# Mittuniversitetet

Research strategy

Challenges facing modern democracies and their implications
– linking citizens with politics and politics with citizens

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Introduction

The research agenda of Political Science at Mid Sweden University approach some of the most intriguing questions within discipline today; questions that emerge from how citizens and political institutions respond to changes within society due to processes of *individualization, globalization and urbanization*. Departing from a modified version of David Easton's (1965) model of the political system, the outlined challenges modern democracies are facing can be considered as changes in the surrounding context. These changes have profound impact on the two main areas of research within Political Science. We identify our two main areas of research as first the transformation of citizen voice in to the political system, and second policymaking on the output side of the democratic system.

Figure 1 Model of the political system
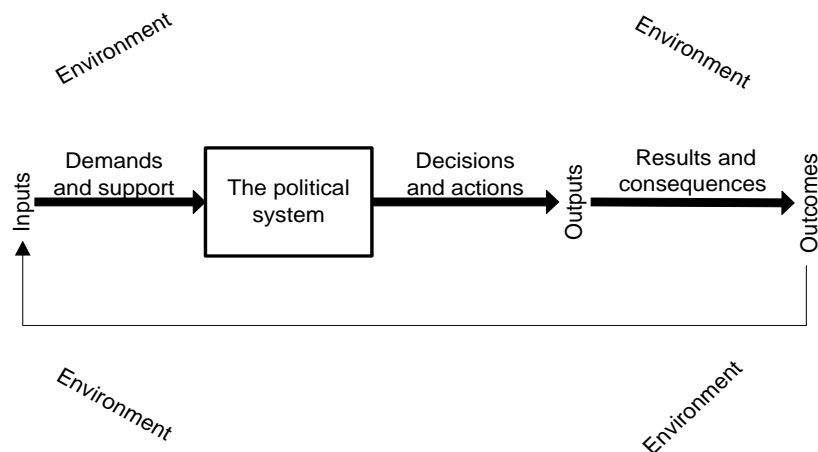
(Högström 2013, 10, based on Easton 1965, 32)

In this document we provide a brief outline of some of the most significant challenges that we maintain will alter the prerequisites for politics in modern democracies, both at the input side and on the output side of the political system. We outline the two areas of research in which we focus our studies on. We also present the current status of the unit, including strengths and weaknesses, and outline a vision for the research environment, including a five-year strategic plan. The overarching ambition guiding our efforts is to work collectively towards creating a well-functioning and thriving research environment that is recognized within the discipline, based on high quality research and publications, excellent national and international contacts and a solid basis of external funding.

Challenges facing modern democracies

Exploring the preconditions for democracy and governance is a topic that is as enduring as political science itself, dating back to at least Plato and Aristotle. The challenges that governments and political systems are facing do however tend to vary over time. Even though Francis Fukuyama provocatively proclaimed the end of history in the aftermath of the fall of the wall of Berlin, neither history nor political challenges have come to an end. Contemporary Western democracies are currently facing several long-term meta-challenges that on many accounts are altering the prerequisites for politics, both on the input

side of the political system and on the output side. The principal tendencies that we identify as being of mutual and significant concern for the research agenda of political science at Mid Sweden University are *urbanization*, *globalization*, and *individualization*.

Urbanization is a trend that involves most parts of the world where increasing shares of the world's population live in cities. From a Swedish perspective this process has resulted in a shift from about 90 per cent of the population living in rural areas 200 years ago to 85 per cent living in urban areas in 2010 (Statistics Sweden, 2010). The implications for political systems arising from urbanization are manifold. The flip side is a process of depopulation of rural and sparsely populated areas. Depopulation hit parts of the world unevenly and, again using the example of Sweden, only 24 out of 290 municipalities are classified as main urban areas using the definition by Eurostat. Population growth in urban areas vis-à-vis population decrease in other parts of the country may result in somewhat divided political realities within the same country with distinct implications on the output side of democratic systems. Where urban areas are struggling to solve political issues related to e.g. lack of housing, child care, and schools, municipalities in areas with decreasing populations are facing problems of e.g. maintaining mandatory welfare services with decreasing tax income and, the organization and distribution of welfare provision when the population is not as concentrated as in an urban area. Problems of equality in terms of the equal amount of tax paid result in different levels of service provision can in turn be considered a democratic problem. These developments may result in different trends occurring within the same country, which may lead to citizens and political leaders having increasingly different views on political issues depending upon their place of residence. These increasing differences may also fuel the political cleavage that Stein Rokkan labelled as the conflict between centre and periphery. Empirically this can be observed e.g. through demands for political autonomy that have been voiced in some regions across Europe. The trend of urbanization also tends to raise concerns regarding sustainable development, both in terms of eco systems and social sustainability.

Another trend that characterizes the last decades is processes of ***globalization***. Globalization and its effects on the economy has had profound indirect impact on the political scene resulting in e.g. central states having less political power over the economy than before. Even though economists tend to agree that openness of economies have contributed to the increase of wealth this may also, at least in the short run, put political systems under pressure by for example outsourcing of jobs and productions from advanced countries. This can in turn contribute to rising political conflicts, with citizens and political parties demanding more protectionist or nationalist turns of policy. The processes of globalization also involve increases in migration flows from poor, conflict-ridden, and often non-democratic countries to for example the European Union. These changes have put political systems, including subnational entities, under strain from different aspects. One arising problem is what Kenneth Newton (2007) identifies as *the new liberal dilemma*; namely how can social cohesion be maintained in increasingly heterogeneous liberal democracies? If individual rights are strong then demand for individual rights from growingly heterogeneous populations can become more difficult to handle if social cohesion is not maintained. In parallel with increasing levels of migration other trends such as increasing levels of residential segregation and rising levels of inequality occur on a broad scale. Previous research have demonstrated an array of politically relevant effects of heterogeneous societies ranging from e.g. lower levels of political participation, higher levels of economic inequality, and less support for welfare redistribution. Globalization has also been a process that has rapidly changed technologies of communication where the introduction of internet-based forms of communication has e.g. one the one hand challenged the monopoly of information in authoritarian regimes, and on another hand providing citizens in democracies with new technologies for communication and political activism. The changes that the introduction of internet-based means of communication has brought about for the role played by traditional mass media in the formation of public opinion are not insignificant (Strömbäck 2015).

A third trend, which relates to how developments of urbanization and globalization are reflected in shifting values among populations, is ***individualization***. One of the most dominant explanations to

individualization is the gradual process of modernization, where increased material well-being also tends to result in increased levels of education, which is often correlated with a shift from economies based on industrial (material) production to economies based on services (Inglehart 1997). This increase in material well-being and levels of education is argued to result in value changes; from material to post-material or self-expressional priorities and a shift from collectivist towards individualized values (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013). In a comparative empirical perspective Sweden stands out as one of the countries with the most individualized values among its citizens, and leading scholars such as Inglehart and Welzel (2005) argue that with increased levels of economic well-being citizens in an increasing number countries will tend to resemble the Nordic countries in terms of giving priority to secular and self-expression values. Citizens in affluent democracies are in general conceived as having values focusing more on self-expression and less fear of traditional authorities, which in turn is expected to have wide ranging effects on political behaviour, expectations and attitudes, e.g. resulting in a more critical approach towards the actors and institutions of representative democratic processes, rising expectations on the service provided by the welfare state and altered patterns of political engagement (Dalton & Welzel 2014).

Prioritized areas of research

The input side of democratic systems: linking citizens with the political system

Policy-makers and academic experts alike have for several decades voiced increasing anxieties over the state and future of representative democracy. In the late 1990s it appeared as if there was an international consensus that processes of individualization and modernization had rendered many of the forms of citizen organization and representation based on collective loyalties from the heyday of industrialism outmoded (Clarke & Stewart 1998), and as such weakening the link between citizens and the political system. Research has been occupied with trying to understand the implications of the weakened collective ties, and also to evaluate the extent to which spontaneously altered modes of political engagement are able to reconnect citizens interact with relate to the political arena (Christensen 2013).

Another, more proactive response to the long-term changes has been the call from political theorists for more participatory or deliberative forms of democracy (Barber 1984; Dryzek 2000), followed by attempts of scholars as well as policy-makers to reconnect citizens with the political arena by pursuing an array of project, often labelled democratic innovations (Smith 2009). As such it seems as if the procedural consensus on which democracy has been founded on since its establishment in the early is dwindling. The field of study on democratic innovations is very broad and it includes studies that range from political theory to experimental research (Hansen & Normann 2007; Grönlund et al. 2010). The true potential and impact of participatory and deliberative forms of democracy is however still contested and knowledge about citizens' own expectations about the current form of representative democracy, as well as their capacity and willingness concerning direct or deliberative democratic participation is insufficient (Bengtsson & Christensen 2014; Wojcieszak 2014).

There are, however also signs that suggest that the future of traditional party politics as the way to connect citizens with the political arena is not all together bleak. The long-term negative trend in rates of turnout in elections and party membership appears to have leveled out. Moreover, during the last couple of decades new political alternatives have increasingly entered the political scene and yet again revitalized the level of political conflict. Research in this area has mainly focused on trying to explain the establishment of these parties and their electoral success (e.g. Bolleyer 2013). While early studies primarily dealt with the importance of structural conditions, such as e.g. the development of new social cleavages, the demands from the electorates, as well as the design of the electoral system, increasingly

the new parties themselves are brought into the analysis. In this vein, it is argued that we must take into consideration such things as the new party's strategies, ideology and organization in order to fully grasp why party system change (e.g. Mudde 2007).

Increasingly also the question of whether, and how new parties matter has been posed (e.g. Carvalho 2014; Mudde 2013). Moreover, both old and new parties seem to adapt to external challenges by advocating internal changes. Hence, although classics such as Michels (1915), already a century ago asserted parties are bound to be oligarchies, an international trend where parties increasingly are opening up the internal processes of both policy formulation and leadership and candidate selections could be identified (Cross & Blais 2012; Hazan & Rahat 2010). However, although these measures are employed as a way to meet the challenges stressed above, there is by no means a consensus that intra-party democracy in fact is something inherently desirable since it might increase the distance between parties' policies and public opinion (May 1973).

Following both the trends of urbanization and globalization there has also been an intense scholarly interest in the extent to which increasingly heterogeneous populations resulting from immigration to Western European democracies may threaten social cohesion, as well as the potential political implications that might follow. Empirical studies have suggested negative effects of diversity on social cohesion (Alesina & LaFerrara, 2002). Following an article by Putnam (2007) that presented U.S. data supporting these negative correlations, the relationship between diversity and trust has been thoroughly investigated empirically in several Western contexts (Morales 2013; van der Meer & Tolsma 2014). The topic is urgent and controversial especially in a contemporary European context in which a tendency towards rising support for anti-immigration parties in many countries (including Sweden) is played out against the backdrop of a relatively recent European experience of Nazism and Fascism.

The extent to which diversity is likely to have negative or positive effects on trust and social cohesion is however still debated (see e.g. Allport 1954; Uslaner 2012; Stolle & Harell 2013). The studies of the alleged effects of diversity on social trust and its political consequences underline the need to study this phenomenon at the community level since diversity and residential segregation often are higher in certain (urban) areas within a country and effects on social cohesion may not be as evident in data that express national averages (van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Furthermore it has also been shown that neighborhood diversity first and foremost has an impact on trust towards members of the local community rather than towards people in general (van der Meer & Tolsma 2014; Wallman Lundåsen & Wollebæk 2013).

Based on the observations above we outline three research questions that are leading the scholars occupied with the input side of the political system, i.e. the link between citizens and the political arena:

- What expectations do citizens have on democratic processes and what are the behavioral consequences of these expectations?
- How do the traditional actors within representative democracy react to the fundamental challenges that societies are facing?
- Under what circumstances is social cohesion in liberal democracies resilient to the challenges posed by e.g. increasing diversity?

The output side of democratic systems: Policymaking at the subnational level

Over the last few decades, scholars of political science and other disciplines have paid a great deal of attention to the frequency and the impact of long-term change in the international as well as the national environment. Increasing in frequency and scope, multiscalar demands have been placed at the doors of policymakers at the regional, national and international levels to develop and revise strategies in order

to cope with key events and critical junctures affecting global, national as well as local politics. The consequences of urbanization, globalization and individualization put specific pressure on such processes. To a significant degree such challenges are tackled at the subnational level, in regions or in municipalities. These entities are however today are less homogenous and more diverse than ever before.

In contemporary research, policymaking is seen as a creative process of translating the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices (Braun et al. 2011). Hence, it can be argued that subnational political systems make policy even if the task is to implement national decisions. This is because they embed such processes in their unique local contexts (Ball 2008), involving stakeholders from the private, public, and third sectors are involved as the government no longer holds the monopoly in policymaking (Pierre and Peters, 2000). Inspired by management and administration techniques from the private market, local politicians and public officials together with other actors jointly function as policymakers who at the subnational level address how to make sense of governing principles and solve both global and local challenges.

Approaches to the study of public policymaking have traditionally focused either on the structures that foster or hinder certain behaviors or on the actors within these structures. This dichotomy reflects an unresolved deadlock in social sciences. For a policy to be made and implemented there has to be a political system in place – an institutional arrangement that can host this policy. At the same time, institutions *per se* do not make policy, people do (John 2015). Still, actors are part of larger institutional arrangements and structural conditions will influence processes of policymaking, from at least two analytically different but related dimensions (Lidén & Nyhlén 2014). Characteristics originating from within the organization in which the policymaking occurs will pose relevance, for example through aspects such as political settings and financial capacity. Additionally, conditions emanating from the surrounding society will represent structural opportunities or constraints for how policies are made and implemented. Among other aspects, size and demography (e.g. Denters et al. 2014) can be decisive factors.

Satisfactory examinations of policymaking must ultimately be anchored in assumptions of individual behavior (Elster 2007). This enable answering questions concerning specific actors' dominance and benefit of policymaking and its output (Theodoulou 1995) and does so through acknowledging the varying background of included interests. By denoting actors as policy entrepreneurs those who operate in the public sphere and seek transformative change are highlighted (Mintrom 2015). These entrepreneurs' possess far-reaching roles for influencing agenda setting and consequences of policymaking. Still, the manner in which policy entrepreneurs understand their subnational conditions is important. As such, every-day policymakers are seen as actors that are institutionally embedded in different settings.

Studies of subnational policymaking involve coping with several theoretical perspectives as well as acknowledging different analytical levels. At the same time, policymaking at the subnational level is conducted in the larger, flatter structure of networks in which a variety of actors is participating. Through the infusion of systems for steering and control from the private market an 'audit culture' has been established, often described in terms of the broad concept of new public management (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011). Such trends raise new theoretical challenges for understanding complex systems; the relevance different analytical levels can bring should also be addressed. By researching subnational policymaking both through structural factors as well as agency mechanisms provides fruitful insights for academics and practitioners alike.

The proposed analytical argument that policymaking to a large extent is reached at the local level via translation of ideas into specific settings is not the only one that highlights a research agenda with subnational ambitions. The long-term trend that shifts competence to lower levels of governance and

increase discretion for subnational entities make another argument for the formulation of the following research questions:

- How are policies translated and constructed within processes at the subnational level?
- How can variations in output of subnational policymaking be explained?
- How can the drivers and mechanisms of policy change at the subnational level be understood?

These general questions are highlighted in a number of policy sectors relating to changes and variations in the welfare state, migration policy, local development and environmental policy, largely in the Swedish context.

Strengths and competences within the unit

The research team within political science at Mid Sweden University is not a large unit, but rather encompasses of less than 20 active researchers.[1] Despite the modest size of the team, it is however on many accounts a highly qualified and well connected group of scholars with experiences that vouch for accomplishing excellent research within our two designated fields of research.

One of the most prominent strength within the group is the advanced experience in survey research. The research environment host the Swedish part of the large scale comparative survey *The European Values Study* (EVS) and is also represented in leading positions within the consortium for electoral research in Finland. This is supplemented with substantial experience of performing surveys among citizens and political elites alike. The group is however highly qualified in both quantitative and qualitative research methods and both are regularly applied and often combined in a mixed-methods approach.

The environment has longstanding and well-functioning, cooperation with no less than four of the research centers at the University; Risk and crisis Research center (RCR), Forum for Gender Studies (FGV), Centre for Economic Relations (CER) and the European Tourism Research Institute (ETOUR). Such multidisciplinary cooperation has proven to enhance possibilities for attracting external funding but also adds value in terms of upholding international networks and by facilitating international publishing. Cooperation with the research centre DEMICOM is currently being institutionalized and aims at further strengthen the unit's research on political behavior and survey research. In cooperation with DEMICOM, which have a longstanding tradition of panel studies under Swedish election campaigns, the group posits the potential of becoming a stronghold within the field; competence which also can be utilized in order to attract funding and cooperation with actors outside academia.

The environment has until this date been relatively successful in attracting external funding from a wide array of financiers. This includes Swedish Research Councils, the European Union's Structural Funds as well as foundations and regional and local actors. In addition, long-term networks with public actors within the region are both preserved and continuously developed. We also frequently contribute to organizations and public actors outside academia, e.g. participating in writing scholarly reports to the Swedish Government's official reports (Statens offentliga utredningar), research hearings in parliamentary committees, lectures and speeches upon invitation and media appearances.

The research environment is well connected within both national and international networks. These networks have been created through participation in various projects and at conferences, including the

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[1] At this stage the unit comprises two professors, eight university lecturers, of which three have been awarded docent competence. We also have five active doctoral students within the unit.

organization of workshops and panels that subsequently has led forward to deepened forms of cooperation, including both publications and research projects. The most significant national and international collaborators and networks are listed below.

Table 1 Networks and collaborators

Institutionalized research networks	Collaboratin with researchers at universities
European Values Study (EVS)	Karlstad University
Nordic Migration Research (NMR)	Loughborough University, UK
Political Party Data base	Drury University, U.S.
Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS)	Åbo Akademi University, Finland
Intra-Party Democracy in the Baltic Region	Örebro University
Nordic Elections and Democracy research consortium (NED)	York University (Centre for Women's Studies), UK
Mid Sweden International Network for Gender Studies (MING)	University of western Ontaro, Canada
	McGill University, Canada
	Umeå University
	University of Greenland

Political Science at Mid Sweden University 2020

As was already mentioned in the previous section, Political Science at Mid Sweden University is not a large research environment. Our main advantage is however that the unit to a great extent consist of relatively *young, engaged and highly qualified researchers* who are determined to invigorate the environment for many years to come. Departing from the ARC13-process, the unit has formulated the explicit goal to *reinforce our position* within the national and international political science community within framework of our two outlined fields of research, but also to gain recognition for our work within the borders of the university and outside academia.

Throughout this process we also aim at building a *sustainable and inspiring research and working environment*, with an inclusive, mutual and cooperative strategy that makes use of all the competence and engagement that exists within the group. The unit actively takes into account aspects of equal opportunities for career development for all members of staff. We are also fortunate to have a relatively reasonable gender balance within the unit at large.

Well aware of the vulnerability of a small unit we aim at *working strategically* towards reaching our overarching goal during the following five years. To facilitate the process we have identified six *specific areas, or sub-goals* that we perceive as the most important to cultivate, including more specific categories within each of the areas. In order to reach our outlined goals we have outlined a number of more specific indicators, involving the point of departure and what we aim at accomplishing during the coming five years, presented in table 2 below.

    (1) External research funding
In order to improve the basic prerequisites for research within the unit, and be able to develop expertise within our outlined fields of research, external research funding is of crucial importance. External funding is also the main, not to say the only available mean in order to grow as a team and to increase the number of postgraduate students. Within this specific goal we aim at working towards different types of funders and programs such as the Swedish Research Councils and EU Framework Program for Research and various types of regional and local funding, including the EU Structural Funds. In regards of the ambition to attract external funding a structured plan has been in place already for a few years, involving a seminar series fully devoted towards enhancing possibilities for external funding; a strategy we aim at continue with and further develop.
    (2) Internationalization

Internationalization is of fundamental significance within today's research community and is of particular importance for a small research environment such as ours. It is also vital in order to gain a reputation as a unit that performs high quality research and to facilitate the attraction of external funding. Our strategy within this section is targeted towards publications and involvement in international research projects and networks. In terms of publication an inclusive strategy is guiding the unit. We do however emphasize publications within international peer-review journals. In order to reach our designated goal funding for proofreading and seminars devoted to journal publishing are institutionalized practices within the unit.

(3) Networking

For a small research environment, such as ours, cooperation with other scholars, networks and environments is of vital importance in order to generate a large enough critical mass and to facilitate publication as well as facilitate successful applications for external funding. Although the research unit on many accounts can be considered as well connected today, we aim at reinforcing and working even more actively towards other scholars and environments. This goes for both our established networks with research centers at the Mid Sweden University and with scholars and networks reaching far beyond.

(4) Integrate research profile with education

One of our identified goals is to strengthen the connection to our research profile within our graduate programs (in particular the masters program) in order to be able to provide high quality education based on research and also to improve our basis for recruitment to our postgraduate program.

(5) Postgraduate program

The post graduate program is a key aspect in the vitalization of the research environment In order to guarantee a high quality education for our PhD-students we aim at applying two strategies; a more strategic recruitment within our outlined field of research and active cooperation with other actors within the political science community that allows us to offer a richer selection of courses and seminars for our students.

(6) Interaction with society

In order to raise the profile of our unit we aim at increasing our visibility and interaction with the surrounding society, both at the national level and within the region, a strategy that we hope will help us to attract more students to our programs and create new possibilities for cooperation with various actors in society. Increased interaction can be achieved through various strategies and the ambition is to build on already existing relations and to create new ones, involving e.g. branch councils, developed collaboration for internships, media appearances, lectures, research hearings.

In table 2 our outlined sub-goals are summarized and planned activities and indicators that can help us to reach our designated goals are outlined.

Table 2. Political Science at Mid Sweden University 2020: goals, activities and indicators

Goal	Activity	Indicators	ARC13	Target 2020
Increase external research funding	• Seminars target towards improve quality of applications	• Proportion of external funding	13 %	26 %
	• Applications to the European Research Council	• Involvement in applications to European Research Council (No.)	0	3
	• Applications to the national research councils	• Successful applications to national research councils (No.)	1	2

	• Local and regional applications (EU regional, etc)	• Successful applications to regional funders (No.)	x	x
Reinfoce inter-nationalisation	• International publication	• No. publications in relation to total funding (MSEK)	2	5
	• Cooperation in projects	• Involvement in international research projects (no./year)	x	x
Enhance networking	• Involvement with Research Centers at Miun	• Joint activities (no./year)	x	x
	• Contacts and partnership with researchers at other universities	• Research visits abroad (>1 week) (no./year)	1	3
		• Visiting scholars (no./year)	0	2
Integrate research profile and education	• Improve and integrate research into our graduate programs	• Proportion of courses with explicit integration of own research	50 %	80 %
Develop post graduate program	• Partners to create a critical mass	• Yearly joint PhD courses & seminars with other universities	1	3
	• PhD candidates within research profile	• PhD candidates within profile	-	100 %
Interaction with society	• Broadened cooperation with authorities and other organizations	• Yearly guest lectures from practitioners	5	8
		• Yearly guest lectures from academy to society	5	8
		• Participants in government committees	1	2
		• Participants in boards & councils	0	5

Comment: Activities, indicators and targets are still under consideration by the unit.

Research Ethics and Practice

Political Science will regularly discuss issues related to research ethics and good research practice at its seminars. Both PhD-students and researchers are given an opportunity to discuss research ethical issues. In order to comply with the requirements of the university regulation the postgraduate education includes both education and practical application of research ethics. For this reason, two different elements of research ethics are included in the higher seminar. The first element will be of a more general nature and the theme of such general seminars can thus vary and adapt to the wishes and needs of the researchers. The second element will more specifically focus on the PhD-students' dissertations. In order to ensure that the PhD students have acquired the ability to make research ethical assessments, they will have to present their own research ethical at least once during the course of their postgraduate studies.

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