

Summary

SNS Democracy Report 2017. Cooperation and Conflict in a Parliamentary Democracy

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English summary of the report “*Samverkan och strid i den parlamentariska demokratin*”

Uncertain and unstable political situation

The political situation in Sweden has been uncertain and unstable during the last few years. Two months after the 2014 general election, the Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, rejected the government’s budget bill. A few weeks later, the two governing parties, the Social Democrats and the Greens, made a political deal with the center–right opposition: the “December Agreement.” But the December Agreement lasted less than a year. In the summer of 2017, the government was again under threat since the center–right parties declared that they were planning to introduce no-confidence motions against three Social Democratic government ministers.

Meanwhile, popular confidence in Sweden’s democratic institutions has declined. In 2014, just before the election, 78 percent of the respondents in the national SOM survey stated that they were

satisfied with how democracy works in Sweden. By 2015, the figure had fallen to 69 percent and in 2016, it was 71 percent. Will this trend continue? Will it be possible to govern Sweden in the future? Will constitutional reforms be necessary to increase political stability?

In the 2017 SNS Democracy Report, *Samverkan och strid i den parlamentariska demokratin* (“Cooperation and Conflict in a Parliamentary Democracy”), we assess the quality of contemporary Sweden’s parliamentary democracy. In so doing, we place the current political situation in Sweden in historical and comparative context. Our analyses are based on examples from Sweden’s political history, new evidence on the state of Swedish politics, and comparisons with other Western European democracies.

Sweden has been a parliamentary democracy for almost one hundred years. This means that the government must be tolerated by the popularly elected Riksdag. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Sweden has also had a proportional electoral system, which makes it possible for small parties to be politically competitive. In the elections of 2010 and 2014, eight parties were elected to the Swedish parliament.

Our investigation is based on the premise that parliamentary democracies work best if they are not deadlocked by inter-party conflicts that inhibit the formation of reasonably stable governments, the adoption of new legislation, or the implementation of at least parts of the programs the political parties ran on in the preceding election.

As the Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten wrote in his book *Demokratiens problem* (1945),



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the central political problem in a democracy is “the preservation of community in spite of disagreement.” He made the observation that a democratic system requires a “balance ... between cooperation and conflict.” We investigate whether the balance between cooperation and conflict has been disturbed in Sweden. We also discuss whether Sweden’s basic constitutional rules need to be changed to maintain this balance.

There is no doubt that political circumstances have changed in Sweden. The number of political parties has increased and the nature of political conflicts has changed, at least in the short run. The political parties need to adjust to these new circumstances. But we find that this adjustment process has started. We therefore see no need for major constitutional reforms. Instead, we discuss a number of practical measures that would strengthen the prospects of maintaining a healthy balance between cooperation and conflict in the future.

The party system has become more fragmented

During Sweden’s century-long history of democratic government, the Swedish party system has never been more fragmented than it is today. With its eight parliamentary parties, Sweden has one of the most fragmented party systems in Western Europe.

One crucial question for the future is whether the economic left–right dimension, which has long dominated Swedish politics, will continue to be the most important dividing line among the political parties. The evidence that we present indicates that the so-called “GAL–TAN dimension”—that is, values, culture, and identity, as opposed to economic issues—is restructuring political conflicts. This change is especially noteworthy on the right. The Center Party and the Liberal Party are more libertarian, on sociocultural issues, than the Conservative Party, which is more libertarian than the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats.

We also note, however, that the left–right dimension remains very important. Moreover, the GAL–TAN dimension is less of an independent conflict dimension in Sweden than in countries such as Denmark and Finland. In Sweden, the positions of the parties in the GAL–TAN dimension are becoming more, not less, correlated with their positions in the economic dimension.

Increased risk of drawn-out cabinet negotiations and cabinet crises

The current Swedish government, a coalition between the Social Democrats and the Green Party, is in one sense historically unusual: the Social Democrats have not formed a regular coalition government since the 1950s, when they ruled Sweden in coalition with the agrarian party (now called the Center Party). But the fact that the incumbent Löfven government is a minority coalition is not unique; there have been three other minority coalition governments in Sweden in the post-war period.

Minority governments are the rule in Sweden, not the exception. On average, Swedish governments have been supported by 46 percent of all members of parliament between 1944 and 2014. In most other Western European countries, governments have typically been supported by more than 50 percent of all members of parliament.

In recent years, government formation has become more complicated and uncertain, since neither of the two political “blocs”—the center–left bloc and the center–right bloc—is likely to win more than 50 percent of the votes in coming elections. This does not only mean that majority governments are likely to become rarer still; it also means that it has become more difficult to form strong, effective minority governments, as the Social Democrats could for much of the twentieth century.

International experiences suggest that the risk of drawn-out cabinet negotiations and cabinet crises has increased. It is particularly difficult to form stable and effective governments if all parties but one are divided into two blocs, while one party is considered a “pariah” by all others. Ever since the Sweden Democrats entered the parliament in 2010, this has been the case in Sweden: the two main blocs of parties stick fairly closely together, especially within the center–right Alliance, while none of the blocks want to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats.

So far, however, government formation has taken less time in Sweden than in most other countries in Western Europe. Meanwhile, governments have not been significantly more unstable than elsewhere.

Laws are being passed, more cooperation between the two party blocs

We draw two main conclusions from our studies of decision-making in the Swedish parliament, the Riksdag. First of all, there is no evidence that decision-making in parliament is deadlocked, even if eight parties are now represented in the Riksdag and even if the current government is supported by fewer than 40 percent of all members of parliament. Proposals made by the Riksdag's powerful standing committees very rarely fail. The political situation in Sweden cannot be compared to the deadlocked US Congress between 2010 and 2016.

Second, it has become more common for political parties from the two main party blocs—the three center-left parties on the one hand and the four center-right parties on the other—to cooperate with one another. New types of voting coalitions have emerged. One of the reasons is that many conflicts are not left-right conflicts.

This is because many of the conflicts in parliament can no longer be described in left-right terms. The high level of agreement among the center-right Alliance parties during the period 2006–2014 appears to have been a unique event in Swedish politics. Ever since the Alliance parties lost power, they seem to have decided to let each party behave more independently.

Since the 2014 election, the proportion of votes in which at least one of the center-left parties voted with at least one center-right parties has been greater than 70 percent, approximately the same level as in the early 2000s, before the formation of the center-right Alliance.

Swedish parties keep their promises

The most fundamental relationship in a representative democracy is the relationship between the political parties and the electorate. In the report, we investigate the consequences of the formation of governments and political decision-making in the Riksdag for this essential relationship, by studying party pledges.

Sweden is a country where the governing political parties typically do what they promised to do in their election manifestos. For example, the Social Democrats kept more than 80 percent of the promises they made in the elections of 1994, 1998, and 2002. In that sense, Swedish democracy works as it is supposed to work.

International experiences suggest that it is more difficult for political parties to deliver the policies they pledged to deliver in countries that are governed by coalition governments and minority governments. We show, however, that the minority coalition that was in power between 2010 and 2014 kept most of its promises. 78 percent of the center-right Alliance's election pledges in its 2010 manifesto resulted in new policy, and 4 percent of the pledges were partially met.

So far, there is therefore no evidence that the changing conditions of Sweden's parliamentary democracy have changed the relationship between election campaigns and subsequent government policy fundamentally. It is a reasonable forecast, however, that the current coalition government will deliver on fewer Social Democratic election pledges than previous Social Democratic minority governments, since the Social Democrats face more obstacles in the current parliament.

Two Scenarios

Swedish politics is changing. The first fully democratic parliamentary election in Sweden was held in 1921, almost one hundred years ago. Since then, Sweden has been ruled by minority governments three quarters of the time. Most minority governments have been stable and effective. The reason is that the economic left-right dimension has been particularly strong in Sweden. In a political system where one particular dimension dominates, a centrist minority government rarely needs to worry that the opposition parties will agree on a common policy and bring down the government.

Now the situation is different. At least in recent years, policy issues that are not easily treated as left-right issues have become more important. Meanwhile, the populist radical-right party, the Sweden Democrats, has not cooperated with any of the established blocks. The conditions for stable and effective minority governments have therefore deteriorated.

Ever since the Sweden Democrats entered the Riksdag in 2010, the central political problem in Sweden has been how governments can be formed when neither of the two main party blocs is able to form either a majority government or a strong minority government.

We describe two main short- to medium-run scenarios for Sweden's parliamentary democracy. In

the Majority Government Scenario, majority governments become more common, either because of new patterns of cooperation between the political parties or because of constitutional changes that cause a restructuring of the party system. In the Minority Government Scenario, minority governments continue to be the norm.

Since most Swedish governments have been minority governments ever since Sweden became a parliamentary democracy almost one hundred years ago, we consider the Minority Government Scenario the most likely. In our view, it is desirable, in such a scenario, to ensure that the uncertain political situation that emerged after the 2014 elections is not repeated and prolonged. This can only happen if the relationship between the government and the opposition parties changes.

Historically, minority governments have been most common in countries where the other parties in the party system are in a position to influence legislation and economic policy even if they are not in government. But in the last three or four decades, the trend in Sweden has been in the opposite direction—political power has shifted from the Riksdag to the cabinet. There are strong reasons to believe that it has thereby become difficult to maintain the balance between a tough, ideological struggle for power and pragmatic, compromise-oriented political decision-making in parliament that long characterized Swedish politics.

Against this background, we discuss several proposals that are meant to increase the political influence of the parliamentary opposition.

Proposals

One measure that would probably make it easier to form stable minority governments is to form more commissions of inquiry in which the opposition parties are represented. Ever since the beginning of the 1980s, this form of government commission has become less common. Meanwhile, the proportion of expert commissions has increased, which has strengthened the government at the expense of the Riksdag and complicated cooperation between the governing parties and other political parties in parliament.

Fiscal policy and EU policy are two other areas where the government's position has been significantly strengthened in recent decades, as a result

of the new budget process that was introduced in the 1990s and Sweden's membership in the EU. Future reforms of the fiscal framework and the system for consultations on EU legislation in the Riksdag should take into account that in a system with minority governments, the opposition has a legitimate interest in influencing policy.

Our final observation is that the resources of the central government offices, and especially the number of political appointees in the government ministries, have increased sharply in the past three or four decades: since the first half of the 1980s, the total number of employees in the central government offices has increased by more than 50 percent, the number of committees has more than tripled, and the number of political appointees has doubled. This means that the government has access to more resources and is able to fill more positions than previously. It is likely that one consequence of this trend is that the political parties sometimes prioritize the struggle for office over constructive legislative work in parliament.

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