Politics and Policy on the Dark Side of the Town is a study of the conditions for political engagement in poor residential areas. The starting point is that individuals’ possibilities to take part in political life to some extent depend on the attributes of their local environments. In accordance with the scholarly literature on similar causal relationships, I refer to this as contextual influences. A contextual effect is present when individuals’ attitudes and behaviour in some way are affected by the social or institutional characteristics of their surroundings. Such effects may thus be the result of differences between local geographical areas—differences that, in turn, are consequences of prevalent segregation patterns in the society as a whole.

Segregation as a Threat against Democracy

In Sweden (as elsewhere in Europe) ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods’ are found in the metropolitan periphery. Along with lower socio-economic status on an aggregate level, these neighbourhoods display high unemployment rates and, accordingly, high dependencies on welfare support. To put it bluntly, they are the poverty areas of the welfare state. Infamous as they are, these areas represent locations on the dark side of the town.

Official statistics describing poor areas breed concern, which is reflected in the public debate as well as in official reports. Several government commissions have studied the state of affairs in poor areas during the 1990’s, and have concluded that the situation has become increasingly gloomy. Of special interest for this study is that the spiral of decline is also believed to encompass political engagement—or rather disengagement. For instance, the Commission on Metropolitan Problems concludes in its final report:

Democracy moves backwards in the disadvantaged areas. Voter turnout declines steadily, in local as well as in national elections. Political activity is low and many people feel that they lack power over the most important domains of everyday life. As a result, powerlessness grows, nourishing an intensified sense of exclusion, in relation to both democratic institutions and the surrounding society [my translation].

Statements of this kind seem to be founded on the presumption that residential segregation in itself causes political apathy. People in poor areas tend to feel excluded from democracy at least partly as a result of where they live.
Thus, they would have been more politically engaged if they instead had been living in neighbourhoods with higher socio-economic status. The idea is fascinating, or even provoking, but why should we expect the environments of poor residential areas to have negative consequences for political commitment?

Explaining Contextual Influences

As a result of segregation, social groups tend to be disproportionately represented in different parts of a city. This may have consequences for political engagement since the social environment—resulting from the specific population composition of a neighbourhood—can influence the attitudes and behaviour of its residents. Utilising this insight from contextual analysis, the implicit presumption, on which the concerns expressed in public reports are based, may be transformed to an empirically testable hypothesis.

However, a carefully reasoned contextual analysis also requires a theoretical explanation. One must be able to identify the social and psychological mechanisms through which a certain contextual factor may affect the individual. I propose a flexible model of contextual influences on political attitudes and behaviour. According to this model, a contextual factor—as, for instance, the population composition of a residential area—affects the quality of the resource pool and the information flow of a given context.

Previous research has repeatedly demonstrated that resources of various kinds are important for individuals’ possibilities to participate in political life. An example is that those who are better educated, for instance, have an advantage in that they have acquired skills and knowledge that facilitate participation. Individual resources are, obviously, largely determined at the individual level (e.g. by factors such as educational background and work experience). However, it is also plausible that resources are developed in local contexts. Individuals may profit from informal contacts and social networks in a neighbourhood where the general resource level is high (a neighbourhood with a well-supplied resource pool). A fair assumption is for instance that immigrants will find it easier to learn Swedish in locations where there are plenty of opportunities to encounter, and perhaps socialise with, native speakers.

Another key to contextual influences is the locally determined information-flow. As residents of a certain area, individuals receive information that in one way or the other is ‘biased’. The content of the messages conveyed, through causal encounters, will to some extent depend on the relative repre-
representation of different social groups in a given context. Comparing residential areas with different population compositions, one may for instance find systematic differences in terms of political opinions and behaviour patterns. Such collective properties are likely to be perceived and interpreted by individual residents. A person interacting with, or merely observing, other people in the near environment will have reason to evaluate and adjust her or his perspectives and behaviour. Context-specific information may thus be important as individuals form their political attitudes; but also as they develop ideas regarding civic virtues and the meaningfulness of political participation.

This study also finds that both mechanisms outlined above seem reasonable as explanations for contextual effects. The study also shows that the resource pool and information-flow of a residential area may be determined by its population composition, but also by local institutional arrangements.

**Contextual Effects on Political Engagement—Empirical Findings**

The empirical investigation begins with a test of the hypothesis that living in poorer areas will make individuals less politically engaged. The analysis is based on data from a large-scale survey, containing individual as well as contextual level information. Specifically, the analysis focuses on residential area unemployment rates (which may be regarded as a measure of the degree of poverty on the aggregate level) using observations for respondents living in Swedish cities.

The analysis indicates that there are contextual influences of neighbourhood unemployment rates. Moreover, the statistical evidence points in a direction consistent with public concerns. Controlling for individual employment status (along with other important individual level factors) there are significant negative effects of area unemployment rate on a number of indicators of political engagement. The residents of high-unemployment areas—including those who are employed—tend to be less active in political life (for instance, by voting less frequently). Similarly, they tend to be less politically interested, and they also tend to have a weaker sense of political efficacy. These tendencies are important as they indicate that individuals do not refrain from political participation because they are content with their current situation. Rather, the result suggests that residents of poor areas to a higher degree experience powerlessness, and therefore consider it less meaningful to take part in democratic life.
A more detailed analysis shows that the negative contextual effects on political participation are also caused by inequalities regarding resource networks. For instance, residents of poor areas are to a lesser extent subjects of political recruitment efforts; they receive fewer requests from others to engage in political activities and, correspondingly, refrain more habitually from political participation. Thus, the misgivings of public reports seem to be justified. The level of political engagement drops as poverty in the near environment becomes more pronounced. Hence, social segregation as such seems to bear some responsibility for the differences in actual political equality that can be observed.

However, the picture becomes more complex in the second part of the empirical investigation, where focus is shifted and differences in contextual characteristics between poor areas are studied. Their similarities notwithstanding, it turns out that neighbourhoods of this kind exhibit substantial variations in immigrant density. A reasonable assumption is that this contextual factor should reinforce feelings of exclusion in poor areas. Presumably, the conditions for political engagement are even worse in poor areas where a particularly large proportion of the residents are immigrants.

This negative expectation is, however, not empirically confirmed by the study. Using survey data based upon a sample of residents in nine poor areas of greater Stockholm, no negative relationship between immigrant density and political engagement is found. This result is also corroborated by a complementary analysis, in which official demographic and election statistics for all electoral districts in the nine selected residential areas are used to make ecological inferences (by means of a method recently developed by Gary King). Contrary to initial assumptions, the analysis reveals significant positive effects for the sense of political efficacy. This suggests that residents of poor areas that are more densely populated by immigrants express more positive attitudes regarding their potential possibilities for political influence. Furthermore, this tendency can be observed for immigrants as well as for natives.

The contextual effect thus revealed may at first seem incomprehensible. A possible explanation is, however, that area-based urban renewal programs may influence the sense of political efficacy. Government sponsored projects have continuously been initiated in poor areas since the 1970’s. These activities expanded during the 1990’s and have to an increasing extent become characterised by the ideals of participatory democracy. Thus, public officials work together with volunteer citizens and associations to improve the living conditions of ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods’ in various ways. Within the framework of these renewal programs, residents are encouraged
to make their voices heard and are given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

In the final part of the empirical investigation, the scope and durability of government programs launched in poor areas are studied. In addition, data based on in-depth interviews is also analysed, in an effort to assess the plausibility of the proposed explanation.

According to available information, program intensity is not constant across neighbourhoods. Instead, poor areas exhibiting higher immigrant density seem to have been especially favoured in this particular respect. This variation in local institutional arrangements is likely to be important since it may explain the unexpected positive contextual effect on political efficacy. Differences concerning attitudes of this kind between residents of different areas are presumably not a consequence of variations in immigrant density. They may, however, be related to the observed variation in terms of the ‘policy density’ that poor areas exhibit.

Moreover, interview data reveals that residents are well aware of the measures taken to improve living conditions in their areas, even if they do not actively participate in projects themselves. This awareness also seems to be reflected in a more positive outlook concerning the possibilities for political influence, at least at the local level. The results from this study thus suggest that the policy response to perceived problems in poor areas may have enhanced a sense of political efficacy—thereby promoting actual political equality and, hence, also the health of democracy.