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# An unfinished suffrage reform. Voting rights in Sweden after the ‘democratic breakthrough’

Fia Sundevall <sup>a</sup>, Annika Berg <sup>b</sup> and Bengt Sandin <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Economic History & International Relations, Stockholms Universitet, Sweden, Stockholm;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholms Universitet, Sweden, Stockholm; <sup>c</sup>Swedish Labour Movement’s Archive and Library, Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek, Sweden, Huddinge

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex and non-linear process of democratization in Sweden after the introduction of so-called universal suffrage in 1921. The research questions address the excluded groups post-1921, the reasons for their exclusion, and the historical processes that led to further expansions of suffrage rights. The study shows that the expansion of suffrage rights in Sweden after 1921 was not guided primarily by a desire to broaden voter inclusion and/or rectify the limitations of the 1921 legislation. Instead, the motivations were embedded in a more intricate and multi-faceted tapestry of political aims and alliances as well as situational factors that included various social, economic, and cultural shifts. The article concludes that the history of suffrage in Sweden after 1921 has been one of continuous negotiations, transformations, and adaptations, and that this provides valuable insights for addressing challenges of political inclusion and representation in the present and future.

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## Introduction

In recent years, several nations worldwide have celebrated the centenaries of their respective ‘democratic breakthroughs’.<sup>1</sup> Among these nations is Sweden, whose Parliament initiated an extended jubilee, encapsulated in the slogan ‘Celebrate Democracy!’ The celebrations, which spanned from 2018 to 2022, commemorated the legislative enactment of ‘universal and equal suffrage’ a century earlier (1918–1921).<sup>2</sup>

The year 1921 was as a pivotal moment in the timeline of the Swedish ‘democratic breakthrough’. In that year, the Parliament reaffirmed its earlier decision to introduce ‘universal suffrage’ in the national elections for the Second (lower) Chamber, which resulted in a substantial expansion of the electorate, particularly through the enfranchisement of women. However, contrary to the inclusive implications of the term ‘universal suffrage’, the right to vote was not extended universally; in the first elections held after the 1921 reform, nearly half of the population remained excluded.<sup>3</sup> While the large majority of those excluded were below the voting age, a considerable

**CONTACT** Fia Sundevall  [fia.sundevall@ekohist.su.se](mailto:fia.sundevall@ekohist.su.se)

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number of Swedish citizens of voting age were also denied the right to vote. A century later, the proportion of the population ineligible to vote in national elections had decreased to one-quarter.<sup>4</sup> This demonstrates that the process of suffrage expansion continued beyond 1921.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this, historical research on suffrage in Sweden has predominantly focused on the period up to 1918–1921.<sup>6</sup> Whether intentional or not, this has arguably reinforced the notion that 1921 marked the end of the expansion of voting rights. Furthermore, historical inquiry into the limitations of suffrage in Sweden beyond the parameters of gender and economic status has been notably scarce. Until recently, the only comprehensive study on this topic was (Berling Åselius's, 2005) dissertation, which remains a pivotal publication in the field. However, Berling Åselius's study concluded with the year 1920, thus leaving the voting restrictions that persisted beyond that year unexplored.<sup>7</sup>

The recent centenary commemorations of suffrage in the Nordic countries and elsewhere appear to have reinvigorated historical scholarly interest in this field.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, and similar to the case of Sweden, much of this research remains limited to the analysis of specific types of voting limitations. Among the few notable exceptions are Minna Harjula's comprehensive work on voting restrictions in Finland.<sup>9</sup>

By scrutinizing the many limitations on suffrage that persisted in Sweden beyond 1921, the authors of this study aim to shed new light on the trajectory of suffrage expansion in Swedish history and to show how it reflects both the short- and long-term transformations of Swedish society. In doing so, our study not only challenges the narrative of 1921 as the culmination of suffrage expansions but also offers new insights into the complex, asynchronous, and multifaceted mechanisms that shaped suffrage rights in Sweden after its 'democratic breakthrough'.

While obstacles to the *exercise* of suffrage rights must not be overlooked,<sup>10</sup> the primary focus of this article centres on formal exclusion from the right to vote. This encompasses restrictions based on factors such as national citizenship and age as well as various grounds for disqualification. The latter categories include individuals who meet the basic requirements for suffrage but are disqualified due to particular legislative provisions, such as felony convictions or outstanding tax liabilities.

Our study is structured around two key questions. The first concerns the groups of people who were affected by the remaining restrictions and excluded from suffrage: who were they and on what grounds were they kept excluded from suffrage? The second question concerns the alleviation or eventual abolition of the restrictions: what historical processes led to the further expansion of suffrage rights?

We will argue that, in contrast to the suffrage extensions of the early twentieth century, the post-1921 expansions were not the result of a unified struggle or a coherent ambition to eliminate the remaining restrictions. The fragmentation of the suffrage issue post-1921 suggests that it no longer functioned as an overarching concern, underpinning a broader political struggle for democracy and political citizenship. The remaining disqualifications were concerns predominantly for smaller entities of the electorate and not for major political interests, with the exception of the case of voting age in which the Farmers' League and the Social Democrats acted together. With that exception, we propose further that the extensions of suffrage implemented after 1921 were *not* primarily driven by the ambition to expand voting rights but were part of various political processes with other objectives in focus. Some of these processes were novel, reflecting, for example, specific

social and cultural challenges to Swedish society during the interwar and post-war periods, while others constituted a continuation of the earlier reform agendas.

Our study operates under the premise that democratization is a fluid and ongoing process, continually subject to renegotiation. Furthermore, our argument rests on a basic understanding of how institutional and political arrangements change. We will analyse how discussions of voting rights were interlinked with other political questions, to party-political dynamics, and to how institutional frameworks developed.<sup>11</sup> Our standpoint is that institutions not only define and shape cultural constructs such as voting rights through policy, but are also susceptible to challenge and transformation by social movements and individual agency, sometimes in a bottom-up process.<sup>12</sup>

The Swedish case aptly illustrates the complexity of the historical factors that influence voting rights. Unlike a linear perspective of franchise, which suggests a steady inclusion of more and more groups, our results indicate that processes of suffrage expansion are much more complex, and that rigorous historical research is needed to shed light on these complexities. Also, changes can rarely or never be attributed to a single cause. Political scientists and historians alike must acknowledge that processes of change are usually multifaceted, sometimes even contradictory. That means we must keep our eyes open for historical dead ends and lost causes.

Previous international research indicates that different waves of democratization have had multiple causations, not necessarily synchronized. As political scientist Daniel Ziblatt notes, 'the different elements of democracy (civil liberties, responsible executives, and universal suffrage) do not always travel together'; indeed, 'one can argue that democracy emerged historically as an amalgam of discrete institutional reforms that at times *undercut* each other'.<sup>13</sup> In line with this, our analysis accounts for the possibility of contradictory processes of change, conflicting cultures, and paths.<sup>14</sup>

Our article is organized as follows. We begin by providing an overview of changes in the voting age and grounds for disenfranchisement in local and national elections in Sweden post-1921. We then scrutinize the composition and size of the excluded groups, identifying factors that, we argue, explain why the continued expansion of voting rights after 1921 was neither a political priority nor the subject of a unified effort. In the subsequent section, we delve into the processes through which many of the remaining suffrage restrictions were either removed or modified post-1921. We conclude by summarizing our findings and discussing their implications for the understanding of Sweden's suffrage expansion process specifically, and for the study of suffrage expansions and processes of democratization more generally.

### **Grounds for suffrage exclusion in Sweden after 1921**

The suffrage and parliamentary reforms enacted in Sweden between 1918 and 1921 led to substantial modifications within the country's electoral system. Among these were the abolishment of the plural voting system at a municipal level and the establishment of a proportional system mirroring what had been practiced in the Parliament's Second Chamber elections since 1911. Moreover, these reforms expanded the right to participate as a candidate in parliamentary elections as well as the right to vote, most notably to women.<sup>15</sup>

However, as previously indicated, a number of other voting restrictions persisted after the 1921 implementation of what is commonly termed universal suffrage.

**Table 1.** Voting age in Sweden after 1921.

Year when new age limit came into force	National elections (Until 1968: Second Chamber only)	County council elections	Municipal council elections
1921	23*	(27 since 1919)	(23 since 1919)
1937		23	
1941		21	21
1945	21		
1965	20	20	20
1974	18**	18	18

\*This year, the voting age for the Second Chamber decreased from 21 to 23, while the indirect voting age for the First Chamber was increased from 21 to 27.

\*\*Until 1973, the right to vote applied to those who had reached the voting age in the year preceding the election. From 1974 and onwards, the right to vote was valid from a person's 18th birthday.

Additional comment: The age of majority and voting age did not always follow suit. During 1921–1968 the age of majority was 21, during 1969–1973 it was 20, and since 1974 it has been 18.

Source: Sandin and Josefsson, 'Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship', 260.

**Table 2.** Grounds for disenfranchisement in Sweden after 1921.

Grounds for disenfranchisement*	Year of abolition	
	National elections (Until 1968: Second Chamber only)	Municipal and regional elections
<b>Incomplete military training</b> [ <i>Värnpliksstrecket</i> ] Failure to fulfil compulsory military training sessions during the year before the election in question, without legitimate cause	1922	–
<b>Felony</b> [ <i>Straffpåföljdsstrecket</i> ] Sentenced to penal labour or imprisonment for at least 6 months (with some exceptions)	1937	1937
<b>Tax debts</b> [ <i>Utskyldsstrecket</i> or <i>skatteskuldsstrecket</i> ] Unpaid municipal taxes during two or more of the last three years before the election in question.	– (abolished in 1921)	1945
<b>Bankruptcy</b> [ <i>Konkursstrecket</i> ] In the legal state of bankruptcy.	1945	1945
<b>Poor relief</b> [ <i>Fattigvårdsstrecket</i> ] Taken in for long-term economic support and care by the public poor relief system.	1945	1945
<b>Guardianship</b> [ <i>Förmynderskapsstrecket</i> ] Adults declared legally incompetent and therefore under guardianship.	1989	1989

\*Defined as grounds for disqualifying electorates from suffrage despite their meeting the basic suffrage criteria related to age and, when applicable, national citizenship and/or residency.

Source: SFS, no. 1922:47, 1937:201, 1945:244, 1945:246–248, 1988:1251–1253. For more details on each ground for disenfranchisement as well as exceptions from the rules stated above, see Berg and Ericsson, eds., *Allmän rösträtt?*

What was the basis for those voting restrictions, and how did the restrictions evolve over time? In the tables below, we provide an overview of the changes in the voting age (Table 1) and grounds for disqualification (Table 2) in the municipal, county, and parliamentary elections in Sweden after 1921.

It is imperative to acknowledge that these tables offer a succinct overview of intricate historical events and that their condensed format inevitably omits certain details and complexities. For comprehensive insights into the specific restrictions, their origins and rationales, we strongly encourage readers to refer to the tables' references. For example, while the tables cover the period from 1921 onwards, it must be recognized that the suffrage reform of that year was closely linked to the 1918–1919 municipality and county suffrage reforms. Moreover, significant voting restrictions, such as the introduction of new grounds for disenfranchisement, were introduced in 1909, while a number of other

restrictions, including age limits and tax debt-related disenfranchisement, underwent changes in several stages from the mid-1800s.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that until 1971, the Second Chamber was elected through direct election, whereas the First Chamber was appointed indirectly by franchised members of county councils and a few municipal councils. This bicameral system (legislated in 1866, executed in 1867) was replaced with a unicameral system in 1971 (with the last elections under the old system taking place in 1968), where all members of Parliament were elected through representative direct elections. This unicameral system remains in place today.<sup>17</sup> It should also be noted that the years indicated in the tables denote when legislation came into force, and do not always correspond with the year when a certain bill was passed, nor with the year of the first election cycle in which the new legislation was implemented.

### Who were excluded?

As shown, the suffrage reforms of 1918–1921 were accompanied by several restrictions. We now turn our attention to the size and composition of the excluded groups, while also highlighting a number of factors that, we contend, serve as key explanations why the further extension of voting rights after 1921 neither emerged as a political priority, nor activated a unified advocacy effort.

When considering the size of the excluded groups, it becomes apparent that age restrictions had the most significant impact on voter eligibility. In the Second Chamber elections in 1921, over 8% of the population above the age of majority – which at that time was 21 for both women and men – were excluded from voting due to age limitations. In the elections to the county and regional councils, where the minimum age requirement was even higher, about 19% of the population over the age of 21 were excluded for the same reasons.<sup>18</sup>

By comparison, the various grounds for disenfranchising individuals applied to a relatively small proportion of those who had met the basic suffrage requirements related to age and national citizenship (and thus been added to the election roll): 2.2% of the people in the election rolls were disenfranchised in the 1921 Second Chamber elections, and 3.4% in the 1923 municipal elections held in 1922. In the former elections, the largest group (about 42,000 people) was excluded due to disenfranchisement based on poor relief, while the smallest group (about 1,300 people) was excluded due to felony disenfranchisement. In municipal elections, tax debts were the primary reason for disenfranchisement, affecting approximately 60,000 people.<sup>19</sup>

The relatively small number of disenfranchised individuals implies that there were few votes to be gained for any political party by eliminating those voting restrictions – unlike the age limits, which affected large numbers of people. In addition, the uncertainty about whether removing or modifying such restrictions would benefit a specific party most likely made such efforts even less appealing for politicians. However, parties did have significant potential to gain or lose votes by changing the voting age. Decreasing or increasing the voting age could have a substantial impact on a party's support base. Similarly, parties may have had different expectations regarding gaining votes from Swedish nationals living abroad or non-citizens residing in Sweden, depending on their specific platforms and policies.<sup>20</sup> Overall, while the potential gains and losses of extending suffrage to specific groups were likely

a factor in political parties' decision-making, it was not the only consideration. Parties had to carefully balance the likely benefits of expanding their voter base against the potential costs of alienating their existing supporters.

However, if we were to accept the assumption that 'politicians, just like voters, are primarily guided by their self-interest',<sup>21</sup> one could also argue that it would be in the interest of parties to extend suffrage to certain groups, even if they were few in number, if those extensions appealed to existing supporters. Nevertheless, because the proportion of the population who exercised their right to vote was relatively low in the first few elections after 1921,<sup>22</sup> efforts would probably be directed towards mobilizing a larger segment of the group that had already gained formal voting rights. The Social Democrat Gustav Möller made this point explicit in his 1918 post-election analyses when he emphasized that the party had to reach the agricultural workers in the countryside.<sup>23</sup>

When examining the size of excluded groups, it must also be considered that the proportions of excluded and included individuals changed over time.<sup>24</sup> These changes were not solely due to alterations in voting age or grounds for disenfranchisement, but also resulted from demographic changes, as well as other factors, such as changes in the pension system and the elderly care infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> This leads us to the composition of the groups excluded from the vote by age or grounds for disenfranchisement, wherein we can observe the following characteristics.

First, the excluded groups consisted of individuals who were marginalized due to age or other reasons, or even stigmatized by the prevailing societal norms. Second, being poor, disabled, legally dependent (adults declared legally incapable, as well as children), bankrupt, or sentenced to serve a prison term, were all states associated with institutional dependencies and restricted autonomy.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the groups in question were in many (but not all) cases fragmented and dispersed across the country, with individuals frequently residing in isolated communities or small institutions. Draft dodgers and those who purposely avoided paying taxes, however, had other reasons to actively keep themselves invisible to local administrative officials.

Finally, it is crucial to consider that the groups excluded from suffrage were, in some cases, excluded only temporarily. The younger generation, still unable to vote, could look forward to doing so in a few years' time. Similarly, those unable to pay their taxes, in a state of bankruptcy, or serving a prison sentence might hope for a change in their situation and not want to be identified with their current, and hopefully temporary, circumstances. In contrast, individuals in poor relief institutions were predominantly of old age and had, in most cases, a relatively short remaining lifespan.

Overall, we argue that these circumstances constrained the ability and inclination of these groups to mobilize and gather support for their suffrage rights. Additionally, the relatively small number of disenfranchised individuals meant that they were of limited interest for parties seeking to maximize their votes. In contrast, however, the youth attracted the interest of two political parties during the 1930s, and of several parties in the 1960s. Likewise, the vote of non-citizen residents and expatriate Swedish citizens caught the attention of several parties in the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite the challenges outlined here, an extension of voting rights did occur in several steps post-1921. How did this expansion of suffrage come about? This is what we will examine next.

### **Why inclusion, nevertheless?**

When the Swedish Parliament met on 26 January 1921 to confirm its previous decision to introduce 'universal suffrage' for national (Second Chamber) elections,<sup>27</sup> several motions had already been issued to amend the reform. This serves to highlight that the negotiations of suffrage rights had not yet ended.

Three of the motions called for the reinstatement of tax debts as grounds for disenfranchisement in elections to the Second Chamber of Parliament.<sup>28</sup> In yet another motion, a member of the First Chamber proposed the abolition of all remaining grounds for disenfranchisement.<sup>29</sup> With one small exception, which we will revisit, all these attempts to modify the recently approved suffrage act were voted down by the chambers. The debates preceding these rejections marked the last time all remaining grounds for disenfranchisement were discussed in Parliament and no further attempts were made to address the issue comprehensively. Instead, each of the remaining voting restrictions was examined separately or, in some instances, just a few of them together. This approach represented a departure from how matters of suffrage exclusion and inclusion had previously been addressed by Parliament and exemplifies how the remaining disqualifications were viewed as concerns for special interest groups rather than for democracy and political citizenship as a whole.

Another significant difference was that, unlike the period pre-1921, the issue of suffrage expansion was no longer driven by either a dedicated suffrage movement, nor by other social movements (at least not until the latter part of the twentieth century).<sup>30</sup> As discussed, members of parliament (MPs) also showed little interest in pursuing the issue, although there were some initiatives from individual members or smaller parties to abolish (or strengthen) one or more of the remaining grounds for disqualification and thus consider other excluded groups, such as non-citizens residing in Sweden or Swedish citizens living abroad. Instead, negotiations regarding suffrage were initiated by non-parliamentary actors, such as civil servants or legal experts within the state administration.

The recurring suggestions about lowering the voting age were not a part of a suffrage movement but the 1930s ambitions of the Social Democratic and the Farmers' League parties' to broaden their respective caucuses via the youth vote, which were motivated by the need to stall the expansion of left- and right-wing parties that catered to the younger generation. During the 1960s, the youth vote seemed important to all the political parties. In contrast, reforms to include expatriate Swedish citizens in the electorate and non-citizen residents as voters in local elections were initiated by two oppositional political parties. Furthermore, these initiatives were clearly related and intended to balance out one another's effects.

In the next section, we will discuss various factors and processes that, despite the structural obstacles, challenged the post-1921 voting legislations and facilitated the removal or modification of the remaining suffrage restrictions.



### ***Path dependence, demographic change, and new political alliances***

As previously noted, in 1921 all attempts to amend the recently ratified Suffrage Act were rejected by both chambers, except for the proposal to eliminate incomplete military service as a cause for disenfranchisement. The success of this proposal can, at least partially, be ascribed to the extension of suffrage to women in Second Chamber elections. As a result, MPs argued that it was inconsistent to uphold a voting restriction that applied exclusively to one gender. Moreover, disenfranchisement due to incomplete military service was initially introduced as a means of resolving a conflict that had since been settled.<sup>31</sup>

This illustrates how previous constitutional reforms, particularly those from 1909–1921, delineated the potential trajectories that future expansions of suffrage could take. This dynamic serves as a clear example of path dependence, wherein earlier decisions and institutional arrangements open up, as well as constrain, future possibilities. Another example, related to voting age, pertains to the preservation of the two-chamber system. During the suffrage reforms of 1918–1921, new constitutional rules were instituted to distinguish between the two chambers. Specifically, the First Chamber received distinct eligibility requirements for MPs and longer terms in office,<sup>32</sup> and a notably higher (indirect) voting age.<sup>33</sup>

According to the law committee that proposed these differentiations between the chambers, the most significant distinction was the different voting ages, as it favoured the older segments of the population, who were perceived as more stable and responsible. However, two decades later, amid changing political alliances, the parliamentary majority re-evaluated this approach. The eligibility requirements and indirect voting age for the First Chamber were lowered to 23 in 1937, and subsequently, in the 1940s, to 21 – thereby aligning it with the age of majority. The new political alliance that formed the parliamentary majority at that time, namely the Social Democrats and the farmers' party, worked jointly for this reduction. Their alliance marked a significant departure from the long-standing conflict between agrarian and conservative interests versus the Social Democrats, which had dominated Swedish politics until the 1920s. Their rationale was based on several contextual factors, such as the need to balance generational influence in light of the declining birth rates of the 1920s and 1930s, and concerns over the potential radicalization of youth. Additionally, the reduction was presented as a means to honour the contributions of the younger generation during the Second World War.<sup>34</sup>

The two-chamber structure remained a recurrent political framework for the debates around the age of voting (and eligibility) throughout the 1950s and 1960s. All proposals aimed at reducing the voting age was contextualized within the gradual evolution of constitutional reform and ultimately led to a political consensus favouring a unicameral system and a voting and eligibility age of 18 years. This decision also indicated the onset of a new political landscape characterized by a less dominant social democracy and a partially novel understanding and appreciation of the contributions of the younger generation to society as adults.<sup>35</sup>

There are numerous additional examples of how legislative and institutional changes in other areas had direct impact on suffrage restrictions or facilitated a change. A prime example concerns disenfranchisement on grounds of guardianship, which referred to adults who had been declared legally incompetent through a court order, and who were

therefore under full guardianship and consequently disenfranchised. This basis for disenfranchisement was abolished following the abolition of the entire institution of full guardianship for adults in 1989.<sup>36</sup>

Another case pertains to felony disenfranchisement, which was abolished within the context of comprehensive criminal justice reform. This reform, in turn, was part of a long-term, gradual development of penal reforms, tracing back to the nineteenth century, which entailed a transformative shift in correctional thinking, where a strong focus on treatment and individual prevention contrasted sharply with older, more punitive views on criminal justice that endorsed public shaming as an integral part of the penalty.<sup>37</sup>

A further example, intricately tied to legislative changes in other areas, as well as the formation of new political alliances and shifts in political majorities within Parliament, pertains especially to the evolution of the welfare system during the mid-1900s. This encompassed major social reforms targeting the poor relief system and elderly care institutions alongside the establishment of a more inclusive and generous pension system. As a result of these reforms, the economic standing of elderly individuals in poor relief institutions was improved, subsequently undermining the rationale to exclude them from political citizenship.<sup>38</sup>

In the early 1940s, MPs established that economic grounds for disenfranchisement (tax debts, poor relief, and bankruptcy) were highly affected by, and thus vulnerable to, various circumstances beyond individual citizens' control, such as economic fluctuations and mass unemployment. They consequently called for a government initiative to rectify such dysfunctional institutional arrangements. These issues had already been recognized by socialist and communist MPs before 1921, and became increasingly so during the 1930s recession. However, they gained further and broader attention during the Second World War, which saw numerous breadwinners conscripted into military service.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Streamlining and certification***

The push to align the voting age with the age of majority was also partly fuelled by aspirations for streamlining and uniformity. This objective was in turn closely tied to the principle of legal certainty, which underpinned numerous discussions about voting rights expansion. The administrative processes linked to voter disqualifications were labour-intensive, difficult to manage, and risked generating inconsistent practices across different communities, thereby contravening the pursuit of uniformity. For example, in the early 1940s a parliamentary committee observed that poor relief authorities in various regions interpreted legislation regarding disenfranchisement of individuals taken in for long-term institutional care differently. This inconsistency led to notable disparities in the number of individuals disenfranchised due to poor relief, which further bolstered the argument for the abolition of this form of disenfranchisement.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, critique against the institution of guardianship often centred on its arbitrary ways of working. Originating as far back as the 1890s, debates about the problematic aspects of declaring adults legally incompetent escalated from the 1960s onwards, propelled by media attention on a number of cases framed as legal abuse. That people under guardianship lost their right to vote was often highlighted as particularly problematic in light of the very diverse grounds for being declared legally incompetent and the

seemingly haphazard ways in which those grounds were invoked in practice. Legislative changes were initiated, leading to restrictions of the guardianship institution in the mid-1970s, and culminating in its complete dissolution in 1989. The government committee proposing this dissolution presented it as, among other things, a means to eliminate the paradox that, as the law was applied, it was more common for people with mild disabilities to be declared legally incompetent – and thus lose their right to vote – than for people with more severe disabilities, who had no finances to manage.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Societal integration through rights of political participation***

The proposal to abolish the guardianship institution, and consequently associated disenfranchisement, was also grounded in arguments of ‘social adaptation’. This referred to the pursuit of enhanced opportunities for the integration of individuals with mental disabilities into mainstream society, enabling them to contribute their knowledge and skills. The government investigation committee that brought forward these arguments also cautioned against the possible negative impact on individuals’ mental well-being resulting from interventions such as the declaration of incapacity. Moreover, during the committee’s work, representatives from the National Board of Health and Welfare and other stakeholders highlighted the distress experienced by many individuals with cognitive disabilities due to the denial of rights that are considered fundamental for others. When releasing their final report, the committee underscored the deprivation of voting rights as a particularly negative consequence of the guardianship institution.<sup>42</sup>

Integration also emerged as a persuasive argument in deliberations regarding the reduction of the voting age and the abolition of felony disenfranchisement. The proposition to lower the voting age was put forth as a mechanism to assimilate the younger generation into society as responsible citizens. The underlying idea was that by recognizing them as politically mature, their skills and abilities could be effectively harnessed for the betterment of society.<sup>43</sup> In the case of felony disenfranchisement, it was argued that excluding felons from voting rights produced shame and mistrust, which in turn impeded their journey towards self-sufficiency, moral restoration, and, as a consequence, their reintegration into society.<sup>44</sup>

Arguments about integration were also crucial – and partially successful – in debates about the inclusion of non-citizen residents in the electorate. While non-citizenship is still a voting barrier in Sweden, this restriction has been at least partially relieved since 1921. In the mid-1970s, non-citizens were given the right to vote, not for Parliament, but at the municipal level, on condition that they had been permanently resident in Sweden for three years. Social Democrats may well have campaigned for the enfranchisement of non-citizen residents for strategic reasons as a large number of non-citizen residents were working-class labour immigrants and the Social Democratic Party could expect many votes from this group. However, in the debates preceding the extension of suffrage to non-citizen residents, voting rights were almost exclusively framed as a means for their societal integration. It was viewed as one of several strategies within a new and ambitious integration policy (or immigrant policy as it was called at the time), introduced in the 1970s, with the aim of increasing employment rates and fostering national economic growth.<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that a proposal made some years later to extend non-citizen residents’ voting rights to the national level, and thereby establish a strong link between

Swedish residency and national voting rights, did not progress. The reason behind its failure was that such a move would have excluded Swedish citizens residing abroad from voting. This prompted a strong response from expatriate Swedish citizens who put forth arguments emphasizing what they claimed was an inherent and inseparable connection between ethnic Swedishness, citizenship, and specific rights.<sup>46</sup>

### **Transnational contexts and discourses**

While some of the circumstances, processes, and discussions that impacted post-1921 expansions of suffrage were specific to Sweden, most of them also reflected developments and events in other countries, including the other Nordic countries.<sup>47</sup>

Some of the contextual factors and discourses that facilitated change were distinctly transnational. During the Vietnam War, the issue of voting age came sharply into focus in the United States, subsequently influencing discussions in Sweden as well. The prevailing argument posited that individuals deemed old enough for conscription and participation in warfare should also be considered mature enough to have the right to vote. This perspective underscored the importance of political representation for those directly affected by military conscription and emphasized the need to reassess voting age thresholds in light of these concerns.

An emerging popular discourse on human rights, which could also encompass voting rights, became important during this period, when only one formal restriction on voting for adult citizens remained – the one connected to guardianship. Although formulated in the wake of Second World War, in the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948, historian Samuel Moyn has argued that it was not until the 1970s that the new human rights discourse became firmly rooted in public debates.<sup>48</sup> This timing coincides quite well with how the question of guardianship was problematized in Sweden. While this was first done in the context of an ongoing debate on ‘legal abuse’, featuring people who had allegedly been victims of abuse of medical and state power, later on the question merged into a wider debate about human rights. In both phases, the problematization of legal guardianship (including the disenfranchisement that was part of it) was largely driven by the media, and a new interest in pursuing political causes by featuring individual cases as stories of human interest. This interest was part of a transnational trend in journalism, which was further propelled by the popularity of television, working synergistically with the press, particularly tabloids such as *Expressen* and *Göteborgs-Tidningen*.<sup>49</sup> For the final abolition of the guardianship restriction, the increasingly activist disability rights movement – another transnational phenomenon – would play an important part too.<sup>50</sup>

### **Concluding discussion**

This study on the voting restrictions in Sweden following the ‘democratic breakthrough’ of 1918–1921 sheds light on the intricate, non-linear, and multifaceted nature of democratization processes. Contrary to the grand narrative of the Swedish centenary celebrations of suffrage, our findings suggest that the expansion of suffrage in Sweden was far from a straightforward, unidirectional evolution. Rather, it was characterized by a variety

of driving forces, which reflected the transformations and challenges within Swedish society at the time, and was dependent on multiple processes of change.

We further contend that the temporally narrow scope of much of the earlier research on suffrage in Sweden has influenced the collective memory of the suffrage trajectory, depicting 1921 as the culmination point of suffrage expansions. This focus has inadvertently overshadowed the continued evolution and complexities of suffrage post-1921 and lead to a somewhat distorted understanding of Sweden's democratic development. Our study addresses this oversight by highlighting the ongoing and dynamic nature of suffrage reforms beyond the celebrated milestone of 1921.

We propose that democratization be viewed as a series of protracted and ongoing processes that are subject to constant renegotiation. In the case of Sweden post-1921, this perspective enabled us to identify a decisive lack of coherence and logic in the outcome of certain political negotiations, which could be attributed to shifting alliances, as well as economic and social dependencies. These observations align with previous international studies that have highlighted not only the different international waves of democratization, their distinct characteristics, and their dependence on pre-existing political institutions, but also the disparate development of democratic institutions.

Our analysis reveals that the expansion of suffrage rights in Sweden post-1921 was not guided primarily by a desire to broaden voter inclusion and/or to rectify the limitations of the 1921 legislation. Instead, the motivations were embedded in a more intricate and multifaceted tapestry of political aims and alliances as well as situational factors that included various social, economic, and cultural shifts. For example, reliance on a bicameral parliamentary system and a relatively high voting age were seen as stabilizing forces during and after the 'democratic breakthrough'. However, demographic shifts and political changes in the 1920s and 30s – exacerbated by the global economic downturn, the national transformative debate on the population crisis, and, eventually, a looming world war – emphasized, on the one hand, that young people constituted a resource for society, and, on the other, the potential dangers of excluding the youth from democratic institutions, as this risked leading them into the hands of more radical – right-wing or left-wing – alternatives.

The 1930s also marked the beginning of a new political era characterized by an alliance between former antagonists – the Farmers' League Party and the Social Democrats – and the quest to develop the nation's welfare system. The Social Democrats' vision of a 'People's Home' – inclusive of all classes – clashed with the continued disenfranchisement of the elderly and impoverished, particularly when such exclusion was motivated by their lack of economic means. Furthermore, the expansion and organization of the welfare state required increased national administrative uniformity and efficiency, which, in turn, had an impact the voting rights of certain groups.

The drive for social integration through political participation was another thread that ran from the repeal of felony disenfranchisement in the 1930s to the abolition of full guardianship in the 1980s. It was a core motivation for lowering the voting age as well as for including non-citizen immigrants in local elections. The questions of citizenship and national residency points to another motive influencing the rights to vote in Swedish elections, namely, the political self-interests of parties in expanding their voter bases. While the Social Democrats advocated for the increased inclusion of immigrants in suffrage in the hope it would expand their electoral base (at least in local elections), the

liberal and conservative parties favoured the inclusion of Swedes living abroad, motivated for a similar reason.<sup>51</sup>

Lastly, the focus on human and individual rights emerged as a driving force behind suffrage expansion in the late 1900s, particularly in addressing the last vestiges of disenfranchisement, which until 1989 disqualified voters due to declared incompetence.

In sum, the evolution of suffrage in Sweden post-1921 did not emanate from a coherent and unified struggle, let alone any large popular movement, but rather a series of negotiations among various actors, each with distinct vested interests. Internationally, the expansion of voting rights has often been combined with efforts to mitigate its effects,<sup>52</sup> and as our study demonstrates, Sweden is no exception to this pattern. Several groups remained – formally, practically, or both – excluded from voting after the introduction of so-called universal suffrage, and some still are to this day. The Swedish suffrage reforms of 1918–1921 should therefore not be seen as a definitive ‘democratic breakthrough’, but rather as part of a complex and non-linear process of democratization. The Swedish case, therefore, demonstrates a common paradox of voting inclusion reforms: that the extension of suffrage and increased inclusion often coincide with persistent or new forms of exclusion.

The fragmented and incoherent nature of the process of voting expansion in Sweden after 1921, including the fact that – in sharp contrast to the decades before – no social movements similar to the workers or women’s suffrage movements were organized to defend the suffrage rights of the groups that were still excluded, may also help explain the historiographical silence that has long prevailed regarding the remaining restrictions as well as how they were eventually abolished or mitigated.

A century on, the debate continues, with calls for both the expansion and contraction of voting rights. For instance, in 2021, twelve Swedish youth organizations, including the youth leagues of the Swedish branches of the Red Cross and Save the Children, joined forces to advocate for a reduction in the voting age from 18 to 16.<sup>53</sup> Concurrently, the second-largest party in the Swedish Parliament (the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats) proposed revoking municipal and regional voting rights for non-citizen residents.<sup>54</sup> These contemporary discussions, alongside the historical examples highlighted in this study, illustrate the ongoing nature of 1918–1921 suffrage reforms, with their continuous negotiations, transformations, and adaptations, which reflect the broader societal conversations about political representation, inclusion, and citizenship rights.

## Notes

1. These celebrations, especially related to women’s suffrage, have in turn been scrutinized in scholarly work, e.g. Larsen, Manns, and Östman, “Gender-equality Pioneering, or how Three Nordic States Celebrated 100 Years of Women’s Suffrage”; Bosch, “Gender and the Politics of History and Memory”; Manns, “Memory Work, Memory Politics, and the Centennial of Women’s Suffrage in Sweden”.
2. Sveriges Riksdag [Swedish Parliament], “Fira demokratin” [Celebrate Democracy]. Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://firademokratin.riksdagen.se/>. This and all forthcoming quotes in Swedish have been translated to English by the authors.
3. *Riksdagsmannavalen år 1921*, 20. See also Lindgren, “Dataunderlag”.

4. Calculation based on: Press release from the Swedish Election Authority (Valmyndigheten), posted August 16, 2022, Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://www.val.se/servicelankar/servicelankar/press/nyheter-pessmeddelanden/pressmeddelanden/2022-08-16-sa-manga-far-rosta-i-arets-val.html>; SCB. "Befolkningsstatistik 2020–2023 (månad) och 1998–2022 (år)".
5. This observation served as the starting point of a recently completed research project, which generated several empirical case studies on post-1921 voting restrictions in Sweden. This article draws on and brings together the findings from these case studies. For collections of all case studies, see Berg and Ericsson, eds., *Allmän rösträtt?*; Ericsson and Sundevall, eds., *Arbetshistoria*. See also Berg, Ericsson, and Sundevall, "Rösträtt för alla?"; Lindgren, *Utan rösträtt*; Ericsson, "Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration"; Ericsson, "Partierna, rösträtten och medborgarskapet"; Sundevall, "Fattigvård och rösträtt"; Sandin and Josefsson, "The Reform that Never Happened"; Hultin Rosenberg and Sundevall, "Contributivist Views on Democratic Inclusion"; Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*; Sundevall, "Money and the Vote"; Berg, "Omyndigförklaringens fall"; Kristjánsdóttir and Sundevall, eds. *Conditional Citizenship*.
6. Among the influential publications on this period are: Larsson, *På marsch mot demokratin*; Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst*; Rönnbäck, *Politikens genusgränser*; Berling Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder*; Jönsson, ed. *Rösträtten 80 år*; Wägnerud, "How Women Gained Suffrage in Sweden"; Florin, *Kvinnor får röst*. See also: Holgersson and Wägnerud, eds., *Rösträttens århundrade*.
7. Berling Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder*. See footnote no. 5 for recent amendments to this subject of research. See also: Engwall and Söderlind, "Barn och demokrati i ett historiskt perspektiv"; Beckman, "Demokratin och debatten om de utländska medborgarnas rösträtt"; Kaveh, "Den allmänna rösträtten".
8. See, for example, Hommerstad and Steine, eds., *Stemmerettens grenser*; Kristiansdóttir and Sundevall, eds. *Conditional Citizenship*.
9. Harjula, "Excluded from Universal Suffrage"; Harjula, "Kelvoton valtiokansalaiseksi?". For Denmark, see: Borchorst and Dahlerup, eds., *Før og efter stemmeretten*. For comparative and normative perspectives, see e.g. Katz, *Democracy and Election*; Blais, Massicotte, and Yoshinaka, "Deciding Who Has the Right to Vote"; Beckman, *The Frontiers of Democracy*.
10. Practical impediments, such as pre-registration or voting on a designated day at a specific polling station, may prevent eligible voters from exercising their right to vote. For instance, voters may be required to pre-register or to turn up at a designated polling station on a specific day, thus making it difficult or even impossible for individuals to vote if they are travelling, working, hospitalized, incarcerated, unable to secure childcare, and so forth on the day of the election. There are also countries which conduct elections on a working day, without ensuring leave of absence for all workers. Other reported obstacles include language barriers, ID requirements, and lack of accessibility at polling stations, which have reportedly constrained the exercise of voting rights among groups such as ethnic minorities, homeless individuals, and people with mobility impairments. See, for instance, Priestley et al., "The Political Participation"; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 311. For Sweden, see: Nordblad, "Förtidsröstningen väcker demokratin grundfrågor"; Nordblad, "Praktiska rösträttshinder"; Nilsson, "Det inskränkta medborgarskapet". Note also that pre-registration is currently a prerequisite for voting in the Sámi Parliament. See: Dahlberg and Mörkenstam, "Social identification".
11. Capoccia, "When Do Institutions 'Bite?'"; Magnusson and Ottosson, *The Evolution of Path Dependence*; Rixen et al., *Historical Institutionalism*; Steinmo et al., *Structuring politics*.
12. Capoccia, "When Do Institutions 'Bite?'," 9–13; Jenson, "Paradigms and Political Discourse".
13. Ziblatt, "How Did Europe Democratize?," 337–8. See also, e.g. Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures"; Capoccia and Ziblatt, "The Historical Turn"; Dahl, *Polyarchy*, ch. 3.
14. Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy*; Przeworski, "Conquered or Granted?".
15. For diverse perspectives and historical context regarding these reforms, see Holgersson and Wägnerud, eds., *Rösträttens århundrade*.
16. For example, in 1909 the voting age for men increased from 21 to 24 in 1909. Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*, ch. 4.

17. Nilsson, "The Swedish Senate 1867–1970," 133–5.
18. Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*, ch. 6, 8.
19. *Riksdagsmannavalen år 1921*, 20, 27; SCB, *Kommunala valen åren 1922 och 1923*, 3, 8. See also Lindgren, "Dataunderlag".
20. Ericsson, "Partierna, rösträtten och medborgarskapet"; Ericsson, "Rösträtt, migration och nationellt medborgarskap," 205–10.
21. See Leif Lewin's discussion based on public choice theory in *Self-interest and Public Interest*, 60.
22. On voting turnout in those elections, see: Lindgren, *Utan rösträtt*, 19–20.
23. Möller, "Studier i valstatistiken," 203.
24. See Lindgren, *Utan rösträtt*.
25. See Sundevall, "Ekonomi och rösträtt," 103–7.
26. See Berg, "Det sista strecket"; Berg, "Ett straff på straffet"; Sundevall, "Ekonomi och rösträtt"; Sundevall, "Fattigvård och rösträtt"; Sandin and Josefsson, "Ålder som måttstock för politiskt medborgarskap"; Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship".
27. Because it entailed a constitutional change, the reform had to be approved by the chambers twice, with one election in between. It was first approved in May 1919. An election was then held in 1920, and the approval was confirmed in 1921.
28. First Chamber motions nos. 7 and 8 (1921); Second Chamber motion no. 29 (1921).
29. The MP Carl Lindhagen was, however, willing to compromise on his proposal to abolish guardianship as grounds for disqualification, suggesting that it could be adjusted to apply only to individuals that were under guardianship due to 'insanity' (vanvett). First Chamber motion no. 174 (1921). See also: Berg, "Det sista strecket," 130–2; Häggglund, *Demokratins stridslinjer*, 21.
30. Cf. historian Kjell Östberg, who (referring to Sweden in the last 150 years) argues that 'every step towards increased democratic rights is a result of social movements' struggles' [our translation]. Östberg, *Folk i rörelse*, 9.
31. This conflict encompassed demands from the Social Democratic Party stipulating that voting rights for men must be broadened before the party could acquiesce to an extension of the length of military service. Conversely, conservative parties insisted that men must fulfil their military obligations before they could assert political rights. See Ahlbäck and Sundevall, "Värnplikt, rösträtt och kön".
32. These requirements encompassed a wealth/income threshold (which was maintained until 1933 and was not applicable to the Second Chamber), and a higher eligibility age (until 1970). *SFS 1921:40*, Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship," 260; Sundevall, "Money and the Vote".
33. Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship," 260.
34. Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship," 266–74. On the political conflict, see e.g. Schüllerqvist, *Från kosackval till kohandel*.
35. The debates over the role of youth during the 1960s focused primarily on the fact that the generation between 18 to 21 years of age was, de facto, living and assuming the responsibilities of adults. Given that they could legally marry, sign contracts, serve in the military, and obtain study loans without the consent of elders, the voting age was no longer consistent with other legal changes affecting the status of young people. Hence, the rationale for maintaining a voting age of 21 had been undermined. This discrepancy needed rectification, which also underscored the necessity for young adults to act as representatives in court, as wage earners supporting the reformed pension system, in government roles, and within the expanding educational system. Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship".
36. From January 1, 1989 it was no longer possible to declare adults as legally incompetent, and those who had formerly been so were declared legally competent again. After 1989 these people acquired a trustee (or alternatively, in cases of less acute need, a so-called 'good man') who, like previous guardians, took care of their client's



- finances. However, a big difference was that people under trusteeship had the right to vote. Berg, "Det sista strecket".
37. Berg, "Ett straff på straffet," 66–78.
  38. Sundevall, "Ekonomi och rösträtt," 105, 111. See also, Sundevall, "Money and the Vote".
  39. Sundevall, "Ekonomi och rösträtt," 103–7.
  40. Sundevall, "Ekonomi och rösträtt," 102–5, 111.
  41. Berg, "Det sista strecket," 130–6. After 1976, only people with mental disabilities could be declared legally incompetent in Sweden. Ibid.
  42. Berg, "Det sista strecket," 145–8.
  43. Sandin and Josefsson, "Age as a Yardstick for Political Citizenship," 273–5.
  44. Berg, "Ett straff på straffet," 71–8. On the shift in criminal justice, see further in Qvarsell, *Utan vett och vilja*, 330–3; Nilsson, *Växjöfängelsets historia 1848–1995*, 99–102.
  45. Some of the results of the new 'immigrant policy' were the Swedish Immigrant's Authority, Swedish for immigrants and, a few years later (1975), education in 'home' languages in schools – and voting rights in municipal elections. See Ericsson, "Rösträtt, migration och nationellt medborgarskap"; Ericsson, "Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration".
  46. Ericsson, "Rösträtt, migration och nationellt medborgarskap," 205–9.
  47. See, for example, various reports from government investigation committees (i.e. pre-legislative work), in which comparisons with other countries, especially the Nordic countries, were a recurring feature.
  48. Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.
  49. Berg, "Det sista strecket"; Berg, "Omyndigförklaringens fall". Florence Stephens, a defrauded landowner who fought publicly for nearly two decades to get her legal status – and voting rights – back, became the figurehead for legal abuse in relation to guardianship, but many other cases were highlighted too. Ibid.
  50. The final abolition of the institution of guardianship went remarkably quickly, notably because several structural factors were embodied by one pivotal actor: Gunnar Wiktorsson, who was a regional superintendent of guardianships as well as an active force in RSMH, the national organization for 'mental and social health'. In addition, he was a well-connected Social Democrat and, apparently, had a good hand with media. Berg, "Det sista strecket," 144–148; Berg, "Omyndigförklaringens fall".
  51. See further in Ericsson, "Rösträtt, migration och nationellt medborgarskap".
  52. See e.g. Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000*, ch. 1.
  53. See press release for the youth organizations' joint platform störedemokrati.nu, posted May 18, 2021 at <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/hugo-stenbecks-stiftelse/pressreleases/ungdomsroerelsen-gaar-foer-foersta-gaangen-samman-foer-att-saenka-roestraettsaldern-3100091>. On age limits, see also Wall, "Why Children and Youth".
  54. Sverigedemokraterna, *Migrationspolitiskt inriktningsprogram*, 2. See also parliamentary motion no. 2020/21:685 from Matheus Enholm et al. (SD).

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## Notes on contributors

**Fia Sundevall** is an Associate Professor of Economic History at Stockholm University in Sweden. Her research interests lie at the intersection of economic history with political history, and labour history with military history and gender history. Among her recent publications is an edited collection on suffrage and capital, co-edited with Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, which is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

**Annika Berg** is an Associate Professor in the History of Ideas at Stockholm University in Sweden. Her research moves in the intersection between history of medicine and the history of political ideas, and includes work on e. g. psychiatry, public health, development aid and mediatization of medicine. Among her recent publications is the volume *Allmän rösträtt? Rösträttens begränsningar i Sverige efter 1921* [Universal Suffrage? Voting Restrictions and Disenfranchisement in Sweden after 1921], which she co-edited with Martin Ericsson.

**Bengt Sandin** is a historian and Professor Emeritus in Child Studies at the University of Linköping in Sweden and the Swedish Labour Movement's Archive and Library. His research includes work on early modern education and state building, child labour, 19th Century education, street children, history of child psychiatry, and child rights. His latest publications deal with age restrictions and universal suffrage as well as restorative justice for children in out of home care in Sweden 1920-1980.

## ORCID

Fia Sundevall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2523-2575>

Annika Berg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4332-0357>

Bengt Sandin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5450-5440>

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