Sweden General Election
9th September 2018

Democracy Volunteers
26th September 2018
Sweden General Election – September 9th 2018
Final Report on Election Observation

Mission Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process in Sweden.
2. To advise the local councils and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within Sweden.
3. Support local bodies and national election authorities with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

The mission deployed 25 observers from 12 different countries in teams of two. They made 240 separate observations in 149 polling stations across Stockholm, Vasteras, Uppsala, Malmo and Gothenburg. The deployment of observers broke down as follows:

- Stockholm – 110 ballot boxes (46%)
- Gothenburg – 42 ballot boxes (17%)
- Malmo – 60 ballot boxes (25%)
- Uppsala – 17 ballot boxes (7%)
- Vasteras – 12 ballot boxes (5%)

Observers deployed were from Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Each observation was conducted in pairs to allow for objective observation and the observers then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live.

The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station through the voting process until voters exited the polling station.

The organisation of polling stations was generally well run across the area of observation, voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process. The polling stations were well resourced in terms of staff and this is one strength of the Swedish election system.

Polls were open from 8am to 8pm and the teams were asked to observe an opening as well as a closing of a polling station and visiting polling stations throughout the day. Counting began almost immediately, based in the polling stations before results were transmitted to the central count for checking the following week.

Our observer team and electoral experts met with a number of professional and political interlocutors whilst in Stockholm and we have also included some of the feedback on these meetings in our conclusions.
The Core Team

Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom) was the Head of Mission for the Sweden General Election and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR in parliamentary elections as far afield as Kazakhstan and is a former chair of the UK’s Electoral Reform Society.

He has also observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers including the Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general election in 2017, the Finnish presidential and Dutch elections in 2017 and 2018. He has also been a consultant on the subject of electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova.

He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has previously lectured at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Manchester. He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published a number of books on the subject including his doctoral thesis on electoral campaigning.

Alexandre Ollington FRSA (United Kingdom/ France) was Deputy Head of the Sweden General Election and is Head of Operations for Democracy Volunteers.

In his role at Democracy Volunteers, he plans all aspects of the observation including the advanced work on observer deployment. He is also one of the directors of the organisation.

He received both his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Exeter studying International Relations. He has observed elections for the National Assembly for Wales in 2016, the UK General Election in 2017 as well as the Finnish Presidential election in 2018 among other international and domestic observations.

He coordinated with the International Elections Study Centre in May 2018 to facilitate the attendance of a team of Russian observers from the civil society organisation GOLOS at the English local elections.

Alex has previously worked with veterans at the Royal Hospital Chelsea as part of the fundraising and communications department finding funding for future projects as well as a researcher for a number of organisations including the universities of Harvard and Bristol.
Joshua Wakeford (United Kingdom) was the Media Officer of the Sweden General Election and is the Press Officer for Democracy Volunteers and an experienced observer with the organisation.

Joshua is currently in his final year at the University of Manchester, Joshua’s role as Press Officer includes handling our communications with the media, sharing the findings of our deployments with the public and raising, where appropriate, the profiles of missions.

His previous deployments include the 2017 UK General Election, several local elections in the UK, and international deployments in Norway, Finland and the Republic of Ireland.

Political Analysts

Orestes J. Suárez Antón (Spain) was Political Analyst of the Sweden General Election.

Orestes is a lawyer and political scientist currently working as a Policy Adviser in the European Parliament.

With both an academic and professional background in international politics and human rights, for more than 10 years, he regularly takes part in international missions of electoral observation in a variety of countries. In the last years, he has participated in electoral missions in Bulgaria, Kirghizstan, Tunisia and Ukraine. In particular, in missions organized from the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR).

Researcher of the Governance and Human Rights Cathedra of the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), his PhD research on Popular Initiatives in Latin America and the European Union is being published this year by Tirant Lo Blanch, the main legal editorial company in the Spanish language.

Max Wheeler (United Kingdom) was Political Analyst of the Sweden General Election.

Max completed his MRes in History at the University of Exeter with a focus on regional politics in the Celtic Fringe.

He has observed the National Assembly for Wales by-election in Ynys Môn in 2013 and the National Assembly for Wales Election in Cardiff in 2016 as well as a number of international deployments as part of Democracy Volunteers.

As Observer Trainer Max is responsible for mentoring new observers to the team and train them to identify different aspects of election activity.

Max is also a Non-Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.
Legal Analysts

Richard Winkelhofer (Austria) was Legal Analyst of the Sweden General Election.

Richard is a Judge at the Higher Court of Appeals Vienna and Member of the Boards of Appeal of the European Patent Office (EPO), based in Munich.

He holds a master’s degree in Business Administration and a Doctorate degree in Law.

He has been working in the Austrian judiciary from 1995, starting full-time practice as a judge in 2000. From 2008 to 2010 he served for the Rule of Law Mission EULEX Kosovo, as the President of the ‘Special Chamber of the Supreme Court of Kosovo on KTA Related Matters’.

From 2011 to 2014, he was Head of the Justice Department in the Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU. Prior to joining the European Patent Office, he previously worked as Rule of Law Advisor in the Civilian Planning Conduct Capability (CPCC) within the European External Action Service (EEAS). He has been doing short-term election observation from 2005.

Nicholas George Yiannias (Greece) was Legal Analyst of the Sweden General Election.

Nicholas is an attorney at law, admitted before the Athens Bar Association and a New York practicing legal counsel (pro hac vice).

He holds a Master’s degree in Investment Banking, Securities, Derivatives, Taxation and general U.S. law from the University of Cornell law school and a Bachelor’s degree in Hellenic/E.U. law from the University of Athens law school.

He has interned for the Central Bank of Greece and the Athens Stock Exchange Chief Legal Counsel and volunteered for the indigent before the Brooke Courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts.

As the acting Compliance officer of Peace Jam Greece, he ensures the non-profit’s legal function and funding for the development of youth leadership skills by inspiration and interaction with Nobel-prize winners.

Since 2004, he has either presided or assisted in consecutive national, European and prefectural/municipal elections in Greece, observed presidential, congressional and judicial elections in the United States as well as the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland.

Mr. Yiannias’ private practice focuses on Trusts and Estates of North American/European clients with interests in either continent.
Michael Grange (Ireland) was Legal Analyst of the Sweden General Election.

Michael is a lawyer with a strong commitment to human rights, social justice and the rule of law.

He has been extensively involved in Irish elections for over twenty years as a volunteer, legal expert and observer.

Over the last ten years he has been an election observer in Asia, Europe, and countries within the Commonwealth of Independent States. Michael has observed with Democracy Volunteers in elections in the United Kingdom and advised on the recent deployment by the organisation to Ireland 2018 referendum on abortion rights.

It is his view that without free elections human rights cannot be guaranteed in any society and that election observations helps ensure that elections are conducted properly.

He says a useful way of understanding election observation is the Russian proverb “Doveryai no proveryai” — trust, but verify!"

Electoral Specialist

Aliya Jiwa (Canada) was Electoral Specialist of the Sweden General Election.

Aliya has been working in election administration for the last 13 years.

Aliya has a Master’s degree focused on election management body decision making and currently lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

She has worked in over a dozen elections in Canada and the United States of America as well as for a number of different election management bodies at the federal, provincial, and municipal level at a number of different levels of responsibility from Head Office to frontline organisation.

As well as having worked in an official capacity, Aliya has been involved in grassroots electoral awareness campaigning in the United States of America.

FUNDING

All of the 25 observers deployed to Sweden for the observation of the 9th September parliamentary elections did so at their own cost. This was arranged by Democracy Volunteers, and this covered their travel to Sweden, accommodation and internal transport. No finance was sought, or received, from any party, whether internal or external to Sweden, for the observation, writing of the Preliminary Statement or this Final Report. Our observations are wholly independent of any institution.
Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

**QUESTION 1:** In only 75\% of cases were polling stations properly signposted from the street.

**QUESTION 2:** In 88\% of cases, observers did not identify problems with where voters should report. In some buildings multiple polling stations were distributed around several parts of buildings making it potentially challenging to find the relevant area.
QUESTION 3: 87% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear. Another 5% suggested that the disabled access was available however this was not clearly signposted. 7% identified other issues which included the clarity of signposting, the positioning of disabled access polling booths and often lifts being required to access polling stations not on the ground floor which were unavailable/not in evidence.

QUESTION 4: Despite the official openness of the process, 12% of presiding officers did check the ID of observers. On one occasion our observer team were initially excluded but were advised that would be a breach of Swedish election law.

Comment: Swedish electoral law does not legislate for the attendance for observers at polling stations – and we were aware of this before deployment to Sweden. However, despite voting being open to all the public to ‘observe’ we felt it was appropriate to issue Democracy Volunteers’ with ID to present at polling stations to explain that they were observers not simply interested members of the public.
QUESTION 5: 95% of polling stations had the required three members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station.

QUESTION 6: Only on 44% of occasions were ballot boxes sealed.

Comment: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secure, and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers – and that it should be seen to be sealed. There appeared to be a distinct lack of clarity as to whether ballot boxes should be sealed or not. The official guidance for the Swedish electoral authorities is that boxes should be sealed.1 Because we discovered the practice of not sealing ballot boxes seemed to be widespread we asked polling staff whether this was normal practice, as we were surprised by this. There was a widely held view that ‘we used to do that but it changed about ten years ago but we can seal it if we feel we need to’. Although, we can see the benefits of this subsidiarity of responsibility to the presiding officer we are concerned that this might lead to the possibility of legal challenge to the process.

QUESTION 7: This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station. 3% of polling stations were found to contain political leaflets while 97% did not.

QUESTION 8: In 44% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called ‘family voting’. We identified 536 separate cases of family voting in 105 of those stations where family voting took place. The team recorded 4251 voters attending polling stations whilst they were in attendance – 25% of the electorate observed was involved in, or affected by, family voting, as this involves a minimum of two people. There was little suggestion that this was associated with any particular ethnic group. Comment: OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within Sweden, describes ‘family voting’ as an ‘unacceptable practice’. It occurs, for example, where a where husband and wife voting together is normalised and women, especially, are unable to choose for themselves who they wish to cast their votes for and/or this is actually done by another individual entirely. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that this was associated with any particular ethnic group.

2 This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature (MP or councillors’ surgeries) were on display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.
QUESTION 9: On 68% of occasions voters took just one ballot paper and thus it was clear which party they were voting for.

Comment: We generally do not ask our observers to assess whether the secrecy of the ballot is secure when voters are casting their vote. However, we did on this occasion because we were aware that ballot papers are issued by parties and appear in polling stations as per Figure 1. Because ballot papers are party-specific we asked observers to assess, especially if voters took only one paper, whether this would allow a third party the opportunity to assess their voting intention.

QUESTION 10: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 40% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 37% ‘Good’, 19% ‘Bad’, and 3% ‘Very Bad’.
CONCLUSIONS

Our observer team and electoral experts met with a number of professional and political interlocutors whilst in Stockholm and we have also included some of the feedback on these meetings in our conclusions. Three particular aspects of the voting procedure became apparent to the observer group as they met electoral officials, and other interested parties, in the days preceding polling day and also on polling day itself.

They were:

- The sealing of ballot boxes
- The secrecy of the ballot papers
- Family voting
- Observers

1. Sealing of the Ballot Boxes

Our observer team was surprised that it was not routine to seal ballot boxes (in over of a half of the observations according to question 6). Official guidance is that ballot boxes should be sealed. Individual presiding officers had various reasons why ballot boxes should be unsealed and others sealed them. If nothing else there is a lack of clarity as to whether ballot boxes should be sealed and this guidance should be explained to polling staff, voters and observers alike.

Although there was no suggestion of malpractice or interference with the ballot boxes the observer team felt that normalising this aspect of the voting procedure would build greater confidence in the security of the ballot in Sweden. While high level of trust takes years to build up it can be damaged overnight, accordingly sealing is one measure to help it endure.

2. Secrecy of the ballot papers

The ballot papers are financed and issued by the various political parties.

The way that ballot papers are acquired in Sweden needs some explanation for those unaware of the system. Ballots for candidates and parties are stacked in boxes for voters to collect before entering the polling booth to complete, then insert into an envelope before presenting it to the polling staff and having it deposited in the ballot box by polling staff.
Voters are allowed to take as many, or as few, ballot papers as they want before completion. This allows them to choose in the polling booth – however the team observed that many voters in reality, do not do this.

In one case in Uppsala, an unidentified person was observed standing by the box of the ballot papers for the 45 minutes of the observation by our team. In that case, most voters picked several ballots to take them to the booth.

As well as this concern, on several occasions, one particular party appeared in its own box separate from the other parties. This made it even more apparent that voters had a specific choice of voting intention that would clearly apparent to any third party in the polling station.

In some polling stations some minority parties had no ballot papers in evidence at all, despite having candidates contesting the election locally. This was ascribed to them having not delivered any.

Most parties interviewed expressed concerns about the secrecy of the vote (Liberals, Alternative for Sweden, Sweden Democrats or Left Party).

3. Family Voting

So-called ‘family voting’, where two, or more voters, enter a polling booth to cast their ballots together, or to discuss their voting preference, seems to be an accepted practice in Sweden.

This was observed in 44% of all the polling stations visited and of all the voters observed, some 4251, this affected 25% of all voters according to the results of question 8. One some occasions this was discouraged by elections staff, but invariably it was not contested.

This practice was especially observed in a large proportion of polling stations in Gothenburg where observers reported seeing numerous (the maximum being 35 occasions) instances of family voting that went unchecked and seemed normalised. One observer team reported ‘a couple pulled up chairs in the lobby of the school and sat down with their ballots to chat about which party they would vote for. They did this 1.5 metres in front of the polling staff’ – no action was taken.”

One other team in Vasteras reported, ‘First case: elderly couple with man in wheelchair. Wife pushed him to booth and then went to table for papers. She picked her husband’s too, only giving him one party’s papers. They then stood in the same booth. Staff saw but did nothing. Second case: old man with walker could not easily access table with ballots. Wife passed him

3 Democracy Volunteers Coding: SWG176.
1 set of ballot papers. Voted in separate booths. Wife went behind booth to check on him. **Third case:** a girl walked over to her (apparent) boyfriend in another booth and showed him her ballot papers over the top of the screen.⁴

Another team reported, ‘Two cases: **Case One** - two parents attended the station with their son (who took only the Moderate party ballot). The father goes over to the son’s booth, who then leaves the booth and takes the Sweden Democrats ballot instead. Staff noticed Family Voting and he moved away but his son’s mind seemed already to have changed. In **Case Two**, ‘two young women went to the same booth but staff noticed and separated them.’⁵

Staff should be aware that family voting should not take place and to intervene even in the case polling stations are busy and it is quicker and simpler for voters to vote together to speed up the process. Family voting would seem to be an accepted voter practice in parts of Sweden even if it is illegal and not in line with Sweden’s international commitments. There was much less evidence of family voting in Stockholm.

**4. Observers**

A number of organisations and individuals we met felt that the legal ambiguity of the role of observers, whether domestic or foreign, should be enacted into legislation. Sweden has one of the most open election systems. The requirements of the Copenhagen Declaration, however, requires that the role, rights and responsibilities are provided by legislation. This complies with the legal principle of legal certainty, known as ‘Rättssäkerhet’ in the Swedish language.

**OTHER COMMENTS**

The organisation of polling stations was generally well run across the area of observation, voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process.

Our observer teams had varying experiences on polling day. In all cases staff were welcoming and helpful in facilitating our observations. We found the national electoral office, **Valmyndigheten**, very helpful in providing information concerning Swedish elections and also for providing a briefing for our team of observers and we would like to thank the various political parties we met, whether in formal interlocutor meetings or whilst they were campaigning, for their helpful and responsive attitude. Elections are very busy periods of time for parties and we realise that sparing time for observers can seem a questionable benefit to parties whilst they are trying to secure support. All our interlocutors are listed in Appendix A. In our meetings with parties we learned about some concerns that we report on here but have not observed ourselves.

1. Early voting is allowed in Sweden and many voters take the opportunity to do this. However, voters also have the right to change their minds and enter the polling station to cast their vote differently on polling day. A number of voters were observed

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⁴ Democracy Volunteers Coding: SWV105.
⁵ Democracy Volunteers Coding: SWV108-110.
attempting to do this. However, a number of voters were prevented from doing this because their early vote had not been delivered to the polling station by the post office.\(^6\)

2. All parties expressed concern over misinformation (fake news) regarding either their party or the election in general (trolls) and social media/online advertising and the lack of legislation to arise these issues, together with worries on the will to destabilize the process from third countries (Russia) either through fake news and/or in support of certain parties (Sweden Democrats).

3. Most parties noted (but did not seem particularly concerned by) rival parties using each other’s symbols and materials to impersonate each other.

4. Media coverage is generally accepted as being fair amongst the larger parties however, some did express some concern that the smaller parties do not receive equal coverage.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Whilst the responsibility for securing and developing elections in Sweden rests with the electoral and legislative authorities within Sweden we feel it appropriate to make some helpful suggestions and recommendations to the authorities to further improve the electoral process in Sweden. We feel these suggestions should be considered to limit and counteract any suggestions of electoral malpractice, whether internally or externally to Sweden.

**Ballot Box Security**

According to the official guidance for the Swedish electoral authorities’ boxes should be sealed, we are therefore in front of a problem of implementation of this guidance:

- **R1.** National election authorities should make it clear to local election authorities what their guidance is concerning the sealing of ballot boxes.

- **R2.** This recommendation should be made clear to polling staff, during their pre-election briefings, and in polling stations to build confidence in the integrity of the voting process.

- **R3.** The sealing of the ballot box should be done in public, with a witness, at the opening of the poll, and an appropriate methodology should be found to build trust in this process.

**Secrecy of the ballot papers**

Ballot papers are in most cases on public display in polling stations to allow voters to select those, or one, they wish to vote for. This is done in plain view and thus allows the secrecy of the ballot to be compromised against the national legislation that ask to guarantee the secrecy of the vote and to place the ballot papers in a hidden place.

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\(^6\) Numerous presiding officers reported this to our observers during polling day as well as our observers being able to see this problem for themselves.
R4. – To place the ballots inside polling booths allowing voters to select their ballot in the privacy of the polling booth.

This is a practice already in use in other countries like Norway as we observed during the election observed there in 2017 (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3 Polling Booths in Norway have ballots in private rather than on public display](image)

Family Voting

R5. Family voting should be acted upon in Sweden. This could be dealt with by the deployment of extra staff in polling stations to deal with this, but it could be ameliorated if Sweden adopted polling booths fitted with curtains and staff monitor closely the ingress and egress of voters to polling booth as part of their duties.

Observers

R6. We encourage the Swedish authorities to enact the rights and responsibilities of election observers in Sweden in line with international commitments.

Other Issues Observed or through meetings with Interlocutors

R7. Early voting: we recommend that election authorities could limit this as several voters were unable to change their vote despite this being legislated for.

R8. Party impersonation is a concern where literature, or advertising, can be used to mislead voters as to another party’s campaigns leading to so-called fake news. This should be an area assessed by the electoral authorities in Sweden.

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7 To our best knowledge, pending an in-depth analysis which could not be carried out ahead of this report, the Elections Act has already been amended accordingly, to enter into force in time for the next General Elections 2022.

R9. Checking the proportionate nature of media coverage for smaller parties should be assessed by media outlets to ensure fairness.
APPENDIX A - INTERLOCUTORS

Election Administration:

Election Authority – Valmyndigheten:
Peter Wållberg – Electoral Officer

Political Parties:

Swedish Social Democratic Party – Socialdemokraterna
Various activists and campaigners

Moderate Party – Moderaterna
Various activists and campaigners

Sweden Democrats – Sverigedemokraterna
Various activists and campaigners

Green Party – Miljöpartiet
Various activists and campaigners, meeting with one of the two party leaders, Lovin, during a rally.

Centre Party – Centerpartiet
Annica Roos – Project manager
Johan Kling – Organisation developer

Left Party – Vänsterpartiet
Various activists and campaigners

Liberals – Liberalerna
Martin Angeby - Election Leader
Hedwig Kastenholm – Borgarradssekreterare
David Ekstrand – Borgarradssekreterare
Rasmus Jonlund – Local Liberal Party candidate

Christian Democrats – Kristdemokraterna
Various activists and campaigners

Alternative for Sweden – Alternativ för Sverige
Various activists and campaigners

Feminist Initiative – Feministiskt initiativ
Various activists and campaigners

Pirate Party – Piratpartiet
Various activists and campaigners