

An Illusion of Consensus

Ideological Dimensions of Cultural Politics in Local Government

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Abstract

There is a common misconception about local government politics that for some reason it is supposed to be less ideological than national or international politics. But if by "ideological" we mean "based on values" there is no way that any act or field of politics could be deemed less ideological than another. When we decide to act or not, and when we choose between alternative actions, we always consider the options and pick what we conceive of as the best choice for the moment. Volition and the evaluation of alternatives are part of every rational (and free) action and hence, if we regard politics as action, or at least plans for action, all politics is based on values. The general aim of this study is to contribute to the ongoing debate on the problems of local democracy: both by emphasising the importance of ideological consciousness even in local politics; and by trying to provide instruments that help to make actually existing ideological dimensions visible and easier to understand. Another aim of this study is therefore to say something about the connection between the democratic institutions in a representative democracy and the ideological beliefs of its representatives.

The study focuses on cultural politics in Swedish local government, with the prime motive for choosing this focus being that this policy area could be seen as somewhat of a symbol of the consensus spirit that traditionally has characterized local government in this country. A survey was sent out in the year 2000 to all the members of local committees responsible for culture in Sweden (close to 2,700 people). The results from this survey comprise the main data source for this study.

After having examined the ideological beliefs of these politicians, the conclusion of the study is that they are far less unanimous than they believe themselves to be. The party system, however, fails to reflect many of the key ideological dimensions that are essential in this policy area. How the municipalities choose to organize their committees is also important, while politicians in specialised committees for cultural affairs tend to be more protective about their sector; a result partly due to the fact that specialised committees attract certain groups of representatives who are more interested in cultural issues. In fact, social identity and personal experience from the field of responsibility are often more important in explaining which politicians have which ideological beliefs than party membership.

Keywords

Ideology, local government, cultural politics, democracy, politicians, political values, group representation, parties, democratic institutions, Sweden.