with national elections. Therefore, it is expected that local parties that are better at utilizing effective campaign methods can reap better electoral results. Questions related to which particular campaigning methods the parties use and how sophisticated they are in utilizing these methods can therefore be interesting when it comes to investigating local party success.

Having a good outreach is not only important during campaigning – it is also important between elections. Therefore, it is of interest to understand in what specific ways the different local parties reach out the voters and advertise themselves between elections. Does the local party have presence in and is written about in local media? Does the local party have any presence on social media? Is the local party good at mediating to its voter how they are working in the council, in order to show that they are of relevance to the political work in the municipality? According to Lucardie (2000), media attention is something that is important for new parties in order to secure and keep seats (p. 182). However, since local parties are only active in specific municipalities and are usually quite small, they do not at all receive the same type of media attention that established parties do. Therefore, local parties need to be much more active in seeking media attention, specifically in local media. By being seen extensively in local media and also by having a great presence of social media, I hypothesize that these matters can be of great importance for local party success, and I will therefore in my empirical analysis investigate if the local parties differ when it comes to these matters.

3.4.4. Leadership, Membership & Resources

The last factor that I believe is of importance that has not been adequately addressed by local party studies, is the nature of the leadership, prominent members and resources of the party. Wörlund (2008) briefly touch upon this and argues that local party leaders who can distance themselves the best from the establishment and promise to be different compared to the established parties can reap electoral results (p. 200). Soós (2008) also clarifies how expertise and leadership- and management skills may contribute a lot to local party success (p. 65). In Poland, Gendźwiłł (2012, p. 508) summarizes that independent councillors in Poland are, among other things, more anti-centralistic, have a more technocratic "nonpolitical" model of

local government and are more anti-partisan and local-oriented and by looking at the attitudes and descriptions of many local parties in Sweden, these notions assumingly fit well with Swedish local party leaders. Therefore, local party leaders indeed actively try to distance themselves from the establishment, and it is logical to assume that the local party leaders that manage to this most efficiently can also reap the largest electoral successes for the local party which they represent. Moreover, it is not only the nature of the party leader that I hypothesize could influence local party success. Another thing that potentially is of importance is how much resources the leadership and/or members of the party have. Since local parties in Sweden receive financial support from the municipality, the monetary resources should not be a problem. However, by having a local party leader (or other prevalent party members) that has a good number of resources privately, this could probably influence the local party for the better. If the party has members that can contribute with things such as monetary capital, expert knowledge, large social networks or other resources, I hypothesize that these things could greatly increase the electoral support for local parties.

To summarize this chapter, I argue that institutional factors are not relevant factors in Sweden – the electoral system is allowing for local parties, the financial support is good and the barriers for party formation are low. When it comes to contextual factors, these might have some impact for local parties, even if most authors that deal with local parties in a Swedish setting highly stress that local parties in Sweden are very geographically spread, and that no clear pattern is detectable. Contextual factors will be controlled for in the case selection and is therefore a control variable. Moving on further to the push factors, political dissatisfaction/distrust are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for local party success. There needs to be an amount of political dissatisfaction/distrust, both on the supply and demand side: If there exists no dissatisfaction or distrust, the motivation for starting a local party is not existent, and there also exists no motivation for the voters to cast their vote on the local parties. When it comes to absence of established parties, I have argued that this is something that is not a big problem in Sweden, but it will nonetheless be controlled for in the case selection. Moving on further to pull factors, I have argued that localism is, just like political dissatisfaction/distrust, a necessary but not sufficient condition for local party support. Localism is something that relates all local parties, and having a localistic stance is, together with political dissatisfaction/distrust, the main mobilizer of local party voters. However, these factors are not enough to reach electoral success. It is argued, in this thesis, that political dissatisfaction/distrust and localism are arguably the same in both municipalities and will therefore also be considered as control variables.

Therefore, the political dissatisfaction/distrust variable and the localism variable are also control variables. The independent variables in this thesis are the last three pull-factors: issue ownership, campaigning & advertisement as well as leadership, membership & resources – these are the variables that I hypothesize explain the differences in Sweden.

Figure 6

Variable map.
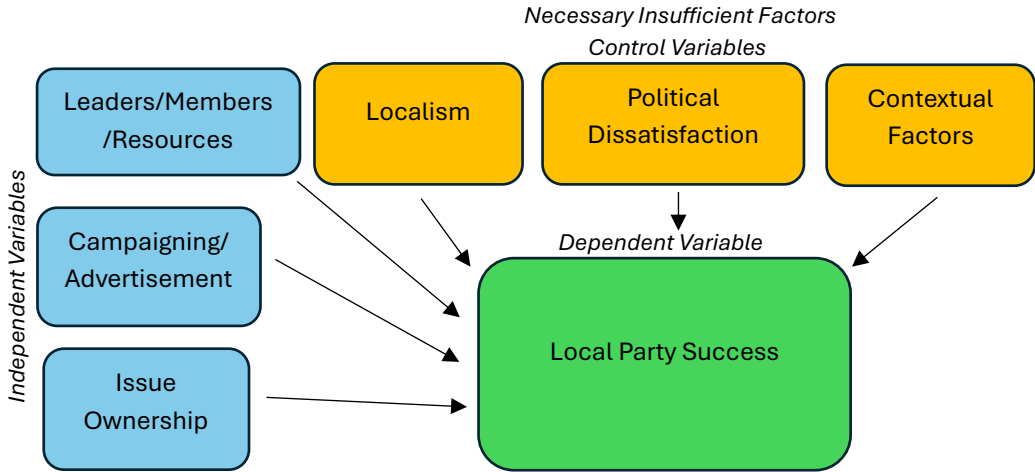
Note. The figure shows the three control variables, the three independent variables and the dependent variable.

The purpose of this literature review was to provide the reader with a thorough overview of the state of the art regarding research on local party success. The rationale behind this was to clearly show which factors I have considered when selecting my cases, as well as describe which factors that I am interested in investigating further. What now follows it the methodology-chapter.

4. Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the research design of the thesis. As written in the introduction as well as the literature review, my hypothesis is that factors related to issue ownership, campaigning & media as well as leadership, membership & resources can explain differences in local party success. Therefore, by conducting a most-similar case study and controlling for the other proposed factors that the literature has laid forward, and by interviewing knowledgeable respondents, one can assess whether the hypothesized factors can explain the different grades of success. However, making use of semi-structured interviews also allows one to deeply investigate if there are other potential explanatory factors that may explain local party success.

This chapter will be structured as follows: I will first summarize the most-similar case design study and motivate the choice of using interviews as my data-gathering method, as well as touch upon the inductive and deductive nature of the thesis. I will then thoroughly describe the sampling process, including identification, selection as well as pairing of parties. After that, I will describe the local parties that I have collected for the case study, and then describe the municipalities in which they are based. After that, the data collection method will be outlaid, as well as a brief discussion about the participants. I will then describe the data analysis method and conclude with ethical considerations.

4.1. A Most-Similar Case Study

A most-similar case study design means that the cases studied are as similar to each other as possible when it comes to relevant independent variables, except for the outcome (dependent) variable that is of interest for the study (Esaiasson et al., 2012, p. 102). In the context of this thesis, the dependent variable is electoral success for the local party. The independent variables are in this case the factors related to issue ownership, campaigning & media as well as leadership, membership & resources (but also potential unaccounted factors that will come up during the interviews). The control variables are in this case the contextual factors, political dissatisfaction/distrust as well as the pull factor of localism.

In the case of this thesis, the rationales for using this approach are several.

As of now, there exists a decent amount of literature on the success of local parties in different contexts. However, these studies are almost exclusively looking at the success and/or failure of local parties through time, not seldom trying to establish if there are any patterns that links certain geographical or socioeconomic factors to the success of local parties, such as for

example size, economic development, and/or variables related to population. Other studies try to establish different characteristics of local party voters. There are not, as argued for in the literature review, studies that investigates what successful local parties are actively doing/not doing, and what unsuccessful local parties are actively doing/not doing, in order to not only reach initial electoral success, but also to stay relevant through time. In order find out exactly what these factors are, one needs to look beyond comparisons and measures through time and investigate these parties in depth. Using a qualitative approach, is in my opinion, the best strategy to do this.

Sweden has contextual variances in municipalities, but there are also many municipalities that are quite similar. Moreover, there are also big similarities between the local parties of interest in this thesis in how they are organized and what they are setting out to achieve. By conducting a case study analysis, one can look into two very similar municipalities that have local parties that differ in success, and therefore rule out many contextual explanations. One can then establish how the strategies and actions of these local parties differ, related to the uncontrolled independent variables, and therefore find out what (if any) effect these strategies and actions have on electoral success, and/or if there are any other potential explanations. Moreover, the rich and varied number of cases of municipalities and its local parties makes for a very purposeful study design and fits very well for a qualitative approach (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022, pp. 6-7). When it comes to making sure that the cases are as similar as possible, one needs to clarify in which ways the case in this context needs to be similar and why. One therefore needs to consider all things that might affect the electoral success of these local parties, that the local parties themselves are not responsible for, and control for the variables that are controllable for in the case selection. In order to make this work, a high-quality case selection process needs to be carried out.

In research, a study can be of inductive or deductive nature, or a mix between them. A study being deductive means that the study uses a positivistic approach, and that the hypothesis is derived from theory or hypothetical construct (or earlier research), and then tested. This approach is often referred to as theory testing. With inductive research on the other hand, the goal is not to test a predetermined theory, but rather to generate a theory and/or explanations of a phenomena (Newman, 2000, p. 4). This study is of both inductive and deductive nature. As could be derived in earlier chapter, earlier scientific research has led to three hypotheses that I have before the empirical research. This means that I, before I conduct the actual research, already have some explanations that I believe can explain local party success, that I aim to test

by constructing interview questions that captures the prevalence of these factors. In this sense, the study is deductive: I am testing my predetermined hypotheses. However, there is also an inductive element in this study. Since this field (determinants of local party success in controlled cases) is fairly underexplored, there might be factors that are unaccounted for that affects local party success. By using semi-structured interviews, some of these potential unaccounted factors might come up during the interview. In this sense, the study is also of inductive nature: I am also leaving room for theory- and explanation generating.

4.2. Sampling Process and Case Selection

The sampling process was manually carried out. First, election results for all 390 municipalities in the last election of 2022 where controlled, using data from the Swedish Electoral Authority. Each municipal election was controlled, in order to identify local parties that were either successful or unsuccessful. When a local party was identified, it was added to an Excel spreadsheet, along with basic and crucial information about the municipality that related to the control variables of interest. The information was mostly received from Statistics Sweden (Statistiska Centralbyrån, SCB), the official Swedish agency for official and state statistics, but also from the Swedish Electoral Authority. An example of one of these variables in this case is municipal size. More detailed description about each variable will be further described later in this chapter, when the two selected parties are described.

After all potential cases were identified, they were all once again thoroughly examined, and many potential cases were removed from the sample. There were several reasons for removing cases. Firstly, if the local party had only existed for one election, it was removed. This is because I am interested in local parties that have managed to withhold some support over time. The success of a party is more than just initial electoral success in their first election. This is pointed out by Wörlund (2008): "If a local party gets elected to the local council only to disappear at the next election, it is not to be considered as relevant." (p. 200). Most local parties in Sweden are young and short-lived and therefore have insignificant lifespans and disappear very quickly after entering the local council. Moreover, a local party that goes strong in the first election could easily do so due to exogenous shocks, and after that completely fade out, which is, according to me, not a successful party. Therefore, it was decided that a party needed to have also campaigned at least for the 2018 elections, in order for them to stay in the selection pool. Secondly, some parties that I first believed were local parties relevant to my thesis but showed not to be after further investigation, were sorted out. This could for example be parties with a clear right-left political orientation, parties with very specific interests such as school or

healthcare or parties that only focus on a small part or a village of the municipality. Since I am looking for so called welfare-populistic parties, and these factors do not fit this definition, they were removed.

When this was completed, I started to pick out local parties that I found were successful or unsuccessful. Since success is a very ambiguous term, a hasty discussion about what I consider unsuccessful or successful is warranted. I had no exact definition or limits whether a party were to be considered successful or not since this depends entirely on the parties' ambitions and hopes and the voter's expectations. A party that increases its electoral result in one election compared to the last can still be unhappy that they didn't increase more, and the increase could be viewed as a failure. Furthermore, a party that goes negative compared to the last election, can be satisfied if the party had reason to believe that they would go back even further. Due to this, individual judgment was used in each case and I needed to set up parameters and guidelines regarding what could be viewed as a successful or unsuccessful party. One thing to consider in this regard is the trend of the parties in the latest elections. Most local parties in Sweden do not have a very long history which makes it easy to check their electoral development through the years. Have they been able to confidently amass increased electoral support since their beginnings, or have they lost or stalemated when it comes to votes through their lifespan? Another thing to consider is share of mandates. Does the number of mandates give them a chance to actually influence the municipal politics? This is also something that could vary largely in different municipal settings depending on their relative mandate count compared to other parties. Moreover, is the local party part of the steering coalition, and/or do they have important strategic posts in the municipal board? All these things are factors that determine the level of success for a party. Therefore, all these factors have been considered and investigated before pairing the cases together in order to make sure that the dependent variable actually differs. When the parties are described later in this chapter, the motivation for referring to them as successful or unsuccessful will be outwritten.

After identifying successful and unsuccessful cases, I categorized them according to municipal type. I utilised the Swedish Agency for Economy and Regional Growth's (Tillväxtverket, 2024) division of different municipal groups in order to get an initial indication of the nature of the municipality. The agency has, as of 2021, ordered all Swedish municipalities into six different municipal groups, starting with the group of the most urban municipalities, and descending towards more rural groups:

- City municipalities (storstadskommuner)

- Densely populated municipalities near a city (täta blandade kommuner)

- Densely populated municipalities in remote areas (glesa blandade kommuner)

- Rural municipalities near urban areas (tätortsnära landsbygdskommuner)

- Rural municipalities in remote areas (glesa landsbygdskommuner)

- Very rural municipalities in remote areas (mycket glesa landsbygdskommuner)

Every successful and unsuccessful party were therefore sorted into one of these six groups, depending on in which municipality type they were based. In every group, there were two subgroups: in one subgroup, the successful parties were sorted, and in the other subgroup I sorted the unsuccessful ones. I then investigated the parties in both subgroups of each municipality group, in order to find parties that were as similar to each other as possible, except their electoral success. By doing this, I was able to match cases with each other in the best possible way, attempting to find at least one good match per municipality group. Once again, this was done by comparing the potential cases with each other thoroughly, using information from SCB and the Swedish Electoral Authority to make sure that the independent variables were as similar as possible. After finding four pairs, each with their own municipal group, the parties were contacted via e-mail. After considering the parties that responded, I settled on one pair:

Figure 7

Selected parties for the study.

	Case Study Pair	
Municipality Type	Rural Municipality in Remote Area	
Party	Götenes' Future (Götene Municipality)	The Ronneby Party (Ronneby Municipality)
Successful or Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful

Note. The chosen parties for the study.

As can be seen from figure 7, I ended up settling on two local parties from the same municipality group. The rationale for choosing this particular group, was firstly that both parties accepted

my request to conduct an interview. In some other case groups, I was not able to get a response from both parties in the group. Also, by only focusing on one group, I could in a more sophisticated and disciplined manner deeply investigate the parties and the contexts surrounding them in order to make sure that they were as similar as possible. Moreover, the particular parties have a very long history, which means that there is rich information about the parties that goes back in time. Moreover, both the parties have easily accessible and content-rich websites. This makes it so that researching the parties is easier.

4.3. The Parties

In this section, the parties will be described. The main reason of this section is to describe the similarity of the parties. Another reason is to set the reader into a better context of the respective parties.

Götenes' Future (GÖF) is a party in Götene municipality, which is a municipality in Västra Götaland county, in the western part of Sweden. They ran for their first municipal election in 1994. After reaching between 2-3 mandates in the elections 1998-2006, they made a dramatic jump up to 5 mandates in 2010, more than doubling their share of the votes, becoming the third largest party in the municipality behind the Social Democrats and the Moderates and for the first time governed the municipality in a majority coalition with the Social Democrats and the Left (V) (however, this coalition became null and void after roughly one month, something that will be touched upon later in the results section). Next election, in 2014, they managed to grow even more, now becoming the second largest party in the municipality and obtaining their highest share of votes since – 16% (6 mandates) and steered together in minority with the Social Democrats and have since then uninterruptedly been a part of the steering coalition. In 2018 they lost one mandate, now governing in a majority with the Centre Party (C), the Moderates, the Christ Democrats, the Liberals and the Greens. Finally, in the last election, GÖF once again managed to increase with 2,77% and once again captured 6 mandates. During this current mandate period (2022-), GÖF have still governed with the same parties as in the last mandate period and more than that, since 2023, they also in their party have appointed the municipal councillor as well as chairman of the municipal board (Valmyndigheten, 2024a; Laurén, 2014; Fritzson, 2022; Götene Kommun, 2011; SCB (1994, 1998); J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024). To summarize, GÖF have consistently, at least since the 2010 election managed to draw high electoral results in every election and they have right now the most important political posts in the municipality, as well as a leading role in the governing coalition. One can therefore classify them as a very successful party.

The Ronneby Party (ROP) is a local party in the very southeast of Sweden, in Ronneby municipality, in Blekinge county. Just like GÖF, the party was founded in 1994, and consequently ran in their first municipal election that year. The party managed to secure 4 out of 49 mandates (7,3%) in their first municipal election, becoming the fourth largest party in their first election. In 1998 and 2002, ROP lost one mandate per election, but jumping up once again to 4 mandates in 2006, once again cementing their place as the fourth largest party. However, they were still yet to be part of a ruling coalition. Next election, in 2010, even while backing 1 mandate, they managed to secure a place in the ruling coalition, now entering in a minority coalition with the Moderates, the Centre, the Liberals and the Christ Democrats. This exact coalition further existed in the 2014-2018 mandate period, even if ROP once again lost one mandate, sitting at 2 mandates. In 2018, they were still at 2 mandates. However, due to disagreements between ROP and some of the other parties in the coalition, ROP were discarded from the coalition. Since then, in the last election of 2022, ROP once more lost a mandate, and entered the council in 2022 with only one mandate left, still outside the ruling coalition (Valmyndigheten, 2024a; SCB (1994, 1998); Hallberg, 2018; Svensson, 2018; S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024). To summarize, ROP started out as a strong party in their initial elections (except a dip in 2002) and managed to secure a spot in the steering coalition in 2010. However, since that election, their electoral results have gone negative in every election, reaching an all-time low in the last 2022 election. As of now, they are only at one mandate. While ROP historically have been a strong party, it is as of today, to be labelled as an unsuccessful party.

Figure 8

Election results and governing coalitions since 1994 in Götene and Ronneby for respective party.

Mandate Period	Götenes' Future – Share of Votes and Mandates	Götenes' Future – Governing Coalition	The Ronneby Party – Share of Votes and Mandates	The Ronneby Party – Governing Coalition
1994-1998		C+M+L+KD (minority)	7,3% (4/49 Mandates)	S+V (majority)
1998-2002	8,5% (3/41 Mandates)	M+C+KD+L (minority)	6,3% (-1%) (3/49 Mandates)	S+V (majority)
2002-2006	6,1% (-2,5%) (3/41 Mandates)	C+KD+M+L+MP (majority)	3,3% (-3%) (2/49 Mandates)	S+V (majority)
2006-2010	5,3% (-0,8%) (2/41 Mandates)	C+KD+M+L (majority)	8,1% (+4,8) (4/49 Mandates)	S+L+KD (minority)
2010-2014	11,6% (+6,3%) (5/41 Mandates)	S+**GÖF**+V (majority) (broken up after one month).	7% (-1,1%) (3/49 Mandates)	M+C+**ROP**+L+KD (minority)
2014-2018	16% (+4,4%) (6/41 Mandates)	S+**GÖF** (minority)	4,9% (-2,1%) (2/49 Mandates)	M+C+**ROP**+L+KD (minority)
2018-2022	11,8% (-4,2%) (5/41 Mandates)	C+M+**GÖF**+KD+L+MP (majority)	3,2% (-1,7%) (2/49 Mandates)	M+C+L+KD (minority)
2022 -	14,6% (+2,8%) (6/41 Mandates)	M+**GÖF**+C+KD+L+MP (minority)	2,6% (-0,6%) (1/49 Mandates)	SD+M+L+KD (majority)

Note. The figure describes the ruling coalitions and electoral results of the two parties since their conception. The information about the ruling coalitions was collected from SKR (2024b) and SCB (2024c). When it comes to the share of votes and mandates, Valmyndigheten (2024a) have the results directly on their website, starting with the 2002 election. For the 1994 and 1998 elections I used the reports SCB (1994) and SCB (1998).

As can be seen from figure 8, the parties have had electoral journeys that have both similarities but also differences. While both parties started out relatively good in their first elections, capturing three and four mandates respectively, both parties saw a decrease in support the next two elections and lost mandates. Then, in their third elections, both parties managed to do quite a jump, in both cases at least doubling their mandates. It is after the third election their paths

diverge. While GÖF have managed to keep a very large number of voters, even after becoming a part of the steering coalition, and now having the most important roles in the local government (municipal councillor and chairman of the municipal board), ROP have struggled to keep their voters.

Before moving on to compare the municipalities in which the parties are active in, in order to rule out contextual factors, a brief description about both the parties is warranted to be able to underscore that both parties are actually very similar in nature. When it comes to why they were formed, both parties were in varying degree formed out of unsatisfaction with the local politics. When it comes to GÖF, one group of the party had previously been members of the short-lived, but for a brief period very successful right-populistic party New Democracy (ND) , a party formed in 1991 that received 6,7% of all votes in the parliamentary elections in 1991, as well as a total of 335 mandates on the municipal level (Fellman, 2016). When New Democracy as a party not so long after that became very weak (they lost all their parliamentary seats in the 1994 elections), many local parties were formed out of the remains of New Democracy, but with new names. GÖF was a mixture between this first group, but there was also a second group that consisted of citizens that had no ties to New Democracy, and were just generally engaged citizens:

> One could say that it was a little bit of a combination – I do know that one wing of the party was in what used to be New Democracy in the municipal council in Götene. Another wing was more of a community-oriented group of residents that felt that they couldn't really find a home … It was something new, some members happened to have been a part of New Democracy before, and others came from the complete outside and were engaged. And it was not, as it so often is, one specific issue that made the party – it was rather a political engagement of citizens that felt that they couldn't find a home in the established parties. (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

The party was in other words not formed out of dissatisfaction with one specific issue. Instead, it was a mixture of people that before had been part of an anti-establishment party and were now looking for a new party, but also other citizen's that felt a general resistance towards getting involved in the established parties. When it came to ROP on the other hand, the reasons for the party formation were a bit more specific. The founder, that earlier had been engaged in the Centre, was dissatisfied with the transparency of municipal companies in particular and decided to form the party after running into two persons from the Moderates and New Democracy that also had similar plans. Therefore, they decided to form the party:

I was active in the Centre and became a little dissatisfied with the transparency of municipal companies in particular. I founded the party in 94' – I was around 50 years old so to speak. But since I was earlier active in the Centre, I had to show personal curtesy … You could say that I founded the party but when I was about to start the party, I ran into one from the Moderates and one from New Democracy. They said, "we have already decided to start a party, so can't we do it together? One new party is enough". And so, it went … The reason was simply that I had, over the years, written numerous letters to the editor, really every week, to Blekingeposten [local newspaper in Blekinge county] … And there, among other things, I analysed the municipal companies and I wrote that these contracts are not public contracts. The municipality owns it, but no one knows under which conditions. So, it was about a lack of transparency in municipal companies. There are still problems to this day with our municipal companies. The municipality, for example, owns the Ronneby-Brunn facility [a spa and leisure facility in Ronneby], but the contract of the lease is under secrecy. (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

To summarize, both parties were formed out of some sort of dissatisfaction with the established parties, or at least an unwillingness to participate in the already existing parties. The difference is that GÖF was founded out of a more general dissatisfaction, while ROP had more specific complaints. Before going further and discussing the municipalities in which respective parties are based, a brief description of the localism of the parties is warranted. Both parties, like most local parties, have very localistic orientations. When asked the question: "*How pragmatic would you describe your party on a scale 1-10, where 1 is not pragmatic at all, and 10 is as pragmatic as possible*", both parties responded with very high numbers. The same theme was repeated when the interview objects were asked about ideological boundness and local focus:

Figure 9

1-10 scale questions to the interview objects.

Interview Question	"On a scale 1-10, how pragmatic would you describe your party, where 1 is not pragmatic at all, and 10 is as pragmatic as possible?"	"On a scale 1-10, how ideologically bound would you describe your party, where 1 is very ideologically bound and 10 is as ideologically unbound as possible?"	"On a scale 1-10, how much would you say that your party focuses on local issues as an opposite to national issues, where 1 is only focusing on national issues, and 10 is only focusing on local issues?"
Götenes' Future	"10. Pragmatism is the word we use very much in our marketing and election material and so on – that we find solutions and look ahead".	"8."	"9."
The Ronneby Party	"Well, it probably lands on 7-8".	"Well, not any lower than 8. Simply because we allow particularly a lot of issues to be brought up to the surface and it is not like we are sitting there and decide something and then say that now must we all defend this until the last drop of blood, no. We do not have a party whip."	"Well, that probably lands on a 9. Of course, it is so that one sometimes steals from, I mean one has to also be knowledgeable about what happens on the national level".

Note. Three scale-questions posed to the interview objects and their answers (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024; S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

The localistic and quite similar nature of the parties is further emphasized when one looks at the description of the parties on their respective website. When looking at the general self-description of the parties, the similarities are clear:

> GÖF was founded in 1994 and is a local party in Götene municipality that is independent from the established national parties. The party has its roots in a pragmatic – wise, objective and practical – way of thinking and acting in questions related to the municipality. The party is not bound to any party-political statue or ideology, instead we base our work on what is best for Götene municipality and her citizens (Götenes Framtid Partiprogram, 2024).

ROP has existed since 1994 and is party-political unbound, when it comes to the national parties and their respective ideologies. ROP has got Ronneby in its heart and wants the entirety of Ronneby municipality to live. ROP can consider cooperating with all other parties for Ronneby municipality and her citizen's best. ROP is not steered by any other ideology than what is best for Ronneby municipality from an economic as well as practical perspective. The interest of ROP is what is good for Ronneby municipality and her future. (Ronnebypartiet, 2024).

More than this localistic nature, the parties also overlap quite much when it comes to what they are focusing on. School, elder care, leisure and culture, entrepreneurship and much more are all things that respective parties prioritize and argue for. To summarize this chapter, both parties have a similar history, but diverging electoral success, at least since 2010. Both parties were formed out of some sort of dissatisfaction with established parties and they are both very localistic of nature. In the next section, the municipalities in which the parties are active will be described.

4.4. The Municipalities

In this section, the municipalities will be described. In order to reduce the potential impact of the contextual factors, it is important to control for the factors that has by previous authors been identified to potentially impact local party success. Drawing from previous literature on contextual factors, municipality size (inhabitants), population decrease, rurality, voter turnout, income, socioeconomic equality, unemployment, immigrant, support for and absence of other parties, historical dissent and coercive mergers have been controlled for.

Starting with municipality size, Ronneby municipality is more than twice the size compared to Götene municipality. Ronneby municipality had the first quarter of 2024, 28 921 inhabitants, while Götene had 13 217 (SCB, 2024d). This could indeed be seen as slightly problematic for the study, since it is by previous literature argued that local parties are generally more successful in smaller municipalities. However, it is not so much of a problem as one might believe. As written earlier, in Sweden, there seems to be no clear geographical patterns when it comes to where local parties are successful in Sweden – they are prevalent in all types of municipalities. There are several successful parties in larger municipalities than Ronneby that are successful, and vice versa for Götene. It is of my opinion that a difference of roughly 15 700 inhabitants cannot explain the difference in local party success. Moreover, as can be seen historically, the success of the parties has been fluctuating, and at one point in time, ROP was bigger than GÖF (2006 elections). Therefore, while the size difference is not optimal, I argue that the relatively small amount of citizens that differentiate the municipalities, taken together with the fact that

municipality size in Sweden is not, as stated by previous authors, a good determinant for local party success and also the fact that the municipalities belong to the same municipality type and because they are so similar on all other variables, makes it so that the potential impact of this size difference is negligible and cannot explain the difference in electoral outcomes of the parties. Regarding population increase, both municipalities have been very stable since 1970 and both have only seen a very slight increase in these 50 years. When it comes to rurality, both parties belong to the same municipal group (rural municipalities in remote areas), (Tillväxtverket, 2024). In Ronneby, 19,2% of the population live in rural areas, while in Götene, 36,3% live in rural areas. This means that in both municipalities, most people live in urban- and semi-urban areas, but that there is quite some rurality surrounding the central areas. Both municipalities had similar turnout for the municipality elections in 2022 – 82,69% and 84,62% respectively. The monthly income is quite similar, with the average monthly income in Götene being 30 367 SEK, and 28 000 in Ronneby. The socioeconomic equality is almost identical in both municipalities (In 2021, SCB constructed a gini-coefficient that investigated socioeconomic inequality in all municipalities, where 0 is total equality and 1 is total inequality. Ronneby had 0,252 and Götene had 0,244). 86,2% of citizens have a job in Götene, while 78,6% are employed in Ronneby. In Götene, 88,2% of the population is born in Sweden, and in Ronneby the share is 82,7%. No coercive mergers or other unpopular administrative reforms were identified municipalities, and no specific history of dissent towards administrative reforms were found (SCB, 2024e; Valmyndigheten, 2024a; SCB, 2024f). One last thing to control for is also the support for and absence other parties. Previous literature has proposed that a big support for other anti-establishment parties could in fact reduce the support for local parties (e.g. Jankowski, 2022). While it is debatable if the Sweden Democrats (SD) is the same anti-establishment party that it used to be before it grew to the power they have today, the party still clearly has got a nature of anti-establishment. In an interview from 2023, the Sweden Democrats' party leader Jimmie Åkesson claimed that "the Sweden Democrats will never become a part of the establishment … To blindly follow the statues that the Social Democrats have established under such a long period of time will never be relevant for us" (Expressen, 2023). One study in Sweden that has studied the interaction between SD and local parties in Sweden is Lundåsen & Erlingsson (2023). The authors found, surprisingly, that voters of local parties in the municipal elections are roughly even when it comes to if they vote for the Social Democrats, the Sweden Democrats or the Moderates (the three largest parties) in the national election. Even while this might be a small indication that the impact of the Sweden Democrats on local parties might not be as large as it might be in other countries (Germany for example),

it still does not tell us to what extent the Sweden Democrats' local branches might steal votes from local parties. However, the authors also investigate if votes for local parties and votes for the Sweden Democrats in the local elections are correlated. The authors find a weak but albeit negative correlation (Pearson's r = -0,26, p. 6). In other words, local parties might suffer from the Sweden Democrats being strong in the municipality. However, the authors also stress that there are a lot of municipalities where support go hand in hand. While the authors do not give any examples, one of these municipalities is Nykvarn municipality in Stockholm county where the local party and the Sweden Democrats both did very well in the 2022 elections (16,7% and 19,% respectively, Valmyndigheten, 2024a). Because of this, it becomes quite hard to determine how big the influence of SD is in individual municipalities. The fact is that the Sweden Democrats have historically been very strong in Ronneby and weak in Götene. In the 2022 elections, the Sweden Democrats received 14,74% of the votes in Götene, while it they received 26,32% in Ronneby. However, the support for the Moderates and the Social Democrats in respective municipality is quite similar, and no absence of representatives for parties were identified (Valmyndigheten, 2024a). This is something that needs to be acknowledged when carrying out the analysis as it might be a weakness for the thesis. Another thing that seems to affect local party success is civic engagement. Regrettably, there is as of today no data that investigates civic engagement in different municipalities and/or specific local parties. It is however unlikely that the variance in civic engagement in two municipalities as similar as Götene and Ronneby will have any impact on local party success.

To summarize, generally speaking, the municipalities in which the parties are active are similar to the extent that the potential contextual factors cannot be considered to affect the outcome variable of interest. However, municipality size and support for the Sweden Democrats might be factors that skew the results in a negative direction for ROP. However, even if they do have an impact (which is not certain), the electoral losses for ROP following these factors can, in my opinion, not explain their overall negative trend since the 2006 elections.

4.5. Data Collection Method

After I had my cases set out, the parties were contacted and an interview was requested. There were several rationales for choosing to use in-depth informant interviews.
Firstly, for the proposed independent variables, getting in contact with the most knowledgeable and involved actor as possible (the party leader/main representative) seemed to be the most suitable approach. Matters like party strategy relating to issue ownership, advertisement/campaigning and leadership and membership & resources are best investigated

by contacting informed representatives, since detailed information on this is not accessible elsewhere. While some information about this could be found by conducting research on the parties' websites, social media and news outlets, these are not sufficient to get an in-depth understanding of these factors and should instead be used in a complementary matter. Many of these parties are small and organized on a free-time basis, which means that there is limited information about them. While in-depth interviews are no safe-proof method to get a hundred percent accurate information, it is the most suitable approach.

There are also several other advantages with using interviews as a data collection tool. Two advantages with interviews are that one can register unexpected answers and also follow up answers (Esaiasson et al., p. 251). In this sense, in-depth interviews with leading representatives of the parties can be used in order to assess if (1) the independent variables differ between cases and therefore can serve as a potential explanation for the variety in the dependent variable and (2) if there are any other potential explanations for the dependent variables that are un-hypothesised for. In this sense, the, the advantage of using interviews is twofold. Moreover, while for example surveys are very good methods in order to describe the frequency of a phenomena, interviews are better at making phenomena visible, which is what this thesis is trying to accomplish (p. 252).

The advantage of utilizing semi-structured interviews instead of a more closed and structured method is that it allows interviews to be focused and limited to the subject, while still giving the interviewer a chance to explore ideas that may come up during the course of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 3). In the case of this thesis, it was very important to have this opportunity, due to the fact that the informants might come with information that has not yet been investigated before in the literature, and hence not identified in the secondary sources. Therefore, it was important that I was able to expand on this information if they were to come up during the course of the interview. In qualitative research design using interviews, the trustworthiness of a study relies heavily on the participant's knowledge on the matter. This thesis made use of a non-probability sampling, more specifically a purposive sampling. What is meant with this, is that the participants were not chosen by random selection, but instead by meeting certain criteria that I found to be important. (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 6).

When finding participants for an informant interview, *centrality* is very important (Esaiasson et al., 2012, p. 258). This means that you want to find participants that are in the centre of the procedure or phenomena that you want to investigate. One advantage when studying local parties in Sweden, is that the party leaders and/or other knowledgeable subjects are very easily

reachable which means that you can reach extremely central actors quite easily. However, what is also important is that the subjects are well versed in the daily procedures of the local party, not least under elections. For example, if one were to investigate campaign strategy in national parties, speaking with the party leader might not be the best strategy, since he or she may not be the most knowledgeable in the party regarding these matters. Instead, one could probably find better answers talking with someone else in the organization that works more directly with these matters. One thing that therefore is advantageous with local parties is that the party leader is very often directly engaged in the daily procedures of the party and is many times often directly campaigning in the municipality. When the requests for the interviews were sent out, I specifically requested to talk with actors that were central to the organization (that were knowledgeable about the inner organization of the party as well the parties' campaigning), as well as actors that has had a long history in the party. This criterion was in all cases met, and I was able to talk with the party leaders. When it came to GÖF, I interviewed the current party- and group leader, that as of 2022 also is the municipal councillor as well as chairman of the municipal board. When it comes to RÖP, I interviewed the first name and founder of the party. The interviews were either conducted via telephone or Microsoft Teams.

4.6. Data Analysis Method – Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is commonly used across a large variety of qualitative designs (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). It is a way of "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It allows to explore the gathered data at a depth that quantitative methods do not and also allows for flexibility when interpreting the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). A thematic analysis consists of five distinct steps:

The first step is *compiling*. This means, in this thesis, to transcribe the interviews into easily visible data. The second step is *disassembling*. This means separating the data into useful groupings (coding), in order to convert raw data into "useable data through the identification of themes, concepts, or ideas that have some connection with each other" (Austin & Zutton, 2014, p. 439). This is done by *coding*. Coding is identifying interesting features of the data across the entire data set, and the codes serve as a tag to retrieve and categorize data across the entire dataset. The third step is *reassembling*. What is meant here is that the codes and/or categories are mapped and put into context with each other to create themes. What is meant with a theme, is that it "captures something important about the data in relation the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braune & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Themes can be described as patterns in the codes: they put together the codes into

bigger pictures. Themes can also be divided into sub-themes. Then comes the fourth step: *interpretation*. At this step, the author needs to make analytical conclusions from the data presented as codes and themes. According to Robert K. Yin, there are five qualities needed for a good interpretation: (1) the reader should be able to see beginning, middle and end of how the interpretations were drawn, (2) other researchers should reach the same conclusions with the same data, (3) the interpretation should be accurate and representative of the data, (4) good studies will add value to our understanding of the topic and (5) the data methods and interpretations should be credible (Yin, 2015).

Lastly is *conclusion*. This simply means looking at the thematic analysis and correspond it to the research question/s and/or purpose of the study (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, pp. 808-813).

By making use of a thematic approach, the data obtained from the informant interviews can be analysed in a way to see if the recurring themes correspond to the hypotheses, or if there are other themes prevalent that could explain the success or unsuccessfulness of local parties.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

A brief discussion about ethical considerations is warranted, before moving on to the analysis section. There are a few ethical considerations when it comes to using interviews as a method. Firstly, it is important to be transparent with what the nature of the study is going to be about so that the informants do not feel misguided when the interview is conducted and when the study is completed. Therefore, when reaching out to the potential informants, I was transparent with what the study was going to be about and also gave a broad outline on what the questions were going to be about. I also, before starting the interview, reminded the participants that the interview was voluntary, and that they anytime until the thesis gets published, without specifying any specific reason, can withdraw their interview if they would like.

When it comes to the recording of the interview and questions of technical matter, the audio of the recordings has been recorded with a third-party program. The reason for this is that service that I used to conduct one of the interviews (Microsoft Teams), allows only recording of audio and video. Due to the fact that I did not want to record video due to integrity reasons, but still wanted to see the informant (and wanted him or her to see me), I chose instead to go with the third-party programs that allows for audio recording only. For the telephone interview, and internal recording program in the phone was used. Regarding the recorded audio file, I informed the informants that I would keep the recording until I was done with the transcription and that I would then delete it and notify the informant. I would also, if requested, send the audio file to

the informant. Moreover, before publishing the thesis, the informants would get the opportunity to read through the final transcription. I also informed that when publishing the thesis, a digital copy of the entire thesis would be sent to them. I also insured the informants that the recording would be used for nothing else than the thesis.

5. Results

By asking the participants semi-structured and open-ended questions regarding respective party and carefully going through the transcripts several times, several themes related to the proposed independent variables were found. Also, a theme related to an unconsidered factor emerged.

5.1. Theme #1 – Issue Ownership

Being able to successfully identify and to focus on issues that can mobilize voters was a recurring theme that the interviewees brought up several times. When asked whether he was happy or not about the latest electoral results, the ROP-leader claimed that not being able to successfully identify issues that mobilized voters was the main reason for their electoral setback:

> Unhappy, naturally. And the analysis is not public, but … We went into the election with a thing.
> We did it unanimously so there is no reason to blame anyone, but we went into the election with
> a focus on homework-free school. And that didn't fly. That is where we lost the percent, I believe
> (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

ROP was unable to identity correct issues to focus on, from a voter-mobilization perspective. This was not only because of the miscalculation of focusing on homework-free school. It was also generally hard to find questions that ROP could own, as the interviewee expressed when asked if he felt that they lost support due to their focus on homework-free school:

> A: Yes. And once again, one has to mediate around the parties in the council. And this has been
> simply because we are too many. It is not possible to have a sensible debate in the council, because
> should all parties speak, then no one will listen. But it has not existed any question that has
> attracted anyone [voters]. But once again – If it was election today, there would be, considering
> the recent events with the municipal councillor. This thing about the homework-free school was
> the triggering factor, since we didn't have any real good question. If I say it like so, we could
> probably together with MP be perceived as the most immigrant-friendly party, something that I
> also believe had an impact (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

It is from these answers clear that ROP has had trouble with identifying mobilizing issues. Moreover, when it comes to the immigration question which is evidently very mobilising in Ronneby (SD is particularly strong there), ROP positioned themselves on the wrong side of the issue, which was potentially electorally damaging. GÖF also in their interview lifted forward the importance of issue ownership:

> I would describe us as an engaged party that are good at figuring out what kind of issues that local
> citizens are engaged in, in all parts of the municipality … Definitively has there been up and

downs … We held a decent level 94' and 98' and I also believe decent in 02', a small dip. But there I would say was the most challenging period for the party electorally for survival. And it is a combination of that we didn't have any specific issues to pursue to a large extent, at least not in that period … As long as one is in opposition, one is very reliant on the possibility to pursue one or two issues very strongly, and it is also very important that it is not always the same issues, one needs to always find new ones, at least in opposition. This was something that we missed, at least under a period, the electoral results slowly became lower which led to worse engagement of the members and worse in-flooding of new members (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

GÖF in particular managed to position themselves on a very mobilizing issue in Götene municipality. In 2008, a very controversial theme park opened up in Götene, called "The World of the Middle-Ages" (Medeltidens Värld). The theme park was closed in 2018, after being a total economic and infrastructural failure and after several protests from the citizens (Daun, 2019).

It was a large issue that came up here in Götene, the construction of a theme park that it was extremely much fuss about and that GÖF were against at the time, actually as the only party, and it was that that led to the great electoral lift of the party in 2010, when I came into the picture … At that time, the party lifted and had a decent inflow of new members … But as I said, that was when I came in and we fought on and increased our support for the 2014 election, much due to the fact that all the other parties ganged up on GÖF so one can build a larger support from the voters under that time period. So, 2014 and onwards it has gone very smoothly (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

Another example of one specific question in which GÖF managed to secure many votes, was the question about the local bathhouse, and a question regarding the building of an amphitheatre, before the interviewee was involved in the party:

The bathhouse… Yes. The bathhouse-question has been, with no comparisons, the largest under the latest years in which we have governed. That is correct. I believe that we also won a lot on that issue, we are a little bit lucky there to be honest. So even that question have we profiled ourselves in, even if we all got along in the end. So clearly, the bathhouse. Another issue from before my time that GÖF engaged themselves in the time when they were more an anti-establishment party was an … Amphitheatre it is called, in our quarry out in Kinnekulle, that there were plans to establish, but GÖF were against this and built an opinion against it, and then it never became a reality (J, Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

Also on a more general level, a large portion of GÖF's success can be ascribed to, according to the party leader, their ability to find issues that mobilize the voters. Also, their localism allows them to be flexible when it comes to how they should position themselves on an issue:

As you said, we lost a little in 2018 but still managed to stay at a stable level, and there is no easy explanation for this, but I believe that it grounds itself in the fact that we have existed for such a long time. We have proven that we are not only about a specific question - we have been willing to deal with many questions, and it is not only about being in opposition but to also push the local questions that are important for the citizens, that the established parties might miss and live on the fact that they are Social Democrats or Moderates and so on, sometimes they are a little bad at finding what it is that engages the citizens locally. It can be everything from bicycle roads to bicycle racks but also larger issues like schools. youth centres and other things (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

Both interviewees explicitly state that their able- or unableness of finding issues to focus on has greatly influenced their electoral success. When it comes to ROP, they have explicitly stated that they have had troubles to find issues to own. And while one could draw the conclusion that GÖF has greatly benefited from particular issues such as the theme park and bathhouse, Ronneby has not been without political issues that perhaps could work as a mobilizer for a local party. More than the bad transparency of municipal companies, there have been other infected issues in Ronneby municipality. One has for example dealt with the retirement homes, where RÖP have been challengers towards building new homes, due to the fact they have found that it is not needed. Moreover, RÖP have also criticized that the retirement homes have reduced locally cooked food (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024). Also, as of 2024, there have been large controversies regarding the current municipal councillor (M), where several allegations regarding misconduct have been lifted towards him, and his rule has been described as a "reign of terror" (Turner & Elmstedt, 2024). It is yet to be seen whether this specific issue might potentially increase the support for ROP. What is also noteworthy, is that ROP right now is focusing on elder care and school. These issues are not issues that at glance seem to be bad for mobilizing voters. Therefore, the problem might therefore more than finding relevant issues to focus on, also be that something is lacking in the positioning or persuasion of said issues. Meanwhile, GÖF have been very successful in not only identifying issues well, but they have also been pretty alone in their stances on important issues compared to the other established parties, which has resulted in great electoral results.

To summarize, the analysis shows that issue ownership is indeed important for electoral results, and that ability- or inability to identify, position oneself and persuade voters that the party is the best party to deal with said issue impacts the electoral results.

5.2. Theme #2 – Campaigning & Advertisement

The next theme related to our independent variables is the theme regarding how the parties' campaigning and media presence looks like. Starting with campaigning, GÖF stated that they make use of pretty classic campaigning – trying to be visible in the entirety of the municipal and that they put a lot of weight on that they are visible not only in the central parts, but also more in the rural areas, something that the established parties are missing:

> We do not go door-to-door. We are at public places quite simply and have tried to be visible in all public places in the entirety of the municipal, and in that sense, we differ a little bit from the other parties that usually only campaign here in Götene centre. That is how we campaign, you could say. To a small extent we also visit enterprises and businesses but in pretty limited quantities. We are outside on streets and squares. We have worked a lot with mailing also, more than classic advertisement, mailings, direct advertisement in many different varieties and directed towards specific age groups – mail advertisement towards specific age groups … If one looks at Götene as a municipality, these mail advertisement towards specific age groups have been pretty experimental. Once again, there have we stuck out and thought to ourselves that now should we really communicate our proposals to age groups and also a little bit in social media but not so much so to speak … We have for example mails directed to youths, or first-time voters so to speak. We have there put together a folder where we explain how local politics works, like a list of words, a short presentation on who is sitting where and what the different municipal boards do and what the council does etc., so pure knowledge, but in the name of the party … This is something we have done in the last two elections. Then, the other part is that we have very clearly advertised ourselves against everyone … We have not had one party program so to speak, we have had four different party programs that have been directed towards the four different parts of the municipality and sent out proposals just for that particular area … And also, when we have been out in these regions, we have handed out specific pamphlets for that area and for Götene as a whole (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

GÖF have therefore made use of pretty classical campaigning and tried to be visible for the public but they do not go door-to-door. They have also utilized more experimental methods such as for example handing out different pamphlets and mails for different age groups and also for different parts of the municipality. Moreover, the established parties have been very inactive in these regards compared to GÖF. ROP gave a very similar answer, making use of classical town square-campaigning but they have also utilized more experimental methods (however quite a long time ago). Moreover, the potential gains of campaigning in Ronneby square has been questioned by the leader:

> You could say that we send out regular material and regular advertisements and try to come in the local newspaper. And then in the latest election, at least the two or three latest elections have

we been at Ronneby square, and to be at Ronneby square is completely meaningless. The party workers for the different parties, we go back and forth and talk with each other and we are drinking coffee together, but ordinary people do not come and talk with us. And around the 2000 election when we realised that we are having extreme difficulties to get rid of the municipal financial support for parties, we arranged Herring-table [Swedish fish buffet] down here and gave out around 50 tickets to randomly chosen people. We also support the youth-sporting organizations, we have given away 5000 SEK in campaigns. The only thing we demand is that they say: "todays match ball is sponsored by Ronnebypartiet" (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

While both parties make use of advertisement and sending out material, from what can be heard from the answers, GÖF put more resources into making this material designed for specific age groups and geographic parts of the municipality. Moreover, there was no indication in the interviews that ROP had made use of these special campaigning methods in the most recent elections. Moreover, ROP's picture of campaigning in the square is quite pessimistic, indicating that in the particular setting of Ronneby, this particular method might not work so very well. Moving onwards from campaigning in election times, the parties were also inquired about their general advertisement and presence in local and social media. When it comes to social media, none of the parties are particular active, even if ROP have started a new Facebook-page that they hope will amass a large following. When it comes to GÖF, the interviewee stated that while GÖF as a party is not active on social media, he himself as the party representative is active in his private channels. To summarize regarding social media, none of the parties have any larger presence on it, but for different reasons:

We haven't advertised on social media to a larger extent. This is because that I have not liked the tone on social media and the nature of the discussions there. It has been a little bit of a statement to advertise in more traditional media. We do have a Facebook-page that we update irregularly but not daily and not even weekly, but perhaps more monthly. We do not have a large number of followers there (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

We are getting started [with social media]. We have something called "Duck Pond Ronneby" [Facebook page], but it is new so there is not much content there yet … The thought is that it will be used by more members, but if you go back in time, all politicians had their own Facebook-page. I have never had one, quite simply because I am so bad at technique. But the other politicians and the other parties usually have a website but they are always so empty on information. If you visit parties' websites, they are referring to events that took place three months ago. It seems like there aren't even ten posts per year. They tell us that the annual meeting is coming up, but no more than that (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024)

When it comes to presence in local media, both have a large presence, but for different reasons. Since GÖF hold the position of chairman of the municipal board as well as municipal councillor, they are very often in the local media due to the fact that their party is central in the governing coalition. Therefore, they get a lot of natural exposure. However, since this exposure usually deals with GÖF as the leading part of the governing coalition, the advertisement that they can get out that is related to GÖF specifically gets damaged:

> If we start from the role that we have – My role in the media and thereby also GÖF's role is very large, many times per week in the local newspaper. For natural reasons, when you find yourself in that position, you get a lot of exposure, maybe sometimes a little bit at the expense of the party in general when you speak out in the media as the chairman of the municipal board, because it's hard to go out in the media and profile the party in its entirety or bring up party questions. Therefore, you could say it goes two ways – We have an incredibly big role in the media but at the same time, when you cooperate to govern a municipality, the advertisement for the distinct party profile can get a little damaged (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

ROP on the other hand also have gotten a lot of media exposure, but for a different reason. The interviewee of ROP has got a long tradition of writing very many letters that gets published in a variety of local newspapers. Also, due to connections with a prominent retired local journalist, ROP has been able to get out many articles in the local media:

> I have in principle free access to write letters to the editor in local newspapers. I claim that I was the one who first informed the public that the kitchens in the elder homes got shut down … We had a local retired journalist that had a blog, unfortunately he passed away 2 months ago. He's surely turning in his grave right now due to the fact that he can't write about the current scandal [the current municipals councillors "reign of terror"]. If you had an interesting news-take you could send it to him, either under your real name or not. And you could write "you should write about this". And he did (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

The interviewee has written extremely many letters to the editor for various newspapers during the years as a representative of ROP. However, when it comes to media exposure that is not related to his letters, when asked how the media exposure has been for ROP when the letters to the editor are disregarded, the media exposure has on the latest years been scarce, according to the interviewee:

> Not the last four years, no. Not the latest mandate period, no. But in the 90's, all the way until 2012 it was very much, compared to what was written about the other parties. But it needs to be said that the local newspaper has more or less disbanded the political coverage. It is actually pretty amusing – In the council we are talking and discussing for 3 hours. Not a single line about this in the newspapers. And it is noticeable that before, it used to 32 pages, but now it is only 16 pages in

the local newspapers. Also, to a large extent, the local questions have almost been completely removed (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

To summarize, both parties have got, or at least used to have good media exposure, but the nature of this exposure has differed between the parties. While GÖF naturally gets a lot of media exposure due to their big role in the local politics, ROP has not in the latest 12 years gotten much attention from the local media, that according to the ROP interviewee is failing to sufficiently report on local matters related to local politics. Low frequency of media cover on political matters in the municipality could potentially be damaging for local parties, since Erlingsson & Lundåsen (2023) argue that if voters are more knowledgeable about the state of affair in the municipality, they are more likely to vote for local parties (p. 3). However, the ROP interviewee has through the years written extremely many letters to the editor, which means that they have gotten some exposure that is very much tailored to their liking. Therefore, when it comes to media, it is not perfectly clear if it has any effect on respective parties' electoral success and any conclusions cannot be drawn. Social media presence is also negligible in both cases and can therefore not explain local party success. When it comes to campaigning during election times however, it seems as if GÖF are putting in more work in order to make the campaigns relevant for different age groups and for different geographical areas in the municipality as well physically visiting all areas of the municipality. Taken together with the fact that the other parties are very inactive in this regard, this might be of an advantage for GF. RÖP on the other hand seems to rely more on sending out material and being active in the centre square. Moreover, it is by the ROP-leader indicated that campaigning at Ronneby square is not very effective. This is overall an indication of that tailoring your material to the receiver and having a larger geographical presence in the municipality could lead to better electoral gains (however, one thing to have in mind that Götene is a smaller municipality than Ronneby, and this might therefore be logistically easier. Taken together, it can be argued that there is evidence that campaigning can influence local party success, even if the evidence is weaker than in the first hypothesis. However, it is uncertain whether prevalence in local media has any effect. Social media does not seem to have any impact on local party success, in this case.

5.3. Theme #3 – Leadership, Membership & Resources

The third and last theme related to the instrumental variables has to do with whether the investigated parties have any variation when it comes to prominent leaders, members or other resources that could be of benefit for the parties. Having leaders or members that can provide extra resources to the parties, for example financial resources or special expertise or a large

social network, can potentially be of great benefits for the parties. This is for example underscored by the ROP-leader, when asked why he thinks they lost votes the last election:

> The explanation is partly that in the latest election, we had a very talented member. You could say that we had a tough start. He was first a member of the Centre and he was very good in small issues and had quite a few faithful voters. But he didn't go far enough in the Centre, so he came over to ROP and took his voters with him. ROP however, had the principle that it on the voting ballot should be "every other woman" [meaning that every other name on the ballot was a woman, to get an even representation]. This meant that he would be behind me and a woman and he thought that was too bad. He therefore went over to the Christ Democrats and once again took with him his voters. Nowadays he is a non-partisan (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

As can be read from the quote, prominent members of the party may not just provide material resources, they can also be valuable if they are good at mobilizing voters. In municipalities, which are quite often pretty small, the impact of a popular and prominent member might reap large electoral benefits for the party. When inquired about these matters however, and whether the parties have especially prominent members or leaders of the party that attracts voters or enhance the organizational capacity of the party, none of the interviewed party leaders gave any answers that are to be interpreted as having these things to an extent that could influence their electoral results to a great extent. While the leader of ROP did not mention anything about having members that can provide them with extra resources or expertise, he had this to say when asked if he would say that they have members with deep roots in the municipality:

> Yes, that you could say, yes. But at the same time, one has to remember … It is a little difficult to answer that question but we can take the example that there is an association called "Odd Fellows" … And there the rule is that you are not allowed to speak of politics during the meetings, but there is pre-sitting and post-sitting, and there some politics gets discussed. And in this association, we have had a few representatives. That is it, you could say. And some have also been active in societal organizations and so on (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

According to this answer, the party do indeed have a few members that potentially could reach out due to their civic engagement. However, it is hard to judge whether this civic engagement of some of the members is high enough to affect the party electorally. GÖF also do not have any spectacularity when it comes to this matter:

> On a scale 1-10 I would say somewhere over the middle. In varying degree, so to speak. Of course, It's natural that … I would say that compared to the other parties in the municipality, I would say that our representatives have the largest local roots. Then I cannot say that it is

massive in any way whatsoever. Of course, one would like to have more business leaders – you cannot get to enough of those (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

To summarize in this regard, none of the parties seem to have an extraordinary base of members and leaders in the party that can provide the party with extraordinary special resources and expertise. However, one must also ask how the parties' financial situation looks – how much financial resources do they have, and to they have and extra financial resources beyond the municipal party support? In both cases, the financial situation is very good, and none of the parties are struggling – quite the opposite:

> All is relative, but our resources are strong. We have extremely low costs. We have no secretaries, no personnel who gets paid and we do not have a fixed party headquarter. We can save money; we can have pleasant meetings with nice food and still save money for our campaigns. This have we been able to do since 2010 when we became a little bit bigger … Now we have resources so that we can advertise ourselves exactly how we want. That is what we use our money for, exclusively advertisement (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

> We have resources that we can use. The economic problem is, on the contrary, to spend the money in a fruitful way. We only get resources from the municipal party support. I like to jokingly say that we have a members-fee of 100 SEK, and in that fee a Christmas-dinner for 400 SEK is included (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

To summarize this theme, none of the parties seem to have any members or leaders in the party that is particularly resourceful for the party. However, the party leader of ROP gave a specific example on how prominent members can mobilize a lot of voters could be of importance. When it comes to how much material resources the parties have, both of them have a sufficient amount of this. GÖF spends almost all of their resources on advertisement.

So far in the analysis, the three independent variables that were hypothesized to affect the party success have been evaluated. To summarize these three variables, when it came to issue ownership, the results were very much in favour of it being very important for local party success. When parties have a hard time identifying mobilizing issues to focus on, their electoral results get damaged. This is not a surprising finding: one of the unique selling points of local parties is precisely that they are able, by making use of a localistic way of conducting politics, to focus on questions that get neglected by the established parties and issues that the citizens think is important. If the party therefore is able to do this, they are rewarded electorally. However, the results also indicate that more than identifying correct issues, it is just as important to position oneself correctly and also to persuade the voters that said local party is the best option. Just finding correct issues to focus on is not enough (Take for example ROP focusing

on school and elderly care – not necessarily bad issues to focus on, but their positioning (e.g. homework-free school) didn't gain the voters votes. There are also some indications that campaigning has an impact on electoral success. While GÖF described tailored mailings and presence in the entirety of the municipality, ROP does not seem to have made any particularly special type of campaigning, at least not in the latest elections. Therefore, it could be argued that putting time and effort into campaigning can reap large electoral benefits. Moreover, GÖF's party leader said that all their money goes to advertisement, which gives a hint that it is something that at least the party themselves thinks to be important for their success. Social media seems as of now not to be of any large priority for any of the parties. ROP were historically, up until 2012, written about a lot in the local media, but since then it has been very little. However, the party leader has written extremely many letters to the editor of various local newspapers, up until one year ago. GÖF on the other hand, get a lot of media attention right now due to their central role in the governing coalition. However, it is not clear how much they were written about beforehand. Therefore, it is not clear in this particular case whether local media presence leads to local party success. However, of course, it is logical to assume that GÖF's large electoral jumps in 2010 and 2014 were boosted by the extremely large media attention that the failed theme park received. It is also unclear whether the large controversies that happens now in Ronneby municipality will pay off electorally for ROP (Lundmark & Ogenblad, 2024). Moreover, presence in social media is negligent in both parties and cannot explain the varieties of success. Lastly, when it comes to leadership, membership & resources, there were no proof that any of the parties have more prominent and resourceful members or leaders, or that any of the parties are financially stronger than the other. However, ROP's leader gave an example from the latest election how a popular party member can take with him/her voters when they leave the party.

One could summarize the hypotheses: **H1** was largely supported, **H2** was partially supported (support for impact of campaigning, albeit weaker than for **H1**). For **H3**, no support whatsoever was found. However, there was one more interesting theme that came up in the interviews that seems to differentiate the parties but that was not hypothesized, that is worthy a brief discussion before the conclusion – and that is adaptation to incumbency.

5.4. Theme #4 – Adaptation to Incumbency

One thing that is noticeable with many local parties is that they gain a lot of votes, but then fade away, which is one of the explanations from Wörlund (1999) that historically such little research has been conducted on them. Why is it that some parties seem to be able to become a stable part

of the ruling local government, when they start out as anti-establishment party or single-issue party? The key is to adapt to the incumbent role. When the local party becomes a part of the ruling establishment, they can no longer be called anti-establishment parties, and when the issue that they formed to tackle gets resolved they can no longer focus on that issue. In that case, the local party needs to transform into an established party. The Nykvarn Party in Nykvarn municipality (Stockholm county) started out as single-issue party in 1998, when Nykvarn was a part of Södertälje municipality. The issue was that they wanted Nykvarn to break free from Södertälje municipality and form a new municipality. They received 24,2% in their first election and snatched 7/31 mandates. In 1999, Nykvarn broke out of Södertälje, and Nykvarn municipality was born. The issue that the Nykvarn Party had set out to resolve was now resolved. However, the Nykvarn Party didn't cease to exist. In 2002, they managed to grow to 34,8% and became the largest party in the new municipal, ruling in majority together with the Moderates and the Centre. Since then, the Nykvarn Party has been the largest party in all steering coalitions, even if their original issue of interest was resolved already in 1999. As of today, they are a classic localistic local party (SCB, 1998; SKR, 2024b; SCB, 2024c, Valmyndigheten, 2024a; Nykvarnspartiet, 2024). It could just as well have been so that after the Nykvarn Party had managed to come through with their main issue, they would seize to be relevant. Instead, they adapted and became a welfare-populistic party, managing to stay in power since 2002. Exactly what mechanisms or factors that made this possible for the Nykvarn Party is something that is outside the scope of this thesis, but one could easily see that if they hadn't adapted from being a single-issue party, they would not be able to hold the power in the municipality for 20 years.

GÖF managed to secure a spot in the ruling coalition for the first time in 2010, according to the party leader much because of the question of the theme park. However, this coalition was broken after just a few months, due to the fact that the question about the theme park still was a very infected and segregating question, in which the ruling parties could not agree. This meant that GÖF could continue to be an oppositional party, which the party leader believes was the main reason that they could continue to grow in the 2014 election:

> It [the theme-park] led to that we for the first time could negotiate ourselves to a share of the rule, actually, already in 2010. But this was the toughest period. The coalition broke up, just because of this issue. We were able to come to an agreement with the Social Democrats and the Left, but it was broken up after just a month or so … We didn't come into a ruling position in 2010, which led to that we could continue to grow until 2014. We were continuing to be an anti-establishment party until 2014. So, if I am going to completely honest, now in retrospect, this might have been

good for the survival of the party. The question about the theme park, it had blown over until the 2014 election, but by then we had managed to find other issues and to work in opposition in other questions, with much broader strokes. I believe that it would have been harder for us if we came into the ruling coalition on the theme park question and ruled until 2014. We could continue to make use of oppositional politics under the years 2010-2014, so it is not so strange that we managed to grow in the 2014 election. (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

In 2014, GÖF finally became a stable part of the ruling coalition because of their large electoral increase in that election. However, even if they lost some percentages in the 2018 election, they still managed to gain a hold of the ruling position, and in 2022, they increased even more. According to the party leader, the party managed to do this because they were successful in adapting to their new role as leader of the coalition:

And then, what can one say … Since we have come into the ruling coalition, which we have since 2014, we have managed it well. And that is the challenge. One may lose votes very quickly because one cannot simple be an anti-establishment party anymore and then you have to clearly show that you also actually make improvements for the municipality and at this we have been very successful, especially now in the latest election where we grew and became the largest party of the coalition, we steer together with the same parties now as we did in the last mandate period, and now we became the biggest. This is the challenge for local parties – if you take over the rule, you also need to deliver and that is not so easy. But we have managed well with this, in my opinion (J. Månsson, personal communication, May 3, 2024).

As told by the party leader, there are large differences in being an oppositional party and being a dominant party in a ruling coalition. As an oppositional party, the party can point out the things that the established parties are failing to accomplish. By doing this and also persuading the voters that the local party can make it better, they can manage to grow electorally. When the party however actually manages to secure a spot in the ruling coalition, they need to show that they actually can get things done. It is clear that this is something that GÖF have managed to do successfully based on their election results from the latest election.

This difference between being an oppositional party and being a party of the governing coalition is something that is also quite clear in the case of ROP. ROP reached their peak as an oppositional party in the 2006 elections. According the ROP's party leader one of the main reasons for this jump was simply that they were the only party that were hard enough in their oppositional criticisms of the ruling coalition:

Often times, it is when someone else fails. I could say that the Moderates now in retrospect as oppositional leaders, they were very kind in their opposition. And that resulted in that when we

raised out voice just a little, we attracted voters (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

This jump up to the parties' all-time high of 8,1% did however not give them a spot in the governing coalition. In 2010 they became a part of the ruling coalition for the first time, but lost one mandate in the 2014 elections, and lost one further in 2018, where they were discarded from the coalition, following disagreements within it. According to the municipal councillor (who still is to this day) from the Moderates, this was because the ROP failed to clearly give notice in how they stand on the distribution of spots in the different political boards and that the party leader of ROP had reached out to other opposition-parties in order to form a new rule (Alfredsson & Sandström, 2018). However, according to ROP's leader, this is not entirely correct:

> It is simply that it began in 2016. And it was a question – should we build more elder care homes? I said no, we should not. It is not needed. Quite simply because we have an abundance of spots. This led to that I fell into conflict with the municipal councillor, who is still the municipal councillor to this day. And so it went: "I don't know if the Ronneby Party should be allowed to be a part of the coalition anymore", and officially, he blamed that I had reached out to other parties and wanted to have some technical cooperation with them and discuss, which was not completely untrue. They saw it as an unfriendly act, and we clashed in many of the boards (S. Håkansson, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

Regardless of what the real reason for the breakup was, it is clear that ROP was not able, to the same extent as GÖF, to keep voters after they became a part of the governing coalition. When looking at respective parties' electoral history, they both follow a surprisingly similar pattern up until the point where they entered the governing coalition: both parties made solid first elections, only to decrease in the two subsequent elections. After this, both parties made solid electoral jumps, and both parties joined the governing coalition in the next election. It is at that point, where the paths of the parties started to diverge. GÖF managed to secure a great share of voters as ruling party. Even if they dipped from 16% to 11,8% between the 2014 and 2018 elections, they still kept a substantial portion of the mandates (5/41 mandates) and managed to win an additional mandate in the 2022 election, securing their future as the leading governing party in the coalition. ROP, on the other hand, lost voters in all subsequent elections since they entered the governing coalition in 2010 and were discarded from the coalition in 2018, culminating in having just one mandate in the 2022 elections. While the scope of this thesis does not include investigating exactly what went good/bad in the respective parties' times as governing parties, GÖF's were more successful in adapting to incumbency and keep voters.

6. Summary and Concluding Remarks

The interest in local parties and the explainers of their success has increased in the last decades. While most studies have made use of a quantitative approach, attempting to establish patterns that explain in which conditions local parties thrive, this thesis has instead used a qualitative approach in order to assess which specific factors that differentiates more and less successful parties, utilizing a most-similar case study approach with semi-structured interviews. The research question was "what explains local party success", and the three hypotheses were that (1) being good at owning and relating to mobilizing issues, (2) conducting well-thought and outreaching campaigns during election times and having good media- and social media presence and (3) having members and/or leaders that can provide the party with special expertise and resources, explain local party success. By using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis with two party leaders from local parties with different grades of success, large support for the importance of issue ownership was found. Being able to identify mobilizing issues and also to position oneself correctly in relation to these issues is crucial for the success of local parties. When it comes to campaigning and media presence, some support was found for the hypothesis that having creative and outreaching campaigns affect local party success. However, this support was weaker than for the first hypothesis. No support was found for the importance of media and social media outreach. Furthermore, no support for having prominent members or leaders of the party that can provide extra resources or expertise was found, even if an example was given on how popular members can attract voters. More than the hypotheses, a before unconsidered theme was lifted during the interviews that has to do with how well the local parties adapt to incumbency. Being able to transition from being an anti-establishment party in opposition to becoming an incumbency party is important for the longevity of the party. To summarize, issue ownership, good campaigning and adapting to eventual incumbency are three key factors that seem to be able to explain local party success. Anti-establishment themes such as political distrust and also localism are factors that are shared by both parties. Another finding of interest is that political scandals and infected questions might increase the support for local parties – but not necessarily.

By using a qualitative approach and interviewing central informants, the thesis has been able to deeply investigate which factors that differentiates successful from less successful local parties. However, acknowledging limitations of the thesis is warranted. Only interviewing two local parties made it possible to really focus on the specific parties and extract thorough information from the informants. However, focusing on just two parties means that potential additional

factors might be overlooked that could potentially be impactful for other parties in other types of municipalities. Therefore, research in the future should perhaps look at a larger number of parties, perhaps with qualitative comparative analysis. This would increase the external validity of the research, making it so that it becomes more generalisable to other settings. Secondly, while interviews with informants is a good way to gain deep knowledge about the factors explaining local party success, there is always an issue with the operationalization of the answers – can one be certain that the answers that the party leaders give corresponds with reality? The perception of the party leaders might be biased and give answers that do not fully correspond with reality. In future endeavours, it might be useful to interview more informants of the parties to get a more nuanced perspective. Interviewing or surveying voters of the party might also provide good insights into what local parties can do to be more successful. Another limitation of this study is that the two municipalities in which the parties were based were dissimilar in in two important factors – size and support for the Sweden Democrats. While I consider the size factor to not be of such a large importance, the fact that the Sweden Democrats are very strong in Ronneby is something that is of disadvantage for the study, even if its impact is not judged to be extremely large, due to the fact that ROP actually managed to be successful together with the Sweden Democrats in earlier elections. While it is impossible to find parties and municipalities that are identical to each other, these factors could potentially skew the results, damaging the internal validity. Therefore, in future research, more work to find municipalities that are even more similar when it comes to these factors are required. Another thing to keep in mind is that if one wants to establish that the factors of issue ownership, campaigning and adaption to incumbency really are important factors, further research on this is warranted. The reason for this is because this study has only indicated (albeit strongly) that these factors are important in this specific case – in other municipalities and in other countries, other factors might be more important. Therefore, it is also not certain that media- and social media presence and resourceful members and leader are not important for some local parties. One could for example imagine that in more developing countries, the leader- and membership factor could be of more importance. However, when it comes to local parties in the west, this thesis can give a good indication on where to start looking.

This thesis has attempted to investigate and develop and understanding of what local parties can do to increase their electoral success by making use of a more qualitative approach, talking directly to central representatives in order to find specific factors that explain local party success in a way that is not fitting for quantitative endeavours. While the results have given some valid

support for some of the hypotheses and also found another factor that might be of importance, more research is needed to actually prove their impact more thoroughly. In the future, conducting research on even more parties could further increase the external validity. It could also be beneficial to also contact local party voters in order to get answers from a demand-perspective. Another more quantitative road one could take, is for example to investigate which specific issues that seem to mobilize voters most.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1: Can you tell me, openly, about your background and role in the party?

2: Can you tell me how, according to your best of knowledge, how and why the party was founded?

3: How has your parties' journey looked like since its conception until today, both electorally but also the party as an organization?

4: When going through your electoral results since the beginning, why do you think it has gone as it has?

5: Can you please describe your party with a few short sentences, as it is today?

6: Under the years as electable for the council, do you think that you have managed to profile yourselves in a good manner?

7: Has there been any particularly big happenings, such as for example infected political questions that has engaged the citizens, that you can remember?

8: According to your conception, how has the dissatisfaction of the voters towards the established parties looked like?

9: Can you please openly tell me how your presence in media looks like/has looked like?

10: Can you please openly describe how your campaigning has looked like during the years? How do you campaign?

11: The representatives and members of your party, do they have deep roots in the local, or can they provide extra resources or expertise?

12: How big resources would you say that your party have?

13: Of your understanding of the term "populism", would you say that you are a party that sometimes make use of populistic strategies or sayings?

14: In your latest elections, are you satisfied with the results? What do you find that you can do better until next election?

Interviewed Party	The Ronneby Party	Götenes' Future
Informant	S. Håkansson	J. Månsson
Position	Founder, Party Leader, First Name	Party Leader, First Name, Municipal Councillor, Chairman of the Municipal Board
Location	Telephone Interview	Microsoft Teams Interview
Date	24/4/2024	03/05/2024
Interview Length	00:57:43	01:08:55