



Erik Amnå

Erik Amnå, PhD, is a professor in political science at Örebro University. His research deals mainly with the development of contemporary democracies, with special attention to civic engagement, civic education and civil society. Erik is chairman of the board of Hög Röstén and has served on several governmental commissions on democracy and civic education. Contact: erik.amna@hojrosten.se



Daniel Sachs

Daniel Sachs is the founder of Hög Röstén and a member of the board. He is CEO and member of the board of Proventus AB and Proventus Capital Management AB based in Sweden and a member of the Global Board of the Open Society Foundations, the panel of senior advisers to the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House and a council member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Contact: ds@proventus.se

Translating Civic Engagement into Political Participation: A Non-partisan School for Becoming a Politician

Many Western democracies have lately become the object of a wide-spread populist critique. They are severely marked by increasing social and economic inequality that spills over into democratic institutions. Voters are turning away from the established parties in favour of leaders of new political movements. The Hög Röstén school for politicians is new Swedish non-partisan school for politicians with the purpose of contributing to the revitalisation of democracy. Over time, this should help political parties include candidates who are more representative in mirroring Swedish society.

Societal interest develops at a different pace to that of political interest. While the latter already seems to be fixed among a few individuals in their twenties (Prior 2010), the former continues to grow among most young citizens throughout early adulthood (Russo and Stattin 2016; Shehata and Amnå 2017). As a general rule, civic engagement is channeled through civil society organisations and individual activism, while political engagement is shaped and channeled by political parties. “Politics” is closely connected to formal political institutions: at best with trustworthiness, efficiency and equality; at worst with corruption and a lack of transparency.

Independent of their differences regarding democratic maturity and progress, many Western democracies have lately become the object of a wide-spread populist critique echoing citizens’ feelings of distrust, distance and disillusion. Populist anti-political orientations, even anti-democratic and anti-immigrant ideas, seem to attract apathetic and politically unengaged citizens as well as politically alienated citizens.

Contemporary Western societies are severely marked by increasing social and economic inequality that spills over into democratic institutions. Even in general elections, in spite of normally being the least unequal of all political modes of action, voters from lower socio-economic groups take part to a far lesser extent than their more educated and more privileged fellow citizens. A major reason behind this may be that political parties are failing to present candidates that are representatives of certain groups, such as youths, people living in rural areas and citizens with a foreign background. Recently, in one country after the other,

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we have witnessed how voters are turning away from the established parties in favour of leaders of new political movements. The political parties are part of the problem. But can they also be transformed into solutions to the problem by improving the way they are presented and perceived?

The Swedish context: Standby citizens

The Høj Rösten school for politicians is an initiative that builds on the existence of a substantial group of young citizens who are very engaged in civil society and express not only an appreciation of politics, but who also follow the news flow closely, as well as discussing politics and societal matters in their everyday life contexts. The challenge is that this engagement does not often translate into participation. In contrast to a tiny group of political activists, they prefer to stand by (Amnå and Ekman, 2014). They trust their elected politicians and democratic institutions – as long as nothing special happens that may jeopardise the values they cherish. They may be taking democracy for granted in absence of a human catastrophe: an emerging populist movement, a decision that will send a classmate back to a country that violates human rights, etc. These standby youths also typically have severe problems identifying themselves with existing political parties and committing to them with their own political dreams and ideas.

Would it be possible to get this group of standby youths to participate, especially those representing under-represented citizen groups, by transforming their political passions and experiences into real political engagement and the ambition to run for political positions? This is the core idea of the new Swedish non-partisan school for politicians, a citizens' initiative with the purpose of contributing to the revitalisation of democracy through improving representation. Over time, this should also help political parties include candidates who are more representative in mirroring the growing diversity of Swedish society.

The 'raise your voice' school for politicians

It all started with a vote-mobilisation campaign in Sweden called Høj Rösten (Høj Rösten means raise your voice in Swedish, or literally "speak up", but since the word for voice is the same as the word for vote, the implicit meaning is also raise your vote) – a Swedish Rock the Vote using artists, actors, sports stars, etc. to engage youth. The goal was to increase participation and turnout of young people, especially in socially challenged areas and among first- and second-generation immigrants, in the EU election in May 2014 and subsequently in the national elections in September 2014. Even though Swedish democracy is one of the best-developed in the world, there are large differences between areas, generations and social groups. The overall voter participation is around 85%, but certain areas and groups can have turnout as low as 30–40%.

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The two campaigns were successful. The youth vote increased markedly in around half of the districts where the campaign had a presence. The campaigns opened up a discussion on the importance of taking part in a democratic society in the short term, but of course a much longer-term perspective is needed to really change these behaviours.

The key problem: Representation

After being active in these two elections and meeting a large number of young voters, we analysed our experiences. Our observation is that the key problem is representation. This was also confirmed in studies of youth participation in politics – the feeling that “there is no one who understands my situation, no one I can identify with, who represents me” is probably the most important reason for not voting.

More precisely, we experienced a clear link between participation, representation and trust. At the moment, low trust in politicians (especially in some groups and areas) leads to low participation, which in turn leads to certain groups being under-represented in democratic congregations. This then leads to lower trust, and so the vicious cycle is extended. It is imperative to break this circle into a virtuous one, which will involve not only working on participation as could be done in the short term before an election, but also on representation and trust. If representation can be improved over time, this is likely to increase trust and thus participation. In other words, improving representation – or broadening the recruitment of politicians – is key for turning the vicious circle into a virtuous one.

The need for alternative routes into politics

In this time of lowering trust in politicians and institutions, there is an increasing trend for young people who are politically conscious and engaged in society to choose to express this outside of established political arenas – on blogs, social media, in demonstrations and other manifestations. This engagement in civil society is great, but we also need young people who are willing to be active within the system where the decisions are taken. Otherwise we risk a widening gap between the political class and citizens in general. The political parties are working hard on recruitment and training, but they are failing to attract large groups of people. There is a need for other, alternative routes into politics to avoid an increasing political inequality. There is a need to broaden the recruitment to political parties and positions of power in order to vitalise democracy over time. This is the premise underlying Høj Røsten School for Politicians.

The Høj Røsten School for Politicians is a one year non-partisan program where between twenty and twenty-five young political talents – young people

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who are already civic activists and engaged in society in different ways – are given the knowledge, inspiration, individual development, professional tools and relationships they need to engage in politics and eventually run for office. Through various networks and organisations we have looked for and encouraged candidates throughout the ideological spectrum who have been civically engaged for various purposes and who are willing to seriously consider a future as elected politicians for a political party. At its final admission, the board carefully aimed at getting a dynamic mix of people, notably from citizen groups hitherto under-represented by elected politicians.

The curriculum

The curriculum is a mix of political science, political skills and global challenges with an emphasis on the practical dimensions of politics, such as debating, public speaking, campaigning, working inside practical politics, etc. It is grounded in servant-leadership, values, ethics and transparency principles – encouraging participants to go deep into themselves about why they are interested in politics and what they hope to achieve for their communities/country. We also give them insights into the actual role of governing once in office.

The curriculum has been inspired by similar programs, notably two successful programs based in the US Institute for a Democratic Future (running for more than twenty years) and Emerge America (running for over ten years). While both programs focus on diversifying candidates in the Democratic party (they are not non-partisan, as our program is), this reference has served as an important framework to build from with guidance, templates, lessons learned, programmatic design, governance, resource mobilisation and overall operations.

We have been able to attract very competent and accomplished lecturers and discussion leaders: in the first four weekends, the group met with six active or retired government ministers as well as many specialists from different fields. The program runs over ten long weekends in a year and involves substantial reading and assignments between weekends. Even though we kept a very low profile initially, we had 200 applicants for the first year, which started in January 2016. We are now preparing for a second year. It is important to note that this is, of course, a long-term project, and so far should be seen as an experiment where there has been substantial learning already from this first year that will make the second year even better. Having said that, the first group is an amazing group of political talents, and they have achieved very high marks in the first evaluations.

In ten years' time, we hope to be able to look back on ten years of successful education, having a vibrant alumni community, and seeing signs of this group in a more vital Swedish version of representative democracy.

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