

The power and democracy research project, University of Iceland: Project management details

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The Power and Democracy Research Project was a five-year (2014-2018) research project at the School of Social Sciences, University of Iceland. It was established through a decision of the university council and funded by the University of Iceland Centennial Fund. It is a study of power and democratic governance in Iceland focusing on the legislature, executive and judicial powers, public policy and administration, as well as on the actors and participants in the system, such as political parties, interest groups, the media and the public. Power and democracy studies have been conducted in the other Nordic countries and the Icelandic study is guided to some extent by the Nordic studies, while also taking into account the specific conditions in Iceland, particularly the impact of the financial collapse in 2008. Neither the government nor parliament, however, had any part in forming the Icelandic study and the scale of the project is consequently more limited than in the other countries. Although a certain amount of interests has existed both in parliament and the government, dating back to the late 1980s, the decision to invest in a thorough study of power and democracy in Iceland has given way to other needs.

The Icelandic power and democracy study focuses on empirical research and emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach, involving scholars from different disciplines of social science. The empirical focus of the project is partly the result of its institutional



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association with the School of Social Sciences, reflecting the interests and research areas of social scientists at the University of Iceland. A different project, more focused on the concepts, ideas and historical development of Icelandic democracy, was led by Vilhjálmur Árnason, professor of philosophy, and funded by the Icelandic Research Council. His contribution to this volume reflects some of the considerations that emerged from the sister project.

Professor Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, of the Faculty of Political Science, is the principal investigator of the School of Social Sciences power and democracy project. He was assisted by a project management team of four researchers from different branches of social sciences and by a project manager, Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir, who is also the director of the Institute of Public Administration and Politics. While the funds made available by the university were generous, they were insufficient to establish a centralised and integrated research project based on a preconceived mapping of needed research. Instead, it was decided early on to base the project on the research resources available at the School of Social Sciences and strengthen research which could be considered relevant to power and democracy.

Preparations began in mid-2013, and at the beginning of 2014 academic staff at the School of Social Sciences was invited to send in research proposals relevant to the project. The project ended up with 30 scholars from different faculties of the School of Social Sciences. Given the decentralized nature of the project it was also clear early on that no attempt would be made to arrive at an overall conclusion or a concluding report, some of which have received considerable attention in the other Nordic states. Instead, the different products of the project are considered important contributions to knowledge on power and democracy in Iceland, without necessarily adhering to an integrated perspective or a theory which all participants subscribe to. The themes covered in the study include: diversity and citizenship; political organisations and participation; democratic ideas and values; trust in government and corruption; elites and networks, the media and access to public information; constitutional arrangements and public policy.

The project is described in greater detail at its home page: www.vol.hi.is This includes main objectives, the names of participants and a list of all published results, most of which are in open access with links from the home page.

Notes

- 1 The project received 24 million ISK from the Centennial Fund (which amounts to 194,000 EUR at present values). Researchers associated with the project obtained additional funding from a number of sources so that in the end project funding amounted to 27 million ISK.