

Ronneby kommun

Val2002

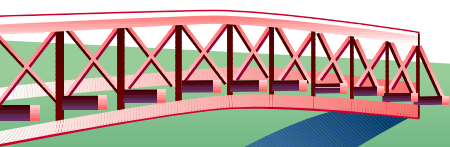
• • • • •

Summary

Val2002
E-democracy project
Municipality of Ronneby
val2002.ronneby.se

January - October 2002





Summary

In the run-up to the election in 2002, Ronneby Municipal Board decided to implement an e-democracy project. The idea was to use the local authority website to test new forms of information, questions and debate. The aim of the project was to encourage active involvement of the general public and local politicians, thereby stimulating interest in local politics and the forthcoming election, not least among young voters.

The Information Department was given the task of managing the project. A project group was formed and inhabitants of Ronneby and local politicians were consulted about the organisation of the project. The Municipal Executive Committee was empowered to make decisions concerning questions of special importance.

Website

The preliminary work was carried out during the spring and summer. A website was ready for access eight weeks before the election. With the aid of the website val2002.ronneby.se the inhabitants of Ronneby could glean information about the political situation in the municipality, where to vote etc. Some of the information provided was translated into several different languages.

In accordance with a political decision all parties with candidates for the Municipal Council must be treated equally on the website. As a result, there were links to websites of nine political parties, including the extreme right-wing party Swedish Democrat Party (Sverigedemokraterna).

All candidates were invited to publish information about themselves, and to provide a photograph if they would. Many candidates took advantage of this opportunity.

The project and the website attracted considerable interest from the media, particularly during the initial weeks. Many questioned the wisdom of providing a link to the Swedish Democrat Party's web pages. The political majority in Ronneby were, however, of the opinion that the links should be allowed to remain.

The project group also produced a brochure about the election. This was sent out to all households in the municipal authority. Great importance was attached to producing printed material and a website which were easy to read and understand.

Debate forum

On 1st August a debate forum was opened on the website. Politicians and citizens of Ronneby discussed among other things 'care of the elderly and the disabled', 'education, schools and childcare' and 'the town, country and the environment'. A total of 362 contributions and comments were made by 64 contributors.

Debaters were required to follow certain rules. Breaking the law was, of course, forbidden. The debate must also have some connection with Ronneby and local conditions.

The contribution could be read on the website at once. The editorial staff of the project group continuously supervised contributions. Nearly 20 contributions were considered not to fulfil the debate requirements. The editorial staff moved these to a special archive. They disappeared from the website but were registered as a public document. At the same time, the writer was sent an e-mail justifying the measure taken.

On average, just over 140 people per day visited the val2002 website. Most were interested in the debate; many were also interested in the presentation of the various candidates.

e-democracy with Open 24

To make a contribution it was necessary to become a member. The system behind the project, Open 24, from the Söderhamn company Your Voice, automatically sent a confirmation to the e-mail address provided by the user. By approving the confirmation one became a member. A total of 118 people became members during the project period.

As a result, the system was more secure than any without a membership application. Those people who had no e-mail address were given assistance by the local library.

Open 24 also regulated the opportunity for the candidates to publish information about themselves. Your Voice developed this particular function especially for Ronneby, and it is now an integral part of the system package.

Open 24 incorporates a question panel enabling people to ask parties etc. direct questions. The Municipal Board did however, not select this service. Questions of this kind were instead asked in the debate forum.

The Executive Committee also decided not to opt for the planned "political café". The idea was that it should be possible in a political panel to discuss local youth questions; the debate was to be published on the Internet as it was running. Interested parties could then send in questions and comments to the panel via the web or SMS.

Results and follow-up

The website was well received. An upper-secondary schoolteacher felt that the pages were easy to work with even for her pupils of the special school. Others expressed satisfaction that a debate had been started up and that it was Ronneby Municipal Authority that had taken the initiative.

The project did not result, however, in more people voting. The number who voted in Ronneby was much the same as in the rest of the country. Repeated campaigns of different kinds are probably required to increase interest in municipal democracy.

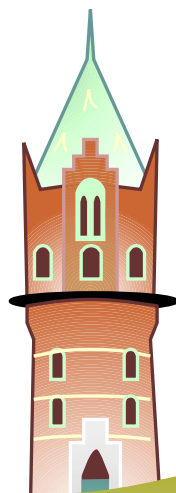
The question panel in Open 24 will probably be of use in the future. The same applies to the idea of public debates over the net. Our Information Manager has been given the task of suggesting how the idea can be developed without specifically linking the idea to an election. It is a question of making the best use of the lessons learned from the project.

Several suggestions and requests have been received via val2002.ronneby.se. These were aired in the debate panel before the election; most suggestions and requests, however, materialised during the weeks after the election. By this stage the website had been re-designed in order to illuminate the election results and encourage people to express their opinions about the project and e-democracy as a whole.

Approximately 30 people expressed opinions on the net. The majority were in favour of the project and anxious that the Municipal Authority should continue the process. Personal interviews with politicians and individual members of the community were also included in the evaluation. A number of interesting points of view on e-democracy were received, many of which could be useful in the future both in Ronneby itself and in other cities in Sweden or perhaps abroad.



**RONNEBY
KOMMUN**



Project Val2002

Information office

Phone: +46 457-38 51 27

val2002@ronneby.se

<http://val2002.ronneby.se>