

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific countries or regions.

## Voter Turnout in Sweden 1994–2014

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- Turnout levels have been relatively stable in Sweden over time with an average of approximately 85 percent since 1944 to present time. The highest aggregated turnout level was reached in the 1976 election with 91,8 percent while the lowest turnout rate in modern time is found in the election of 2002 with 80,1 percent.
- The decline in turnout for both the national elections as well as for the elections to the European parliament was broken in the mid-2000. One of the most viable explanations for the break in this trend was the reorganization of the system for absentee voting.
- Simulation studies based on information on voters and non-voters for the election of 2014 have shown that there would not have had any substantial impact on the seats allocated to the political parties if all eligible voters had been participating (if turnout rate was 100 percent instead of 85,8).
- Voter turnout has been debated by the Swedish political parties from time to time. The first major debate in modern time started in the 1960s and was then renewed during the period of 1987–1999. The debates resulted in several government initiated investigations, usually conducted by researcher from the academia.
- One electoral reform with the aim of finding a balance between political stability, voter accountability and voter turnout was when the terms of office change from three to four year election cycles were starting in 1994. Another reform with the purpose of vitalizing the democratic system was the candidate vote reform launched for the election in 1998.
- The most recent reform with the specific purpose of increasing turnout was the transferred responsibility for absentee from Posten AB to the country's municipalities in 2006. The reform resulted in a drastic increase in the number of polling stations for absentee voting.



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## Introduction

Few fields in the political sciences have received as much attention as political participation and voter turnout. Swedish political science is no different. For example, in a recent study, Persson, Sundell, and Öhrvall looked at voter turnout and rainfall. Luckily for Swedish politicians, wanting to increase turnout, they found no effect of rainfall on turnout in Sweden. This great interest, combined with the world's second longest running research program on national elections, going back to 1956, has created a wealth of systematic empirical studies on political behavior and voter turnout. It is from this pool of knowledge that we draw, providing you with a distilled review and the best available answer to questions concerning voter turnout in the Swedish context.

The report is based on government initiated investigations (SOU), academic publications and official data from Statistics Sweden (SCB) and data from the Swedish National Elections Studies (SNES), conducted in collaboration between the University of Gothenburg and Statistics Sweden. The report aims at answering five aspects of voter turnout in Sweden.

First, we give an account of Swedish voter turnout over time and we discuss the factors that have been found to affect turnout. Second, we discuss the implications of turnout for Centre-left parties. Third we focus on the societal debate and policy recommendations laid out in the governmental initiated investigations on voter turnout during the last twenty years. Fourth, we provide a short account of modifications of the electoral system that were made during the same period.

### 1. Voter Turnout in Sweden 1994–2014

Voter turnout is often viewed as central in democratic political systems. If democracy is rule by the people, it is rather intuitive that the people are expected to show up to rule. Why is however, often more vaguely spelled out in the debate, in reports, and official documents (Martinsson 2007). The most frequently used argument is that turnout levels can be viewed as a measure of the legitimacy of the political system. On the other hand, it has been argued that low turnout is not a problem per se if the reason is that voters are happy with the way things are. Ezrow & Xezonakis (2014) have, for example, shown

that over-time increases in citizens' satisfaction with democracy is associated with significant decreases in voter turnout in national elections. However, voter legitimacy is only one of the values associated with turnout. Another equally important aspect is political equality. Turnout might be seen as an indicator of political equality, but political equality might also be affected by turnout. In theory, decreasing turnout might not affect political equality among eligible voters as long as the decrease is similar across subgroups of voters (Lijphart 1997). However, according to the law of dispersion, formulated by the Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten in 1937, this will not be the case. The law of dispersion simply predicts that the higher the turnout is, the smaller are the differences in turnout across different socio-economic groups of voters and the other way around. When turnout decreases, it decreases disproportionately across different groups of voters (Tingsten 1937; Öhrvall 2016). A large body of academic studies have focused on the link between turnout and political equality; and one of the most important issues within the fields of elections studies has been the question of who is voting and why. One of the main reasons for this attention is that Tingsten's law of dispersion has been empirically demonstrated in several Swedish studies (see f. c. Ben-nulf & Hedberg 1999; Persson, Solevid & Öhrvall 2013).

From a West European perspective, turnout levels have in general been declining over the last decades, although, there are signs that this trend seems to have halted in more recent years. In fact, it appears as that a discernible trend rather is that voter turnout has risen slightly in many established Western European democracies during the last elections. Empirical results do, however, show that the general picture is shattered both in terms of levels and trends. For instance, it appears as that turnout levels are decreasing more in many more newly democratized countries. Another finding is that trends in turnout differ across political levels (i. e. local elections, national elections and elections for the European parliament) within countries (Martinsson 2007).

When it comes to turnout, Sweden is one of the countries that witnessed a decrease in turnout from the mid 1980s but with a decrease which has declined and turned into an increase during the last three elections from 2006 and onward. It should be pointed out that Sweden makes a special case in this respect since turnout has been decreasing but now is increasing again

however it has done so from already very high levels. The average aggregated turnout rate in Swedish national elections has been approximately around 85 percent since 1944 to present time, which gives Sweden a top position when it comes to voter turnout from an international perspective.

## 2. Evolution of Voter Turnout

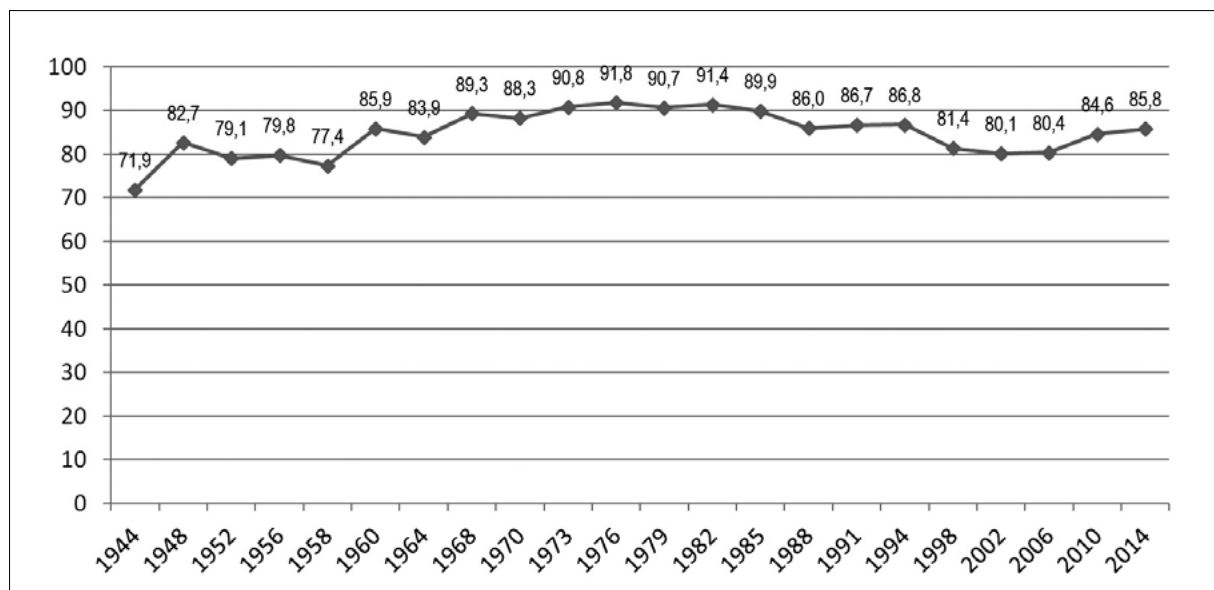
### ■ How did the voter turnout change in the last twenty years?

Turnout levels have been relatively stable in Sweden over time with an average of approximately 85 percent since 1944 to present time. The highest aggregated turnout level was reached in the 1976 election with 91,8 percent while the lowest turnout rate in modern time is found in the election of 2002 with 80,1 percent. From the late 1960s to mid 1980 the turnout levels in Sweden reached 90 percent on average, which simply means that when voter turnout started to decrease in the late 1980s it was decreasing from already high levels. Hence, during the last twenty years we find a decreasing trend in turnout from 1994 with 86,8 percent to 80,1 in the election of 2002. The negative trend is then broken from the election in 2006 when the aggregated turn-

out level reached 80,4. The increase in turnout in the national elections of 2002 and 2006 is small but the negative trend was here broken and from 2006, turnout rates have continuously been increasing to 85,8 percent in the election of 2014.

We find a similar pattern when shifting attention to Swedish turnout in the elections to the European parliament, though at a much lower level. The overall trend in elections across member states has been one of continuously decreasing turnout since the first election in 1979. Sweden held its first election for the European parliament in 1995 and had a turnout of 41,6 percent, which is remarkably low compared to turnout in national elections. From this already low level, turnout continued to fall even further in the subsequent two election reaching a low of 37,9 percent in 2004. Around this time something however started happening, with the downwards trend in national elections turnout being broken in 2006, and in the 2009 elections to the European parliament turnout jumped by more than 7 percent coming in at 45,5. In the 2014 election, turnout in Sweden jumped another 5,6 percent reaching an all-time high of 51,1. This is however still 34,7 percentage points behind the turnout in national elections in the same year, but better than the average turnout in the whole EU which was 42,6 percent in 2014.

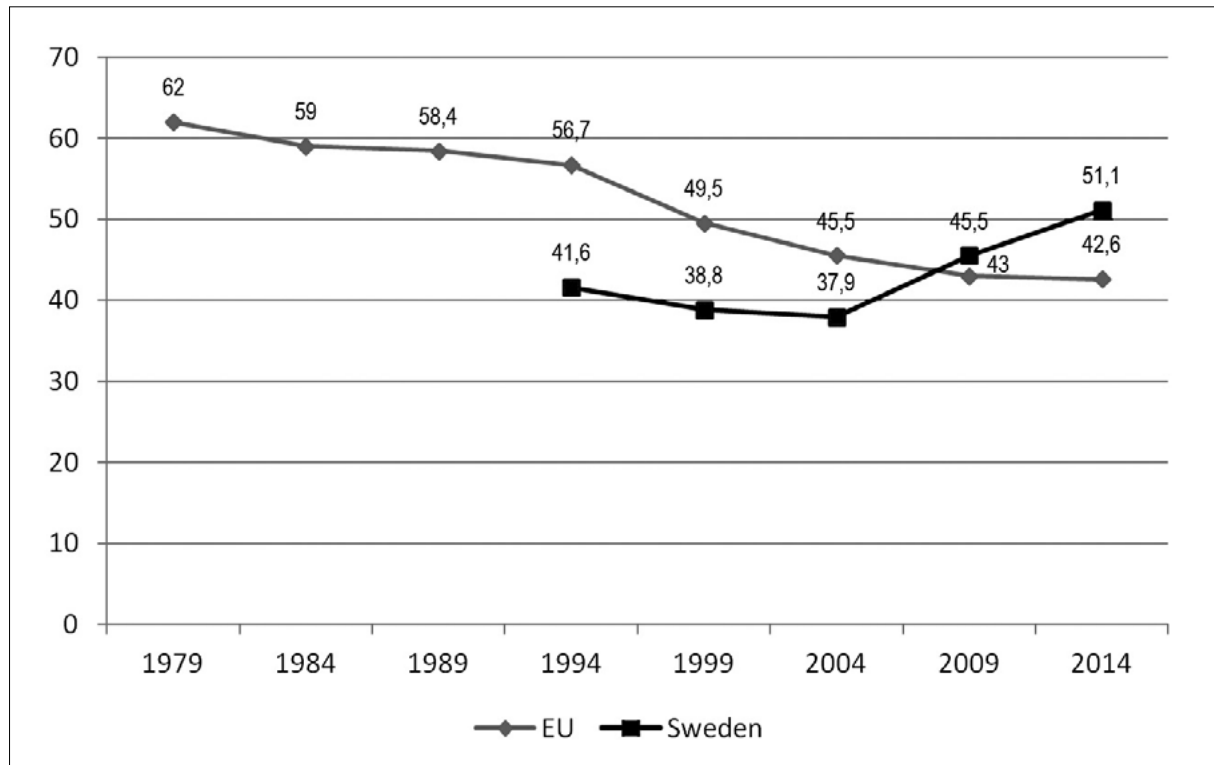
Figure 1: Aggregated voter turnout in Sweden 1944–2014 (percent)



Data source: Statistics Sweden. [www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se).



Figure 2: Voter turnout in the European Parliament elections 1979–2014 (percent)



Comment: The first election to the European Parliament was in Sweden held on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1995. Data source: Sveriges Riksdag. EU-upplysningen. <http://www.eu-upplysningen.se/Sverige-i-EU/Val-till-Europaparlamentet/Deltagande-i-val-till-Europaparlamentet/>

#### ■ What factors affected the voter turnout?

The state of knowledge on which factors that affects voter turnout is, as mentioned, exceptionally good. When talking about voter turnout the literature is usually making a distinction between *individually factors*, *contextual factors* and so called *institutional factors*, which is simply factors related to the electoral system (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2004; 2013). Among the individually related factors the literature is discerning between *resources* and *motivations*. Among the former we find factors such as gender, age, education, income and occupation while the latter are about party identification, political interest and media consumption. When it comes to contextual explanations traditional factors are party system polarization, excitement and engagement of the elections. Finally, the institutional explanations regard electoral systems and election administration, where proportional electoral systems without registration laws and a generous system for absentee voting are crucial explanations for turnout (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016; Öhrvall 2016).

All three levels are important in order to be able to paint the full picture when it comes to voter turnout.

In national elections, individual factors usually receive much attention, as knowledge about turnout in different groups of voters provides knowledge about the state of the political equality. It is also one of the two factors, the other being contextual factors, that can explain fluctuations in turnout in absents of changes to institutional factors such as the electoral system.

Individual level factors affecting voter turnout are perhaps best thought of as similar to the classical categories of social stratification, and the term individual might therefore be a bit misleading. Rather, it is explanations containing many of the usual suspects, such as class, income, gender, rural-urban, education, and differences between people born in the country and not. This underlines why we expect turnout to be informative about political equality. Summarizing the factors in Table 2 very briefly, higher socio-economic status

Table 1: Explanations of voter turnout

<b>Individual explanations</b>	Resources (time, money and civic skills)	High social status (by eg gender, class, occupation, education, income); Strong social inclusion (age, Swedish born, married / cohabitant, large social networks; employment); political knowledge
	Motivations	party identification; political interest; consumption of political news; ideological extremism; compulsory voting feelings
<b>Contextual explanations</b>	Political context	important and exciting elections; high ideological polarization; clear differences between political alternatives; engaging electoral campaigns; high degree of party cohesion;
	Social context	High participation; high degree of political resources and a high level of motivation in the individual's close social environment; recruiting networks.
<b>Institutional explanations</b>	Electoral systems, election administration, location of elections day	single-chamber; proportional electoral system; common election day for local and national elections; Sunday selection; low thresholds; the order of the voter lists; absentee voting; time-span between elections; compulsory voting

Comment: The table is taken from Oscarsson & Holmberg (2016:45).

is traditionally associated with higher turnout. When it comes to gender differences the turnout rates have traditionally been higher among men than women until the election of 1988 when the turnout rates shifted. Since then turnout has on average been slightly higher among Swedish women. Age is another factor that affects turnout but here the relationship is curve-linear in the sense that turnout on average is lower among the youngest and the group of oldest voters. When it comes to geography, turnout is generally lower in rural areas compared to urban ones (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2004). The regional differences are however small in Sweden (Öhrvall 2016).

Education is one of the most important factors when it comes to turnout. The effect of education has, however, been questioned and it appears as that it is not primarily the knowledge or obtained skills per se that are of importance for turnout but rather the impact that education has on one's social status. It has also been suggested that both education and age are the result of pre-adult factors (Persson 2013). Other individual factors that have a positive impact on turnout are marriage and having a job and the mechanism here is believed to be the accessibility to social networks (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2004). Another explanation relates to class where the turnout rate among blue-collar workers is significantly lower compared with the white-collar workers. The gap was a bit smaller during the early 1990, due to the law of dispersion as turnout was higher.

In the national election of 2014, voter turnout among persons born in Sweden increased by almost 2 percentage points compared with the 2010 election. No significant change can, however, be found when looking at foreign born persons. The difference in turnout between these two groups has since increased to 17 percentage points in 2014; when voter turnout was 89 and 72 percent respectively. An additional factor in this is that the number of foreign born persons has increased considerably between 2010 and 2014 and the tendency to vote is lower among those who recently received Swedish citizenship (Öhrvall 2015). Thus the aggregate difference between the groups will in part be a function of the number of recent citizens.<sup>1</sup>

### Contextual Factors

Among the contextual factors that are known to affect turnout we find exciting and engaging campaigns, polarization in the party systems and the close-race hypothesis (van Egmond 2003; Franklin 2004). The close-race hypothesis is simply that when the likelihood of affecting the overall outcome of the election this might cause higher turnout. The close-race hypothesis does sometimes receive support in the Swedish elections

1. While foreign citizens have the right to after being registered as living in Sweden for three years, suffrage to the national level requires citizenship. EU citizens only have to be registered as living in Sweden to have suffrage in local/regional elections.



Table 2: Voter turnout in Sweden among different groups of voters 1994–2014 (percent)

<b>Sex</b>						
man	85,9	80,1	78,2	78,8	81,8	84,5
women	87,8	82,7	82,1	85,2	87,5	87,2
<b>Age</b>						
18–22	83,7	71,8	70	73,3	71,6	72,4
23–30	83,5	74,9	74,8	76	80,6	81,4
31–40	85,8	80,4	74,3	79,3	84,2	86,7
41–50	90,2	80	81,5	83,7	87	87,8
51–60	89,2	86,6	88,2	85,1	88,2	90,2
61–70	89,7	90,6	86,9	88,4	87,7	91,1
71–80	84,6	83	81,3	84,1	86,4	83
<b>Geography</b>						
sparsely populated	87,8	82	77	80,4	80,1	86,7
small town	87,6	78,4	80,9	83,1	84,1	81,3
larger town	86,2	83,2	82	83,6	86,2	86,0
Sthlm, Gbg, Malmö	87,7	85	81,3	80,2	85,4	90,1
<b>Education</b>						
low	84,2	79,9	79,1	76,2	73,5	86,9
medium	86,6	79,9	75,4	79,8	86,3	80,8
high	92,4	88,4	90,7	91,5	89,4	91,4
<b>Marital Status</b>						
married/cohabitation	89,8	86,8	86,6	85	89,4	95,6
widowed	86,4	83,8	76,5	84,7	87,6	90,3
divorced/unmarried	80,8	72,2	69,4	75,4	73,5	74,1
<b>Occupation</b>						
förfärdarbetar	87,7	84,2	81,3	83,1	87,1	86,2
arbetslös/i åtgärder	78,9	60,3	70,3	61,9	68,8	65,3
<b>Work</b>						
industry	83,1	73,9	68,3	70,8	78,9	75,4
other worker	82,2	76,7	74,1	75,8	75,7	82,2
white collar, low	84,4	83	83,4	83,2	87,6	84,2
white collar, medium, mellan	91,6	88,2	89,4	88,6	91,1	90,3
white collar, high, hög	91,9	90,7	90,4	93,7	90,4	88,6
business man	86	84,5	76,2	70,4	93,7	92,3
farmer	91,4	88,6	88,6	83,8	80,9	100,0
student	90,6	79,8	75,4	83,4	70,4	88,2
<b>Class</b>						
working class	82,6	75,5	72,2	74	76,6	81
middle class	89,9	87,6	87,2	86,2	90,3	88,6
<b>Union</b>						
LO	85,1	77	72,9	75,6	79,4	77,5
TCO	91,5	91,4	90,7	93,7	92,3	89,6
SACO	95,4	94,2	93,1	91,1	92,2	92,8
<b>Employment Sector</b>						
public	88,9	88,1	86,7	89,6	90,6	84,9
municipality	88,6	84,4	85,8	87,1	85	91,6
private	86	81,1	78,9	78,9	85	85,6
<b>Income</b>						
very low	82,2	68,9	68,9	75,4	68,2	69
rather low	81,5	77,4	74,4	75,6	80,6	81
neither high or low	86,2	81,5	80,3	82,6	85,6	88
rather high	92,8	86,3	86	86,9	90,4	91
very high	92,9	92,1	91,6	89,5	95,2	92
<b>All</b>	<b>86,8</b>	<b>81,4</b>	<b>80,1</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>84,6</b>	<b>85,8</b>

Comment: Information is taken from Oscarsson & Holmberg (2016:48). Data is based on the Swedish national Election Studies. University of Gothenburg.



(Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004) and sometimes it does not (Persson, Wass & Oscarsson 2013). According to Oscarsson and Holmberg (2016), the Swedish block system facilitates empirical tests of the close-race hypothesis. The balance between the block of bourgeois parties and the socialist block has been and still is decisive for government formation in Sweden. Looking at opinion polls voter will have information about the closeness of the election and thus we can test this hypothesis fairly well. In the 2014 election the hypothesis is confirmed. The more exciting an election is, according to this operationalization, the higher are the turnout rates. The relationship also applies under the control of individual level explanations. According to Oscarsson and Holmberg (2016), the expected difference in the probability that an individual will vote is 4.6 percentage points lower in the most unexciting election (1994: 10.6 points difference) than at the most exciting election (1979: 1.0 units). Voter turnout is higher when the political struggle is exciting than when it is not.

#### Institutional Factors

Institutional factors have been found to form the most powerful class of explanations for voter turnout. According to Franklin (2004), simultaneous analyzes of individuals across countries with different institutional settings show that the institutional variation explains up to four times more than individual explanations do when it comes to turnout levels across countries. Differences between individuals in different countries are not large enough to be able to explain the great variation in aggregated turnout across countries.

The institutional arrangements in Sweden with regard to its electoral system and election administration should according to prior research maximize voter turnout. Sweden has a *proportional electoral system* and proportional systems are thought to be superior over majoritarian systems when it comes to promoting turnout (Blais & Aarts 2006). The costs of voting are also low. Electoral rolls are based on universal population registers and vote cards are sent out to all who are eligible to vote. Hence, *no pre-registration* is needed (Öhrvall 2016). Registration laws have in earlier studies been shown to decrease electoral participation (Dahlberg, Oscarsson & Öhrvall 2008). All elections both local, regional as well as national elections are held at the *same*

*day and during the autumn*, on the second Sunday in September to be precise, every fourth year. It has been shown that the individual cost of voting is decreased even further if elections are *held on Sundays* when most people are off work and during seasons which usually not clash with any big holidays (Franklin 2004). On top of that Sweden has a very generous system for *absentee voting* (Öhrvall 2016; Dahlberg, Oscarsson & Öhrvall 2008). According to Oscarsson and Holmberg (2016) the Swedish system is well-equipped to resist the challenges from decreasing voter turnout.

### 3. Implications for Centre-left Parties

#### ■ How did the voter turnout influence the election-results of Centre-left parties and other parties?

As earlier mentioned, Herbert Tingsten (1937) once formulated *the law of dispersion*, which states that the more the overall electoral turnout is decreasing, the greater the differences in turnout rates across different socioeconomic groups of voters tend to become. Since we know that socio-economic factors are among the most crucial individual level explanations of turnout, we can expect that it is especially parties that have a large degree of their political base among less skilled blue collar workers that suffer most from a decline in overall turnout. From the field of traditional election studies we know that social democratic parties and parties to the left on the left-right continuum have the largest proportions of working class and less educated people in their electoral base. In the case of Sweden, the law of dispersion has been empirically demonstrated in several studies (Bennulf & Hedberg 1999; Persson, Solevid & Öhrvall 2013).

If the electoral participation is low in general or if turnout rates are decreasing proportionally in different socioeconomic groups, it is not only a problem for the political parties on the center-left flank but also a problem for the democratic principles of political and social equality. The Swedish election study program has continuously conducted research on these matters and in general, the results show that the differences between voters and non-voters are quite small in Sweden. Hence, there are no large significant differences across different socioeconomic groups when it comes to electoral turnout with the exception of the issues of nuclear energy and for

issues related to the European Union (Bennulf & Hedberg 1999; Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016). The reason for this is likely due to high turnout in Swedish elections.

Oscarsson and Holmberg (2016) have used information on voters and non-voters from the Swedish election studies in order to simulate the election results if the turnout rate was 100 percent instead of 85,8, which was the actual turnout rate in the election of 2014. Their results show that if all eligible voters had been participating, that would not have had any substantial impact on the seats allocated to the political parties.

However, in election where turnout is lower, such as to the European parliament where it is averaging around 40 percent, the consequences of the differences are more severe. Calculations made by Oscarsson and Holmberg (2010) shows that the Social Democratic Party, over all five elections on average would have had six percentage points higher vote support if all voters had been voting instead of only about four out of ten.

- *How was the party-organization affected? (How are candidates selected; how are campaigns organized?)*
- *How was the program of the party affected?*
- *How have policies been affected?*

Due to the fact that turnout in general is relatively high in Swedish parliamentary elections, we find only very

small differences in terms of representation across different socio-economic groups of voters. This in turn has, from the perspective of the political parties, meant that the electoral campaigns have mainly been a struggle of agenda setting and a competition for voters from competing parties rather than a struggle for mobilization of non-voters. Given this, it is reasonable to believe that the turnout rates have only had limited direct impact on the party organizations, candidate selection or the organization of the political campaigns or policies and party programs. One of the few exceptions to this has been »election schools« organized by the Social democrats in certain areas. The stated aim of one such »school« was to teach citizens how to vote. The schools have however been controversial and party officials accompanying students to the vote booth directly after »class« led to a reelection in held in 2011 in one district.<sup>2</sup> However, as far as we can tell there has been no systematic study focusing on these questions specifically.

However, in Sweden parties get much of their finances from the state and since the election of 2002, the political parties are given extra money for specific information initiatives during the election campaigns, usually between 2–3,000,000 euros which are distributed among the parties according to their former allocation of parlia-

2. [http://www.val.se/det\\_svenska\\_valsystemet/overklaga/avgoranden/2010\\_36.html](http://www.val.se/det_svenska_valsystemet/overklaga/avgoranden/2010_36.html)

Table 3: Election results in the parliamentary election 2014 and the predicted differences with a turnout rate of 100 percent.

	<b>Election result</b>	<b>Predicted difference</b>
<b>Left Party</b>	5,7	0,1
<b>Social Democratic Party</b>	31	0,5
<b>Center Party</b>	6,1	-0,2
<b>Liberal Party</b>	5,4	-0,1
<b>Moderate Party</b>	23,3	-0,4
<b>Christian Democratic Party</b>	4,6	-0,1
<b>Green Party</b>	6,9	0,2
<b>Sweden Democratic Party</b>	12,9	0,1
<b>Feministic Initiative</b>	3,1	-0,1

Comment: Data is based on actual elections results and the predicted differences are taken from Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016.

mentary seats. Starting in the 1990s, the ambition with this extra funding was to promote the parties to make further efforts to reach voters that are usually more difficult to mobilize, such as disabled people. Since 2002 the initiative is more focused on information in general. However, since there are no special requirements for parties to report on how the funds are spent there is no direct opportunity to evaluate or examine what actually has been implemented or obtained with these extra finances (Dahlberg & Åsbrink 2010).

#### 4. Societal Debate / Political Discourse

- *Is there an open debate regarding the challenge of decreasing voter turnout?*
- *What are the key arguments? Who is taking part in the debate?*

Voter turnout has been debated by the Swedish political parties from time to time. The first major debate in modern time started already back in the 1960s and was then renewed during the period of 1987–1999. The debates resulted in several government initiated investigations, usually conducted by researchers from the academia (see c. f. Westholm & Teorell 1999). The general discussions, usually initiated by representatives from the political parties, were until 1999 focused around the electoral system in terms of laws and administration. The debates were generally promoting political accountability and voter turnout, which are two fundamental democratic values. In relation to the electoral system the argumentation regarded the length of terms of office and the separating election days for local, regional and national level elections. After a relatively sharp decrease in turnout in the election of 1998 the debate started to circle around party activities, information campaigns and absentee voting as measures to curb further decreases in turnout (Brothén et al. 2003).

After decades of debating the virtues of having joint or separated election days for local, regional and national elections, a reform was enacted in 1968 which stated that the elections for all levels should be held on the same day (von Sydow 1989). The first election to have common election days was in 1970. By this time elections were held every third year (Oscarsson et al. 2001). The debate of joint or separated election days did, however, continue and culminated in an investiga-

tion which released its report in 2001. Three arguments were paramount in the debates: 1) the impact on voter turnout, 2) the impact on political accountability and 3) the relationship between the state and the local level (Kjellgren 2001).

There were two lines of argumentation. On the one hand there were the Social democratic and the Left party who argued for a common election day since it would maximize voter turnout. High voter turnout strengthens the link between voters and elected politicians and increases the political equality among voters. A common election day was also argued to politicize and stimulate the local campaigns which in turn could affect voter turnout positively (Prop. 1968-27:192). The other line of argumentation was proposed by the bourgeoisie parties together with the Green party who spoke in favor of having separated election days for local, regional and national elections. The main argument was that each policy level deserves its own focus. By separating the election days for each level this would vitalize the democratic system at the local level (SOU 1987:6). The counter argument among spokesmen for the Social democratic and the Left party was that separated election days would decrease voter turnout, which in turn would have consequences for the legitimacy of the locally elected politicians (Kjellgren 2001). The fact that the arguments found to be most normatively appealing for each side coincided with the reforms thought to benefit them in terms of votes was of course purely coincidental. Throughout all periods, during the mid-1960s and during 1987 to 1999 the main argument against common election days is governmental accountability. In the 1990s the argument concerning accountability changed and a common election day for all levels was believed would benefit accountability. The reason for this would be that it allowed voters to compare enacted policies and results not only between elections but also across political levels (Kjellgren 2001). Although there has been a lot of discussion regarding the Election Day there has not been any changes made in this respect since the introduction of the joint Election Day in 1970.

The terms of office were changed from three to four years with start during the election of 1994. This was an issue raised by the bourgeoisie parties for a long time (SFS 1994:1469). The referenda for joining the European Union were held the same year and the Swed-

ish citizens voted yes. This meant that there would be an additional election held every fifth year. Since the elections for the European parliament were directed through European regulations they were not affected by the Swedish election law regarding dates and terms of office (Vallag 1997:157). The arguments here were twofold. Having elections too often could have a negative impact on voter turnout while too long time periods between the elections could affect voters' ability to hold representatives accountable negatively (Kjellgren 2001). The aim of the discussion was thus to find a balance point which would maximize both turnout and accountability.

After the parliamentary election of 1998, there was a renewed public debate regarding the decreasing turnout. In this election turnout reached 81,4 percent, which was a drop of five percentage points from the prior election in 1994. This led to the initiation of an investigation in which nearly 100 academics from ten different disciplines participated (SOU 1999:132). The aim of the investigation was to examine the factors that affect electoral participation. The debate has mainly been driven by representatives from the political parties. The outcome from this investigation laid the foundation for two specific actions from the government with the aim to increase turnout levels.

One arrangement, already presented above, aimed at assisting the parties to mobilize voters by giving the parties extra funding for information campaigns in relation to the elections. The extra funding started in the run up to the election of 1994 but was at this time aimed at ensuring that information reaches out to voters with special needs and to reach groups of voters that usually are more difficult to mobilize such as immigrants (Bäck & Soininen 2003). During the 2000s, and as a consequence of the outcome of the SOU 1999:132, the additional funds were more directed to extend the parties' information activities in general in order to encourage greater voter turnout in all groups of the population (Andersson 2005).<sup>3</sup> The allocation principle was, and still is, based on the parties' mandates in the parliament (Dahlberg & Åsbrink 2010).

3. The government bill »Democracy in the New Century« (Prop. 2001/02: 80) was a proposal for strategy to safeguard democracy and the Swedish democracy. The parliament passed later four goals to promote citizens' political participation, including to increase turnout in national elections and elections to the European Parliament (bet. 2001/02: KU14 and Comm. 2001/02: 190).

The second course of action resulted in an electoral reform where the responsibility for absentee voting was removed from the Swedish postal offices (Posten AB) to the municipalities. The background for this reform was the decreasing numbers of post offices which affected the availability of vote receptions for absentee voters. By letting the municipalities organize the absentee voting the expectation was that the availability of vote receptions would increase, both in absolute numbers but also in terms of centrality, i.e. that they would be located in areas where citizens usually are moving in their everyday life such as libraries, health care centers and other public places (Brothén et al. 2003; Dahlberg, Oscarsson Öhrvall 2008).

## 5. Election System

- *Were there any modifications in the electoral system aimed at rising voter turnout in the past?*
- *If so, what changes have been made and what is the outcome of it?*

As mentioned above, one electoral reform with the aim of finding a balance between political stability, voter accountability and voter turnout was when the terms of office were changed from three to four year election cycles starting in 1994.

Another reform with the purpose of vitalizing the democratic system was the candidate vote reform launched for the election in 1998 (actually it was tested already in the 1994 election in seven municipalities and in the election for European parliament in 1995). The idea with the reform was to personalize the election campaigns. If voters were given the ability to not only vote for a party but also to cast a vote on a particular person on the party lists,<sup>4</sup> it was believed that the candidates – through personal campaigning – would draw attention from parties to persons. The reform aimed at making candidates more visible in the election campaigns. This would increase the contact between voters and representatives which in turn would have positive effects on trust in parties and political institutions (Holmberg & Möller 1999). The reform was thus indirectly related to the aim of increasing voter turnout. The reform was met with

4. A candidate need eight percent in the national election and five percent in the other elections to pass the electoral threshold for gaining representation based on personal votes only.

skepticism and some argued that it would make politics more candidate-centered and less focused on ideologies and party programs. Some argued that it would make the act of voting more complicated. It was also believed that the representation of women and minority groups would be affected negatively, which in turn could have a negative impact on voter turnout (Johansson & Möller 1998). The reform was criticized due to the extremely low numbers of voters who actually casted a candidate vote. Only 12 candidate made their way to the national parliament on personal votes in 1998 and in the following election in 2002 the corresponding number was 13 (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2004). The numbers of voters who actually mark a candidate on the party lists have been relatively constant since the reform was launched, approximately about 25 percent (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013). But as a rule it is the person topping the list that gets the most personal votes.

The most recent reform, not of the electoral system per se but an election administrative reform with the specific purpose of increasing turnout was the transferred responsibility for absentee or early voting from Posten AB<sup>5</sup> to the country's municipalities (Electoral Act 2005: 837). In conjunction with the 2006 general election the premiere for early voting in municipal management took place. The voters who wanted to vote in advance or in a

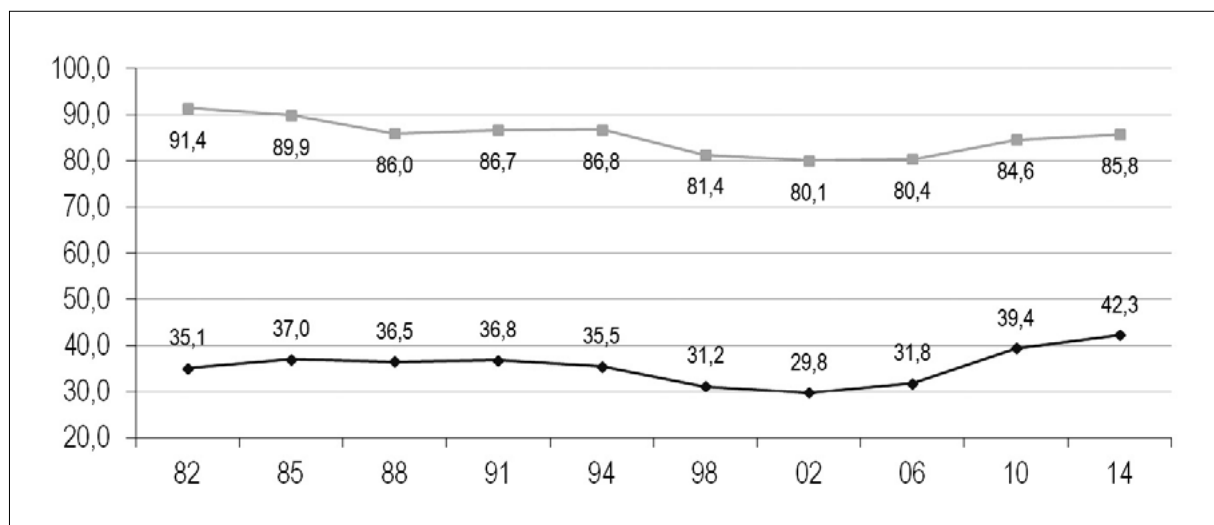
5. Postal service.

different place than their allotted polling station had to visit the library, city hall or civic office instead of going to the post office.

The reform of early voting system was considered necessary in the light of the changes in the working operations of Posten AB that was closing many postal offices during the late 1990s. The changes decreased the coverage dramatically and the proximity to the voters deteriorated. Many of the remaining premises were no longer a design which met the requirements of the electoral law (SOU 2004:111). The electoral investigation in 2002 proposed that the entire local responsibility for the conduct of elections, including advance voting, would be transferred to the municipalities. The electoral committee concluded that the »possibilities to cast a postal ballot (...) in fact no longer exists« (SOU 2004:111:119).

The negative trend in the number of post offices was associated with a declining willingness of citizens to make use of early voting, which in turn was linked to the difficulty of maintaining a high turnout in the general elections. The members of the parliamentary committee on elections argued that the reduction in the number of facilities for early voting put an unnecessary burden on the election administration and citizens that have a hard time getting to their polling station on Election Day. By giving municipalities the responsibility to organize early voting the committee hoped to maintain and possibly

Figure 3: Voter turnout and absentee voting in Sweden 1982–2014 (percent)



Data source: Statistics Sweden ([www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se)) and Valmyndigheten ([www.val.se](http://www.val.se)).

even increase citizens' access to polling stations, which in turn would have a positive impact on voter turnout or at least help mitigate the declining trend in voter turnout (SOU 2004: 111).

Previous to the reform the highest percentage of eligible voters using early voting was in 1985, when as many as 37 percent of voters chose to cast their votes beforehand. In the 2002 elections this number had fallen to 30 percent, a decrease of the number of voters using absentee voting of 19 percent. Parallel to this development there was also a decrease in the number of places to vote before the Election Day. In the 1985 election there were 2,102 places for absentee voting while in the 2002 election there were only 1,496 places, which resembles a decrease of 29 percent overall. Earlier, the share of voters using early voting averaged around 30 percent with 31.2 percent in the 1998 election and 29.8 percent in the 2002 election.

As a result of the absentee voting reform and the municipalities taking over, the number of places for absentee voting increased to 1,785. The increasing availability also meant a slight increase in the percent of voters who used the possibilities of absentee voting: from 29,8 percent in 2002 to 31,8 choice in the election of 2006. In the two following elections in 2010 and 2014 the percentages of absentee voters increased even further to 39,4 and 42,3 respectively. At the same time voter turnout increased to 84,6 percent in 2010 and 85,8 in the election of 2014. It is not a dramatic change between 2002 and 2006 but the trend is still clear and it seems that the number of vote reception to some extent coincides with the proportion of absentee voters. This conclusion is also made by Martin Brothén in the book *Svenska poströstare* (Swedish postal voters). While Brothén cannot show that the availability of early voting stations caused the drop in turnout, he argues that it is reasonable to assume that the decreased availability contributed to the decrease in absentee voting between 1985 and 2002 (Brothén 2003: Chapters 1–2).

Previous research argues that the overall turnout is positively affected by a generous and well-functioning system for absentee voting. The degree of accessibility to voting receptions have been identified as a key component to that the absentee voting actually will lead to increased voter participation. To this date, there is only one systematic study conducted in Sweden concerning

absentee voting and its impact on voter turnout. The book *Absentee voting in Sweden* (Dahlberg, Oscarsson and Öhrvall 2008), examines both who the early voters are, developments over time and what effect the electoral-administrative reform might have had on the difference in turnout between the 2002 and 2006 elections. The authors examine the effect of a number of different measures of availability to absentee voting facilities. The results show that there was some support at the municipal level of availability in terms of absentee voting places, under the control of a number of other factors such as geography, population, population density, etc., co-varied positively with an increased turnout. However, the result could not be determined on an individual level since the number of respondents who were included in both the election study of the 2002 election and the 2006 election was too low.<sup>6</sup>

The argument that increased availability of the number of early voting stations should promote the absentee voting and voter turnout has received some support in previous empirical research. Oscarsson (2003) studied how Swedish voters themselves justify their choices of type of polling station. The main idea is that the availability plays a role in the choice; this should also be reflected in the voters' reasons why absentee voting versus voting in polls is used. Simplicity and accessibility should therefore be recurring motivations among voters. Absentee voting is motivated mainly by lifestyle reasons or geographical mobility. Many voters reported that the decision to vote in advance was prompted by being away, busy or stressed. The results indicate, therefore, that *availability* is the link between absentee voting and individual turnout.

For that reason it is quite reasonable that availability factors are added to the long list of explanations for individual turnout that already exists in the literature. Well-functioning election administration in general and the presence of generous absentee voting system in particular, can potentially contribute to improve the practical ability of voters to participate in the general election. To reduce costs (time, money, practical needs etc.) to participate is a key goal of the election administration (Dahlberg, Oscarsson & Öhrvall 2008).

6. Since the late 1970s, the Swedish election study were carried out in connection with the general elections designed as a two – step panel where half those interviewed in a given election re-interviewed at the next election.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

### Voter Turnout in Sweden 1994–2014

When it comes to turnout Sweden is one of the countries that witnessed a decrease in turnout from the mid 1980s but with a decrease which has declined and turned into an increase during the last three elections from 2006 and onward. Sweden makes a special case in this respect since turnout has been decreasing but now is increasing again but it has done so from already very high levels.

### Evolution of Voter Turnout

Turnout levels have been relatively stable in Sweden over time with an average of approximately 85 percent since 1944 to present time. The highest aggregated turnout level was reached in the 1976 election with 91,8 percent while the lowest turnout rate in modern time is found in the election of 2002 with 80,1 percent.

Higher socio-economic status is traditionally associated with higher turnout. When it comes to gender differences the turnout rates have traditionally been higher among men than women until the election of 1988 when the turnout rates shifted. Since then turnout has on average been slightly higher among Swedish women. Age is another factor that affects turnout but here the relationship is curve-linear in the sense that turnout on average is lower among the youngest and the group of oldest voters. When it comes to geography, turnout is generally lower in rural areas compared to urban ones (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2004). The regional differences are however small in Sweden (Öhrvall 2016).

### Implications for Centre-left Parties

Oscarsson and Holmberg (2016) have used information on voters and non-voters from the Swedish election studies in order to simulate the election results if the turnout rate was 100 percent instead of 85,8, which was the actual turnout rate in the election of 2014. There results show that if all eligible voters had been participating, that would not have had any substantial impact on the seats allocated to the political parties.

### Societal Debate / Political Discourse

Voter turnout has been debated by the Swedish political parties from time to time. The first major debate in modern time started already back in the 1960s and was then renewed during the period of 1987–1999. The debates resulted in several government initiated investigations, usually conducted by researcher from the academia (see c. f. Westholm & Teorell 1999). The general discussions, usually initiated by representatives from the political parties, were until 1999 focused around the electoral system in terms of laws and administration. The debates were generally promoting political accountability and voter turnout.

### Election System

One electoral reform with the aim of finding a balance between political stability, voter accountability and voter turnout was when the terms of office change from three to four year election cycles were starting in 1994.

Another reform with the purpose of vitalizing the democratic system was the candidate vote reform launched for the election in 1998.

The most recent reform, not of the electoral system per se but an election administrative reform, with the specific purpose of increasing turnout was the transferred responsibility for absentee or early voting from Posten AB<sup>7</sup> to the country's municipalities. The reform resulted in a drastic increase in the number of polling stations for absentee voting. The argument that increased availability of the number of early voting stations should promote the absentee voting and voter turnout has received some support in previous empirical research. In the case of Sweden, the decline in turnout for both the national elections as well as for the elections to the European parliament was broken in the mid-2000. One of the most viable explanations for the break in this trend is the reorganization of the system for absentee voting (Dahlberg, Oscarsson & Öhrvall 2008).

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7. Postal service.



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