

Swedish Electoral Corruption in Historical-Comparative Perspective

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The international NGO *Human Rights Watch* in their 2008 report declared fraudulent elections as being one of the most pervasive human rights abuses in the world today, adding that established democracies are too acceptant of such corrupt practices. In the year 2007, Human Rights Watch said, “too many governments... acted as if simply holding a vote is enough to prove a nation ‘democratic,’ and Washington, Brussels and European capitals played along” (www.hrw.org). A brief look at the history of elections in these established democracies themselves, however, reveal that they mostly share a similarly murky past. In Great Britain, outright vote buying was rampant throughout most of the 19th century (Kam 2007). Meanwhile across the Atlantic, in the United States, elections were mostly a dirty affair, involving voter intimidation and violence on a large scale (Bensel 2004). In Imperial Germany another form of electoral misconduct pervaded: the use of social hierarchies and privileged positions in society to pressure voters to vote for other than their freely preferred candidates (Anderson 2000).

The reason we have fairly systematic information on these practices is that they left a tangible trace in the historical record: charges of electoral fraud filed with

political authorities (Lehoucq 2003). The purpose of this research project is to use this largely unexplored source material to shed new light on the elimination of corrupt electoral practices in established democracies.

Theoretical and Practical Import

The study of electoral corruption have implications for both theories of democratization and corruption, and for the relationship between the two. There is a widely held belief among political scientists and policy practitioners alike that democracy should help curb political corruption. By submitting the choice of representatives to competition for popular votes, dishonest candidates and parties should over the course of time be replaced by uncorrupt adversaries. Despite this unambiguous expectation, however, the empirical evidence linking the level of democracy to corruption is mixed. The most consistent finding appears to be an inverted U- or J-shaped relationship, with the countries perceived to be most corrupt located somewhere halfway between authoritarianism and democracy (Montinola & Jackman 2003; Sung 2004; Bäck & Hadenius 2008). Historically speaking, the evidence is also not straightforward: In Germany and France autocrats such as Frederick the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte cleaned up government, whereas in the United States, corruption proliferated with the expansion of the suffrage in the early 19th century (Neild 2002).

This raises an important puzzle. How could it be that democracy does not help in curbing corruption? It appears to be the case that the electoral mechanism does not work as expected: corrupt politicians are not severely punished at the polls, and

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regularly they stand good chances for re-election (Chang et al. 2007). Explanations for this “paradox of corruption”—“unpopular corruption and popular corrupt politicians”—come in two guises: demand- and supply-side explanations. Whereas the former locates the source of the problem in the electorate, such as cultural norms or incomplete information on the extent and consequences of corruption, the latter blames the political system for failing to deliver a non-corrupt alternative to the voters (Kurer 2001). This research project will advance a new theoretical understanding of the frail linkage between democracy and corruption, one that stands at the intersection of the demand and supply sides: fraudulent elections. We usually think of democratic competition and administrative capacity as belonging to two analytically distinct spheres of the political system, the former located at the “input” (demand) side where *access* to power is regulated, the latter at the “output” (supply) side where public authority is *exercised* (Rothstein & Teorell 2008). On election day, however, this neat distinction breaks down. Since elections not only determine who will get into government, but also must be *organized by* government, the study of electoral misconduct allows one to assess the state of democracy and administrative corruption simultaneously.

The problem of electoral misconduct is thus a critical obstacle to democratization in the world today. In Pastor’s (1999, 2) words, “most democratic transitions often totter on the fence that separates a good from a bad election.” There is a burgeoning literature on the importance of institutional learning in this regard. A long stretch of elections even under authoritarianism, although not fully free and fair, may eventually pave the way for a democratic breakthrough (Schedler 2002; Lind-

berg 2006). Also the large-n literature has recently started to find support for this supposition (Persson & Tabellini 2007; Teorell & Hadenius, forthcoming). This means that electoral administration, or “electoral governance”, is a crucial but inadequately understood variable affecting transitions to democracy (Pastor 1999; Mozaffar & Schedler 2002; Elklit & Reynolds 2002). In the Western world, we usually take the capacity to conduct a clean election for granted (Choe 1997). Understanding how we historically rid ourselves of electoral corruption is thus of crucial importance, not the least for the sake of developing policies for proper election conduct in the developing world.

The Swedish Case

It is a well-established fact among political scientists that Sweden was democratized in the early 20th century, when universal suffrage and parliamentary control over the executive was established (see, e.g., Lewin 2002). It is an equally well-established fact among historians that Sweden had an elected Parliament of the Estates (*Ståndsriksdag*) since Medieval times, and that a particularly important time period of this parliament was the “Age of Liberty” in the 18th century, when an early proto-parliamentary system with party competition between two factions, the “Caps” and the “Hats”, was established (see, e.g. Winton 2006, 18–25, for an overview of the literature). Far less is however known about the potential connections between these two lines of development. More specifically, there is a dearth of studies on Swedish elections and how they functioned in the intermediate time period, that is, during the 18th and 19th centuries. Tellingly, a recent overview of the state of historical knowledge on the Swedish admini-

nistrative system during this time period has preciously little to say on the nature of elections; it even lacks an index entry for the word (Asker 2007).

The most authoritative sources of information regarding parliamentary elections in the time before the Parliament of Estates was replaced by a bicameral parliament in 1866 mostly document the rules and regulations (Lagerroth et al. 1934; Fahlbeck 1934), not the actual practice of electoral conduct. Apart from an account restricted to the Estate of Burgesses in the city of Stockholm (Nicklasson 1953), and a chapter on female suffrage in the elections to that same estate (Karlsson Sjögren 2006), the first studies focusing on election *per se* cover the post-1866 period (Wahlin 1961; Lewin et al. 1972; Esaiasson 1988). Most important for present purposes, Wallin (1961, 89-94) has a brief chapter on petitions against parliamentary elections lodged with the authorities in 1866-1884. He found that around one in every six elected seats were appealed against, and that around 6 percent of the elections were annulled. Most of the irregularities complained against were however caused by “negligence, ignorance and indifference”, not with malicious intent to systematically bias the outcome.

One may from this prematurely form the impression that Sweden’s predemocratic electoral history was all nice and peaceful. This was however most obviously not the case during the Age of Liberty, as the following citation from a classical source on this historical time period should make altogether clear. Writing on the parliamentary election of 1771, the year before King Gustaf III put an end to the proto-parliamentary experiment in a bloodless coup, Malmström (1901) comments on the fact that several contestants

from both the Hats and the Caps fought in the election in many constituencies:

Party splintering, local interests, personal animosity and awe made those struggles violent...Bribery and treating, threats and trials, slander and promises, everything was put in use in order to achieve victory. It cannot be doubted that public officials used their privileged positions to the advantage of the party to which they belonged, and this was not the first time that happened; however, the ambiguous instructions for how to conduct parliamentary elections and the varying practices with respect to how these instructions were implemented caused uncertainty even where impartiality was the rule. Many elections were appealed against, but these appeals were not always tried with impartiality and exactitude on behalf of the county governors; it also occurred that the plaintiffs did not accept the governor’s decision, but went to Parliament equipped with documents that could prove them right (*ibid.*, 215; my translation).

The plaintiffs did not accept even decisions on their appeals that were overruled by the King, since an informal practice had started to form through which each Estate in Parliament itself should establish the outcome of each electoral contest. As more than one candidate claimed victory from within the same constituency, the struggle thus continued in Parliament, in the Estate of Burgesses even leading to fistfights and bloodshed (*ibid.*, 218ff.)

This observation attests in several ways to the importance of the study of electoral fraud in Sweden that I am proposing. First, if elections were so corrupted in the 18th century, when and how was that practice abolished? Does the historical trajectory display a slow erosion of corrupt practices, an abrupt end, or perhaps a pattern where fraudulent practices wax and

wane over the course of time? Were Swedish elections clean already by the inauguration of the bicameral Parliament in 1866, as Wallin's (1961) study would suggest, or did corrupt practices remerge with the return of partisan electoral contests from the "tariff election" of 1887 and onward? Last but not least, Malmström's (1901) account of the 1771 election also attests to the usefulness in drawing on filed charges as a source material for studying electoral corruption historically.

Specific Aims and Research Design

The first aim of this research project will be to study practices of electoral misconduct in Sweden through the empirical record contained in complaints filed with the local governors (*Landsbövdningarna*), and the High Court (*Högsta Domstolen*) or its predecessor, from the Parliament of 1719 to the advent of democracy in the early 20th century. These complaints will be systematized into a time-series dataset, with standardized codes for the most essential characteristics of each contest. This will allow for a methodologically very powerful combination of qualitative historiographic and quantitative statistical analysis of trends, patterns and critical junctures.

The second aim of this study is to make comparisons between the Swedish historical record and that of other countries. Most notably, the way these petitioned elections has been coded into systematic time-series datasets for Germany, Great Britain and Costa Rica (see Lehoucq and Molina 2002) should allow for a very rich temporal and cross-country comparative study with at least these countries included. Apart from this there is secondary

sources available for comparisons with at least the US case. If time and resources allow it, primary source material on electoral petitions might also be collected for one additional country.

Whichever the exact selection of cases eventually will be, the third aim of the project is to explain how and why electoral corruption was abolished. This will first and foremost be accomplished for the case of Sweden, by studying both inter-temporal and inter-regional variation in the data on electoral petitions coupled with socio-economic constituency information (from Carlsson 1949, 1966; Lewin et al. 1972), in combination with contextual process knowledge on the appeals process, the parliamentary debate and the process of reform. But the cross-country comparative cases will of course also be crucial in this regard, both to study the import of national features that does not vary within the Swedish case, and in order to qualify the generality of the Swedish findings.

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