

## The societal impact of political science research at Örebro University – three case studies

### Introduction

As part of developing a new model for evaluating the quality and impact of research in Sweden, the Swedish Research Council conducted a pilot-study of the research subject political science in 2020. As part of the pilot, the political science departments at Swedish universities were instructed to present case studies of the societal impact of their research. The cases were to function as “good examples” to facilitate learning and development. The three cases reported here were submitted by the political science department at Örebro University in the Spring of 2020.

### Motivation of the choice of case studies

The three case studies were chosen for several reasons. First, the cases are related to the two interrelated research themes – democratic participation and public policy/administration – that we aim to strategically focus on and continue to develop in the coming five-year period. Thus, the work of producing as well as the feedback we get on these case descriptions will contribute to our own learning and development. Second, the cases reflect different types of societal impact – from instrumental uses to “enlightenment”<sup>1</sup> – as well as different ways of generating societal impact, e.g. reflecting, among other things, differences in the outreach activities undertaken by the respective research groups. It is important to acknowledge and illustrate the wider impact of political science research on not only specific policies, plans, and decisions, but also on wider debates concerning democracy or the functioning of the welfare state. Third, the cases were deliberately chosen to illustrate how the development of (new) concepts (i.e. standby citizens, inside activism, democratic innovation) – that is, basic research – also has the potential to reach a wider audience and to have practical implications and effects beyond the academy. In a sense, this is a “hard test” when it comes to the societal impact and relevance of political science; but it is an important one, as it shows how the theory-praxis divide, which is often seen in the social sciences, can be bridged. Finally, and reflecting on the cases that were *not* chosen, political science at Örebro University has a long tradition of engaging in applied research, often in close cooperation with practitioners – e.g. in the form of government commissions. In that type of research project, the political science research and the societal impact are intermixed, or develop together, which thus makes it harder to separate the research from the impact.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Weiss, C. (1979) The Many Meanings of Research Utilization, *Public Administration Review* 39(5): 426-431.

## **CASE STUDY 1: Standby Citizens – theory put into local government practice**

By Erik Amnå

### **Reach and significance**

How can citizens' civic engagement and relationship to the wider community and to politics be understood? How can many young peoples' apparent lack of political engagement be understood? How can young people get involved in local politics? How can they be heard by their local governments?

These questions are of central concern to many Swedish public officials wanting to improve local democracy by reviewing and developing existing channels of citizen participation. They are also of concern to the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF), which is tasked by the parliament to develop and improve citizen participation and inclusion, as part of a national policy aimed at enhancing democracy in Sweden.

It is in this context our research on these questions has had an important and concrete impact. Through innumerable outreach activities by the researchers themselves the research has been presented at national, Nordic and international conferences, and meetings arranged by civil society organizations as well as governmental agencies.

### ***The UNIK project***

In 2013, the theme of a national conference arranged by The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden (BO) and a major foundation (Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset) was "Children's' and Youths' Right to be Involved and have Influence". In the audience, there was a public official from the City of Västerås. She became particularly interested in the keynote "Four types of citizens" concerning the 94% of youths that seemed to avoid politics. It spoke directly to one of her professional tasks; namely, to improve youth engagement in local politics in the city of Västerås.

When she returned from the conference and met with local politicians concerning representativity in local policy-making, she could now more convincingly argue for the necessity of widening the scope of representation beyond the political parties' youth branches to also include the majority of seemingly non-active youths.<sup>2</sup> She developed a project labelled *UNIK* (Swedish acronym for Young people's contemporary influence in Västerås) based on an awareness of each young individual's unique relationship to politics. By translating the research concepts and the cluster characteristics she developed both soft and hard empirical instruments, such as items for youths' self-identification, panels and information technology in close collaboration with more than 500 youths.

The project was based on Article 12 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The overall aim was to find, understand, and establish new avenues for dialogue with the local government concerning the city's strategic development areas: social sustainability, knowledge, competence, urban planning, and the environment. The UNIK project designed instruments that utilized a more fine-grained method for characterizing youths' diverse (dis)interest in local politics. They were entirely based on a survey that asked respondents to self-characterize as either active, disengaged, disillusioned, or standby citizens. At the meetings, differently coloured T-shirts were worn by the participants depending on what

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<sup>2</sup> Reisten, M. (2017) *Ungdomsdialog. En UNIK rapport till kommunstyrelsen*. [Youth Dialogue. A UNIK report to the City Council]. Västerås stad: Förvaltning för stöd, fritid och entreprenad, 2017-12-01.

group they belonged to. In the next step, instead of applying the usual, general and non-discriminating “youth” approach, the city could now use a more nuanced approach that was able to adapt to, channel, and engage a wider group of young people by inviting young citizens to panels and dialogues – based on a recognition of the fact that young people have to be represented according to their various attitudes to civic and political engagement, and not only according to age. For each of the groups, a leader was elected to coordinate the activities during the workshop, in which the political issues they wanted to deliberate on were identified and formulated. As a result, a wider group of youths could make themselves heard than had previously been the case in the city.

Later, the UNIK project received a project grant from MUCF and established a collaboration with the research group at Örebro University as well as with scholars and students at the nearby Mälardalen University. The project has inspired colleagues in other cities and municipalities. Currently, the project is working to develop a teacher manual to be used in schools to promote civic and political engagement. The local project also got wider national attention due to the repeated coverage<sup>3</sup> of the project on Swedish Television (SVT) and presentations at a national meeting arranged by, among others. MUCF.<sup>4</sup>

## Contributing research

Particularly since the mid-1980s, research on youths and school from a socialization perspective has been a broad research interest among many scholars outside political science, e.g. in civic education, sociology, history, and pedagogy, as well as in media and communication. Collaborative studies have been carried out with strong internal and external funding<sup>5</sup>. With the support of a six-year program grant awarded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond in 2008,<sup>6</sup> a typology was developed to capture theoretically and empirically test variations over time in civic engagement and political participation (Amnå et al. 2009; Amnå et al. 2016). In contrast to much of the earlier research, which was characterized by a dichotomic pre-understanding – basically active vs non-active –, we argued for a more nuanced and multidimensional conceptualization (Ekman & Amnå 2012; Amnå & Ekman 2014). Based on an alternative distinction between a latent and a manifest dimension, the original typology has been frequently cited in the subsequent years (Google Scholar citation numbers, March 2020:731).

Utilizing a person-centred cluster analysis, we found that citizens differed in terms of social trust, civic knowledge, news consumption, political talk, etc. Furthermore, we found a significant and dynamic combination of degrees and modes of political participation, on the one hand, and degrees of political interest, on the other (Amnå & Ekman 2014). Four clusters of young citizens were found: unengaged, alienated, standbys, and activists.

Since the first article, the typology as well as the method of using four clusters has been applied by many scholars working in different fields, such as political science, media and communication, and social psychology. While some have used it on small samples, others have employed it in large national

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vastmanland/unik-ska-oka-ungdomars-inflytande-inflytande-i-vasteras>  
<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vastmanland/unik-metod-fran-vasteras-sprids-i-skolor-i-hela-sverige>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mucf.se/poddar-fran-rikskonferensen>

<sup>5</sup> Amnå, E., Arensmeier, C., Ekman, J., Englund, T., & Ljunggren, C. (2010). Skolornas institutionella karaktär och elevernas medborgarkompetens: en jämförelse av olika kommunala och fristående skolor över tid och rum. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 112(1), 23-32; Amnå, E., Englund, T., Arensmeier, C., Ekman, J., Ljunggren, C., Unemar Öst, I., & Zetterberg, P. (2010). *Skolor som politiska arenor: medborgarkompetens och kontrovershantering*. Stockholm: Skolverket, internationella studier.

<sup>6</sup> Reference number: M2008-0073:1-PK (35 MSEK)

surveys<sup>7</sup>. Quite rapidly, the concept also affected the framing of the comparative cross-country civic education study ICCS 2016 conducted by International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)<sup>8</sup> as well as the EU funded research projects PIDOP (FP7)<sup>9</sup> and Catch-EyoU (H2020)<sup>10</sup>.

Through a more differentiated and fluid perspective on citizens' political involvement, the hegemonic marginalization of seemingly passive citizens was challenged. Practitioners were supplied with a theoretical argument for also factoring in more or less temporarily non-active citizens in their perspectives, analyses, and the scope of their intended reforms aimed at improving deliberative and participatory local democratic forums and initiatives.

### Key processes and factors

Basically, there were four factors that encouraged us to pay attention to the needs outside of academic society.

- A search for new concepts and labels able to map a greater variety of participatory modes than hitherto used dichotomies

The shortcomings of existing concepts has incentivized some political entrepreneurs, policy makers, and leaders of civil society organizations to take a closer look at our research on civic engagement and political participation. The hitherto existing active-passive dichotomy did not seem to be suited to the needs of policy development

- Practitioners' demand for theoretically solid contributions

Our research had a fairly immediate and sustained impact on influential international research in several disciplines<sup>11</sup>. It offered practitioners a solid and trustworthy reference, which they frequently used when developing policy. In addition, it served their need to legitimate their policy changes and new policy initiatives.

- Researchers' interest in involvement and dialogue

For decades, the research group has been very active when it comes to outreach activities and involvement in external projects such as parliamentary commissions, governmental dialogues, and seminars arranged by the National Agency of Education on the development of local government, the

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<sup>7</sup> Evans, M. & Stoker, G. (2016) Political participation in Australia: contingency in the behaviour and attitudes of citizens, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 51:2, 272-287

<sup>8</sup> Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., & Agrusti, G. (2016). *IEA international civic and citizenship education study 2016 assessment framework*. IEA/Springer Open.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Barrett, M. and Zani, B, Eds, a.a.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Banaji, S., Mejias, S., Kouts, R., Piedade, F., Pavlopoulos, V., Tzankova, I., ... & Amnå, E. (2018).

Citizenship's tangled web: Associations, gaps and tensions in formulations of European youth active citizenship across disciplines. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15(3), 250-269.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., Xenos, M. A., Steel, H., & Burgum, S. (2015). Campus politics, student societies and social media. *The Sociological Review*, 63(4), 820-839; Sveningsson, M. (2016). 'I Wouldn't Have What It Takes' Young Swedes' Understandings of Political Participation. *Young*, 24(2), 139-156; Prior, M. (2018). *Hooked: How politics captures people's interest*. Cambridge University Press; Pickard, S. (2019). *Politics, Protest and Young People* (pp. 57-87). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

future of Swedish democracy, and the role of civil society. The scholars have also made contributions to national hearings on democratic development set up by The Swedish Association for Regions and Municipalities and the Swedish Association of Youth Organisations. The public commitment has been demonstrated in many ways, e.g. keynote presentations at national conferences and participation in national debates. The perhaps most profound involvement was with the Swedish Parliamentary Commission on Democracy 1997—2000.

In addition, incentives to engage in outreach activities were embedded in the grant. One of the conditions for receiving the grant was actually that the findings should be disseminated to a wider public audience through writings and seminars.

- Mutual benefits (win-win situation)

In sum, both the practitioners and the researchers could cooperate expecting mutual benefits. The practitioners could gain instruments, arguments and support for their ideas. The scholars were satisfied to see that (and how) their research could be brought into governmental experiments and practices.

## Key References Case 1

1. Shehata, A., & **Amnå, E.** (2019). The development of political interest among adolescents: A communication mediation approach using five waves of panel data. *Communication Research, 46*(8), 1055-1077.
2. **Dahl, V., Amnå, E.,** Banaji, S., Landberg, M., Šerek, J., Ribeiro, N., ... & Zani, B. (2018). Apathy or alienation? Political passivity among youths across eight European Union countries. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 15*(3), 284-301.
3. Kim, Y., Russo, S., & **Amnå, E.** (2017). The longitudinal relation between online and offline political participation among youth at two different developmental stages. *New Media & Society, 19*(6), 899-917.
4. **Amnå, E.,** Ekström, M., & Stattin, H. (2016). *Ungdomars politiska utveckling: slutrapport från ett forskningsprogram*. Stockholm: Riksbankens Jubileumsfond/Makadam Förlag.
5. Russo, S., & **Amnå, E.** (2016). When political talk translates into political action: The role of personality traits. *Personality and individual differences, 100*, 126-130.
6. **Amnå, E.,** & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review, 6*(2), 261-281.
7. Ekman, J., & **Amnå, E.** (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human affairs, 22*(3), 283-300
8. **Amnå, E.** (2012). How is civic engagement developed over time? Emerging answers from a multidisciplinary field. *Journal of adolescence, 35*(3), 611-627.
9. **Amnå, E.,** Ekström, M., Kerr, M., & Stattin, H. (2009). Political socialization and human agency: The development of civic engagement from adolescence to adulthood. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift, 111*(1), 27-40.
10. **Amnå, E.** (2006). Playing with fire? Swedish mobilization for participatory democracy. *Journal of European Public Policy, 13*(4), 587-606.

## CASE STUDY 2: The practical relevance and impact of Inside Activism

By Jan Olsson and Erik Hysing

### Reach and significance

What is, and should be, the role of public administrators today? Within both public administration research and practice the Weberian ideal-typical bureaucracy is being discussed, problematized, and elaborated. This has taken place both in relation to normative and theoretical concepts and ideas and the “lived” practices of practitioners. In Sweden, this became clear in 2018 during the debate following the so-called “normative foundation call” (“värdegrundsuppropet”), in which senior public administrators working at the Swedish Central Government Offices wrote to their administrative director expressing concerns that a government that was dependent on the right-wing party the Sweden Democrats for support would negatively impact the “normative foundation” (värdegrund) of the government. At the centre of the debate that followed were questions concerning the proper role of public administrators – with some seeing the call as a breach of loyalty while others saw it as a proper response by concerned officials.<sup>12</sup> This is just one example of many discussions taking place within organizations (public agencies, companies, NGOs) as well as in public debates concerning the role of public administrators.

One of the fundamental purposes of social science research is to contribute to, and have an impact on, such debates in society. Based on theoretical elaborations and empirical research on inside activism, political science research at Örebro University has in various ways contributed to an intra-organizational debate and reflection (through presentations at public agencies and other organizations) and a public debate (through media reports and open lectures) on the role of public administrators. Inside activism is theorized as an institutional phenomenon and its ‘carrying’ actor, the inside activist, is defined as ‘an individual who is engaged in civil society networks and organizations, who holds a formal position within public administration, and who acts strategically from inside the public administration to change government policy and action in line with a personal value commitment’ (Olsson and Hysing 2012, p. 258).

Grounded in empirical studies, inside activism was introduced in 2009 as a theoretical concept, and stands in contrast to the traditional bureaucratic ideal for public administrators. Even though the theoretical construct was aimed at academic peers, the concept (and idea) has in a short time received substantial public attention and has had an impact on public debates. This makes this example a particularly interesting case of political science research having a societal impact.

The impact of inside activism research can be seen through the attention it has received in the media and the public debates it has evoked. The media coverage has varied in terms of how inside activism has been framed and discussed. First, there have been news articles, presenting recently published academic work, which focus on promising results of green inside activism; that is, environmental public administrators who contribute to strengthening and implementing environmental policy from inside public administrations in cooperation with environmental movements. Even though the articles paint a positive picture, the articles also discuss the potential risk that the impartiality of the bureaucracy will be undermined and that the principles of democratic decision-making may be violated. Second, these

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre, J (2019) Institutions, politicians or ideas? To whom or what are public servants expected to be loyal? BJPIR 21(3): 487-493; Ehrenkrona, CH and Sandberg H (2018) Tjänstemän kan använda sin meddelarfrihet- eller sluta, Dagens Nyheter Debatt 2018-09-30; Sundström, G (2018) Lojaliteten mot regeringen omfattar mer än att vissla eller sluta, Dagens Nyheter Debatt 2018-10-01;

risks have received significant attention in another type of article, which critically problematize inside activism from a normative point of view. These articles have stressed that bureaucratic radicalism is unjustifiable – something to be condemned and stopped. In these debates, well-known opinion-makers have been active, such as the historian Gunnar Wetterberg and the journalist and chronicler Janerik Larsson.

Studies of inside activism also come to have an impact on society through contacts with various organizations as well as interested people in general. For example, "this is a very interesting approach. Highly relevant considering the lack of responsibility among public officials [tjänstemannaansvar]" (e-mail conversation with a private house owner in Kristianstad with a drain problem). Inside activism also has an impact on society through presentations at various organizations as well as open public lectures, spurring critical debate and reflection during as well as after the presentations. To conclude, the societal impact of this case study is about contributing to debates, reflection and an enlightened understanding of the role of public administrators – a conceptual impact that, over time, may affect individual behaviours and stimulate reform ideas, even radical ones like the idea of handling the problem with "too committed bureaucrats" by substituting them with automated decision-making.

## Contributing research

Inside activism is not a new phenomenon, but a new theoretical concept that makes possible empirical studies and further theorizing. So far it has been theoretically elaborated and empirically validated in qualitative case studies and extensive quantitative research. Over the last decade, 13 publications have been produced on inside activism and the power of public administrators (see the reference list). In short summary, inside activism has been shown to be empirically valid and important for explaining green institutional change in policy and planning processes (Olsson 2009; Hysing & Olsson 2011; Hysing & Olsson 2018). In a survey study of local environmental officials in Sweden, 81 of 701 respondents, operating within 67 of the 290 local governments in Sweden, expressed attitudes and behaviours corresponding to inside activists (Hysing and Olsson 2011). It is further shown that green inside activists can exert influence by developing and using networks; arguing proactively from their positions as experts; and on some occasions acting in a politically strategic way in relation to superiors and vested interests (Olsson & Hysing 2019a).

Furthermore, the political nature of inside activism and public administrations has been theorized by elaborating on: (1) the political character of public administrators as being relatively informal, quiet, and cautious; (2) the dual character of inside activism, acting both on the light and the dark side of public life; and (3) the power and influence of inside activism in terms of subversive action; for instance, saying one thing to political superiors but acting in another way behind closed doors (Olsson 2016; Hysing & Olsson 2018; Olsson & Hysing 2019).

The concept of inside activism has also been discussed and problematized in relation to democratic and bureaucratic values, rules, and norms. In what sense and to what extent can inside activism be legitimized or justified? (Hysing & Olsson 2018, ch 7). The conclusion here is a bit more sophisticated than the harshest criticism, which often lacks understanding of the nature of real-life public administrations, giving considerable degrees of freedom to public administrators and professionals due to unclear expectations and governing from leading politicians and managers. Furthermore, whistleblowing studies continuously report on organizational wrongdoing in public organizations, which may convince ethically aware bureaucrats to take action, such as leaking information about unlawful behaviour to the media. Thus, the question of impartiality is easy when it comes to the level of principle, but empirically the problems and opportunities of activist bureaucrats must be analysed in relation to the specific situation and context. It depends very much on what is at stake.

## Key processes and factors

Two aspects need to be addressed in relation to the factors and conditions that were of crucial importance to the impact of inside activism research: (1) the controversial nature of the case, and (2) the basic conditions and contexts that gave birth to inside activism research.

The fact that inside activism stands in sharp contrast with the traditional bureaucratic model, which largely remains a general ideal for civil servants, makes it appealing to use the concept of inside activism in public debates on what is deemed as good and bad with public administration. Inside activism challenges widespread common-sense knowledge about bureaucracies and bureaucrats and evokes both hopes for important policy action and worries about negative consequences for democratic decision-making and impartial public administration. Those hopes and worries are quite understandable but risk being expressed in a one-sided, confrontational manner. The intense contacts with journalists, citizens, and organizations have raised questions and garnered comments that have motivated us to write more popular scientific texts (e.g. Olsson and Hysing 2019a). This is an important strategy for making sure that more nuanced, science-based reasoning concerning this subject also reaches the interested public. Our experiences in meeting people at public lectures is that “black-and-white views” on inside activism are usually nuanced after a discussion, which also usually means that most people can agree on some examples where inside activism would be “good” or “bad” in relation to different values and policy outcomes.

The inside activism studies have developed within the broader research tradition of public administration, public policy, and planning within the political science department at Örebro University. This research tradition started in the 1980s through multidisciplinary groups of scholars and has during the past 20 years become a more formalized research profile within political science. Much of this research has had an ambition to interact with society and involve interested stakeholders. Today, about 15 scholars are active in this tradition, which has successfully received considerable external funding and produced many international publications over the years. Important examples of research themes, beside inside activism, are, for instance, studies of the politics-administration dichotomy, organizational reforms, traffic policy, school policy, and sustainable development and public ethics. This research profile has also led to the development of university educational programs with a focus on public administration, political science, and public planning that have a very strong research basis. Studies of public administration and inside activism provide a nuanced understanding of public administrators beyond the bureaucratic paradigm. Inside activism has been presented in books and articles both in Swedish (Hysing & Olsson 2012) and English (Hysing & Olsson 2018) suitable for academic teaching. Beyond helping to make future public administrators and planners better equipped and informed about the complexity of their bureaucratic mission and better able to elaborate on the difficult normative issues raised by alternative bureaucratic roles, these publications have also helped further a societal interest and awareness of the concept.

In summary, the presented research impact was not intended or planned by the research team, but once the impact became obvious it was necessary to take on a more interactive role with actors in society. This has also spurred the research team to engage in new activities, both in terms of publications and public presentations.

## Key References Case 2

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2. **Hysing, Erik and Olsson, Jan** (2011) Who Greens the Northern Light? Green Inside Activists in Local Environmental Governing in Sweden, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 29(4): 693–708.
3. **Hysing, Erik & Olsson, Jan** (2012). *Tjänstemän i politiken*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
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5. **Hysing, Erik, Olsson, Jan & Dahl, V.** (2016). A radical public administration? Green radicalism and policy influence among local environmental officials in Sweden. *Environmental Politics*, 25 (3), 535-552.
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7. **Olsson, Jan & Hysing, Erik** (2019a). Aktivism bland offentliga tjänstemän. *Fronesis* (62-63), 123–132. (Popular text in Swedish)
8. **Olsson, Jan & Hysing, Erik** (2019b). *Inside activism: political agency and institutional change*. I: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. **Olsson, Jan** (2009). The Power of the Inside Activist: Understanding policy change by empowering the advocacy coalition framework (ACF). *Planning Theory & Practice*, 10 (2), 167-187.
10. **Olsson, Jan** (2016). *Subversion in Institutional Change and Stability: A Neglected Mechanism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## CASE STUDY 3: Democratic innovation

By Martin Karlsson and Joachim Åström

### Reach and significance

Decreasing trust in political institutions and declining levels of citizen participation in politics through traditional channels has led to an increased interest in democratic innovations among national and local governments. Democratic innovations are forms of citizen participation that are (1) initiated by public institutions, and (2) innovative in relation to the formal political system<sup>13</sup>. The study of democratic innovations has been an ongoing research focus within political science at Örebro University for the past 20 years. Our research has often been conducted through collaborative projects involving public authorities as well as academics, and not seldom also private companies (supplying technological solutions for democratic innovations). Such collaborations are often mutually beneficial for all parties involved, supplying researchers with access to real life cases and public authorities and companies with much needed expertise and evaluations of implemented processes.

As will be demonstrated below, the research focused on democratic innovations and new forms of political participation at Örebro University has had a demonstrable impact on public policy and the implementation of democratic innovations. Political science researchers at Örebro University have been involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating democratic innovations initiated by public institutions at the European, national, as well as local level. Furthermore, researchers at the department have played key roles in governmental commissions and networks shaping policies related to democratic innovations and new forms of political participation since the 1990s. Our research on democratic innovations has had a broad scope, covering many types of democratic innovations: from online deliberation and citizen budgeting to political representatives' use of ICTs to communicate with citizens (Åström & Karlsson, 2013; Karlsson & Åström 2016). As an illustrative example, however, this case study will focus on our research in relation to electronic petitions, or e-petitions.

E-petitions allow for citizens in a state, region, or municipality to launch petitions to a parliament or council online and to sign petitions in order to support them. Successful petitions that reach above a certain threshold of required support are put on the agenda for the parliament or council. Our research into the potential democratic benefits and challenges of e-petitions has fed into debates and developments in Sweden and beyond. In Sweden, it began with an invitation from the City of Malmö in 2007 to give a talk on 'what works, when and why' when it comes to democratic innovations. The City of Malmö subsequently launched, in 2008, 'Malmöinitiativet', the first e-petition system in Sweden. The collaboration with the City of Malmö continued with a contract to evaluate Malmöinitiativet in 2009, from which a number of recommendations on how to improve the system was made<sup>14</sup>. Ten years later, Malmöinitiativet is still up and running and has gathered more than 2 000 petitions from the citizens of Malmö.

As e-petitions started to generate a broader interest, we initiated several collaborative projects. *Citizen-centric e-Participation: A Trilateral Collaboration for Democratic Innovation* was a three-year (2012-14) collaborative project in the Nordic-Baltic region, financed by Vinnova, Nordforsk, Rannis

<sup>13</sup> Newton, K. (2012). "Curing the democratic malaise with democratic innovations", in Geissel, B., & Newton, K. (Eds.) *Evaluating democratic innovations: Curing the democratic malaise*, 3-20. London: Routledge; Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic innovations: Designing institutions for citizen participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Åström, J., & Sedelius, T. (2010) "Representativ demokrati 2.0: En utvärdering av Malmöinitiativet och Malmöpanelen". Slutrapport till Malmö Stad, Maj 2010.

and the Estonian Ministry for Economic Affairs and Communications. The project had broad reach and significance for a number of beneficiaries. Local governments, ICT-companies, and NGOs partnered the project and worked with us to gather data and inform the development of e-petition systems in Sweden, Iceland, and Estonia. Perhaps the most well-known e-petitioning system among our partners was ‘Better Reykjavik’ but the project team was also engaged in facilitating and evaluating The Estonian Citizens’ Assembly (ECA). ECA was initiated in late 2012 as a response to a legitimacy crisis concerning Estonian political parties and representative institutions. The innovative process, which included e-petitioning and a deliberation day, was initiated by Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and resulted in changes to several laws in Estonia. Another significant collaborative project was *Building pervasive participation*, which received three-year funding (2013-15) from Formas within the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI). In this project we developed, tested, and evaluated a mobile version of e-petitioning by way of a ‘Living Lab’ together with partner universities in Austria and Finland and the City of Åbo.

Besides the immediate impact in relation to the partners of our collaborative projects, we have been involved in several governmental commissions on democracy. In the most recent – 2014 års Demokratiutredning –, we were invited to summarize our own and others research on e-petitions<sup>15</sup>. One main proposal in the final report from the commission was to introduce e-petitioning more broadly in Sweden.<sup>16</sup> Even though the suggestion was not adopted by the parliament, many local governments has taken up this proposal. Today e-petition systems have been implemented by around 40 Swedish local governments, who have frequently cited our research as a source of inspiration for implementing e-petition systems.<sup>17</sup>

## Contributing research

The research on democratic innovations at Örebro University has been guided by two main research questions: (1) will democratic innovations reinvigorate democracy? And (2) what are the factors that facilitate or hinder their success? In our research pursuing answers to the first question we have studied the outcome of democratic innovations in terms of their impact on policy (cf. Åström & Grönlund, 2013) and their effects on established political institutions (Åström & Karlsson, 2013; Karlsson & Åström, 2016). Further, studies have been conducted that investigate the effects of democratic innovations on the trust between actors within the political system (Åström et al., 2017; Karlsson et al., 2020). Through this research, we have found that the impact of democratic innovations varies greatly and that the potential for democratic innovations to reinvigorate democracy hinges on factors related to the institutional design of the innovations as well as the institutional and political context in which they are implemented.

In order to contribute to an understanding of what factors facilitate or hinder the success of democratic innovations, our research has pursued several different themes. One prominent theme within this research has been how democratic innovations are designed, and how the process design influences the procedural fairness and policy impact of democratic innovations (cf. Adenskog, 2018; Karlsson, 2013; & Åström, 2004). In an influential study, Åström and Grönlund (2013) surveyed existing case studies of local electronic consultations in Europe between 2000 and 2008, finding strong associations between the design of such consultations and their outcomes as reported by earlier studies. Other studies

<sup>15</sup> Karlsson, M., & Åström, J. (2015). Kan e-petitioner utveckla den representativa demokratin?. in: Låt fler forma framtiden!: Forskarantologi från 2014-års Demokratiutredning, pp. 559–605, Stockholm: Wolters Kluwers.

<sup>16</sup> SOU 2016:5 “Låt fler forma framtiden!” Final report from the Governmental commission on democracy of 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Eskilstuna local government (2019) “Införande av e-petitioner: förslag till beslut”. KSKF 2019:104 (2019-03-25); Södertälje local government (2017) “Åtgärdsplan för ökat valdeltagande 2018”. KS 2017:214 (2017-11-07).

have investigated variations in the design of electronic petitioning systems in Europe and the implications for various design choices. Further, our studies have focused on the connection between the political as well as socio-technological context and the design of democratic innovations. Furthermore, and as has been reported above, researchers from the political science unit have been involved in designing and implementing several democratic innovations as part of collaborative research projects.

Another aspect of democratic innovations explored in the research at Örebro university is the relationship between democratic innovations and their political context. A series of studies have explored between-country variations in the implementation of electronic participation processes (cf. Åström et al., 2013). This research shows that democratic innovations are increasingly being implemented in non-democratic contexts. Other studies have investigated variations in policy makers' attitudes towards democratic innovations, showing that having organizational experience of implanting democratic innovations is strongly associated with policy-makers support for democratic innovations. Furthermore, our studies have identified that a high level of crisis in the political context may enable more far-reaching democratic innovations.

Taken together, the research conducted at Örebro University pertaining to democratic innovations and new forms of citizen participation has contributed to an understanding of the relationship between contextual and institutional aspects of democratic innovations and the surrounding political system.

## Key processes and factors

The societal impact of our research on democratic innovations has been generated through several different pathways. *Collaboration* has been one key pathway. We have regularly collaborated with stakeholders on common problems in research and development projects. One notable example of this is our involvement in the implementation and evaluation of the Swedish part of the European Citizens' Consultations 2009. This project was conducted by a network of research institutions, public authorities, and civil society organizations across Europe. Another pivotal collaboration platform was the EU-initiated Network of Excellence "Demo-Net". Furthermore, we have regularly presented our research to public authorities at the local, national, and European level.

Since the political context is important for understanding the potentials and challenges of democratic innovations, we seldom do experimental research. Instead, collaborating with pioneers in the field has been one way of getting a hold of interesting data. In turn, our partners sometimes, but far from always, take the results of our research into account. While often illuminating the complexities and power-relations involved in innovating democracy, we sometimes provide 'implementable solutions' that can be incorporated in the design of democratic innovations. As good opportunities for societal impact sometimes arise suddenly, such as in the case of the Estonian Citizen Assembly described above, a condition for being able to generate an impact in certain situations is 'to seize the day'. The *expertise* pathway to societal impact has also been important, as we have often played the role as experts, making policy recommendations, conducting evaluation studies, or performing other kinds of contract research. Examples include our involvement in multiple governmental commissions on democracy<sup>18</sup> as well as

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<sup>18</sup> Åström, J. (1999). "Digital demokrati?: Idéer och strategier i lokal IT-politik", In Amnå, E. (Ed.) IT i demokratis tjänst (SOU 1999:117). Stockholm: Fakta info direkt.; Montin, S. (1998). Lokala demokratiexperiment exempel och analyser (SOU 1998: 155). Stockholm: Fritzes.

our work conducting evaluations of democratic innovations on behalf of local governments<sup>19</sup> as well as the European Union<sup>20</sup>.

For both of the above described pathways, a long-term and continued commitment to this research theme has been instrumental. Our research on new forms of citizen participation spans over more than two decades, allowing our research group to build networks for collaboration within as well as outside of academia, and allowing us to generate a level of expertise related to democratic innovations.

### Key References Case 3

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<sup>19</sup> Åström, J., & Sedelius, T. (2010) "Representativ demokrati 2.0: En utvärdering av Malmöinitiativet och Malmöpanelen". Slutrapport till Malmö Stad, Maj 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Karlsson, M. (2010b) "The role of MEPs in the national consultations", section in Leyenaar, Monique & Neimöller, Kees (eds.) *Evaluation Report: ECC 2009*, Commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels.