Political parties are crucial actors in the governing of most countries and essential for the functioning of parliamentary democracy. The political role of adult education in relation to democracy and active citizenship is a theme that has received significant attention in research over the years (e.g. Bron et al., 1998; Coare & Johnston, 2003; Fejes et al., 2018; Laginder et al., 2013; Martin, 2003; Schugurensky, 2006). However, adult education and learning in political parties have not, to our knowledge, received much attention, even though political parties are a direct channel for citizens to gain, and influence, formal political power. Accordingly, parties recruit and prepare members for political work at all levels, from handing out flyers to enacting legislation and leading governments. Thus, the educational practices of political parties, we argue, should be given much more attention by scholars in the field of adult education. A parallel could be drawn to the extensive literature on the role of adult education and learning in social movements and trade unions, which are also essential entities in a vibrant democracy (e.g. Hall et al., 2013; Holst, 2001). Although some studies point to the links between, for instance, trade unions and political parties (e.g. Gougoulakis, 2016; Holford, 1994; Jansson, 2013, 2016), adult education and learning in political parties per se has not been at the centre of attention of scholars in the field. This article addresses this research gap by
presenting an exploratory study on the various roles of intra-party education. It is based on a qualitative analysis of interviews with experienced party functionaries and popular educators in two Swedish labour movement parties.

**Education in political parties**

Previous studies that address the relationship between education and parties in multi-party democracies can chiefly be found in political science or sociological research. However, this research tends to use education as a background variable in order to, predominantly, focus on the educational backgrounds of political representatives or the significance an individual’s level of education has on political preferences or involvement (see Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Gaxie & Godmer, 2007; Kurtz & Simon, 2007).

There are some exceptions, however, where educational aspects related to political parties have been scrutinised. Previous research on party-political education has to a notable extent focused on education in communist parties. During the cold war, the formal educational system of the communist party in the Soviet Union became a matter of interest in the field of Soviet and Communist Studies (Katz, 1956). More recent research on intra-party education within communist parties has focused on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Pieke, 2009; Shambaugh, 2008), and on the historical role and influence of the communist movement on adult education in Australia (Boughton, 1997, 2005). Shambaugh’s (2008) study focuses on the national network of the party schools of the CCP. These schools at the provincial and central levels not only provide mid-career training and ideological education for all party cadres but also for government officials and some military officers and businessmen. The schools provide training in the party’s organisation, ideology, policy as well as practical skills needed when working for the party. The party schools are also an important ‘incubator’ for new policies and a channel for disseminating these policies. These schools have grown to have an important impact on the CCP’s efforts to strengthen its position by influencing both party members and state employees.

Some studies have also noted that the educational practices among communist parties have influenced other, non-communist, parties. Both Flowers (2005) and Holford (1994) point out how the communist parties’ traditions and methods of training and education have become a source of inspiration also for the People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore. Flowers (2005) study elucidates party-linked community education. Community work in Singapore is, according to Flowers (2005), on the one hand, about community participation and self-help, and, on the other hand, about political and social control by the ruling PAP. As shown by Holford (1994), PAP has also utilised labour education as a means to gain control over the National Trade Union Congress, i.e. the main trade union organisation of the country.

There are also some previous feminist studies on education organised outside political parties but directed towards women representing political parties in local parliaments (Clover & McGregor, 2011; Clover et al., 2011). The results of a study of such education and its relation to learning among women in local parliaments in Canada and India show how women participants in both countries thought that acquiring practical skills, training in communication, and factual knowledge of politics was crucial. However, the interviewed women also recognised the need for other types of education, as several had experiences of knowledge being used to deny women access to influence, something the authors call ‘tactical power’ or ‘political capital’. The findings of this study point out how the ‘non-partisan’ structure of the Canadian educational programme enables the replication of gendered norms and structures.

To summarise, previous research on political education in relation to political parties has drawn attention to this education being of both practical and ideological character, where traits of social and ideological control are not insignificant (Clover et al., 2011; Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008).
Popular education and political parties in Sweden

In the present article, we focus on the context of Sweden and the two parties in the Swedish parliament with roots in the labour movement: the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party (previously the Communist Left Party). Sweden is a suitable context for studying education in political parties since the country has a comprehensive structure of organised popular education that is supported with state subsidies (Rubenson, 2013). Popular education in Sweden today is often understood to comprise the activities organised by two types of organisations: folk high schools and study associations. Even though Swedish popular education is both institutionalised and supported with state subsidies, the origins of popular education in the late 1900s and early 2000s are closely linked to social movements, as is the modern-day organisational structure (Laginder et al., 2013). In the case of Swedish popular education, the state, social movements, and political parties are intertwined—popular education is supported by the state, and at the same time, the organisations are, to a large extent and at least indirectly, maintained by social movements in the form of membership and background organisations, including political parties. Especially the labour movement parties have strong links, both in historical and contemporary times, to popular education organisations (Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019).

In the Swedish academic debate, the link between popular education and political parties has attracted some attention. Popular education, in the form of study circles, organised by study associations, and courses at folk high schools, has played an important role in learning for representative democracy in Sweden (Erickson, 1966; Larsson, 2001; Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019). In general, there has been a dominant historical focus in the research on the relation between party politics and popular education in Sweden. One of the main tasks for folk high schools, when they were founded in the second half of the 19th century, was to prepare the sons of the upper farming class for political commissions, which became increasingly important as wealthy farmers gained more political influence (Gustavsson, 2010). In the early 20th century, as the political strength of the labour movement grew, some folk high schools had a similar role in training working class representatives (Berggren, 1988). The role of the folk high schools for the labour movement remained secondary, however, as mainly independently organised study circles played a more crucial role in providing democratic education for political party members and representatives (Larsson, 2001). The participants in the study circles gained theoretical and practical knowledge that was essential for positions in municipalities and associations. They were also immersed in a culture of disciplined order, which became a guiding principle for political organisation (Ambjörnsson, 1988; Arvidson, 1989).

Workers’ education in Sweden early became integrated into one centralised organisation, Arbetarnas bildningsförbund, the Swedish Workers’ Educational Association (ABF). ABF was founded in 1912 and came under the control of the reformist Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Social Democratic Party, although smaller and less influential leftist organisations have been part of the umbrella organisation from the beginning. Hence, this development differs from the development of the workers’ educational organisations in Britain, which was more pluralistic and more independent in relation to labour movement parties (J Jansson, 2016).

This article sets out to discuss the contemporary role of popular education for Swedish labour movement parties from the viewpoint of key actors in the labour movement parties and ABF. Today, two of ABF’s 60 member organisations are parliamentary parties in Sweden: the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party. The study draws on interviews with representatives for these two parties and ABF. Party-political popular education in this context refers mainly to the parties’ activities in relation to ABF and to the type of organised studies that the parties arrange outside the formal cooperation with this study association.

The aim of this article is to analyse the contemporary role of party-political education as a form of popular education in two Swedish left-wing parties. By doing so, it intends both to update current
knowledge of the phenomenon in Sweden and to draw attention to an under-researched topic of importance beyond the national context. The research questions in focus for the paper are: What roles do intra-organisational education play in the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party in Sweden, according to involved party and ABF functionaries? How does this intra-party education relate to the national tradition and infrastructure of the state-subsidised popular education that Swedish ABF represents?

The article is structured as follows: First, an outline of some contextual issues regarding popular education in labour movement parties in Sweden is presented. After this, the method, data, and analytical approach of the study are introduced. The subsequent section presents the analysis. The concluding discussion comprises remarks with reference to representational democracy and party-political popular education.

**Swedish labour movement parties’ popular education: trends over time**

There is a common perception that popular education in Sweden is characterised by the myth of a golden age (Larsson, 1999). According to this widespread perception, popular education was important in the past but is less important now. In fact, a look at statistical data on the number of participants and the scale of popular education shows that the picture is the exact opposite. In 1950/51, for example, over 30,000 study circles were arranged in Sweden with about 315,000 participants (Larsson, 1999, p. 250). In 2017, the corresponding figures were 272,000 study circles with a total of over 1.7 million participants (Folkbildningsrådet, 2018). The relationship becomes even clearer further back in time. Looking at the total study circle activities in Swedish ABF in 1917/1918, shortly before democracy was introduced, there were 5,535 participants, including activities run by the trade unions and other member organisations. Currently, twice as many participants (10,829 in 2017) are involved in study activities organised solely by the Social Democratic Party as a single member organisation of ABF (ABF, 2019, p. 56). Despite the fact that party-related popular education activities are a minor part of ABF’s current total volume of study circles, the figures above show that party-political popular education is not a phenomenon belonging to a bygone era. As pointed out by Gougoulakis (2016, p. 22), party member education continues to be conducted in cooperation with ABF, and this cooperation is still endorsed by the leadership of the Social Democratic Party.

Even though party study activities have declined in recent decades, the numbers of participants remain remarkably higher than in the years before democracy was established in Sweden, in 1919, in the form of general and equal voting rights. In relative terms, however, a change can be seen over time where the proportion of popular education activities related to movements, including political parties, has decreased. Study circles these days tend to be more independent in relation to associations than in the past; participants, in general, join study circles as individuals with personal interests rather than as members of a certain movement or party (S. Larsson, 1999).

From an overall perspective, it appears that contemporary popular education – including socially and politically oriented studies – is much more widespread than during the mythical pioneer years or during the establishment of the welfare state in the 1950s. At the same time, membership in the political parties has decreased sharply in recent decades, even though this trend seems to have taken a slight turn during recent years. In 1979, as many as 19% of Sweden’s population were members of a political party. In 2009, thirty years later, the corresponding figure was less than 3% (Gilljam et al., 2010). In accordance with this decline in party membership, party-political study circle activities have also decreased. However, contrary to the idea of the golden age myth of the early 1900s, party study activities are still arranged to a significant extent.

The Social Democratic Party has a significantly larger volume of study activities than the Left Party. One reason for this is that the Social Democrats are a much larger party, both in terms of number of members and support in general elections. Another reason is the party’s historical relationship with ABF. The Social Democratic Party was one of the founding organisations of ABF
in 1912, which naturally means that the party has a strong, close link with ABF. The Left Party first became a member organisation of ABF in 1971 (ABF, 2008, p. 42). However, the historic link goes further back in time. ABF was founded before the split of the Social Democratic Party in 1917, when the left wing of the party was excluded and formed the Swedish Social Democratic Left Party, which, in turn, became the Swedish Communist Party in 1921 (subsequently, VPK and the Left Party). In the later struggle between Swedish Social Democrats and Communists for influence over the labour movement during long periods of the twentieth century, however, the communist branch of the movement had not nearly as strong links to ABF as the Social Democrats. The Social Democrats also held a firm grip over the organisation. Through its close ties to the Social Democratic Party, ABF has also contributed to the consolidation of the Social Democratic reformist dominance among the working class (J. Jansson, 2012).

Method and analysis

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with a total of ten interviewees representing ABF, the Left Party, and the Social Democratic Party, four men and six women. The interviewees were selected through a combination of snow-ball sampling and mapping of the organisations’ internal structures in order to gain interviewees with insights into both local, regional, and central levels of the two parties and ABF. The interviews were carried out at three different locations: in the capital Stockholm, in a relatively large town, and in a small industrial community. The interviewees had insights into, and significant experience of issues related to education in political parties. All interviewees were employed full time by their organisation, or had full-time, remunerated political positions, and they were responsible for the planning and organising of political party-related educational activities at the time of the interviews. The purpose of the interviews was not to capture a representative cross-section of those taking part in party education, but to gain a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind the organisation of education in political parties. The interviewees were selected with the aim of gaining an understanding of the roles of intra-party organisation from the perspective of functionaries within the concerned organisations. Thus, the results presented in this article draw on data that represents the viewpoint of a small group of knowledgeable interviewees. We do not claim that this comprises a comprehensive study of how education is perceived in the three organisations. However, we do claim that the data reflects key aspects of the reasoning behind intra-party education in the organisational settings that we studied. To what extent the results are possible to generalise to other settings, is, as often is the case in small qualitative studies, a matter for the reader to evaluate in relation to her knowledge about potential context similarity (S. Larsson, 2009).

The interviews lasted on average for about an hour. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. As is customary in this form of research, the interviewees were anonymised in the results section for ethical reasons. The transcribed interviews were interpreted using a thematic analysis, where we looked for similarities as well as differences across the data. From this process, a set of analytical categories emerged (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The different ways of reasoning about intra-party education were analysed with respect to their perceived significance for the parties as organisations. Hence, the categories presented in the following section were analytically deduced from the interviewees’ descriptions of party-related educational activities organised by the Swedish Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, and ABF. Although the analysis is based on a specific perspective, in the sense that we have narrowed our focus to what roles experienced functionaries ascribe to education in political parties in relation to the party organisation, it is not based on a ‘grand theory’. Instead of testing, or applying, a more general theoretical perspective, our ambition is to develop an understanding of a specific phenomenon – education in political parties. Thus, we have searched for patterns in a specific setting, through the analyses of a specific set of data, with the ambition to develop a conceptualisation of a phenomenon that, hopefully, will contribute to a more substantive theory of education in political parties (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Results: the roles of education in political parties

The parties arrange educational activities with a range of different contents and formats. According to the terminology used by the interviewees, the educational activities are referred to as introductory courses, members’ courses, representatives’ courses, specialised courses, leadership courses, ideology studies, election studies, studies in specific political areas, module-based studies, process courses, trade union/political evening schools, theme events, and debates. These labels give an indication of the types of courses that are arranged; typically, they focus on either a theme or a specified target group, sometimes both. An example of this is leadership courses for party representatives in leading positions. When analysing the material, we aimed to go beyond the labels used by the interviewees to identify more fundamental roles or meanings related to intra-party educational activities. Four such fundamental roles were detected. Some educational activities may be related to two or more of these analytically distinguished roles.

Two of the roles were related to the content of the education, presented below as ideological training and training skilled members and leaders. The other two roles we distinguished were related to social relations within the parties: training for a social infrastructure and, finally, something the interviewees mentioned as problematic and unintentional, or what we refer to as training for internal positioning and distinction. The knowledge-oriented roles are presented below, followed by the relationship-oriented roles of education that were distinguished.

Ideological training

Even if the population’s general level of education has increased during the last decades in Sweden as well as worldwide, which has made both citizens and party members more familiar with a number of areas of socio-political knowledge, there remain some areas where the interviewees indicated a negative trend in knowledge. One such area was ideology in the sense of the fundamental values and more basic political perspectives that the Social Democratic Party and Left Party represent. The issue of lack of ideological training is described below by an interviewee who was active within the Social Democratic Party at the central level.

If you go back 20 years in time when I mostly worked with the trade union, there were very advanced trade union courses, and then perhaps you became a member of the party after taking a trade union course. Back then, you had that training, the ideological training. There are a lot of people [today] who are perhaps very interested in the environment and so on, who step straight into the party without having any ideological training first. (Interviewee, employed regionally by ABF)

The type of values and the special party-based ideological orientation that was described by the interviewees as being important for party representatives must be acquired within the movement rather than in a general education context. The development described above can be understood as connected to the parties’ general decline in membership, and the decline in members’ involvement in trade unions and other popular movements, over the last few decades. In the quote above, the interviewee feels that party education employs an essential, compensatory role. What is no longer learned through participation and previous education in large political movements must be taught in the form of party education. This problem is exacerbated when older party representatives, who were recruited at a time when the parties’ size and character in terms of political movements were quite different, are being replaced with new representatives. A kind of balancing act is described in the next quote, which illustrates how the party wants to attract new members who can represent the party relatively quickly, at the same time as new members cannot be expected to have acquired the ideological consciousness of the type that was perceived to be developed through trade union engagement.

[D]o we have enough new young members to take over the new seats prior to an election? We’ve not had any problem appointing politicians in the past, but there will be problems if it [fall in membership] continues at this rate. That wouldn’t be so good. Can you really take someone from the street, if we’re going to be frank
about it, to be a representative in an election without first taking a course or doing some sort of training? That is really a challenge for the future. (Interviewee, active at the central level in the Social Democratic Party)

Members of the Social Democratic Party in the present study described this as an impending problem; if the trend continues, they may be forced to select completely new members without any party training as nominees for election. Members of the Left Party seem to find that this situation has already occurred in some cases. One interviewee from a town where the Left Party has a strong position in the municipality described a situation where, in principle, all members have at least one municipal position of trust. New members are, thus, quickly given positions of trust, as elaborated in the quote below.

Because to some extent it is [...] as a new member you quickly get [...] a municipal position of trust. And that requires that you are familiar with and feel secure in that role, and it’s no fun to go in and start cutting the budget for this and that, and not feel secure. (Interviewee, member of the Left Party, former MP, active at the local level)

The number of positions of trust and the limited number of members lead, in turn, to study activities becoming more difficult to arrange despite that these studies are described as an important and desirable thing to do.

There is a vision of running study circles [...] many people are very busy with ordinary civilian careers, plus all the political duties they have in municipal or other groups. So, this is probably a major problem, finding enough time. (Interviewee, member of the Left Party, previous MP, active at the local level)

The consequence is that the only commission-related training given to the party’s elected representatives is the general introductory course offered by the municipal administration, i.e. totally unrelated to the party’s specific ideology.

In addition to organised study circle activities, the interviewees mentioned other forms of popular education activities that focus on ideological training. Activities referred to as debates of ideas in various forms are especially prominent in this area, i.e. public lectures or debates. One interviewee from the Left Party described this type of activity organised by the Left Party in cooperation with ABF in the following way:

In Stockholm, ABF is incredibly lively, with the ABF building among other things. We work together in many different ways. OK, we don’t have that many study circles of our own, but that’s a different matter. On the other hand, we are involved in a huge number of different seminars, and we advertise them, and encourage our members to go there and participate. (Interviewee, employed by the Left Party at the central level, responsible for party educational issues)

Ideological activities that are aimed at the general public also have an internal educational role, as providing possible ideological training forums for party members who are encouraged to participate in them. Organising public debates is also described by interviewees as a means of developing party politics as well as reaching groups outside a party.

Training skilled members and leaders

Another identified role of intra-party education is related to the development of certain organisational skills among members and representatives. Some training courses clearly have this purpose, such as special cashier courses, training for chairpersons, and so on. More general skills for organising meetings were also mentioned as important for improvement through studying. An interviewee describes this type of skills training within the Social Democratic Party education below.

This could be anything from meeting formalities to the Municipal Act to … well, anything interesting to you if you work in an organisation. […] Because we have a total deficiency there, you can see it in the committees and everything, just this … In the past, when people were active in different associations, they knew about meeting formalities, everyone did, but we haven’t been able to get there now, but it’s really important. (Interviewee, employed by ABF at the local level)
The need to arrange studies on meeting formalities is perceived by the interviewee above as more important now than in the past. Despite the level of education being generally higher among the general public, this is clearly a field of knowledge that is perceived as neglected by members.

Training in specific organisational skills is not only needed for new members; leadership training programmes also deal with developing administrative and organisational skills for political leaders. Some interviewees, such as the ABF employee below, emphasised the skills required for a mayor, for example, who must lead a large organisation and needs both political and organisational skills.

Such high demands. Imagine stepping into the role of chairman of a municipal executive board in [name of municipality], one of Sweden’s largest. It’s like taking on the role of CEO at a huge company. It’s a wonder that things work as well as they do. (Interviewee, regionally employed by ABF, responsible for party-political education)

The ability to lead a large organisation is mentioned in terms of knowledge or skills in the quote above, where the requirements for municipal leadership are compared to those required of the CEO of a major company. The size of the organisation is considered to put special requirements on knowledge, since the party must organise qualified courses, sometimes at university level. One example of this is an educational package called Campus Bommersvik, which is linked to the Social Democratic Party’s conference centre with the same name. This educational package is run in cooperation with the School of Economics, Stockholm University, and Uppsala University. The interviewee quoted below relates this to developments in society that result in elected representatives in large regions and cities having more issues to manage.

There are changes, too, if you look at the municipal or county council levels, being a municipal commissioner or a county council commissioner these days requires a lot of knowledge, with the decisions they make in large municipalities, such as Stockholm, Gothenburg, or Malmö. Knowledge is needed there. So, it’s probably a natural change in society that is taking place. We have to go along with it, which means having elected representatives who feel that they have the support and opportunities for development. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the central level, responsible for education for positions of trust and organisational development)

Another skill that education is meant to develop refers to the members’ and representatives’ ability to argue for the party’s standpoint. This is a matter of being able to articulate one’s familiarity with political areas where both factual information and principles are of central importance. Courses with the purpose of training debating skills are described as most common in conjunction with elections, and they are often referred to as election studies.

The purpose of them [election studies] is to provide participants with knowledge of local politics and enable them to explain central policies. Central policies, which is what we go to the election with, come at a rather late stage […] We have a congress that has, so far, been held […] around November before the election because less than a year remains. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the central level, experience of different educational responsibilities)

An essential part of political work is arguing for standpoints in different contexts, and one resource in this area is, according to the interviewee, the ability to present objective reasons for these standpoints as well as the reasons for shortcomings in political opponents’ positions.

Training for a social infrastructure

The roles described above have been related to study contents and their significance for the sharing of knowledge and skills within an organisation in different respects. Study activities also have another type of role that has a more relational nature. One basic role that several interviewees ascribe to studies is the creation of a sense of social community in the organisation. Educational activities provide an opportunity to meet others and get to know each other and, through this
process, get to know the organisation. One interviewee went as far as to describe this as the primary role of the educational activities.

No, but like I said, as I see it, the main aim of studies, which we have touched on, is the social aspect – becoming part of the whole, feeling that you are involved in the organisation. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the local level)

Education is described as a path towards a social community. Compared with formal meetings, where new party members risk being invisible and excluded, education is described as a more socially inclusive activity.

Another aspect of this relational role of intra-party education is strategic networking. The relationships that the educational activities are assumed to produce are not only described in strictly social terms, such as creating a sense of belonging and community, they also have a more instrumental dimension. This applies, in particular, to studies aimed at more active participants, who are expected to have a more leading role in the organisation. Many interviewees claimed that party education produces such strategic relationships both when they commented on their own experience of studies and when they talked about more general objectives behind certain educational activities.

So, the best thing about courses, it’s [...] that you create a network, that you get more contacts. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the local level)

There’s a lot about building up contact networks, which we work with quite a lot in our movement. It’s incredibly important – learning from each other is a process of developing in politics too. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the central level, responsible for education for positions of trust and organisational development)

The importance of creating networks is emphasised. Networks are taken up as an individual benefit as well as an overall benefit for the party. The individual’s personal network is seen as an important resource in solving tasks within commissions that may be complex and full of responsibility. Contacts are assumed to encourage the exchange of ideas, which can develop the party’s politics, so it is not so much their significance for the individual’s career that is important, but rather their role in the organisational infrastructure, which facilitates the exchange of experience and the development of knowledge. This, it is assumed, improves both the individual’s and the party’s capacity to solve different tasks.

There are centrally planned study activities in the Social Democratic Party, the explicit purpose of which is to train future leaders in the party. For example, prior to the 2010 election, there was a project named ‘Leadership Development 600’, the overall aim of which was ‘to contribute to winning the 2010 election by developing leadership skills among 600 new and relatively new leaders’ (Social Democratic Party, 2007). This scheme, which interviewees referred to as the 600 Leader Course, had been preceded by a similar though slightly larger project (the 900 Leader Course). Starting from an overall model established at the national level, party districts were given the task of producing training courses in cooperation with ABF and local folk high schools. Participants on these courses were to be recruited and nominated locally by worker municipalities (the municipal level of the party organisation).

Yes, as I understood things, it was about recruiting people who were competent and intended to become chairpersons on councils, boards, and, in the long run, become municipal commissioners or members of parliament [...] at that level. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the local level)

People given the opportunity of participating were expected to make the necessary sacrifices of their time that the training required, including weekends away on courses. There was, thus, a feeling of exclusivity to the selection process for this training; not just anybody could participate. It was an education for the chosen few who were likely to hold prominent political positions in the party in the future. The participants also described the structure of the training in a way that seems to
underline this exclusivity. Participants on the courses had the chance to talk informally with people who had prominent positions in the labour movement.

We invited a lot of top people, who could . . . I know once it was Jonny Andersson, I think that’s his name, he was head of a nomination committee in parliament, if it was the home office, or whatever it’s called. And then once Stefan Löfven was there, the chair of [the industrial workers’ union] IF Metals [later party leader and prime minister]. We got to discuss politics with them, and this was before the congress and before the elections, and so, so it was a good thing. (Interviewee, employed by the Social Democratic Party at the local level)

By meeting guest visitors, such as union chairs or the party secretary, participants could gain insider information and have the opportunity to talk with party leaders. In this manner, the training course plays a role for the party organisation since it builds up an infrastructure for communication and identification between those with central posts in the party and the participants, who are expected by their local worker municipality to become leaders in the long run. The training was part of a selection process through which (potential) political leaders were locally selected and initiated into an inner circle of influential party representatives.

**Internal positioning and distinction**

So far, the role of intra-organisational education has been discussed in terms of benefits for the party’s organisation. However, some intra-organisational education and knowledge sharing are also described as problematic for the organisation. An interviewee in the Left Party describes experiences from study activities in the party’s youth association (Young Left) below.

> Sometimes it’s almost like it’s important to have a real working class background, it was also important that you knew your Marx, a little, which I imagine how it was, stereotypically, in the 1970s, when you sat and stared at your navel and read loads of Marx and were totally stuffed with different theoretical concepts and ideology. There was a culture, or a spirit, when you hadn’t read so much of that stuff, which I hadn’t when I joined the Young Left, when you felt a bit like . . . you weren’t in the same division, the same league. (Interviewee, employed by the Left Party at the central level, responsible for party educational issues)

In the type of power structure described in the excerpt, based on the interviewee’s experience of the youth association, theoretical knowledge is used to establish an informal hierarchy in an organisation. Even though a specific type of knowledge is given in the example, it is reasonable to assume that knowledge and studies of different types can have this hierarchy-creating role. Party studies from such an angle may be important as arenas for internal positioning and creating hierarchies in the way described by the interviewee, i.e. an opportunity to expose those who know, or do not know, ‘their Marx’, or any other type of theoretical knowledge that is ascribed status and recognition.

Another kind of internal positioning that can be connected to educational activities is described in the quotation below of an interviewee with long experience from SSU (the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League). The study contents are described as consistent with an internal positioning of SSU districts in an ongoing struggle between the right and the left within the organisation.

> These training courses depended on which district you came from of course, how they were structured. The SSU was very much organised along the lines of which district you came from, as well as which side you were on in this big struggle of the 1990s and the 2000s, [between] those who called themselves the left district and those who called themselves the right district. If you took the descriptions of the different training courses and put them side by side, you wouldn’t believe that it was the same organisation. Marx had a very large part in the courses in the left districts, whereas in the right districts he wasn’t even mentioned. […] In Stockholm county [a ‘right district’], there was more emphasis on practical organisation, practical politics, and practical municipal politics. (Interviewee, employed by ABF at the local level)

Rather than producing an ideological community within the organisation, according to this description, the studies became part of the organisation’s internal power struggle with an ideological character. Districts and factions position themselves in relation to each other, rather than in relation to another party.
Summary of results: four roles of party-political education

Through an analysis of interviewees’ accounts, four different types of roles of education from a party and/or an organisational perspective were identified. Two of these – training for a social infrastructure and training as internal positioning and distinction – have a relational character. The other roles, ideological training and training skilled members and leaders – are more concerned with issues of knowledge in that the study content is given central importance. Even though it is possible to analytically distinguish the knowledge-oriented roles from the relationship-oriented roles, in practice they are interwoven. Several roles can be found in one and the same training course or study activity.

These four roles of party-political education are related to the tradition and infrastructure of Swedish popular education in the sense that ABF is still deemed to play an important role in supporting the endeavours of the labour movement, especially the Social Democratic Party. As a result of a shrinking member base, the interviewees recognise the lack of knowledge in areas considered important – ideological knowledge and organisational skills. Some decades ago, these insights and skills were widely acquired through a more widespread engagement in associations and social movements, such as trade unions.

We do not claim that the four categories of roles of education in political parties, presented in the present study, should be regarded as valid for education in political parties in general. Our conceptualisation primarily represents patterns found in a specific setting and in a specific set of data. However, by introducing these findings to a scholarly debate and relating them to previous research, as we will do in our concluding remarks, our ambition is to contribute to a more general, and in that sense, theoretical, understanding of education in political parties.

Concluding remarks: party-political popular education and representative democracy

Through interviews with strategic and knowledgeable insiders, this article has shown that party-political popular education activities, in the sense of self-organised studies, still exist and play a significant role in representative democracy in Sweden today. This is not part of a bygone era; in absolute terms, such activities are more widespread than in the ‘golden age’ that is often assumed to have occurred around the time of the implementation of democracy in Sweden. Of the different parliamentary member parties of ABF, the Social Democratic Party, in particular, has developed distinct educational activities. Even though the Left Party no longer sees itself as actively marginalised for political reasons, its educational activities are still rather loosely integrated with ABF. The reasons given by interviewees for the relatively low level of study activities of the Left Party are a lack of established cooperation procedures and limited resources in terms of few and busy members, rather than tensions between two political branches of the labour movement (Social Democrats and Communists).

The knowledge-oriented and relationship-oriented roles of party-political popular education presented in our study find some support in previous research. Especially the knowledge-oriented roles – ideological training and training skilled members and leaders – have significant similarities with findings in previous research. For example, the party-political training of the Chinese Communist Party provides education in practical and organisational skills as well as ideological studies (Shambaugh, 2008). Previous research has pointed out traits of social control and the reproduction of existing norms in the relational roles of political education (Clover et al., 2011; Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008). The two relationship-oriented roles in our analysis are, to some extent, related to these types of issues. These have both positive and negative connotations in the interviewees’ depictions. The role of training for a social infrastructure has traits of building relationships on the members’ own terms as well as identification with the leadership, to some degree, both of which are preferred outcomes of training, according to the interviewees. Conversely, the role of training as internal positioning and distinction is depicted as having the unwanted traits of creating subfractions within the party and positioning some members as less knowledgeable than others. This positioning and distinction could possibly also be linked to the
reproduction of restricting norms (cf. Clover et al., 2011), however, this is not something our interviewees explicitly touched upon.

Apart from the role of developing the organisational and debating skills of members and leaders, which reasonably could be handled in external educational arenas (in for example, trade unions, general speech classes and universities), it is difficult to see that education and training outside the party organisation could replace intra-party education. The other roles, to a greater or lesser degree, are based on the activity being connected to and carried out within a political party organisation; they are related to the creation of internal relationships and ideological cohesion. The general increase in the level of education in society can hardly be said to have made this activity redundant or less important for the parties. It appears that party-political studies are, first and foremost, about aspects other than developing the members’ general knowledge of social and political life, which could be done through a social science course at a university, for example.

There are even indications that party-political studies are ascribed a greater significance as social changes take place, such as those seen over the last few decades, in particular, the sharp fall in party membership numbers and the decrease in involvement in traditional popular movements. On the one hand, it seems that party-political studies have come to be seen as a more important provider of knowledge concerning organising and ideology, which was previously acquired through participation in popular movements. On the other hand, new demands are made for quickly preparing new members for positions of trust at a time when there are fewer and fewer members available for these positions in political assemblies. Political scientists have pointed out that the trend of downturn in membership during the past three decades indicates that it may be difficult to fill positions of trust in local parliaments in the future (Gilljam et al., 2010, p. 10).

So far, however, the parties studied here have a sufficient number of members to provide a base for political positions of trust, even though this base from which new representatives must come is shrinking and a larger proportion of members are, therefore, needed for recruitment to political positions. This creates challenges, especially when a generation-shift occurs in the political parties. When an older generation of politicians, who gained their political and organisational skills at a time when party links to popular movements were stronger, are to be gradually replaced by a new generation with new forms of previous knowledge, a situation is created that the parties must address.

In parliamentary democracies, where political power is strongly linked to party organisations, it is worth noting that the arrangements for training and education organised by the parties appear to be central practices. Through research in this area, we can better understand the learning processes that form the political representatives through whom representative democracy is governed.

In this article, we solely focused on aspects explicitly described by organisers of intra-party education. We also focused on only two labour movement parties in a specific national setting. These limitations call for further research in order to develop an understanding of intra-party education more generally. We conclude this article by pointing out some possible areas for further research.

A first remark is that the use of critical theoretical perspectives and other sources of data (participant interviews, study material, survey data, etc.), which shift focus beyond the views of insider party functionaries, may be a generative approach to illuminate the norms and power structures of party-political education, revealing, for instance, patterns related to class and gender (e.g. Clover & McGregor, 2011). The role of party-political education in the construction of organisational identity is another aspect that was not addressed explicitly by our informants. Analysing centrally designed study material for members may reveal how the organisational leadership uses education as a tool to construct a collective identity (e.g. Jansson, 2013). Party-political education in other parliamentary parties, whether green, conservative, liberal, or nationalist, would also make an interesting topic for further research. Do the study activities have a similar structure, and do the same types of educational ideas operate in other parties? International comparative perspectives would be welcome as well, illuminating the role of the intra-party education organised by parties in different national political systems.
A number of unknown pieces of the puzzle remain to be laid out before we can see how popular education, as well as other forms of intra-party education, currently influence party-political life. However, it can be ruled out straight away that this influence, at least in the Swedish context, is only historical.

Note

1. The analysis is a development of a previous discussion on the various functions of education in political parties, published in Swedish (Nordvall, 2013).

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