

COVID-19's Impact on Sweden as a Result of the Swedish Political System

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many have wondered why there have been widespread discrepancies between different countries' mitigation efforts. On the surface level, some may assume that this is simply because of ideological or political differences among world leaders, but in reality, much of the reason may fall on the varying political systems that states have adopted. Now, in the third year of the pandemic, perhaps no better time exists to investigate government responses to the virus. In this particular study, my focus will be on Sweden's response to the virus in relation to the powers and constraints of the country's political system. To complete this study, I focused my research on Sweden's political system, and what powers are given to the government(s) from it. Based on those findings, I was able to identify the country's varied— and certainly unorthodox— reaction to the virus and how that reaction not only impacted the cases, deaths, and transmissibility of COVID-19 within Sweden but also the impact on its economy and the wellbeing of its citizens. From my research, I was able to conclude that while Sweden's approach to the pandemic was atypical in comparison to most of its European neighbors, Sweden's COVID-19 statistics were similar to those countries that enacted stricter measures, and the impact of the pandemic on the country's economy and citizens was less severe.

COVID-19 has had a varied impact on Sweden from the beginning of the pandemic through the present day. In response to the pandemic, Sweden initially took a different approach to mitigate the virus in comparison to its Nordic neighbors, Finland and Norway. While these countries, including many others throughout Europe, instituted strict mitigation measures to combat the spread of the virus, Sweden initially refused to. Moreover, Sweden was

not legally allowed to do so based on the democratic parliamentary structure of their government and the personal beliefs of many Swedes on the role of government within their lives. Throughout most of 2020, Sweden continued in this hands-off approach to the virus. Due to a sharp uptick in positive cases in the fall of that year, and international and internal condemnation of the lack of mitigation efforts, the Swedish Riksdag passed a temporary law in January

2021 allowing the government to impose more measures. This new law, however, still did not allow for the type of measures that were seen in other European states. Some of these new restrictions began to be rescinded by the summer, with most of them ending by autumn 2021. As of March 11, 2022, almost all mitigation measures have been removed, with any remaining restrictions to be lifted on April 1.

Sweden's Political System

Sweden's political system is officially a parliamentary democracy. A parliamentary democracy is a form of government where the power flows from the people, as they elect members to represent their interests in parliament. Parliamentary democracies typically have one executive who performs the executive duties of the government and in Sweden is nominated by the Speaker of the Riksdag, who is then either approved or rejected by the entire parliament. . The executive branch, made up of the Prime Minister and the other agency-specific ministers, is referred to as a whole as "the government". The Prime Minister is then in charge of appointing ministers, similar to cabinet leaders in the United States, who oversee the running of the various ministries of the government and provide expertise within their field. The legislative process is typically started by the government submitting policy to the Riksdag in the form of a government bill, which then goes through various processes within the Riksdag to become law. Once the legislation is law, it is the responsibility of the government to enforce it. Sweden has two types of laws—normal and fundamental. Fundamental laws can be viewed as similar to constitutional amendments in the United States. Swedish normal laws are not arbitrary or unilateral, and must meet the minimum freedoms outlined by the Fundamental Laws. These

provisions outline the freedoms and democratic ideals appointed to the Swedish citizenry, and how the government is allowed to operate.

Constitutional Provisions and their Impact on Pandemic Policy

The Swedish Constitution, and the freedoms afforded within it, had a significant impact on the development of the government's mitigation efforts for the virus. One of the most impactful parts of the constitution was its separation of the national and local governments. Sweden is not a federal system, where the laws of the national government often supersede those of local municipalities, and as such local governmental systems in Sweden operate autonomously without having to worry about national edicts on public interest. This is outlined in Chapter 14 Article 2 of the Swedish Constitution, reading "The local authorities are responsible for local and regional matters of public interest on the principle of local self-government."

Moreover, public agencies, which are independent of all forms of government and ministry, are given even more liberty to make their own decisions, as stated in Chapter 12 Article 2 "No public authority, including the Riksdag, or decision-making body of any local authority, may determine how an administrative authority shall decide in a particular case relating to the exercise of public authority..." Some of the essential health organizations in pandemic research and policy, such as the Public Health Agency of Sweden, fall under this category, giving them complete independence from governmental directives on pandemic matters.

Finally, while people throughout the world criticized Sweden for not instituting a national lockdown, many failed to realize that the government legally could not institute one. Under the constitution,

Sweden is not allowed to declare a state of emergency in a peacetime period, and global health emergencies are not an acceptable reason to change that designation. National lockdowns are only permitted if under the guise of a state of emergency, and as such, the government could not institute one. Attempting to enforce a lockdown during a peacetime designation would mean that the government violated Chapter 2 Article 8 of the constitution, which reads “All Swedish citizens shall also in other respects be guaranteed freedom of movement...” An attempt to restrict Swede’s freedom of movement likely would have been unpopular within the country, and would have been, by far, the strictest COVID-19 mitigation measure instituted.

Sweden’s Response to COVID-19

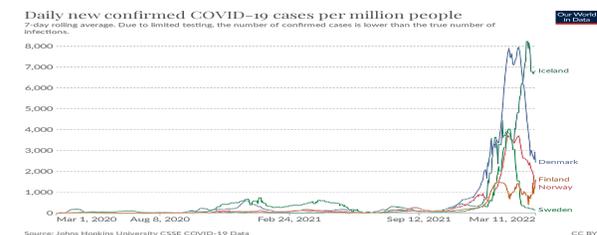
Sweden mainly deployed voluntary mitigation measures and recommendations to combat the coronavirus, encouraging each citizen to do what they viewed as best to protect themselves and those around them. This policy was received positively from the citizenry, and many heeded to the recommendations. In fact, many Swedes avoided gatherings, took personal rather than public transit, adhered to social distancing, and by April 2020, nearly fifty percent of the Swedish workforce was working from home— all without a government mandate. As a result, the mental health aspect to the pandemic was not as harsh in Sweden as it was in other countries, as the personal control allowed people to feel a sense of normalcy.

Even though most of the initial mitigation measures came in the form of recommendations, the government did issue some mandates, mostly in the form of capacity limits. On March 11, 2020, the government passed a law capping most non-essential public gatherings at 500 people. Later, on March 27, this was

lowered to 50. Additionally, the government suspended the policy of unpaid sick leave after a certain time period in order to encourage employees to stay home. On March 24, the government mandated that restaurants be tabletop service only, and advised that tables be spread apart to allow for social distancing. Perhaps the most isolating mandates handed down by the government came towards the end of March, with the banning of in-person secondary education learning and nursing home visits.

Following a sharp increase of cases going into the winter of 2020, demonstrated in Figure 1, the Riksdag passed a temporary law giving both the national and local governments more power to institute mitigation measures. The act, which was passed on January 8, 2021, allowed the government more liberty to institute further mitigation measures, including further limiting capacity in private businesses and public transportation, mandatory closing times for restaurants, and fining individuals that violate coronavirus protocol. The law also allowed for lockdowns, although the measure was never acted upon. Sweden also instituted new customs restrictions, including a general entry ban and requiring a negative coronavirus test to enter the country.

Figure 1
Confirmed Coronavirus case comparison between the Nordic countries



Over the summer of 2021 and into the fall, many of the mitigation measures that had been introduced were removed because of dwindling cases and higher vaccination rates. However, as winter approached and the Omicron variant caused

cases to surge, as illustrated in Figure 1, the government reinstated several strategies, including vaccine passports for events over 100 people, early closures of restaurants, capacity limits of fifty people, and suspending unpaid sick leave. By the beginning of February 2022, the Omicron variant had diminished, and on February 3rd, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson announced that by February 9th many of the restrictions and recommendations put forth by the government would be lifted. On April 1st, Sweden removed all existing restrictions, and replaced them with three recommendations: get vaccinated, stay home if you have symptoms, and be cautious in public settings if you are unvaccinated.

Conclusion

Overall, the Swedish approach to mitigating the coronavirus can be viewed as mildly successful. Even though their outlook to reduce the spread and impact of the virus was internationally criticized as being too

liberal, the data collected over the course of the pandemic now show that the virus did not significantly impact the country as severely as many more beneficial than the common lockdown, which literally changed people's lifestyles overnight for the worse. The Swede's strategy largely allowed individuals to approach the coronavirus as they saw fit, enabling a more mental health friendly approach. After a close examination of the coronavirus statistics in Sweden, their policies regarding the virus, and the reasons those policies existed, the Swedish approach to the virus was not a failure as many have suggested, but the large case numbers and deaths from the virus limit its success.

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