

Master Thesis in political science  
Department of political science  
Lund University  
Word Count: 19707

# Peripheral Sweden

An in-depth study of geographical inequality and  
support for right-wing populism



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

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Master Thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

After the major populist events such as Trump and Brexit, the media politicians turned their attention to the socio-economic and political division between big cities and small countryside communities. Rural areas where right-wing populist parties have found a large part of their support have become “left-behind places”, described as forgotten and misunderstood. The question of why these populations give their support to far right movements is almost exclusively answered by political experts, journalists, or through hard figures. Despite the great academic attention on the subject, very few have given the population that they try to understand a chance to express their viewpoints. Based on previous research about right-wing populism and structural vulnerability, this study explores how the term “left behind” can be conceptualized and shed light on the success of right-wing populist parties in structurally vulnerable rural areas. I suggest that these places with advantage can be understood to be both politically and economically abandoned and that such a situation creates dissatisfaction in line with the theory of relative deprivation, making it a breeding ground for right-wing populist parties. In order to explore this, I conducted a most-likely case study on the rural municipality of Ljusnarsberg, including interviews with inhabitants in the constituency of Ställdalen. The analysis suggests that both economical and cultural abandonment play a role in the success of RWPP parties but that much of the dissatisfaction found among the inhabitants can be attributed to the socio-economic situation and not a profound value difference with the rest of society.

**Key Words:** Left behind places, Relative deprivation, Right-wing Populism, Socio-economic and cultural-political abandonment.

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## List of abbreviations

**RWPP:** Right-Wing Populist Parties

**SD:** Swedish Democrats

**LB:** Left-Behind

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## 1.0 Introduction

“The high visibility vest (yellow vest) or safety vest is a high visibility garment considered as personal protective equipment, *intended to improve the visibility of a person (...)*” (Guilluy, 2019. p.5)

In the debate following the eruption of the Yellow Vests movement, the sociologist Didier Eribon and his book "*Retour à Reims*" received much attention (Eribon, Didier. 2009). In the book, the author takes a break from his mundane life among Parisian intellectuals and returns to his hometown Reims, where he rediscovers the working-class world of his childhood. He discovers that his formerly communist family is now voting for the Rassemblement National (former FN). Through conversations with his mother, the division between people who are able to speak for themselves and people who are only ever spoken about becomes clear. In an interview study across regions of rural France, the geographer and sociologist Christophe Guilly tries to understand this division that seems to have been growing out of site for people in the big metropolises. He observes that “*the sense of being demoted from the center of the national destiny to the periphery of its consciousness is an important driver in the opposition to the government and established elites*” (2018, p. 179). Similar patterns of discontent are expressed in comparable studies and literary work across the western world (Gest, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018; Louis. E, 2014; J.D. Vance 2016; Mathieu 2016, 2018; Eribon 2013; Lawrence. R, 2019; Guilluy, 2016), including Sweden where Patrik Lundberg’s book “*Fjärilsvägen*” (2020) describes a changing welfare society through the story of his mother and her life in Sölvesborg - the hometown of Jimmie Åkesson.

The point of departure and inspiration for this project is a mixture of this type of ethnographic literature that delves deep into the life and attitudes of some of the

social groups most open to populist appeals and the economic reality of growing geographical inequalities. Across national settings, ethnographic literature investigates the same trend and reports similar findings; there is a significant part of the population that feel they are not being valued as an important part of society. The personal economic distress often cited as the reason for the increasing support for right-wing populist parties is part of but not the main answer given in these works. What stands out is a sociotropic concern of a devaluing position within society and anxiety about the direction of society as a whole, which arguably has translated into support for right-wing populist movements (Gidron and Hall 2018, Spruyt 2016, Rydgren 2016).

In this context, the term “left behind” places (hereafter LB-places) has been widely used to explain the rise of populism. As globalisation has concentrated job opportunities and riches in big cities, many rural communities, it is argued, are abandoned to face the negative consequences of globalisation and deindustrialisation. These places are described as engines for right-wing populism, driving anti-establishment revolts such as the yellow vests and the Brexit movement.

Within the academic discussion, there are two dominant theoretical explanations that animate the demand-side of the debate on the success of right-wing populist parties today. Both of these have been associated with and argued for in terms of LB-places. One is based on the argument that their appeal is rooted in a declining economic situation, usually referred to as the economical explanation (Klein, 2017). The other explanation points to the cultural changes that have taken place during the past decades and argues that the dominant liberal politics has generated a “cultural backlash” among voters with more traditional values (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Both schools have found support, although not unambiguous, for their arguments in research. But the term LB-places is somewhat ambiguous since

there appears to be no real consensus around the conceptualisation within the academic field

## 1.2 Statement of purpose

This paper will explore the concept of LB-places and how it can be used to understand the rise of SD in the municipality of Ljusnarsberg, a small community in the Swedish countryside. This will be done through a conceptualization of the term “ Left Behind places” combining both cultural and economic factors, and by arguing that it can be understood in terms of relative deprivation. Based on this conceptualization I will argue that Ljusnarsberg is an example of a municipality that can be described as an LB-place and then analyze interviews carried out with inhabitants in order to understand their opinion about how the country is doing and the perception they have of their place in society. Although the regional inequality and the support for SD have been rising in Sweden during the past decades, no in-depth qualitative study like this has been carried out before.

The aim is to gain a better understanding of the population that lives in these social milieus and by extension a better understanding of the success of right-wing populist parties in these areas. On a general level, this work is an addition to the debate about the disruptive effects of globalization and the consequences it has for people in a place that arguably can be described as LB.

### 1.3 Research question:

- How can the term left behind be conceptualized and understood in a Swedish context?
- And, how can this conceptualization of Left Behind places, in combination with the theory of relative deprivation, help to understand the support for SD in Ljusnarsberg?

To try and answer these questions a qualitative case study has been carried out in the municipality of Ljusnarsberg in Örebro county in Sweden.

## 2.0 Previous literature

There exists a tension between LB as primarily a socio-economic concept related to the globalisation of the economy and LB as a politically-cultural concept related to value differences or status anxiety within certain groups. Even though one can distinguish between cultural and economic explanatory models, studies often consist of a blend of different explanations that are woven together or put in relation to each other. The clear links between the LB and the perverse effects of globalization on parts of the population in the western world make it a potential causality of broader debates about the main causes of populism. The topic is most of the time a subcategory of research on RWPP, where the concept of LB is part of a broader set of demand-side explanations but seldomly at the center of the research. This is why reviewing the literature on the concept of LB means reviewing the literature on the causes of RWPP. With this in mind, the following section will examine how the term has been used in existing literature, how it has been defined, and why some scholars have criticized the use of it. But first, I will give a short definition of what is meant by right-wing populism in this work.

### 2.1 Right Wing populism

The goal of this research is to examine the concept of LB in a Swedish context and how it can help to explain the success of right-wing populist parties (RWPP). The primary interest is thus not right-wing populist ideological characteristics but rather the opinions of inhabitants in LB-places. Nevertheless, to understand the appeal that these parties can have for people in LB-places, it is important to define the most important characteristics of RWPP. Relevant for this work is the opposition that RWPP parties make between the "pure/ real" people and what they consider to be the corrupt and politically correct elite (Rydgren, 2005).

The other important point is the ethnic-nationalist basis of their ideology that can be described as ideas and fantasies of the past. In this picture of the past, the nation had a homogeneous normative majority culture that dominated society, which excludes immigrants who are seen as an obstacle to overcome in order to return to this past (Mudde 2007). The elites and immigrants are the collective “others” who vegetate on each other; none of them are like “us”, both steal and rob from the honest majority, neither of them pays their taxes properly, and both regard local traditions and the rural population with indifference and hostility (Ibid.). RWPP positions themselves outside of and in opposition to this elite, claiming to propose an alternative that will prioritize the “real” people. In that capacity it becomes the alternative for so-called protest voting, i.e. voting for a party as a way to protest and show dissatisfaction with other parties and not on the basis of a political conviction that the party can solve the country's problems.

According to Rydgren (2016), Hellström and Lodenius (2016) SD fits into these criteria and can be described as a right-wing populist party. There is an interdisciplinary debate on what the crucial features of right-wing populism are but it is beyond the topic of this research. The characteristics outlined here are relatively accepted as central features within the academic field.

## 2.2 The socio-economic conception of the LB

In their comparison between the economical and cultural explanations, Inglehart and Norris observe that the concept of LB is typically part of the conceptual armor of the socio-economic perspective (2016, p.8). A lot of research carried out in this field starts by pointing out that in most western countries the support for RWPP is strongest in structurally vulnerable rural areas (Goodwin and Heath 2016, Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2016, Ehrenberg-Shannon and Wisniewska 2017a, Ehrenberg-Shannon and Wisniewska 2017b, Roth och Wolff 2017, Vestin E.

2018). In their discussion about the reason for the success of UKIP in Great Britain, Foord and Goodwin (2014) states just that and argue that the economic and social changes of the last few decades have hit some groups in society harder than others, namely older people, less skilled and less educated working-class voters in structurally vulnerable areas. These are the groups described as being LB. The economic changes referred to here are unemployment, stagnating wages, living standards, and deterioration of local welfare services that often are vital for low-income earners (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, p. 133). Of course, these problems differ between and within countries, but they all have in common that they are caused by socio-economic dislocation and according to this perspective it is what defines LB-places and drives the support for populist politics.

Other scholars such as Guilluy (2018) and Rodriguez-Pose (2018) concur with the socio-economic diagnostic but also stresses the significance of the spatial dimension. According to them, abandonment of “places that don’t matter” also has to be understood as a consequence of the neo-liberal economic policies that have created a free development of high-growth clusters in the big cities and as a consequence an abandonment of regional development. This has contributed to the creation of a populist revolt with strong territorial foundations (Rodriguez-Pose 2018). The focus is here not solely on the socio-economic problems but also on the place-based effect of socio-economic change.

This socio-economic approach understands LB-places as a product of economic globalization. What drives economic development in this direction is increased free trade and mobility of people over national borders, undermining the situation of low skilled workers in the western world (Gordon, 2018). This is also true for high-growth clusters, created out of the need to specialize and exploit comparative advantages to stay competitive in a globalized economy, which has led to increasing regional inequality. According to Pose, urban policy is driven by the belief that policymakers have invested in this economic model since the 1980s

(2018, p.189-93). In other words, the development of regional inequality is not only driven by the impersonal forces of globalization but is a result of active political choices. As a result of being neglected and feeling disrespected by mainstream politicians, anger and disappointment grow among "LB voters" and the anti-establishment rhetoric of RWPP becomes more attractive (Guilluy 2018, Pose 2018, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Rydgren 2017).

There is no sharp dividing line between town and countryside but when comparing the geographical distribution of RWPP strongholds in western countries, with that of socioeconomically vulnerable areas, a correlation becomes distinguishable (Ibid.). However, correlation is not causation and studies carried out in Europe and the US, exploring socio-economic variables, as a possible explanation for this pattern, have yielded ambiguous results (Rydgren 2016). Socio-economic vulnerability is mainly measured by looking at people's position on the labor market, above all in terms of unemployment rate but also variables such as income, amount of early retirees, and people on welfare benefits (Dal Bó, et al. 2018; SOM 2017; Guilluy 2018; Goodwin and Heath 2016).

National and cross-national studies testing the causation between unemployment and support for RWPP have yielded results that both confirm and deny the socio-economic thesis (Arzheimer and Carter 2006, Vestin 2018, Rydgren 2016). According to Rydgren et al., the ambiguity surrounding this explanation variable is much due to the different amount of cases included in the studies, combined with a lack of precision in the geographical delimitations of the studied areas (2016). The consequence is that research is carried out on socio-economically heterogeneous population samples, yielding scattered results (Ibid.). To overcome this issue of precision, Rydgren and Ruth looked at almost all election districts in Sweden (5500) and found a strong and robust negative correlation between unemployment rates and electoral support for RWPP (2011). Criticism has also been leveled at the precision of the method used by many researchers to analyze

the labor market, a method consisting of a division between insider and outsiders. Confirming the negative correlation between unemployment and support for RWPP in the European elections, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou also include the variable of insecure insiders on the labor market, i.e. people whose employment is threatened by new technology and automatization (Halikiopoulou, D., & Vlandas, T. 2019). These findings are attested by Ernesto D, et al. in a Swedish context and suggest that economic insecurity, defined to include insecure insiders, plays a role as a driver for increased support for SD (2019). As the feeling of insecurity accentuates the tension between in-group and out-groups, the unemployment rates can create feelings of relative deprivation and antagonism towards groups that are believed to be prioritized on the labor market (Rydgren 2003, Ibid.). As will become clear further down, the theory based on outsider and insider is here understood as an important part of the concept of LB-places and not an alternative explanation.

In summary, in this account, places are LB because they have been disadvantaged by globalization, urbanization, and industrialization. They have also been politically ignored in favor of major cities and regions of economic importance. Research both denies and confirms this thesis and without claiming to settle this debate, it can be stated that extensive and serious research by experts in the field shows that socio-economic vulnerability is a driving factor in the support for SD in Sweden. This view of LB does not deny the importance of political-cultural values, but it is primarily a socio-economic exclusion that is put at the center of the analysis.

### 2.3 Political-cultural conception of the LB

As already mentioned, the concept of LB is closely associated with the above socio-economic understanding, but there is an alternative explanation, sometimes labeled the cultural perspective, that criticizes the former. Mutz is one of its

advocates, he believes that the LB thesis, as presented in the above section, is misleading in its attempt to understand populism today. The real basis for increased support for populism is instead a perceived status threat among high-status groups (Mutz 2018, p.6). From this perspective, the LB is understood as culturally abandoned rather than economically disadvantaged. Left aside by hard-to-grasp value changes in the media, popular culture, and by younger progressive generations. In their work on "cultural backlash", Inglehart and Norris argue that it is primarily the older generation of voters who run the risk of feeling like strangers in their own country by cultural progressive changes (2016, p. 6). In an attempt to explain Trump's victory, they argue that voters feel LB by LGBT rights, gender equality, and immigration rights (Ibid. P. 25).

The ethnographic studies mentioned in the introduction supports the view that it is a combination of cultural and economic reasons that leads to a narrative of abandonment and support for RWP (Eribon 2013, Cramer 2016, Hochschild 2016, Gest 2016). These studies indicate that people who perceive themselves as being economically underprivileged also tend to feel a cultural distance from the dominant groups in society, a distance experienced as an opposition. This, of course, is in line with the populist rhetoric of pure people versus a corrupt political elite (Müller 2016, Bonikowski et.al. 2016). Another aspect these studies point out is the importance of the spatial segmentation of the support for RWPP today. One of the roots of the populist support today is undoubtedly the unequal regional economic development but regional economic decline also seems to be linked to cultural resentment. The relatively weak support for RWP in big metropolitan centers can be understood to reflect not only relative economic well-being but also an experience of life that encourages distinctive cultural outlooks (Gidron and Hall 2017).

In his study on rural communities in the USA, briefly mentioned in the introduction, Wuthnow (2018) takes this a step further and argues that LB places

are "moral communities" composed of specific common values such as being independent and loyal to one's family. Among the people in these places, anger is born from the feeling that the power elite does not share, look down on, and actively oppose their moral values.

This is confirmed by empirical studies of elections in countries including the UK, the United States, Germany, and France and show that the attitudes of the supporters of RWPP or candidates are based on an underlying worry for both their economic situation and the cultural development of the country (Guilluy 2018; Ford, R., & Goodwin, M. 2014; Hochschild, A. R. 2016). People who voted leave in the Brexit referendum were much more pessimistic about their economic future and hostile towards the dominant culture associated with social liberalism, multiculturalism, gender questions, and conservation of the environment (Gidron and Hall, 2017). It has also been found that increased financial uncertainty is linked to increased anti-immigration attitudes among people in the EU (Guiso 2017)

In Sweden, polls reveal similar opinions among SD supporters. They are much more pessimistic about their economic future and the future of the country than people voting for other parties. On several issues, SD voters have a much more negative opinion than people voting for other parties, including a trust for and the feeling of being respected by politicians, trust for the media, and whether or not one gets value for taxes (Kantar Sifo, 2018). In a survey study from 2018 (Jylhä et al), 98 percent of the respondents believed that immigration is too costly for the country's public finance and that they mobilize resources in the welfare services that native Swedes are entitled to. An interesting aspect is that those who are most economically disadvantaged tend to strongest exaggerate the number of immigrants in the country or region, leading to a spiraling effect that drives even more anti-immigration feelings (Ibid.). These opinions suggest that it is not necessarily the absolute amount of immigrants in the country but rather a

perception of immigrants as a potential threat to one's social position that drives people to vote for RWP parties, accentuated by a relatively bad personal economic situation.

Research shows that the level of education plays a more or less important role as a driver for RWP support all around the western world, following the logic of; the higher the education, the lower the odds that a person will vote for a right-wing populist party and vice versa (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Rothwell and Diego-Rosell, 2016; Ehrenberg-Shannon and Wisiniewska, 2017; Roth och Wolff, 2017; Vestin E., 2018). The fact that people with lower levels of education are overrepresented among RWPP voters is often interpreted as the result of opposition to the cultural shift towards the dominating liberal values in society (Inglehart and Norris 2016). However, studies have shown that the relationship between educational attainment and liberal social values, is the result of individuals already having these attitudes when applying to universities, rather than “learning” these values during their education (Lancee and Sarrasin 2015, Vestin 2018). Such results point towards a selection process rather than socializing effects. People with liberal social values seem to be moving away from the countryside, rather than the education turning them into liberals when they get to university in bigger cities.

From this perspective, LB-places can be burdened by socio-economic problems that are blamed on the elite or immigrants but these problems neither define LB-places nor drive political development there. It is the cultural clash between one's local community and the dominant cultural values in the country that creates the LBs and is the source of their disappointment and anger.

## 2.4 Identifying the research gap

The spatial character of the increasing socioeconomic and cultural inequalities in the western world has been the subject of an intense debate in countries such as

France, the US, and the UK, where elections partially have been decided by inhabitants in what is described as LB-places. In Sweden however, similar debates have not taken shape on a larger scale, even though the regional inequalities have been increasing for many decades and correlate with the support for RWPP (Enflo 2016).

Most studies that are discussed above are based either on extensive statistical material or on a large number of cases. It enables generalizations about voting patterns and behavior but the nature of the standardized large-scale method also imposes limitations. Large-scale quantitative interview studies require that the researchers ask specific questions and provide respondents with standardized responses bound to specific interpretative patterns. In contrast, a qualitative approach aims to describe the living environment from the inside - from the perspective of the inhabitants. Although the qualitative approach doesn't allow for generalization, it can disclose opinions and attitudes of representatives of a group in a deeper and more genuine form. Gathering people's own statements through open-ended questions allows for research to examine individuals' interpretative patterns. That is what this study aims to achieve through arguing for a case study of Ljusnarsberg as an example of a LB-place and doing an in-depth analysis of interviews carried out in the municipality. Hopefully, this will result in a deeper understanding of the opinions, attitudes, concerns, and the population living in LB-places.

## 3.0 Theoretical framework

In this section, I will outline a conceptualization of LB-places based on previous studies presented here above. This will be followed by a presentation of the theory of relative deprivation and how it can be understood to complement the concept of LB-places. Finally, I will discuss how this theoretical framework can be put into relation with the increased support of RWPP.

### 3.1 Conceptualisation of the LB-places

In the light of the existing research on the subject, as well as the fact that the LB label is used to describe both socio-economic vulnerability and cultural isolation, it makes sense to take both these variables into consideration when defining what is meant with LB-places. As suggested by the existing research, a combination of socio-economic and cultural-political exclusion can produce a sense of abandonment and alienation from mainstream society. The interaction between these can be reinforcing, with economic decline undermining confidence in the community's value system. As a result of this, inhabitants might feel a collective alienation from mainstream politics which can be a driver for support for RWPP (ref. Wraight 2017). It is the experience of living in such an area and how it can be understood to result in political opinions that translate into votes for RWPP that is of interest in this paper.

The perceived distance to the state is an important aspect to take into consideration in order to address the approximative character associated with the use of the term LB-places. A perceived distance to the state depends on many factors, including the degree of centralization and how welfare services are provided. In smaller communities, it is likely a matter of public transport, infrastructure, healthcare, and the presence of institutions that are associated with

the state. If these are perceived as bad or worsening, it can increase the social and psychological distance to the state among the inhabitants (Matter 2011). If the state is perceived as present and playing a positive role in the community, feelings of abandonment arguably would have a hard time taking root in the mind of the inhabitants. If the state is instead perceived as absent, a narrative of abandonment is more likely to take root within the community. One could argue that the urban and ethnically mixed communities in the periphery of the big cities should be included in the concept of LB places but the proximity to the central state in the shape of heavy policing, targeted policy interventions as well as the relatively big attention these places get in mainstream media, is likely to result in a different reaction than when the state is perceived to be absent (Bhambra, 2017). Possibly, the perception of an absent state, combined with an economic and cultural exclusion, reinforces a narrative of abandonment and antagonism aimed at the economic and political elite in big cities associated with the state apparatus. It may be part of the explanation for why communities in poor and rural places have a self-image of being LB (Guilluy 2016).

Cultural exclusion is not easy to define in concrete opinions because, unlike economic difficulties, it is specific to a country. Reluctance and opposition to LGBTQ rights, climate change, and gender equality might be questions that divide in the USA but as a comparatively liberal and secular country, these questions are widely accepted among the rural population in Sweden (Vestin, 2016). In Sweden, the feeling that people in power and the mainstream media do not share and look down on their moral values is more likely to be centered around the issue of immigration rights and questions that are part of but not exclusively economic issues such as the survival of a prosperous countryside.

Thus, in this paper LB-places are conceptualized as communities that experience both cultural and socio-economic exclusion, and this experience translates into a narrative of abandonment which includes a perceived distance to the state. I want

to stress that LB is here treated as a perception and narrative among the population rather than an objective reality. The reality might well be that the place has been wrongly treated by the government but to understand the links it might have with support for RWPP in the area, the important thing is whether or not there is a perception of abandonment among the population (Wuthnow, 2018).

Feelings of relative depravity can provide an interpretation of such perception. The sense of relative deprivation offers an explanation as to why people feel they are in a vulnerable and weak position based on the perception that one's situation is a consequence of injustice and discrimination against people "like us" who do not get what they deserve (Gidron and Hall 2017). Just like the definition of LB-places here above, it is based on how a person perceives their status in relation to other groups in society. Thus, in line with the concept of LB-places, it is the experience and interpretation of one's position in relation to the rest of society that is central.

### 3.2 Relative deprivation

Introduced halfway through the last century, the concept of relative deprivation is a key ingredient of social evolution theory. It postulates a subjective state that shapes emotions and cognitions and influences behavior (Pettigrew, et.al., 2008). Relative deprivation can be understood on two levels. An individual can feel relatively deprived due to the person's position within a group, the reference point being ingroup members. A person may also feel relatively deprived due to the ingroup position in society and the comparison is here made between the ingroup and outgroups (Moghaddam 2008). In particular, the comparison between ingroup and outgroups has shown to lead to the development of feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and prejudice against outgroups (Ibid, Pettigrew, et.al.,2008). Relative deprivation can occur due to the perception of material disadvantaged in relation

to others but it can also occur due to feelings of threat to one's social identity (Ibid.)

According to Smith et. al., relative deprivation can be explained in three steps (2012). First, a comparison is made by the individual in question, followed by a cognitive assessment resulting in the perception that one is personally, or as part of a group, at a disadvantage. Finally, the disadvantage must be perceived as unfair. We all constantly compare ourselves with people and groups around us, but feelings of relative deprivation only affect people's behavior if the comparison is perceived as unfair and leads to feelings of dissatisfaction. If so, it can lead to a promotion of outgroup prejudice (Ibid.). Comparison requires that there is a reference to compare with and this is where social identity comes into the picture. Social identity is a key ingredient to the concept of relative deprivation because a strong group identification is required for the point of comparison to become clear (Pettigrew 2011).

Because the feeling of being disadvantaged and unfairly treated as a group is a central element to both the concept of LB-places and relative deprivation, it is useful to elaborate on the socio-psychological mechanism behind it. In all societies, people must create clear group affiliations to be able to distinguish between whom to trust and whom not to trust. The need for cooperation and security justifies the adherence to group norms and behavior. Symbols and behaviors that distinguish the in-group from the out-group ensure that privileges are not extended to out-group members. The differences between in-group and out-group are more or less accentuated and, although not necessarily, can lead to a conflict-ridden and hostile perception under certain conditions. The perception of out-groups as a threat to the in-group's social position, competition over material resources and political power, actual or imagined, are circumstances that accentuate the conflict between in-and-out groups. The notion that one or more out-groups are a threat to the in-groups' interests creates an in-group identification

that is to some extent based on fear and hostility towards the competing out-groups (Brewer, 1999).

In summary, the aspects of relative deprivation that are of interest to this research are group identification, feelings of being treated unfairly, and outgroup prejudice. The identification with one's community can be driven by the feeling of being treated unfairly as a group in relation to more privileged out-groups, toward whom prejudice and feeling of hostility develop.

### 3.4 How it translates into support for RWPP

As already mentioned, the theory of relative deprivation offers a way to understand how the experience of living in LB-places can translate into electoral support for RWPP (Gidron and Hall, 2018). As a descriptive term LB-places implies dynamism, to be left behind suggests an earlier period in which one was not left behind. By painting a picture of a time when things were less complicated when the country was more united and the future looked bright, RWPP taps into this perception of a situation that is getting worse. It is seldom specified when this time was, it is rather a general image consisting of a society that excludes culturally and ethnically different people and against which RWPP projects an image of today's society as corrupt and unfair (Rydgren, 2016).

Coupled with the dynamic perception of a shift over time, the term also implies intent from an outside actor. Generally, one is abandoned by someone else. The dissatisfaction of being economically and culturally disadvantaged in comparison to a prior time period and to other groups in society can translate into a narrative of abandonment and a feeling of not being valued as an important member of society. In small rural communities, it is conceivable that it will be expressed in the perception of state institutions not living up to one's expectations, that the policies pursued do not agree or even oppose one's worldview and instead prioritize other groups in society. Provided that this order of priority is perceived

as unfair and in accordance with the theory of relative deprivation, it can lead to the development of out-group prejudices against contemptuous political elites in big cities and against immigrants who are perceived as prioritized (Pettigrew, 2011). RWPP appeals to this feeling with political rhetoric that pins the “real” people against immigrants and the politically corrupt elite.

Following this logic, it is possible that the experience of living in an LB-place, with all that it entails, leads to a perception of society and the place one holds in it, which creates a breeding ground for RWPP support. The remaining part of the essay will make use of this theoretical framework to explore the case of Ljusnarsberg.

## 4.0 Methodology

Before I go into the methodology, I want to clarify how this thesis took form. City and countryside is the name of the project that I have worked with at Arena Ide - a politically independent think tank financed by labor union organizations (LO). The project is inspired by a German/French project with the name “returned to the politically abandoned” (2018) about right-wing populism and its growth in some parts of France and Germany. The aim was to replicate the study in Sweden and during the spring of 2019, I was involved in designing and carrying out the collection of interviews in six different places in Sweden, including Ljusnarsberg. The case selection and interview material used in this research has initially been chosen and gathered to write and publish a report at the think tank although with a different focus and without the ambition of an academic publication. I have personally been involved in the planning, development, and execution of the project.

This paper aims to explore the extent to which the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter can shed light upon the success of RWPP and can be described as a theory consuming most-likely qualitative case study. Theory consuming because the aim is to use the theoretical framework to explore the mechanisms at play in the specific case of Ljusnarsberg. Most-likely case study because the selection of case has been done based on criteria that allow me to believe that if the theoretical framework does not find the support it is unlikely that it would do so in other places. It is a case study of a social milieu and not a study of RWPP voters. The study is about people in a certain environment: a rural socio-economically vulnerable area, with a high proportion of electoral support for RWPP. The study is not about a specific group of people (e.g. people with a short education or on welfare benefits), because it has not been possible to ask questions about either party sympathies, level of education, or income. Nor is it a

study of the SD voters because it is not certain that it is precisely people who vote for SD who have chosen to talk to us. Instead, it should be seen as a study of people living in a specific environment, a social milieu.

#### 4.1 Case selection

The purpose of a qualitative interview study is to map and describe people's opinions as accurately and broadly as possible. To get a representative sample of a community, the aim is to interview people who are as different from each other as possible but still share the common denominators at the basis of the selection process. In this case, the common denominators are the geographical location (rurality), the socio-economic situation (Vulnerability), and election results at the constituency level (support for RWP). To ensure that the interviews were carried out in places that fit these denominators, the following steps were carried out.

A classification of socioeconomic exposed areas from the Swedish Parliament was used to determine the structurally vulnerable areas in Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag 2018: 151 & 2018: 152). This classification divides the municipalities deemed to require government grants in groups of 32 agglomerations and 30 rural municipalities. The 30 socioeconomically exposed municipalities (rural municipalities) are determined by 1) employment rate, 2) the proportion of long-term unemployed, 3) the proportion with a low level of education, 4) voter turnout, 5) at least 50 percent of the population living in rural areas, and 6) more than 50 percent of the population having 45 minutes or more to an agglomeration (Regeringsbeslut, 2018, IV 9).

Among the municipalities considered to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, the once with the highest proportion of votes for SD were chosen. In table 1 here beneath the socio-economically disadvantaged rural municipalities are sorted by

the proportion of votes for SD in the 2018 parliamentary elections, top five in Sweden.

*Table 1. Socio-economic disadvantaged municipalities sorted by the proportion of votes for SD*

<b>County</b>	<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Proportion of votes for the Sweden Democrats in the 2018 parliamentary elections</b>
Kronobergs country	Markaryd	31,53%
<b>Örebro country</b>	<b>Ljusnarsberg</b>	<b>31,20%</b>
Blekinge country	Ronneby	29,42%
Västra Götalands country	Mellerud	28,55%
Västra Götalands country	Dals-Ed	27,04%

*Sources: Valmyndigheten 2019 and Regeringen 2018a.*

To determine what municipalities are considered more socio-economically vulnerable than others in the table above, a set of variables has been taken into account: percentage of single parents, percentage of highly educated, unemployment rate, and median income. The figures are presented in tables 2 and 3 in the appendix. They are sorted by the highest proportion of election support

for SD. Based on this data, a selection of municipalities considered more disadvantaged has been made. Further, the number of inhabitants, the employment rate, and the share of early retirees has been taken into account in order to create a clearer picture of the area and its vulnerability.

Finally, to find the most vulnerable areas within municipalities, the internal distribution of the state grant within the municipality, which is made on the premises of area-based degree of vulnerability, has been used (see Table 4 in appendix).

### 4.3 Gathering the interview data

The interviews were made through a door to door method. A team of eight coworkers knocked on doors in the chosen neighborhood until at least 50 interviews had been gathered. The minimum amount of interviews were decided through a weighing of time and resources. The interviews were carried out between 17 and 18 November 2019, between 4 and 8 pm in order not to exclude people working during the day.

We used a semi-structured interview method. It implies that the questions are formulated in forehand, that they are structured but allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore themes that seem especially interesting. All interviewees were asked the same set of questions, in the same order. However, the difference in length between interviews is considerable. Some people answered very briefly while others took their time to talk for longer. The study aims to try to understand the interviewees' view of reality, and therefore it has been important to allow them to express themselves freely.

Most interviews were recorded with the help of a phone application and then transcribed by the person who carried out the interview or a professional

transcriber. An individual will always have an impact on the character of the interview, in the way the question is asked, what to emphasize, which answers are worth digging deeper into, etc. (Yin, 2015). The fact that several people were involved in carrying out and transcribing the interviews can thus be an issue for the internal validity of the project. To minimize this impact, all interviewers got a clear review of what the purpose and aim of the study was, as well as a thorough review of the interview guide.

The same goes for the transcription of the interviews. Everyone involved in transcribing the interviews followed the same instructions regarding speech elisions, unfinished sentences, lack of clear-cut ending, laughter, punctuation, etc. (Diefenbach, T. 2009). The audio recording was transcribed in its entirety, including laughter and slang, which resulted in a consistent and comparable textual record.

Although the interviews were conducted randomly in the selected constituencies, the method cannot be described as random for a variety of reasons. The time chosen to knock on doors might rule out some people who are not at home, others might be reluctant to answer the door because of insufficient trust and some immigrants could not speak Swedish or English and therefore could not participate (Esaiasson, P. et.al. 2007).

The relatively large number of interviews gathered, does not increase their validity in a methodological sense. We are usually more convinced by what the majority regards as true and right, but validity is not a numbers game. However, data from a relatively large number of interviews (50 in this case) referring to the same issues will provide a broad picture. It enables cross-checking and comparing data and hopefully can lead to emerging patterns and deeper insights into the matter. Following this logic, an increased number of interviews increases the quality of the research (Diefenbach, T. 2009). That said, there is no good way of

determining what a sufficient number of interviews are. It is up to the researcher to make that decision and in this case, it was limited by time and resources.

A negative aspect of the project, impacting the resulting interview material, was the focus on collecting the right number of interviews, rather than the actual content of the interviews. It resulted in a lot of interviews having the character of quantitative opinion polls rather than qualitative in-depth interviews. That is the reason why only recorded interviews have been included in the analyzed material because the content is richer than a non-recorded interview that was written down on the spot.

Regarding the timeframe of the interviews, one can argue that the “snapshot character” and the lack of longitudinal material is a problem for the internal validity of the data (Deem 2001,p. 14). This is especially true when investigating peoples’ opinions on issues that are affected by their consumption of information. It is reasonable to assume that the dominating themes and viewpoints reported in mainstream media around the time of the interviews have had an impact on the content of the interviews. To address this issue the interview material is complemented with other resources, especially from the *Samhäll, Opinion, Medier Institutet* (SOM-institute), providing the paper with more longitudinal and quantitative research on people's opinions, giving the research more balance. I have also briefly lined out the topics and events that got a lot of attention in national and local media around the time that the interviews were carried out. This to give some perspective of the impact recent events reported by the media might have had on the content of the interviews (Diefenbach, T. 2009).

However, while this might have a balancing effect on the research, it does not remove the influence that time and place has on the interview data. This is one of the reasons why this research cannot claim to be representative of a bigger

population but rather a case study of a social milieu and part of the population living in it.

#### 4.4 Selecting and grouping of data

The question of how to discriminate between important and irrelevant data is something all researchers using a qualitative method need to address. The goal is to give a valid description of what has been investigated and the assumption and expectation is therefore that the data is selected “objectively”. Unfortunately, there is no blueprint pointing to the importance and relevance of the content of interviews or how data is related to each other. It is up to the researcher to make subjective decisions. The problem is that a researcher has an agenda and might, consciously or not, select and arrange the data according to the story he/she wants to see emerge (Achenbaum 2001).

A way to address this issue is to invite a second researcher to code the interviews and compare the results to improve the quality of the coding. For this project, it is not possible and even the most detailed coding still requires subjective decisions on what to include and what to exclude. The simple and somewhat “unscientific” answer to this issue is that the reader has to trust the researchers’ integrity, based of course on the reflexivity and honesty of the work that is presented. The dire reality is that there simply is no objective qualitative research. It is a creative process and the result of the research is a translation of the talent, interests, and influence that the researcher, consciously or unconsciously, takes into account during the process (Diefenbach, T. 2009).

Following the logic of grounded theory, this project uses an inductive approach to the interview data to better explore the material and try to avoid forcing a story onto the coding and analysis of the interviews. Given that the data collection has already been carried out using a semi-structured interview method, it is not

possible to make use of the entire potential in grounded theory for the analysis. Therefore, only parts of grounded theory are used.

When gathering data using grounded theory an important step is to start the analytical part of the project during the collection of the data. The researcher has an idea and a focus but lets the collecting process guide and steer the collection of data towards possible leads that occur. Also, the goal is to get as much data as possible on the subject, their lives, the place where the collection is made, the experience of the researcher, the perception that he/she has of the interviewee, etc. (Yin, 2015).

These two procedures have not been used in the collection of the data for this project. To some extent they are fulfilled, for example, if there was something special that hindered a good conversation, the interviewer has commented on this. Details of the neighborhood where the interviews were carried out are presented but never were the questions adjusted, nor did the answers guide the continued research. Hence, the use of grounded theory starts when coding the data.

Grounded theory emphasizes the development of analytical categories rather than constructing tightly framed theories that generate hypotheses and make explicit predictions (Charmaz, K. 2007). Since the data gathering process and methodology in this project does not allow for the full potential of grounded theory to express itself, it will make use of the exploratory strength of the method rather than the theory development.

#### 4.5 Coding the data through grounded theory

After having familiarized myself with the data, the first step is to create codes that explore what the interviews express about the research issue. Preconceived codes used in quantitative coding methods were not used. Instead, using line-by-line coding made it possible to stay close to the data and avoid taking off on

theoretical “flights of fancy” or input my motives and an excessive amount of preconceived understanding onto the data (Charmaz, K. 2007). This way each idea earns its way into the analysis (Glaser, 2007). It is a good way to apply self-criticism to the theories of the discipline, especially in a case like this when the risk of being influenced by a similar study is big. Line-by-line coding does run the risk of becoming in a way “too close” to the data and losing sight of the big picture and overall message of it. That is why it is important to keep going back to the original interview transcription to have continuity from the original text until the final categorization (Diefenbach, T. 2009).

Through writing and rewriting codes I sharpen an abstract analysis to define essential properties and relationships while providing sufficient actual data to demonstrate how my analysis is grounded in the data (Ibid. p. 40-5). This way I hope to do justice to the voices of the population that have been interviewed rather than forcing a theoretical filter upon the data.

The interviews were translated from Swedish to English by myself. The language used in the interviews is familiar and no major complications occurred during the translation.

## 4.6 Reflexivity

Before coding the data it is important to reflect on the influence that the researcher has on the data, the collection of data, the interview situation, etc. A way of doing this is to write down preconceived perceptions of what I will find in the data, to avoid biases in the coding process.

The organisation where I did my internship is a think tank called Arena Idé and it is financed by labor unions. It is not bound to any political party but can be described to have a wage worker perspective as guidelines in its activities. Part of

the reason why the think tank decided to carry out this project has to be understood in the light of the big amount of lost voters from the Social Democrats to SD. That said, it has been clearly stated from the start that the ambition of the project has been that of scientific research, with ethical integrity and transparency.

The German/French study that has been the inspiration of this project has to be taken into account as a possible influence in the finished product (Hilje, J., 2018). As the interview material has been gathered using the same questions and methods the outcome is also bound to be similar and there is a risk of influence on the results of this study. This risk is minimized by the difference in research questions, purpose, and academic requirements. I have nevertheless decided not to dig deeper into the result section of that German/French study before finishing the analysis of the interviews.

Carrying out the interviews through a door to door method has its advantages and disadvantages. The biggest disadvantage is that the interviewee has not gotten the time to prepare for the interview beforehand and in that way be able to give a more reflected and complete answer to the questions. Also, the immediate character of carrying out an interview on the doorstep is potentially inhibitory for the honesty of the interviewee since the person carrying out the interview is a stranger (Esaiasson, P. et.al. 2012).

The positive aspect is that a lot of the people that were interviewed would probably not have been reachable with other methods and when focusing on a part of the population that might be skeptical to politics and “the establishment”, knocking on their door and presenting oneself in person is an effective way of breaking that barrier. Also, the fact that the interviews were carried out in an environment that is familiar and safe for the interviewee, i.e. their home, is positive for the honesty since there is a feeling of being in control of the situation (Britten, 2006).

The fact that we, the interviewers, came from Stockholm to carry out interviews on the topic of geographical/social differences may be charged with certain connotations. It is possible that some interviewees would experience this as condescending as if we were sent from the capital to see how “ordinary people” were doing. One person interviewed in Skåne humorously said that the fact that we had come from Stockholm to ask for his opinion gave him hope for the future, suggesting that the capital generally doesn't care about the rest of the country. This perception might entail suspicion and thus be an obstacle for the interview. To avoid such perceptions, the fact that we had come from Stockholm was left out, unless the interviewee asked.

#### 4.7 Media

A brief account of the news and events covered in the national and regional media will be outlined here. This to somewhat bridge the validity problem that arises due to the "snapshot" character of the interviews and to increase the understanding of the interviewees' opinion.

During the year 2019 and especially at the time of the interviews, the national media coverage was strongly dominated by shootings and gang criminality and there was a vivid debate around integration and immigration. Just a couple of days before the interviews were carried out, some particularly noteworthy murders linked to gang criminality had taken place in Malmö where both victims and suspects had foreign-sounding names (SVT (c), 2019). One can assume that this media climate at the time and the attention the murder in Malmö received in the media affected people's answers. It is probable that if the interviews had been carried out for example in the spring of 2020, the answers would have been focusing on the pandemic at the expense of for example criminality.

## 5.0 Analysis

The following chapter will explore the geographical character of the support for the SD and how it can be understood in relation to the concept of LB-places outlined in the theoretical chapter. This will be followed by a case study of the municipality of Ljusnarsberg where I will argue that it is an example of an LB-place in Sweden before proceeding to the interview analysis in the next chapter.

### 5.1 LB-places in Sweden

As part of an international trend, the regional inequality in Sweden started to increase after the 80s and is no longer a country with particularly high regional equality today. It has gone from being the country with the highest regional equality to just a bit over average within the OECD countries. It is mainly the Stockholm region that stands out as growing in economic importance in relation to the rest of the country. Other metropolitan regions have also experienced economic growth but not at the same rate (Enflo, 2016).

It is not just economic differences between regions that are increasing. Income inequality among the population as a whole has been growing more in Sweden than in any other country in the world during the past decade. The main explanation for this trend can roughly be divided into two categories: (1) Income from capital has grown disproportionately to wages and concentrated to the top of the income distribution (Regeringen, Regeringsbeslut IV 10). (2) Tax-transfers, like unemployment and sickness benefits intended to harmonize income distribution, have had a shrinking effect since the turn of the millennium. It is above all the most vulnerable part of the population that is lagging behind the rest of society, people with the lowest income and education (Ibid.).

This trend has led to an increase in both the income gap and relative poverty in all Swedish counties over the past couple of decades, but some regions are more affected than others (Almqvist, 2016 p.). The general trend is that municipalities with the largest proportion of poor people are found in the inland and sparsely populated areas in both the southern and northern parts of the country. Areas with the least proportion of relative poverty tend to be the surrounding municipalities to Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö (Ibid.). The explanation for this trend differs depending on the area in question but general tendencies point to the fact that job opportunities are increasingly concentrated in bigger cities where you find the knowledge-intensive sectors and service industries. This creates shrinking tax revenue for many rural parts of the country where the municipalities have a hard time to attract industries and maintain the working population, especially young people (Almqvist, 2016; Vestin, 2016).

Increasing geographical differences between cities and countryside is a trend found all over the western world today and it has been followed by increased support for RWPP in the most socio-economically vulnerable rural regions. In Sweden, SD has its proportionately greatest support in rural municipalities with high unemployment, low education, and a small and shrinking population (Melin, 2018). In other words, where the population has among the weakest positions on the labor market. Studies have shown that the population that is dependent on welfare are more likely to vote for SD based on e.g. "explanations such as general dissatisfaction and mistrust as well as concern for welfare" (Melin, 2018,p. 15). According to Melin it is thus not so much "they take our jobs" but "they take our welfare" that matters (Melin, 2018, p.22). A feeling of powerlessness, Melin writes, challenges and reduces the social status of the population and mainly the male worker identity in these regions. The demands for 'political correctness' mean that the language used and perhaps even the values he grew up with are described as incorrect. In the public debate, the white working man is described as being privileged and dominant, although he may see himself as rather powerless

and unprivileged (Melin, 24). Loss of employment and/or feeling of insecurity on the labor market may thus challenge the masculinized breadwinner role, which could also be an explanatory factor as to why men in particular vote for SD (Rydgren, 2007). Unfortunately, due to a lack of data, it has not been possible to explore this argument in the coming case study.

In 2016, Tillväxtverket (Swedish Growth Agency) published a report on vulnerable municipalities. Worth highlighting in this report is the correlation between the increased (general) vulnerability of small rural communities and a high proportion of votes for SD in elections. Tillväxtverket writes that a common denominator for many of the vulnerable municipalities is that “they are a sparsely populated area, making the basis for an expanded road network and public transport insufficient” (Tillväxtverket, Report 0208 REV A, 28). Particularly interesting is the impact of the commuting pattern on election results, as poorer commuting opportunities correlate with a high proportion of votes for the SD. Among the population in these vulnerable areas, this can be interpreted as a sign of not being valued as an important place and feeding the feeling of abandonment by the governing elites who don't value these places. This brings us to the cultural arguments as to why SD has grown so much in socio-economic vulnerable areas.

SIFOs' survey “Not only immigration drives voters towards SD”, tells us about the causes/arguments to why swedes vote for SD based on parameters of cultural value differences. Respondents who voted for SD differ greatly in their opinions on these themes compared with those of other party sympathies. The authors write “It is obvious that SD voters to a lesser extent than others think: that politicians listen, that they receive value for taxes, that they are respected by society” (Kantar Sifo, 2018 p.4). The result testifies to a higher level of dissatisfaction and distance to the dominant political and cultural streams of the country among SD voters than among people with other political sympathies.

Finally, an extensive study exploring the extent to which SD's success can be explained by standard theories of political representation, conclude that voters in economically vulnerable areas to a larger extent find SD politicians to be credible because coming from the same social background and being more representative of that part of the population than other parties (Dal Bó, et al. 2018). The majority of politicians in the mainstream parties are highly educated people from bigger cities, which is not the case for SD politicians who are generally from a lower social class and more rural parts of the country (Ibid.). These results testify to a feeling of distance to the mainstream political elite among the population in economically vulnerable areas. It suggests that people having gotten relatively worse off during the past two decades have a stronger feeling of social identification with what they perceive to be their own in-group and to a lesser extent trust the out-group of established politicians because they do not offer a political representation of this in-group.

In summary, these findings show that (1) the increasing economic inequalities between sparsely populated rural areas and big cities has been followed by an increase in SD support in these rural areas, (2) that the increasing economic difficulties and uncertainties of this population to some extent drive support for SD, (3) that perception of increasing cultural distance to mainstream politics and the dominant cultural currents also correlates with rising support for SD in these places. Finally, (4) that the relation to state institutions such as welfare services and public transport, if perceived as bad or absent, might lead to a feeling of abandonment and distance to the political elites. The source of SDs success in communities in the countryside thus seems to have both economic and cultural origins and leads to feelings of abandonment and not being valued as part of society.

Most of the research referred to hereabove is done using statistical qualitative methods, some are based on big opinion polls and have the weight of several

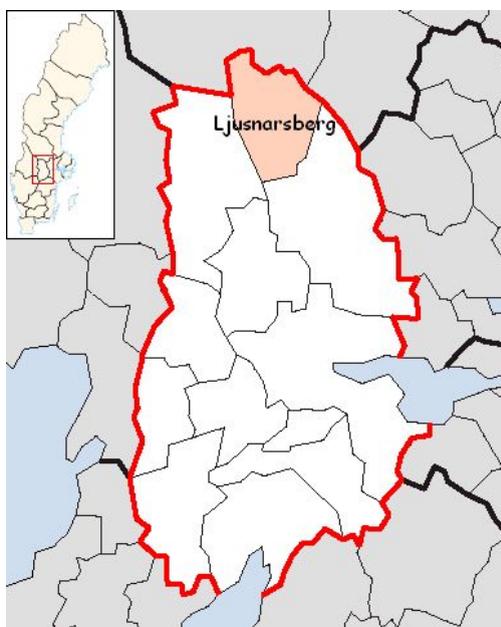
years of comparable data. As a complement to these studies and as a contribution to the debate, this study gives an in-depth analysis of a social milieu that, although not representative, can help us understand the success of SD in LB-places.

## 5.2 Empirics Case: Ljusnarsberg/ Ställdalen

Ljusnarsberg has been chosen for this case study in accordance with the method laid out in the methodology section. Ställdalen is the constituency within the municipality with the highest level of electoral support for SD and, according to available statistics, the most socio-economically vulnerable. The interviews have been carried out in Ställdalen but unfortunately, much of the information and data is only available on a municipal level and not specific constituencies. However, the municipality is small and does not differ significantly between constituencies so it should not skew the study in a significant way.

Ljusnarsberg is a small inland municipality within Örebro County in what is commonly referred to as the middle of Sweden, three hours by car west of Stockholm. It used to be an active industrial society that emerged from the mining industry that dominated the region during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some mining industries in the closeby areas remained active until the end of the 1980s but the majority of them closed during the 1960-70s (Ljusnarsbergs kommun, 2013). Today the biggest enterprise in Ljusnarsberg is Ahlstrom Ställdalen AB (non-woven products) and the well-known Kopparbergs Bryggeri AB with over 120 employees which is the biggest employer after the municipality itself (Ekonomifakta (a), 2019). The number of inhabitants in Ljusnarsberg has been shrinking slowly but steadily during the past 70 years from over 10 000 in the 1950s to 7 400 in 1970 and is today down to 4 846 (SCB, 2019).

*Map 1. Ljusnarsbergs geographical location*



*Explanation: a map indicating the location of Ljusnarsberg in Sweden, Örebro county.*

### 5.2.1 Socio-economic situation

The socio-economic circumstances in the municipality of Ljusnarsberg are by all means bad compared to the rest of the country. It is one of many places that has, and is, suffering the negative consequences of industrial outsourcing and the centralization of economic activities to bigger cities. The average age is more than 6 years above the national average. It is the municipality with the highest number of early retirees in the entire country. The median income is third to lowest in the country, the unemployment rate is the fourth-highest and the percentage of people living on subsidies is the fifth highest in the country. The municipality receives twice as much state subsidies and a compensatory grant from the state (utjämningsbidrag) as the average municipality in Sweden and the income from taxes has not been rising at the same rate as the rest of the country's municipalities in the past decade (Ekonomifakta (a), 2019).

Needless to say, that the economic situation is bad and it is to a large extent thanks to state subsidies that the municipality can maintain welfare services in

Ljusnarsberg. The demographic trends coupled with the unattractive labor market makes it hard to imagine a near future in which the younger generations will cease to move away from Ljusnarsberg and deepen the already declining economic situation.

### **5.2.2 Political situation**

Traditionally Ljusnarsberg and the surrounding regions have been a bastion for the Social Democrats (S) but have lost voters to SD during the last ten years. The Social Democrat Ewa-Lena Johansson is the mayor (kommunstyrelseordförande) of Ljusnarsberg. The municipality is run in a collaboration between S, the Left, the Green Party, and the Liberals but the municipality is a stronghold for SD. In the parliamentary election of 2018, SD went from 23,7 to 31,2 percent support in Ljusnarsberg which makes them the second-biggest party, only two percentages smaller than S who decreased from 42 to 33,8 percent in the same election (SVT (b), 2019).

All constituencies in the municipality show significantly higher support for SD than the national average, inhabitants in all constituencies have a lower level of education than the national average as well as a lower median income and employment rate. In Ställdalen, the constituency where the interviews were conducted, 24% have a higher education, the median income is 18424 and the employment rate is 67%, a couple of points under the national average. In the constituency where interviews were conducted, SD got 41 percent of the votes in the national elections while S only got 30,9 percent as the second-biggest party (SVT (a) 2019).

In the light of the socio-economic downwards trend and political situation in Ljusnarsberg and Ställdalen, it is an area that can be described as being socio-economically LB. That being said, what is of interest in this work is the

narrative among the population in LB-places and the account given here above suggests that Ljusnarsberg is a fitting choice for a most likely case-study.

## 6. Interview analysis

In this section, I will describe the results of the interviews conducted with people in the constituency of Ställdalen in Ljusnarsberg. I will describe and compare the most prominent ways of thinking and give a nuanced picture of the interviews. The section will be divided into four subjects following the themes of the interview guide. I will explore people's opinions and attitudes about 1) Sweden as a country 2) their home and local area of Ljusnarsberg 3) their everyday life 4) their future. Quotes will be woven into the running text as illustrative and interesting examples of how people think. Each subject area will be interpreted on the basis of the theoretical framework and finally summarized and discussed.

### 6.1 People's opinions about Sweden as a country

The inhabitants of Ställdalen had a negative picture of the situation in Sweden today. When asked about what is going well in Sweden, the majority responded that they did not know or could not come up with anything. Those who had positive things to say mostly talked in general terms and thought that it is a good country to live in and compared to other places on earth there was little reason to complain. A few people mentioned the welfare and healthcare system and the feeling of security it creates. These people often emphasized that most people "around here" have a lot to complain about and that they did not want to take part in that attitude.

The widespread pessimism these answers testify to is something that permeates the absolute majority of the interviews. Many of the respondents were somewhat taken by surprise when asked about positive aspects as if they had not thought in those tracks before. The general perception seems to be that the situation in Sweden is heading in the wrong direction and that things are getting worse. This

can be illustrated with the following quote from a 51-year-old man to the question “what is going well in Sweden?”:

*“Well, not that much? I think nothing will work soon. It's been a deterioration with everything. Violence, shooting, everything. Nothing is working soon.”*

This feeling has partly different sources among the inhabitants of Ställdalen, but common to most respondents is a concern and fear of immigrants who are seen as the reason for a perceived increase in crime and insecurity as well as deteriorating living conditions for "Swedes".

Most people living in Ställdalen see immigrants as the central problem of the country today. Immigrants are perceived as a problem because they cost too much and that the cost is at the expense of “Swedes”. Above all, it is poor Swedish retirees that are seen as the losers and set against costly immigration. Many feel that we must prioritize “our own” instead of paying for immigrants to get it better. The following quote from a 57-year-old man is an example of this:

*“A lot is about immigration and everything, it is the worst. We take in too much and don't care about our own elderly. That's it. It doesn't work like it used to. ”*

Healthcare is also something that many people see as problematic. Many testify to difficulties of getting in touch with healthcare, having to endure long waiting times, and an experienced difference between their rural municipality and larger cities where healthcare is easier to access. In the same way that immigration is seen as a corrosive element at the expense of Swedish retirees, many make the link between deteriorating healthcare and increased immigration. The opinion can be summarized as "immigration costs too much and therefore we cannot afford to take care of the weak and vulnerable Swedes in our society". An experienced

injustice where “we the Swedes” who pay for welfare and built society are ranked second to give way to “them”, the ones who take the raisin out of the cake. A clear example of this is the following quote from a 52-year-old man who is otherwise critical of the increased differences between the rich and the poor:

*“Look at healthcare today, take that as an example. As a normal person, you don’t get in anywhere. First of all, I am Swedish, so I have to wait. Unfortunately. And another thing. Why should we who worked here in Sweden, paid taxes and everything, pay so much for the healthcare ourselves when others come here and pay 50 kronor? It’s the same with dental care. There are a lot of retirees who can’t afford to go to the dentist and they get no help. We have homeless Swedes. We have accepted too many, we need to take care of our own first. Then we can receive those who need help, not economic refugees. Yes, those who are really fleeing ... But look how it is today with shootings, bombings, rapes, no empathy for people at all. I think it has gone to hell. But maybe you see it yourself? But maybe you’re not allowed to say so.”*

The quote is interesting because it also reflects a recurring view that many people seemed to have strong feelings about, that immigrants are the cause of increased violence, gang-related criminality, and rape. Most often, respondents used sweeping and generalizing terms that label all immigrants as criminals and sexual abusers. Many interviewees argue for this view with reference to what they have seen on the news and read on social media, suggesting that these views reflect fear about what might happen rather than their own experiences of crimes and violence committed by immigrants.

Politicians in general and especially the current government is accused of being incompetent and too liberal in their immigration policies. The perception that criminal immigrants escape harsh penalties, are not expelled from the country, and are allowed to “go on as they please”, many respondents see as the reason

why the situation they describe today is allowed to continue. It is important to clarify that far from all interviewees make generalizations about immigrants as criminals, many express a more nuanced picture of what they perceive as problems created by immigrants. Some sympathize with them as a vulnerable group that is not responsible for the situation in which they find themselves and a few people see racism and the success of SD as the biggest problem facing Sweden today.

However, when asked about who could resolve the problems in the country, a majority of the respondents cited the state government (not especially the current one) and individual politicians, which testifies to a belief and trust in the political system. With that said, a lot of people thought that the established parties and the current political government (social democrats and the green party with support from the liberals and the centrists) were not the answers to the country's problem, quite the opposite in fact. After having expressed this opinion about the government, a woman in her 40s added that:

*“Politicians should have to live a couple of months here, or in a similar place, so that they can see how normal people have it and understand how we live”*

This opinion, expressed by many respondents although not as straightforward, reflects a general feeling of distance to politicians who are perceived as being disconnected from “normal peoples” lives in Ljusnarsberg. A few people did mention politicians and parties that would be the aptest to offer a solution, which was almost exclusively SD, and its party leader Jimmie Åkesson. Although some expressed trust in the party and Åkessons’ ability to solve the problems facing the country, most people saw it as a party that could “stir the political pot” and changes the status quo. This can be interpreted as a sign of protest voting, which is also reflected in the fact that answering the question of who could solve their

problems, a notable proportion of the respondents talked about parties and politicians that would not be able to do so. However, a few respondents also viewed the politicians in power at the time as capable of solving the country's problems.

In summary, three major themes can be identified in regardings to the respondents' view of the situation and the future of the country: (1) a concern about the cost and criminality associated with immigration and a belief that these costs are at the expense of "us Swedes", (2) a deteriorating welfare system, (3) a distrust of the governing politicians.

## 6.2 People's opinions about living in Ställdalen, Ljusnarsberg

As was the case for the previous topic, people generally spend more time emphasizing the negative sides of living in Ställdalen and did not elaborate much on the positive aspects. That said, the majority of the respondents felt that Ställdalen/Ljusnarsberg is a calm and safe place to live and offered an environment close to nature that increased their quality of life. Many respondents talked about the advantages of knowing all the residents of the neighborhood of Ställdalen and emphasized the advantages of a small community and feelings of safety. A 67-year-old woman put it this way:

*"I know most people who live around here and the ones I don't, I still know their names and where they come from. Even if there are not many shops left around here and I have to take the train to get into town I wouldn't want to move away. I feel safe knowing the people around me."*

Apart from praising the benefits of commonality this quote also mentions the closing down of shops which was the thing most people mentioned when asked

what was not going well in their neighborhood. The absolute majority of people thought that the disappearance of different infrastructures such as the local grocery store, the library, hairdresser, gas station, and even the pizzeria was a problem. Some older persons complained that public transport did not allow them to travel into Kopparberg to buy groceries as often as they wished because the price of the ticket was too high. Others mentioned that medical care was getting worse and that many public facilities and abandoned houses were not taken care of and falling apart. Alongside the immigration problem, this feeling of living in a community that was slowly but surely fading away was the most widely shared and expressed opinion throughout the interviews. It can be summed up as: “when people witnessed how the shops and other infrastructures were closing and disappearing from the neighborhood, they felt a sense of abandonment and worry for the future”. A woman in her early 40s illustrate the following quote:

*“The worst is that everything is closing down. Nothing works anymore. In the 80s when I was a child, we had a post office and a bank. At the Folkpark (folkets park) people danced, I don’t think that happens anymore. Today we don’t even have a grocery store here around. The place is fading out, slowly but surely.”*

This opinion also alludes to a poor cultural offering in the area that some people mentioned. Although it is possible to take the train into the bigger communities like Kopparberg or further, the feeling that everything is increasingly concentrated in the bigger cities was a recurring topic.

While this criticism was not directed at any specific politically responsible body, it can be seen as a general criticism of a political direction that doesn't focus enough on countryside communities like their own. This perception, that the government neglects the countryside (a topic also present in the perceived

worsening of local transport), revealed a narrative of abandonment shared by most of the interviewees.

In summary, the community is deteriorating because of the shutdowns of local businesses increasingly concentrated in bigger cities and leaves Ställdalen to its fate. It also appears that the respondents appreciate the place where they live and express a sense of community and emotional attachment to Ställdalen.

### 6.3 People's opinions about everyday life

In contrast with the predominantly negative opinions that have been reported so far, most people answered that they could not think of or do not have any problems in their everyday lives when asked about it. People were often brief on this topic and the reluctance to answer can be due to several things. The more personal nature of the question may be a reason why people withdraw from opening up, but it can also be due to the context in which the questions were asked. The topics covered so far were of a more political nature and this issue breaks with that pattern, which may have been perceived as sudden. In contrast to big societal issues, personal problems might feel futile.

With that said, many talked about the difficulties they had with their personal finances, loneliness, unemployment, and even childhood trauma. A common topic that people talked about, although never extensively, was the worry of being short of money and having difficulty finding work in the area. Another issue that seemed to complicate the lives of the respondents is public transport which they thought has become worse and more expensive over the years. A 35-year-old man that had recently moved back to Ställdalen expressed it in this way:

*“When I went to school here it was okay because I took the school bus, but it feels like it has gotten worse. I do not go to school anymore (laughter) but now I have*

*to take the train into town and it doesn't go that often (the train). In addition, it is almost cheaper to take the car even though it feels worse for the environment.”*

The respondents were asked who they thought was best suited to solve their personal problems. In contrast to the solutions that people put forward to the country's problems, fewer people seem to have confidence in politicians' problem-solving ability when it comes to their personal problems. A majority answered that only they would be able to solve it. But some answered that it was up to those in power to solve their problems. A representative example of that opinion was a 52-year-old woman who also talked about some previously mentioned topics:

*“Politicians, what we vote for. But now, now they have not agreed at all in this latest agreement. With all these blocs that overlap, you get scared (blocs of political parties). They get nothing done. Of course, you have to solve the problem here and now, but there must also be someone who has a slightly long-term vision, to keep our young people here, for example, to make them want to stay. But it is difficult when everyone moves. The store closes, it becomes expensive to commute, and with difficulties to find work, you have to move. I thought it was expensive, the train. It was more expensive here than in Stockholm. From here to Ludvika it costs SEK 75 one way. (It's) almost cheaper to travel by car.”*

Interestingly, SD and Jimmie Åkesson were only mentioned by one person as the answer to their personal problems. It seems that people make a distinction between the actions and actors who are able to improve their personal situation and those who have the potential to resolve the problems of the country.

In summary, respondents here express concern about their economic prospects and problems linked to deficient public transport, which is in line with the everyday problems one might expect people to face in communities such as

Ställdalen. Few respondents held politicians accountable for solving these problems, but neither did they express any disappointment or accusations towards politicians in relation to their everyday problems.

#### 6.4 People's opinions about the future

Before people were questioned about their outlook for the future, they were asked to put themselves in the shoes of a politician and think of an election promise they would make to their electorate. As stated in previous paragraphs, immigration and integration are seen as the country's biggest problems, but despite this, very few would focus on these issues if they were allowed to decide. The most common problem areas that respondents wanted to address were social problems related to welfare and economic inequality. The most common promises were about welfare and health care, about higher pensions for the elderly, and efforts to improve welfare services. It can be summarized as follows; "there are many groups in society who are vulnerable today and we as a society should not let them fall through the welfare net ".

Many respondents did not want to make any election promises at all. Not because they could not come up with one but because they believed that it was not possible to make and keep promises in today's political situation. It can be seen as a critic of the current political system and the politicians within it, who promise change that they are unable to carry out. Many argued along the lines of the following quote from a 55-year-old man:

*"I would not make any promises. Politicians promise too much and can not keep it later. Look at the government today, they get nothing done. "*

More positive attitudes were also expressed. A 29-year-old woman:

*“It's probably hard to make promises today. I would never become a politician (laughter), but I think it's best if you just agree between the parties, it's more constructive. ”*

The latter quote testifies to the opinion that today's politicians promise a lot even though they know that it will not be possible to keep these promises and it would therefore be better to get things done instead of locking themselves into political positions. There were also a few who expressed the feeling of being disadvantaged in relation to immigrants by promising to prioritize "Swedes", poor retirees, and people who "work and pay taxes instead of freeloading immigrants".

Yet another theme that a notable group of people approached was a worry for the future of the countryside and the possibility to continue to live there. Their promises were about the development of infrastructure, investments in industries, and listening to people in the countryside in general. A man in his early 60s, close to retirement, expressed it in this way:

*“(laughter) yes ..., it's these industries really, in the small communities, that they can stay. I think that is very important. For the industry here, for example, it is not so amazingly safe. With competition and so on.”*

When talking about the future, people were more extensive on the negative scenarios than the positive ones which are indicative of the general mindset throughout the interviews. Interestingly, compared to answers given to most other questions, more people had concrete thoughts about what gave them hope for the future. While not everyone seems to be convinced of an optimistic future ahead, at least they were not completely hopeless about it.

A source of worry for many of the interviewed inhabitants in Ställdalen is climate change, that the situation will be worse for the generations to come. This concern for the next generation was naturally, almost exclusively, pronounced by older people. Finally, there were many who talked about being worried about increased crime and insecurity in society. It was one of the more common concerns for the future and a good part of people who mentioned criminality also voiced criticism of immigration, perceived as the root of crime and insecurity. An old woman in her 70s pronounced that opinion in the following way:

*“Yes, I am worried about the children and their future, especially if it is to continue with this immigration and all the crime that is spreading, with shootings and everything you read about. It’s awful, to say the least. ”*

Although this is a sad note on which to end the result section, it also ties back to the first question to which most people expressed a similar worry about the situation of the country today and thus a good way to close the loop.

In summary, people here express a weak trust in politicians' ability to turn promises into reality, which can be understood as both a disappointment and a lack of trust in today's politicians and political sclerosis that leads to tame decision-making. If the respondents get to decide about the political course it would revolve around the problems associated with welfare and people's socio-economic security, especially for the weakest groups in society. Here, too, a dividing line emerges between the in-group "Swedes" and the out-group "immigrants", where respondents believe that one must begin to prioritize "Swedes". Finally, a source of worry for the future is that the insecurity and criminality associated with immigrants would continue.

## 7.0 Discussion

At this point, it can be useful to repeat the aim of this research. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the population that lives in LB-places and by extension a better understanding of the success of RWPP in these areas. The research questions that guide this aim are: How can the term left behind be conceptualized and understood in a Swedish context? And, how can this conceptualization of Left Behind places, in combination with the theory of relative deprivation, help to understand the support for SD in Ljusnarsberg?

In this paragraph, I will discuss the most important topics and opinions in relation to the research question and the theoretical perspective. As such, some topics will not appear in this section, which does not mean they are not interesting but rather that they are not among the topics that I have considered relevant for the discussion. As mentioned earlier the division between socio-economic and cultural-political LB is somewhat artificial, in reality, these are aspects we weave into each other and in this discussion, I will try to demonstrate that.

### 7.1 The interviews

To the extent that it is possible to talk about an overall narrative in the interviews, it is that of a situation that is heading in a negative direction. Respondents think that the current state of the country is worse than it used to be and this because of increased criminality, insecurity, and deteriorating welfare. The main reason for this deterioration respondents believe to be problems created by too much

immigration and immigrants living in Sweden. This devaluation of immigrants can be understood from the logic of relative deprivation.

A clear demarcation emerges between the in-group the respondents referred to as "Swedes" and an out-group of "immigrants". The group "Swedes" is equivalent to "us" and is defined in contrast to immigrants equivalent to "them". In this dialectic, immigrants are seen as a burden to the welfare services of the country and are associated with criminality and insecurity. In contrast, the in-group of "Swedes" are tax-paying citizens who have to deal with worsening welfare services and facing the criminality and insecurity created by immigration.

The perception of a socio-economic deterioration on a national level (deteriorating welfare service) seems to contribute to the development of a narrative of being disadvantaged and abandoned. Respondents feel unfairly treated by the governing politicians who are perceived to be living in a different reality than theirs and to be neglecting the problems that occupy the life and consciousness of the respondents. Instead, politicians are willing to make efforts to welcome immigrants and fight for their rights in the country. In other words, the respondents feel that they are being denied support from the state in favor of immigrants. In agreement with the theory of relative deprivation, when an in-group ("Swedes") feels that their privilege to a resource (welfare) is threatened and that they are unfairly treated in relation to a competing out-group ("immigrants"), it can lead to an antagonistic relationship and to the development of prejudices. This logic offers an explanation to the opinion that fewer immigrants and tougher politics against criminality are assumed to lead to better welfare services and feelings of safety for people in Ställdalen and "Swedes" in general. This logic is politically represented by SD and can thus be seen as a reason for their success in Ställdalen.

The interviewees do not perceive immigrants as a local problem, so it can be assumed that most people have not themselves experienced that immigrants

directly complicated their access to welfare services or their everyday life in other ways. The fact that many refer to what they have seen and read in the media to back up their claims about the problems in the country also makes it likely that immigrants are singled out as an unfairly prioritized group and illegitimate users of welfare because they are perceived as a threat to the privileges of the in-group of “Swedes”.

This narrative, which is consistent throughout the interviews, indirectly compares the current situation with a period of time that is perceived as brighter. A time when welfare services were better and criminality and insecurity was not part of everyday life to the same extent. What separates these two periods in this narrative is immigrants and the deteriorating effect it has on the country today. This view corresponds with the politics of SD who argues that Sweden used to be a better country for the “real people” and in these interviews can be understood to be “Swedes”. The way back to this former situation is to overcome the problems created by “immigrants”. With fewer immigrants, the state of the country and the situation for “the real people/ Swedes” would become better.

Inhabitants of Ställdalen experience that the area is on a downward trend due to the closure of businesses, welfare services, abandonment of infrastructure, and bad public transport. When people experience this structural weakening they tend to feel that their place and their lives are devalued and this contributes to a self-image of being abandoned (Gidron and Hall 2018). Research suggests that this perception of a deterioration of Ställdalen might lead to a feeling of abandonment and distance to the political elite because they do not value the everyday problems faced by the inhabitants there (Dal Bó, et al. 2018; Tillväxtverket 2016;).

This is true for inhabitants in Ställdalen who seem to have fair confidence in the political system but little confidence that today's politicians could improve the situation of the country. Disappointment over political promises that have not

been fulfilled, politicians who are perceived as spending more time arguing than acting while the negative trend of the country and local area continues, have led people to largely lose hope that politicians in power will change things. The lack of character shown by politicians and the strong focus on the rights of immigrants is perceived to engender a form of politics that no longer serves the interests of “Swedes” in general and of inhabitants in Ställdalen especially. The lack of trust is expressed in the respondent’s reluctance to make election promises and the demand for a stronger political course. The view that politics focus on the problems of out-groups, therefore, results in a demand for political parties and leaders who can take resolute decisions about issues such as immigration without having to concede power to other parties. This feeling can tempt people to vote for an “anti-establishment” party like SD, claiming to speak for the neglected part of the citizen and take resolute positions on immigration without concessions.

It may appear as a paradox that: on the one hand, it is mainly immigrants who are pointed out as the source of the problems in the country, while on the other hand, there are very few who point to immigrants and crime as a local problem or even as a question the respondents would prioritize if they themselves were politicians. In other words, there is a discrepancy between what the inhabitants in Ställdalen identify as the “biggest problems” facing the country (immigration and the declining welfare) and the difficulties they face in their everyday life and local area (worries about economic insecurity, the vanishing of social infrastructure and economic equality). This could be explained by the clear link between the problems that respondents approach at the national level and the topics discussed in the media and by politicians during the period leading up to the interviews. Presumably, people are influenced by the dominant subject being treated as a problem in politics and the media. This is not the case for the problems that people experience in their everyday lives or the political priorities that people would have made if they themselves were in charge. As such, this is a probable source of why respondents feel that the problems they experience and their

political views are not represented by politicians, which can intensify a sense of disadvantage and political abandonment. Based on this, the devaluation of immigrants can partially be understood as a consequence of people in Ställdalen feeling devalued themselves as a result of the lack of political representativeness.

Finally, many respondents fear that this pattern will continue and translates into a concern for the future of Ställdalen and of their lives because they expect to face continued downward social mobility through job losses, closing of businesses, depopulation, and increased insecurity because of immigration. This ascertainment is a contributing reason to why people want to see a political change proposed by SD, who claim to represent change and to prioritise places like Ställdalen and the challenges that people face there.

In summary, in combination with the empirical case study, this analysis revealed that: 1) Ljusnarsberg/Ställdalen is a place that suffers from a socio-economic downward trend which has been followed by an increase in the support for SD. 2) That the support for SD in Ställdalen can be linked to the experience of living in a place that is suffering from this socio-economic insecurity. 3) That the low trust and perception of not being politically represented by the political elite is partially explained by the experience of a deterioration of welfare services. 4) That the prejudice against immigrants partially can be explained by a perception of being politically abandoned. Finally, the combination of feeling socio-economically abandoned to the faith of Ställdalen and culturally-political abandoned by the political establishment in favor of immigrants can be understood to motivate inhabitants in Ställdalen to vote for SD, claiming to speak for the abandoned and “real” population.

## 7.2 Limitations

In order to further understand the insights that can be taken away from the study at hand, it is necessary to take a look at certain limitations deriving from the structure of the research design, the proposed theory, and the interview material. It is further necessary to discuss other possible factors that could influence the relationship found in this analysis.

### 7.2.1 Theoretical limitations

Various factors can influence the relationship found between the social circumstances of the inhabitants in Ställdalen and their opinions. The role of media consumption among the respondents is a variable that can have a big effect on the outcome of the interviews. This was noted in the methodology section and discussion but ideally, it should have been part of the interview guide in order to get insight into the media habits of the respondents that could be used to assess the effects of this on the opinions and topics that were approached by the respondents.

It can be argued that the supply-side explanation has a big influence on the content of the interviews carried out in Ställdalen. That SD and their political rhetoric, the media, and its reporting is the source to the opinions among the respondents and not the experience of living in an LB-place. This reversed causation cannot be ruled out, however, given the geographical causation between support for SD and structural vulnerability, it is unlikely that the explanation is a one-sided affair.

### 7.2.2 Research Design

This analysis would undoubtedly have profited from an additional case, in order to minimize the place-based biases such as faits divers or local political projects that are hard to take into account in this kind of study. A comparative case study

with a structurally vulnerable urban area would generate greater insights into the geographical aspects of the LB concept.

Furthermore, the representativeness would have profited from a look beyond Swedish borders into other European countries that are mentioned such as France and Germany. This, however, was not feasible due to a lack of comparable and combinable data as well as a lack of time and financial resources. There are additional datasets that have been collected in a comparable way in both France and Germany and a comparative study would be a feasible follow-up study. Yet, critics might rightfully point out the resulting limitation in regard to the generalisability of the study.

Moreover, it can be argued that a more anthropological effort would have increased the insight into the specific case of Ljusnarsberg and given more insights to possible local issues that would give increasing insights into the content of the interviews. This was not possible, not only due to a lack of resources but also because of the covid pandemic that has changed the priorities and everyday life for everybody including people in this study.

The interview guide was, as already stated, designed for a different study and the theoretical framework and research questions in this paper were in a way modeled accordingly. Unfortunately, it is not a perfect match and additional or different questions might have been more suited than the ones that were used here. More focus on the differences between local and national level would have been able to give more insight into how inhabitants in Ställdalen perceive the division of responsibility for the issues that they experienced on a local and national level. This said, the relatively open design of the interviews makes it hard to predict the outcome and it adds solidity to the content of the interview since it is the respondents themselves who get to steer the conversation.

Since there are, to my knowledge, no studies that look at LB-places in a qualitative case study like this one, the findings offer insights and can give reason to further research.

### 7.2.3 Empirical Limitations

Unfortunately, the interview material, which has been the starting point for the work, does not allow to fully explore all aspects of the definition of LB-places. It allows me to approach an exploration of the concept in Sweden and Ljusnarsberg, since the socio-economic criteria are met and that an analysis of the interviews can explore what narrative the people there have in relation to the state, immigrants, etc. and whether relative depravity is a pattern found. However, the interview material is not sufficient to explore the residents' values that could point to a break with the dominant view of e.g. LGBTQ issues and environmental issues along the line of the theory of a cultural backlash. Admittedly, the lack of these topics can be understood as a sign that they do not play a major role for the interviewees, but I think it is rather because the right questions or topics have not been addressed during the material collection. Respondents seem to have an emotional attachment to their community and it would have been beneficial for the study to explore this to understand if there are values that this sense of community is based on. This would probably require a more anthropological approach, and more time spent in the field in order to get a more complete understanding of the community and its specificities. A good example of such an effort is the previously mentioned work of Wuthnow (2018).

That being said, the material is all the richer in terms of aspects such as socio-geographic differences, a narrative of abandonment, and so on. The balance between what to include and not in an interview study is a difficult thing.

## 8.0 Conclusion

As a reaction to the growing support that RWPP has enjoyed in LB-places during the past decade, many experts and politicians have stated that we need to take the concern of “the people” seriously. Rarely, however, is this statement followed by a more precise analysis of what these concerns are and where they stem from. This case study focusing on the socio-economically disadvantaged municipality of Ljusnarsberg, including about 50 interviews with the residents in the constituency of Ställdalen, investigate this very issue. Based on insights from previous research in the field, this study has argued that the term Left Behind place can be conceptualized as a rural area that is both socio-economically and culturally-politically disadvantaged and where RWPP has disproportionately big support. In combination with the theory of relative deprivation, this study has attempted to explore the concept of LB-places in a Swedish context and how it can be understood to drive support for SD in the case of Ljusnarsberg.

The case study revealed that the source of SDs success in vulnerable communities in the countryside seems to have both economic and cultural origins and leads to feelings of abandonment and not being valued as part of society. The municipality of Ljusnarsberg and the constituency of Ställdalen was identified as a most-likely case based on this insight. The interviews revealed several narratives that govern the perception of the inhabitants in Ställdalen and that can be understood as reasons for the success of RWPP in the area. 1) A logic of relative deprivation

vis-a-vis the immigrants among the respondents is rooted in the perception of a socio-economic deterioration of the local area. This can explain, at least partially, the devaluation of immigrants and the large support of SD in the constituency. 2) A perception that the governing politicians neglect the challenges and concerns that the respondents face in their everyday life and consequently a perception of being politically abandoned by the governing elite. This, according to the logic of protest-voting, can be a reason for the success of SD in the area. 3) A difference in what the respondents identify as the country's most serious problems (immigration and the declining welfare) and problems experienced at a personal level as well as the political agenda of the respondents (economic insecurity, the vanishing of social infrastructure, and economic equality). This difference can be explained by a feeling of abandonment engendered by the lack of political recognition of the personal problems on a national level. The devaluation of immigrants on a national level can, in line with the theory of relative deprivation, be understood as a consequence of feelings of disadvantage.

As an overall concluding statement, it can be said that the concept of LB-places in combination with the theory of relative deprivation offers a theoretical framework that allows an analysis that highlights both a socio-economic and political-cultural feeling of disadvantage and abandonment among the population in Ställdalen. This, in turn, lays the foundation for a party like SD to find success in the area.

This type of study - qualitative with a focus on the geographical differences to RWPP success - is rather unexplored in the Swedish context. Therefore, the field of research still offers many aspects that have not yet undergone investigation. One such aspect, that this study largely failed to capture, is a deeper understanding of the common moral values within the local community. This would enable to expose possible tensions between the in-group and the rest of society and perhaps shed further light on the validity of a cultural backlash among this population. Media consumption is another aspect to further investigate into.

This research suggests that the national media plays a role in the perception of the national problems but less so in the perception of the local problems.

The results of this research also give reason for the established political parties in Sweden to address some issues if they want to regain the trust of the population in Ställdalen and similar social environments. The low confidence of the established political parties is based on a feeling that one's everyday life and political opinions are neglected. An intuitive approach would be to strengthen the physical local presence in these places by promoting youth activities and ensuring that local party branches invite national politicians. This could bridge the feeling that the political elite is living in an alien reality, despite the fact that the Prime Minister is a welder. To include places like Ställdalen in the nation's fate, it is important that politicians show that they are not helpless in the face of depopulation and economic deterioration. A clearer economic distribution policy from prosperous metropolitan regions to rural areas can, as a suggestion, be an agenda that reaches the inhabitants of these places.

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## Appendix

### Tables:

Table 2. Municipalities with disadvantaged socioeconomic areas and data for vulnerability.

Kommuner med eftersatta socioekonomiska områden	Andel röster på SD	Invånare	Medianinkomst	Andel högutbildade	Förvärvsfrekvens	Arbetslöshet	Andel förtidspensionerade	Andel ensamstående mor till barn 0-17 år	Andel ensamstående far till barn 0-17 år
Perstorp	35,29	7 335,00	226 115,00	12,20	70,70	12,30	9,10	23,00	
Åstorp	34,45	15 828,00	248 918,00	12,40	74,90	10,30	6,90	19,70	6,10
Kristianstad	26,46	84 151,00	261 690,00	23,10	77,20	9,70	6,10	18,30	4,60
Filipstad	25,59	10 783,00	229 641,00	9,80	72,30	11,60	8,10	26,90	7,80
Landskrona	25,39	45 286,00	241 554,00	18,10	71,20	12,50	6,90	21,30	4,90
Helsingborg	23,79	143 304,00	264 820,00	24,40	74,10	10,20	5,40	20,50	4,40
Karlskrona	21,56	66 666,00	269 883,00	28,40	78,30	7,90	4,90	17,70	4,90
Sandviken	21,42	39 259,00	259 500,00	16,80	75,60	12,50	5,20	21,80	5,90
Eskilstuna	20,96	104 709,00	256 847,00	20,50	75,10	12,10	5,60	22,90	5,30
Uddevalla	20,60	55 763,00	274 582,00	22,50	79,50	8,30	6,00	18,10	5,20
Motala	20,32	43 549,00	258 260,00	17,20	77,10	9,60	9,00	19,30	5,40
Borlänge	20,31	51 964,00	269 478,00	18,50	77,30	8,00	5,20	24,30	6,30
Norrköping	19,61	140 927,00	265 951,00	23,00	76,50	11,10	5,80	20,60	4,90
Gävle	19,46	100 603,00	278 343,00	24,40	78,60	9,40	4,70	22,80	5,40
Borås	18,37	111 026,00	275 653,00	22,50	80,10	7,10	6,10	18,20	5,10
Katrineholm	17,80	34 133,00	255 520,00	16,00	76,90	9,90	6,70	23,60	5,80
Halmstad	17,71	99 752,00	274 236,00	25,50	79,60	7,80	5,60	16,90	4,30
Västerås	17,51	150 134,00	282 188,00	27,70	78,50	8,50	5,00	20,10	5,10
Södertälje	17,49	96 032,00	257 999,00	19,20	74,20	11,80	4,50	20,20	4,20
Trollhättan	17,38	58 238,00	269 052,00	23,50	77,10	10,00	5,40	20,00	5,20
Malmö	16,80	333 633,00	233 596,00	32,50	67,30	13,90	4,50	22,40	4,00
Jönköping	16,38	137 481,00	287 098,00	27,20	82,00	5,10	5,70	14,50	4,00
Nyköping	16,11	55 467,00	278 777,00	20,50	81,40	7,50	5,40	17,70	5,40
Botkyrka	16,05	91 925,00	256 844,00	19,60	74,20	10,60	4,20	20,60	5,20
Växjö	15,38	91 060,00	279 498,00	29,80	79,60	7,90	4,80	15,30	4,50
Huddinge	15,17	110 003,00	298 963,00	28,40	79,20	6,50	3,20	17,60	5,00
Järfälla	15,00	76 453,00	300 732,00	27,20	80,10	7,40	4,20	18,40	5,20
Örebro	14,38	150 291,00	273 328,00	28,70	4,60	7,60	4,70	20,30	4,90
Göteborg	13,45	564 039,00	283 884,00	35,20	76,50	7,10	4,60	21,50	4,50
Linköping	13,17	158 520,00	277 823,00	37,20	76,10	5,90	4,00	15,60	4,80
Uppsala	11,52	219 914,00	283 164,00	41,00	76,10	5,70	3,80	16,90	4,60
Stockholm	9,84	949 761,00	316 193,00	40,90	79,50	5,90	3,30	22,00	5,10

(Valmyndigheten, 2019), (Ekonomifakta, 2019), (SCB, 2019).

Table 3. Socioeconomically disadvantaged municipalities and data for vulnerability.

Socioekonomiskt eftersatta kommuner	Andel röster på SD	Invånare	Medianinkomst	Andel högutbildade	Förvärvsfrekvens	Arbetslöshet	Andel förtidspensionerade	Andel ensamstående mor till barn 0-17 år	Andel ensamstående far till barn 0-17 år
Markaryd	31,53	10 170,00	237 551,00	11,50	76,60	9,50	7,20	17,00	
Ljusnarsberg	31,20	4 942,00	218 816,00	11,20	69,10	10,10	6,20	25,30	
Ronneby	29,42	29 568,00	248 853,00	18,60	75,10	13,20	9,60	17,70	5,60
Mellerud	28,55	9 377,00	226 869,00	13,70	74,70	10,70	6,70	20,80	5,60
Dals-Ed	27,04	4 763,00	228 513,00	13,00	77,70	6,20	7,20	17,30	
Bengtstors	25,88	9 905,00	228 960,00	13,80	73,20	11,30	5,50	18,80	6,10
Hylte	25,79	10 990,00	255 004,00	13,00	77,90	10,20	4,90	15,90	
Ärjäng	25,08	9 948,00	215 810,00	11,70	69,90	5,90	5,00	16,70	
Hällefors	24,67	7 109,00	234 800,00	10,40	73,10	10,70	6,90	21,10	
Haparanda	24,47	9 805,00	224 569,00	14,30	69,50	11,80	9,60	21,90	6,40
Gullspång	23,87	5 280,00	229 408,00	11,50	73,80	9,90	8,70	21,90	4,30
Ämål	23,20	12 711,00	235 056,00	15,70	75,30	12,60	6,60	20,60	5,40
Töreboda	23,11	9 414,00	237 888,00	13,60	75,60	9,30	8,20	17,90	5,80
Eda	23,01	8 618,00	216 605,00	10,20	66,10	6,20	7,30	19,80	
Fagersta	22,98	13 415,00	263 792,00	13,80	76,10	11,80	6,40	23,60	6,90
Änge	22,13	9 480,00	250 541,00	12,40	78,50	7,20	7,50	18,50	8,50
Hultsfred	21,83	14 579,00	237 875,00	11,40	73,50	11,80	7,40	16,90	
Norberg	21,62	5 796,00	257 307,00	11,30	76,60	8,60	6,20	23,30	7,60
Ragunda	20,89	5 444,00	234 888,00	11,70	78,50	9,30	7,00	19,10	5,00
Högsby	20,56	6 087,00	222 748,00	11,90	71,30	14,20	7,40	18,90	
Ljusdal	19,97	19 028,00	243 148,00	12,60	79,30	8,90	6,60	20,50	6,70
Söderhamn	19,58	25 782,00	250 064,00	13,70	77,20	10,80	8,10	24,10	6,50
Bollnäs	19,57	26 918,00	249 918,00	15,30	77,50	10,50	7,00	23,10	6,20
Vingåker	19,32	9 180,00	245 669,00	12,20	77,10	9,20	7,10	19,80	6,30
Bräcke	19,20	6 501,00	235 891,00	14,20	78,20	9,00	7,50	18,20	
Sollefteå	18,66	19 709,00	243 046,00	15,50	78,50	9,50	7,00	22,30	5,90
Övertorneå	16,18	4 461,00	234 011,00	14,40	76,90	9,00	7,40	16,00	5,60
Kramfors	15,76	18 610,00	245 494,00	13,50	75,90	9,90	8,20	19,90	7,50
Åsele	15,51	2 809,00	225 155,00	13,90	76,30	10,10	6,90	10,80	
Munkfors	15,43	3 763,00	230 232,00	10,00	73,80	8,60	7,10	-	-

(Valmyndigheten, 2019), (Ekonomifakta, 2019), (SCB, 2019).

Table 4. *Criteria for government grants to socio-economically disadvantaged municipalities.*

Criteria	Employment rate	Proportion of long-term unemployed	Proportion of low-educated people	Voter turnout
Area selection	60%	10%	28%	75%
National average	77,9%	4,3%	14,2%	85,8%

(Regeringsbeslut, 2018, IV 10)

## Interview guide:

What do you think works well in Sweden?
What do you think works poorly in Sweden?
What works well in your area?
What works poorly in your area?
What is the biggest problem in your everyday life?
Who could most easily solve your everyday problems?
What is the biggest problem that Sweden has?
Who could most easily solve Sweden's problems?
If you were to get involved politically, what would be your most important promise to the electorate?
What gives you hope for the future?
What worries you about the future?