11 Sweden: the referendum as an instrument for defusing political issues

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The Swedish political system, as it has developed during the twentieth century, is of a traditional parliamentary type. There are regular elections to parliament, the Riksdag; the cabinets have all been dependent on the Riksdag regardless of whether they have been minority or majority governments; the same five parties have competed for parliamentary seats for 70 years, with a few more parties recently appearing on the stage. But there have also been provisions in the constitution for the kind of direct democracy that referendums constitute. The referendum has been regarded as a complementary although exceptional feature of the traditional national decision-making process, and to date five referendums have been held.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The present day Swedish constitution (the 1974 Instrument of Government) includes provisions for two different types of referendum: a consultative referendum, regulated in Ch. 8, §4 and a decisive referendum, regulated in Ch. 8, §15.

The clause concerning the consultative referendum is short and simple. It states only that this kind of referendum is regulated by a special law, and according to this special law it is up to the Riksdag to decide whether a referendum is to be held at all, and also to decide the timing of such a referendum as well as the formulation of the questions to be posed. There are no limitations on the range of issues that may be referred to the citizens. All the decisions taken by the Riksdag on these matters are furthermore determined by straightforward majority rules; in other words, a minority cannot trigger off a consultative referendum.

A paragraph on consultative referendums had also been in the previous Swedish constitution. This paragraph had been inserted in 1922, despite fears that it might undermine the existing representative system. The decision then to add provisions for holding referendums was influenced by demands generally for more democracy.
in the immediate postwar era, and by specific demands from the Swedish temperance movement, which hoped that the prohibition of alcoholic beverages could be achieved by means of a referendum (Wallin, 1966).

The other clause in the present constitution concerning referendums – §8:15, regulating decisive referendums – dates from the late 1970s. The provisions are fairly complicated. A pending constitutional amendment must be referred to a referendum if requested by a tenth of the members of the Riksdag and if the request is supported by a third of MPs. A referendum of this type (“rejective”, according to the terminology introduced in chapter 1) must take place simultaneously with a general election. The proposal is rejected if a majority of the voters have voted No and furthermore – this is one more complicating condition – if their number is more than half of those who have voted in the simultaneous general election. This type of referendum has often been called “semi-decisive”, taking into account that the final word on the matter still rests with the Riksdag if a majority have not voted against the proposal (Ruin, 1992).

This decision to supplement the existing constitutional provisions with a referendum of a new type resulted from a public debate that began after the second world war. Proposals had been put forward for expanding the referendum institution. The main reason for this renewed Swedish interest in referendums was the political situation of the country, perceived to be overpowering in its stability. Governmental activity had expanded; the position of the political parties had been consolidated; the strength of one of them, the Social Democrats, had seemed to be insurmountable as the party remained in government decade after decade after having entered office in 1932. It was not to be ousted from power until 1976, at which stage it had ruled the country alone or in coalition with other parties for almost four and a half decades. The postwar proposals for an enlarged referendum institution had not only dealt with changes in the existing rules regulating consultative referendums but had also, and foremost, included requests for a decisive referendum, not necessarily to be confined to constitutional issues. The decision finally taken in the late 1970s, however, restricted the use of the decisive referendum to constitutional matters.

A referendum of this nature has not yet been held. All five Swedish referendums, the first of which immediately followed the insertion of the original clause in the constitution in 1922, have been regulated either by this 1922 clause or by the one replacing it in the present constitution. This means that all Swedish referendums to date have formally been consultative.