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Injured But Not Yet Dead:

A Bottom-up Perspective on the Swedish Governmental
Commissions

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Abstract

This article analyzes the recurrent “erosion thesis” in the governance literature, arguing that bureaucratic or procedural public-sector institutions have come to play a less significant role in public-policy formation. Evidence from the Swedish policy-making institutions referred to as “governmental commissions” and adoption of the perspective of interest organizations support the claim. Using various theories of institutional change, I show that increased government control has reduced the influence of governmental commissions on policy, but not eliminated the belief held by interest organizations that the commissions are legitimate institutions.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, governance, institutional change, interest organizations, policy making, governmental commissions.

INTRODUCTION

One recurrent theme in the governance literature is that traditional and hierarchical bureaucratic policy-making institutions that are governed by laws and regulations have come to play a less significant role in the formation of public policy (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 2007). Scholars have claimed that the increasing complexity of societies – involving multiple opportunities to influence public policy at various levels – has made traditional institutions of government less able to gather the knowledge they require from outside actors, shape effective and legitimate policies and solve public problems. They have been “hollowed out” (Rhodes, 2007) and “eroded” – and so has the political actors’ confidence in them (Bartolini, 2011, 4). Self-regulating, flexible and horizontal governance networks have come to take the place of traditional government institutions. These networks have been considered as the answer to policy problems, by mobilizing interest organizations and creating a more democratic policy process (Sørensen & Torfing, 2003).

However, the debate on the destabilization of the traditional governing institutions has been driven more by theory than empirical research, even though the need for detailed empirical testing is repeatedly recommended (Kersbergen & Waarden, 2004; Kjaer, 2004; Lynn, 2012; Robichau, 2011). Empirical studies have found hypotheses of the decline of traditional bureaucratic institutions ambiguous (A. Jordan, Wurzel, & Zito, 2005; Koch, 2013) depending on the nature of the issue, the range of actors involved and the context in which policy-making takes place (Head, 2008; Lynn, 2012). In addition, “new policy instruments”, such as governance

networks, often complement and, on some occasions, even competes with old forms of steering (Considine & Lewis, 2003; A. Jordan et al., 2005). Still, scholars have recently focused on the role of new governance networks while empirical interest in traditional bureaucratic institutions has remained somewhat limited, waiting to be “rediscovered” (Olsen, 2006). In addition, there is a need for a bottom-up perspective that examines the perspective of interest organizations¹ in order to understand fully the supposed decline in hierarchical governance (Hill & Lynn, 2005, 179; Lynn, 2012, 61).

This article makes an empirical contribution to this discussion by analyzing whether bureaucratic policy-making institutions are eroded, and if so, how this has occurred. Evidence is drawn from Sweden and the neo-corporatist policy-making institution referred to as the ‘governmental commission’. In the governance literature, neo-corporative institutions are frequently associated with bureaucratic modes of governing (Kooiman, 2003, 222) as they have a high degree of standardization, hierarchy and formalisation – they are portrayed as a “standard response” to public problems (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004, 97-9). Sweden has often been put forward as one of the most corporatist countries in the world, a country where public policy has been produced in close and highly institutionalized co-operation with major interest organizations in a rationalistic and consensual manner (Rothstein, 1992). In comparison to the Anglo-Saxon countries, Sweden is also described as having a distinct policy style (Painter & Peters, 2010, 23) characterized by the tradition of a strong state that is expected to lead the transformation of society through hierarchically organized political and administrative processes (Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006). From a

broader perspective this may imply that if bureaucratic policy-making institutions are eroded in Sweden, this may also be the case in other political contexts that are rooted in a neo-corporative institutional characterized by strong-state governing.

The empirical analysis draws from semi-structured qualitative interviews with representatives of 15 interest organizations with the status of 'insider'. The interviews cover these organizations' perceptions of the evolution of the governmental commissions over the last three decades. The results provide evidence for the erosion, or sometimes the weakening, of the governmental commissions. Departing from various explanations of institutional change, it is argued that the shifting power balance between interest organizations and the government – to the benefit of the latter – and short-time horizons are relevant explanations to the weakening of the governmental commissions. At the same time, increased steering has not brought about a declined belief in the governmental commissions among interest organizations, which indicates that they are still perceived as appropriate and legitimate policy-making institutions. Although the governmental commissions may be injured they are not yet seen by interest organizations as obsolete.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the second section, following this introduction, I present a brief background to the governmental commissions in Swedish policy-making. The third section draws from the literature on institutional change and provides various explanations on how institutions change. The fourth section presents the data and methods used and the fifth section presents the empirical results. In the sixth section the results are discussed with reference to different theories on

institutional change. Conclusions are outlined in the seventh and final part.

THE GOVERNMENTAL COMMISSIONS IN SWEDISH POLICY-MAKING

The system of governmental commissions is one of the most institutionalized parts of the Swedish policy process. Although it is often associated with the neo-corporative mode of governing, its lineage can be traced back to the 1600s. In the first scientific writing to be found on the topic, a governmental commission was defined as “a temporarily and freestanding body of inquiry aimed at formulating political goals and to prepare or solve legislation on specific policy issues” (Hesslén, 1927, 6). Still, this definition is relevant today (Amnå, 2010). The governmental commissions resemble the Royal Commissions in Britain or the Congressional Committees in the US. However, the Swedish commissions are organized under government ministries and not the parliament and a freestanding and temporary authority with its own budget and personnel. The use of governmental commissions has been explained by the relatively small Swedish government ministries with limited personnel. Hence, governmental commissions have allowed a temporary expansion of the government in order to prepare policy issues. As such it has been referred to as an ad hoc committee. Similar commission processes exist in the Nordic countries Norway, Denmark and Finland.

The governmental commissions are embedded in a bureaucratic setting and accord to many of the features ascribed to bureaucratic institutions, including being hierarchical and initiated from below, having a high degree of standardization,

institutionalization and ordered by laws and regulations (eg: Knill & Tosun, 2012, 60). Each governmental commission is appointed by the government and the operating procedures of a governmental commission are regulated in a specific decree (Kommittéförordningen, 1998:1474), and further specified in a government report (Kommittéhandboken, Ds 2000:1). Its aim is always regulated by the “directives” which comprise a document, written by the government. A governmental commission can be run by one or a combination of the following: a single person, a representative body of parliamentarians, civil servants, representatives from interest organizations, and scientific experts. Yet, although a governmental commission is organized as a separate authority the ministry is always able to steer a governmental commission by appointing the member(s) of the commission, initiating the directives and having a final say on its budget, and hand-picking certain civil servants to work on the commission.

Interest organizations can participate as experts in hearings or official meetings arranged by the commission or by sending written submissions and visiting the commission. The reports and policy proposals produced by a governmental commission are sent for review and comments to a large number of actors that are considered to have a stake in the policy according to a list created by the government. This process is referred to as the ‘remiss procedure’. The government commission report, together with comments sent in by interest organizations through the remiss procedure, generally form the basis on which the government drafts a bill and introduces it for consideration by parliament.

Traditionally, the system of governmental commissions has been considered as one central policy-making arena in Sweden due to its role in gathering knowledge and information and as an arena for political negotiations in order to reach consensus and thereby generate stability and legitimacy (Premfors, 1983). With respect to the perspective of interest organizations, Elvander (1966) showed that in the mid-1960s the governmental commissions were assessed as one of the most influential institutions in national policy. When comparing how interest organizations perceived their political influence in different institutions for making policy, the system of governmental commissions was rated as the most important arena in influencing national policy followed by government agencies, the Government Offices of Sweden and the parliament (Elvander, 1966, 237-42).

However, in beginning of the 1980s, the corporatist relationship between the government and major interest organisations started to change. Decision-making arenas, previously among the most centralized in the world, were formally decentralized and in 1991 when the Swedish Employers' Confederation (SAF) withdrew from the boards of almost all government boards and agencies scholars declared the end of corporatism (Lewin, 1994; Rothstein & Bergström, 1999). As lobbying has increased in public policy-making, consultants and informal governance networks where state representatives and interest organizations interact (Pierre & Sundström, 2009; Öberg & Svensson, 2012), the governmental commissions are now said to be playing a less prominent role in public policy-making (Hermansson, Lund, Svensson, & Öberg, 1999). However, research on the governmental commissions is

outdated and it remains an empirical question whether and how the ability to influence policy through governmental commissions has changed during the last three decades.

THEORIZING THE EROSION THESIS

How are policy-making institutions eroded? What triggers change?

One common argument in political science is that institutions, which consist of formal rules, norms of behavior, conventions and the enforcement characteristics of both (North, 1993, 2), are sources of inertia and relatively resistant to change. Institutional structure, behaviors and collective action are influenced by a standard operation procedure following pre-defined patterns of thought. However, institutions are not static and may change.

A prevalent starting point in theories on institutional change is to emphasize the strategic choice of institutional actors and the utility of institutions (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Much of this reasoning rests on rational choice theories where institutional actors, which could be states and interest organizations, are perceived as self-interested and goal-oriented, intentionally choosing institutions that have the potential to maximize their individual benefits. Institutional stability occurs when all of the actors have an incentive to cooperate because all gain equally from the institution (Calvert, 1995). Following this argument, institutions change when at least one actor within the institution has an incentive to reconsider the existing institution and propose another institutional setting that is more advantageous (Héritier, 2007; North, 1990). Change may be caused by a dissatisfaction with the existing institution, a change of capabilities of an individual actor (Roberts & Greenwood, 1997) or

increasing transaction costs associated to the institution (Williamson, 1975). If the institution fails to maximize benefit, the transaction costs would be considered too high in relation to the anticipated influence and interest organizations would try to change, opt out from the institution or choose another venue to influence policy that are more advantageous and thereby initiating institutional change.

However, the efficiency-oriented explanation of institutional change does not take into account aspects of power as a trigger for change. According to the theory of distributional rational choice institutionalism, institutions have different distributional consequences for the involved actors and institutions are compared under this perspective. The reason why institutional actors end up choosing a particular venue to form a public policy is because various institutions imply different distributional benefits among the actors (Knight, 1992, 210). As pointed out by Lake, “institutions lock in a particular division of the joint gains” (Lake 2004, 3, cited in Héritier, 2007, 41). Thus, an institution may change due to the altered preferences of institutional actors or an increase in power of a particular actor (Héritier, 2007, 40-3).

In a critique towards the rationalists’ account, Paul Pierson has argued that “time horizons should be treated as a variable with real implications for questions of institutional origins and change”, in particular regarding legislative policy-making institutions (Pierson, 2000, 483). Legislators tend to be more interested in policy interventions having short-term consequences to serve electoral politics and to influence the decisions of voters. Therefore, legislators tend to pay attention to long-term consequences only if these become politically salient, or when they

have little reason to fear being overthrown in the upcoming election. As such, if legislators are motivated by short time horizons, policy-making institutions such as the governmental commissions, which traditionally functioned as an arena for major institutional reforms with long time horizons, may be subject for institutional change. However, it may be more valued among voters and interest organizations whose interests span beyond the next election (Pierson, 2000, 480).

Likewise, interest organizations may be motivated more by conceptions of what is appropriate than by conceptions of what would work. According to the sociological institutional tradition, standardized and accepted institutional norms and ideas shape the beliefs and practices of participants of an institution. (March & Olsen, 1989). Institutions are in this sense “self-enforcing because actors have internalized the belief that some actions are appropriate, natural, and legitimate” (Olsen, 2009, 9). Following this reasoning, institutions may change as a result of a reshaping of belief and consciousness among and between the institutional actors. This is facilitated through actors’ own experiences and critical evaluations from other institutional arrangements as well as a loss of consensus among certain institutional practices (Olsen, 2009, 24; Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, 708-9). As such, change takes place incrementally and in conjunction with existing institutional ideals.

Now we return to the question raised in the introduction of the article: whether and how are the governmental commissions eroded? What results can be expected given the perception of interest organizations? A rationalist may expect that the perceived effectiveness of the governmental commissions has

been subsequently reduced as the alternative venues for policy-making such as lobbying, personal contacts and informal networks, have increased (Öberg & Svensson, 2012). Further, accounting for the distributive rational choice perspective interest organizations may point to an increased government steering of the governmental commissions, for example by reducing the representation of interest organizations in governmental commissions (Christiansen et al., 2010). Finally, from a sociological institutional perspective, interest organizations may give voice to a waning belief in the governmental commissions as an appropriate, natural and legitimate policy-making institution.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To analyze whether and how the governmental commissions process has eroded, this article draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 15 representatives of interest organizations¹ measuring their perceptions of the evolution of the governmental commissions during the last three decades. The organizations include trade unions and producer organizations with ample members and employees.² The organizations were selected for having plenty of experience with participating in governmental commissions and the interviewees have leading positions in their organizations, such as general secretary, union secretary, legal expert or policy director. Interest organizations were identified from a quantitative dataset of 302 interest organizations participating in the remiss procedure from 2003 to 2009. Organizations participating 6 times or more in governmental commissions between 2006 and 2011 were selected. The interviews were conducted between November 2012 and April

2013 and lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. The interview covered the interest organizations' participation in and perception of the governmental commissions, how these have changed and the role of the commissions compared to other venues for policy influence. The interviews have been fully transcribed and analyzed accordingly.

To provide a historical reference point on the position of the governmental commissions, I use a study by Elvander (1966) analyzing Swedish interest organizations' perceptions of influence in the different parts of the policy process. This study was based on in-depth interviews with 19 of the most leading interest organizations, that is, organizations with insider status (Elvander, 1966, 237-42). Although the studies analyze the exact same organizations they draw evidence from organizations with plenty of experience from the governmental commissions, which allows for comparisons. In addition, other studies conducted on the governmental commissions during this time are used to verify the results.

Some methodological challenges need to be addressed. First, it is important to accentuate that the sample is representative of neither all Swedish interest organizations nor organizations participating in the governmental commissions. The sample draws from organizations with insider status, that is, organizations which are having a more consultative relationship with government and therefore they benefit from privileged access (Grant, 2000, 19-20). The motive of using this sample is to include organizations with plenty of experience from the governmental commissions. However, one needs to take into account that the organizations in this sample may overestimate the position of the

governmental commissions to legitimate their insider position in relation to the government. Further, when using a retrospective design there is always a risk that the interviewees may fail to recall, omit or alter circumstances taking place at an earlier time (Bernard, Killworth, Kronenfeld, & Sailer, 1984). Although the interviewees had no difficulties in bringing to mind the circumstances surrounding earlier governmental commissions, this needs to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The results of this study diverge from earlier literature on the governmental commissions (Elvander, 1966, 1974; Premfors, 1983). None of the interviewees in this study perceived the governmental commissions as the most important venue in influencing national policy when compared to other venues, such as the media, personal contacts and the European Union. Almost all of the interviewees declare that during the last three decades, the significance of the governmental commissions has “reduced”, “weakened” and “declined”. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish Trade Federation are the most critical interest organizations, and refer to the governmental commissions as “window dressing” (Ola Pettersson, at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO) and a “democratic charade” (Göran Nordén, at the Swedish Trade Federation (Svenskt Näringsliv).

To interest organizations, the governmental commissions have changed due to a claimed shift in the extent to which government steers the commissions. Reoccurring themes

among the interviewees are that the time frames of the governmental commissions have become shorter and the number of multi-member commissions has decreased. This is supported by previous findings showing that the number of multi-member commissions featuring interest organizations decreased slightly since the beginning of 1980s (Christiansen et al., 2010). In addition, an emerging trend towards shorter time frames was noted in the end of the 1980s (Bergström, 1987, 358; Gunnarsson & Lemne, 1998). Guy Lööf, policy director at the Pensioners' Organization, explains:

The governmental commissions are now much shorter; there are more single-member commissions and fewer multi-member committees. Today you are called to a meeting where you meet the investigator and the secretariat twice or so and that's good too. But it has become more difficult to follow the investigations in the way you did before. The governmental commissions have in some sense [been] eroded. And I think this is an unfortunate development. The governmental commissions have somehow deteriorated because they get so little time to do a proper background analysis and to ask the penetrating questions as was the case earlier. A commission having less than two years, they do not accomplish that much.

Adding to this picture, some of the interviewees state that during recent decades it has become more common for the government to precedes the commission process in their policy-making. Instead of waiting for a commission to complete its work, the government proposes legislation that is not fully considered by the commission.

Mikael Klein, policy director at the Swedish Disability Federation (Handikappförbunden), says that:

Compared to maybe 10 years ago, I think the governmental commissions have weakened. I cannot say that there are some drastic changes. Yet, I think there has been a weakening understanding of the benefits of a commission, which leads to poor policy decisions. The signs are several. They [the government] provide the commissions with [a] shorter time frame than before. I think this is a clear trend. Also, the result of a commission is preceded by picking up individual issues that is still under consideration by the commission and put [forward] as policy proposals. The government does not wait for the whole process to finish. This is also repeated [...] So it's more "trial and error" instead of which we in Sweden have been successful with before, to get to the bottom of an issue and try to see different consequences, which is perhaps a bit boring and takes a little longer, it's not the same action, but it's actually better [for] decisions, and where there has been a change. I do not believe there is a huge change but a

shift. In that sense, I think that the Swedish commission system has weakened compared to 10 years ago.

These claims are supported by a study by the Swedish National Audit Agency (Riksrevisionen) showing that between 1982 and 1995 the average time of all governmental commissions decreased from 4 years to 1 year, and in 2002 the average time for a governmental commission was 1 year and 8 months. Single-member commissions are generally shorter (Riksrevisionen, 2004, 30-1).

Furthermore, some interviewees describe that that over time, the directives of governmental commissions have become more detailed (Johansson, 1992, 221-2). Rather than instructing the commissions to seek for the best available policy solution to a problem (cf: Anton, 1969), interest organizations consider the directives to have become more detailed where the premises of a commission is more clearly defined. Helene Lindstrand, the general secretary at the Swedish Teachers' Union (Lärarförbundet), expresses that:

So much has happened during the last decades. In our area, the governmental commissions have much more defined directives. What is to be achieved by a commission is already decided and the commissions are dealing with much more specific problems today. There are few of the broader commissions considering a social problem asking what we should do about it.

According to almost all of the interviewees, these changes are considered to have reduced the opportunities to influence policy through the governmental commissions. Linda Grape at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) says that shorter time frames and fewer multi-member commissions have made the possibilities to influence the outcome of a governmental commission more unpredictable as they are more dependent on the single appointed

person running the commission and/or the civil servants working in the commission secretariat. Lars-Erik Lundkvist at the Federation of Swedish Farmers (Lantbrukarnas riksförbund) adds that fewer multi-member commissions, shorter time frames and more specified directives have been necessary due to an increasing pace of the national policy process. To account for the decreasing opportunities to influence a running commission, LRF use more personal contacts at the level of the government offices.

This being said, the interviewees have not completely lost confidence in the governmental commissions. Although several interviewees state that over time their strategies of influencing policy have multiplied, especially by using the media, they articulate a trust in the basic idea of the governmental commissions. The system of governmental commissions is described as an “appropriate instrument to solve policy problems by supplying the policy process with ideas and policy solutions” (according to Maicen Ekman, the former general secretary at the Swedish Adult Education Association). Likewise, Mikael Klein, for the Swedish Disability Federation, is of a similar position:

When a governmental commission is working good it collects systematically the different perspectives and highlights different angles of an issue. At that time we have an opportunity to bring our perspective and our perspective that is otherwise easy to forget.

Further, the interest organizations articulate a strong belief in the operating procedures of the governmental commissions. Compared to informal networks at the national government level – such as reference groups, in-house inquiries, workshops and dialogues, which are considered to have gained prominence during the last three decades (cf: Jacobsson & Sundström, 2006) – the relatively

formalized and predictable procedure of the governmental commissions is described as increasing the chance that they will be influential. Helene Lindstrand, the general secretary at the Swedish Teachers' Union (Lärarförbundet), expresses that:

With a directive that is decided upon and with a governmental commission that is appointed by the government we have a stronger right to propose our opinions direct to the commission and take part in meetings arranged by the commission. I may be a proponent of formalism but it is easier to act in relation to a governmental commission because it is more structured and has a clearer purpose.

In addition, the formalized (and bureaucratic) procedure of the governmental commissions enables interest organizations to strategize their efforts to influence. Jan Terstad at The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Naturskyddsföreningen) explains:

Still, a governmental commission is organized according to certain rules and I think there is a specific decree on committees too. The formal procedure of the commission process provides us with some kind of security even though the pace of the commission processes is a problem. The other arenas the government initiates, such as dialogues and reference groups, are very unpredictable; it is difficult to give a forecast. Because, if I as a manager decide to involve my co-workers in about two hundred hours of work in a governmental commission, I am able to calculate with the output, that is, the commission report and also the knowledge that we build. Then it is worth the investment. However, if I put two hundred hours of work in a vague dialogue with an unclear outcome that no one knows what to do with it...?

Even the most critical interviewee, Göran Nordén at the Swedish Trade Federation (Svenskt Näringsliv), articulated a belief in the governmental commissions. Nordén values the formalized and predictable procedure, which is considered as key in upholding transparency and functioning as a means to solve policy problems.

Taken together, the results from the interviewees provide evidence for the erosion thesis and show that during the last three decades, a reduced number of multi-member commissions with representation of interest organizations, a more prompt commission process and seemingly increased governmental steering of the

governmental commissions have reduced the role of the governmental commissions in influencing policy. However, due to the relatively formalized and predictable (bureaucratic) procedure, interest organizations have not entirely lost faith in the comparative advantages of the governmental commissions in comparison to informal governance networks.

DISCUSSION

Returning to the theoretical explanations of institutional change, how is the weakening of the governmental commissions to be understood? First, the results tend to imply that during the last three decades the government has strengthened its position vis-a-vis interest organizations as the number of multi-member commissions with representation of interest organizations and the time frames for each commission has been reduced, and the directives of the commissions has been more specific. This squares with the explanation presented by the theory of distributional rational choice institutionalism that institutional change is triggered by a change in power balance between the institutional actors (Héritier, 2007; Knight, 1992). This interpretation corresponds to the corporatist literature explaining the change of Swedish corporatism by a shifting degree of government steer, which reduced the position of interest organizations in corporative settings such as the governmental commissions (Hermansson et al., 1999; Rothstein & Bergström, 1999). That being said, a rationalistic explanation to the shift in the government steer is also conceivable. In an altered and more complex political landscape with increased global interdependency and multiple actors operating at various institutional levels (Bache &

Flinders, 2004), the government may have adjusted the governmental commissions in order to cut the transaction costs of an extensive process following a predetermined procedure (cf: Dolowitz, 2006).

Second, more rapid governmental commissions support the relevance of the argument made by Pierson (2000) that time horizons should be treated as an essential explanation for institutional change. It is likely that the dominance of the Social Democratic party in Sweden during much of the second half of the 20th century led to a more long-term interest in and use of the governmental commissions. As the shifts in political rule increased during the 1990s, the government may have moved to a more short-term use of the governmental commissions. By these means, parliamentarians' requirements for extensive governmental commissions over a long period of time have gradually weakened.

However, from a sociological institutional perspective, the results speak towards relative stability of the governmental commissions. The increasing steering of the governmental commissions and prevalence of lobbying (Öberg & Svensson, 2012) and informal network institutions has not completely ousted interest organizations' faith in the governmental commissions as a relatively legitimate and appropriate policy-making institution. One key to this understanding seems to be its relatively formalized and predictable procedure. At the same time, this may not be surprising since the most frequent players of the institution prefer and guard its "constitutive principles and standards" (Olsen, 2009, 10). In line with a rationalist account, interest organizations may favor a "bureaucratic" policy procedure since it entails some stability in the power balance with the government

(Elster, 1989, 111). Thereby the preference for the governmental commissions may be consistent with their own partial interests to maximize their individual benefits (e.g. Moe, 1988).

Finally, some limitations need to be addressed. First, the findings have a limited empirical base and draw from retrospective accounts which do not allow firm assertions about the exact change of the institution. Second, the article uses the perspective of interest organizations and offers an insiders' view that is neither fully representative to the organizations participating in the governmental commissions nor to all Swedish interest organizations. Using data based on insiders' testimonies may cause a bias towards interest organizations recognized as certain interests by the state and accepted as legitimate. If so, interest organizations may express a more positive perception of the governmental commissions in comparison to those organizations leaning more towards other influencing strategies, such as the media and mobilization. Thereby the change of the governmental commissions may be underestimated. All of these things must be taken into account when interpreting the results.

CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to analyze the claim that bureaucratic and procedural policy-making institutions are eroded and today play a less significant role in public policy-making. Drawing on evidence from the Swedish and neo-corporatist policy-making institution referred to as the governmental commissions employing a bottom-up perspective focusing on the perceptions of interest organizations with

insider status, the article provides empirical support for these statements (Bartolini, 2011).

The results suggest that an increased governmental steer during the last three decades have reduced the role of the governmental commissions in influencing policy. Using various theories on institutional change it has been argued that the weakening role of the governmental commissions can be understood by an altered power balance between interest organizations and the government to the benefit of the latter (Héritier, 2007; Knight, 1992). However, from a sociological institutional perspective, the results suggest that the governmental commissions are still considered to be a relatively appropriate and legitimate policy making institution (Olsen, 2009). Thus, although the governmental commissions may be injured they are not yet seen by interest organizations as dead. At the same time, a formalized and predictable process may be consistent with interest organizations' own rational interests to maximize individual benefits, not least since it may offer some stability in relation to the government.

The results coincide with findings on the development of Swedish corporatism. Although Sweden is known as one of the most corporatist countries in the world (Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991) corporatist patterns in the country have declined since the mid-1980s (Blom-Hansen, 2000). Although studies have argued that corporatist elements in Swedish politics and society persist (Christiansen et al., 2010), Lindvall and Sebring (2005) have claimed that not only has the formal framework of administrative corporatism changed, so too have the norms and practices of corporatism that existed in Sweden until the 1970s and early 1980s – some have even disappeared.

However, the consensus among the interest organizations on the appropriateness of the governmental commissions may indicate that such norms of social partnership still exists, at least in the governmental commissions. This suggests further analysis.

Further, the increased steering of the governmental commissions tends to suggest that the government has strengthened its position vis-a-vis interest organizations. This contradicts the common assumption in the governance literature about the state as being incapable of steering pursuing collective action and imposing its will on society (e.g. Bevir, Rhodes, & Rhodes, 2013; Kooiman, 2003; Rhodes, 2007). Although one should be careful not to drawing firm conclusions on the relative strength of the state based on limited findings, the state appears to have strengthened its role by downplaying the importance of the governmental commissions by providing the commissions with much more defined purposes and reducing the active role played by interest organizations. This may suggest that the state has increased or preserved its position in state governing (Hysing, 2009; Mingus, 2006, 591).

Finally, the reduced role of multi-member commissions with parliamentarians in governmental commissions (cf: Christiansen et al., 2010) coincides with an international trend towards a reinforcement of the political core executive in relation to the legislative arena (Peters, Rhodes, & Wright, 2000). Over time, the government has come to decide to a much larger extent on issues without consulting parliament – or interest organizations – on board, thereby increasing its coordination power. This may imply that the governmental commissions are used more as a political tool to

legitimize policy suggestions than to overcome political conflicts by seeking long-term solutions to policy problems.

NOTES

1. An interest organization is defined as a membership organization working to obtain political influence. Group members can be individuals, firms, governmental institutions or even other interest organizations. See Jordan, Halpin & Maloney (2004) for further discussion.
2. Representatives from the following organizations have been interviewed: Lars Berge-Kleber, general secretary, *Afasiförbundet*, 2012-10-23; Mikael Klein, policy director the Swedish Disability Federation (*Handikappförbunden*), 2012-10-24; Lars-Erik Lundkvist, policy director, the Federation of Swedish Farmers (*Lantbrukarnas riksförbund*), 2012-10-31; Lars Pettersson, general secretary, the Swedish Association for Non-Profit Health and Social Services (*Famna*) 2013-01-16; Maicen Ekman, former general secretary, the Swedish Adult Education Association (*Folkbildningsförbundet*), 2012-11-09; Martina Krüger, policy director, *Greenpeace*, 2012-11-26; Peter Moilanen, general secretary, the International Organization of Good Templars (*IOGT-NTO*), 2013-01-21; Ulrika Källén Lörelius, legal expert, the Swedish Joint Committee for Artistic and Literary Professionals (KLYS), 2012-10-30; Jan Terstad, policy director, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Naturskyddsföreningen), 2012-11-23; Guy Lööf, policy director, the National Pensioners' Organization (Pensionärernas riksorganisation), 2013-01-10; Milinko Mijatovic, secretary, the Cooperation Groups for Ethnic Associations in Sweden (SIOS), 2012-11-02; Helene Lindstrand, general secretary, the Swedish Teachers' Union (Lärarförbundet) 2013-03-08; Göran Nordén, policy director, Anders Torstensson, legal expert, Anne Wigart, legal expert, the Swedish Trade Federation (Svenskt näringsliv) 2013-02-21; Samuel Engblom, legal expert, the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees (TCO), 2013-03-25; Ola Pettersson, head of economy, and Linda Grape, investigator, at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), 2013-04-22.

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