



The Swedish Riksdag

Photo: Melker Dahlstrand

6. Having an Influence in Sweden

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What is democracy?

The word democracy comes from Greek and means something similar to "government by the people". Issues relating to democracy have been discussed for several thousand years, but there is no definition of the term on which everybody in the world would agree. This is partly due to democracy being something that is constantly being developed and altered. However, there are some things that many can agree are related to democracy, for example the equal dignity and rights of all people, freedom of opinion, freedom of the press and freedom of expression, that all are equal in the eyes of the law and that free elections are held.

In a democratic society with general, free elections, people with the right to vote can vote for the party and the politicians they want to represent them in political decision-making at the national, regional and local level. The politicians or parties that receive the most votes, i.e. a majority of the votes, are those that are allowed to have the biggest say in decision-making.

The elected politicians represent the voters and are the system is therefore called *representative* democracy. Representative democracies are now a common form of government in the world and this is the system we have in Sweden.

Although it is the majority that decides in a democracy, the minority have rights that the majority cannot simply ignore. One fundamental principle in a democratic society is that power is exercised with respect for human rights. This means that those who make decision may not oppress people or groups that have opinions that are different to their own. Everyone in society has the right to say what they think.

General elections are a country's inhabitants' most important means by which to influence how the country is governed. If democracy in a country is to work, the country's inhabitants have to be involved and participate in its democratic processes. Democracy is strengthened by as many people as possible voting in general elections, as well as by factors such as people joining charities or participating in political discussions with friends and colleagues. It also becomes stronger through such actions as people joining voluntary organisations, getting involved in political

discussions with friends and colleagues or contacting politicians in various ways to express their point of view. If a large proportion of the country's inhabitants vote, it becomes more certain that the policies enacted are those the majority actually want.

However, in order for a society to be democratic, it is not sufficient simply for its inhabitants to take part in general elections. What happens between the elections is also important for democracy to function.

Democracy is also dependent on there being respectful discussion. This involves both listening to what others think and expressing your own opinions. It is important that a country's inhabitants feel they are part of society if democracy is to function. They have to have an influence in general elections, but they also have to feel they have the opportunity to influence their everyday lives – in school, at work, in the area they live and in their own family.

Getting involved discussions with other people about what is democratic or not is itself an important aspect of a democratic society. If this discussion ceases, this may indicate that many people think democracy is no longer important, which may be a sign that democracy is becoming weaker.

The question of whether democracy is good or bad has been discussed since the idea was first envisaged. There are those who argue that a democratic system is not always as fast or efficient as a dictatorship in which the person making the decisions can quickly force through their decisions. In a democracy, everyone has to have their say, people must compromise and vote in order to make decisions. Consequently, it has even been decided in democratic countries that in certain extreme situations democracy can step aside in favour of efficiency and speed. Quite simply, in emergency situations it can be necessary for those in charge to make quick decisions in order to prevent the situation becoming worse.

There are many examples of non-democratic forms of government that have oppressed and terrorised people. In dictatorships, people can be put in prison or in concentration camps because of the opinions they hold or because they belong to a certain ethnic group. History shows that democratic government is the form of government that

best protects individuals' freedom and human rights. It also shows that democracy and peace often prevail when people in different countries are in contact and engage in trade with one another.

The development of democracy

The word democracy comes from the Greek *demos* meaning the people and *kratein* meaning government. The first known democratic system was built in Ancient Greece in 500 BCE. This is when the Greek state of Athens went from a dictatorship to a certain form of democracy. However, it was still only free men who were allowed to be involved in decision-making. Women, slaves and foreigners had no influence on decision-making. Accordingly, we wouldn't call Athens as it was at the time a democracy in the modern sense of the word.

From antiquity until today, Europe's history was far from democratic in the way that Sweden is today. Democracy has emerged in various ways thanks to people resisting power being unequally distributed in society.

Following antiquity, the Christian Church, for example, has a lot of power in society for many hundreds of years. Autocratic kings and emperors claimed that their power came from God and not from the people. However, in the 16th century, the power of the Church began to weaken, primarily because many people wanted to change the church. They no longer thought that the Catholic Church stood for the Christian faith and that its activities were more about power and money. This change is called the Reformation. The Reformation led to a split and weakening of the Christian Church. Sweden left the Catholic Church in the 16th century and instead became protestant.

From the middle of the 18th century, a movement emerged in Europe that is usually called the Enlightenment. People were inspired by scientific advances and continued to criticise the Church and others who said that the power to govern a country was handed down by God. One philosopher who had a major significance during this period on the view of how a country should be governed was the Frenchman Charles

Louis de Montesquieu. He thought that if the power was split into different parts, there would be a good balance. The three parts were the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

A significant event in the development of democracy in Europe was the French Revolution in 1789. During the French Revolution, the French people rose up against the king. After the Revolution, France adopted a law inspired by the Enlightenment's ideas that power comes from the people and that no person is worth more than any other. However, it was only male citizens who were allowed to vote for who would make decisions.

Socialism was developed in the 19th century and the most important person in this doctrine was Karl Marx. According to socialism, equality and justice should prevail between all people. These ideas were spread widely and both trade unions and socialist parties were set up all around Europe. At the end of the 19th century, there were increasing calls for equality and justice to also encompass women.

The emergence of democracy in Sweden

Various events in Sweden have influenced the emergence of democracy and how Swedish society looks today. Some events over the course of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century have had particular significance. They laid the groundwork for a modern and democratic Sweden.

Protest march for women's rights in 1918 in Gothenburg.



Photo: Anna Backlund, ©Nordiska museet

The Instrument of Government 1809

Sweden has had written laws since the 14th century. The fundamental law that forms the basis of Sweden's democracy is called the Instrument of Government. The Instrument of Government of 1809 has a major significance to the development of democracy. This established that the king no longer had sole power, instead power was split into four:

- Executive power was in the hands of the king.
- Power over taxes that had been paid in was in the hands of the Riksdag.
- Power to create laws was split between the king and the Riksdag.
- Power to judge was in the hands of the courts.

Despite power having been split in accordance with the new law, there was still no apparent democracy in Sweden. Nevertheless, the new laws created the opportunity for continued democratic development.

Freedom of the press and of speech and freedom of religion

The Instrument of Government of 1809 also reinforces a range of civil freedoms and rights. For example, since 1766, Sweden already had freedom of the press and of expression, which meant that everyone had the right to express their ideas, opinions and feelings verbally and in writing. The Instrument of Government of 1809 also established that all citizens has the right to choose which religion they wanted to belong to.

Universal primary education

Universal primary education was introduced in Sweden in 1842. This meant that all children had to go to school. Many more people learned to read and write. This was an important prerequisite for the development of democracy in Sweden.

Popular movements and freedom of association

Popular movements such as the temperance movement, free churches, the women's movement, the labour movement and political parties emerged in Sweden at the end of the 19th century. This was important for democracy. By organising themselves into groups, people could more easily put forward what it was about society that they wanted to change. The popular movements taught people to organise

themselves, how meetings are arranged and what is needed to push through change. Different organisations worked for different things. The labour movements put forward, for example, demands for better working conditions and the right to vote, regardless of gender and income.

In 1909, the majority of men in Sweden gained the right to vote. In 1919, it was decided that women had the right to vote in, for example, municipal elections. In 1921, all legally competent people, both women and men, gained the right to vote in general elections in Sweden.

The democratic system in Sweden

Sweden is a representative democracy and is governed on the basis of a democratic structure at different levels of society. Sweden is also a monarchy. This means that we have a king or queen who is the country's head of state. However,

The western Riksdag building is reflected in Strömmen with a view from the west.

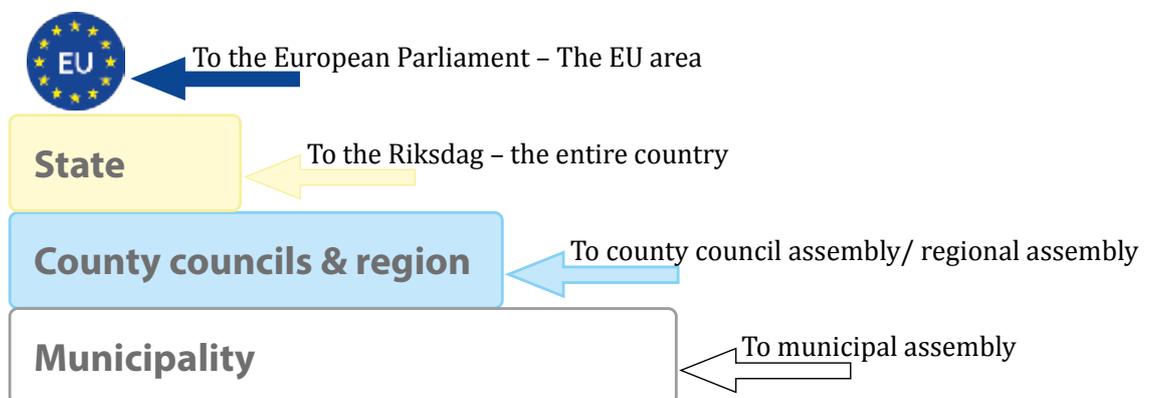


Photo: Melker Dahlstrandt

the head of state has no political power and has a merely ceremonial role. It is the democratically elected politicians who run the country.

The Instrument of Government, which is the fundamental law that determines how Sweden is governed, begins with the sentence "All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people". This means that all decisions made at different levels of society have to be based on the opinions and interests of Sweden's inhabitants.

Decisions are made at three different political levels in Sweden. These levels are the municipalities, the county councils/regions and the central government. As Sweden is a member of the European Union (EU), there is also a level of decision-making above the central government. The EU is a European association of, at the moment, 28 countries. At all levels, there are politicians that the inhabitants have voted into power in general elections. These politicians are also called members. Politicians sit in the decision-making assemblies to which they are elected: municipal councils, county council/regional assembly, the Riksdag and the European Parliament.



In a democracy, it is important that there are built-in checks and balances so that corruption and misuse of power are avoided. One way to do this is to divide power between different actors, who are able to watch over one another in various ways. There are several examples of this in the democratic system in Sweden. One example is that municipalities and county councils are autonomous, which is one way to counteract Sweden becoming too centrally governed and the central government being the

sole decision-making authority. One further example is that central government power is split between the Riksdag, which makes laws, the Government, which implements laws, and the courts, which judge based on the laws. The Riksdag also has the job of scrutinising and controlling the Government. If the Government neglects its duties, the Riksdag can force it to stand down. The fundamental laws provide the media and the general public with the opportunity to gain an insight into how Sweden is governed. All this contributes to Sweden suffering less corruption and misuse of power than many other countries.

The central government

The central government consists of the Riksdag, the Government and about 350 central government-owned companies and central government committees and authorities (the central government authorities). The Riksdag makes decisions about what is to be done in society, the Government then executes and implements these decision with the help of the Government Offices of Sweden and the central government authorities.

The Riksdag

The Riksdag is Sweden's parliament, which enact laws. It is the highest decision-making assembly in the country. The Riksdag is made up of political representatives elected by the Swedish voters at the national level. Political power is strongly linked to political parties as the members of the Riksdag are elected as representatives of political parties. The Riksdag has 349 members who are elected every four years. The Riksdag's most important tasks are:

- making new laws and abolishing old ones,
- setting the central government budget, i.e. determining the central government's annual income (taxes and fees) and expenditure,
- scrutinising how the Government and the authorities are conducting their work, and
- appointing a Prime Minister, who in turn forms a government.

The Swedish Government

The Government has executive authority. This involves being responsible for the day-to-day work of governing

the country. This includes presenting proposals for the central government budget and setting guidelines for how the central government's money is to be used, leading the Swedish Armed Forces and being responsible, together with the Riksdag, for foreign policy. The Government Offices of Sweden, where a large number of civil servants work, is there to assist the Government.

It is usually the largest political party in the Riksdag, or two or more cooperating parties if no party has a majority, that form a government. The person appointed as Prime Minister by the Riksdag chooses which ministers will be responsible for different policy areas. Each minister in the Government heads a ministry. The ministry has various departments that are responsible for different areas. For example, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for issues concerning schools and education, and the Ministry of Culture for cultural matters among other things.

The central government authorities

The central government authorities consist of the Government, the courts and the administrative authorities. Examples of central government authorities are Arbetsförmedlingen, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Swedish Transport Administration. The Government may not dictate how an authority is to use a law or make a decision in a case concerning an authority's work. The authorities are independent, but they have to comply with the laws and guidelines the Government decides on. In many other countries, it is common for a politician who is a government minister to have the power to directly intervene in the ongoing work of authorities. There is no such opportunity in Sweden. There are laws to prevent what is known as ministerial government.

More information on how Sweden is governed is available on the Government's website: www.regeringen.se

The judicial system

The judicial system normally includes those authorities responsible for the rule of law and maintaining law and order. The courts are the foundations of the judicial system. The judicial system also encompasses the authorities responsible for preventing and investigating crime, e.g. the police and the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority.

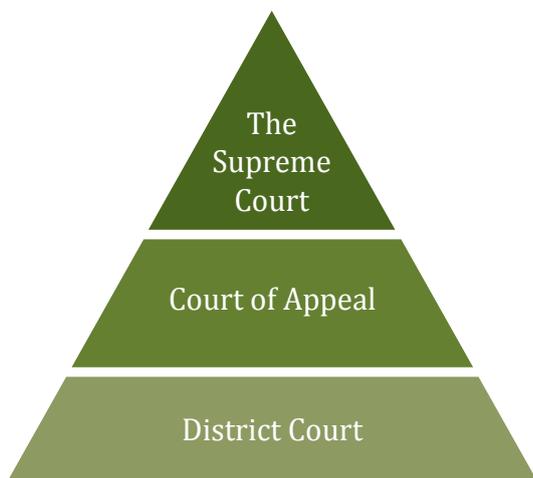
The Swedish courts consists of over 80 different authorities and committees. There are three types of court in in Sweden: general courts, administrative courts and special courts. The courts can lay down punishments and settle disputes. The general courts consist of district courts, courts of appeal and the Supreme Court. The general courts handle matters including criminal cases, family cases and cases between companies or private individuals. The administrative courts consist of the administrative courts, the administrative courts of appeal and the Supreme Administrative Court. The administrative courts settle disputes, primarily between individuals and authorities. This can involve tax cases, cases involving aliens or citizenship (the migration courts), disputes with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency or the municipality.

The special courts settle disputes within various special areas, for example labour law or consumer issues.

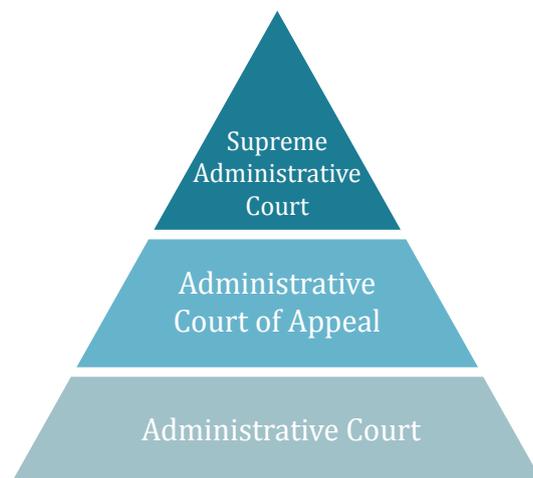
More information about which areas the various courts are responsible for can be found on the Swedish courts' website: www.domstol.se

Having your case tried in a impartial and independent court is a fundamental right of all those who live in Sweden.

General courts



Administrative Courts



According to the Swedish constitution, the work of the courts is governed by the law, but they are otherwise independent. Neither members of the Riksdag nor ministers may influence the courts' decisions.

The rule of law means that all people are equal before the law. A person is to be considered innocent until s/he has been found guilty by a court. The rule of law is an important aspect of democracy and defines the judicial relationship between the individual and the state. The aim is for all people to be protected from being wronged by each other, by the authorities and their representatives and by society in general, and for all people to be guaranteed their rights and freedoms. Legislation must be unequivocal: it has to be clearly stated what is legal and what is illegal. Someone who commits a crime must be able to understand what the consequences will be for him or her.



Photo: Patrik Svedberg (www.domstol.se)

Someone who believes that an authority such as the Swedish Social Insurance Agency or a municipality has made an incorrect decision can appeal this. The authority that has made the decision has to tell them how to appeal. This information is usually at the end of the text informing the person of the decision.

Municipalities

Everyone in Sweden lives in a municipality. The country has 290 municipalities, all of which are autonomous in many ways. A municipality is led by a democratically elected municipal council and by boards and committees appointed by the municipal council. The Local Government Act specifies what the responsibilities and obligations of county councils/regions and municipalities are. The three biggest municipalities are Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, but there are many municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Municipalities can also be called cities.

The municipalities responsibilities include ensuring that there are schools, preschools and libraries, home-help services for older people and income support for those who require it. They also have to ensure that there is a fire brigade and street cleaning, they have to plan roads, housing, water and electricity. The municipalities require money to be able to deliver all these services. The municipality obtains income from municipal taxes, fees and grants from central government. Inhabitants who have an income pay tax in the municipality in which they are registered on the population register. The amount of tax someone pays depends on which municipality they live in and what their income is.

County councils, regions and counties

There are 21 counties in Sweden. There are a number of municipalities in each county. Each county has its own county administrative board. The Government appoints county governors who lead the county administrative boards. The county administrative boards are the Government's representatives in the counties. Their most important task is to achieve the goals the Riksdag and the Government have laid down, while also taking into account the circumstances of the individual county.

Sweden also has county councils (some county councils are called regions). The county council is a political organisation that covers the same geographical area as the county. The county councils have the right to impose tax and are responsible for certain public services, primarily healthcare. They are also involved in cultural issues, local public transport and regional planning. There are currently 20 county councils and regions in Sweden. The regions and county councils are led by a democratically elected assembly called the regional assembly or county council assembly. For example, it can be said that Region Västra Götaland is formally Västra Götaland County Council.

The EU

The EU is an economic and political partnership between a number of European countries. The EU was formed in the aftermath of the Second World War as an economic and political partnership between Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and what was then West Germany. The aim was to cooperate economically and politically in order to avoid further world wars, preserve

peace and increase trade within Europe. One of the founding principles was that countries who trade with each other become economically dependent on each other and thus avoid conflict. It can be said that every member state has chosen to hand over a portion of their sovereignty to the EU in order to collectively gain greater influence in the world.



The European Parliament in Brussels.

Photo: www.europaparlamentet.se

Sweden became a member of the EU in 1995. The EU now has 28 member states; these work together on matters such as the free movement of goods, services, capital and people, environmental protection and security and defence. Many of the member states have introduced the common currency, the euro; Sweden has not.

The EU has three important institutions that together make laws: The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, which is also known as the Council of the European Union. All three are located in the capital of Belgium, Brussels, in the French city Strasbourg and in Luxembourg. The 28 member states cooperate in three different ways:

- **Supranational level**
Decision that all member states have to comply with. This encompasses the laws made by the EU. EU legislation takes precedence over that of a member state. Many of the laws enacted are to make it easier to conduct business, travel and work within the EU. There is a court specifically for EU legislation. This is called the Court of Justice of the European Union and is located in Luxembourg.

- **Intergovernmental level**
Voluntary cooperation between the 28 member states, without legislation. For example, when the EU decides on foreign policy and military interventions, this is done at the intergovernmental level.
- **National level**
Each member state has the right to self-determination. However, all laws and regulations that countries enact must be consistent with what is stated in the laws and regulations there are at the supranational level.

Power is divided between many

Although formal political power is divided between different levels; municipality, county council and region, central government and the EU; there are several power centres in society that are of significance to the democratic system. The mass media, the market and civil society are important actors and arenas in a democratic society.

The mass media (newspapers, radio, TV and internet) are independent of the state. This means that they are free to provide information about and scrutinise politicians and other people who have power in society. The mass media also have an important role in terms of creating a debate concerning topical social issues.

Radio Sweden (SR) and Swedish Television (SVT) are owned by foundations that are independent of the state. Their activities are paid for via the television and radio charge that households pay; this is known as the TV licence. The channels are therefore not funded by advertising or central government grants and are thus known as public service. Their job is to work in an impartial way and with a democratic basis. There are also several advertising-funded TV and radio channels in Sweden that scrutinise those in power, for example TV4.

The market consists of private companies and consumers that together influence the country's economy and labour market. Economic development in the enterprise sector has an impact on the state's tax income.

Civil society is the name given to a part of society in which people help each other without the direct involvement of the state. The primary motivation behind civil society is not money, as is the case with, for example, a company. Civil

society is also sometimes called the non-governmental sector, the voluntary sector or the third sector. Examples of actors in civil society are charities, sports clubs and political parties that are neither directly funded by the state nor exist simply to earn money.

Popular movements in Sweden such as the labour movement or the temperance movement are examples of how civil society can be a powerful force in society, with neither the state nor the market being the driving forces. Civil society is an important part of a democratic society in which there are many ways you as a member of the public can be involved in influencing society.

Democratic rights such as freedom of expression, of the press and of association are also, albeit indirectly, a call to citizens to get involved in politics. People can participate in politics in various ways, for instance by becoming involved in a political party, an organisation or an association in order to pursue various issues. People can contact various media in order to inform them about issues they find important. If you contact a journalist you have the right to have your anonymity protected. People can also contact politicians in the municipality where they live and offer suggestions or points of view about decisions that have been made.

Sweden's four fundamental laws

Laws and rules are required in order for a democracy to function. The fundamental laws are the most important laws in Sweden. The fundamental laws form the basis of other laws and create a framework for the governance of Sweden. They protect democracy and are superior to all other laws. This means that the content of the country's other laws may not conflict with what is stated in the fundamental laws.

In order to guarantee this framework so that no one is able to carry out a coup d'état following an election, these laws cannot be changed easily. In order for a fundamental law to be changed, it is normally necessary for the Riksdag to make the same decision twice. A general election also has to take place between these two decisions. Accordingly, this rule is in place to prevent the central government making

decisions with excessive haste. The additional thinking time provides the opportunity for everyone to carefully consider the change to the law. The fundamental laws protect our democracy. There are four fundamental laws in Sweden:

- **The Instrument of Government** which describes how Sweden is to be governed. The current Instrument of Government is from 1974. This contains rules about how the Government is to work and how elections to the Riksdag are to take place. The Instrument of Government also contains laws about the fundamental freedoms and rights. For example, the Instrument of Government states that everyone has a right to freedom of association and freedom of religion.
- **The Act of Succession** which deals with who may become king or queen in Sweden.
- **The Freedom of the Press Act** which is about what may be written in newspapers and books. In Sweden, people can write whatever they want, provided the text is not criminal.
- **The Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression** which deals with what can be said on the radio, TV, in films and on the internet. In Sweden, people can say what they like, with certain exceptions. For example, people are not allowed to say things that are to others. This can relate to what is said about an individual or a group.

Political ideas and parties

When you vote, you choose a political party that you want to support. A political party is an organisation with members who have similar ideas and who want to have influence in a country. Each party has a political programme that describes the party's ideas about how society should develop. Many of today's political parties are based on ideas that emerged during the 19th century.

Liberalism

The Latin word *liber* means free. The earliest liberals (in the 18th century) were concerned, among other things, with protecting people's rights and freedoms. These included freedom of expression and of the press, which the liberals wanted to protect so that everyone would be able to express their ideas and opinions in speech and in writing.

The liberals also wanted to do away with fees and customs duties when people bought and sold things. That would increase trade between countries. This would be good for the economy and reduce the risk of war.

Conservatism

The word conservative comes from the Latin *conservare*, which means preserve or retain. The first conservatives (in the 18th century) wanted to protect the country's history, traditions and religion. They wanted to power to remain in the hands of the king, the church and the nobility. Significant ideas within conservatism are resisting rapid changes in society and preserving traditions based on the family and religious congregations.

Socialism

The word socialism comes from the Latin *socius* meaning companion. The first socialists (in the 19th century) wanted to protect the rights of the working class. They didn't want factories and other businesses to be privately owned. Instead they wanted people to own these collectively. Significant ideas within socialism are, for example, that there has to be the greatest possible equality between individuals and different groups in society.

Other political ideologies

New ideologies emerged in the 20th century. Their ideas have influences the entire world in various ways.

Feminism has been around for a long time, but grew in strength over the course of the 20th century. Feminists believe that it is wrong for men to have more power in society than women. They focus on strengthening women's political, economic and social rights.

Ecologism is ideas that involve regarding the human race as part of the natural world. Political ecologism revolves around a desire to work to create a good environment and ecologically sustainable development.

Nationalism is ideas that deal with the sense of community within the nation. Nationalist want to preserve their own nation, its culture and history. Nationalists are critical of cultures being mixed.

Fascism and Nazism have existed since the beginning of the 20th century, and maintain that a strong elite rather than democratically elected politicians should govern a country. Both fascism and Nazism are nationalist ideologies that believe their own culture is superior to others. Nazism was strong in Germany in the 1930s when Adolf Hitler governed the country. The Nazis started the Second World War and killed many millions of people including Jews, Roma, functionally impaired people and people who opposed the Nazi regime.

Political parties

The political parties have an important democratic role in providing the voters with choices in general elections and opportunities to influence policy, participate and assume responsibility. Political parties can seek financial support from public funds, so that they will be able to work towards long-term goals without being dependent on private donors. Parties can apply for financial support from Partibidragsnämnden (the Board for Financial Support to Political Parties). Such support may be provided for the general activities of parties that are represented in the Riksdag as well as to those that are not. Election results influence how much money parties receive.

The parties represented in the Riksdag during the current term (2014-2018) are the Centre Party (C), the Liberal Party (L), the Christian Democrats (KD), the Green Party (MP), the Moderate Party (M), the Social Democratic Party (S), the Sweden Democrats (SD) and the Left Party (V). The Social Democratic Party and the Green Party formed a government following the election in September 2014. The Prime Minister is Stefan Löfven (S).

The Moderate Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats form a political coalition known as the Alliance. This coalition was in government in 2006-2010 and 2010-2014.

The Swedish electoral system

The fundamental element of a democratic society is our ability to choose which people are to represent us in general elections. Elections are very important as it is mainly

through elections that the public can influence the politics that are conducted.

Elections and electoral turnout

A large turnout in elections (when a lot of people vote) indicates that many people have confidence in politicians and the democratic system. If the Riksdag, the regional and county council assemblies, and municipal councils are to be regarded as representative of the entire population, a sufficiently large number of those who have the right to vote have to turn out to vote in general elections. About 86 per cent of the Swedish population voted in the Riksdag election of 2014. Turnout in county council/regional and municipal elections was slightly lower. When you vote, the chance increases that someone who shares your views will be involved in governing the country.



Picture from a polling station where people are voting.

Photo: Patrik Svedberg (www.domstol.se)

There are major differences in electoral turnout between different groups of people. People with a low income and limited education are less likely to vote than people with a high income and a higher education. A smaller proportion of young people vote than do older people. Electoral turnout is also low among people who were born abroad. The interest in voting increases the longer a person has lived in Sweden.

General elections

There are four types of general election:

- to the Riksdag,
- to the country council/regional assembly,
- to the municipal council, and
- to the European Parliament.

Voters vote for party and may, at the same time, may vote for one of the people (candidates) listed on the voting slip (voting for a particular candidate). It is of course possible to vote for different parties in the different elections.

The electoral system in Sweden is proportional. This means that the parties are given a number of representatives in the elected assembly that is proportional to their share of the vote.

General elections to the Riksdag, regional/county council assemblies and municipal councils are held every four years, in September. These elections take place on the same day. Elections to the European Parliament are held every five years, usually in June.

Referendums

A referendum provides politicians at the national, regional or local level with an opportunity to find out what the public's opinion is on a political issue. In Sweden, there are two types of referendum that apply to the entire country: advisory referendums and referendums on a matter of fundamental law. An advisory referendum is not binding. Politicians can thus make a decision that contradicts the result of the referendum. A referendum on a matter of fundamental law is held in conjunction with a Riksdag election and is always binding. However, this type of referendum has never been held in Sweden.

Sweden held its most recent national referendum in 2003. This was about whether Sweden should replace the Swedish krona with the euro. A majority of the Swedish people voted against introducing the euro. At the local level, there are generally referendums in one or more municipalities every year. A consultative referendum at the local level must be held on an issue if at least ten per cent of the municipal electorate demands it (this is known as a popular initiative). The referendum will not be held, however, if two thirds of the members of the municipal/county council/regional assembly oppose the proposal.

The right to vote

You have the right to vote in the Riksdag election if you are a Swedish citizen and are 18 years of age or older.

You have the right to vote in the European Parliament election if you are 18 years of age or older and are a citizen of an EU country.

You have the right to vote in municipal and county council/regional elections if you are at least 18 years old and have been registered in the Swedish population register for at least three years. You do not need to be a Swedish citizen to vote in municipal and county council/regional elections.

Prior to the elections, the Election Authority sends out a polling card to all those who are allowed to vote. The polling



Photo: Marcus Lundstedt, Johnér

card is sent to the address at which you are registered. You must take identification with you when you go to vote.

If you have the right to vote, you can also be elected to a political post. This means you can be elected as a member of the Riksdag, a county council/regional assembly or a municipal council.

In Sweden the ballot is secret at elections. This means that you are not obliged to tell anyone which party you voted for. The officials at polling stations who receive your vote have no way of finding out which party you voted for.

Thresholds for small parties

In order for a party to enter the Riksdag, it has to win at least four per cent of the popular vote across the country, or twelve per cent of the votes in a constituency. In order for a party to enter a county council or regional assembly, it has to win at least three per cent of the vote. For elections to the European Parliament, the same threshold applies as for the Riksdag election, i.e. four per cent. Thresholds will be introduced in elections to municipal assemblies beginning in 2018, and will be two or three per cent of the vote, depending on the number of constituencies in the municipality.

There are many parties in Sweden that do not have places in the Riksdag, but are represented in municipalities and county councils/regions.

Democracy between elections and in everyday life

It is important for people to be able to make their voice heard in more ways than by voting in general elections.

The public must also have plentiful opportunities to have insight into, participate in and influence political decision-making processes when they so desire between elections. For example, this is possible through contacting a politician, signing a petition or demonstrating.

It is also important to have the ability to influence decisions that affect you or your everyday life. In recent decades, many people in Sweden have attempted to increase participation

and co-determination in working life, in school, within families, in associations and in residential areas.

Improving people's opportunities to have influence in their working life means that businesses and organisations attempt to get their employees to be more involved in what happens at work. Everyone has to have the same opportunity to influence their work. However, it is still the boss who make the final decisions.

Increasing participation and co-determination in school means that there is an attempt to teach children to think critically and take responsibility. The teacher does not decide everything. Pupils can be involved in planning the teaching.

Increasing the amount of co-determination within families can mean that there is a desire to make children more independent and confident. Many parents plan with their children and allow them to be involved in decision-making within the family.

Many associations in Sweden have had democratic working practices for a long time. For example, they have rules about how meetings and elections to the board are organised. It is important that all members are able to vote. Each member's vote has the same value.

Participation and co-determination in residential areas means that those who live in the area can be involved in decision-making. For example, they can be involved in making decisions concerning things that those who live in the building use together.

Discussion questions for Chapter 6

What does democracy mean to you?

How do you notice democracy in your life?

How can corruption be tackled in a democratic society?

What impact does freedom of expression have on a society?

In what way can freedom of expression be misused?

Why is it important to be able to express our opinion in a democracy?

Which political ideas do you think should govern society?

In what way is electoral turnout a democratic issue?

Why is it important to vote in general elections?

How can you use your democratic rights in our everyday life?

What would you like to change in society?

In which ways is Sweden a democratic country?