

PROBLEMS IN PARADISE?

Changes and
Challenges
to Swedish
Democracy

Edited by

DANIEL SILANDER

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DANIEL SILANDER

*Linnaeus University, Sweden and North-West University,
South Africa*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Swedish Democracy: Problems in Paradise

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Like many other observers around the world, we are deeply concerned with the decline of democracy over the past decade... This intensifying wave of autocratization around the world highlights the need for new initiatives to defend democracy.

([V-Dem. Institute, 2022](#), p. 5)

A quarter of a century ago, liberal democracy was expected to spread and conquer alternative models of governance. The end of the Cold War resulted in numerous democratization processes around the world. Moreover, in already democratic countries, democracy was expected to consolidate further and be the basis of politics, participation, and public discourse. Today, the tone in the scholarly and political debate is different. While we recently saw decades of expanding democratic governance worldwide, the previous decades of democratization have been eradicated leaving 70% (about 5.4 billion) of the world population within the hands of dictatorial regimes. The peak of liberal democracies in 2012, counting to 42 liberal democracies, has now turned to its lowest level in over 25 years, 25 countries ([V-Dem. Institute, 2022](#)). In addition, there also seems to be a growing number of dissatisfied democrats both in new and old established democracies. It is possible to see how the perceived importance to live in a democracy is lower among younger voters than the elderly ([Foa & Mounck, 2017](#)).

The rising tide of autocratization has hit hard worldwide including Asia-Pacific, Central Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, but also Europe and foremost the eastern European countries. Many states have seen autocracy, but mostly electoral autocracy, leaving political regimes with elections, but with harshly limited rights and liberties. These states have also seen intensified political polarization leading to electoral victories of antipluralist parties and leaders using their power to challenge institutions ([V-Dem. Institute, 2021, 2022](#)). The development of homegrown antidemocratic and/or illiberal actions has also taken place within established democracies. Elected leaders have, to a growing extent, started to use their elected power to dismantle democratic institutions to safeguard their own power. This has included political activities like manipulating

political institutions, only representing citizens from their own demographic and partisan base as well as portraying other groups as disloyal and untrustworthy citizens (Freedom House, 2022a, pp. 6–7).

The tide of autocratization is visible within autocracies as well as democracies. Autocratization has embedded the repression of civil society activities, governmental efforts of censorship, disrespect of counterarguments, harassment of media, journalists and scholars, and politicized judicial institutions (V-Dem. Institute, 2022, p. 16; see also 2021). As stated by Freedom House:

Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power.

(Freedom House, 2022a, p. 3)

Traditional research on democratization has analyzed the explanatory conditions to democratization, focusing on liberalization and transitions. This was the spirit of the time of the 1980s and onward. More recently, research has addressed challenges that exist in established, consolidated liberal democracies. This is due to 15 years of autocratization where, on the one hand autocracies have become more internationally active in questioning liberal democracies and on the other hand, liberal democracies have also been attacked from the within by illiberal and antidemocratic elected politicians that questioned those democratic institutions that once led them to power (Freedom House, 2022a, p. 4).

In this book, we direct our interest to the new challenge to established, consolidated democracies by posing the question: *what are the challenges to consolidated democracy?* We explore challenges to consolidated democracies by focusing on Sweden, one of the most consolidated democracies in the world (Olsson, 2019).

Sweden as a Democratic Paradise

Sweden has for a long time been portrayed as a democratic paradise; a high performer in international comparisons on electoral procedures, political participation, public sector efficiency, transparency, rule of law, equality, and anti-corruption. Sweden scores among the top nations in the world, often accompanied by the other Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, and Finland. Today there is an upsurge of rankings and indexes measuring the quality of democracy and the conditions for democratic rights and civil liberties. While Europe continues to be by far the most democratized region of states in the world, the Nordic countries with Sweden are often identified as the best of the best. We

may therefore portray Sweden as a democratic paradise, embedding a high quality of democracy.

Freedom House assesses 195 states around the world by categorizing states as free, partly free, or not free based on the combination of the overall score received on political rights and civil liberties. Sweden has a solid democratic track record, continuing to score the highest possible both on political rights and civil liberties. It is argued in the latest *Freedom Report* of 2022 how: “Sweden is a parliamentary monarchy with free and fair elections and a strong multiparty system. Civil liberties and political rights are legally guaranteed and respected in practice, and the rule of law prevails” ([Freedom House, 2022b](#)).

Another institute, in the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, has since 2006 provided a democracy index and measures 165 states using five categories, namely electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Each state is then classified as either a full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, or authoritarian regime. Sweden, together with the other Nordic countries, dominates the top tier of the index as full democracies. In the report, it is stated how “The Nordics stand out as particularly high scoring, occupying five of the top six positions in the global rankings. These countries boast high scores across all categories. . .” ([Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022](#), p. 64).

A third index is provided by *V-Dem Institute*, analyzing 202 countries, and exploring hundreds of attributes of democracy and classifying states into electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian systems. In the latest report Sweden is identified as the strongest liberal democracy in the world ([V-Dem. Institute, 2016, 2022](#), pp. 10–12). It is stated how,

The liberal dimension of democracy embodies the intrinsic value of protecting individual and minority rights against a potential ‘tyranny of the state.’ This is achieved through constitutionally protected civil liberties and strong rule of law, and effective checks and balances by the judiciary and the legislature that limit the use of executive power. . . . The high levels of equality before the law and individual liberty demonstrate that, to a very large extent, laws are transparent and rigorously enforced and that public administration is impartial. In addition, Swedish citizens enjoy access to justice, secure property rights, freedom from forced labor, freedom of movement, physical integrity rights and freedom of religion.

([V-Dem. Institute, 2016](#), p. 7)

Sweden is also identified as the top nation on the quality of democratic governance by the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* and their Sustainable Governance Indicators covering 41 states. It is argued how “. . . the high performance of Sweden and the country’s robust stability and broad popular support for the democratic rules of the game notwithstanding, the trend observed in previous reports persists” ([Petrediou, Sparf, & Jahn, 2022](#), p. 3). Also, the *World Happiness Report* acknowledges Sweden as a paradise by scoring it and the other Nordic countries

among the top 10 when focusing on life evaluations. The report argues how Sweden, with other Nordic countries, scores high on political rights, lack of corruption, trust between citizens, social cohesion, gender equality, equal distribution of incomes, etc. (Martela, Greve, Rothstein, & Saari, 2020; see also Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). Finally, in December of 2022, *The U.S. News and World Report* presented their world ranking of countries on best countries to live in and quality of life, ranking Sweden in the fifth place on best country and at the top for quality of life (U.S. News & World Report, 2022).

The high level of life satisfaction in Sweden has been argued to be due to a long tradition of democratic institutions providing for political rights, civil liberties, legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and popular participation. Sweden is strong on low corruption, and with government effectiveness, scoring fifth out of 180 countries in the world by *Transparency International* (2022). A second related cause to Swedes' high life satisfaction is the developed welfare state with extensive social benefits and a developed public sector of government welfare spending providing for pensions, income maintenance for the ill and disabled, and importantly, unemployment benefits, with a labor market regulated to avoid employee exploitation. A third factor mentioned in relation to happiness in life is income equality and the related opportunities to make life choices, pursue autonomy and individualism. An additional and fourth factor is social trust, meaning to hold trust in other people with a high level of social cohesion, referring to connectedness to others, having good social relations, and having a focus on the common good. High levels of social trust and cohesion have in particular been stated to be a phenomenon in Nordic countries (Martela et al., 2020, ch. 7). As argued in the *Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*:

If asked to identify the features of Swedish politics and society that stand out in an international comparison, most casual observers of Swedish politics over the past several decades would probably mention the dominance of social democracy; full employment. . . .; a universal and generous welfare state redistributing income and creating an exceptionally high level of equality. . . .; exceptional levels of institutional and social trust. . .

(Pierre, 2016, p. 1)

Research on Swedish politics and society has therefore portrayed Sweden as an advanced democratic and welfare society. Focusing on democracy indexes, as mentioned, Sweden scores high among the top nations in the world. Focusing on life satisfaction, Sweden scores high due to the robust democratic, but also welfare model provided to its citizens. In many ways, Sweden has, with the other Nordic countries, often been ranked as a democratic paradise in an international comparison.

More recent research has, however, started to scrutinize the political conditions within established liberal democracies such as Sweden, and scholars have argued how the days of Swedish exceptionalism are coming to an end (Rothstein, 2014). It should be emphasized that democracies must be evolving to face and handle changes and challenges to safeguard legitimacy, representation, and accountability. Scholarly

studies also point out a worldwide trend of autocratization with democratic backsliding within established European democracies (Freedom House, 2022a, p. 25). Research on Sweden has also questioned the romanticizing narratives of Sweden as a frontrunner on democratic quality, prosperity, and equality and the lack of focus on emerging societal and democratic challenges (Pierre, 2016). The political and academic debate on western societies in general may pinpoint changes in societal polarization and growing societal cleavages, segregation and unemployment, failed integration policies, violence and reported hate crimes (Freedom House, 2022a, 2022b), constrained civil liberties due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), autocratization, (V-Dem. Institute, 2022), cultural and party polarization, populism and nationalism, fake news, scarcity of energy supply as well as terrorism, and regional military tension among others (Petrediou et al., 2022).

With this context, there might therefore be problems in Swedish democracy that need to be identified and addressed to further promote and protect democratic quality. Sweden has its own challenges and is interlinked to the European and global context of changes and challenges leaving Sweden and other liberal democracies with the ongoing task to promote and protect democratic rights and liberties. As argued, “like all liberal democracies, Sweden also faces challenges associated with globalization, international migration, and growing inequality. Despite its reputation as a moral superpower, Sweden is not immune to racism, nationalism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment” (Kenes, 2020).

Today, the traditionally strong Swedish social democracy has become questioned, and scholars have argued that changes within the Swedish society have left Sweden unexceptional (Rothstein, 2014, 2016). Such changes have numerous implications, both economically and politically (Pierre, 2016, p. 3). Economically an overall trend has been an intensified neoliberalization of the traditional Swedish socioeconomic model with policies to a large extent harmonized with other European Union (EU) member states. Political changes have transformed an established five-party system, highly influenced by the Social Democratic Party, to become more diffused with eight parties in Parliament, less class-based, representing a more heterogeneous society and with a severely weakened Social Democratic Party. In addition, in the latest election in September of 2022, the populist radical right party, the Sweden Democrats, became the second most popular party after years of growing popular supporting the Swedish political debate (Pierre, 2016; Rydgren & Van der Meiden, 2016). Sweden was, therefore, another European country that saw a populist radical-right party gaining power (Kenes, 2020).

Research points out a few important aspects of the challenged Swedish exceptionalism that most probably influences Swedish democracy in one way or the other. First, the Swedish exceptionalism is challenged in the welfare state model. Sweden does not stand out as before when focusing on key welfare measures such as poverty rate, education and employment levels, life expectancy, infant mortality, etc. (Pierre, 2016, p. 5; Rothstein, 2016). As argued, “. . . Sweden’s performance in these areas could be regarded as good but not great or perhaps great but not exceptional” (Pierre, 2016, p. 6). Secondly, and as mentioned above, the Swedish exceptionalism regarding its party system is facing

a major challenge. Sweden has been described as a one-party dominated democracy, referring to the strong dominance of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. Today, the Swedish parliamentary system consists of eight parties, shifting alliances, a weakened Social Democratic Party, declined party identification with less class-based in favor of issue-based voting and the development of a right-wing, nationalistic and anti-immigration party in the Sweden Democrats severely influencing the power balance in Swedish politics (Bäck & Erlingsson, 2016; Pierre, 2016, pp. 6–8). Third, Swedish exceptionalism is also questioned regarding public administration. Over the years, Sweden has followed a western trend of New Public Management (NPM) resulting in a mix of a traditional legalistic administration and managerial objectives within public sector administration (Pierre, 2016, pp. 8–9; Sundström, 2016). Fourth and finally, another change of exceptionalism is Sweden's position in international politics. Going from a long tradition of neutrality and nonalignment, Sweden joined the European Union in 1995 and harmonized legislation, administration, and politics in many policy areas with other EU-member states and in addition, applied for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the beginning of 2022. These changes connected Sweden politically, economically, and security-wise with the European and transatlantic alliances (Elgström, 2016; Pierre, 2016, pp. 10–11).

The Quality of Swedish Democracy – An Analytical Framework

To explore the quality of Swedish democracy requires an analysis of ongoing changes and challenges in Swedish society. A democracy must always transform to meet new needs and demands within the population and continue to politically adjust to new societal circumstances. It is in the context of major changes in the Swedish societal landscape that this book turns its interest toward the quality of the Swedish democracy.

The approach to study the quality of democracy in democratically consolidated countries is a more recent one. Traditional research on democratization has almost exclusively focused on nondemocracies and possible driving engines to democratization. Studies have mostly explored how political institutions in dictatorial states have been transformed into democratic ones, focusing on political and socioeconomic liberalization and eventually the transition into democracy through free and fair elections. Previous research stated how political systems could be democratic or dictatorial. These types of political systems were argued to have very different structures and impact on how politics were conducted and how people lived their lives. The democratic political system had a certain homogenous set of institutions that sharply contrasted to the dictatorial one. In the 1960s and onward, scholars (Linz, 1964, 1997) identified the existence of political systems that were not democratic but differed in dictatorial nature. It was then argued that the dictatorial system could vary between totalitarian or authoritarian. It was emphasized how totalitarian political systems embedded control of all subsocieties also beyond the political one, when authoritarian

systems mostly focused on political control over political institutions. The research thereby identified a spectrum of political systems in democratic versus authoritarian and totalitarian ones (Linz, 1964, 1997, 2000). In the 1980s, further research identified how political systems could combine democratic and authoritarian institutions. The hybrid nature of these political systems was identified not only among states going through democratization in a former authoritarian system, but also in democracies that had seen incomplete democratization processes (Finer, 1970, 1997). The notion of hybrid political systems garnered significant attention and resulted in a new type of political system where hybrid regimes consisted of both democratic and authoritarian institutions (Morlino, 2008, 2009). Since then, the previously mentioned indexes on the quality of democracy and level of freedom in countries across the world have come to identify authoritarian political systems embedding popular elections. Such systems allow for elections, but mobilization and campaigning, freedom of association, and expression of opinion before elections and the political outcome of such elections may be undermined and limited. These countries not only have been labeled as ruled by hybrid regimes (Diamond, 2002) but also being semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian (Diamond, 2002).

The traditional assumption in research was, until very recently, that challenges to future democratization mostly existed in non-democracies or hybrid regimes. This traditional argument left out the study of democratic states, which in turn left the question unanswered of whether certain institutions within democracies, such as Sweden, may be in need of further democratizing. Regime heterogeneity refers to institutional variation of institutions that could be more or less democratic or authoritarian within one and the same country (Denk & Silander, 2011). Meanwhile, states may be shaped by both democratic and authoritarian institutions; there may also be conditions beyond the political system that influence the political life. The theoretical perspective of this book assumes that some states that are traditionally regarded as democratic may consist of subsocieties in need of further democratization. The overall analysis will base its analytical framework on Juan Linz and Alfred Stephan's (1996) classic study of problems of democratic transition and consolidation. They argued that a deepened, enduring, and consolidated democracy required the development of five sub-societies where each of them was not only an important driving engine for democratic deepening, but also how all subsocieties were interacting and interdependent leaving problems in one subsociety with negative democratic impact on others. While Linz and Stephan identified a civil, political, judicial, bureaucratic, and economic subsociety, we argue that these subsocieties, complemented with additional ones in the form of the media, education, and international societies are well-placed to be used as a framework for analyzing current challenges to Swedish democracy. This book explores contemporary challenges to Sweden's liberal democracy by focusing on a wide range of subsocieties to democratization: *the political society; the judicial society; the bureaucratic society; the economic society; the educational society, the media society; the civil society and finally the international society*. The concept subsociety in this book is interchangeable with arena. The applied approach is multidisciplinary to fully embrace challenges to liberal democracy and to improve

our understanding of how to promote and protect liberal democracy. The different chapters are written by domestic and international experts on democratization on the different aspects of quality of democracy.

The eight subsocieties used in this book are summarized in [Table 1.1](#).

Table 1.1. Framework of Study on Problems in Paradise.

Sub-societies	Content	Challenges
Political	Subsociety where political actors compete for power over public policies and the state apparatus through free and fair elections; where the people participate and support democratic institutions, and institutions are transparent, representative, and with existing checks and balances all embedded in a constitutional arrangement	
Bureaucratic	Subsociety with useable and efficient bureaucracy to implement democratic governance and the rule of law and with power to perform in accordance with democratic norms and values and to follow through on decisions taken within the political society. In addition, a subsociety to protect citizens' rights and liberties and to pull resources to the state to afford to deliver basic services demanded by the people	
Judicial	Subsociety based on independent rule of law with judicial institutions ensuring checks and balances, democratic institutional performance and accountability as well as the protection of citizens' rights and liberties against state abuse of power	
Economic	Subsociety with economic institutions of rules on how economic affairs are to be conducted, to some degree controlled by the political society to avoid pure market economic forces, but without the risk of a state-controlled economy. A set of norms, values, and regulations that combine private and state interests to provide for market autonomy, ownership diversity as well as state regulations to uphold legal contracts, money, pricing, weights, tariffs, and property rights in addition to personal safety and wealth of all people through basic public services	