The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same:
The Swedish Local Government Elite between 1985 and 2005

Stefan Szücs and Lars Strömberg
Centre for Public Sector Research (CEFOS),
Göteborg University, Box 720, 405 30, Göteborg Sweden
Tel.:46 31 786 4498, Fax: 46 31 786 4480
e-mail: stefan.szucs@cefos.gu.se; lars.stromberg@cefos.gu.se

ABSTRACT: This article examines the development of the main characteristics of the Swedish local political–administrative elite, by analysing repeated surveys, performed in 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005, of all important leaders in a representative sample of 20 towns and cities. In relation to the great changes that have occurred at the local government level, we find a surprisingly high degree of elite homogeneity and stability over time. Although the composition of the local government elite has become increasingly gender equalised and professional, local problems have become only slightly more complex; meanwhile, the influence and effectiveness of leaders in solving these problems has remained unchanged, probably because the power and autonomy of local government to act effectively has declined somewhat. In contrast, the leaders’ political capital (networks, democratic values, and global relations) has remained strong and stable.

Keywords: local elites, politicians, administrators, self-government, political capital, development, change, stability, homogeneity, democratic values, horizontal networks, global relations.

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Introduction

The development of local government from the 1950s to the late 1970s represents one of the most obvious efforts to modernise the organisation of the Swedish political system in the twentieth century. The number of local governments was reduced from approximately 2,500 before the first reapportionment reform in 1952, to 280 after the latest amalgamation reform in the mid 1970s (today, Sweden consists of 290 local government units). This development paved the way for an increase in each local government’s revenue income base, as well as an expanding public sector, local party politicisation, and transformation from administration by laypeople to administration by professionals (Strömberg & Westerståhl, 1984).

In Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, this modernisation of the political system has more generally resulted in the development of a nationally regulated, but nevertheless locally governed, welfare state (Szücs, 1995). However, despite the important effects of day-to-day local governance performed by the leading administrators and politicians, other local government research have mainly been focused on the development of municipal citizenship (Johansson, Strömberg & Nilsson, 2001) or local politicians (Bäck, 2000; Bäck et al. 2006). This article describes the development of the powerful Swedish local political–administrative elite over the three decades of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, after the great reapportionment and amalgamation reforms were concluded locally.

According to recently published findings, the successful development of democracy in the 1990s in the Northern European/Baltic region has grown parallel to the local political–administrative elite’s ability to build and maintain political capital based on commitment to democratic values, informal governance networks, and connecting the community to global relationships (Szücs et al., 2006). In these
studies – performed with data from 1985, 1991, and 1999 in the Swedish case – the magnitude and stability of this local political capital is striking (Szücs et al., 2006: 39–70). These findings thus point in the direction that the more the conditions of local government have changed in Sweden, the more the qualities of governing have stayed the same – a proposition the present article will examine. Considering the great changes in the development of the Swedish local government after the mid 1980s, to what extent did the qualities of its political–administrative elite stay the same?

The Development of Swedish Local Government

Since the 1980s, the development of the locally governed public sector has been characterised by the deregulation of local government, changing state–local relations (especially decentralisation and the attendant off-loading of national and regional responsibilities to the local government level), the privatisation and outsourcing of local government services, and public sector down-sizing (Wise & Szücs, 1996). A slight decline in the strength of Swedish local democracy is perhaps most clearly evidenced by the gradual decline in voter participation in local elections, by approximately 10 per cent.

As a means to increase local self-government and autonomy, the new 1991 Local Government Act (1991: 900) gave each local government the right to determine its political organisation for itself (Montin & Amnå, 2000). However, its implementation has mainly led to a reduction in the number of local government boards, and in the number of lay politicians in many municipalities.

One of the most important functions of Swedish local government has been that of local self-taxation. However, in the 1990s, central government instituted both
temporal limits on local self-taxation and a new system of redistributing local income from ‘rich’ to ‘poor’ municipalities that remains today. Thus, although Swedish local self-government has increased in legal and organisational terms as a result of the new 1991 Local Government Act, in economic and practical terms, self-government has probably become increasingly restricted.

The period this study covers has also witnessed great international change and the globalisation of ideas about local governing. Using several theories, scholars have tried to influence, pinpoint, or forecast national and international change in local government and its local political–administrative elite.

Theories of Political–Administrative Change and Related Hypotheses

Our intention is to examine the development of the local government elite from the point of view of new theories of political–administrative change and public sector reform. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century the state was challenged by a multidisciplinary theoretical approach advocating decentralised political–administrative change. In the aftermath of the early 1990s, mainly inspired by economic theories based on the notion of gaining efficiency by rolling back the state, the reform movement of New Public Management (NPM) theory became almost global in the reach of its ‘new orthodoxy’ for solving public efficiency problems more professionally, by means of decentralisation, down-sizing, lean production, and privatisation (Olsen, 1997). NPM theorists of the early 1990s were the first generally to prescribe the decentralisation of public sector functions to improve efficiency. Important NPM models include (1) the goal of efficiency, achieved by means of (2) decentralisation and down-sizing, (3) the search for
professional excellence and innovation, and (4) accountability for performance, by means of evaluation and service orientation (Ferlie et al., 1996; McLaughlin et al., 2000).

A second theoretical approach is political in the sense that it rests on a challenge to the political organisation. This approach claims that to understand today’s politics, due to the increasing complexity of the solutions to public problems, we must look at theories of governance and multilevel networks of the political–administrative elite rather than simply studying the government per se (Kooiman, 1993; Pierre, 2000; John, 2001). These theorists have more directly emphasised new forms of public steering and decision-making based on loose, horizontal, and flexible networks of individuals – especially between government and non-government actors and non-state collective action approaches – to coordinate policy and solve public problems (Stoker, 1998, 2000).

A third new approach to local government elite change mainly rests on the challenge of traditional sociological theory. The common ground for theories of New Political Culture (NPC) and of ‘glocalisation’ and local–global relations (Clark & Hoffmann-Martinot, 1998; Robertson, 1992; Teune, 1995) defines a new style of policy and politics challenging older theoretical traditions of national clientelistic politics. The NPC theory in particular describes increasingly tense relationships between elites and the public at the local level, due to the decline of class politics and the rejection of traditional political cleavages. It is claimed that this tension forces leaders to deal with legitimacy and effectiveness by adopting new selective and populist policies based on pragmatism, rather than on party ideology or basic democratic values, in order to increase public interest.
Based of these new theories, we have formulated ten hypotheses concerning changes in the characteristics of the local political–administrative elite. We hypothesise that throughout the study period: 1) the Swedish local political–administrative elite has become increasingly professional in terms of their educational level; 2) that the local problems facing their cities have become more serious and complex, 3) but that the perception of effectiveness in solving these problems has increased as well, 4) especially in solving problems concerning local government costs; 5) that due to decentralisation, the elite has displayed increasing power and autonomy to act on these problems; 6) that the personal influence of the elite on what is accomplished in the community has increased; 7) that their informal horizontal networks (based on support contacts) has grown as well; 8) that while commitment to democratic values has declined, 9) party politics has meanwhile increasingly focused on methods of gaining public interest; and 10) that the elites’ community context has become increasingly based on local–global relationships.

Our basic theoretical assumption is institutional, in the sense that the perceptions, behaviour, and values of the leading politicians and administrators in a political system are regarded as mainly depending on their experiences in their formal roles and positions (see, for example, Eldersveld et al. 1995: Szücs, 1998; Szücs et al., 2006: 33–34). Thus, regardless of the hypothesised findings regarding change, we will also be able to analyse the degree to which Swedish top local politicians and administrators represent an elite also in terms of their homogeneity in sharing similar perceptions, behaviour, and values. The research questions are as follows: What characteristics of the local government elite have changed according to our hypotheses, and what are the main differences between administrators and politicians, affiliated to different parties, in different cities? How have these
characteristics changed over the period studied? Why have some characteristics changed, while others have remained stable and homogenous?

The Sample of Cities and Leaders

The sample of Swedish local governments and leaders was selected to represent a group of middle-sized cities and their local top governing elite, according to the sampling rules for the international Democracy and Local Governance (DLG) research programme (Jacob et al., 1993; Teune, 1995; Jacob et al., 1999; Szücs et al., 2006). The data consist of repeated surveys, conducted in 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005, of leading local government politicians and administrators in 20 Swedish cities.

When the Swedish sample was first drawn in 1984–1985, the local units were sampled with regard to population size, left- or right-wing political party majority coalition in council, and level of economic development. The five largest cities in the sample have populations of 100,000 or more inhabitants: approximately 4 per cent (12) of Swedish local governments fall into this group. The second group of cities selected range between 50,000 and 99,999 inhabitants: 11 per cent (32) of all Swedish municipalities are of this size today. The third group of selected cities have populations between 25,000 and 49,999 inhabitants: 19 per cent (54) of Swedish municipalities belong to this group. Five municipalities with under 25,000 inhabitants were also selected: this group represents two thirds of all Swedish municipalities (192). The three major cities of Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö were not included in the study.

The surveyed politicians come from the central executive board (all members) and the chair and vice chair of the units functioning as the building board, health and
environmental board, social services board, school board, cultural affairs board, and recreation board. Many of the selected politicians also serve as members of the council, so they are certainly the most influential politicians in their municipalities. The sample of administrators in each city consists of the chief administrator, the chief financial officer, the personnel manager, and the leading administrator of each selected political board.

The 1985, 1991, and 2005 studies were all conducted three years after the elections, while the 1999 study was performed only one year after the elections. All studies were performed after elections that led to Social Democratic rule nationally, and to Social Democratic regimes in many of the 20 studied cities. Although the power shifted in some of the studied cities over the period studied, we will demonstrate in the next section that these electoral winds only slightly affected the composition of top politicians in the studied cities. In relation to the proportional votes in the local elections and the distribution of seats in local councils after these elections, Social Democratic Party politicians are somewhat overrepresented in our samples of the most important political positions (see Tables 1 and 2).

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

The Swedish study was conducted by mail surveys in 1985 (December 1984–February 1985), 1991 (May–June), 1999 (April–May), and 2005 (November 2005–January 2006). The response rate was quite high. Overall, approximately 70 per cent of the selected local political and administrative leaders participated in our studies: 75 per cent in 1985, 67 per cent in 1991, 69 per cent in 1999, and 65 per cent in 2005. Some local leaders have participated in at least two surveys (17 per cent
participated in both the 1991 and 1999 studies, 39 per cent in both 1999 and 2005). In the 1999 control sample of leaders, drawn from an equally large sample of 20 other similar Swedish cities, the response rate was 72 per cent (the findings of the 1999 control sample, generally not reported in this article, match the main sample in almost every respect).

**Toward an Increasingly Professional and Representative Elite**

The institutional composition of the Swedish local government elite is very much characterised by homogeneity and stability. In the 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005 studies, approximately 70 or more per cent of the governing elite are politicians. The average leader has held his or her present position for approximately 8 to 10 years. Nevertheless, he or she was found to have been in public service for quite a long time, 16 to 18 years, in all the four surveys (Table 2). Thus, the Swedish local government elite on average stays in power for almost two decades, which is quite a long period from a country comparative perspective as well (Szücs et al., 2006: 259–261).

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

Above all, it is the administrators who have spent a long time in public service (83 to 86 per cent of the administrators have served in their local government for 11 years or longer). Generally, the proportion of left-wing politicians (from the Social Democrats and the Left Party) with over 11 years in local government is larger than that of the bourgeois politicians (from the Centre Party, Liberal Party, Moderate Party, and Christian Democrats). The largest proportion of politicians and
administrators serving in local government for 11 years or more is found at the very top of the local government elite. Among the chairs, vice chairs, and other full-time politicians of the central executive board (kommunstyrelsens ordförande/vice ordförande samt övriga kommunalråd) and the chief administrators (kommundirektör), almost all were found to have been in public service for 11 years or more in each of the studies.

Analysing the differences in socio-economic background of the Swedish local government elite indicates the same basic continuity (Table 3). The average age of the Swedish local leaders in 1985, 1991, and 1999 was 52 years. In 2005, the average age for the first time increased somewhat, to 54 years. The increased average age in 2005 was mostly a result of an increase in the proportion of leaders in the oldest group (60 years and older) by 10 per cent, from approximately 20 per cent in the previous studies to 28 per cent in 2005.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Thus, members of the generation that developed the modern Swedish society and welfare state, born in the 1940s and reaching ages of 60 or older at the times of the studies, seem to have retained their positions in a way that previous generations did not, according to our data. At the same time, the proportion of leaders under 40 years of age is almost half in 2005 compared to its previous level. Thus, recruiting a new generation of local top politicians is an urgent task for the coming several years.

Approximately 30 per cent of the leaders have a parent who performed or performs a similar political or administrative task to that of the respondent. This proportion is approximately twice as high as those in other countries, such as the
Netherlands (de Vries, 2006). However, while as many as one third of politicians belonging to the Swedish local government elite have parents who have held a similar position to that of the respondent, approximately one fifth of the administrators share this kind of family heritage. Thus, among the Swedish local top administrators, the proportion of the local government elite having an administrative family heritage is quite normal compared with those of other European countries.

The few ongoing substantial changes found in the composition of the Swedish local government elite concern gender and education in particular. The proportion of female leaders doubled from 18 per cent in 1985 to 36 per cent in 2005. It is first and foremost among the politicians – not administrators – that this change has occurred. In 1985, 22 per cent of the politicians and only 10 per cent of the administrators were female; in 2005, 41 per cent of the politicians and 22 per cent of the administrators were female. To be a female politician is approximately six per cent more common among left-wing politicians (mostly in the Social Democratic Party) than among bourgeois party politicians. Thus, the implementation of gender equalisation in Swedish politics has mainly been driven by the left-wing political parties.

The educational level has also increased substantially. The proportion of leaders with some sort of university education increased from 50 per cent in 1985 to 66 per cent in 2005. Still, the proportion of university educated is modest in international terms (Szücs et al., 261–263). Among the administrators, the proportion of university educated moved from 87 per cent in 1985 to 100 per cent in 2005. Among the politicians, the proportion of university educated increased by 20 per cent, from 35 per cent in 1985 to 55 per cent in 2005. The proportion of university-educated politicians is generally larger among leaders from the bourgeois parties (64
per cent in 2005), the Green Party, and other parties (61 per cent in 2005), than among leaders from left-wing parties (48 per cent in 2005).

Thus, the change in the composition of the Swedish local political–administrative elite is first and foremost characterised by an equalised level of female political representation. Furthermore, the significant rise in the level of highly educated leaders verifies our first hypothesis about the increased professionalisation of the local political–administrative elite.

A Slight Increase in the Seriousness and Complexity of Local Problems

The longitudinal pattern of the governing conditions facing the local government elite in 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005 indicates primarily that the local problems most leaders see as very serious typically concern issues that are harder to control because they are related to local government costs (and revenues), but are carried out by national authorities at the local level. The problem regarded as very serious by the largest proportion (50 per cent) of the local government elite in 2005 was unemployment. The perception of unemployment as a very serious problem was at almost the same levels in both the 1985 and 1999 studies (47 and 44 per cent, respectively). In 1991, a large proportion (63 per cent) viewed unemployment as ‘somewhat serious’. That only one fifth of the leaders perceived unemployment in their cities as ‘very serious’ in 1991 can be explained by the strong concern about the escalating costs of local government at that time.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
The second most seriously regarded problem according to the 2005 study concerned the cost of local government (40 per cent). Problems with local government costs were peaked in 1991, when 58 per cent of the local leaders regarded the matter as very serious. This can largely be explained by a large increase in the pay of local government employees. As a means to decentralise the responsibility for primary and secondary schools from the national to the local government level in the late 1980s, there was an increase in teacher salaries, which raised the pay levels of public sector employees as a whole in the early 1990s (Szűcs et al., 2006: 45). The third most problematic local issue in 2005 was public safety, a public sector function handled by the national police authorities at the local level. The proportion of leaders viewing problems with public safety as very serious increased from only 5 per cent in 1985 and 1991, to 10 per cent in 1999, and to 20 per cent in 2005. The most serious problems with public safety are, regardless of the year of study, found in the larger middle-sized cities (above 50,000 inhabitants).

In total, we asked the respondents about their perceptions of local problems in 14 different policy areas. When we add these different issues together, however, we find that the average elite perception of the seriousness of local problems has increased only slightly. In 1985, the mean of the problem perception scale was 0.76; in 1991 it increased to 0.78; in 1999 it increased to 0.87; while in 2005 the scale mean decreased to 0.81. The scale ranges from 0 (no problems) to 2 (very serious problems). This slight increase in the perceived seriousness of local problems between 1985 and 2005 is statistically significant at the 0.10 level. Thus, our second hypothesis – that local problems are increasingly complex – is verified statistically. The fact that it is in the policy areas in which local governments depend on
nationally and regionally governed authorities further verifies that solving public problems locally has become more complex.

**Increasingly Effective Action, but Only on Local Government Costs**

According to the third hypothesis, we should be able to observe a significant shift toward increasing policy effectiveness. However, there is no statistically significant change in the average effectiveness of action taken on the issues perceived as problematic. The effective action scale, ranging from 0 (no action) to 2 (effective action), only changed slightly over the study period, from 0.92 in 1985, to 0.87 in 1999, and 0.89 in 2005; the change between 1985 and 2005 is not statistically significant. Compared internationally, Sweden represents the only country where the perceived effectiveness of action taken did not on average significantly increase throughout the 1990s (Szücs et al., 2006: 264–265).

Although we did not find a significant increase in the average perceived effectiveness of actions taken, we did find policy areas in which actions taken have been perceived as more effective. According to the fourth hypothesis, the assumption is that the problems most effectively solved by the governing elite have shifted toward ‘populist/selective’ problems. Supporting this hypothesis, we find that the perceived effectiveness of action taken has only increased with reference to dealing with local government costs (from 14 per cent in 1985 to approximately one fifth in 1999 and 2005); this increase is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.
A Slight Decline in the Autonomy and Power of Local Government

In line with what is claimed by advocates of NPM theory, we have so far been able to verify a growing professional status and increasing perceived effectiveness of action – at least in dealing with local government costs. NPM theorists also claim that it is necessary to decentralise power to gain such effectiveness. Our empirical findings, however, indicate little correspondence with the fifth hypothesis, that there has been a shift from ‘centralised’ to ‘decentralised’ power and autonomy, regarding the local problems we asked about. Rather, among the Swedish local political–administrative elite, what we find is the opposite.

There was a statistically significant decline between 1985 and 2005 in the view that local government has enough power and autonomy to act effectively. The local power/autonomy scale score in the 1985 survey was 0.69, while the corresponding scores were 0.63 in 1999 and 0.60 in 2005. This slight decrease in perceived local government power and autonomy to act effectively is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The scale ranges from 0 (local government lacks power) to 1 (has power). Nevertheless, despite this decrease, compared internationally, the local political–administrative elite’s perception of local government power and autonomy is still quite strong (Száucs et al., 2006: 266–267).

The differences between administrators and politicians from different parties, and between cities of different sizes, remained small in the period studied. Above all, it is in the areas of employment, indigent support, health, public safety, and immigration that the perceived power and autonomy of local government has decreased over the studied period. The perception of declining local government autonomy and power is as high as 20 per cent in each of these areas between 1985 and 2005. Thus, it is mainly in public sector functions performed at the local level by
national or regional authorities that the power and autonomy of local government has declined the most, i.e., immigration, health, employment, and public safety.

**FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**

The findings indicate no significant change in the levels of personal influence over what was accomplished in the local community (contrary to the assumption of the sixth hypothesis). The scale mean for average personal influence was 0.70 in the 1985 survey, increased to 0.72 in 1991, and finally decreased in the 1999 and 2005 surveys to 0.68 and 0.69, respectively. The scale ranges from 0 (no influence), 1 (some influence) to 2 (great influence). Generally, a politician felt that he or she had significantly more personal influence than did the average administrator. Over the 1985–2005 period, left-wing politicians (mainly Social Democrats) felt they had much stronger personal influence than did politicians affiliated with bourgeois parties. Naturally, this is largely explained by the fact that their parties held power locally in the period studied (except from 1991 to 1994, when no survey was performed).

**Stable Horizontal Networks and Changing Vertical Networks**

According to the seventh hypothesis, the networks of local government elites have shifted from being ‘vertical’ to ‘horizontal’ (see, for example, Haus & Heinelt, 2005: 19), by acquiring less support from national and regional levels of government, and significantly more informal support from others in the local government elite and the local civic community. Regarding to whom a leader usually turns in situations in which support from others is necessary, as shown in Figure 3, approximately 70 to
80 per cent of Swedish local leaders turn to local party leaders and local party organisations, local elected officials, other local political leaders, and top local administrative officials. The core triangle of the Swedish local power elite includes its administrative and political executive as well as its local party organisations.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The most dramatic increase in the Swedish local government elite’s support network concerns various spheres of local civil society. Civic action groups were contacted by 6 per cent of the elite in 1985 and 11 per cent in 2005. Contacts with ethnic/immigrant spokespeople increased from 12 per cent in 1985 to 18 per cent in 2005. Contacts with neighbourhood organisations for support moved from 18 per cent in 1985 to 28 per cent in 2005. Contacts with business leaders rose from 22 per cent in 1985 to 32 in 2005. Contacts with the general public also grew, from 32 per cent in 1985 to 36 per cent in 2005. Finally, contacts with local media increased from 44 per cent in 1985 to 54 per cent in 2005.

To a great extent, these contacts for support depend on reciprocal relationships. The extents to which people/organisations are contacted by the respondents for support depend on the fact that these people/organisations also turn to the respondents for support. For example, the growing number of times respondents contacted ethnic/immigrant spokespeople and neighbourhood organisations for support was paralleled by the increasing number of times these people/organisations contacted the respondents, seeking support from the local political–administrative elite.
The index containing all network contacts we asked about – from the first survey in 1985 to the last in 2005 – contains 19 different support contacts (Figure 3). According to this index, we find a slight but statistically significant (0.10 level) increase from 7.2 contacts for support in 1985 to 7.4 in 2005. In practice, this means that the average local leader in both 1985 and 2005 had seven contacts whom he or she could usually turn to in a situation in which support from others was necessary. On average, five of these seven contacts were locally based. The average score in 1985 was 4.6, and in 2005 was 4.9 (a statistically significant increase at the 0.10 level).

The contacts for support from higher administrative and political levels, however, display a statistically significant decrease (at the 0.01 level) from 1.48 in 1985 to 1.27 in 2005. Nevertheless, when we look at an index that in addition to the other national specific questionnaire items, starting in 1999 also includes new questionnaire items about contacts for support from regional/county government administrators and politicians, the average number of non-local contacts for support actually increased (at the 0.01 significance level) from 1.42 in 1999 to 1.92 in 2005. The increase in hierarchical contacts when regional/county government politicians and administrators are included in the measure is not restricted to the cities in the two regions where experiments with territorial amalgamation reform have been implemented (Västra Götalandsregionen in western Sweden and Skåneregionen in southern Sweden). On the contrary, turning to regional politicians and administrators for support increased all over Sweden after the 1999 study.

Thus, on top of the political capital of a rock-stable internal local government network, it is the horizontal networks linked to civil society that grew the most obviously between 1985 and 2005. However, we cannot claim that the vertical
networks have declined. Rather, what we find is a shift of vertical networks, going from an old network of contacts with national authorities at the county level, to a new vertical network of contacts with the regional/county government level.

**Strong and Stable Democratic Values**

The eighth hypothesis, that commitment to democratic values declined in the period studied, is not verified. On the contrary, we find two statistically significant *increases* in support for democratic values (Figure 4). First, the political equality value increased between 1991 and 2005, going from a scale mean of 49 in 1991 to a scale mean of 61 in 2005. The value scale ranges from a minimum of −100 for strongly disagree to a maximum 100 for strongly agree (see description and reliability tests of the values scales in the Appendix).

Throughout the period of study, politicians from left-wing parties remained the most strongly committed to the value of political equality. Generally, the least committed to these values are administrators and politicians belonging to bourgeois parties. Furthermore, there is a stronger commitment to politically egalitarian values in the larger cities. Thus, the stronghold of participatory and egalitarian values is to be found among left-wing politicians in the larger Swedish cities.

**FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE**

The second statistically significant change is the increasing support for capitalist values. However, the support for economic equality values did not change at all between 1985 and 2005. This indicates that the stability of egalitarian values (this
time in terms of economic redistribution in society) has been combined with a shift
toward a more pro-capitalist stance among the Swedish local government elite. There
are no significant community differences depending on population size; the
commitment to capitalism and the rejection of economic equality values instead
depend on party ideology. The standard deviation from the scale mean for the value
of economic equality is quite high in all four studies, which indicates that issues of
capitalism, especially regarding economic equality, are still highly contested. In
general, the more left leaning the party in Swedish politics, the more positive the
deviation toward a redistributive economic equality value. This partisan ideological
tension, often called the left–right continuum (vänster-högerskalan), remains one of
the main characteristics of Swedish politics. It is often found to be the main line of
cleavage when studying beliefs among Swedish political elites (Holmberg, 1974;

The Domination of Special Party Interests in Local Politics

According to the ninth hypothesis of our model, we assume that when we ask why
parties are important, the Swedish local government elite will think that ‘public
interests’, i.e., involving people in politics, are more important than ‘special
interests’, such as forming majorities in governing bodies. When the Swedish local
government elite is asked about their perceptions of how people can best influence
decisions, it is the formal avenues of the political system – through parties and
elections – that are viewed as the most powerful. However, when we come to the
question as to why political parties are important, quite surprisingly, the least-
mentioned argument for the importance of parties concerns ‘involving people in
politics’. This pattern was the same regardless of whether the leader belonged to the
administrative or the political elite. Thus, regardless of whether the leader is an administrator or politician, when it comes to the importance of parties, the most important reasons for having parties at all typically concern practical issues such as forming majorities; the least important reason is to involve people in politics.

**Strong and Stable Local–Global Relations**

In the 1991 survey, the Swedish local leaders were asked for the first time about the local–global relationships of their municipalities. In support of the tenth hypothesis of this study, we find that the average level of foreign impact on their communities, perceived by local leaders, increased substantially between 1991 and 2005. Clearly, it is economic foreign impact (i.e., foreign investment, exports, and imports) that has increased the most (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE**

Taken together, the foreign economic impact score, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 2 (a great deal), increased from 1.13 in 1991, to 1.24 in 1999 and 2005. The score includes the questionnaire items regarding exports, imports, and foreign investments in the community. This increase in perceived foreign economic impact is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Over the same period of study, the increase (from 0.74 in 1991, to 0.85 in 2005) in the scale measuring non-economic forms of foreign impact (e.g., foreign tourists, workers, and media) is also statistically significant (at the 0.01 level). These perceptions of local–global relations in Sweden were found to be among the strongest, based on international comparison (Szücs et al., 286–290).
Conclusion

In relation to the great changes that have occurred in the public sector at the local level in terms of deregulation, reorganisation, and privatisation, we found a surprisingly high degree of homogeneity and stability of the institutional elite over time. Although the composition of the local government elite has become increasingly gender equalised and professional in terms of educational level, according to elite perceptions, local problems have become slightly more complex, while the personal influence and effectiveness of the elite in solving these problems has remained unchanged, perhaps because the perceived power and autonomy of local government to act effectively has declined. The only area where the perception is that the effectiveness of action taken is increasing is that of handling the cost of local government.

Thus, only parts of the new theories of local political–administrative change can be verified empirically in Sweden between 1985 and 2005. First, the New Public Management notion of increasing professionalism (i.e., increasing level of education) was verified, but not its claim that the increased decentralisation of power is leading to more effective action – at least, not in the eyes of the surveyed leaders. Second, although we may verify the claim of New Political Culture theory about an increased focus on dealing with issues linked to the cost of local government, we find no shift toward growing pragmatism or personal influence, nor are political parties increasingly viewed as a way to promote public interests. Third, the small but statistically verified changes in favour of the theories of governance and local–global relations are too modest to define in terms of any great shift in local governing.
Instead, we find that the Swedish local government elite has succeeded in strengthening their political capital (i.e., global relations, networks, and values). Thus, it seems that the old saying that ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same’ is relevant to the study of the local government elite in an advanced Western democracy like Sweden. The more the conditions of local government have changed, the more members of the local government local elite use their main skills of local governing and ‘muddling through’, using their extensive informal networks, strong democratic beliefs, and the strong global relations of which their cities are part. Thus, globalisation has forced them to support, rather than resist, foreign relations that impact their communities. Cutting the costs of the welfare services provided by local government has driven these elites to strengthen their informal horizontal and vertical networks. Concurrently, the growing right-wing political movements of the 1990s has probably motivated them to be increasingly committed to democratic values.
References


Table 1. Local election results in 1982, 1988, 1998, and 2002 (per cent)

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<td>The Left Party*</td>
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<td>The Social Democrats</td>
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<td>37.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Centre Party</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Liberals</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moderate Party</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Christian Democrats</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Green Party**</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parties</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* The Left Party was called the Communist Party in the 1982 and 1988 elections.

** Also called the Ecological Party.
Table 2. Institutional background, 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005 (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>1985 (N)</th>
<th>1991 (N)</th>
<th>1999 (N)</th>
<th>1999* (N)</th>
<th>2005 (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of elite</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>71 (351)</td>
<td>72 (318)</td>
<td>74 (326)</td>
<td>74 (310)</td>
<td>75 (312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>29 (146)</td>
<td>28 (122)</td>
<td>26 (112)</td>
<td>26 (107)</td>
<td>25 (102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 (497)</td>
<td>100 (440)</td>
<td>100 (438)</td>
<td>100 (417)</td>
<td>100 (414)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party affiliation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Left Party</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>7 (22)</td>
<td>14 (44)</td>
<td>8 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Democrats</td>
<td>49 (171)</td>
<td>49 (155)</td>
<td>40 (130)</td>
<td>44 (136)</td>
<td>44 (138)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Centre Party</td>
<td>15 (53)</td>
<td>13 (42)</td>
<td>9 (29)</td>
<td>9 (27)</td>
<td>9 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Liberal Party</td>
<td>5 (18)</td>
<td>11 (36)</td>
<td>6 (19)</td>
<td>7 (22)</td>
<td>12 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moderate Party</td>
<td>29 (100)</td>
<td>18 (57)</td>
<td>22 (72)</td>
<td>15 (46)</td>
<td>13 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democrats</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>7 (23)</td>
<td>4 (14)</td>
<td>6 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Green Party</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (9)</td>
<td>3 (10)</td>
<td>5 (15)</td>
<td>3 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parties</td>
<td>0 (1)</td>
<td>2 (7)</td>
<td>6 (21)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>4 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 (351)</td>
<td>100 (318)</td>
<td>100 (326)</td>
<td>100 (310)</td>
<td>100 (414)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In present position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤2 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10 (44)</td>
<td>20 (86)</td>
<td>21 (84)</td>
<td>7 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3−10 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>60 (256)</td>
<td>51 (220)</td>
<td>46 (184)</td>
<td>53 (214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥11 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30 (128)</td>
<td>29 (125)</td>
<td>33 (132)</td>
<td>40 (162)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 (428)</td>
<td>100 (431)</td>
<td>100 (400)</td>
<td>100 (400)</td>
<td>100 (403)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average (mean)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In public service</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤2 years</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td>5 (22)</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3−10 years</td>
<td>20 (96)</td>
<td>20 (84)</td>
<td>29 (121)</td>
<td>27 (107)</td>
<td>23 (92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥11 years</td>
<td>78 (369)</td>
<td>79 (336)</td>
<td>66 (275)</td>
<td>67 (262)</td>
<td>76 (303)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 (475)</td>
<td>100 (426)</td>
<td>100 (418)</td>
<td>100 (391)</td>
<td>100 (398)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (mean)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
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</table>

* Findings for the control sample in 20 other cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>1985 (N)</th>
<th>1991 (N)</th>
<th>1999 (N)</th>
<th>1999* (N)</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age Cohorts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤39</td>
<td>11 (56)</td>
<td>8 (38)</td>
<td>11 (47)</td>
<td>12 (51)</td>
<td>6 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>27 (130)</td>
<td>36 (155)</td>
<td>22 (97)</td>
<td>24 (100)</td>
<td>23 (92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>40 (197)</td>
<td>35 (152)</td>
<td>49 (210)</td>
<td>49 (199)</td>
<td>43 (173)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥60</td>
<td>22 (107)</td>
<td>21 (89)</td>
<td>18 (76)</td>
<td>15 (61)</td>
<td>28 (113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82 (406)</td>
<td>76 (330)</td>
<td>66 (289)</td>
<td>68 (279)</td>
<td>64 (261)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18 (91)</td>
<td>24 (105)</td>
<td>34 (146)</td>
<td>32 (134)</td>
<td>36 (148)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>23 (116)</td>
<td>16 (67)</td>
<td>7 (28)</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>6 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>27 (131)</td>
<td>25 (106)</td>
<td>28 (123)</td>
<td>27 (112)</td>
<td>28 (116)</td>
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<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>50 (250)</td>
<td>59 (253)</td>
<td>65 (280)</td>
<td>67 (277)</td>
<td>66 (270)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(by father’s occupation)**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>28 (126)</td>
<td>32 (129)</td>
<td>28 (110)</td>
<td>34 (132)</td>
<td>34 (129)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>55 (254)</td>
<td>45 (180)</td>
<td>43 (170)</td>
<td>42 (159)</td>
<td>46 (176)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper income class</td>
<td>17 (76)</td>
<td>23 (90)</td>
<td>29 (116)</td>
<td>24 (93)</td>
<td>20 (77)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active parent</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held corresponding position</td>
<td>31 (152)</td>
<td>32 (140)</td>
<td>29 (128)</td>
<td>30 (127)</td>
<td>30 (123)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious activity</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular ***</td>
<td>17 (80)</td>
<td>14 (56)</td>
<td>14 (58)</td>
<td>12 (47)</td>
<td>14 (55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Findings for the control sample in 20 other cities.
** There are some difficulties with coding the respondent’s socio-economic background from an open-ended question concerning the father’s occupational status (mother’s status is often ‘housewife’).
*** At least once a month.
Figure 1. Very serious local problems, 1985, 1991, and 1999 (per cent)
Figure 2. Autonomy and power to act effectively, 1985, 1999, and 2005 (per cent)*

* This question was not included in the 1991 survey.
Figure 3. People/organizations to turn to for support, 1985, 1991, and 1999 (per cent)
Figure 4. Local elite values, 1985, 1991, 1999, and 2005 (means)*

Comment: The scales extend from −100 (strongly disagree) to 100 (strongly agree).

* The validity and reliability tests for each value scale are displayed in the Appendix.
Figure 5. Foreign impact on the community, 1991, 1999, and 2005 (per cent answering ‘a great deal’)

* Nation-specific item for the Swedish study.
Appendix: The Transformed Variables

The following mathematical syntax abbreviations were used in SPSS 11.0 in order to construct the scales referred to in this article:

*The problem perception scale:*
recode preduc to prmigr (99=0.1).
count prfreq = preduc to prmigr (0,1,2).
compute primp = (trunc(preduc) + trunc(prjobles) + trunc(prpoor) +
trunc(prhealth) + trunc(prhouse) + trunc(prpublic) + trunc(prsafety) +
trunc(prwelf) + trunc(prpollut) + trunc(prmin) + trunc(precede) +
trunc(prcost) + trunc(prmigr))/prfreq.
VARIABLE LABELS primp "MEAN IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEMS".

*The effective action scale:*
recode efeduc to efmigr (99=0.1).
count effreq = efeduc to efmigr (0,1,2).
compute efimp = (trunc(efeduc) + trunc(efjobles) + trunc(efpoor) +
trunc(efhealth) + trunc(efhouse) + trunc(efpublic) + trunc(efcultu) + trunc(efsafty) +
trunc(efwelf) + trunc(efpollut) + trunc(efrace) + trunc(efcede) +
trunc(efcost) + trunc(efmigr))/effreq.
VARIABLE LABELS efimp "MEAN OF EFFECTIVE ACTION".

*The local power/autonomy scale:*
recode auteduc to autmigr (99=0.1).
count autfreq = auteduc to autmigr (1,0).
compute auttot = (trunc(auteduc) + trunc(autjob) + trunc(autpoor) +
trunc(autheal) + trunc(authouse) + trunc(autpublic) + trunc(autcult) + trunc(autsafe) +
trunc(autpoll) + trunc(autwelf) + trunc(autcede) + trunc(autmigr))/autfreq.
VARIABLE LABELS auttot "MEAN AUTNOMY".

*The personal influence scale:*
recode infecde to infpoor (99=0.1).
count inffreq1 = infecde infhouse infpollu infheal infcultu infeduc infreven
infsafe infwelf inflabor infmimmig infpoor (0,1,2).
compute infimp1 = (trunc(infecde) + trunc(infhouse) + trunc(infpollu) +
trunc(infpubli) + trunc(infeale) + trunc(infcultu) + trunc(infeduc) + trunc(infsafe) +
trunc(infwelf) + trunc(infmimmig) + trunc(inflabor) + trunc(infpoor) +
trunc(infreven))/inffreq1.
VARIABLE LABELS infimp1 "INFLUENCE - MEAN".
The all network support contacts index:
COUNT SUPPORT2 = suplopar suphipar suploele suplopol suppargr supgover supcong suptadm supadmcg supfdadm supbus suppblor suptrun supethni suprelig supcivgr suplomed supneigh suppubli (1).
VARIABLE LABELS support2 "SUPPORT - 1985-2005 NUMBER OF SUPPORT CONTACTS MENTIONED".

The local network support contacts index:
COUNT SUPLOC2 = suplopar suploele suplomed suplopol suptadm supcivgr suppubli supneigh suprelig suptrun supbus (1).
VARIABLE LABELS suploc2 "SUPPORT - 1985-2005 LOCAL CONTACTS AVERAGE SCORE".

The first vertical network support contacts index:
COUNT SUPNLOC2 = suphipar supgover supcong supadmcg supfdadm (1).
VARIABLE LABELS supnloc2 "SUPPORT – 1985-2005 NON-LOCAL CONTACTS AVERAGE SCORE".

The second vertical network support contacts index (1999-2005):
COUNT SUPNLOC1 = suphipar supgover supcong supadmcg supfdadm supreadm suprepol (1).
VARIABLE LABELS supnloc1 "SUPPORT – 1999-2005 NON-LOCAL CONTACTS AVERAGE SCORE".

The economic foreign impact scale:
recode imfinv to imfrefug (99=0.1).
count impfefr1 = imfinv imexport imimport (0,1,2).
compute impacfe1 = (trunc(imfinv) + trunc(imexport) + trunc(imimport))/impfefr1.
VARIABLE LABELS impacfe1 "IMPACT COMMUNITY - TOTAL ECONOMIC".

The non-economic foreign (people) impact scale:
recode imfinv to imfwork (99=0.1).
count impfppfr = imfmed imftour imfwork (0,1,2).
compute impacfpp = (trunc(imfmed) + trunc(imftour) + trunc(imfwork))/impfppfr.
VARIABLE LABELS impacfpp "IMPACT COMMUNITY - TOTAL PEOPLE".
Validity and Reliability Tests of the Value Scales

The value scales used here concern political equality, participation, political pluralism (acceptance of opposition and political conflict), capitalism, and economic equality. The value scales are Likert scales, consisting of a set of ‘forced-choice statements’ used to determine the respondent’s degree of commitment to, or repudiation of, a certain value. The value scales presented in this study have a long history in cross-national and cross-system tests and comparisons of local leaders’ values. They were developed in the mid 1960s by the International Studies of Values in Politics (ISVIP) research programme for the first truly cross-national/system study of local elites, described in Values and the Active Community (Jacob et al., 1971).

Value scales are intended to better handle scale-level measurement and the methodological problems that single variable items are believed to cause in terms of general interpretation. As early as the first study of the 1960s, it was believed that a set of items measuring leaders’ orientations would allow more secure interpretation than would a single item when comparing local elites in countries with widely differing political systems, for example, India, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the U.S.

The scales are based on a set of items, usually four to five, which are assumed to say something about a special value commitment, for example, the acceptance of political equality, among a group of leaders (all individual items of the value scales are displayed in question no. 8 of the questionnaire, and the constructions of all value scales are shown in the DLG code book; see, for example, Szücs et al., 2006). Thus, the respondent is given a set of statements regarding, for example, political equality, with which the respondent can strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The responses to these statements are put together on a scale with interval scale measurement properties. The homogeneity and independence of the value scale can be proved or disproved by factor and scaling analysis. If an individual item on a special scale forms a latent variable or a dimension of its own, then it can be claimed to represent a value. The validity of each value scale in terms of homogenous response has been tested using factor analysis (orthogonal rotation, varimax) and reliability has been tested using Cronbach’s alpha.