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The changing political landscape in Sweden

Political cleavages, actors and processes

Abstract
The political landscape in Sweden has undergone considerable changes in recent decades The number of political parties in the Swedish parliament has increased from five to eight, and the socio-economic issues of the traditional political right–left scale has been challenged by socio-cultural issues relating to lifestyle and identity. Notably, the notion of Swedish exceptionalism and the particularities of its welfare state is lingering despite findings pointing in the opposite direction e.g. with the increased electoral support for the radical right, and its ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The corporatist model has been challenged by new forms of political authority, participation and representation. New political actors, such as social movements and civil society actors, think tanks and policy professionals, are becoming increasingly engaged in political processes. The long-term trend suggests that traditionally marginalised groups, such as the young, women and groups of migrant background, are represented in decision-making forums to a higher degree than before. Yet, current conditions need further analysis. In this article, we provide a background to *Sociologisk Forskning*'s special issue on the political landscape of the parliamentary election in 2018.

Keywords: cleavages, political sociology, radical rightwing parties, the Sweden Democrats, Swedish Exceptionalism and the Swedish general election 2018

A changing political landscape

Political sociology is a matter of interdisciplinary research by social and behaviour scientists and we are therefore pleased to introduce articles from scholars from different disciplines. The political landscape in Sweden has undergone considerable transformations in recent decades with regards to central institutional and organisational changes. New political parties and movements have been established and that have challenged the legitimacy of long-established ones on the ideological left-right continuum. These changes have brought attention towards both socio-economic and socio-cultural cleavages, the creation of new political actors and platforms for mobilisation.

In recent decades, the number of political parties in the Swedish parliament has increased from five to eight. Traditionally, as positioned on the ideological left–right scale the centre-left was led by the Social Democrats and supported by the Left Party whereas the centre-conservative bloc has been led by the Moderate Party, supported

by the Centre Party and the Liberals. However, political parties and movements which have formed in recent years have challenged the ideological left–right scale. The Green Party was formed in the aftermath of the referendum on nuclear power in Sweden in 1981 and entered the Swedish parliament in 1988; the Christian Democrats gained seats in the parliament in 1991 and the Sweden Democrats in 2010. The party Feminist Initiative managed to get one seat in the European Parliament in 2014 but has not reached the four-percent threshold. The four-percent threshold to enter parliament remains a focus of Swedish politics for the many relatively small political parties.

The parliamentary election of 2014 had more than one surprise in store: The Social Democrats may have remained the largest party with 31 per cent (notably low for a party used to electoral support that could stretch to 40% and beyond), and the second largest party the Moderates dropped from 31 to 23 per cent. However, Sweden's radical right-wing party, the Sweden Democrats, more than doubled its share of the votes from 5,7 per cent in 2010 and to 12,9 per cent in 2014 and subsequently became Sweden's third largest party, a matter to which we shall return.

The ideological left–right scale has in other words been challenged and institutional changes brought about by Sweden's membership to the European Union (1995) has further modified the content and scope of political actions (and has generated debate in Sweden too). Related systems of political participation and representation have also changed. In general terms, political parties and trade unions have seen their membership fall, even if trade union membership in Sweden ranks among the highest in the world. Simultaneously, new political actors and interest groups, civil society actors, think tanks and policy professionals, have emerged on the political scene and are becoming increasingly engaged in political processes. Notably, traditionally marginalised groups, including the young, women and groups of migrant background, are represented in decision-making forums to a higher degree than before. However, such claims are made for the long term, a matter to which we shall return.

Significantly, the notion of Swedish exceptionalism and the particularities of its welfare state (once poetically termed the People's Home) is lingering. Yet, findings point in the opposite direction and towards increasing economic inequality, labour-market as well as political polarisation, and the increased electoral support for nationalist and anti-immigrant ideas.

The contributions of political sociology

A special issue on political sociology by the journal of the Swedish Sociological Association is timely. Political sociology constitutes a central area of sociological theory since the work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim and their focus on political power, actors and action, social hierarchies and elites, stratification and inequality, conflicts and forms of social solidarity. Political sociology has been studied with reference to the role of social elites (see C. Wright Mills, Robert Michels) political participation, voting and public opinion (see Paul Lazarsfeld), social cleavages, states and political systems (see Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan), political organisation for protests and revolutions (see Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol), the public sphere (Jürgen

Habermas); social conditions for the development of democracies or dictatorships (see Barrington Moore) and nationalism and related ideologies and movements (see e.g. Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Lyn Spillman).

Whereas political sociology was traditionally preoccupied with social class, it has increasingly come to focus on other (overlapping) forms of stratification such as gender, age, race and ethnicity, and patterns of inequality that influence opportunities and political action (see e.g. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nira Yuval-Davis). The traditional focus on political actors, institutions, parties and corporatist interest-organizations has also embraced the study of new social movements, think thanks and civil society organisations.

Cleavages and the GAL–TAN divide

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) used "cleavage" to refer to socio-economic cleavages (between labour and capital, and agriculture and industry) and socio-cultural cleavages (between church and state, and centre and periphery). This to explain how social cleavages contributed towards shaping political parties and systems in Western Europe since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Swedish political system was primarily shaped by the cleavage between labour and capital, expressed through the workers' movements and growth of the welfare state. The socio-cultural cleavage was traditionally concerned with the church and the state or divides between the centre and the periphery and traditional/religious versus secular lifestyles. These cleavages overlap social positions, values and norms and forms of political organisation and action.

The socio-cultural dimension has been explored in relation to the increasing political polarisation since the 1970s (see Inglehart 1977, Bornschier 2010, Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002) and is today sometimes conceptualised as the GAL–TAN divide. The GAL–TAN divide refers to the contrasting spectrum of views between Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist attitudes. In the Swedish case, political cleavages relate increasingly to political divides forming around values and lifestyles relating to the environment, the promotion of gender and LGBT rights, Christian ideals, or by opposing immigration. Yet, socio-economic cleavages, social class and status remain central at times in new forms and guises.

The close association between class and political party support has declined in Sweden since the 1950s (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016:77, see also Heath *et al.* 2007, 2009). According to the Swedish National Election Studies 1956–2014 social class remains a central dimension for voter preference. With the help of the Election Studies we are able to show how class (workers vs. employees and professionals), gender (men vs. women) and the level of urbanisation (urban vs. rural) relate to political attitudes and how they have changed over time.

The first two diagrams relate to the political interests along the lines of labour–capital and the degree to which the state should control the private sector (Figure 1) or whether the public sector should decrease or not (Figure 2). The remaining diagrams relate to the GAL–TAN divide and the need for "more" law and order (Figure 3), whether Sweden should accept more or less refugees (Figure 4), whether equality between men and women should be promoted (Figure 5) and whether traditional Swedish values should be protected (Figure 6).

Figures 1–6: Changes in attitudes of the Swedish electorate is based on the Swedish National Election Studies 1956–2014, *Valundersökningarna*, and show the average of different social groups' responses. The variable social class is defined by workers and employees/professionals (for more details, see Oskarson 2007) and for the level of urbanisation four values were reduced to two, rural area and city. The questions and alternatives given has been explained underneath each figure. "Do not know" or "Do not want to respond" has been coded as missing data.
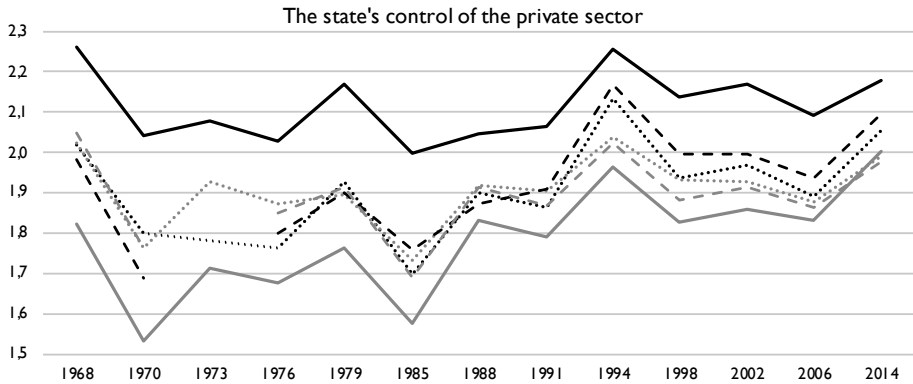
The state's control of the private sector

Figure 1: "Leading banks and the industry will have too much say if the state is unable to control the private sector." (4. Strongly agree 3. Partially agree 2. Partially disagree 1. Strongly Disagree).
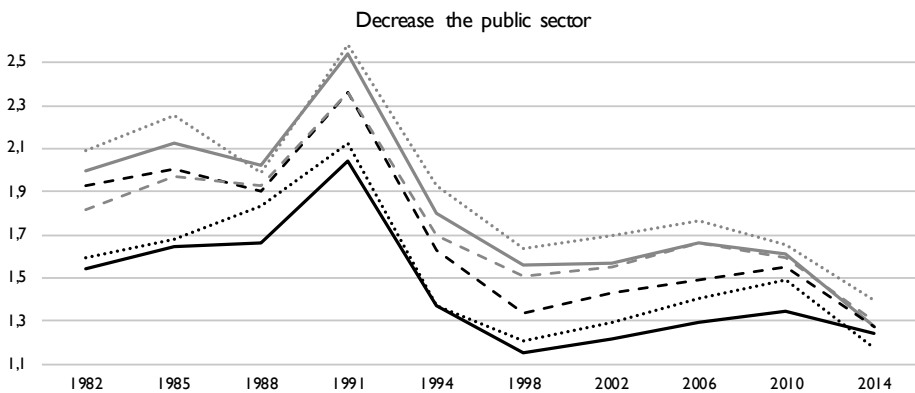
Decrease the public sector

Figure 2, "Decrease the public sector" (5. This is a good suggestion and it is very important that it is being realized; 4. A good suggestion and somewhat important that it is being realized; 3. Does not really matter; 2. This is a bad suggestion and somewhat important it is never realized; 1. This is a bad suggestion and very important that it is never realized.).

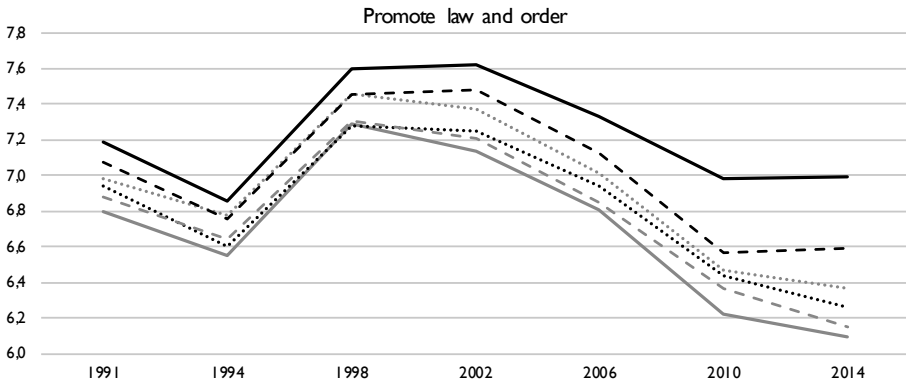| ——— Workers	········ Women	– – – Rural areas
——— Employees and professionals	········ Men	– – – Cities

Figure 3, "Promote law and order" (0–10; 0=a very bad suggestion; 5=neither good nor bad; 10=a very good suggestion).
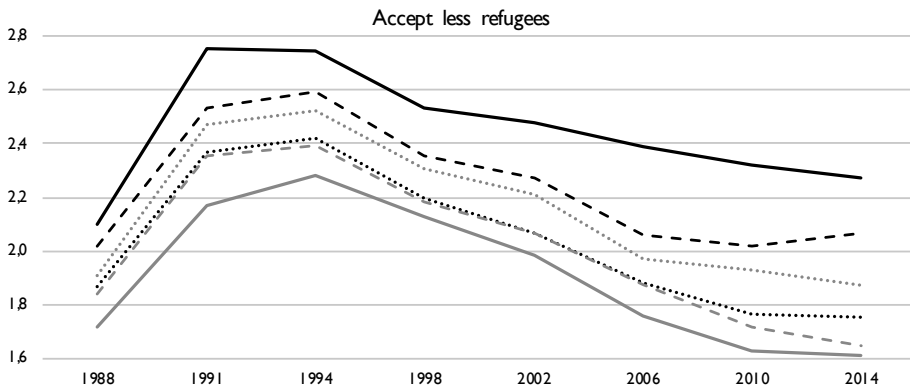

Figure 4, "Accept less refugees in Sweden" (5. This is a good suggestion and it is very important that it is being realized; 4. A good suggestion and somewhat important that it is being realized; 3. Does not really matter; 2. This is a bad suggestion and somewhat important it is never realized; 1. This is a bad suggestion and very important that it is never realized.).
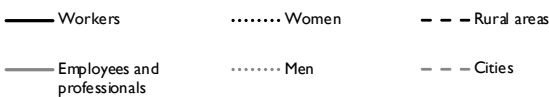
Equality between men and women

Figure 5, "Promote more equality between men and women" (0–10; 0=a very bad suggestion; 5=neither good nor bad; 10=a very good suggestion).
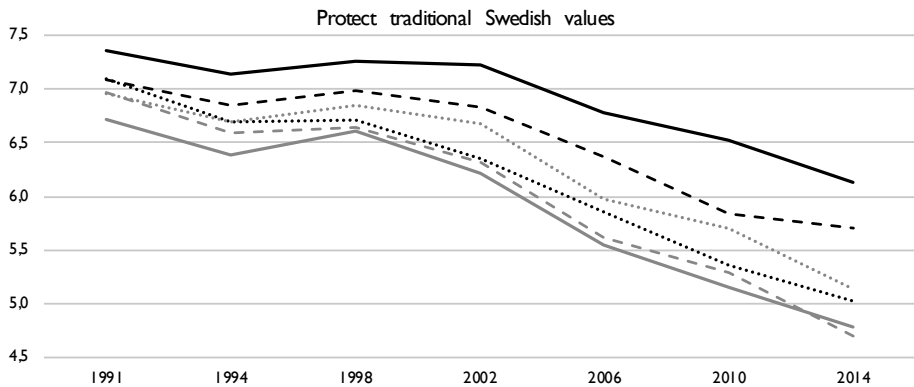
Protect traditional Swedish values

Figure 6, "Promote a society that protects traditional Swedish values" (0–10; 0= a very bad suggestion; 5=neither good nor bad; 10=a very good suggestion).

Workers	.... Women	– – Rural areas
Employees and professionals	...... Men	– – Cities

The findings, show that social class is the most important social factor of those measured that contributes towards explaining political attitudes about market regulation (Figure 1), even if the differences between workers and employees/professionals have decreased over time (and differences between urban and rural areas have increased since the 1990s). On attitudes about the size of the public sector (Figure 2), social class plays a significant role too: employees/professionals are becoming increasingly positive and closer to the attitudes of workers, and women are more positive than men towards a large public sector. For political views relating to the GAL–TAN divide, social class is also most important in explaining attitudes to criminal policy, refugees or Swedish values (Figures 3, 4, 6) whereas gender is more important for attitudes towards equality between men and women (Figure 5). However, the level of urbanisation has become more important for related attitudes over time. In terms of social cleavages, class position is, as expected, important for the cleavage labour–capital but also with reference to moral attitudes on the GAL–TAN divide. Previous research has found similar patterns (Svallfors 2006).

The extent to which Sweden is on a trajectory of change from the traditional social cleavage based on the divide between labour–capital is explored by articles in this issue. Mattias Bengtsson and Kerstin Jacobsson analyse the institutionalisation of a new social cleavage in Sweden, generated by the transformation of the Swedish social democratic welfare state. This transformation, the authors argue, was enabled by changes in labour market and social insurance policies, combined with significant tax reductions, and justified by the previous centre-conservative government's discourse of "outsiderhood".

Klara Hermansson, in turn, approaches welfare politics from the perspective of "public safety", a central theme for the politicisation of criminal policies. The author argues that the symbolic meaning of "public safety" cannot be overlooked as the rhetoric is closely associated with the traditional socio-economic left-right dimension but is increasingly attached to "new" social cleavages. The author analyses the political debates on public safety in the last three general elections with reference to three parties, the Social Democrats, the Moderate Party and the Sweden Democrats. Hermansson shows how these parties use "public safety" and "insecurity" to diagnose problems, articulate demands and formulate solutions in relation to social cohesion and national pride.

Magnus Dahlstedt and Barzoo Eliassi also explore the cleavages of contemporary Swedish politics with specific reference to contemporary discourses about social exclusion in Swedish suburbs. The authors examine the discursive resources used by party leaders during the Politician's Week in Almedalen to frame the suburbs as sites of "parallel society", criminality, passivity, gender oppression, radicalization and values that allegedly pose a threat to the social cohesion of Swedish society. Specifically, "Swedish values" are highlighted as important resources to strengthen social cohesion but also gradually becoming markers of difference and hierarchies of belonging and rights in Swedish society.

The rise of the radical right

The resurgence of radical right-wing parties and movements constitutes one of the most significant political changes in democratic states in the past decades. Sweden was long thought of as an "exceptional case" since there were no representatives of the radical right in the national parliament. However, the election of 2010 signalled the end of this exceptionalism as the radical right, the Sweden Democrats, entered parliament.

The Sweden Democrats' electoral success has been understood as a result of profound macro-changes including the transformation from industrial to post-industrial societies and globalization, changes that have rendered the political left–right scale ineffective. The growing convergence among mainstream parties on socio-economic cleavages (Kitschelt 1995; Kriesi *et al.* 2008) and the partial de-politicization or neglect of socio-economic issues have helped explain the rise of radical right parties (Rydgren 2005; Mair 2013). Clashes of economic interests are, therefore, increasingly framed as a clash of "dervedness" between "immigrants" and those perceived of as "ethnic Swedes" (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018).

A few issues appear as central in the context of the Sweden Democrats: the party's electoral success, the impact of the conceptualisation by which we analyse its mobilising agenda and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

First, the Sweden Democrats originated in 1988 from a radical right-wing, xenophobic and racist environment as the successor to the Sweden Party (*Sverigepartiet*) (Jungar & Jupskås 2014). In the 2002 national election, the party received 1.4 percent of the vote, a figure that increased to 2.9 percent in 2006 and reached 5.7 percent in 2010, when the first parliamentary seats were won. This share of votes increased dramatically, to 12.9 percent in the 2014 election and has since been hovering between 15 and 20 percent in the polls. The party's increasing share of votes has been explained as the result of polished rhetoric (see Hellström 2010; Peterson 2016) and electoral success is roughly marked by Jimmie Åkesson becoming party leader (2005) and entering parliament (2011) (Bergmann 2017). However, the party demonstrates considerable continuity on central dimensions such as the exclusive nature of national identity (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018).

Second, although radical right-wing parties in Europe are increasingly referred to by their populist elements, i.e. anti-system, anti-elitism and anti-establishment, these elements do not constitute their defining characteristics. Ultimately, it is the discourse of ethnic nationalism, rather than populism, that defines the radical right and so also the Sweden Democrats concern about immigration, multiculturalism and "Islamist threat" (Brubaker 2017; Rydgren 2017, 2018; Elgenius & Rydgren 2017, 2018; cf. Mudde 2007).

Third, the ethno-nationalist rhetoric centres around the notion of an ethnically homogenous nation now threatened by immigration. The latter constitute the single most important reason as to why voters support the radical right (Arzheimer 2018). Anti-immigrant frames are therefore central to political mobilisation and include the portrayal of immigrants as a threat to national identity, a major cause of criminality and as the illegitimate competitors over scarce resources (be it jobs, housing or welfare services) (Rydgren 2003, 2008).

Articles of this special issue analyse various aspects of the rise and establishment of the Sweden Democrats. With reference to electoral success, Anders Hellström and Pieter Bevelander explore its correlation to media exposure during the parliamentary periods before (2006–2010) and after (2010–2014) the party entered parliament. Media exposure was central for electoral breakthrough and whereas it contributed to electoral gains in the first period, it did not in the second. Significantly, there was a shift from national to regional media exposure in the second parliamentary period when the Sweden Democrats had already crossed the parliamentary threshold.

Johan Wänström's article analyses the impact on local politics with specific reference to coalition formation on municipal level. The author argues that the new parliamentary landscape is no longer dominated by the two blocs on the ideological left–right scale. In fact, findings show that coalition formation along the lines of the traditional ideological left–right scale, has not dominated local government since the 2014 election. Significantly, the GAL–TAN spectrum do not play a decisive role in coalition formation either. Instead, the ability to cooperate and personal chemistry are considered important factors in coalition building at the municipal level and in local government.

The growing importance of radical right social media groups has much to tell about grassroots discourses and mechanisms for mobilization. Anton Törnberg and Mattias Wahlström explore the "orientational frames" of the largest online facebook discussion group of a predominantly racist and anti-immigrant discourse. Its mobilising potential is analysed in view of its dual function as a "counterpublic" and a "free social space". The authors hereby challenge the simplistic understanding of online forums as "echo chambers", by highlighting the active negotiation of frames and use of external links that both confirm and contradict the group. A form of collective identity can be discerned through the opposition to various outgroups and through nationalism expressed through the concern of "sacred national objects" typically perceived to be under threat.

In general terms, the Sweden Democrats has contributed towards a rhetoric of doom and decay that echoes that of other radical right parties in Europe. This rhetoric is based on ethnic nationalism, which alongside nationalist claims of homogenous origins, a common destiny, also assumes an inherited national social solidarity that is being compromised by immigration. Swedish nationalism is hereby provided as a remedy to restore authenticity, (ethnic and cultural) homogeneity and social solidarity (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018). The dramatic rise of the Sweden Democrats has seemingly been of particular relevance in view of Sweden's acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers since 2015.

New political actors and changes in political participation

The political landscape has also witnessed changes in political participation in Sweden as in many other liberal democracies in the past decades, the most persistent trend being ways in which citizens choose to influence politics and the political actors that do so. Membership in political parties is falling, and political parties are becoming more

professionalised and less dependent on their volunteers (Petersson 2000). Similarly, we find citizens getting engaged in a number of ways, by protesting, petitioning, and boycotting, through formal organisations or informal networks and social movements. The social media and online portals has enabled new forms of social interaction and new ways through which to be politically engaged. The political landscape may therefore have many so called "standby citizens" that may not be actively involved but who follow political debates (Amnå & Ekman 2014). Moreover, new political actors include think thanks and policy professionals (Garsten, Rothstein & Svallfors 2015).

Therefore, scholars of political sociology have tried to understand how seemingly contradictory processes complement each other by way of concepts such as individualisation (Beck 1997), the "social movement society" (Meyer & Tarrow 1998), the "normalisation of protest" (Van Aelst & Walgrave 2001), the increase of "political consumerism" (Stolle & Micheletti 2013) and "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg 2013). Research on political participation has also explored increasing inequalities in citizens' political participation, and unequal changes with regards to social capital and the social resources generated by and in networks and organisations (see e.g. Heath *et al. 2013;* Putnam 2011; Schlozman, Verba & Brady 2012).

Political participation in Sweden demonstrate change over time and how political participation differs across different groups in relation to social class (workers vs. employees/professionals), gender (women vs. men) and "foreign-born" (born outside Sweden). Voting in the national election across these groups is seen below (Figure 7). Notably, the largest gap is between those born in and outside Sweden and between workers and employees/professionals.
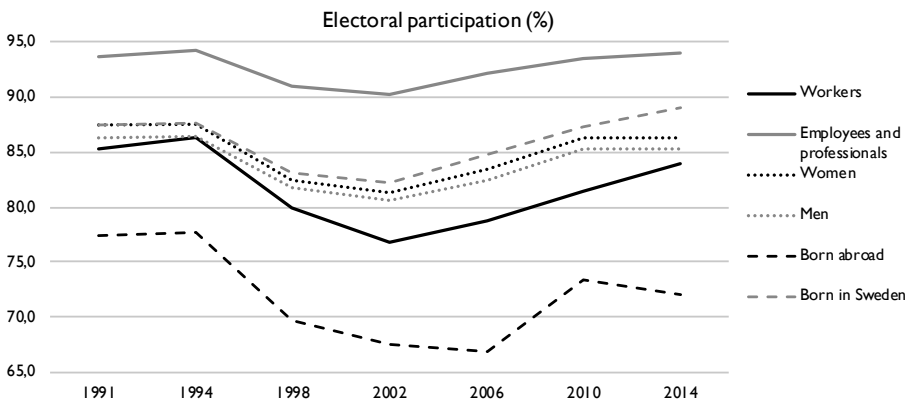

Figure 7. Voting in parliamentary elections, in percent. Figures are based on Statistics Sweden (SCB 2012, 2015).

With regards to membership in political parties the following differences are found across social groups (Figure 8): men tend to be members of parties to a higher degree than women, professionals and employees more than workers and those born in Sweden to a higher degree than those born outside Sweden. However, with reference to taking part in demonstrations, individuals born outside Sweden are more likely to participate compared to those who are born in Sweden (Figure 9) (see also Wennerhag 2017).
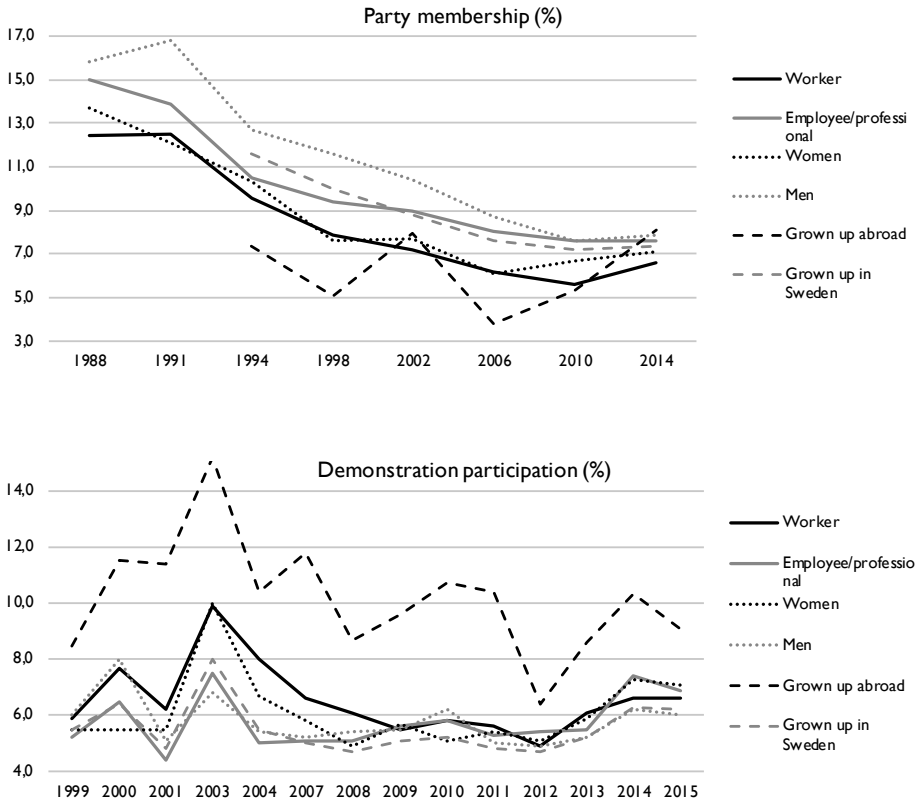
Figures 8 and 9. Party membership and participation in demonstrations (in the past twelve months) in percent. Both diagrams are based on data from the annual SOM-surveys (1988–2015).

In direct relation to the claims above, we turn to Alireza Behtoui's article on political representation and the extent to which individuals with migration background were appointed and elected into different levels of public decision-making bodies be it on national, regional or local levels, in the Swedish general election of 2014. Individuals with "migration background" refers to those born abroad or born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents and are severely underrepresented in the Swedish decision-making bodies and in cases when they are listed on the political parties' ballot papers, they have less chance of being elected compared to candidates without a migrant background. The results indicate that access to social networks are important in order to get both nominated and elected.

Several articles in this special issue analyse the political participation of particular groups such as the young, women, tenants and the role of think thanks, civil society organisations and social movements.

The role of the social media is discussed in the context of political participation among the young in an article by Elin Fjellman, Nils Gustafsson och Malena Rosén Sundström. By analysing attitudes of politically active as well as inactive participants, the article shows that the so called "participation divide" is not as clear cut as indicated by previous research, and that a majority of the youth were sceptical to political discussion online. However, results indicate that such divide cut through the most confident and non-confident groups. Even some of the most politically active young people in the study state that they refrain from participating in social media.

The corporatist model that used to dominate political organisation were based on a couple of organisations representing large social groups. Today, there are a large number of civil society actors that represent a multitude of interests. The article by Malin Arvidson, Håkan Johansson, Anna Meeuwisse and Roberto Scaramuzzino explores the extent to which Swedish civil society organisations are trying to influence politicians, civil servants and public opinion. Based on an extensive survey the article analyses the logic of a specific Swedish culture of advocacy in which Swedish civil society organisations are both allowed and expected to voice criticism against public actors and policies. The results reveal a complex picture of civil society advocacy activities and challenge established advocacy research.

Also challenging the corporatist model, think tanks have become an increasingly important political actors both inside and outside the Swedish context. Through their activities they are able to connect businesses, civil society organisations, civil servants, politicians and journalist. In Sweden, there are today a number of think tanks connected to the corporative models foremost political actors. Adrienne Sörboms draws on insights from think thanks in Stockholm and results show that the activities colloquially termed "networking" and "agenda setting" can be understood from an organisational perspective. These activities may come across as random attempts bridging think tanks with policy actors but are, on the contrary, designed to make other actors implement their ideas in the future. Sörbom shows that think tanks are actively trying to balance their need for resources and access to important networks with the appearance of independence.

The last two articles explore the experiences of two very different groups, housewives, and tenants of renovictions. Both articles pay attention to groups that have been hit by the changes in welfare provision but vary with regards to whether they act or protest such changes. In Catrin Lundström's article we meet women who have accompanied their spouses abroad and return to Sweden and handle values and norms related to Swedish equality. Most women have been situated outside the formal labour market during their time abroad and been occupied with family related work. The article discusses the political and social consequences of women's economic dependence, in terms of welfare state distribution and pensions. When living abroad, these women were provided for by their husbands. Yet, their positions as "trailing spouses" had a severe impact on their opportunities for reintegration into the labour market as well as for their future – or current – pensions. The author analyses how political ideals are formed around work, gender equality and income redistribution and its relation to Swedishness.

Dominika V. Polanska and Åse Richard's article investigates the experience of tenants that are facing eviction following forced renovation. Concepts such as cultural trauma, resistance and action repertoires are used to understand the processes that residents in renovation areas have to face and how their collective self-image and strategies for action change during these processes. The exceptionally high trust in Sweden, based on the Swedish welfare state and housing policy, they argue, contributes to the traumatic experiences among tenants when facing forced renovation. The authors analyse the ways in which traumatic experiences are expressed, the causes of these, the forms resistance take and how such experiences can be transformed into individual and collective resistance actions.

The special issue on political sociology

We hope that the articles of this special issue shall contribute to understanding the complexities surrounding the changing political landscape. We would like to thank the contributing authors and all the anonymous reviewers who made this special issue possible. We also extend special thanks to Sara Eldén, editor of *Sociologisk Forskning*, who has provided much support during this process. We would also like to thank Erik Vestin och Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson of the Swedish National Election Studies Program at the University of Gothenburg for the valuable help with the data displayed in figures 1–6 in this article.

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