

Conducting Municipal Council Meetings with Social Distance



A political meeting i Östergötland County before COVID-19.

Photo credit: Ellen Aguirre

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Abstract

This paper studies how COVID-19 related social distancing affects Swedish local council meeting and the situation for elected representatives. It is based on interviews with local political advisors, a professional group employed to assist elected representatives in their political work.

Social distancing has affected the political agenda and the ways of organising local politics; digital meetings are limiting for the political debate, less engaging and affects who is heard and who is not. It is challenging to arrange digital meetings in a way that are in line with the law. However, digitalisation of local politics has led to technical and legal knowledge that can be used to adapt more swiftly in future crises.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on implications of COVID-19 on a local democracy level. How does social distancing and the following digitalisation of local council meetings affect the situation for elected representatives and for the local democratic process? In order to study this issue, I have interviewed local political advisors, a professional group with unique insight in the inner workings of local politics. As described in Swedish municipal law, the role of political advisors on the local level is to assist and relieve the elected representatives in their political work (SFS 2017:725, municipal law). Although they are chosen by the political parties, they are formally employed and paid by the municipality or county. This group is sometimes also referred to as political secretaries.

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Cramped political meeting in Östergötland County before COVID-19

Photo credit: Ellen Aguirre

Methodology

The study is based on 17 semi-structured interviews with political advisors from three municipalities and one region in eastern Sweden. Apart from one pilot interview that was conducted in August 2020, the interviews were conducted through video conference during the beginning of the so-called second wave of the Swedish COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it provides insight into the workings of local politics during a period of intense digitalisation.

Council meetings and local democracy

The main findings of the study illustrate how the pandemic has affected the political agenda and the ways of organising local politics. The respondents describe several examples of practical solutions meant to adapt the workings of local politics to the need for social distancing. Apart from a few cancelled council meetings, the meetings have been arranged in different ways.

During social distancing, council meetings were arranged:

- Outdoors or in more spacious premises such as concert halls or sports centres.
- As reduced council meetings with half of the council present
- As digital meetings.
- As hybrid meetings with half of the council online and half on site.

Some of these solutions were not well-received by the respondents; the hybrid meetings received criticism for being unequal and the meetings held in sports facilities experienced audio problems. In some cases, the voting process had to be adapted as well. One council, for example, that tried to use acclamation during a digital meeting.

There are challenges in digitalising the municipal and regional offices, elected representatives are a heterogeneous group with differences in digital skills, experiences and age. Senior representatives are frequently mentioned as a group that faced problems, both with social distancing and increased digitalisation. Some of the older representatives have also resigned because of the pandemic. However, it was pointed out that some senior politicians have adapted to digitalisation more quickly and are more skilled than their middle-aged colleagues. The changed ways of working have consequences for other elected representatives as well. One example is representatives living in rural areas with insufficient Internet connection.

“It is more difficult to make a grand speech sitting in the living room than standing at the lectern in front of eighty people.” - Respondent 11

Challenges with digitalisation of council meetings

- Some of the older council members resigned although their voices were extremely important for the decisions taken.
- Some older council members experienced difficulties with the new technology while others were able to adapt quickly.
- Some council members living in rural areas experienced bad connection.
- Digital meetings are less engaging and limit the political debate.
- Making sure digital meetings are in line with the law was an issue of concern.

“You were really scared that an entire council meeting would be appealed and all the decisions would be invalid and had to be remade or something. (---) Then, when the second wave hit, the politics took kind of a stand like ‘nah, enough with the red tape, we have to switch to digital mode.’” – Respondent 10

“At the end of the day, you and I both have these human needs for validation. You don’t become dedicated just like that - it comes from participation, satisfaction in your work and having this sense of belonging. And that is important to us politicians. We are committed to something together, and you could say that this is the reason that we want to work for other values than ourselves.” – Respondent 18

According to the respondents, digital meetings have resulted in a changed debate with less engagement and difficulties in finding the “zoom rhetoric”. Many mentioned the absence of grand speeches. The opposition practices self-restraint, the agenda is reduced and both sides think twice before speaking. Some of the respondents add that this is rather efficient and not necessarily a bad thing. Opposite effects can also be noted - as some members are more active in a digital format.

Keeping the meetings within the frame of laws and regulations is a major concern for the political advisors. A main difficulty is the clash between the rule that every council member has to be seen and heard during the council meeting (SFS 2017:725, municipal law) and the possibilities of the offered technology. It should be noted that different councils, and even different committees within the same municipality, seem to have interpreted the rule in slightly different ways.



Windy outdoor political meeting with social distancing.

Photo credit: Ellen Aguirre

Implications for future policy

Overall, the findings show that the respondents try to handle discrepancies between the content of their work and what is possible to do using the technology offered. This is consistent with the emergent imperative, an approach that describes digital organisational change as a dynamic phenomenon that is difficult to predict (Markus & Robey 1988).



A local politician's home office during the second wave of COVID-19.

Photo credit: Ellen Aguirre

Questions for local governments

- What have you learned from the use of hybrid meetings or distance meetings in your municipality?
- Have you seen effects on which voices you hear more or less of in local politics? If so, are there aspects of distance work that you think can be used to improve the inclusion of certain groups in the long run?
- How can the social side of politics, or the sense of belonging, be safeguarded during times of social distancing and beyond?

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Policy recommendations

Digitalisation of local politics is a challenge but, as several respondents emphasise, it is also an opportunity for inclusion. According to the respondents, digital meetings are here to stay, especially when it comes to smaller groups where the members already know each other. Keeping some of the meetings in a digital mode makes it easier to combine political participation with family and working life, especially for parents with young children and citizens living far from the meeting venues

For the sake of resilience, use the technical and legal knowledge acquired from digital council meetings to adapt more swiftly in future crises.

A crisis affects different parts of society in different ways. An example was the - albeit short - period in spring 2020 when the senior representatives had limited opportunities to participate in decisions despite the fact that many of the questions on the agenda were highly relevant for them as a group. Instead, the decisions were left to others who were less affected by social distancing. Work actively to find the differences and cushion the effects.

Some of the respondents are worried about low preparedness for unforeseen events and by reluctance to digitalisation in local authorities, especially in comparison to the private sector. It could be useful to take advantage of this digital transition, for example by keeping some of the current digital meeting habits after the pandemic. Frequent usage of digital tools at the workplace is an important step towards digital inclusion (van Deursen & van Dijk 2018). Also, local democracy could gain from using digital tools to involve and interact with citizens.

Several respondents talked about how politics are based on a sense of belonging. The social side of politics and the personal meeting is crucial and have to be upheld even during a pandemic. This calls for other strategies for keeping in touch with party members in order to uphold the sense of a mutual cause.

References and further reading

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