No More Political Compromise? Swedish Commissions of Inquiry 1990–2016

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This article studies recent trends in the composition and uses of Swedish commissions of inquiry in preparing policy for the government. For much of the 20th century, commissions with representatives of major parliamentary parties and other policy stakeholders served as an arena of negotiation and compromise between the government, the opposition parties, and organised interests. Drawing on a unique data set of 2,087 commissions appointed between 1990 and 2016, we show that their representativeness has declined significantly. We also document a significant decrease in the inclusion of politicians and an increase in the presence of civil servants. Governments have also increased their control over commissions by issuing more directives. We further document a dramatic decline of reservations and dissenting opinions in the commission reports. This may be due to a combination of including fewer potentially dissenting voices and restricting commissions’ scope. We conclude that commissions are no longer the arenas of compromise-seeking that they were for most of the 20th century.

Introduction

Before a bill enters the parliamentary decision-making process, it undergoes much preparation. Its legal, economic, and societal ramifications are scrutinised. Parliamentary parties learn about each other’s policy positions and become aware of potential gridlocks and areas where compromise is possible. Therefore, how a government sets up its policy formulation process can provide insight on its ability (or desire) to negotiate compromise.¹

When a policy issue is particularly important or controversial, this policy formulation stage may include a lengthy deliberate process involving experts, political parties, interest groups, and government agencies. To facilitate this process, governments may appoint ad hoc commissions to perform

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policy analysis and to provide representation for different political and societal interests (Christiansen et al. 2010; Tama 2014). Such commissions, known as commissions of inquiry, Royal commissions, advisory commissions, and public inquiries, operate independently from the executive and legislative branches. They provide policy-relevant expertise not available through the regular policy-making channels and serve as a platform for bargaining and negotiating between the government and opposing interests (Gosnell 1934). They may also be used strategically to shift blame, delay action, or increase public support for a particular proposal (Marier 2009).

Commissions of inquiry are particularly common in Westminster systems, such as Australia (Prasser 2002003), New Zealand, and Canada (Inwood & Johns 2016), and in North European countries with (neo)corporatist policymaking traditions, such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands (Siaroff 1999). Similar institutions exist elsewhere, however. Their use is especially widespread in Sweden, dating back to the seventeenth century (Hesslén 1927). The Swedish legislative process is also unique in that the government sends almost all significant legislative initiatives to commissions of inquiry for initial policy formulation.

For much of the twentieth century, commissions with representatives from major parliamentary parties (parliamentary commissions) occupied a central role in the Swedish policy-making system. They served as an important arena of negotiation between the government and interest groups, especially the large confederations representing the majority of labour unions and industries. Their recommendations influenced the content of major policy changes and often became law. In addition, they often succeeded in negotiating compromise across the political aisle on controversial issues (Hesslén 1927; Meijer 1956; Anton 1969; Heclo 1974; Premfors 1983; Johansson 1992; Hermansson et al. 1999).

Recently, scholars and policy makers have expressed concerns that Swedish commissions are not as representative or numerous as before (SOU 2000:1, 2016:5; Gustavsson 2015; Lundberg 2015; Lindvall et al. 2020). In particular, broadly representative parliamentary commissions have become increasingly rare, whereas less representative special investigator (särskilda utredare) inquiries have become more common (Meijer 1969; Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998; Petersson 2016). Given the centrality of commissions of inquiry in the Swedish policy-making system, these changes may have diminished the government’s ability to negotiate compromise with opposition parties and interest groups.

Previous studies have covered the development of Swedish commissions up to 1990 (Hesslén 1927; Meijer 1956; Hermansson 1993; Hermansson et al. 1999). However, only two reports from the standing parliamentary Commission on the Constitution (2016/17: KU10; 2017/18: KU10) present more recent data. This study fills this gap by providing an answer to the
following questions: how have commissions of inquiry in Sweden changed from 1990 to 2016, and what do these changes imply for their role of facilitating political compromise? We analyse several variables related to Swedish commissions of inquiry from 1990 until 2016, including their membership composition, independence from the government, and internal resources in terms of the time allotted to the inquiries. Our analysis uses a novel database based on a population sample of 3,560 inquiry reports (Statens offentliga utredningar, or SOU) published between 1990 and 2018, with information about 2,087 commissions appointed between 1990 and 2016.

We show that Swedish commissions have changed profoundly in this time period and that the trends documented in earlier studies have accelerated. Parliamentary commissions are now only a small fraction of public inquiries, and the share of politicians as commission members has shrunk considerably, whereas the share of civil servants has increased. In other words, commissions do not seem to be used as arena of bargaining, negotiation, and compromise-seeking between the government, opposition, and organised interests to the extent they were for most of the twentieth century. We also document a dramatic decline in reservations (reservation) and dissenting opinions (särskilda yttrande) in the commission reports. This trend should not be interpreted as an increase in overall consensus on policy. Instead, because politicians are the most likely members to dissent (Johansson 1992), it is more likely related their exclusion from commissions. Finally, we find that Swedish governments issue slightly more directives to commissions, indicating that commissions are less independent. However, the length of inquiries has not changed significantly within the time period we study.

We interpret these findings as follows: the shift away from appointing more independent and broadly representative commissions may have reduced the government’s ability to foster compromise. It may also reflect or have contributed to polarisation in a previously consensus-oriented political system (Anton 1969; Petersson 2016), increased the probability of gridlock, lengthened the time it takes to pass a bill, and reduced the stability and legitimacy of the government’s proposed policies. Furthermore, to the extent that broadly inclusive policy-making institutions generate more effective policy solutions, these trends may have led to lower policy quality.

This study contributes to the literature on the historical and institutional development of Swedish commissions of inquiry and the stability and change of the Swedish policy-making system (Hesslén 1927; Meijer 1956; Johansson 1992; Hermansson 1993; Hermansson et al. 1999). It also contributes to the literature on advisory commissions by analysing conditions for achieving compromise in a setting known for its compromise-oriented policy process (Anton 1969; Heclo 1974; Arter 2008).

This paper is organised as follows. The next section defines commissions of inquiry and explains their role in the Swedish policy-making system. We
then describe how commissions’ membership composition, political independence, and internal resources affect their ability to facilitate political compromise. We then present our results. The concluding section summarises the results and discusses their implications for the role of commissions of inquiry, both in Sweden and in general.

Commissions of Inquiry and their Role in the Swedish Policy-Making System

Commissions of inquiry (or advisory commissions) are *ad hoc* bodies set up by a government or head of state to provide advice on specific policy problems, usually during the policy formulation stage of the legislative process. They differ from other types of committees and policy preparation bodies in several ways. First, they are appointed for a specific task and dissolved when the task is completed. Second, they have a certain degree of independence from the government and are not part of the regular bureaucracy or permanently attached to a department or minister. Third, they are purely advisory and have no formal decision-making power. Instead, their output is a report with their findings and policy recommendations. The report may also contain reservations and dissenting opinions by commission members who do not agree with the findings or recommendations. Fourth, they include third-party actors, such as academic experts and representatives from interest groups. Finally, in addition to performing policy research, commissions often function as a platform for negotiation among organised interests, political parties, and the government (Anton 1969; Hysing & Lundberg 2016). For example, Marier (2009, 1208) states that an important motive for creating commissions as ‘to appease interested parties and to establish the basis for political compromise’, whereas Prasser (2003, 160) argues that the main purpose of commissions is to ‘help secure consensus on what needs to be done’.

The Swedish government uses commissions of inquiry extensively at the policy formulation stage of the legislative process, resulting in about 200 legislative proposals each year. Commissions are set up for various purposes and differ in their membership composition, scope, and the type of policy issues assigned to them. Most commissions prepare policy for legislative initiatives or policy reforms, but there are also commissions with purely administrative tasks, permanent commissions that deal with recurring policy issues, and commissions that investigate one-time events such as political scandals or large-scale disasters. The last type is relatively rare in Sweden (in our sample, there are only 15 such commissions). In this paper, we focus exclusively on commissions advising the government during the policy formulation stage of the policy process. We refer to these as *policy advisory commissions* or *policy inquiries*. 
In contrast to other countries, Swedish governments use commissions routinely for legislative preparation and do not reserve them for only extraordinary policy issues. Scholars have explained the extensive use of commissions by the small size of Swedish government departments; setting up a commission allows a temporary expansion of the government’s capacity by bringing knowledge and information from the outside into the governmental policy process (Premfors 1983).

Commissions are regulated by a government ordinance (Kommittéförordningen, SFS 1998:1474) and appointed by the Cabinet. The Cabinet collectively decides on specific instructions for each commission, which are specified in the commission directive (kommittédirektiv). The directive describes what issues the inquiry is to examine, its desired membership structure, and the date by which the inquiry should be completed.

The Cabinet has historically assigned policy initiatives requiring extensive deliberation and debate to parliamentary commissions with representation from all major parliamentary parties, and less significant and less controversial policy initiatives to special investigator inquiries or to ministerial staff (Meijer 1956; Johansson 1992). Parliamentary commissions are generally larger and more representative and deal with more contentious or important policy topics. They normally contain subject matter experts, representatives of various interests, and politicians from all major parliamentary parties. Special investigator inquiries deal with less contentious or more technocratic policy issues. They are led by a special investigator (särskild utredare), often a high-ranking civil servant, or a judge, who is supported by one or more subject matter experts and secretaries. In practice, there are commissions with features of both, as we discuss below. For much of the twentieth century, parliamentary commissions conducted about half of all public inquiries in Sweden, with a lower proportion in the 1950s and 1960s, and a higher proportion in the 1970s (Meijer 1969; Petersson 2016).

Once the inquiry is completed, its findings are presented in a report, which is published the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) series. The report is then sent for further comments to relevant government agencies, special interest groups, local government authorities, and other affected parties through the referral system (Petersson 2016). After the referral bodies have sent in their comments, the ministry responsible for the policy area drafts the bill. The bill is then submitted to the Riksdag.

Facilitating Political Compromise

Scholars have ascribed a range of functions and roles to commissions of inquiry, such as enhancing knowledge, facilitating political compromise, and educating the general population. Commissions may also fulfil partisan roles, such as shifting blame and delaying action on controversial issues
(Lockwood 1967; Marier 2009). In the Swedish context, the consensus-building function has been especially important (Anton 1969; Heclo 1974; Zetterberg 1990; Arter 2008). Since the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1917, Swedish politics have been characterised by minority governments, and seeking broad consensus across the political aisle has, therefore, been a practical necessity (Lindvall et al. 2020). Appointing parliamentary commissions where the government and opposition parties can negotiate before proceeding with a legislative proposal has allowed Swedish governments to develop compromise solutions and to test the feasibility of proposals before committing to them. This has prevented legislative gridlock, especially during times when there has been no stable majority in the Swedish Riksdag (Meijer 1956; Nyman 1999), such as the politically tumultuous 1920s when several governments had extremely low levels of parliamentary support (Tingsten 1940).

Commissions of inquiry have also played a key role in facilitating negotiation and political compromise between the government and interest organisations. For most of the twentieth century, political power in Sweden was shared by a dual structure of a strong central government and highly organised interest groups, the most important of which were the national confederations representing capital and labour (Anton 1969). Within this dual structure, politicians and parties decided the overall policy goals in collaboration with leaders of main interest groups. Major interest organisations and popular social movements were given privileged representation in the policy process as members of commissions of inquiry and administrative boards of government agencies (Lewin 1998; Hermansson et al. 1999). The purpose of such involvement was to generate support and legitimacy for state policy and to induce interest organisations to moderate their demands and handle grievances concerning state policy internally among their members (Rothstein 1992; Öberg et al. 2011).

Membership, Independence, and Time

Previous literature on commissions of inquiry has argued that successful negotiation of compromise presupposes that a commission contains policy stakeholders (and politicians) from multiple sides of the issue (Pronin 2020). When governments use policy advisory commissions to negotiate compromise, they typically select commission members to represent various factions or interested parties, usually in a deliberately bipartisan or counterbalanced fashion (Cartwright 1975). Although it would seem that such commissions would struggle to reach compromise, they have in practice been surprisingly effective in producing unanimous policy recommendations (Tama 2014). In fact, Pronin (2020) suggests that commissions with a diverse ideological range of stakeholders may be better at producing unanimous
policy recommendations than more narrowly representative commissions. This is because more representative commissions are more effective in producing information relevant to successful policy implementation. Such information is a public good and generates policy valence, which benefits all parties and creates more opportunities for compromise. In addition, the commission must persuade the government that its proposal is worth supporting. This creates an incentive for the commission members to moderate their demands and coordinate on solutions, which are acceptable to other commission members and the government.

In addition, Nyman (1999) and Petersson (2016) argue that broadly representative commissions with members from opposition parties are better at solving policy problems and provide an opportunity for political negotiation at the early stages of the policy process, when policy positions have not yet been cemented. This helps to lay the ground for compromise at the later stages of the legislative process. Johansson (1992) and Lindvall et al. (2020) make similar claims, arguing that deliberation between political parties and interest groups representing different constituencies and societal interests at the policy preparation stage can prevent or mitigate conflicts at the subsequent stages of the policy-making process. The involvement of organised interests also generates support and legitimacy for state policy and induces interest organisations to moderate their demands (Rothstein 1992; Öberg et al. 2011).

Prasser (2003) and Tama (2014) highlight the importance of the independent and bipartisan nature of commissions. They argue that these allow commissions to generate policy proposals that can credibly serve as focal points for compromise, in a way that proposals by partisan commissions cannot. Studying a related phenomenon, Öberg (2002) shows that including interest groups on Swedish government agency boards has increased the participants’ mutual trust and deliberative negotiation. This has often led them to redefine their self-interested goals in a more public-regarding way.

Another recurring theme in the literature on commissions of inquiry is the importance of their independence from the government and the legislative branch, which is one of their defining characteristics (Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998; Lundberg 2015). Scholars have argued that the independence of commissions from the normal political process and especially the government strengthens their problem-solving role, legitimacy, and credibility across the political aisle (Bulmer 1981; Prasser 2003; Petersson 2016). Independence from the government also ensures that there is room to negotiate political compromise among political parties and organised interests. However, governments may still exert control on commissions by various means, such as by restricting their mandate or by issuing additional directives amending the original mandate (Jacobsson et al. 2015).
Previous literature has also drawn attention to the time allotted to inquiries (Johansson 1992; Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998). Commissions need adequate time and resources to produce policy proposals of high enough quality to be taken seriously by all parties (Bulmer 1981; Hunter & Boswell 2015). Resources, in terms of time and money, also provide commissions with general investigatory power (Hayner 1994) and thus influence their ability to gather knowledge, consult with societal interests, facilitate political compromise, analyse the policy problem, and produce credible recommendations (Bulmer 1981). Although a longer timeframe does not necessarily result in more well-informed policy solutions, a too limited timeframe certainly reduces the commission’s potential.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Swedish commissions of inquiry operated for lengthy periods of time, up to about 6–8 years (Premfors 1983). Such long timeframes are no longer common. A study by the Swedish National Audit Agency (Riksrevisionen) shows that the average duration of inquiries decreased from 4 years to 1 year between 1982 and 1995, and that in 2002 the average duration was 1 year and 8 months. These trends can, in part, be explained by changes to institutional rules governing public inquiries enacted in the early 1980s. For example, in the beginning of the 1980s, the government limited the length of inquiries to no more than 2 years out of concern that they were taking too long (Bergström 1987). These institutional rules were already in place by the beginning of our study period, so they should not affect our results, however.

This section has described the role of Swedish commissions of inquiry in the Swedish policy-making system, with a particular emphasis on their role in facilitating political compromise. We have drawn attention to three aspects of commissions of inquiry, which affect their ability to broker compromise: whether their membership is broad and representative of different interests, whether they are independent, and whether they have sufficient internal resources. We now turn to our data collection and findings.

Data Collection

We use novel, hand-collected data on Swedish commissions of inquiry appointed in the years 1990 to 2016. The data were collected as follows: from a population sample of 3,560 inquiry reports (Statens offentliga utredningar, or SOUs) published between 1990 and 2018, we identified 3,054 inquiry reports with a policy recommendation. From this figure, we eliminated five reports that were missing from all archives, 15 special inquiry reports about accidents, political scandals and historical events, 54 additional volumes or appendices to reports already included in our sample, and 12 reports by permanent commissions (e.g., Jo 1968:A). Examples of excluded inquiry reports include an investigation into the activities of Soviet submarine activity
in the Swedish coastal waters (SOU 1995:135) and periodic long-term economic forecasts (Långtidsutredningen).

Since our data are collected from inquiry outputs (SOUs), which we use to backtrack to inquiry appointments, we do not have data on inquiries that were appointed but still ongoing at the end of 2018. To address this issue, we drop observations for inquiries appointed in 2017 and 2018 (recall that inquiry length has been limited to two years from the beginning of the 1980s (Bergström 1987)). Dropping these observations avoids the problem of oversampling shorter and perhaps more consensual inquiries towards the end of the time period. Similarly, we drop all inquiries initiated before 1990, to avoid oversampling longer and perhaps more significant or conflictual inquiries. Our final data set contains 2,087 policy inquiries appointed in 1990–2016. Note that each commission or special investigator inquiry is counted only once, even if it was assigned additional tasks. Our sampling strategy is summarised in Table 1. Table 2 shows a list of appointing governments.

To obtain membership information, we scraped data from the Swedish government’s open document database and then verified the results against SOU reports stored in online libraries. Because there are often changes to commission membership between the intermediate and final inquiries, we used the membership composition in the commission’s final report. The final database contains information about 23,271 commission members, excluding secretaries, with the following roles: chairpersons, special investigators, commissioners, experts, and subject specialists. We also noted the presence of external reference groups. If the scraped data and the SOU were in conflict, we used the information in the SOU.

Table 1. Sample Selection

| # Inquiries in sample | Excluded inquiries | Explanation |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 3,560                 | 0                 | Initial sample: published commission reports (SOUs) 1990–2018 |
| 15                    |                   | SOUs by investigative commissions on scandals or accidents |
| 491                   |                   | SOUs with report of findings but no policy recommendation |
| 54                    |                   | SOUs containing additional volumes or appendices |
| 5                     |                   | SOUs not found |
| 12                    |                   | SOUs by a permanent commission (Jo 1968:A) |
| 211                   |                   | Commissions/inquiries established before 1990 or after 2016 |
| 685                   |                   | Intermediate inquiry reports (SOUs) |
| 2,087                 |                   | Final sample: Commissions of inquiry and special investigator inquiries, which made a policy recommendation and were appointed in 1990–2016 |
We categorised each commission member using a classification scheme used in previous research of Scandinavian commissions (see the Appendix and Christensen & Hesstvedt 2019). We then reduced these categories to Academics, Bureaucrats (civil servants and public servants in Christensen & Hesstvedt 2019), Interest groups, Politicians, and Other (judges, professionals and private sector in Christensen & Hesstvedt 2019). We marked those members whom we could not classify as Unclassified. Finally, we added party affiliations for members of parliament from the Swedish Riksdag’s website. 

We collected data for reservations and dissenting opinions from both the intermediate and final reports. We counted each time a member expressed a reservation or dissenting opinion as one instance of dissent. Because members can dissent more than once, individual shares of dissent may exceed one.

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the variables of interest. The shares of different member types, directives, and the dissent variables are calculated over the particular inquiry and its total membership. The share of politicians includes parliamentary, regional, and local politicians. Note that the shares of different members are based on a count of members who are not secretaries. We excluded secretaries because they are almost always civil servants, and their number is almost directly proportional to the commission size. The length is calculated in months from the first commission directive to the completion of the last inquiry of the commission. Some of the directive numbers and dates could not be located, so the numbers of observations are smaller for these two variables.

| Government | Beginning/end date | Parties | Government type          |
|------------|--------------------|---------|--------------------------|
| Carlsson I | 1986 to 1990       | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Carlsson II| 1990 to 1991       | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Bildt      | 1991 to 1994       | c-fp-m-kd | Minority coalition       |
| Carlsson III | 1994 to 1996     | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Persson I  | 1996 to 1998       | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Persson II | 1998 to 2002       | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Persson III| 2002 to 2006       | s       | Single-party minority    |
| Reinfeldt I| 2006 to 2010       | c-fp-m-kd | Majority coalition       |
| Reinfeldt II | 2010 to 2014     | c-fp-m-kd | Minority coalition       |
| Löfven I   | 2014 to 2018       | s-mp    | Minority coalition       |

Note: sd = Social Democrats, c = Centre Party, fp = Liberals, m = Moderate Party, kd = Christian Democrats, mp = Green Party.
Results

We analyse changes to the representativeness of policy inquiries by first looking at different types of inquiries appointed over time, and then by describing trends in their membership composition.

To analyse trends in the appointment of different types of inquiries, we use a typology based on a recent report of the Riksdag’s standing Committee on the Constitution (2017/18: KU10 64), shown in Table 4. In addition to the commission/inquiry structure, we note the presence of a parliamentary reference group. These are groups of parliamentarians from all major parties attached to the inquiry. They provide feedback on but do not participate in deliberations or drafting the final report.

Figure 1 shows the shares of different types of policy inquiries appointed by the government in 1990–2016. In 1990, 9.8 percent of policy inquiries were non-parliamentary commissions without a parliamentary reference group. In 2016, the corresponding figure was 4.3 percent. Non-parliamentary commissions with a parliamentary reference group are quite rare in our sample, and in most of the years, none were appointed. Parliamentary commissions are common earlier, comprising 19.7 percent of policy inquiry appointments in 1990. They become less common over time, and in 2016 they were only 2.9 percent of policy inquiry appointments. Special investigator inquiries without a parliamentary reference group are by far the most common type
in our sample. In 1990, they were 68.9 percent of policy inquiry appointments, and, in 2016, 84.3 percent. Special investigator inquiries with a parliamentary reference group are rare earlier, comprising less than 2 percent of policy inquiry appointments in 1990. They become more common later, comprising 8.6 percent of policy inquiry appointments in 2016.

Our results are consistent with prior research on the reduced role of parliamentary commissions (Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998; Hermansson et al.
1999; Lundberg 2015; Petersson 2016). Similar trends have also been documented in Norway, Denmark (Christiansen et al. 2010, 31; Binderkrantz & Christiansen 2015), and Australia (Prasser 2003). However, as mentioned above, there appears to be recent substitution of special investigator inquiries with a parliamentary reference group for parliamentary commissions.

Figure 2 shows the mean shares of bureaucrats, politicians, interest groups, and academics over time. The figure includes a small share of members in the Other category, and a relatively large share of unclassified members. The shares are calculated over the number of members, excluding secretaries, support staff, and external reference groups.

From the figure, it can be seen that bureaucrats are a large and increasing part of inquiry membership. In 2016, they comprised 60 percent of the members, compared with 49.5 percent in 1990. During the same period, the share of academics declined from 8.4 to 5.1 percent. The decline in the share of politicians is especially dramatic, dropping from 11.4 percent in 1990 to less than 2 percent in 2016. This is likely reflecting the shift from parliamentary commissions to special investigator inquiries discussed above. It should be noted that we may underestimate the share of academics, as they may be more common in the inquiries not included in our sample. Examples of excluded inquiries include expert inquiries with reports of findings but no

Figure 2. Mean Shares of Bureaucrats, Academics, Politicians and Interest Groups over Time. Sample: Policy advisory commissions/inquiries appointed in 1990–2016.

Note: On average, 17% of members are unclassified.
policy recommendation, such the Swedish Democracy Commission (SOU 2000:1) and periodic long-term economic forecasts (Långtidsutredningen).

Regressing the share of politicians on appointment years and using a student’s $t$-test, we find that the decline of the share of politicians is statistically highly significant at the $p < 0.001$ significance level. By contrast, the trends for shares of interest groups and their subcategories (labour unions, industry associations, NGOs, professional organisations, and organisations representing regions and municipalities) are not statistically significant (see the online Appendix for all the regression tables).

The trend for the share of bureaucrats is positive (i.e., there is a tendency to appoint more bureaucrats over time) and statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ significance level. Breaking bureaucrats into subcategories, the trend seems to be largely driven by an increase in the share of civil servants working for ministries and the central administration. By contrast, there is no statistically meaningful change in the share of bureaucrats from government agencies, or in the share of public servants (bureaucrats and professionals working for the local governments and provinces, such as teachers, doctors, nurses, and municipal employees). The trend for the share of academics is negative and statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ significance level.

Looking at the backgrounds of the special investigators, the largest categories are civil servants (35.8 percent), judges (26.3 percent), academics (7.7 percent), and politicians (7.7 percent). Over time, there is a decrease in politicians and civil servants and an increase in the number of judges. The civil servants’ category might be of particular interest since having in-house investigators from the ministries might give the government more control over inquiry outcomes. However, agency staff makes up the majority (56.9 percent) of the civil servants, whereas 18.1 percent are ministry employees, and 14 percent are county governors (landshövding).

Figure 3 shows the presence and shares of reservations (reservation) and dissenting opinions (särskilda yttrande) in inquiry reports over time. These are written by members who disagree with some aspect of the inquiry. They are included in the inquiry report and can be used as a measure of the amount of policy conflict remaining at the conclusion of the inquiry.

We calculated the shares of reservations and dissenting opinions using inquiry reports (SOU), rather than commissions, as the unit of analysis. First, we counted the number of times an individual member participated in a reservation or dissenting opinion, either alone, or together with other commission members. We then divided the resulting number by the number of commission members, excluding secretaries and external reference group members. As we note above, the shares may sum to more than one. This is because each instance of a reservation or dissenting opinion by a member was counted as one observation, and all the reservations or
dissenting opinions by members were then added and divided by the number of members.

From Figure 3, it can be seen that the presence of reservations and dissenting opinions in inquiry reports has dropped noticeably. In 1990, 25.6 percent of inquiries had at least one reservation, and 42.2 percent had at least one dissenting opinion. In 2016, the corresponding figures were 5.5 percent and 27.5 percent. Similarly, in 1990, the average share of reservations was 4.6 percent, and the average share of dissenting opinions was 11.3 percent. In 2016, the corresponding figures were less than 1 percent and 6.5 percent. All four trends are significant either at the $p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.001$ significance levels.

We now turn our attention to inquiry independence. The most important tool the government uses to control inquiries are the written instructions given to the inquiry. These are contained in the commission directive (kommittédirektiv). The directive specifies the inquiry’s mandate, including its mission and the timeframe within which the inquiry must be completed. The government can change, add to, or retract these instructions by issuing a new commission directive. One measure of how actively the government manages an inquiry is therefore the number of commission directives the government issues in the course of the inquiry.

Figure 4 shows the average number of directives issued to policy inquiries. Note that x-axis shows the year of the original commission directive.
In 1990, the average number of directives was 1.7. Throughout the 1990s, this figure was closer to 1.2, increasing in the 2000s and then levelling off closer to 1.6, with some evidence of a decline after 2014. For example, in 2016, the average number of directives was 1.5. Using linear regression and a student’s $t$-test (regressing the number of commission directives against the appointment years), we find a positive and statistically highly significant trend ($p < 0.001$). This provides additional evidence that the government is exerting tighter control over commissions.

Figure 5 shows the number of policy inquiries appointed per year. The figure only shows new commissions or special investigator inquiries, not new inquiries assigned to existing commissions or special investigator inquiries. In 1990 the government appointed 61 new policy inquiries; the corresponding number for 2016 is 70. Examining the figure, one can see a peak in the mid-1990s, which seems to have been an exceptional period with many large multi-inquiry commissions. For example, in 1995, the government appointed 118 policy inquiries. Using linear regression and a student $t$-test (regressing the number of policy inquiries against the appointment years), we find a negative trend over time. However, this trend is significant only at the $p < 0.1$ significance level. We, therefore, do not draw any conclusions from these numbers.

Figure 6 shows the average number of months from the time when the commission directive was issued to the time when the commission completed its report per appointment year. Commissions and special investigator inquiries appointed in 1990 took an average of 20.9 months to
complete, compared with an average of 16.5 months in 2016. Our numbers are somewhat higher than those reported by the Riksdag’s Commission on the Constitution (2017/18: KU10, 77). The reason for the difference is likely
that we include only inquiries which provided a policy recommendation. These tend to be longer than inquiries which only produce a report of findings. Using linear regression and a student’s t-test (regressing the number of months against the appointment years), we find a negative trend over time. However, it is not significant at any conventional significance levels. These results contrast with earlier studies, which show that the time allotted for completion of inquiries has declined over time (Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998; Hermansson et al. 1999; SOU 2007:75, 2016:5).

Conclusions and Discussion

The policy formulation stage is important for the rest of the legislative process. It influences whether a bill will find sufficient support in the legislature and whether a proposal will successfully address the policy problem in question. In Sweden and elsewhere, governments may appoint ad hoc advisory commissions to prepare policies and negotiate political compromise, especially for controversial or significant policy initiatives. These advisory commissions come in different forms and have alternatively been seen as facilitators of political compromise or as a government’s way to steer policy in its desired direction.

Our study contributes to previous studies of Swedish commissions of inquiry (Hesslén 1927; Meijer 1956; Johansson 1992; Hermansson 1993; Hermansson et al. 1999) by presenting and analysing data on Swedish policy inquiries from 1990 through 2016 (although see 2016/17: KU10 and 2017/18: KU10 for partial data). More specifically, we investigate whether the membership composition, independence, and internal resources of Swedish commissions of inquiry have changed in ways that hinder their ability to broker compromise with the opposition parties and organised interests.

We show that the composition of Swedish policy commissions of inquiry has changed dramatically. Broadly representative parliamentary commissions, which were once a key part of Sweden’s policy-making system, have declined to less than 3 percent of the policy inquiries in our sample, from about 50 percent historically (Meijer 1969). This is a major shift in Swedish policy making and represents an acceleration of trends in earlier research. For example, analysing 509 commissions of inquiry from the 1960s until the mid-1990s, Hermansson et al. (1999, 29) found that the share of special investigator inquiries had increased from about 30 percent in 1960 to 60 percent in 1995, and that the share of parliamentary commissions had correspondingly declined (see also Gunnarsson & Lemne 1998). Today, the dominant type of policy inquiry is a much less representative special investigator inquiry. These now make up over 90 percent of policy inquiries.

The share of politicians as commission members has also declined, and commissions are increasingly dominated by bureaucrats. Partly as a
consequence of these changes, the presence of reservations and dissenting opinions in inquiry reports has also dropped. Governments have also become more active in issuing commission directives, which may indicate that they are trying to steer the outcome of policy inquiries in their preferred direction. This is consistent with earlier research showing that, starting in early 1980s, the government has increased its control over the policy preparation process (Petersson 2016). However, the trend towards more commission directives is only moderate, and there has been some decline in the average number of commission directives after 2014. Finally, although both the number of policy inquiries and the time assigned to them have declined slightly, these changes are not statistically significant.

Our results may have important implications for the Swedish policy-making process. Historically, Swedish governments have used parliamentary commissions to negotiate compromise with the opposition parties and organised interests on significant and controversial policy initiatives. Parliamentary commissions have also been seen as ensuring a rational policy process focused on problem-solving rather than political positioning (Meijer 1956; Johansson 1992). To the extent that the broadly representative commissions are essential for establishing a common understanding of the policy problem and laying the ground for political compromise, a vital part of the Swedish policy-making system is now missing (Anton 1969; Gustavsson 2015; Christensen & Holst 2017). In sum, today’s commissions have less capacity to identify and resolve dissent at the policy formulation stage of the legislative process. Conflicts might, therefore, appear for the first time in parliament, when party positions have already been solidified, and it may be more difficult to identify compromise solution to the policy problem at hand.

What has caused the decline of parliamentary commissions and the share of politicians as commission members? Two possible contributing factors are the increase in the number of parliamentary parties and the dimensionality of policy conflicts. If politicians come from multiple parties with platforms scattered across multiple dimensions, then including politicians in commissions involving bargaining may lead to instability, for reasons discussed in McKelvey (1976) and Shepsle (1979). This possibility could make governments less willing to appoint parliamentary commissions which deal with significant policy initiatives, because such initiatives will inevitably involve bargaining over different policy positions.

There is certainly evidence that both the number of potential players and the dimensions of policy conflict have increased. First, the current party system in Sweden includes eight parties, up from five before 1988. Looking at the effective number of parties, Sweden currently is among the upper third of the most fragmented party systems in Western Europe (Lindvall et al. 2020). Second, there has been a change in the dimensionality of party
conflict. Historically, party competition in Sweden has been structured by the economic left–right dimension (Sälvik 1966), and new dimensions (such as European integration) have generally been absorbed into the left–right dimension. In the last decade, however, immigration and multicultural values have added new dimensions to party conflict (Aylott & Bolin 2019; Lindvall et al. 2020).

These changes could make it harder to find support for policy proposals in the Riksdag, something that broadly representative commissions of inquiry might have helped overcome. However, without further research, we cannot establish that these are causative factors behind the decline in parliamentary commissions.

The decline in the share of politicians and parliamentary commissions may also simply lag an earlier decline in the share of interest groups caused by the weakening of corporatist arrangements in the past 20 years. For most of the twentieth century, political power in Sweden was shared by a dual structure of a strong central government and highly organised interest groups. At the top of this hierarchy were several confederations representing the interests of capital and labour. Within this dual structure, politicians and parties decided the overall policy goals in collaboration with leaders of main interest groups. The government then appointed commissions of inquiry with representatives of interest group from both sides of the issue and politicians from all major parliamentary parties. Interest groups were also represented on the boards of government agencies (Meijer 1956; Anton 1969).

This system of corporatist arrangements started to weaken in the 1980s, which led to a drop in interest group participation in commissions of inquiry and boards of government agencies (Johansson 1992; Rothstein 1992). Öberg et al. (2011) argue that an important cause of these developments was that the base of the exchange relationship between the government and interest groups had weakened and that interest groups were no longer controlling the resources which made them attractive negotiation partners, such as their ability to deliver their membership’s support. At the same time, governments have been forced to curb their expenditures on welfare, which has reduced the possibility of side-payments. The need to curb welfare expenditures has also led governments to reach out to other types of interest groups which had evolved in relation to existing welfare programs or those that possess resources to control implementation of policies (Pierson 2006; Lundberg 2020). Increased Europeanisation following Sweden’s accession into the European Union in 1995 has also weakened the governments’ mandate and limited the number of policy concessions they could make. Interest groups have, therefore, turned to other avenues to influence policy, such as political lobbying toward elected representatives instead of participating in corporatist arrangements (Rommetvedt et al. 2013; Petersson 2016).
These changes could have made commissions of inquiry a less focal part of the policy-making system, and indirectly led to the decline of parliamentary commissions.

Our results may also indicate that Swedish governments are using policy inquiries in a more strategic way to steer policy in their desired direction. The government could do so through deck-stacking (Balla 1998), i.e., by changing procedural rules to increase political control over commissions, or by picking by commission members who are predisposed toward policy choices preferred by the government. The government could also exert control on inquiry outcomes by limiting their discretion (Epstein & O’Halloran 1994), or by setting the policy agenda by sending only certain types of policy issues to commissions. Testing these hypotheses is outside the scope of this paper, but we will make a few remarks about their plausibility. First, the increasing number of commission directives provides some evidence that the government is limiting commissions’ discretion. Second, the decline of parliamentary commissions and the decreasing presence of reservations and dissenting opinions in inquiry reports indicates that dissenting voices are being excluded, which may indicate that deck-stacking is taking place. Because both political polarisation and fractionalisation have also increased in the past two decades, we should expect to see more, rather than less dissent (Lindvall et al. 2020). Politicians are the most likely member type to express reservations and the third most likely member type to express dissenting opinions. Their exclusion is, therefore, likely to have a dampening effect on overall dissent. In addition, reservations (two-thirds of which are written by politicians) are more likely to cite ideological reasons for disagreement than dissenting opinions (Johansson 1992), so excluding politicians from commissions can have the specific effect of dampening ideological dissent.

NOTES
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2. For example, in the United States, blue ribbon panels and presidential commissions serve a similar purpose (Rowe & McAllister 2006).
3. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO), the Swedish Confederation of Professional

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Associations (SACO), the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, and the Swedish Federation of Business Owners

4. http://rkratbaser.gov.se/sfr

5. The Swedish Law web page (https://lagen.nu), Linköping University’s Open SOU web page (http://www.ep.liu.se/databases/sou/), the Swedish Royal Library’s SOU archive (http://regina.kb.se/sou/), and the Swedish government’s SOU web page (http://www.regeringen.se/rattsdokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/).

6. Other studies of Scandinavian commissions of inquiry, such as Petersson (2016) and Christensen and Hesstvedt (2019), have used a similar data collection procedure. An alternative data source is the Kommittéberättelsen, a yearly report from the Government offices to the Riksdag concerning all active commissions of inquiry. The main advantage of using published reports is that they contain more detailed information about commission members, as well as information about reservations and dissenting opinions, which are not recorded in detail in the Kommittéberättelsen. The disadvantage of using the published reports is that some commissions do not publish a report or complete their inquiry, or publish their findings in the departmental publication series (Departementsserien). We collected additional data using scraped Kommittéberättelse records from 2002 to 2016 and found that the two data sets had over 80 percent agreement.

7. https://data.riksdagen.se/data/ledamoter/

8. This category consists mostly of representatives of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and its predecessors.

9. The independent variables in all the regressions are either appointment years or SOU publication years. This makes the constant large in some of the regressions.

10. The shares of special investigators are calculated among those whose background was recorded in the SOU. In about 17 percent of cases, the background of the special investigator was not given.

11. As a general rule, only commissioners are allowed to write both reservations and special comments. Subject matter specialists are only allowed to write special comments, and experts are allowed to write special comments only if allowed by the chair. Reservations are usually objections to the conclusions of the report, whereas special comments often to some technical aspects of the inquiry, but these distinctions are not absolute (Johansson 1992).

12. Length of the inquiry was calculated by deducting the original directive month and year from the completion month and year of the final commission SOU. If the SOU only listed a month and a year, the day was coded as the first of the month.

13. See Hermansson et al. (1997), Christiansen et al. (2010), Öberg et al. (2011), Binderkrantz and Christiansen (2015) for evidence that this decline is overstated or has only occurred in limited respects.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:
Supplementary Material
Appendix A. Member variables
Appendix B.
Appendix C. OLS regressions for Figures 2–6