This thesis investigates political participation in the indigenous communities of Guatemala. The aim is to find out and explain the individual and societal motivations that indigenous people have for deciding to participate or not to participate in local level politics. More precisely, this thesis tries to discover what are the main factors that influence local level political participation of the indigenous Maya people in Guatemala. In addition, the study aims to find out what kind of participation the indigenous people are involved in.

Another objective of this thesis is to investigate the functioning of the so-called civic committees. These committees represent a new type of political organisation and they are claimed to play an important role in giving indigenous people greater chances to enter the Guatemalan political system and to participate at local level decisions. It is however important to note that these committees may at the same time restrict indigenous people from exercising real power. Thus an important question to be answered is whether these organisations increase the indigenous peoples’ political participation, or whether they instead limit it.

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of different theories on political participation. Various types of participation are discussed, and a tentative listing of factors which may affect the scope and nature of an individual’s participation is presented. The theoretical frame is used as a heuristic tool for identifying the factors that indigenous people perceive as influencing their participation.

In order to gain answers to the research questions a three month long field work period was conducted in Guatemala. During the field study extensive library studies were carried out at several research centres, and a substantial amount of first hand information was collected from the indigenous people themselves. A field study was conducted in the department of Quetzaltenango which consisted of 110 individual interviews with indigenous people and observations made at a number of local meetings and workshops. On the basis of the empirical results and literature studies three groups of factors were drawn up which all help to explain the current state of political participation among the Guatemalan indigenous people.

The main results obtained include the fact that Guatemalan society suffers from a great lack of trust and there is hardly any democratic political culture. The result of this is that a great majority of indigenous people abstain from political participation. Those indigenous people who do participate are often found in passive and consultative roles of participation. They may be given the possibility to be present at local meetings and be given seats at local governing boards, but they are seldom given any real decision-making power. Very few indigenous people seem to have access to independent organising and positions of power in the Guatemalan political system. The civic committees are unfortunately in their current form unable of guaranteeing the indigenous population access to important seats of political power. They do however have potential and may gain more stability and strength if they are granted a permanent status as political organisations.