

Queues found to negatively impact voter turnout in Sweden

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A new study by Uppsala University has investigated how the comprehensive queues that built up during the Swedish elections in 2022 negatively impacted voter turnout. In total, turnout fell by three

percentage points. 87 percent of the population voted in 2018, which fell to 84 percent in 2022.

"One of democracy's cornerstones is the principle that all citizens should have full and [equal opportunities](#) to cast their vote. Participating in elections should therefore not demand more time and resources than necessary. We wanted to examine how the unusually widespread queuing in 2022 impacted on people's inclination to vote."

"The study is important both in terms of how we understand voter behavior and the discussion about how the Swedish election system is designed," notes Axel Cronert, Docent in Political Science and one of the researchers behind the study.

There is a lack of studies into how queues affect turnout in countries like Sweden, which traditionally have very high voter turnout. A few studies in other countries have shown that long queues at the polling stations can frighten away voters looking to cast a ballot. In Sweden, long queues have historically been unusual, but during the general elections in 2022 reports came in of significant queues.

Researchers have examined how voter turnout changed in the electoral districts which had problems with significant queues on election day, compared with other comparable districts without queuing issues. To measure the formation of queues, information is used about how late the electoral districts in the 20 largest municipalities had to stay open before the last voter in line had cast their vote, combined with information about queues during election day from questionnaires to polling station staff in three larger municipalities.

"The responses of polling station staff support the notion relatively strongly that late closing times are generally linked to queuing issues on election day," notes Marcus Österman, researcher at the Department of

Government, also researcher behind the study.

The results consistently show that the decline in voter turnout since 2018 was greater in the districts that had problems with queues than in comparable districts without queues. The significance of queues for the decline in [voter](#) turnout is estimated at around one percentage point in [queue](#)-affected districts. The researchers have also noted signs of spillover effects, that is, queuing issues that arose in one electoral [district](#) also negatively affecting turnout in neighboring electoral districts.

"However, the results indicate that some of the voters who refrained from voting at their regular polling station instead chose to go to an early voting station that was open on election day," notes Cronert.

Overall, however, the study indicates that the queuing problem was relatively limited. Of the 40 percent of the country's electoral districts involved in the study, only around 3 percent needed to remain open more than 15 minutes beyond the ordinary closing time.

For this reason, the researchers' assessment is that the queues' overall effect on [voter turnout](#) in Sweden was marginal. Even the largest estimate in the study does not suggest that the effect exceeds 0.25 percentage points, i.e. at most one twelfth of the total reduction in the country of three percentage points between 2018 and 2022.

One conclusion drawn by the researchers in the study is that the risk of consequences of the queuing issue should be taken seriously.

"Our results show that even in Sweden, where many are assumed to vote out of habit or a sense of duty, there are limits to how long voters are prepared to queue. In municipalities affected by queues, there are grounds to consider more ballot boxes, increased staffing and expanded opportunities for early voting on [election](#) day, for example. If the queues

in 2022 have created an image among voters that it takes a long time to vote in Swedish elections, there is a risk that fewer will participate in future elections as well," adds Österman.

More information: Article: Cronert, Axel & Österman, Marcus (2023) "Köer och valdeltagande i de allmänna valen 2022 (Queues and voter turnout in the general elections in 2022)." Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift, 125(4).

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