International IDEA

PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY: THE CASE OF SWEDEN

Protecting Elections Series

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines Sweden's comprehensive approach to enhancing election protection over the past eight years. In response to the rise of foreign interference and the proliferation of disinformation targeting the credibility of elections, Sweden has developed a collaborative framework to assess and prevent electoral risks, build resilience against stress and shocks, and establish efficient crisis response and recovery mechanisms to ensure the integrity of its electoral processes.

The case study details the establishment of election protection networks at national, regional and local levels. It further highlights how agencies and stakeholders have proactively assessed and mitigated risks, including disinformation, cyberattacks and physical threats. The study emphasizes the work undertaken to build resilience through training, developing learning resources, public awareness campaigns and enhanced cybersecurity. Finally, it analyses crisis response and recovery mechanisms, focusing on information sharing and coordinated action among relevant authorities.

Central to Sweden's strategy is a collaborative, whole-of-society approach. Its pillars include classifying elections as critical infrastructure, engaging the public through transparent communication, financing independent research and enhancing broad societal resilience to disinformation.

Despite significant progress, Sweden continues to face challenges in ensuring uniform capacity and preparedness across all levels of government. These difficulties are compounded by the country's decentralized structure and the dynamic nature of foreign and domestic threats. However, Sweden's

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experience offers valuable lessons in fostering transparency and public trust while strengthening security measures. By embracing collaboration, information literacy and continuous adaptation, Sweden exemplifies how nations can safeguard democratic elections in the face of evolving threats.

INTRODUCTION

> All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people. Swedish democracy is founded on the free formation of opinion and on universal and equal suffrage. It is realized through a representative and parliamentary form of government and through local self-government. Public power is exercised under the law. (Sweden 1974: Chapter 1, section 1)

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The integrity of electoral processes is fundamental to the functioning, vibrancy and legitimacy of any democracy. In recent years, elections worldwide have become subject to increasingly complex threats, with actors ranging from foreign states to domestic individuals seeking to manipulate outcomes, sow discord and undermine public trust in the process.

Sweden often stands out as a bastion of democratic stability and electoral integrity, consistently garnering high voter turnout, high public trust in its electoral system and international acclaim for transparent and well-managed electoral processes (Cederholm Lager, Oscarsson and Solevid 2023; International IDEA n.d.; Lundmark, Oscarsson and Weissenbilder 2020). However, rising concerns about election interference following the 2016 United States presidential election have spurred Swedish Government authorities to implement proactive measures to strengthen election protection (Solevid and Oscarsson 2023; LaForge 2020).

This case study examines Sweden's efforts to strengthen election protection over the last eight years, focusing on Sweden's collaborative approach to safeguarding electoral processes and highlighting the role of election protection networks. It also details how the country's agencies and stakeholders have proactively assessed and prevented electoral risks, enhanced resilience to stress and shocks and established efficient mechanisms for crisis response and recovery.

Background

The Instrument of Government—one of four fundamental laws forming the Constitution—establishes the overarching principles of Sweden's democracy and public elections, including the right to vote and to stand for election, and the principles of free, fair and regular elections (Sweden 1974: Chapters 1, 3 and 6). The electoral law and regulations (Sweden 2005a, 2005b), and some additional laws, provide detailed provisions regarding the conduct of elections (Hermansson 2015; Valmyndigheten 2024d).

The electoral system in Sweden is based on proportional representation. Under the Elections Act, general elections are held for the Riksdag (parliament), regional councils and municipal councils every four years on the second Sunday of September while elections to the European Parliament are held every five years (Sweden 2005a).

For Riksdag elections, the country is divided into 29 constituencies. Of the 349 seats in the Riksdag, 310 are fixed constituency seats allocated proportionally within each constituency, while the remaining 39 are adjustment seats distributed to achieve national proportionality. Voters cast their ballots for party lists and can indicate a preference for individual candidates within those lists, enhancing voter influence over which candidates are elected (Hermansson 2015).

The Swedish legal framework strongly emphasizes protecting political rights and promoting inclusive participation (Sweden 1974: Chapters 1 and 2). While there are no legislated quotas for gender or minority representation, many political parties have voluntarily adopted measures to enhance diversity among candidates and elected officials. This commitment has contributed to a high degree of gender balance in political bodies—for instance, in 2022 women were elected to 45.8 per cent of Riksdag seats (Freidenvall 2018; Riksdagen 2024).

Sweden's overall governance is structured to ensure the separation of powers and to insulate public administration from political interference. Central government ministries are responsible for formulating overall policy directions and goals; implementation is in the hands of separate agencies enjoying considerable operational autonomy. Swedish law prohibits direct ministerial control over specific decisions of public agencies (Regeringen 2015, 2024).

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Responsibility for administering elections is shared between the central Swedish Election Authority (Valmyndigheten), the regional County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelsen), and the local Municipal Election Committees (Valnämnd). Swedish elections are thereby managed by a decentralized system of 311 election authorities (one national, 21 regional and 290 local). Each of these bodies has specific roles. For example, the regional level is responsible for candidate registration and vote counting, while the local level recruits polling staff and manages polling stations. Additionally, out-of-country voting is coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by individual embassies and consulates abroad. This multi-layered administrative structure seeks to ensure local accountability and responsiveness while maintaining a shared national framework and apex electoral management body (EMB) (Hermansson 2015; OSCE 2018).

Working in close partnership with the lower tiers, the Swedish Election Authority (hereafter the Election Authority) oversees and coordinates elections nationwide. Its duties include, but are not limited to: maintaining the national electoral register, voter information, and providing guidance and training to regional and local election authorities to ensure adherence to electoral laws. In international comparisons, the Election Authority has received top marks

for its effectiveness in fulfilling its duties. Expert evaluations have also ranked Sweden among the leading countries globally in overall electoral integrity (Hagevi 2022; Lundmark, Oscarsson and Weissenbilder 2020).

1. PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN SWEDEN

Historically, electoral integrity has been a minor concern. Democratic elections have been conducted without significant irregularities, disruptions or unexpected issues. Election results have been widely and immediately accepted with minimal suspicion or controversy (Solevid and Oscarsson 2023; Theorin et al. 2023).

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However, Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election served as a wake-up call for Sweden. In 2017, a US Intelligence Community Assessment detailed this interference and concluded that Russia would apply lessons learned to similar efforts in the future, including against the election processes of US allies. Russia's campaigns of electoral influence were characterized by a hybrid approach combining covert intelligence operations with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media and third-party intermediaries. Among the tools and tactics were disinformation and social media manipulation (DNI 2017). Recognizing that Sweden was already a target of Kremlin-sponsored disinformation in an increasingly tense geo-political situation, Swedish authorities acknowledged that upcoming elections might be at risk of foreign interference (Bay et al. 2022b; LaForge 2020).

The sections below provide an overview of how Sweden has built its capacity to prevent risks, counter threats and recover from crises in the electoral process.

2. THE SWEDISH CRISIS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Sweden's crisis management system is anchored in legal statutes and three fundamental principles: (a) the responsibility principle; (b) the principle of proximity; and (c) the principle of similarity.

The first maintains that entities responsible under normal conditions retain their responsibilities during crises, including those of proactive action and collaboration. The second principle, proximity, dictates that crises should be managed at the level where they occur by those most directly affected. Finally, the principle of similarity ensures organizations maintain their usual structures and operations as much as possible during a crisis (MSB 2018, 2024c).

Sweden's approach maintains that each actor—be it a government agency, municipality, or private entity—is responsible for managing crises within their operational domain. By dispersing crisis responsibilities in this way

across numerous actors at different levels of government and society, rather than vesting them in a single body, the crisis management system places a premium on multi-actor coordination. Effective collaboration and communication between these diverse actors is required to address vulnerabilities for crisis prevention, resilience and recovery.

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Given this structure, initiatives to protect elections in Sweden have primarily been driven by agency-level mandates and interactions—and existing policies, rather than fresh directives or other intervention by central government (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021). Further, Swedish election authorities are not subject to specific requirements for electoral risk management, resilience-building, or crisis management. Consequently, the central EMB's role in ensuring compliance with electoral laws and rules does not extend to directing and enforcing regional and local election authorities' risk management, resilience-building, and crisis management efforts. Instead, the Election Authority provides the lower tiers with support, guidance and training on these matters (Refors Legge 2023; Valmyndigheten 2023a).

At the same time, Swedish law does provide a legal framework for risk management, resilience-building and crisis management for all municipalities and government agencies—electoral ones included. This framework consists of regulations outlining the duties of agencies and municipalities and the coordinating role of the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) (MSB 2024c).

Government Ordinance (SFS 2008:1002) directs the MSB to support relevant societal actors to prevent, manage and recover from accidents, crises and war. This includes risk and vulnerability assessments, identifying and supporting preventive actions, and supporting collaboration between governmental bodies, municipalities, organizations, and other emergency management and civil defence stakeholders (Sweden 2008).

Government Ordinance (SFS 2022:524) outlines the duties of state agencies to enhance societal resilience during peacetime, crisis and periods of heightened alert. Agencies are mandated to conduct risk and vulnerability assessments and act on them to ensure the continuity of critical functions in emergencies. In a crisis, agencies must take the necessary actions to manage the situation and its consequences—as well as to cooperate and support other agencies to facilitate a coordinated response across different sectors (Sweden 2022).

Swedish Law (SFS 2006:544) does the same for local authorities: municipalities are mandated to enhance their preparedness for extraordinary events in peacetime and periods of heightened alert. Municipalities must conduct risk and vulnerability analyses to identify potential extraordinary events and assess their impact on municipal operations. Municipalities are

also instructed to reduce vulnerabilities in their operations and, like state agencies, 'develop a robust capacity' to manage crises (Sweden 2006).

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3. COOPERATION NETWORKS

As we have seen, because of the decentralized form of Swedish governance and of election management, cooperation and coordination among responsible actors are an essential part of the Swedish crisis management system (MSB 2018). In the electoral sphere as in others, cooperation networks have been established to ensure multi-actor coordination. The initial national election cooperation network, a high-level forum, was set up at the request of the Election Authority in 2017 and was co-chaired by the Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen) and MSB. The latter had identified strengthening inter-agency collaboration as the country's most pressing capacity-building need in safeguarding electoral integrity. The forum brought together the national and regional election authorities with other responsible central agencies. These included the Police Authority and the Tax Agency (being responsible for the national population registry, which is central to the creation of the voter registry). From January 2018, the forum met regularly before and during the elections to coordinate preventive efforts and build joint capacity to respond to crises (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020).

In early 2021 the Election Authority, together with other participating actors, evaluated the temporary election cooperation network (the high-level forum). The evaluation identified the need to establish a permanent election cooperation network in line with the European Union's recommendation that member states establish national election cooperation networks (European Commission 2018). This was achieved in late 2021, involving the Election Authority, County Administrative Boards, the MSB, the Psychological Defence Agency (MPF), the Police Authority, and the Security Service (Valmyndigheten 2023b; 2024a).

The national cooperation network can appoint ad hoc expert-level working groups for specific thematic areas, such as communication coordination, cyber coordination, and scenario and exercise planning. The network conducts regular assessments, planning and tabletop exercises before elections to identify risks, undertake preventive activities, and plan responses for various attacks on the election system. During election periods, the network establishes an operational forum to strengthen government capacity to identify, counter and recover from threats to the election process (Valmyndigheten 2024a).

At the regional level, the County Administrative Boards maintain a regional election cooperation network that integrates the efforts of all 21 independent boards. This network seeks to promote resilient and effective election practices, build joint capacity, and ensure a unified approach to preventing election-related risks (Länsstyrelserna 2022).

During inter-election periods, the regional election cooperation network emphasizes continuity in election expertise, as gaps between elections can sometimes lead to a loss of specialized knowledge within individual boards. By providing a structured format for experience sharing, knowledge dissemination and ongoing environmental monitoring, the forum enables each board to stay informed of changes in regulatory frameworks, emerging threats and best practices. The regional network empowers each County Administrative Board to adopt preventive measures and build resilience within their election processes. This cooperative approach also facilitates mutual support during times of increased demand, such as election years, when the need for coordinated and consistent actions becomes even more critical. The regional election cooperation network is structured with a steering group, a working group and a forum for all County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelserna 2022).

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On the local level a membership organization, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), has established an election cooperation forum and held regular workshops ahead of each election. The workshops share recent developments and lessons learned to strengthen subnational authorities' individual and collective capacity. This broad forum is complemented by a permanent cooperation network for the 20 largest municipalities in Sweden. The participating municipalities organize this network on a rotational basis. In 2024, SKR established an election cooperation network for small and medium-sized municipalities to provide a regular forum for their specific needs. Fifteen municipalities now meet two to three times a year to identify joint challenges and solutions. To facilitate cross-level cooperation, SKR and the Election Authority organize recurring national conferences which focus on lessons learned and planning for upcoming elections (Kullander and Lidhamn 2024).

4. PREVENTION

To enhance regional and local election authorities' capacity to conduct thorough risk and vulnerability assessments in light of evolving challenges, the MSB collaborated with the Elections Authority and the county of Västra Götaland (a steering committee member of the regional election cooperation network). Together, they developed a risk and vulnerability assessment guide distributed to all election authorities before the 2018 elections. Additionally, some municipalities received hands-on training in implementing the guide's recommendations (LaForge 2020). To further bolster municipal capabilities, the MSB partnered with subnational authorities to disseminate information about election protection and the new assessment guide to all localities (Birnbaum 2018; Kullander and Lidhamn 2024).

Ahead of the 2022 elections, the risk and vulnerability assessment guide was complemented by another project by these same partners—a new chapter on election security was developed for the updated handbook (MSB 2024b)

supporting municipalities in developing civil preparedness. The election security chapter describes tasks, roles and responsibilities, planning, risks and vulnerabilities, and training and exercises to strengthen election security efforts at the local level.

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This move came partly as a consequence of the MSB having listed elections as national critical infrastructure in 2021, underscoring the role of elections in maintaining and upholding the fundamentals of Swedish society (MSB 2023, 2024c). The agency argues that to maintain and secure critical infrastructure during crises and war, public and private actors must be able to identify—and at prior stages of analysis and planning—which processes are essential to society (MSB 2023). Another (and primary) reason for the chapter's inclusion was that in the agency's assessment, elections are infrequent enough as to make structured, external planning support to municipalities appropriate. When the handbook was evaluated in 2023 (prior to revising the 2021 edition), respondents indicated it had indeed provided valuable support for their crisis preparedness work in other such areas (Edsgård 2024).

In 2021, the Election Authority also broadened the concept of election security beyond risk and vulnerability assessments, prevention efforts and continuity planning (the focus ahead of the 2018 elections). By 'election security', the Election Authority now refers to the efforts undertaken by the election administration to safeguard the tasks mandated by the Election Act and other election-related regulations. The concept thus encompasses accident prevention, crisis preparedness, information security, continuity planning, protective security and operational security (Valmyndigheten 2024b).

Prevention work for 2022–2024 cycles

In support of the 2022 elections, the Election Authority developed a handbook for operational security analysis for the election administration, specifically to enable local and regional actors to better assess, prevent and defend against antagonistic threats to the election process. It was complemented by updates to all other available handbooks, guides and instructions containing—or needing—election security advice. For both the 2022 and the 2024 elections, the Election Authority also offered digital training and workshops to the regional and local election authorities to further support their ability to assess and prevent electoral risks from materializing (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024a; for trainings and materials see Valmyndigheten 2024e).

The method proposed by the Election Authority for election operational security analysis is a six-step process based on the Protective Security Analysis method outlined by the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen 2024). First, a description of the election process is developed, considering local factors and conditions. Second, assets requiring protection (protected values) are identified and assessed based on the potential impact of a security breach. Third, potential threats to the election are identified, leveraging a national Design Basis Threat Assessment and local threat assessments. Fourth, vulnerabilities in the existing security measures are identified. Fifth, security measures are defined to address the identified vulnerabilities. Finally,

a comprehensive security plan is created, prioritizing actions based on risk level and assigning responsibilities. The method incorporates risk assessment matrices, considering both the likelihood and consequences of threats, to guide decision making (Valmyndigheten 2023a).

In support of the operational security assessments recommended by the Election Authority, a national Design Basis Threat Assessment was developed for the 2022 and 2024 elections. Rather than assessing specific threats, a Design Basis Threat Assessment specifies the threat level to which the authority's specific advice and recommendations are tailored. This specified threat level provides a foundation for election administrators to analyse threats, risks and potential consequences during the planning and execution of elections (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2023c).

5. RESILIENCE TO STRESS AND SHOCKS

Building electoral resilience involves systematically strengthening electoral institutions and processes to withstand threats by demonstrating perseverance, adopting flexibility, or transforming in response to a changing environment (Alihodžić 2016; International IDEA forthcoming).

In 2017, several agencies of the Swedish Government identified the need to strengthen their ability to counter election interference in view of the deteriorating security situation globally and increases in both foreign and domestic interference risks (Bay et al. 2022b; Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020). For the 2018 and 2019 elections, maintaining public confidence was a crucial aspect of Sweden's efforts to strengthen the resilience of its electoral system. The MSB recognized that even minor incidents or unsubstantiated allegations of fraud could significantly undermine trust in electoral integrity. To address this concern, the agency implemented several key strategies (Bay et al. 2022b; Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020):

For the 2018 and 2019 elections, maintaining public confidence was a crucial aspect of Sweden's efforts to strengthen the resilience of its electoral system.

1. *Electoral communications capacity*. The MSB collaborated with Lund University to develop training programmes and a comprehensive handbook for public sector communicators (since published under MPF) (MPF 2018). These resources equipped communicators with the skills to identify and effectively respond to disinformation narratives about the election process. Transparent and accountable communication about election procedures was emphasized throughout.

2. *Media partnerships*. Together with the Election Authority, the MSB partnered with a broad range of news organizations, primarily terrestrial broadcast media and newspapers with national coverage. By providing accurate information about electoral procedures and dispelling common misconceptions, the aim was to prevent inadvertent spread of

disinformation, as well as to improve the media's own capacity to identify and counter it.

3. *Online information environment*. The MSB worked closely with social media platforms, primarily Google, Meta and Twitter, to ensure the prompt removal of fake 'official' accounts, facilitate the dissemination of accurate voter information and respond promptly to any public concerns.

4. *Information literacy*. Public awareness campaigns were launched to encourage citizens to think critically about the information they encounter. These campaigns aimed to equip the public to identify and disregard disinformation, particularly emotionally charged content. They expanded in scope and reach for the 2022 and 2024 elections under the auspices of the newly established Psychological Defence Agency, MPF (MPF 2024a; Sallinen 2022). Formed in 2022, this agency is tasked with identifying and countering foreign information influence activities aimed at Sweden and building resilience against said activities. To this end it has developed handbooks for journalists and citizens, among others (see: MPF 2023, 2024b).

5. *Research and monitoring*. In addition to training and resources, the MSB commissioned research to monitor online information and identify potential information influence campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections (Fernquist et al. 2018). For the 2022 election, the Election Authority and the MPF did likewise (see: Kaati and Shrestha 2023; Svenonius et al. 2023).

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While the Security Service addressed overarching threats to the democratic process, the Police Authority concentrated on ensuring the security of the election itself. Their efforts encompassed countering domestic extremism, safeguarding vulnerable areas and protecting candidates and electoral officials. The Police Authority recognized the potential for domestic actors to disrupt the voting process through violence or intimidation at polling stations and accordingly prioritized monitoring of extremist groups and individuals. Additionally, the Police Authority has a long-term project to influence extremist groups to adhere to legal and parliamentary methods, rather than violent, anti-constitutional politics (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; Hallsenius 2024; Holgersson 2019; LaForge 2020).

Cybersecurity has also been a significant focus of resilience-building efforts, particularly concerning the Election Authority's election management IT system (Valid) and its website, which displays real-time voting results. Although the vote count is conducted offline, the website has been a frequent target of cyberattacks, especially during the 2018 and 2022 national elections. Significant investments were made to bolster the Election Authority's cybersecurity defences in preparation for the 2018 election (LaForge 2020; Valmyndigheten 2019, 2023a). These efforts expanded and continued before the 2022 and 2024 elections when the National Cybersecurity Centre (NCSC) also set up a task force to help protect the election infrastructure. According to the Election Authority and the NCSC, these enhancements were crucial in

mitigating risks and building resilience (NCSC 2022; Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024a).

Preparedness and resilience during polling

Ahead of the 2022 election, the Election Authority developed digital training for election officials on how to prevent and counter discrimination, disturbance and violence at polling stations (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024c). The Election Authority also sought to build resilience to a specific kind of problem which had developed during the past few elections and gained media attention (Bay et al. 2022a; Langert 2021; Ritzen 2020; Valmyndigheten 2023b). In some instances, voters had refused to trust election officials with handling their ballots, apparently on grounds of polling workers' gender, ethnicity or perceived political affiliation, causing disturbances during voting (Bay et al. 2022a). Election officials responded firmly by filing police charges against perpetrators of antisocial behaviour (see: Orrenius 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Sweden held no general elections, but 10 municipalities held local referendums (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024f). Significant efforts were undertaken to safeguard public health during these referendums under pandemic conditions (Dagens Samhälle 2020; Valmyndigheten 2024f). For example, during the Västerås municipal referendum in March 2021 the city followed the recommendations of the Public Health Agency and consulted regional infectious disease experts. Comprehensive precautions included controlled entry and exit flows at voting stations, promoting early voting to reduce crowding, and encouraging proxy voting for at-risk groups. Polling stations had plexiglass barriers, personal protective equipment and disinfectants. Special voting arrangements were made for care home residents. Public health guidance was strictly followed, and post-election feedback from polling staff confirmed a high level of confidence in the Covid-19 safety measures (Västerås 2021).

To address the challenges posed by the pandemic ahead of the 2022 general election, the Election Authority closely monitored the situation and worked closely with the Public Health Agency. As Covid-19 restrictions were gradually lifted from February 2022, and the disease was no longer classified as dangerous from 1 April, the Election Authority focused on providing recommendations to ensure that voters felt safe from infection and were not deterred from voting (Valmyndigheten 2023b).

To address the challenges posed by the pandemic ahead of the 2022 general election, the Election Authority closely monitored the situation and worked closely with the Public Health Agency.

Beyond postponing electoral events in some cases and holding them in others, most municipalities (221 out of 256 responding to a survey by the Election Authority) reported introducing special measures due to the pandemic. These included providing hand sanitizer, masks or visors for election workers, adding extra staff, supplying masks for voters, and installing plexiglass shields at voting stations. Additionally, at least 94 municipalities (37 per cent) reported adapting polling stations by expanding physical space, employing queue managers, marking minimum social distances, or directing voter flow with separate entrances and exits (Valmyndigheten 2023b).

Before the 2024 European Parliament election, an unexpected issue arose when the Commission criticized Sweden for not complying with the EU Directive (2003/88) on Working Time. As a result, regional and local authorities (through SKR) and the trade unions agreed to ensure that workers would receive 11 consecutive hours of rest within every 24-hour period (SKR 2024a). However, local election administrations assessed that complying with the new agreement would require municipalities to increase staff by as much as 50 per cent on election day—a very challenging target since municipalities already struggled with recruiting sufficient staff for the election. Further, introducing two shifts of election workers could also negatively impact election integrity. Alerted to the problem by their members, SKR and the labour unions negotiated an exception to the directive in their collective agreement (Kullander and Lidhamn 2024; SKR 2024b).

6. **RECOVERY FROM CRISIS**

As alluded to above, from early 2018 the temporary cooperation network (high-level forum) engaged in scenario-based discussions on potential election incidents, such as cyberattacks or unfounded allegations of election fraud, allowing each agency to outline its response strategies. This collaborative approach ensured stakeholders were prepared to respond more effectively during an incident. The Civil Contingenies Agency also created a parallel forum for communications and media officials from the involved agencies to enhance communication strategies. This group focused on planning public communications and developing risk and crisis communication strategies related to the election (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020).

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Maintaining regular crisis management coordination was also an initial priority ahead of the 2018 elections. The MSB hosted weekly coordination conference calls with all agencies responsible for crisis management, including County Administrative Boards. In the months leading up to the election, these calls included election security as a standing agenda item, reinforcing that existing crisis management protocols applied to election incidents, including disinformation attacks. To facilitate swift communication among authorities, the MSB also compiled a comprehensive contact list of individuals involved in conducting and securing the election. This contact list ensured that authorities at all levels could quickly reach counterparts at other agencies (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020).

During the 2018 and 2019 elections, the MSB was a central clearinghouse for understanding information influence incidents. It mandated all government authorities to submit reports of any such incidents, which were reviewed by an internal analysis team at the agency to assess the likelihood of foreign interference. Confirmed incidents were documented, and reported back out to all relevant agencies and municipalities to support them in their work (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020). The Police Authority complemented this in 2022 by refining an incident code for election-related problems and

threats developed in 2018 and in 2022 they also created a priority hotline for the election administration for reporting crimes against the conduct of elections (Hallsenius 2024).

Before the 2022 elections, the response structure partially changed when the Election Authority took over responsibility for the now permanent election cooperation network. The election cooperation network continued to work similarly with monthly scenario-based discussions to enhance joint capacity to respond to crises. The work was also complemented by new expert-level working groups that conducted detailed planning to improve joint and individual agency capacity. For the 2022 election, four working groups focused on joint mapping of critical assets (to inform e.g. police command and control systems), coordinating communications, coordinating cybersecurity, and scenario and exercise planning. The network also conducted three scenario-based tabletop exercises and participated in a training organized by the NCSC to counter cyberattacks against election infrastructure (Hallsenius 2024; NCSC 2022; Valmyndigheten 2023b).

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During the election period in 2022, the election cooperation network established daily contact to strengthen shared situational awareness and enable joint handling of incidents. A direct result of prior inter-agency security planning, this collaboration proved crucial when the Election Authority and the Tax Agency (by 2022, also in charge of providing the IT infrastructure for the Election Authority) faced significant cyberattacks (Valmyndigheten 2023b).

For the European Parliament elections in 2024, the election cooperation network further developed its cooperation. An NCSC-led working group facilitated ongoing cyber defence dialogue among relevant authorities before, during and after the election. A communications network was also again established. The Election Authority assessed that the collaboration within the national election network was successful: joint planning, joint operations and continuous information sharing contributed to a more robust situational picture and incident response, ultimately contributing to the integrity and security of Sweden's electoral process (Valmyndigheten 2024a).

After the 2022 and 2024 elections, the Election Authority assessed that despite significant and far-reaching improvements in securing general elections, challenges nevertheless remain—notably the uneven distribution of capacity, internal collaboration and protective measures among regions and municipalities. While election security work demands continuity, the authority is aware that a relatively large proportion of election administrators will be new to the field each election, requiring training before each election. In its view, while disparities can be reduced—through education, advice and support—the desired level of uniformity is unlikely to be achieved without the Election Authority being given regulatory power to standardize election protection measures—something it currently lacks (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024a).

7. GENDER SENSITIVITY

Gender sensitivity involves consistently addressing gender-based differences and inequalities among women, men, and non-binary people throughout all stages of processes to overcome systemic barriers and promote gender equality and inclusion. The integrated framework for protecting elections in development by International IDEA integrates and promotes gender as a critical election protection perspective in response to gender-based discrimination and violence. These gendered phenomena are highlighted as essential challenges to electoral integrity as well as political equality and social cohesion, hence gender analysis should be entrenched in election protection efforts, be they assessments, learning or capacity development (International IDEA forthcoming).

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The overarching goal of Swedish gender equality policy is that women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives. The strategy for achieving gender equality in Sweden is gender mainstreaming, which entails incorporating a gender perspective into all government decision-making processes and activities. In 2013, the government launched a Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies (JiM) programme to strengthen the work of governmental agencies in this field. The goal was, and is, to develop the participating agencies' operations to contribute even more effectively to achieving national gender equality policy objectives. As of today, 54 government agencies participate in the programme, the MSB and the Police Authority among them. Neither the Election Authority nor the County Administrative Boards participate. However, the County Administrative Boards are specifically tasked to integrate gender mainstreaming into their work (Regeringen 2020; Sweden 2017).

Available information on Swedish election protection efforts since 2017 does not identify gender mainstreaming or gender sensitivity as a dimension addressed (Fjällhed, Pamment and Bay 2021; LaForge 2020; Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024a). The incident reporting mechanisms developed for the 2022 and 2024 elections have not included specific questions about gender, nor have the lessons learned reports for recent elections addressed gender specifically (Valmyndigheten 2019, 2023b, 2024a).

However, in 2022 the Election Authority commissioned a report to assess election integrity from the perspective of how voters had experienced voting that year. The study concluded that Swedish voters have high levels of trust in the Election Authority, voting procedures and Sweden's overall electoral integrity. The study did not identify any significant differences between men and women. Among the respondents, more men than women (4 per cent cf. 1 per cent) reported that they had experienced other voters acting threateningly or disturbingly. More than 95 per cent of the respondents reported having experienced no such behaviour (Cederholm Lager, Oscarsson and Solevid 2023).

Upon request, one of the authors of the report mentioned above provided an extended gender-based analysis of the underlying statistical data, which suggest no meaningful gender-based differences regarding Swedish voter's trust in the conduct of elections. More importantly, the analysis shows that party choice, age, income and education level are the most significant factors influencing perceived trustworthiness of the conduct of elections in Sweden (Solevid 2024).

Recently, municipalities have struggled to recruit a diverse group of election workers, with men and younger persons being underrepresented. An external audit of the local election administration in Västerås municipality concluded that despite efforts to increase diversity, there was only marginal improvement in gender balance from 2014 to 2018 (the percentage of women declined from 68 to 66 per cent, and the average age declined from 55 to 52 years). Stockholm municipality has reported similar challenges, with 63 per cent of election workers during the 2024 EU election being women. However, a more equal 50/50 representation was achieved for chairpersons and deputy chairpersons at polling stations (Debels 2024; Västerås 2018).

The Swedish Agency for Psychological Defence has demonstrated how the increased prevalence of gender-based information influence activities, such as disinformation, disproportionately affects women and heightens the risk of self-censorship and reduced participation of women in public spheres (Regeringen 2024). In terms of gender-based discrimination as a dimension of threats and violence against poll workers, there are no available statistics in Sweden (Valmyndigheten 2023b, 2024a). However, a report from 2022 identifies a female poll worker being subjected to discrimination by a voter (Bay et al. 2022a), and a publicized incident from the 2022 election details how two female poll workers were subjected to racist and aggressive remarks by a female voter (Orrenius 2022). While these individual cases do not allow any conclusions to be drawn, they highlight that future lessons identified reports, incident collection and assessment efforts could benefit from including a gender perspective. Future election security prevention and resilience efforts could also further assess the gender perspective on trust in the election process as a factor for reducing risks and strengthening election integrity.

Assessments of the Swedish Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies (JiM) programme have shown that successful gender mainstreaming efforts in Sweden require (a) engagement from leadership; and (b) legitimacy within a given organization. Additionally, a well-defined responsibility structure and alignment with ordinary operational processes are necessary to ensure sustainability and widespread acceptance across various levels of government. Support mechanisms, including external expertise, have been seen to play a vital role in bolstering these initiatives, while precise guidance on integrating equality goals into specific organizational functions is critical to achieving meaningful outcomes (ESV 2023; JiM 2024; Statskontoret 2019).

As for election protection, evaluations have also shown that inter-agency collaboration can play a crucial role in amplifying the impact of gender

As for election protection, evaluations have also shown that inter-agency collaboration can play a crucial role in amplifying the impact of gender mainstreaming initiatives.

mainstreaming initiatives. Encouraging cooperation between agencies has contributed to addressing sector-specific gender equality challenges. Evaluations have also suggested that a collaborative approach to goal setting, involving the government and participating agencies, creates a more conducive environment for formulating precise and impactful directives (ESV 2023; JiM 2024; Statskontoret 2019).

The rise of foreign interference and the proliferation of online disinformation have posed significant challenges.

8. CONCLUSION

Sweden's steadfast commitment to democratic principles and robust public institutions has historically engendered high public trust in its electoral process. However, the rise of foreign interference and the proliferation of online disinformation have posed significant challenges. Sweden has adapted by implementing proactive measures that align with its administrative structure. By fostering collaboration among agencies and stakeholders, the country has focused on preventing electoral risks, enhancing resilience to stresses and shocks, and establishing efficient crisis recovery mechanisms.

Central to Sweden's strategy is also a whole-of-society approach that emphasizes building societal resilience. Initiatives, such as election protection networks, comprehensive risk assessments, designating elections as critical infrastructure, broad education and training programmes, and active engagement with the media and the public, have been instrumental. Prevention, resilience and coordinated recovery efforts through election cooperation networks have effectively addressed many election protection challenges.

Nonetheless, ongoing challenges highlight the necessity to continuously adapt and improve election protection measures. These include ensuring gender sensitivity in designing, implementing and evaluating election protection efforts. As Sweden's strategy to safeguard its electoral integrity continues to evolve, its experience offers valuable lessons for other contexts: cooperation, resilience, proactive engagement and public trust are vital to protecting elections, as is balancing transparency and other security imperatives in achieving these.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MPF	Psychological Defence Agency (Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar)
MSB	Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap)
NCSC	National Cybersecurity Centre (Nationellt Cybersäkerhetscenter)
SKR	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och regioner)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sebastian Bay is an election security, hybrid threats and disinformation researcher. His election expertise is grounded in managing several projects on reducing electoral risks, enhancing resilience and establishing efficient response and recovery mechanisms for Sweden's 2018 and 2022 general elections. Internationally, he has supported workshops and tabletop exercises to bolster election protection efforts in several countries and has authored numerous reports for the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, the Swedish Defence Research Agency and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, among others. Sebastian co-authored the chapter titled 'A Swedish perspective on foreign election interference' in *Defending Democracies: Combating Foreign Election Interference in a Digital Age*, published by Oxford University Press (2021).

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We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

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