

# **The Democratic Audit of Sweden 1995–2011**

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## **Abstract**

The Democratic Audit of Sweden published annual reports between 1995 and 2011. The aim of the Audit was to actively contribute to a constructive debate on the basic preconditions for democracy by means of a wider discussion of the concepts, analyses and empirical research. The Democratic Audit of Sweden consisted of independent social scientists who were invited by SNS (The Center for Business and Policy Analysis, a Stockholm-based research organization) to assess the state of Swedish democracy.

The democratic ideal as formulated by the Democratic Audit was one of *popular, constitutional* and *effective* government. The people must be free to govern themselves (popular democracy). Public power has to satisfy the fundamental requirements of the rule of law, to be respected by the authorities and enjoy public legitimacy (constitutional democracy). Finally the political system must have the capacity to implement democratic decisions (effective democracy).

Results were published in annual reports. The research teams normally consisted of four or five scholars, mostly political scientists. Some authors participated in several reports, but members were usually replaced each year. Published reports received relatively broad media attention and members of the research teams participated in seminars around the country.

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## **Approach and methodology**

The common experience from the countries that have undergone the democratization process shows that a number of relationships are necessary conditions for democratic government. One can, therefore, speak of a minimal definition of democracy. It is important that the legislative branch be chosen in free and general elections. Elections must be conducted on a regular and fair basis. Another key principle is that no adult can be deprived of the right to vote and candidate for office. Moreover, everyone must be allowed to express their opinions and criticize holders of power in society. The liberal freedoms of speech, press, and association form an important cornerstone of the minimal definition of democracy. Citizens must, therefore, also have the opportunity to obtain information from different sources. The right of association – particularly the right to create political parties – needs to be guaranteed in a democratic state.

These criteria are the basis for democracy. They must be fulfilled in order for a country to be considered a democracy at all. Established democracies, including Sweden, fulfill these criteria well. An audit of mature democracies requires more specific standards of the quality of democratic governance than the one given by these minimal requirements.

A more appropriate definition of democracy must, therefore, assess how well these basic values are fulfilled. This was the starting point for the work of the Democratic Audit, which focused its attention on the quality of Swedish democracy. The quality of a country's democracy can be measured with the help of a number of criteria for good democratic governance. These criteria form an ideal type of democratic government that is both a theoretical abstraction and a norm for comparison. This ideal can, therefore, be used as a scale and a measuring stick to judge the democratic quality of political systems as they appear on paper and in action.

This basic ideal can be formulated as *popular*, *constitutional*, and *effective* government. This ideal signifies, first, that citizens must be able to govern themselves in a free and equal way. Second, the legal system must satisfy certain fundamental requires which are

respected by administrative authorities and enjoy public legitimacy. Third, democratic government must be able to perform its tasks and implement its decisions.

This ideal of democracy contains three different elements. This means that democracy cannot be reduced to one single value. Democracy is not just popular government, as democratic political systems must also fulfill the criteria of constitutional and effective government. Democracy is not only proper legal treatment and due process – i.e., constitutional government – because citizens in a democratic political system must have the final say and government must be able to perform its tasks effectively. Finally, democracy cannot be delimited to effective government. The need for strong leadership must be balanced with the need for popular consent and legal impartiality.

The three cornerstones of democracy – popular, constitutional, and effective government – constitute an inescapable predicament. The different fundamental values may and frequently do come into conflict with each other. It has even been shown theoretically that it is impossible to construct an entirely perfect democratic form of government. Dilemmas and the balancing of the fundamental values are an inherent part of democracy. The problems of balancing conflicting values cannot be left to experts or outsiders. Ultimately it is only the people and their elected representatives who through public debate and dialogue can find practical solutions that satisfy the fundamental requirements of democracy.

The debate on how these fundamental values should be balanced can be made more manageable if the values are given concrete form. This is what the Democratic Audit did in its evaluations of Swedish democracy. Operational definitions were given to the three cornerstones of democracy. Thirteen different indicators were used in the initial audits.

### **Popular government**

The principle of popular government is the first cornerstone of democratic government. A number of special demands are put on popular democratic government. The people must be able to control the political agenda. They must ultimately be the group who decides which issues should be the focus of legislative action. The people must be able to form their own opinions on these issues. There is, in other words, a demand that citizens can keep themselves informed. Effective participation is crucial for the political process in democracy. The third, fourth, and fifth indicators measure the quality of electoral campaigns, voluntary associations/civil society, and local self-government. Democracy

also requires decision-making equality. Every citizen must have the same right to participate in the making of decision without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. Every member of the public must tolerate and respect the right of other citizens to hold different points of views. Seven indicators were formulated to measure this value. They are presented below as statements formulating ideal types or ideal situations.

#### *1. Control of the political agenda*

A requirement of good democratic governance is that all citizens decide on the future of their own society. An obvious condition is that there is something to decide on. It is, therefore, crucial in democracy that citizens have ultimate control over how the political agenda is set. A minimal requirement in any representative democracy is that the legislative branch should have the deciding say over its own agenda.

#### *2. Enlightened understanding: the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit)*

Government by the people is realized through the free formation of opinion. Democracy is a method for solving conflicts through dialogue. This democratic ideal requires that the political views of the people are based on informed understanding. Dialogue is the life-blood of democracy. A necessary requirement is, therefore, a functioning public sphere. It is crucial that the mass media provide the public with alternative sources of news as well as different interpretations of events. In other words, there must be pluralism in the mass media. All citizens must have the opportunity to reflect upon the political process and formulate their own opinion.

#### *3. Effective participation: elections*

Elections are the primary means in representative democracy for citizens to demand accountability of their politicians. Generally, elections and electoral campaigns should realize the ideal of independent, reflective citizens who under the same conditions first discuss and then decide on issues which they have themselves decided as common concerns. Election campaigns must give the citizens these opportunities.

#### *4. Effective participation: voluntary associations*

Arenas where people can meet and discuss issues of common importance are necessary in order that the inhabitants of a country become true citizens and do not remain anonymous

and powerless in society. This means that a well-functioning civil society is crucial for democracy. Ideally-speaking, voluntary associations tend to promote democratic dialogue. Social movements, study circles, and political parties create social capital. Active participation in civil society contributes to the creation of trust and solidarity among citizens. Voluntary associations function as a school in democracy.

#### *5. Effective participation: local self-government*

Involvement in local affairs has been seen as a school in democracy. Civic virtue stems from engagement in local political life. Local government has even been seen as an experiment laboratory for national politics and recruitment ground for national politics. The idea behind decentralization is that political decisions as much as possible should be made by the people who are affected by them. When seen in relation to the nation-state, local self-government is an expression of the decentralization of political power. Local and regional government can, therefore, be seen as furthering popular government if they practice good democratic traditions. Here we are, for instance, interested in the role of political parties, civil society, and the mass media at the local level.

#### *6. Decision-making equality*

Democracy means that all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social group etc., have the same right to participate in political bodies. Systematic under-representation of different social groups is an important sign of weakness in the government structure of any country. Systematic and permanent under-representation of certain groups undermines the credibility and legitimacy of the political process.

#### *7. Toleration*

The concept of citizenship is central in democratic theory. In comparison to traditional society, where a person's social status depended on his or her family background, gender and social class, democratic society is based on equality. All citizens have the same right to take part in the political community. Citizenship is a combination of rights and duties. An important duty is toleration. Anti-discrimination is an important basis for democracy. Everyone has the same right to formulate and express her or his opinions. Toleration is the duty to respect the rights of others. Intolerance seriously threatens the requirement in democracies for free exchange of thoughts, opinions, and ideas.

## **Constitutional government**

Not only must citizens perform certain duties of democracy. The power of the state in democracy must also be subject to limitations. Such limitations are justified by reference to the rights of minorities and liberal freedoms. Political power must be exercised in a legal fashion. It can be discussed how strong these limitations should be. Laws and rights which regulate the democratic process itself are naturally compatible with the ideals of democracy. Yet there are many important rights which do not, strictly speaking, relate to the political process. The rights of minorities and the protection of the integrity of the individual set limits on the decision-making powers of the majority. Constitutional democracy presupposes that it is possible to find practical solutions which meet the requirements both of rule of law and government by the people.

In order for a state to qualify as a polity governed constitutionally several requirements must be fulfilled. Individual citizens must enjoy a number of fundamental rights and freedoms. The exercise of political power must respect the principle of due process. The power of the state must be organized according to the principle of separation of powers. These requirements were formulated as three separate indicators.

### *8. Rights and freedoms*

This aspect focuses on how citizen rights and freedoms are exercised in practice. It is not uncommon that there is quite a difference between the formal and real rights of citizenship. The question is whether certain groups in society are more capable of using their rights and freedoms than others.

### *9. Rule of law*

The principle of rule of law means that individual citizens must not be discriminated against or be treated arbitrarily by government. Every person must have access to effective means for the assertion of their rights against government.

### *10. Separation of powers*

Montesquieu's idea that only power can check power is as relevant today as when he formulated it. Constitutional government implies that political power must be divided and regulated. A polity built upon legal principles must consist of several different centers of power. Particularly important is the existence of independent institutions for supervision

and oversight of the political system. A well-functioning court system is an example of such an institution.

### **Effective government**

Many social scientists claim that effective government is not a crucial aspect of democracy. In a historical perspective, it has mainly been anti-democratic political theorists who promoted ideas regarding effective government and the need of strong leaders. The experience of Europe in the interwar years clearly shows, however, that democracy must also be able to govern effectively. Weak governments that are not capable of solving social problems have on several occasions led to the fall of democratic political systems.

The decision to include this element in the theoretical ideal of democratic government, it was done so under the assumption that the need for government effectiveness cannot by any means be achieved at the expense of the other two crucial elements, popular and constitutional government. Rather, the effectiveness of democracy is identical with the capacity of the people to realize common goals through collective action under democratic forms of regulation. Three indicators of good effective government were developed by the Democratic Audit of Sweden.

#### *11. Resource control*

An important part of independent decision-making capacity is control over an adequate supply of available resources. Resources come in many forms. Examples are financial and environmental resources. For an audit of contemporary Swedish politics, it is beyond doubt that economic resources are of particular importance. This is the case because Sweden had experienced problems with government financing and had accumulated a considerable public sector debt that threatened other important elements in democratic governance.

#### *12. Decision-making capability*

The ability of politicians to make lasting decisions is an important requirement for effective government and, thereby, good democratic quality. Political institutions must be constructed in such a way that they make collective decision-making possible even when differences of opinion are large and the issues complex. Political actors also have a responsibility to promote decision-making capability.



### *13. Outcome control*

In mature democratic states, it is not sufficient that politicians can make decisions on public well-being. Political systems can choose among different strategies to implement democratic decisions and monitor the effects of legislation. A central issue in good democratic governance concerns the way administrative bodies handle legislative decisions. It is important that civil servants do not misrepresent the will of the people as reflected in legislative decisions in their daily contacts with citizens. Legislative decisions must be implemented correctly for government to be considered effective and democratic.

A crucial question for the Audit is whether it is possible to use the same framework to assess democracy at different levels of government. The answer is by no means an obvious one. For instance, many scholars have argued that local democracy is essentially different than national democracy and must, therefore, be analyzed on the basis of special normative demands. However, the Democratic Audit attempted to test this claim in studies that applied the basic criteria of democratic quality to different territorial levels. Most Swedish audit reports have studied the national level but some have also dealt with the European Union and local self-government.

## **Organization of the Audit**

The Democratic Audit of Sweden was established by the Center for Business and Policy Studies (Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle, SNS) in 1994. SNS is a private, non-profit organization that seeks to promote research on economic and social issues of importance to public decision-makers, making it readily accessible to a broad audience. SNS attempts to be a bridge between social science research and decision-making in business and public life. Its goal is to provide an independent forum for discussion of policy issues among decision-makers in business, politics, the media and the academic community. As an organization, SNS does not take a stand on policy issues.

Previously SNS had published annual reports on the state of the Swedish economy. Over the years, the economists who conducted this audit pointed to problems within the political system as one explanation for weak economic performance of Sweden. This

criticism was an important impetus for the creation of the Democratic Audit. A group of independent political scientists was commissioned to study the political system in Sweden and assess the state of Swedish Democracy on an annual basis. The SNS Democratic Audit was primarily financed by grants from private research foundations.

Seventeen reports were published between 1995 and 2011. The research team normally consisted of four or five scholars, mostly political scientists, but also sociologists, economists, and legal scholars. A total of 41 researchers participated in the Democratic Audit of Sweden. One third of these were women. Around sixty percent were 50 years or younger. While a majority of the Audit members were Swedes around 40 percent of the participants came from other countries (Norway, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Slovenia, United Kingdom, and the United States). At the beginning some of the authors were Audit members for several years. Subsequently the entire research team, with the exception of the academic research director of the Audit, was normally replaced every year. Two thirds of the Audit members only participated once. The Audit had three different directors: Bo Rothstein (1995), Olof Petersson (1996–2008), and Jonas Tallberg (2009–2011). The participating scholars were recruited by SNS, in reality by the academic research director of the Audit. The work of the Democratic Audit was carried out under conditions of complete academic freedom. The authors were solely responsible for the contents of each report.

The series of report from the Democratic Audit of Sweden came to an abrupt end in September 2011. According to the original plans the 2012 report was to concentrate on the problems of corruption and bad governance. The preliminary title was “The hidden assets of democracy” and a research team (Carl Dahlström, Marcia Grimes, Johannes Lindvall and Bo Rothstein) had started to write the report. However, a dispute at the SNS institute led to an immediate stop. According to researchers the SNS management had breached the principle of academic freedom by restricting the freedom of expression of a key research director of SNS. Although the conflict concerned another research project the Audit team immediately broke contacts with SNS. Also the present author, who had been in charge of the Audit series, resigned from his position because the independence and credibility of SNS had been jeopardized. Following these events SNS had a new management but there are no signs of a continuation of the Audit series. This is why the story about the Democratic Audit of Sweden now has to be written in the past tense.

## **The most important results and conclusions**

The initial SNS Democratic Audit reports gave comprehensive assessments of the overall status of the quality of democracy in Sweden, in Swedish municipalities, and the European Union. Later on the reports focused upon particular aspects of the democracy, such as political parties, global governance, political accountability in a parliamentary system, mass media and the European Union.

### **1995 – Democracy as dialogue**

*”Demokrati som dialog”, by Bo Rothstein, Peter Esaiasson, Jörgen Hermansson, Michele Micheletti, Olof Petersson*

The 1995 report established the basis for democratic auditing. Popular, constitutional and effective government were operationalized in thirteen criteria. The audit used the criteria in two ways. First, Swedish democratic performance was compared to the ideal type for each criterion. Second, an assessment was made of the direction of change in Swedish performance over the past few decades, i.e., if the quality of democratic practice was improving by becoming more similar to the ideal type or whether the trend was that democracy was deteriorating and becoming more dissimilar to the ideal type for each criterion.

Swedish democracy received a passing grade in certain areas, such as civil society, politicians as a fairly descriptive representation of the electorate, liberal freedoms, the rule of law and decision-making capacity. The weak points were limited access to the political agenda, quality problems in the public sphere, intolerance, lack of clarity in the separation of powers, deficient accountability and weaknesses when it came to economic resource control.

The report concluded that Swedish democracy generally could be characterized as satisfactory when compared to the ideal type but that the general trend was negative. In particular the quality of democratic practice was deteriorating on those criteria that were once the foundation of the Swedish model: control over resources, control over the political agenda, effective participation in civil society, decision-making capacity of government, and control over implementation.

## **1996 – Democracy and leadership**

*“Demokrati och ledarskap”, by Olof Petersson, Jörgen Hermansson, Michele Micheletti, Anders Westholm*

A problem that appeared on several indicators involved political leadership. Events in Swedish politics in the preceding year showed that the country lacked a serious discussion about how leadership in a democratic system. While there was no lack of literature about leadership in general, and also about political leadership, it was surprising to learn how little useful had been written about leadership in a parliamentary democracy. The evaluation of democratic leadership in Sweden began with the basic demands placed on democratic government: citizen rule, rule of law, and government performance. These were translated into norms for democratic leadership: responsiveness, fairness, and effectiveness.

There are several circumstances in Swedish politics that facilitate good democratic leadership but that there are also several characteristics of the system that prohibit its further development. The Democratic Audit 1996 argued that one serious problem was the unclear division of roles and responsibilities among the various political actors involved in democratic government. Another problem concerned the social and informal gate keeping characteristics that threatened the goals of equal access to the political system. The authors concluded that elected officials had not been successful in making citizens understand the conditions under which politicians work. Therefore, Swedish politics needed a more creative political pedagogy. There was a lack of transparency and good political communicators.

## **1997 – Democracy across borders**

*“Demokrati över gränser”, by Olof Petersson, Jörgen Hermansson, Michele Micheletti, Anders Westholm*

As in the preceding reports, the Democratic Audit provided a summary of the state of democracy in the Swedish political system. Democracy received a passing grade in certain areas – civil society, politicians as a fairly descriptive representation of the electorate, liberal freedoms, the rule of law and decision-making capacity. The weak points were inadequate control over the political agenda, problems in the public sphere, intolerance, lack of clarity in the separation of powers and weaknesses when it came to economic resource control.

The evaluation of the European Union showed a number of weaknesses in democratic quality. The EU suffered from several democratic deficits. Popular government was the most serious weakness. The Democratic Audit questioned whether the EU could be said to meet even minimal requirements of popular government. Other deficiencies were noted in relation to the criterion on effective government, though these were not seen as equally serious. Constitutional government was the only democratic cornerstone that received a passing grade.

Results from the audit of Swedish municipal democracy were entirely different. Popular government was judged satisfactory. The most serious weaknesses of municipal democracy concerned legal and constitutional issues. Constitutional government was the Achilles heel. Municipal reforms and reorganizations had led to problems regarding the rule of law, predictability, the division of responsibilities, as well as scrutiny and control.

### **1998 – Democracy and citizenship**

*“Demokrati och medborgarskap”, by Olof Petersson, Jörgen Hermansson, Michele Micheletti, Jan Teorell, Anders Westholm*

Swedes were found to participate less in politics. There was also a drop or stagnation over the entire span of political engagements from the ability to write a formal complaint about a decision of a public agency to active involvement in political meetings, participation in demonstrations, direct contact with decision-makers, and voter turnout. Particularly notable was the drop in activity in political parties. Less than eight percent stated that they were a member of a political party. Even fewer attended political meetings or had a position of trust within a political party.

The encompassing citizen survey also showed that the state of Swedish democracy was not all bleak. Women and men were now on more equal foot in many areas; though in some of them men were still more active than women. Belief in the openness of the political system and in one's own ability to influence the situation of the country had increased.

Important weaknesses in the quality of Swedish democracy were also identified. Importantly, immigrants were found to be political outsiders. Immigrants believed that they were less able to appeal a decision of a public agency than others and that it was more difficult for them to influence their own situation. They also took fewer initiatives to influence their situation in the different social roles investigated in the study. The

development over time was discouraging. The gap between immigrants and the rest of the population had maintained or widened over the preceding ten years. A combination of weak individual resources and badly functioning institutions was identified as the reason for this failure. Many established organizations were better at maintaining the positions that they have reached than at adapting themselves to new social and political challenges. The authors considered it a serious flaw in Swedish democracy that new immigrants were not more welcome to enter Swedish society.

### **1999 – Democracy the Swedish way**

*“Demokrati på svenskt vis”, by Olof Petersson, Klaus von Beyme, Lauri Karvonen, Birgitta Nedelmann, Eivind Smith*

The 1999 Audit looked at Swedish democracy from a European perspective. The Audit included four foreign academics familiar with social life in Sweden. Sweden could definitely develop into a better constitutional democracy in the view of the Audit. Democracy has to be something more than simply a state in which the majority rule through legislation.

The 1999 Audit team recommended that Sweden should not adapt itself on every point to a model based on a single European norm, which can scarcely be said to exist anyway. On certain points, such as the principle of public access to official documents and the Swedish model of autonomous administrative agencies, it was rather Europe that had lessons to learn from Sweden. There were, however, many aspects of the Swedish polity which could usefully be changed so as to strengthen democracy. A greater degree of awareness about Sweden's past and about her nearest neighbors would provide a better basis on which to conduct a critical and independent discussion with the aim of finding ways to improve the country's democratic institutions.

### **2000 – Democracy without parties?**

*“Demokrati utan partier?”, by Olof Petersson, Gudmund Hernes, Sören Holmberg, Lise Tøgeby, Lena Wängnerud*

In the view of a majority of Swedes the political parties were not working satisfactorily. That same majority failed to award the parties a passing grade in relation to taking responsibility for difficult and long-term decisions, to giving their members influence over party policy, to persuading suitable individuals to stand for elected office and to implementing the demands and wishes of the public. The research group drew attention

to the declining membership figures for the parties and argued that this trend gave cause for concern. "Grass-roots party members" were already becoming a rarity. Party members were becoming identical with elected politicians.

A society without parties would lead to increased power for rich special interests, technocracy and charismatic leader-figures. The kind of society envisaged would be based on a combination of elitism and populism. Small elite groups and authoritarian leaders would be able to stir up prejudice through the use of modern media and propaganda techniques.

### **2001 – Transnational democracy**

*"Demokrati utan utland", by Olof Petersson, Karl Magnus Johansson, Ulrika Mörth, Daniel Tarschys*

Globalization and Europeanization need not lead to a weakening of democratic government. Major opportunities exist for strengthening the democratic aspects of international politics. These involve a policy committed to creating a democracy across borders.

The cause of the current democratic deficit is due not only to shortcomings in the formal decision-making rules and the relations between various institutions, but, equally importantly, to the absence of a democratic infrastructure, of functioning systems for news distribution, opinion formation and cross-border contacts between social movements. Major efforts are needed to create a public sphere in Europe and lend real meaning to the notion of European citizenship. The Democratic Audit proposed that efforts should be devoted to stimulate the media and lend greater weight to European and global issues in schools and education in general. Greater resources should be devoted to break the barriers of language or European cooperation will become a monopoly of the well-educated.

### **2002 – Democracy without accountability**

*"Demokrati utan ansvar", by Olof Petersson, Leif Lewin, Sören Holmberg, Hanne Marthe Narud*

In most cases governments that lose votes continue to stay in office. The likelihood of retaining government position after the election is almost as high among losing parties

when compared to government parties that gain votes. The Swedish case in fact revealed a negative correlation in this respect. After an electoral defeat a government party has a somewhat higher likelihood of staying in power, compared to winning parties.

The weak link between voter opinion and government formation indicates that the principal-agent chain of representative democracy is not working properly. In this sense democracy lacks accountability. Elected representatives and the political system are not particularly responsive to voter signals. There has to be a stronger emphasis on accountability. Free and general elections are the most important instrument for voters to affect collective decisions. Elections make it possible to hold political decision-makers accountable.

### **2003 – Democracy in the EU**

*“Demokrati i EU”, by Olof Petersson, Ulrika Mörth, Johan P. Olsen, Jonas Tallberg*

The European convention developed into a large constitutional experiment. The basic question is whether it is possible to design democratic institutions at the European level. The lessons learnt from the convention, both in terms of its results and the convention method as a process, proved to be of practical as well as theoretical importance. It should be added that this report was written during the convention itself and was published on the day of the final plenary meeting.

The 2003 Audit began with a critical discussion of the notion of a democratic deficit in the European Union. If democratic ideals both could and should be taken a starting point for an assessment of EU governance one could argue that major reforms are necessary. The European convention turned out to be an innovative method for constitutional and institutional change. Sweden made some contributions to the reform process, but the government's official position aimed at preserving the institutional status quo.

The Convention made significant contributions to the debate on how the European Union could change towards more democratic, constitutional and effective governance. But many issues remained. The quest for democratic governance at the European level must start with the individual citizen. Transparency, enlightened understanding, participation and accountability are as important for the EU as for democratic communities within national territories. Without such a citizen perspective there is a risk that institutional and constitutional reform in the EU will remain an issue for the European political elite.



Fundamental changes in the living constitution and the basic institution of a political system, identity as well as trust, will take decades. It is unrealistic to expect that the latent conflicts and cleavages in Europe would find lasting solution during the course of a year's debates in a convention. The convention should be seen as a step in a long and fundamental transformation process in the history of Europe.

#### **2004 – A new constitution for Sweden**

*“Demokratins grundlag”, by Olof Petersson, Lauri Karvonen, Eivind Smith, Birgitta Swedenborg*

Can democratic governance and public policy in a mature democracy like Sweden's be improved through constitutional reform? Can widely perceived problems in the political life of such a country, including growing popular mistrust of the political establishment, be remedied by changing the rules of the political game?

These were some of the questions addressed in the 2004 Democratic Audit Report. The report drew on a series of studies produced as part of a research program on the impact of constitutional reform. Researchers contributed perspectives from constitutional law, political science and constitutional political economy and the report's authors themselves represented the different fields (political science, law, and economics). The Audit Report presented the main conclusions that the authors draw from this research and proposed some major constitutional reforms in Sweden. These reform proposals concerned the role of the constitution in a constitutional democracy, the role of local self-government in a unitary state like Sweden and various ways that accountability and governance could be improved in Sweden's parliamentary system. One proposal was to return to a new form of a bicameral system, which Sweden abandoned in 1970.

#### **2005 – The integrity of mass media**

*“Mediernas integritet”, by Olof Petersson, Monika Djerf-Pierre, Jesper Strömbäck, Lennart Weibull*

Free and independent media are supposed to be a prerequisite for a vital democracy, but most media institutions were found to be under strong pressure. The 2005 report gave an overview of the Swedish media structure and its regulatory framework. It concluded with a series of proposals for strengthening the integrity of media organizations and individual journalists.

## **2006 – Media and elections in Sweden**

*“Mediernas valmakt”, by Olof Petersson, Monika Djerf-Pierre, Sören Holmberg, Jesper Strömbäck, Lennart Weibull*

In election years in most democracies thousands of volunteers flock to their parties to help arrange meetings, set up posters, hand-out leaflets, canvass neighborhoods, but not in Sweden. Of 24 countries surveyed, Sweden placed last in this regard. Most contacts between parties and voters are indirect. Direct contacts between the parties and voters are few; most communication takes place via the media. Mass media play a vital role, but the 2006 Audit found indications that the influence of journalistic mass media was ebbing.

The campaigns of the last decades had been formed by the influence the media exert, in two senses: The media have had the freedom to choose how to portray the parties and politics as such, and they have had a strong influence on the campaigns. But there were numerous indications that the epoch of journalist-steered mass media might be coming to an end. The power and influence of mass media and journalists had probably already culminated. New channels and media provided a power base for other groups. Swedish election campaigns face major changes as regards the power relations between media, parties and the citizens.

## **2007 – Media and freedom of expression**

*“Medierna och yttrandefriheten”, by Olof Petersson, Anker Brink Lund, Eivind Smith, Lennart Weibull*

Swedish press freedom has long and proud traditions, but today mass media and journalists are met with new challenges. Politicians and voters support proposals for stricter legislation aimed at reducing the liberty of media. These trends might hamper critical journalism and public debate.

The established media institutions face increasing legitimacy problems. Citizens can no longer be reduced to passive subscribers and viewers. Modern technology allows individual citizens to play an active role in the public arena. The old boundary between media and citizens is being blurred. The Democratic Audit 2007 concluded by asking if the government and established media organizations were prepared to create the legal and ethical rules, which were deemed necessary to protect press freedom, the foundation of an open democratic society.

## **2008 – Media: the voice of the people?**

*“Medierna: folkets röst?”*, by Olof Petersson, W. Lance Bennett, Anker Brink Lund, Preben Sepstrup, Wolfgang Donsbach, Sören Holmberg, Christina Holtz-Bacha, Slavko Splichal, Jesper Strömbäck

This report on mass media’s use of opinion polls differed from most of the other annual audits in that the authors wrote separate chapters, not one joint text. Nevertheless, some common themes emerged. There was general agreement that opinion polls had become an important ingredient of the political process. The mass media use opinion polls to voice popular concerns. Many polls, however, have serious measurement problems and there is reason for concern when it comes to the role of opinions polls in the democratic process.

A fresh survey found that four out of ten members of the Swedish parliament supported the idea of a legal ban to publish election polls during the last week of the campaign. But the members of the 2008 Audit team remained skeptical, as a ban would not only conflict with democratic rights and freedom but would also be very difficult to implement.

## **2009 – Europe after the enlargement**

*“Europa efter utvidgningen”*, by Jonas Tallberg, Daniel Naurin, Anna Michalski, Li Bennich-Björkman

This report was the first of three studies of the European Union. The findings of the 2009 report provided no reason to doubt the EU’s capacity for further enlargement. On the contrary, it was shown that the EU had managed enlarging from 15 to 27 member states without a paralysis of the institutions, deadlock in the political processes or the watering down of integration. The promise of EU membership on the condition of the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria had permitted the EU to promote positive change in the candidate countries in a more effective manner than what would have been achieved through any other means.

## **2010 – The Europeanization of Sweden**

*“Europeiseringen av Sverige”*, by Jonas Tallberg, Nicholas Aylott, Carl-Fredrik Bergström, Åsa Casula Vifell, Joakim Palme

EU membership has left a lasting imprint on Swedish politics and democracy. The prime minister and the Prime Minister’s Office were found to have acquired increased power, at the expense of the other, specialist ministries. Meanwhile, parliament’s scrutinizing role had been complicated and its role in implementing legislation undermined. Swedish

courts had been disinclined to work with the European Court of Justice and thus missed unique opportunities to influence EU law. The authors advocated a more offensive approach, including a revision to the constitution so that it better reflects the constitutional consequences of EU membership.

### **2011 – Power in Europe**

*“Makten i Europa”, by Jonas Tallberg, Derek Beach, Daniel Naurin, Teija Tiilikainen*

Power in the European Union is concentrated to the large member states, despite the fact that the Union consists of more small states than ever. The large member states can wield influence by the increasing role of the European Council, by large state alliances, and by lobbying activities. The authors stressed that a relatively small country such as Sweden must use limited resources more effectively, for example by concentrating on the European Council and the European Parliament and also build strategic coalitions. Since the large states are not always united small states can influence decisions if they have a clear strategy and know how to find strategic partners.

### **Summary 1995–2011**

This overview of the seventeen years of democratic auditing in Sweden shows that the character of the reports has varied somewhat over time. The first three Audit reports started with a broad perspective on democracy based on the ideal of popular, constitutional and effective government. These three reports used the thirteen indicators mentioned above to evaluate the quality of democracy. In the subsequent reports these criteria were not always explicitly referred to but they remained as a general framework for the Audits. After a few years the reports became more focused on special themes, such as citizenship, political parties, globalization, parliamentary government, multi-level democracy, and constitutional reform. During four years, the role mass media in democracy became the subject for the audit reports. The last three reports concentrated on power and democracy in the European Union.

While the seventeen reports differed in subject and scope they also shared some common traits. All reports took their point of departure in a theoretically based ideal of democratic governance and enlightened citizens. Furthermore, the studies were based on relevant empirical findings, sometimes drawing on studies which had been commissioned or even carried out by the audit team itself. Finally, the audit reports usually ended not only with

empirical but also normative conclusions, often in the form of recommendations for democratic reform.

## **Impact of the audit**

Already from the beginning there were two main criteria for the success of a Democratic Audit. Firstly, the findings had to be credible, i.e. based on solid research, clear theoretical standards and systematic empirical research. Secondly, the results had to reach out, i.e. the reports should be accessible for a wider audience, for media and decision-makers. If these two conditions are met the audit reports might contribute to democratic governance as a learning process.

An important aim of the Democratic Audit was to contribute to the public debate on the quality of democracy in Sweden. The audit reports were written for the general public, not a specialized academic audience. The reports were reported on in the media, included as course readings at the university and in classes offered by adult study associations, and discussed within political parties and civil society associations. Members of the Audit teams gave lectures on their results and participated in seminars organized in local SNS chapters around the country.

No systematic studies on the impact of the Audit reports have been carried out so the observations offered here must be somewhat sketchy and impressionistic. The first three reports were mentioned by between 100 and 150 newspaper articles each year. The 1998 report, published shortly before the general elections, received wide coverage. Journalists particularly concentrated on the findings about declining participation and knowledge gaps in the electorate. This report was mentioned in about 300 newspaper articles and several programs on television and radio, including a weekly satire show on public radio. After that public attention varied quite a lot between different years.

The immediate impact on political decision-making has been rather limited. However, several reports contributed to the public debate by focusing attention to particular problems in the political system, such as declining membership in political parties, weak minority governments, and unreliable opinion polls. In some areas, such as constitutional reform, actual policies have in fact gone in the opposite direction from that proposed by the Audit teams. The main influence of the Democratic Audit reports has to be found in

the indirect and long-term effects rather than in the direct input to political decision-making.

Academic influence is just as hard to assess as the contributions to the public debate. The conceptual triangle of popular, constitutional, and effective government has been used as an antidote to binary simplifications. The idea of democratic leadership as the combination of responsiveness, fairness, and effectiveness has also been taken up by other scholars. The citizen survey reported on in the 1998 Audit report developed new ways of conceptualizing norms of good citizenship. The critical conclusions about the declining membership base of the Swedish party system focused the attention to a problem also observed in many other mature democracies. The weak constitutional tradition of a stable democracy such as Sweden came a surprise to at least some of the Audit members. Observations on the mass media and on the European Union could also be added to list of examples of Audit reports quoted by other researchers.

When research reports such as the Democratic Audits receive general attention it is time to reflect upon the responsibility of scientists. Today it is well known fact that social science research can influence its object of study. Observation effects are one example of the methodological problems that illustrate the reflexivity of scientific research. Citizen panels and other types of democratic experiments can trigger increased political interest but also increased cynicism if the projects fail to deliver the positive effects that they promise. Democratic audit reports might be part of a self-reinforcing process. If authoritative reports repeatedly stress that party membership is declining because it is old-fashioned, such reports might discourage younger generations from active participation in political parties. The negativity bias of journalistic mass media tends to give an overly pessimistic view of the democratic process. Furthermore, if citizens are led to believe that other people often cheat on taxes and break the norms of society they might decide to do the same. Thus, a negative spiral of reporting and behavior can undermine the logic of social cooperation. In this way Democratic Audits can become part of the communication process that determines how citizens view each other and how democratic institutions are perceived.

## References

All reports from the Democratic Audit of Sweden were published by SNS Förlag, Stockholm ([www.sns.se](http://www.sns.se)).

Background material from the Democratic Audits between 1995 and 2008 can be found on the author's website ([www.olofpetersson.se](http://www.olofpetersson.se)).

Four reports were translated:

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Petersson, Olof, Klaus von Beyme, Lauri Karvonen, Birgitta Nedelmann, Eivind Smith (1999). *Democracy the Swedish Way. Report from the Democratic Audit of Sweden 1999*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

Petersson, Olof, Monika Djerf-Pierre, Sören Holmberg, Jesper Strömbäck, Lennart Weibull (2006). *Media and Elections in Sweden. Report from the Democratic Audit of Sweden 2006*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag. (Full text in pdf-format: [www.olofpetersson.se](http://www.olofpetersson.se).)

See also:

Micheletti, Michele and Olof Petersson (1997), "The Democratic Audit of Local Government: The Swedish Case", *The Journal of Behavioral and Social Sciences*, 2, 89–107.

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