

The Swedish System of Government

Sweden is a parliamentary democracy. The Constitution declares that all public power in Sweden proceeds from the people and that the Riksdag – the Swedish Parliament – is the foremost representative of the people. The members of the Riksdag are chosen in general elections every four years in accordance with a proportional election system. The king is Sweden's head of state, but he has no formal power. Instead the country is ruled by the Government, which is accountable to the Riksdag.

Foundations of Swedish democracy

In Sweden, democracy and parliamentarism emerged during the earliest decades of the 20th century. Often 1917 is regarded as the year when parliamentarism was definitely introduced. Since then, the king has not exercised any personal power in connection with changes of Government. Formally, however, parliamentarism was not established until the new Instrument of Government in 1974.

Universal suffrage was introduced in 1921. The voting rights reform of 1909 created universal male suffrage and introduced proportional elections, which among other things led to major success for left-wing political parties in the 1911 election. In 1921, universal suffrage was also extended to women. After World War II, democracy became the wholly dominant concept of how the Swedish political system should be organized, and in 1951 freedom of religion was also formally secured.

The Instrument of Government, which is the most important constitutional document, presents the basic features of the Swedish system of government. The Instrument of Government went into effect on January 1, 1975, when it replaced the outdated 1809 Instrument of Government.

The new Instrument of Government largely involved an incorporation of prevailing practice into the Constitution. It is consistently based on the principle of popular sovereignty and the principles of democracy and parliamentarism. The first article declares: "All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people. Swedish democracy is founded on the free formation of opinion and on universal and equal suffrage. It shall be realized through a representative and

parliamentary polity and through local self-government."

In addition to the Instrument of Government, the Constitution consists of the 1810 Act of Succession, which regulates the succession to the throne; the 1949 Freedom of the Press Act, which regulates freedom of expression in printed media; and the 1991 Fundamental Law on the Freedom of Expression, which protects freedom of expression on radio and television, on film, video and tape recordings etc. in accordance with the principles of the Freedom of the Press Act. In addition, there is the 1974 Riksdag Act. It occupies a position midway between constitutional and ordinary law.

The task of constitutional reform did not end with the enactment of the new Instrument of Government. It has instead been altered on a number of occasions. In both 1976 and 1979, for example, the Instrument of Government was amended to strengthen fundamental rights and freedoms, and in 1994 it was amended to enable Sweden to join the European Union.

The head of state – a monarch 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 or she is the representative of the country as a whole, and in that capacity performs only ceremonial duties and functions. The head of state pays official visits to other countries and acts as host to foreign heads of state on official visits to Sweden. The head of state also signs the credentials of Sweden's ambassadors to other countries and receives foreign am-

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bassadors to Sweden. Another official duty of the head of state is to open the annual session of the Riksdag. The head of state does not participate in the deliberations of the Government and does not need to sign any Government decisions.

In 1979, the Act of Succession was amended to give male and female heirs equal rights to the throne. As of 1980 this right belongs to the first-born, regardless of gender.

The Riksdag – representing the people

The Instrument of Government gives the Riksdag – the Swedish Parliament – an entirely central role in the Swedish system of government. The Riksdag has legislative power and the Government, which is accountable to the Riksdag, implements the decisions of the Riksdag and submits proposals for new laws or amendments to laws.

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

General elections to the Riksdag are held on the third Sunday of September every four years. The Government is also entitled to call extra elections between the regular ones. A mandate received in such an extra election is valid only for the remaining portion of the regular four-year parliamentary term of office. It is thus not especially meaningful to consider calling an extra election late in a four-year term.

Eligibility to serve in the Riksdag requires Swedish citizenship and the attainment of voting age. All elections employ

the principle of proportional representation. The election system is designed to ensure a distribution of seats among the political parties in proportion to the votes cast for them in the country as a whole. Thus, in addition to 310 fixed constituency seats, there are 39 "adjustment seats" that can be distributed freely in such a way that a fair, proportion distribution is achieved in the country as a whole. However, the adjustment seats are also filled by candidates from the parties' regular lists.

There is one exception to the rule of full national proportionality: a quota rule requiring a party to receive at least 4 percent of all votes in the election to gain representation in the Riksdag, which is intended to prevent very small parties from getting into the Riksdag. In each separate constituency, however, a party is allocated a number of fixed seats if it receives at least 12 percent of the votes, even if the party did not succeed in obtaining at least 4 percent in the country as a whole.

There are currently seven parties represented in the Riksdag: the Moderate Party (*Moderaterna, M*), the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna, KD*), the Liberal Party (*Folkpartiet, FP*), the Center Party (*Centerpartiet, C*), the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet de Gröna, MP*), the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokraterna, S*) and the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet, V*).

Each party receives public grants for its general activities. The State grant is based on the outcome of the Riksdag election. Parties without seats in the Riksdag also receive grants, provided that they have obtained at least 2.5 percent of the nationwide vote in either of the two latest Riksdag elections.

Since 1997 there has also been a system of voting for individual candidates on a party list, which can provide the basis for determining which candidate or candidates will be selected to represent a given party's seats. To be elected by personal votes, a candidate must receive personal votes equivalent to at least 8 percent of the party's votes in a constituency.

The various occupations in Swedish society are fairly well represented in the Riksdag, although public sector employees are over-represented. Following the 2006 election, the proportion of women MPs rose to 47.3 percent.

The work of the Riksdag

A newly elected Riksdag commences its first session fifteen days after the election. Its work is led by a Speaker and three Deputy Speakers. Each newly elected Riksdag appoints at least 16 standing committees for its four-year term: the Com-

Outcome of Riksdag elections. Percentage of votes received by Riksdag parties.

Year	M	FP	C	KD	NYD ⁴	S	V	MP	Others
1932	23.1	12.2	14.1			41.7	8.3		
1940 ¹	18.0	12.0	12.0			53.8	4.2		
1948	12.3	22.8	12.4			46.1	6.3		
1956	17.1	23.8	9.4			44.6	5.0		
1958 ²	19.5	18.2	12.7			46.2	3.2		
1964	13.7	17.0	13.2			47.3	5.2		3.6
1968	12.9	14.3	15.7			50.1	3.0		4.1
1970	11.5	16.2	19.9			45.3	4.8		2.3
1973	14.3	9.4	25.1			43.6	5.3		2.4
1976	15.6	11.1	24.1	1.4		42.7	4.8		1.7
1979	20.3	10.6	18.1	1.4		43.2	5.6		2.1
1982	23.6	5.9	5.5	1.9		45.6	5.6	1.6	2.2
1985	21.3	14.2	12.4 ³	(2.6)		44.7	5.4	1.5	0.5
1988	18.3	12.2	11.3	2.9		43.2	5.9	5.5	3.6
1991	21.9	9.1	8.5	7.1	6.7	37.7	4.5	3.4	0.9
1994	22.4	7.2	7.7	4.1	1.2	45.3	6.2	5.0	1.0
1998	22.9	4.7	5.1	11.8	0.1	36.4	12.0	4.5	2.5
2002	15.2	13.3	6.1	9.1		39.8	8.3	4.6	3.1
2006	26.2	7.5	7.9	6.6		35.0	5.8	5.2	5.7

¹ This election, held during World War II, was considered a vote of confidence for the Social Democratic Prime Minister.

² Extra election after a referendum on the public pension issue and dissolution of the Riksdag.

³ Including 2.6 percent for the Christian Democrats, who campaigned on the same party list as the Center Party in 1985.

⁴ New Democracy, a populist non-socialist party established in 1991, disappeared from the Riksdag in 1994.

mittees on the Constitution, Finance and Taxation as well as other committees that largely correspond to the division of ministries. The parties are represented in proportion to their number of seats. Government ministers may attend Riksdag committee meetings to present information, and ministerial officials often attend to provide explanations and other relevant information.

On matters concerning the EU, the Government must consult with the Riksdag's Committee on EU Affairs. This applies primarily to how negotiations in the EU Council of Ministers are to be prepared on behalf of Sweden. Unlike the 16 standing committees, the Committee on EU Affairs does not deal with proposals for parliamentary decisions.

The positions of Speaker and Deputy Speakers, as well as the chairmanships of committees, are generally distributed to the various parties by agreement among them. All items of business are thoroughly reviewed in the committees, which sometimes arrange special hearings on complex or far-reaching issues. All items of business discussed in committee are included in reports that the committees present to the Riksdag for a decision. It is not possible to bury a Government bill or a private member's bill in committee.

The Riksdag session lasts about eight months, closing for business from mid-June through September. During the first fifteen days after the Government has presented its annual Budget Bill, individual members may introduce private bills on any subject. After the submission of each Government

bill, members of the Riksdag are given fifteen days in which to propose amendments on the issues dealt with in the Government bill.

Each member of the Riksdag has an official alternate member who takes over his or her duties in the Riksdag if he/she is appointed as a Government minister or as Speaker or is absent for more than one month. As the coordinator of the Riksdag's work, the Speaker is expected to be above party politics and is not entitled to vote in the Riksdag.

Referendums – consultative and binding

Referendums are regarded as an exception from the normal way of resolving important national political issues in Sweden, which is in the Riksdag. For this reason, a national referendum may only occur after approval by the Riksdag.

The Riksdag may call two types of referendums: a consultative referendum or a binding referendum on a constitutional matter. In the case of consultative referendums, the Riksdag enacts a special law that determines what question will be asked and what day the referendum will take place. To date, six consultative referendums have taken place at the national level. The last three concerned nuclear power (1980), EU membership (1994) and the introduction of the euro as Sweden's currency (2003).

Binding referendums may be held concerning constitutional amendments. One third of Riksdag members can request such a referendum, which must take place at the same time as a general election. No such referendum has been held yet.

A referendum may also be held at the local (municipal) or regional (county council) level. Local or regional referendums are always consultative.

The Government – accountable to the Riksdag

The Government rules the country but is accountable to the Riksdag. The Riksdag appoints a Prime Minister, who is given the task of forming a Government. The Prime Minister personally chooses the ministers who will make up the Cabinet and also decides which of the ministers are to be heads of the respective ministries. Together, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet ministers make up the Swedish Government. According to the Constitution, the Government is formally entitled to make governmental decisions, not the head of state.

Normally, ministers represent the political party or parties in power. In many cases, they have a seat in the Riksdag which they keep during their period in the Cabinet. An alternate takes over the duties of a member of the Riksdag when he/she is appointed a Cabinet minister. 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.

In order to exercise the controlling function that is central to a representative assembly the Riksdag may, if an absolute majority exists, issue a vote of no confidence and thereby cause a single minister or the entire Government to resign. The vote of no confidence shall not take effect, however, if the Government calls an extra election within one week.

If the Prime Minister so requests, the Speaker shall discharge him/her. The same applies in case of a vote of no confidence in the Riksdag. A Cabinet minister may be dismissed either by the Prime Minister or by a Riksdag vote of no confidence for him or her.

If the Government has resigned, the Speaker of the Riksdag shall confer with the party leaders and the three Deputy Speakers. The Speaker then presents a proposal for a new Prime Minister, and the Riksdag votes on the proposal. It is approved if no more than half the members of the Riksdag vote against it. If the proposal is approved, the Speaker appoints the proposed candidate as Prime Minister.

The work of the Government and the Government Offices

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 de-

Parties in the Cabinet since 1945

Year	Party/Parties	Prime Minister
1945-1951	S	P.A. Hansson/ T. Erlander
1951-1957	S/C	T. Erlander
1957-1976	S	T. Erlander/ O. Palme
1976-1978	C/M/FP	T. Fälldin (C)
1978-1979	FP	O. Ullsten
1979-1981	C/M/FP	T. Fälldin
1981-1982	C/FP	T. Fälldin
1982-1991	S	O. Palme/ I. Carlsson
1991-1994	M/FP/C/KD	C. Bildt (M)
1994-1998	S	I. Carlsson/ G. Persson
1998-2002	S	G. Persson
2002-2006	S	G. Persson
2006-	M/C/FP/KD	F. Reinfeldt (M)

cidates. Helping the Government in this task are the Government Offices and about 250 other central government agencies.

The Cabinet as a whole is responsible for all Government decisions. Although in practice numerous routine matters are decided upon by individual ministers and only formally approved by the Government, the principle of collective responsibility is reflected in all Government work.

The Government has a staff of civil service officials and political appointees to help it in its work. They are gathered in the Government Offices, a central government agency that consists of the Prime Minister's Office, the various specialized ministries, the Permanent Representation of Sweden to the European Union and the Office for Administrative Affairs. The Government Offices have about 4 600 employees.

Once a week, the Cabinet assembles to make formal decisions. Presiding over the meeting is the Prime Minister or, in his/her absence, the Deputy Prime Minister or one of the other ministers. All important decisions have been discussed by the members of the Cabinet prior to the meeting, in order to resolve any disagreements. In principle, Government decisions are thus always unanimous. If more than one party is represented in the Cabinet, however, one or more ministers may occasionally have an opinion that dissents from that of the majority.

The main tasks of the ministries are to prepare Government decisions concerning

- legislative proposals for submission to the Riksdag, which include the central government's Budget Bill
- the issuance of laws, ordinances and instructions for government agencies
- Sweden's international relations

- the appointment of judges and certain senior officials in the central government administration and
- Government consideration of appeals in cases not dealt with by the courts.

The internal work of the Government involves a high degree of coordination between the various ministries. If an item of business is of interest to more than one ministry, inter-ministerial contact is mandatory. All Government bills and important statements by ministers (for example, replies to questions by members of the Riksdag) to be presented to the Riksdag are circulated in advance to the other members of the Cabinet so that they may express their views.

Ministry working methods may vary, but on the whole, their procedures are roughly the same. Next in rank below the ministers are the state secretaries, who manage the ministry's work. The ministries also have press secretaries and political advisors entrusted with assisting the minister on policymaking. Unlike other civil servants in the Government Offices, the ministers and their political appointees leave their posts when there is a change of Government.

Besides the political leadership team, each ministry has one or more senior civil service officials. The duties of a ministry's director general for administrative affairs include ensuring that Government business proceeds in a lawful, consistent and uniform manner. The responsibilities of the director general for legal affairs, who may be the same person, include ensuring that legislative proposals and other legal documents are drafted and that they are lawful, consistent and uniform.

The day-to-day work of the ministries is carried out by the various policy divisions. These divisions prepare items of business prior to a Government decision and are also responsible for contacts with the government agencies overseen by that ministry. For overarching issues, there is a legal secretariat and an administrative division.

Commissions of inquiry

Often, Government decisions are not prepared solely by the ministries. On issues of major importance, it is common for the Government to appoint a commission or committee of inquiry, which thoroughly examines the issues at hand and then presents recommendations for changes in the laws or other reforms.

The commission may consist of a single person, but it is common for commissions to consist of a chairperson and members

representing the political parties and various public bodies, plus specialized advisors and other experts. The commission is also assisted by a secretariat.

Commissions are given great freedom and may pursue their inquiries by means of travel, hearings, research etc. The work of a commission is often followed by the media until it publishes its report. This gives the general public some idea of its progress. A commission often works for one or two years, sometimes longer. In many cases, the commission's recommendations are unanimous, at least on matters of principle, but members may also have dissenting views and present their alternative recommendations in the report.

Once a commission has presented its report to the ministry to which it is accountable, the report is almost always referred to the affected public agencies and organizations for a statement of opinion. Organizations and individuals to whom the report has not been sent are also always entitled to submit their views on it to the ministry in charge. Once the public comment period has expired, the ministry compiles all the opinions that have come in. The opinions that have been expressed may lead to more or less extensive adjustments to the commission's recommendations, or the Government may even decide not to act on them. As a rule, however, the Government presents its own proposal to the Riksdag in the form of a bill based on the commission report and the opinions submitted.

This working method may seem cumbersome and time-consuming, but is considered valuable from a democratic perspective. In this way, the opposition parties and other organized interests have a chance to influence the Government's policies even before it adopts a position on a given issue.

The civil service

A number of central government agencies or authorities belong to the sphere of operations of each ministry. It is these agencies that are responsible for the day-to-day activities of the Swedish government civil service. Together with the local governments, they ensure that the instructions approved by the Riksdag and the Government are implemented around the country. The Government decides the goals, guidelines and allocation of resources for agency operations, but it does not decide how the agencies will apply a law or how they will decide various items of business.

Each agency is headed by a director general appointed by the Government, usually for a six-year term. Sometimes a director general is chosen from the political

sphere. The board of an agency consists of the director general as chairperson, a number of the senior officials from the agency itself and representatives of organizations or population groups with a special interest in the agency's activities, and sometimes politicians. All board members are appointed by the Government, as are the most senior officials of the agencies. Other officials are hired by the agencies themselves.

A Cabinet minister or a ministry may not intervene in an agency's handling of individual administrative items of business. As a consequence of their independent status, the central government agencies are expected to submit proposals to the Government on the guidelines they should follow. These often concern adjustments in the laws and ordinances that apply to the agencies' respective fields. Such agency recommendations are often referred for public comment in the same way as commission reports.

Government agencies and citizens

The Administrative Procedure Act provides the basis for how the business of central government agencies is to proceed, by establishing rules that are applied, in principle, by all agencies in all fields. The principal purpose of the Act is to safeguard the legal rights of citizens in their dealings with a government agency, for example by requiring objectivity, careful processing and uniform rulings. At the same time, the Act assumes a link between legal rights and service. In other words, agencies must not only act correctly in a formal legal sense, but must also provide quick, straightforward and clear information and help citizens to secure their rights.

Anyone affected by an agency's decision who is dissatisfied with it may normally appeal it to a public administrative court. The first instance is the county administrative court. To the extent that a review permit is granted, a case may then be appealed to an administrative court of appeal and finally to the Supreme Administrative Court.

Most official documents are public, i.e. accessible to the media and individual citizens. All government agency files are available to the public unless they have been classified as secret under the provisions of the Secrecy Act for reasons related to national security, international relations or the privacy of individuals. Normally a person need not state a reason why he or she wishes to see a public document or show identification in order to access it. Anyone denied access to a public document may appeal the agency's decision to refuse access.

Local and regional administration

The Swedish public sector has three levels of government: national, regional and local. At the local level, the entire territory of Sweden is divided into municipalities, each with an elected assembly or council. Municipalities are responsible for a broad range of facilities and services: housing, roads, water supply and wastewater processing, schools, public assistance, elder care, child care etc. The municipalities are entitled to levy income taxes on individuals. They also charge for various services. As a result, municipalities have a fair amount of latitude in deciding what services they should offer. However, they are legally obliged to provide certain basic services.

At the regional level there are both elected county councils and county administrative boards. The county councils are responsible for overseeing tasks that cannot be handled at the local level by municipalities but require coordination across a larger region, most notably health care. County councils are entitled to levy income taxes to cover their costs.

The county administrative boards are the central government's representatives at the regional level. The head of the county administrative board, the county governor, is appointed by the Government for a six-year term and has often previously been a prominent politician, for example a Cabinet minister or member of the Riksdag. The county administrative boards decide on such issues as land use (for example building permits) and traffic (including driver's licenses).

The division of responsibilities between central government, county councils and municipalities may be revised, however, along with the size of regional units. The matter has been under parliamentary review in recent years.

Power, social change and new challenges

For many decades, the Social Democratic Party has played a major, often dominant role in Swedish politics – from 1932 to 1976, the Social Democrats ruled without interruption, except for a period of 100 days in 1936 when Sweden had an interim Government. However, during the past 30 years, the Government has changed hands several times between the Social Democrats and the “non-socialist” political bloc.

In the 1976 election, the non-socialist parties together won a majority of parliamentary seats. The Social Democratic Government resigned and was succeeded by a coalition consisting of the Center Party, the Moderates and the Liberal Party. After two years in office, this coalition was

succeeded by a Liberal minority Government. In the 1979 election, the non-socialist parties retained their parliamentary majority, and a new three-party Government was formed. In the spring of 1981, the Moderate Party left the Government.

In the 1982 election, the non-socialist parties lost their parliamentary majority and a Social Democratic minority Government was formed. The Social Democrats also remained in power after the 1985 and 1988 elections.

In the 1991 election, there was another change of power, with a non-socialist minority Government being formed. It consisted of the Moderates, Liberals, Center and Christian Democrats. In the 1994 election, the non-socialist parties again lost power and the Social Democrats formed a new minority Government. The Social Democrats remained in office after the elections of 1998 and 2002, but in order to implement their policies were forced to form a parliamentary alliance with the Left Party and the Green Party. In the 2006 election, there was a new change in power. The non-socialist parties formed a four-party coalition government, headed by the leader of the Moderate Party, Fredrik Reinfeldt.

The struggle between political parties to win control of the Government is undoubtedly one of the most central ingredients of the Swedish system of government. However, the role of the Government as

well as the functioning of this governmental system in general have also been challenged by other developments in society.

The role of political parties has changed. Citizens do not participate in the work of political parties to the same extent as previously. The decline in voter turnout is also often viewed as being related to increased mistrust of the established political system. On the other hand, there are indications of increased interest in various social movements, often based on social networks. At the political level, the role of informal contacts and “policy networks” has likewise received attention.

In addition, political communication and the relationship between politicians and the mass media have changed, and some observers say that Swedish society is increasingly defined by the media. Similarly, new information technology creates innovative opportunities for citizens and politicians to communicate, but it also raises new questions about the functioning of the public sphere and transparency.

Internationalization has also changed the prerequisites for the Swedish system of government. This became especially clear when Sweden joined the EU in 1995. Various issues once decided upon by the Riksdag are decided nowadays at the EU level.

All of this creates new challenges for the Swedish system of government. In the past decade, there has also been a growing

debate on the governmental system, for example on the inability of the current election system to create strong Governments. As a result of this debate, and in light of such changes as EU membership, the development of information technology and especially declining voter turnout, in the summer of 2004 the Government decided to appoint a commission of inquiry to carry out a broad new review of the Instrument of Government. The commission, which will complete its work in 2008, was entrusted with examining both the election system and the rules on referendums, forming Governments and the role of the court system in Swedish democracy.

Links

The Swedish Parliament,
Sveriges Riksdag,
www.riksdagen.se

The Government and the Government Offices of Sweden,
Regeringen och regeringskansliet,
www.sweden.gov.se

The Parliamentary Ombudsmen – JO,
Riksdagens Ombudsmän – JO,
www.jo.se/Page.aspx

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions,
Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting,
www.skl.se

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