

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to survey the extent of the direct and indirect financial support from the public sector to the political parties in Sweden, and to assess the importance of this support for the parties, as well as analyze various alternative ways of organising the public financial contributions to the political parties. As a separate appendix to the study, Dr. Gullan Gidlund, at the Department of Political Science at the University of Umeå, has contributed an international survey of public support for the activities of political parties in various other countries.

In Sweden, financial support to political parties is provided from public funds at central, regional and local level. The outlays for this "party support", which was introduced in the 1960s, have risen rapidly and there is a risk of this tendency continuing, particularly for county councils, where the support is commonly indexed (usually to the benchmarks for pensions, etc.). Party support from the central government is to be cut, however, by ten per cent as of 15 October 1994. The problems connected with rising outlays are mainly economic and ethical. While the general economic situation is necessitating savings in public expenditure, party support is often exempted.

The political parties are heavily dependent on the public support. Their other sources of income are limited; the Social Democrats are an exception in that they have succeeded in obtaining a substantial proportion of income from lotteries. The danger of being excessively reliant on public funds is that this may limit the incentive for members and sympathizers to provide various forms of support.

The public funds are used by the parties mainly to cover costs for personnel and premises. Media publicity is a growing item, particularly in connection with elections. A strongly rising trend for election costs is evident in other countries. In those countries where party expenditure on election campaigns has been curbed most successfully,

party support is provided indirectly in the form of free time on radio and television. The report proposes the collection of further material in order to investigate the advantages and drawbacks of such a model.

Attempts to limit election campaign expenditure have been made in a number of countries. Experience indicates that this can give some control over the rate of increase. The model could be tested for Swedish conditions by having the parties reach voluntary agreements to limit election expenditure.

Compared with many other countries, the financial regulation of political parties is slight in Sweden. Neither is there in principle any control – again in contrast to other countries – of how the public funds are used. Considering that the support comes from public funds, that in some municipalities and county councils it is relatively large, and that it is decided by the recipients, some degree of insight should be accorded to the electorate.

The introduction of an element of personal candidature in the election system is expected to lead candidates to build up individual campaign budgets. Experience from other countries show that this is liable to result in financing that is undesirable, particularly if the candidates become tied to large donors. These risks can be managed in various ways, for instance by limiting funds and by making sizeable donations public. In the light of experience from other countries, this issue should be considered in connection with the evaluation of future elections with an element of personal candidature. The report considers that the issue of protecting donors, which has been put forward as an argument against making donations public, should be weighed against the public interest in knowing who stands behind the various candidates and, indirectly, the parties.

As regards financial compensation and fees to elected representatives, members of the Riksdag and cabinet ministers, the tendency at national level differs from changes considered by the Committee on Local Democracy. The endeavour at national level is to arrive at a neutral arrangement whereby the remuneration of members of the Riksdag and of cabinet ministers is decided by apolitical bodies. In contrast, the report from the Local Democracy Committee proposes a return to earlier arrangements that give municipalities and county councils more discretion to decide the remuneration to elected representatives.