

Democratic participation and empowerment by folkbildning



2023 edition



Studieförbundet
Vuxenskolan

Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan

Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan (SV) is a “studieförbund” - a non government organization that arranges non formal adult education in a scandinavian educational form called “folkbildning”. People come together, voluntarily, to study something of their own choice.

Studieförbund and folkbildning are government supported, but free to organize, develop and arrange any programs and classes they like, as long as it is in line with the values of folkbildning. (which are: supporting democracy, for a diversity of people’s possibility to engage in society, even up divides in educational levels, broaden interest and participation in arts and culture.) The main method of learning in studieförbunden is the study circle. A study circle has limited number of participants, meeting for at least three sessions and a total minimum of 9 hours.

SV is the second biggest studieförbund in Sweden with 28 branches, about 800 employees, close to 20 000 studycircle leaders and with classes and programs in almost every one of Swedens 290 municipalities. Ever since the term “obildbara”(ineducable) was for ever taken out of Swedish law in 1968, opening education to all citizens – no matter what form of disability he or she might have – SV has had a close alliance especially with people with intellectual disabilities (ID). When Sweden started closing down its big institutions for care of people with ID, replacing it with smaller scale programs and group homes, SV was there to offer education and training, often with empowerment as one of its purposes. Today SV is the biggest studieförbund when it comes to service to the disability community. (2019: SV=52%, all the others 48%). Study circles with people with ID are often in smaller groups and with special needs met at an individual level.

Mitt val – a project to support increased voting among people with ID.

Before the election of 2010 Mr Pie Blume, an employee of FUB, The Swedish National Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability, published an article referring to research saying 8 out of 10 with an ID didn’t take part in Swedish elections for government. (Recent available research shows 6 out of 10 with an ID don’t vote.)

Kjell Stjernholm, organizational developer at SV, saw the article. The analysis he did was one of a gigantic democratic deficit, considering that the group with the lowest attendance at the polls were the

ones most dependent on agency and government programs in their daily lives. While other programs to promote voting often stopped at instructions on how to vote and arguments of why it is important, Kjell drew the conclusion that it's no use to instruct on how to vote, if you are not allowed to understand what we are voting about. A higher participation in the elections had to come with making the very politics being made accessible. And – to assure that the person to cast the vote would be the one with the power to choose who to vote for - political information had to be made accessible on the issues of his or her choice, in a way suitable for his or her way of understanding.

In time for the 2014 elections SV and FUB decided to cooperate and build a method for study circles on Swedish democracy, with a process securing that the participant could ask for and come by the political answers to his or her questions. We invited the easy read-foundation Centrum for Latlast to join us, asking Ulla Bohman to write the study material for us.

They accepted our invitation to cooperate, taking two powerful medias with them. One was the newspaper “8 sidor” (8 pages), an easy read newspaper with a weekly edition. The other was a website called “Alla väljare”(all voters), an easy read website for political information from and interaction with politicians of the parties of the national parliament.

The Speaker of Riksdagen, the Swedish parliament, granted us a meeting to discuss the project. He pointed out that the Swedish constitution makes the national government responsible for measures to support and administer our elections, while the parties monitor taken measures. We therefore informed both the officials at the government unit for democracy and held a meeting inviting the party secretaries of all parties represented in Riksdagen. All sides gave approval and/or support to our project.

One of Swedens most substantial funders for disability and youth projects is Arvsfonden (the inheritance fund). Arvsfonden granted SV 4 million SEK over two years for the development of method and material, education of study circle leaders, pilot study circles nationwide, evaluation and final redesign of both material and method. MUCF (the Swedish Agency for Youth and Society) gave support through the national government allocation in support of voter participation, 465 000 SEK.



The method was workshopped in a process between SV, FUB, the easy read-centre and yet another partner – Inre Ringen. Inre Ringen is a part of FUB where people with ID form national and local boards for self advocacy. The role of Inre Ringen was to identify possible reasons for the low participation in elections as a base for design of method and to monitor and give feedback to the proposed method.

Inre Ringen came up with some critical analysis of why the citizens with ID don't use their right to vote. Among other they spoke about "not understanding what the election is about", "not understanding what the political parties/politicians say", "not sure they have the right to vote", and maybe worst of all "trustees saying we aren't allowed to vote". But they are, although far from every Swedish citizen know about it.

When asked about when Sweden got voting rights equal for all citizens, most swedes say 1919 or 1921. Both om them are correct in the sense that those are the years women got their legal rights as law (1919) and first election for women to vote in (1921).



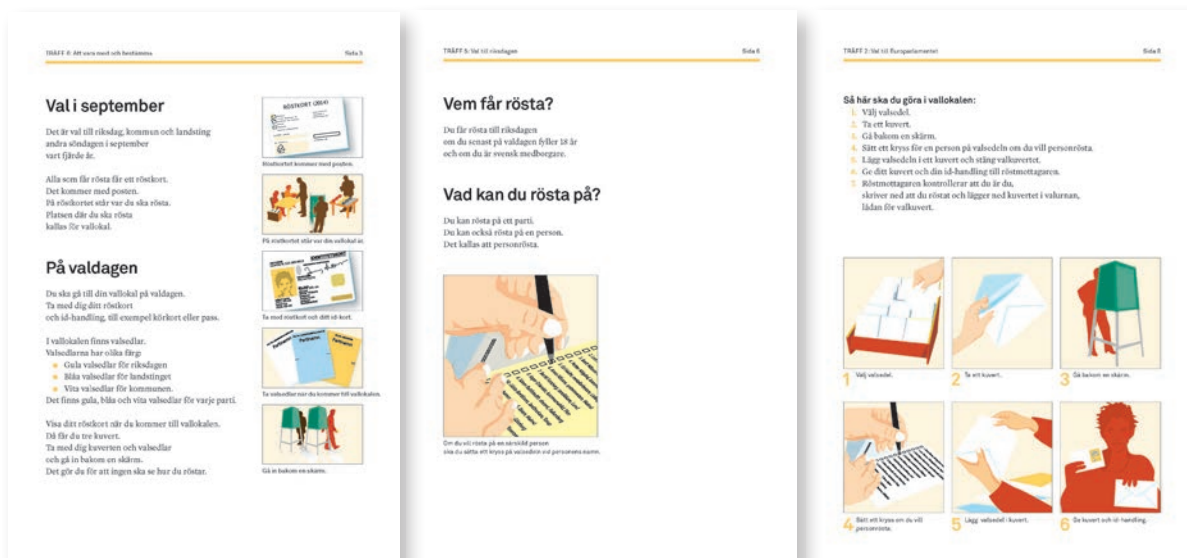
But the answer is incorrect, since we asked for ALL citizens. Poor people and prisoners still had no vote. That changed in the 1960's, but not until 1989 was the law changed so that no citizens were ruled incapacitated.

Sweden had four elections in 2014. The election for the European parliament in May, and the three elections for national, regional and city parliaments in September. We designed a study material consisting of seven sessions.

Session 1 looked at how to vote and why we should vote, with instructions on how to role play the procedure of a polling station, with gear like voting booths and ballots included. Learning by doing to take away the fear of not understanding how to do it on election day.

Session 2-5 focused on the four different elections we could take part in. Basic information on what parliament that holds responsibility for different areas.

Since the study circle always takes its starting point where participants wants it, all discussions about different political issues were initiated and called for by the participants. After looking at what city council does, the participants could choose what they wanted to know more about. Together, the



participants of the study circle (including the study circle leader) would use different resources to find answers to their questions. It could be by using newspapers and other medias, by directly contacting politicians to ask them, and in some cases through discussions of what they had comprehended from the general discussion that came with the election. But they also could use the resources of “8 sidor” and ”alla väljare”.

“8 sidor” having easy read articles on the election, and for special questions they could use the “alla valjare” internet site to post questions and get easy read answers. Resources like the political parties own information in easy read language was used, as well as the Centrum for Latllasts easy read folder produced together with the political parties in national parliament. During these sessions the participants of the different study circle phrased questions for the upcoming easy talked electoral discussions they were to take part in.

Session 6 was an electoral discussion in “easy talked” (compare with easy read) language, where politicians were taught how to communicate with easy language, accessible for the participating audience with ID, before entering the discussion. Instructions to the politicians were for example to use active form, avoid statistics, avoid special terms that calls for prior knowledge of what the term means, avoid metaphors, address directly to the one asking the question, avoid negations, be concrete instead of abstract.

The electoral discussion (not a debate, since a debate means trying to triumph over your opponent through rethorics, not a very user friendly mode for people with ID) was set up with all participating parties on stage, each one with a name and a party name and symbol attached to it to make sure

everyone could register what party representative was speaking. The moderator would pass the word to the participants of the different study circles cooperating, for them to ask the questions. The moderator would also allow follow ups of different kind, allowing participants to make sure they understood what was being said.

Session 7 was an evaluating event. Evaluating the election, but more important evaluating the method, process and mutual learning of the study circle.

We encouraged the participants and the study circle leaders to give us feedback, paying special attention to where we could adjust the material and method to become even better. We had hundreds of such remarks, large and small. Over 80% of those were processed into changes of study material and process instructions. It was then tried and evaluated again with new sets of participants.

As a result of feedback and evaluation the study material is now also available with widget supported text and as an audio file.

The project focused on seven cities for its development of “Mitt val” as a tool for making general elections accessible for people with ID. Altogether more than 500 have completed the study circle “Mitt val”. More than 80% of Mitt val-participants voted in the national elections, equal to the overall average of voting attendance in Sweden.

After having closed evaluations and second round of study circles, we also made mini conferences/ meetings with strategically important organizations and agencies for democracy in Sweden.

The project also did an information folder on the theme “8 out of 10 don’t vote” to start discussions with politicians at the convents of the political parties prior to the election. The SV officials manning these stands said they had never experienced such an interest from the participating politicians as they did with this campaign. The low participation rate of people with ID were news to most of them, and met with respect for a situation needing immediate response.



In Sweden there's a yearly political event called Almedalen, situated in the medieval city of Visby, on the island Gotland in the Baltic sea. Every summer politicians of all parties, lobbyists, civil society organizations, companies, NGOs and all/any other who wants to can join or arrange seminars. While the main focus is on the different party leaders speeches at night in an open park, every street, bar, stage, school or other venue holds events from morning til night, all addressing political issues.

Sweden has – in spite of the murders of prime minister Palme and foreign minister Lindh in modern time – managed to keep its open society. In Visby, the prime minister and citizens walk side by side on the streets. Anyone can start a conversation with members of government, MPs and party leaders – and get a reply.



SV and its partners planned a project. We had a prop maker from the film industry construct a light weight polling booth, that could be carried as a backpack.

We asked Bengt Fredriksson, journalist at 8 sidor, to do a reverse. While usually working with making political messages accessible through rewriting it as easy read, he was now asked to take the parties main messages and transfer them to an even harder level of understanding.

The walking booth was prepared with ballots of every party in the national parliaments – written in hard read Swedish. The mightiest politicians – the party leaders, secretaries of government and MPs – were asked to enter our booths and either find their own political party ballot, or to place all 8 ballots with the correct party, and through this get an experience of how hard it is for people with ID to get access to the political language.

The campaign was a success. Even if several MPs couldn't find their own party among the hard read ballots, they all appreciated the campaign and recognized the importance of our work with making elections accessible for voters with ID. They even asked to get copies of the ballots to test their friends, colleagues and political opponents, and turned out to be volunteers spreading the word. The campaign led up to a seminar with the speaker of the parliament on democracy and accessibility, serving cake to all participants celebrating the 25th anniversary for equal voting rights for all Swedish citizens.



Later on Olle Wastberg, the national enquiry on democracy, revealed that the campaign was a major contribution to allowing the voting ballot to include logotypes in coming elections, and thereby easier to tell apart.

Every year there is a competition of the best campaign in Almedalen. This year 1.000 campaigns were nominated. "Mitt val"s walking booth for accessible politics and elections were selected as one of six finalists, never to have happened before for a low budget campaign from/for/by people with ID. The parliamentary public enquiry for democracy issues also took notice of "Mitt val", recognizing the importance of further work to be done to make elections accessible for all.

Two major outcomes of the evaluation of Mitt val were:

- a. It's hard to be citizen voting every four years, if democratic processes are absent in between.
- b. The political parties only produce easy to read information on national level. The local and regional levels are almost all lacking easy to read information on their local political platform.

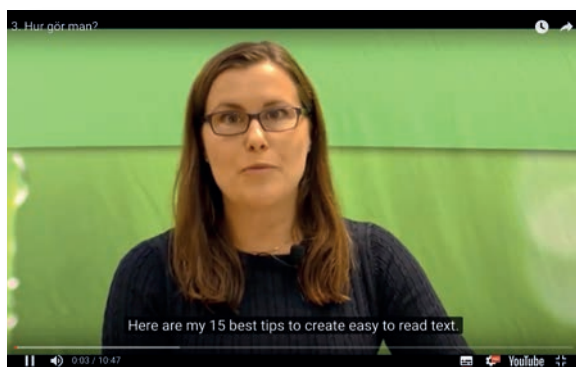


Online education for politicians in easy read

An addition in 2018 was an online education for local politicians called “How to be an easy read politician”. SV decided to take action on the feedback of the participants regarding the lack of easy read information on the different local political platforms.

We invited the easy read language consultant Ylva Bjelle to develop an online education for local and regional politicians/political staff. The objective was not to have them reach expert level, but to train them enough to be able to write the most important statements of their local political agenda in easy read, and to make that information available to voters that need easy read in the election 2018.

The online education consists of 10 chapters, each one with a video of Ylva Bjelle explaining main principles of how to write in easy read. After each chapter, the attendee takes on different exercises. They are all different examples of political texts that need to be transformed into easy read. The participant enters an answer, and can immediately after that compare his or her own text to how the expert chose to answer.



The last exercise is to decide on the most important political statements of their local political platform and write it down in easy read. With that, you have not only concluded the online education, but you actually have an easy read information on your local politics to use and distribute. (the online education is available – in Swedish – at sv.se/lattlastpolitiker)



2018 also saw a new successful campaign in Almedalen. We took difficult to understand quotes of every political party and put in black on white signs. Party leaders, parliament members and government officials were targeted in the public streets and invited to discuss with our crew of participants with ID what their difficult quotes meant. We then switched the sign around with the sign now saying the same message in easy read (white on green). Every discussion was filmed or photographed and with permission published on social media, tagging the leading politicians and referring interested people to the online education.

2022 Latest edition – New digital tools

In the evaluation from 2018 our participants showed us new areas of improvement. At the same time Inclusion International and ZeroProject recognized our work as internationally significant, and thereby allowed us to interact with other outstanding initiatives on political participation. We decided to develop four new digital tools to be implemented in our method. We contacted Begripsam, leading Swedish organization concerning cognitive digital accessibility for design and technical development.

Guess the party?

Our participants say it's hard to know what politician talks for what party. The Swedish riksdagen has eight parties, and the logo of their party is not always included when they are participating in interviews or debates.

Solution: A game in a sort of “Memory”-style, where the participants are challenged to combine the picture/name of the party leader with the correct party logo.



The game is constructed so it can be programmed for local municipality and regional elections too. Our participants thereby learned to recognize the most important politicians on local and regional level as well.



Who's in charge?

One important part of My choice/
my election is the possibility to get
answers to your political questions.

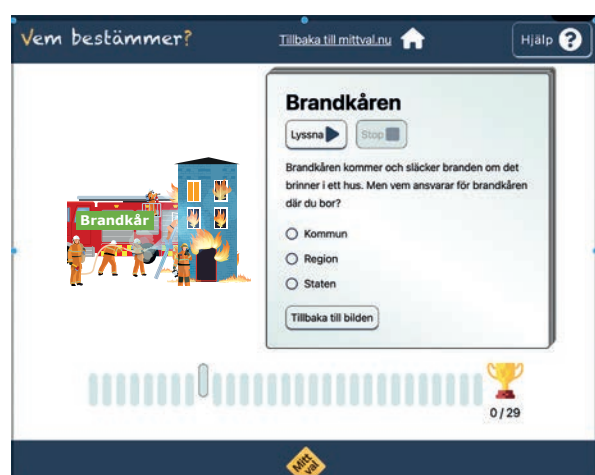
What do the liberals want concerning health? What's the view on energy choices from the conservatives?

But it's not enough to only receive answers to your questions. A voter also benefits from knowing what political level is responsible for health issues. (A poll close to the

election showed that 50% of the voters didn't know who was in charge politically for the hospital care, so people with ID are not alone of this challenge).



We let ourselves be inspired by the Victoria Electoral Commission, Australia, and a game they produced for a prior election. From a map of a society you start pointing out different areas of the picture, and thereby receive a question on what political level that is in charge of garbage disposal, agriculture, defense, immigration, schools etc. We created a Swedish version, adding some disability issues we know our participants care about. Each question is in easy read, have a voice reader function, and you can play with the game in several ways.



Both of these games were also suitable for our participants to take home and challenge family members or staff. Do they know who's in charge of fresh water & sewers?



Facebook questions to politicians

We were also inspired by a Mencap (UK) campaign in 2015, addressing video questions to political candidates and allowing everyone to see whether the politician answered and what he or she answered.



Sweden has a more complicated structure of our electoral districts, allowing a certain geographic area to choose a number of MPs, and the different parties have lists of names that aspire to get elected. So we decided to use the established structure of Facebook. We put up a page belonging to our project (facebook.com/mittvalstudiecirkel). Study circles produced video clips with questions with three demands to get accepted.

1. The municipality name of your study circle must be included.
2. We have to hear what you say/see your face.
3. There's got to be a question somewhere.

All video clips that passed the requirements were formatted with project logos, subtitled and posted to the page. The post explained the purpose, and asked the politicians to answer in the comments in easy language. The local party branches were then tagged to the question, giving them an opportunity to choose whether and what to answer.

Image support

Our study circle leaders gave us feedback on how they produced their own image support to make the understanding of areas of politics easier. So we decided to produce one for them. A basic card set with pictorials on “what do you think?” together with “yes”, “no” and “I don’t know” was developed alongside up to 40 images of political areas of responsibility.

All new features were tested by participants with ID on five different locations in Sweden, and adjustments were made due to their feedback. This development project was financed by the



Swedish Agency for Youth and Society, MUCF. The same agency then supported some of the costs for the project in 2022 elections. They were not alone in supporting our efforts this year. All major national agencies on voting, inclusion, regional/local coordination, national disability representatives highlighted and distributed information and support before, under and after the study circles and the election.

Research project

The Uppsala university department for political science started a research project based upon studying the effects of a political participation project of international recognition, My choice/my election. Thereby we have a more certain result of voter turnout than previous years.

Voter turnout:

Participants of My choice/my election: **85%**

Swedens population as a whole: **84%**



This was accompanied by a campaign once again among leading politicians in Almedalen, where they were invited to try our new digital games for understanding democracy and politics. Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan also produced content for social media running parallel to the program on the challenges we address with our work. This campaign had 1.2 million exposures. Our traditional media coverage service gave 71 hits in newspapers, radio, television with a range of 3,5 – 4 million recipients.

2022:

Participants in study circles: **922**

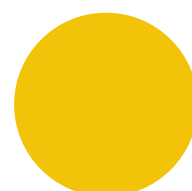
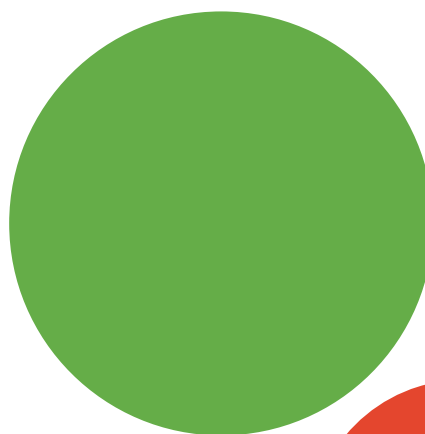
Participants in easy to understand political discussions: **1607**



Future challenges

Two challenges to be addressed until 2026 election is

1. Can the study circle My choice/my election work in a digital mode?
2. Improvement of pre study circle information and recruiting participants.





Plats för
nytänkande

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