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Local political leaders govern their locality restricted by complex systems of regulations, organisations, traditions and norms. The totality of all institutions guiding the actions of local political leaders in a municipality could be summarized “the local constitution” (cf. Bäck, 2006). The local constitution regulates part of the political work in a way that political leaders must obey, while in other parts, the constitution leaves room for considerable discretion. Depending on the degree of discretion, local politicians are able to form their own identities, roles and styles as leaders (Erikson, 2004). Parts of the local constitution are codified in formal documents, such as national acts of law or local regulations. Additionally, as many regulations in political systems are not written down (Lauth, 2000; Ostrom, 2007; Peters, 1999), informal institutions complement, substitute or compete with the formal institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Karlsson, 2012).

The relation between institutions and political leadership has been the central theme of the research project “Local political leadership in a time of constitutional transition” at the School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg. The project, which started in 2006 was funded by the Swedish Research Council and led by Professor Henry Bäck. Results from the project have contributed with new knowledge in the field of local political leadership in a number of aspects. For example, the project has shown how formal positions affects the priorities of local political leaders (David Karlsson & Erikson, 2009), how de-sectoralisation (Karlsson, Rommel, & Svensson, 2009) and parliamentary situations (Gilljam & Karlsson, 2012) affect Swedish local democracy, how informal institutions influence the role perceptions of local leaders (Karlsson, 2012) and how representation principles have changed over time in Swedish local government without any formal constitutional reforms (Gilljam, Karlsson, & Sundell, 2010; Skoog, 2011). It has also been shown how the degree of political discretion varies between sectors and over time in Swedish local government (Bengtsson & Karlsson, 2012). Under the duration of the project, Swedish regional reform has been on top of the political agenda in Sweden – even though few reforms have yet been implemented. Democratic aspects of regional reform and the neglected perspective of political geography have been studied within the project (Gustafsson & Karlsson, 2010; Karlsson, 2010; Karlsson & Norén Bretzer, 2012).

This special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration* marks the end of this project. Each of the three included articles represents essential aspects of how political institutions affect local political leadership. The first article has been written within the project, while the two others are written by internationally renowned local government scholars and provide comparative perspectives on the importance of institutions for political leadership.

The most fundamental aspect of a local constitution is the scale of the self-governing entity. Around Europe, structural reforms is transforming the role and size of local governments (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). The size determines the

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scope of municipal activities in terms of economic revenues, infrastructure, service production and citizen participation. But how does the size of a municipality affect local democracy and the political leadership of elected representatives? This is the question raised in the first article of this special issue: “A Democracy of Scale: Size and Representative Democracy in Swedish Local Government” (Karlsson 2013). The article concludes that the success of local political leaders in their endeavour to identify and enforce the will of the people depends on the size of the municipality they govern. The study shows that the manifestation of political alternatives in local politics increases significantly with the size of the municipality. The results also show that the political knowledge and influence (in relation to national and local bureaucracies) of local political leaders correlate positively with municipal size.

The second article, “When Reform Politicians Eliminate the Goods of other Political Actors: The Case of the Danish Regions” (Krogh 2013), studies one of the most thorough reforms of regional and local government in later years: the structural reforms of Denmark. In focus for the study is the committee system of the new regions and the results illustrate what happens if reforms eliminate the institutional goods of political actors. In line with the “rule-violating theory” of Fritz W. Sharpf (Sharpf, 1997), the author concludes that regional councillors find ways of violating the law of regions by making cosmetic changes which re-design the committee structure in a way that better suits their interests.

The third article, “Formal institutions versus informal decision-making. On parties, delegation and accountability in local government” (Copus & Erlingsson 2013), compares the role of political institutions in England and Sweden. The study mainly focuses on the degree of informality in local government decision-making, especially in the internal workings of political parties, and the results indicate many similarities in the two institutional settings. In the concluding discussion, the authors raise serious questions on how legitimacy, transparency and accountability are affected when political debate and decision-making takes place away from the public gaze.

Together the three articles describe how formal and informal institutions limit and enable political leaders, how institutional frameworks determine political processes and how local actors bend the rules to their own advantage. The conclusion must be that local political leadership could not be studied without considering institutional implications, just as institutional reforms must be understood in terms of how they affect political leaders. It is our hope that the results of this special issue will contribute to the ongoing discussions on these topics.

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