



All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people, and the Riksdag is the foremost representative of the people.

## GOVERNMENT:

# The Swedish system of government

All power proceeds from the people. This is the foundation of parliamentary democracy in Sweden. Everyone has the same rights, the same opportunity to have their say, and everyone is free to scrutinize how the politicians and public agencies exercise their power.

General elections are held every four years. Some 7 million people in the country are entitled to vote and given the chance to influence which political party will represent them in the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament), county councils and municipalities. People can also influence Swedish politics in other ways—taking part in referendums, joining a political party or commenting on reports presented by the Government.

### The Swedish Constitution

The Swedish Constitution defines how Sweden is governed. It regulates the relationships between decision-making and executive power, and the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. Four fundamental laws make up the Constitution: the Instrument of Government, the Act of Succession, the Freedom of the

Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression. Among other things, the Instrument of Government guarantees citizens the right to obtain information freely, hold demonstrations, form political parties and practice their religion. The Act of Succession regulates the right of members of the House of Bernadotte to accede to the Swedish throne.

The Freedom of the Press Act sets out the principle of public access to official documents in order to guarantee an open society with access to information about the work of the Riksdag, the Government and public agencies. This openness entitles people to study official documents whenever they wish. Another principle in the Freedom of the Press Act is the freedom to communicate information. Under this principle, everyone in

Sweden is entitled to give information to the media that they consider important and that they feel should be made public. The publisher of the material is not entitled to reveal the source if the individual in question wishes to remain anonymous.

The Law on Freedom of Expression, which came into force in 1992, largely mirrors the Freedom of the Press Act, for example, in regards to the prohibition of censorship, freedom to communicate information and the right to anonymity.

### Fundamental rights

To amend a fundamental law, the Riksdag must pass the amendment on two separate occasions, separated by a parliamentary election. The fundamental laws take precedence over all other statutes and no law may contravene the Constitution. ■

**DID YOU KNOW THAT...**

**WORLD LEADER IN FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

After the 2006 election, the Riksdag set a world record for female parliamentary representation, with women making up 47 percent of its elected members. Sweden remains in the lead after the 2010 election, with 45 percent female representation in the Riksdag.



PHOTO: UFF HUETT NILSSON / JOHNER

**FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**

Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce freedom of press, in 1776.

**MAJOR UN CONTRIBUTOR**

Sweden is one of the largest contributors to the United Nations and one of the few countries to meet the UN's aid target of 0.7 percent of GDP. Sweden became a member of the UN in 1946 and active involvement in the UN has been a central plank of Swedish foreign policy ever since.



PHOTO: JENNY GAULTZ / JOHNER

**FOREIGN POLICY**

Throughout the 20th century, Swedish foreign policy was based on the principle of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime. Since 1995 Sweden has been a member of the European Union, and as a consequence of a new global security situation, Sweden has modified its foreign policy doctrine, including playing a more active role in European security cooperation.



PHOTO: FRANK CHAJURA / NORDICPHOTOS

The Riksdag has 349 members who are chosen by Sweden's citizens every four years in general elections.

## The Riksdag – representing the people

The Riksdag makes the decisions and the Government implements them. The Government also submits proposals for new laws or amendments to laws to the Riksdag.

The 349-member Riksdag is Sweden's primary representative forum. The entire Riksdag is chosen by direct elections based on suffrage for all Swedish citizens aged 18 or over who are, or previously have been, residents of Sweden. Since 1971, Sweden has had a unicameral (one-chamber) Riksdag.

General elections to the Riksdag are held on the third Sunday of September every four years. Eligibility to serve in the Riksdag requires Swedish citizenship and the attainment of voting age. All elections employ the principle of proportional representation, to ensure a distribution of seats among the political parties in proportion to the votes cast for them across the country as a whole.

**Four percent required**

There is one exception to the rule of full national proportionality: a party must receive at least 4 percent of all votes in the election to gain representation in the Riksdag, a rule intended to prevent very small parties from getting into the Riksdag.

There are currently eight parties represented in the Riksdag: the Moderate Party (Moderaterna, M), the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD), the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet Liberalerna, FP), the Center Party (Centerpartiet, C), the Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna, MP), the Social Democratic Party

(Socialdemokraterna, S), the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) and the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet, V).

**Appoints the Prime Minister**

The Government governs the country but is accountable to the Riksdag. The Riksdag appoints a Prime Minister, who is tasked with forming a Government. The Prime Minister personally chooses the ministers to make up the Cabinet and also decides which ministers will be in charge of the various ministries. Together, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet ministers form the Government. Under the Constitution, the Government—not the head of state (the monarch)—is empowered to make governmental decisions.

Ministers usually represent the political party or parties in power. In many cases, they have a seat in the Riksdag, which they retain during their period in the Cabinet, although an alternate takes over the duties of a Riksdag member appointed to Cabinet. In other words, a Cabinet minister must abstain from the right to vote in the Riksdag. All ministers are, however, entitled to participate in parliamentary debates.

At the official opening of the Riksdag each September, the Prime Minister delivers a Statement of Government

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**HISTORY OF SWEDISH ELECTIONS**

**2010:** The ruling center-right alliance beats the left-of-center coalition, but fails to gain an outright majority.

**2006:** The non-socialist parties form a four-party coalition government called the alliance.

**1998 - 2002:** The Social Democrats remain in office after both elections, but in order to implement their policies are forced to form a parliamentary alliance with the Left Party and the Green Party.

**1994:** The Social Democrats form a new minority government.

**1991:** A non-socialist minority government of the Moderates, Liberals, the Center Party and Christian Democrats is formed.

**1985 and 1988:** The Social Democrats remain in power after both elections.

**1982:** The non-socialist parties lose their majority and a Social Democratic minority government is formed.

**1979:** The non-socialist parties retain their parliamentary majority, and a new three-party government is formed. In the spring of 1981, the Moderate Party leaves the Government.

**1976:** The Social Democrats resign and are succeeded by a coalition consisting of the Center Party, the Moderates and the Liberal Party.

**1932 -1976:** The Social Democrats rule without interruption, except for a period of 100 days in 1936 when Sweden has an interim government.

Policy. In it he presents Government policy goals for the next year and defines priority policy areas at national and international level.

**The Government at work**

The Government rules Sweden by implementing the decisions of the Riksdag and taking initiatives for new laws or amendments to laws, on which the Riksdag decides.

Helping the Government in this task are the Government Offices and around 300 government agencies. The Cabinet as a whole is responsible for all Government decisions. Although many routine matters are in practice decided by individual

ministers and only formally approved by the Government, the principle of collective responsibility is reflected in all Governmental work. As part of its official functions, the Government:

- Presents bills to the Riksdag
- Implements Riksdag decisions
- Allocates the funds appropriated by the Riksdag for expenditure on items in the budget
- Represents Sweden in the EU
- Enters into agreements with other states
- Takes decisions in certain administrative areas not covered by other authorities
- Directs the activities and operations of the executive branch. ■

## Local and regional administration

Sweden has three levels of domestic government: national, regional and local. In addition, the European level has becoming increasingly important since Sweden joined the EU in 1995.

**The regional level**

At the regional level, Sweden is divided into 21 counties. Political tasks at this level are undertaken by the county councils. The county councils are responsible for overseeing tasks that cannot be handled at the local level by municipalities but which rather require coordination across a larger region, most notably health care. The county councils are entitled to levy income taxes to cover their costs. At the regional level there are also county administrative boards, the government bodies for the counties.

entitled to levy income taxes on individuals. They also charge for various services. As a result, municipalities have significant latitude in deciding what services they should offer. They are however legally obliged to provide certain basic services.

**The European level**

On entering the EU in 1995, Sweden acquired a further level of government: the European level. As a member of the European Union, Sweden is subject to the EU *acquis communautaire*—the accumulated legislation, legal acts and court decisions

that constitute the cumulative body of European Union Law. Sweden takes part in the decision-making process when new common rules are drafted and approved. The Swedish Government represents Sweden in the European Council of Ministers, which is the EU’s principal decision-making body. Various issues previously decided by the Riksdag are these days decided at the EU level. ■

**The local level**

At the local level, Sweden is divided into 290 municipalities, each with an elected assembly or council. Municipalities are responsible for a broad range of facilities and services including housing, roads, water supply and waste-water processing, schools, public welfare, elderly care and childcare. The municipalities are



FOTO: JOHNER

Three elections – three ballots.

**LEARN MORE****FOUNDATIONS OF SWEDISH DEMOCRACY**

In Sweden, parliamentary democracy emerged during the earliest decades of the 20th century. Voting rights reforms in 1909 created universal male suffrage and introduced proportional elections. In 1921, universal suffrage was extended to women. After World War II, democracy became the completely dominant concept within Swedish politics.

**THE HEAD OF STATE WITHOUT FORMAL POWER**

The king or queen occupying the Swedish throne under the Act of Succession is the country's head of state. The Swedish head of state, since September 1973 King Carl XVI Gustaf, exercises no political power and does not participate in political life. As head of state, he is the representative of the country as a whole, and in that capacity performs mainly ceremonial duties and functions. Among his duties the monarch chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**THE PARLIAMENTARY OMBUDSMAN**

The Parliamentary Ombudsman, commonly known as the Ombudsman for Justice (JO), handles complaints from anyone who feels that he/she, or somebody else, has been wrongly treated by a public authority or civil servant. There is no requirement for that person to be a Swedish citizen or to be a certain age; even children can lodge a complaint.



FOTO: NILAS CARLSSON / CENTERBILDER

The leaders of the center-right alliance during the campaign before the election in 2010.

## A new political landscape

Sweden's general election in September 2010 delivered historic results. The ruling center-right alliance beat the left-of-center coalition, but failed to gain an outright majority.

For many decades, the Social Democratic Party has played a major, often dominant role in Swedish politics. However, over the past 30 years, power has changed hands several times between the Social Democrats and the "non-socialist" political block.

In the general election of September 19, 2010, Fredrik Reinfeldt became the first conservative prime minister to be reelected — although his center-right alliance could not gain an absolute majority. The Prime Minister's Moderate Party garnered 30.06 percent, far ahead of its previous result of around 20 percent. In a

historic defeat, the Social Democrats won only 30.66 percent of the vote, far below previous levels of around 40 percent and their lowest percentage since World War I.

With its 2010 election, Sweden became the latest in a series of European nations where populist right-wing parties have entered parliament. Up until now, Swedish voters had not given the Sweden Democrats sufficient support to overcome the 4 percent constitutional threshold needed to enter parliament. The 2010 election is likely to mark the beginning of an era of sharper political division in Sweden. ■

## Useful links

[www.jo.se](http://www.jo.se) – The Parliamentary Ombudsmen – JO

[www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se](http://www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se) – The government's website on human rights

[www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se) – The Swedish Parliament – the Riksdag

[www.ski.se](http://www.ski.se) – The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

[www.sweden.gov.se](http://www.sweden.gov.se) – Government and the Government Offices of Sweden

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