A remarkably stable civic engagement – Sweden in prosperity and recession

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In the last two decades Sweden has undergone important political changes and been through both times of prosperity and recession. Yet the amount of civic participation in Sweden has remained remarkably high and stable. Right now, in the middle of worldwide economic crisis, a new national population study confirms a long-lasting stability. Even the traditional Scandinavian popular mass movement pattern of civic engagement seems to be stable and if changing, only slowly. How can different theoretical approaches to civil society and civic participation help us to understand the Swedish case?

In the research of civic engagement there is a continuous interest to empirically and theoretically understand the interplay between civic engagement and a Scandinavian type of state, including its welfare system. This is the point of departure for the studies presented. Here we examine trends of unpaid work in Sweden from 1992 to 2009. Unpaid work implies here both volunteering within the framework of voluntary organizations and informal help and care giving to family members, neighbors, friends or colleagues. We will present trends of these activities by using four nationally representative survey studies carried out 1992, 1998, 2005 and 2009 by the Department of Civil Society Studies at Ersta Sköndal University College, Sweden. These studies are exclusively directed to different aspects of civic participation and connected to the international research in this field. The results from these studies have been used in a number of previous reports, which have described and analyzed a variety of perspectives on volunteering and informal help/care giving (Jegermalm 2005; 2006; Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 1996; 2007; Lundström and Svedberg 2003).

The surveys show that around 50 percent of the Swedish population has consistently been engaged in volunteering. Our results indicate that the amount of volunteering is very stable in spite of dramatic changes in the Swedish economy and in Swedish politics during the period. However, the structure of volunteering in Sweden is changing. Membership in voluntary organizations, the traditional bridge-way into volunteering in the Swedish context, still is very high but has diminished, particularly among women and younger people. Volunteering in political parties and other political organizations continues to dwindle, implying that the traditional voice function of volunteering in Sweden seems to be weakened (but only of volunteering, nota bene, this is not the case if we include professional voice efforts) and that the self-realization and the service role is growing. This seems to be in line with other Scandinavian and European experiences (see, for example, Wollebaek, 2009 and Hustinx, forthcoming).

While the extent of volunteering has remained very stable, informal help and care giving has changed somewhat over time. During the 1990s close to 30 percent of the population provided informal help and care for someone outside their households. At the beginning of the 21st century there was an increase in informal help and care giving. In the latest population study that extent has decreased somewhat. However, all in all, around 40 percent of Swedes provide informal help and care giving. This is high also in a comparative
Informal help giving was already widespread in the early 1990s, something that supports the assumption that Sweden has had and has a well-developed civil society in which helping and caring are widespread, whatever the factual size of the welfare state.

Our point of departure is that the amount of volunteering as well as informal giving is influenced by the welfare state, but in a very complex way. Furthermore, the path dependency of the popular mass movement pattern, as well as the much older tradition of civic participation are among the starting-points to be developed in the forthcoming paper.

Our results support the thesis that there seems to be no contradiction between a universal welfare model of a Swedish kind and an extensive civil society in terms of involvement in different forms of unpaid work (cf. Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg 2007; Salamon & Sokolowski 2003), but even more interesting is the unexpected stability found that is not in line either with Scandinavian or with other international researchers (cf. Vogel et al., 2003 and Putnam, 2000). In the paper to be presented we will relate our empirical data to relevant international empirical and theoretical research.

References

Hustinx, Lesley (2010). Institutionally Individualized Volunteering: Toward a Late Modern Re-Construction. *Journal of Civil Society*


