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The Evolution of Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century Sweden and the Road from Oligarchy to Democracy

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The evolution of popular politics in nineteenth-century Sweden and the road from oligarchy to democracy

*Erik Bengtsson**

Abstract

In the mid-twentieth century, Sweden distinguished itself as one of the most organized and participatory democracies in the world, with high levels of voting turnout and party membership. But in the late nineteenth century the situation was much the opposite – Sweden had for Western Europe a low degree of suffrage, and low political participation. To explain the turnaround, this paper explores extra-parliamentary political activity in the period of the very exclusive two-chamber system of 1866. The contribution of the paper is to explore and describe the evolution of political meetings in Sweden in the final third of the nineteenth century and in this way provide an analysis of the evolution of a democratic political culture, which widened the scope of those who could act and participate politically. The empirical material consists of digitalized newspapers from the south of Sweden in the period 1866 to 1900, studying about 2,700 articles that mention “popular meetings”, *folkmöten*, which was the contemporary description of political meetings. The findings highlight the existence of a farmer-centred democratic critique in the 1860s and 1870s, which combined proposals for widened suffrage locally and nationally with criticisms of banks and the bureaucracy. In the 1880s and 1890s, the social base of the *folkmöten* widened as urban workers – socialist and anti-socialist – took a greater part, and the ideological composition of the meetings became more heterogeneous. The systematic investigation of newspaper coverage shows that *folkmöten* were numerous and involved large numbers of people. This indicates that the Swedish population was more politically active than one would infer from looking at the

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electoral participation, which captures only the activity of the enfranchised, a minority of the population. The *folkmöten* was a major arena for democratic socialization in a country with an oligarchical political system.

Keywords: democratization, Sweden, democracy, political history, political participation

JEL codes: N13, N43, N93

1. The evolution of a democratic political culture and the road to democracy in Sweden

In the twentieth century, Sweden became a paragon of stable democracy¹, and distinguished itself as one of the most organized and participatory democracies in the world.² But it was not always this way. In the 1890s, Sweden had the lowest degree of suffrage in Western Europe – only 24 per cent of adult men could elect others to the second chamber of parliament – and also the lowest degree of voter turnout. In the 1896 election, only 45 per cent of the lucky few who could vote bothered to do so. This contrasts with the 60 per cent of the electorate who voted in Denmark in 1898, 70 per cent in Norway in 1898, 61 per cent in Great Britain and Ireland in 1897, and so on.³ On the local level, the municipal election system was what Thomas Piketty in his recent book refers to as “the most extreme hyper-inegalitarian proprietary system”:⁴ votes were allocated in accordance with the amount of tax one paid so the higher the income or wealth, the more votes; corporations also had the right to vote, and in rural municipalities, one could until 1900 have unlimited number of votes, tens of thousands in some cases, and in fifty or so municipalities, one single person or company had a majority of the votes for himself/itself.⁵ This was an oligarchic system, locally and nationally.

Sweden’s democratization was late (the key reforms came in 1907, implemented in 1909, and in 1918, implemented in 1921) and rapid.⁶ This poses a problem. Why did democratization finally come quite rapidly, and lead to a highly participatory culture, as

¹ E.g. as discussed in Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties*, pp. 339–351. Ian Kershaw in his *To Hell and Back*, pp. 227, 234 points out that Scandinavia was unusual in Europe in that it showed no Fascist surge after the Great Depression.

² Since 1945, Sweden’s average voter turnout has been 83.3 per cent, which is the fourth highest in the world, excluding countries with mandatory voting. In the 1950s and 1960s, 23–24 percent of the electorate were members of a political party (counting trade union members, who were collectively organized in the Social Democratic party), which meant that in an international comparison, the Swedish and Austrian electorates were the most highly organized. Voter turnout: Holmberg and Oscarsson, *Väljare*, p. 16. Party membership: Scarrow, “Parties without Members?”, Table 5.2.

³ Suffrage and voter turnout figures from SCB, *Statistisk Tidskrift*, 1898, Table 20. See discussion in Bengtsson, “The Swedish Sonderweg”. Tingsten, *Den svenska socialdemokratins*, pp. 15–16 castigates the low degree of interest in politics after 1866. His judgement is based especially on electoral participation but of course, in a system with limited suffrage, his is not a fair yardstick for overall political interest.

⁴ Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, p. 188.

⁵ Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?*, pp. 127–139; Bengtsson, *Världens jämlikaste land?*, pp. 77–81.

⁶ For thorough descriptions of the reforms, see Andrén, *Tvåkamarsystemets*, ch. 20 (the 1907 reform) and chs. 21–25 (the 1918 reform). For a shorter description and analysis in English, see Rustow, *The Politics of Compromise*, ch. 2. See also Åmark, “Comment”, p. 45: “I consider Sweden to be an example of very late but rapid democratization.”

shown by the high voter turnout and party mobilization from the 1940s and 1950s onwards? The argument of the present paper is that the causes must be sought in the broad popular opposition to the previous oligarchic regime. The political scientist Ruth Berins Collier and the historian Madeleine Hurd have both discussed the broad class coalitions of working class and middle class people, in the Swedish politics of the late nineteenth century, for purposes of democratization. Since both the middle class and the working class were excluded from influence, they could unite in a coalition for reform.⁷

This paper contributes to our understanding of democratization, especially Swedish democratization, by studying the so-called *folkmöten*, “popular meetings”, from the 1860s to 1900, from the inegalitarian representation reform of 1866 to a situation in the early 1900s when the pro-suffrage movement was strong, and electoral contestation was high. *Folkmöte* was a loosely used term for extra-parliamentary political meetings of various kinds.⁸ That such a catch-all phrase was used is itself telling; it shows how new and controversial was the idea of political meetings outside of the official political institutions.⁹ European historians have lately been discussing a political “participation revolution of the nineteenth century”, but it seems that Sweden was lagging in this regard.¹⁰ As I will show, the participation revolution in Sweden began in the late 1860s with a new wave of liberal opposition, suffered a setback in the 1870s, and took off in the early 1880s. By the 1880s and 1890s, Sweden had a lively civil society with many competing political visions, even if the actual representative institutions were plutocratic. A rich political science literature shows that a legacy of electoral

⁷ Hurd, *Public Spheres*. Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy*, ch. 3, sees Swedish democratization as a “joint project” of middle class-working class collaboration.

⁸ Of course, the concept “*folkmöte*” also invites a discussion of the concept “folk” in Swedish political history. Trägårdh, *The Concept*, pp. 14, 46–47, has argued that “the success of the Swedish Social Democrats depended to a crucial extent on the fusion of the national and the democratic connotations of folk in a set of key terms like *folkhemmet*, *folklig*, and *folklighet*” and that research on Social Democratic ideology in Sweden has underestimated the importance of the ideological and rhetorical repertoire connected to the *folk* concept, focusing instead on a posited shift from Marxism to Social Liberalism. I agree with Trägårdh even if the precise interpretation here of continuities from the nineteenth century to the twentieth in Swedish politics is not the same as his. On the concept of *folk* among nineteenth century radicals see Olofsson, *Tullbergsska rörelsen*, pp. 195–197; Lundberg, *Folket*, *yxan*, pp. 120–125 (“småfolk”), 197, 243, 247. Of course, folk can be both an exclusive concept – the folk versus various imagined non-folk entities – and an inclusive one – political rights for all of the people.

⁹ It is also emblematic of how new and “foreign” this idea was, that a newspaper in 1868 talked about a new wave of, in Swedish, “offentliga meetings” – the loan of the English term is telling. “Skåne är i vårt land den rätta hemorten för offentliga meetings.” *Öresundsposten* 1868-07-23, quoting *Ny Illustrerad Tidning*. Note that I have chosen not to report page numbers for the newspapers. The newspapers used are typically only 4 pages long, and of course they are all digitalized, so finding the referenced articles is very easy given that it is only to search the archive for “*folkmöte*” on the relevant date.

¹⁰ The quote is from Retallack, *Germany's Second Reich*, p. 238.

competition, even in oligarchic systems, strengthens the resilience of a later installed democratic system, and that the evolution of a proto-democratic civil society has the effect of socializing citizens into democratic ways of acting and thinking.¹¹ I argue that the *folkmöten*, by establishing a way of acting politically for the disenfranchised, created this kind of democratic civil society and, as more people got the right to vote, increased the extent of contestation in Swedish elections and was thus one of the most important factors in making Sweden a stable democracy in the twentieth century.

2. The *folkmöten* in context: Swedish politics in the final third of the nineteenth century

The central conflict explored in this paper is that between oligarchy – rule by the few – and democracy – rule by the people. After the 1866 representation reform, suffrage to the second chamber was conditional on male sex and a certain level of income or wealth; this excluded four fifths of adult men from the right to vote. Election to the first chamber was much more exclusive – 2 per cent of adult men had this right.¹² The modern ideal of political representation was far away: the 1866 parliamentary order (*riksdagsordning*) stated that MPs must not take any instructions from their electors or the people in general – the MPs should, once elected, represent themselves alone.¹³ With the exception of the short-lived New Liberal party of 1868–1871, political parties were mere associations of MPs and had no life outside of the riksdag; the first nationally organized Liberal party was founded in 1902 and the first Conservative one in 1904. The Social Democratic party was founded in 1889 but had its first MP only in 1897, elected on a Liberal ticket.¹⁴

In Swedish politics, at least from the 1860s to the 1880s, the conflict between oligarchy and democracy that will be analysed here was by liberals and radicals described as that between “the money principle” and the “personality principle”. The two concepts simply denoted whether political rights such as suffrage and electability should be given according to one’s income and wealth, or *per capita*, for every man.¹⁵ The defenders of the system did not

¹¹ Miller, “Democratic Pieces”; Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning, *Democratic Stability*, ch. 3.

¹² On the suffrage rule and political system, see Rustow, *The Politics of Compromise*, pp. 20–39, 43; Andrén, *Tvåkammarssystemets tillkomst*, chs. 3–4, 9–10.

¹³ Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken*, pp. 34–36.

¹⁴ On the history of political parties in Sweden, see Hadenius, “Riksdagspartier och rikspartier”. On the election of Hjalmar Branting as the first Social Democratic MP, see Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken*, pp. 242–243.

¹⁵ Only the very advanced radicals advocated female suffrage before the 1890s. This demand appears for the first time in the newspaper material used here at a meeting in 1878, when the radical newspaper editor Borg

defend it as being an oligarchic or plutocratic one, but rather claimed that income and wealth of a certain size indicated that a person was responsible, insightful, and had the time and intellectual faculties to engage in politics.¹⁶ Regarding the municipalities, the defenders of the established order did not consider these to be political at all; in fact, in Sweden at the time “political” elections denoted elections to parliament, as distinct from municipal elections. The municipality was, as one historian famously put it, rather considered to be like a joint stock company: the more money one put into it (via tax), the larger share of power one should have.¹⁷ In relation to this narrow conception of politics, as I will show, the *folkmöten* played a key role in furthering a more expansive conception.

The oligarchic order was challenged in several social and political projects after 1866. The first was the New Liberal party, also referred to as the “Democratic Society”, which was constituted in 1868 in direct response to what they found the disappointing conservatism of the representation reform movement. They presented their liberalism as “new”, in opposition to the oligarchic tendencies of the dominant stream of “old”, moderate liberalism, and their leading ideologue Adolf Hedin saw the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League as role models in mobilizing the people politically.¹⁸ The party of the New Liberals

suggested that women should both have the suffrage and be electable. *Öresundsposten* 1878-07-23 (meeting in Ängelholm).

¹⁶ Lewin in *Ideologi och strategi*, pp. 86–103, has a very helpful analysis of the pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage arguments in Swedish politics at this time. The standard arguments were variations of the view that the poorer classes were unfit for political influence. This could be formulated in various ways: Baron af Ugglas argued that the daily struggle for bread made the poor man selfish and so unfit for public activities; Professor Ribbing argued that poverty induces bad temper, credulity, and impatience. Furthermore, the poor and the hard-working classes did not have the time and facilities to deepen their understanding of political issues. The arguments of af Ugglas, Ribbing and others are discussed by Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?* pp. 178–181. A.O. Wallenberg, founder of a banking empire, dismissed demands for suffrage extensions with the slightly bizarre argument that such arguments simply reflected the demands to exercise power at others’ expense. This is of course, precisely what the privileged few were doing in the existing system. Among the other interesting arguments against suffrage extension was that of the gentry estate owner Emil Key, one of the leaders of the Country Party, who in the late 1860s on behalf of farmers argued that they did not wish “day labourers and vagrants” to get the vote – these groups could be manipulated by estate owners, Key ingeniously argued. See Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?* p. 91. In 1902, the conservative Hjalmar Hammarskjöld still could dismiss any suffrage reform with the argument that among those below the income and wealth cut-off points, most were probably disorderly or dishonest (*oredlige*), and those who were not were too pressed by material circumstances to be able to take political responsibility by voting and the like. Against the famous pro-suffrage poem of Heidenstam, Hammarskjöld argued that “it is an honour for Sweden that for us citizen rights, the full influence on the circumstances of the country, are contingent upon work and duty”. Svegfors, *Hjalmar Hammarskjöld*, p. 22.

¹⁷ On the apolitical municipalities see Kilander, *Den nya staten*, esp. ch. 3 and pp. 213–215. The classic study of the “municipality as corporation” is Norrlid, “Kommunen som bolag”.

¹⁸ On the New Liberals, see especially two great studies of their leading figure Adolf Hedin: Kihlberg, *Folktribunen Adolf Hedin*, and Meidal, “S.A. Hedin”, and Magnus Olofsson’s study, *Tullbergsska rörelsen*, of the tenant farmer uprising of the late 1860s and its relations to the New Liberals.. Wallin, *Valrörelser och*

was short lived but some of their radical MPs stayed in parliament on the fringes of the urban “Intelligence” party or the rural “Country” party throughout the 1870s and 1880s.

Outside of parliament, the 1860s and 1870s saw an impressive growth of the so-called popular movements – the canonical ones are the temperance movement and the free churches as the first to grow, followed by the trade unions.¹⁹ These functioned as “citizen schools”, involving those without suffrage, who were taught through practice how to run organizations, and also how to put forward direct political demands on topics such as religious freedom and sobriety. In the 1880s, the labour movement also became a force to reckon with; the Social Democratic party, which was founded in 1889 made a contribution to Swedish democratization mentioned in histories which cover the early period of the party.²⁰ In 1890, a national suffrage union was formed; this was active until 1902 when it transformed into a Liberal party;²¹ the national organization for women’s suffrage was founded in 1902.²² In the 1890s, it also became more and more common for MPs to be challenged to explain their political positions to the people and the electorate, in contrast with the formal rule that MPs were independent once elected.²³ The idea of election meetings was new and controversial in the late 1860s and became more established over the following decades, establishing a more participatory and contested political culture.²⁴

The advantage of studying the *folkmöten* generally, instead of a specific organization or politician, is that it gives a broad perspective on popular politics. The current investigation argues for the importance of active political life, beyond the official political institutions, in creating a democratic political culture and a social movement for democratization; but it is also an explorative, descriptive investigation. This is because we do not know very much about the *folkmöten*: the topic has been treated in a fragmented way and somewhat contradictorily in the literature. Thermaenius talks of a New Liberal “movement of popular meetings” (*folkmötesrörelse*) in the 1870s but also plays down the influence of the meetings,

valresultat, provides a great overview of Swedish politics in this period. See also Hedin’s foundational text, S.A. Hedin, “Hvad folket väntar af den nya representationen”.

¹⁹ Lundkvist, *Politik; Folkrorelserna*. For a critical discussion of Lundkvist’s project, see Wåhlin, “Omkring studiet af de folkelige bevaegelser”.

²⁰ One of the most interesting examples is Palmgren, *Född till agitator*.

²¹ Vallinder, *I kamp för demokratin*; Lundberg, *Folket, yxan*.

²² Rönnbäck, *Politikens genusgränser*; Florin, *Kvinnor får röst*.

²³ Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken*, pp. 37–46.

²⁴ Meidal, “S.A. Hedin”, p. 201: “1868 var tanken på offentliga valmöten, där kandidaterna fick presentera sig och sina politiska program, en djärv nymodighet.” Esaiasson, *Svenska valkampanjer*, sketches the development of Swedish election campaigns from 1866 onward.

and their prevalence outside of the cities.²⁵ There are scattered indications that the *folkmöten* did play an important role in politics, at least on the fringes. The conservative MPs Victor Granlund and Emil Key wrote in their guide to the MPs of 1869 about a Jöns Pehrsson from Svaneryd that he threatened the first chamber with the popular will and popular power: “he did not hesitate to march against the first chamber, leading his ‘plebeians’, the New Liberal cohort and several other loose people, who hold *folkmöten* in the West and the South”.²⁶ This disparaging view of the *folkmöten* as organising “loose people” (*löst folk*) unfit for influencing politics recurs when the nobleman Sparre in the second chamber in 1886 condemned *folkmöten*: “These meetings proceed in a strange way, and if we now take a stance on an issue because of them, then it is wrong.”²⁷ Going beyond such scattered mentions of *folkmöten*, the present paper presents the first systematic study of the meetings and their role in establishing a democratic political culture in Sweden.

3. Empirical approach and sources

3.1 Empirical strategy

To study the prevalence and politics of the *folkmöten*, I use newspaper materials. These have typically been used in studies of Swedish politics at this time, along with memoirs, diaries, letters and the like. The latter type of source is less useful in this study, since I am interested in popular politics, not elite politics.²⁸ Newspapers are especially important as sources, since they are not connected to a specific party or organization. Research in political history is biased towards studying those parties and organizations that survive in the long run and preserve collected archives. However, these might not have been the ones that were the most

²⁵ Thermaenius, *Lantmannapartiet*, pp. 228–229, 85.

²⁶ Granlund and Key, *Andra kammarens män*. In Swedish: ”han tvekade ej att anrycka emot den [första kammaren] i spetsen för sina ‘plebier’, den nyliberala kohorten och åtskilligt annat tvetydigt folk, som håller folkmöten i vester och söder.”

²⁷ Sparre quotes from Lewin, *Ideologi och strategi*, p. 66. In Swedish: ”Det går underligt till på dessa möten, och om vi på grund af dem nu afgifva vår röst i denna fråga, blir det på tok.” That the *folkmöten* could provoke Conservative forces is also indicated by the study of Wigforss of the foundation of the far-right organization the Patriotic League (*Fosterländska förbundet*) in 1893. Wigforss reports that the catalyst was a *folkmöte* where one of the radical Stockholm MPs, the carpenter Jöns Fjällbäck, argued for a major strike of agricultural labourers during the harvest season as a means of persuasion in the suffrage question. A contemporary source reports that “this anarchist threat” caused the men of the far right to found the Patriotic League. Wigforss, ”Fosterländska förbundet”.

²⁸ Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken*, ch. 3; Wallin, *Valrörelser*. See Carlsson, p. 49 for a discussion of sources. Hadenius, “Förord”, pp. 6–7, pointed out in 1966 that high politics on the national level had been relatively well mapped by research but that we lacked research on the way in which politics changed at the local level.

important in the historical period that we want to study. While I am very much interested in the role of political parties, such as the New Liberals, the Country Party, the Social Democrats and the Liberals in the democratization of Sweden, I want to also capture the wider “civil society”, which can play a very important role for democratization.

The newspapers come from the Royal Library’s (Kungliga Biblioteket) database of Swedish newspapers, *tidningar.kb.se*, which by 2022 will include every printed page of nineteenth century newspapers.²⁹ A search for “*folkmöte*” in the KB newspaper database from 1866 to 1900 gives more than 32,000 articles.³⁰ For reasons of tractability, I cannot study all these articles. I choose to study half of the years of interest here (1866–70, 1876–80, 1886–90 and 1896–1900) and choose to study only one region, the southernmost region Scania (*Skåne*). Scania is attractive since it is a populous and internally heterogeneous region, with industrial cities like Landskrona and Malmö, a university town as Lund, and wealthy agricultural areas with the best soil in the country, as well as forested, poorer areas in the north of the region. Attempts to explore geographic differences in nineteenth Swedish politics and explain patterns by means of economic structure or so have been unsuccessful,³¹ and I

²⁹ The database is discussed in Karlsson, “Databasen Svenska dagstidningar”.

³⁰ The end date 1900 is pragmatically chosen as Swedish politics from about this point on is more well-researched which is true not the least for pro-democratic movements and the politics around constitutional reforms.

³¹ Henrik Olsson, *Öst och väst eller nord och syd?* (1998) devoted an interesting dissertation to this issue but came up with few conclusions on patterns of political geography. In his conclusions, he states that “the explanations I have tried in relation to specific political issues (chs. 4–10) have nearly all been unsatisfactory [*otillräckliga*]” (p. 249). Olsson also provides interesting discussion of previous attempts to define Swedish political geography of this period; especially Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken* (1953). On Scania, Olsson argues that it, together with the mining area of Bergslagen and the south of Norrland, had the most radical farmer politicians (p. 207). Scanian politicians of the second chamber in 1887-1896 were generally a pro-suffrage extension; those from Malmöhus county more than those from Kristianstad county (pp. 156–157). The patterns are not easy to explain: for example, that Malmöhus and Kopparberg counties had similar – more radical than average – politicians, even though they are very different counties socially and economically (p. 194). It is also difficult to explain why Scania would elect radical politicians, according to Olsson: other plains regions were politically conservative (p. 204). I would argue that Olsson’s materialist approach is too crude and thus brings us to a lot of analytic dead ends. Especially, it would be more analytically promising to consider the *constellations* of several factors: economic and political dividing lines *within* the farmer class, the co-existence of non-agrarian ways of subsistence; and the degree of proletarianization. For such an approach, see Alapuro’s analysis of Finnish political geography in *State and Revolution in Finland*, ch. 7. The county level is also too aggregated, as Olsson also concedes (p. 157); to take Malmöhus County as an example, the difference between an election district like Luggude south, with its mining business and large agrarian working class, and Onsjö with its wealthy farmers, is considerable. See for example the Socialist leader Axel Danielsson’s discussion (under the pseudonym Marat) in *Arbetet* 1899-07-13, where he thinks that the radical district of Luggude could do “better” (in his terms) than to be represented by what Danielsson considers the “timid” left liberalism of the school teacher and Good Templar LG Broomé, while in Onsjö the conservative dominance is total and the position of the influential conservative farmer politician Ivar Månsson in Trää is formidable. Scanian political geography of

take it as a positive that it has been difficult to pin down Scania politically: the diversity of this large region, which accommodated 12 per cent of the country's population in 1900, means that this study of *folkmöten* will not include more than one type of political locality.

We know that the socialist labour movement took root in Scania especially early in the Swedish context, whereas the two other major popular movements of the late nineteenth century, the free churches and the temperance movement, were not especially strong here.³² Politically, the region was represented in the late 1800s by very wealthy counts and barons, as well as radical farmers and socialist workers.³³ Regarding twentieth century Swedish politics, Lewin argues that the voting outcomes at the county level have persisted since the “realigning” protectionism election of 1887. The region of Scania consists of two counties and in the southwest part of Scania, Malmöhus county, the Left broadly defined has over time been stronger than average, while Kristianstad county, the northeast part of Scania, is a more conservative area.³⁴ To conclude, Scania as a whole has been a politically heterogeneous area, which is helpful, since it can yield more information about the whole political spectrum, but how Scania's politics relate to those of Sweden in general cannot be pursued here; the present study should be seen as an explorative one and should ideally be complemented in the future by studies of other areas.

3.2. An overview of the newspaper material

Figure 1 shows the temporal pattern of the 32,000-plus articles in Swedish newspapers mentioning *folkmöten* from 1866 to 1900. The peaks are 1869–71, 1881–87, and 1890–93.

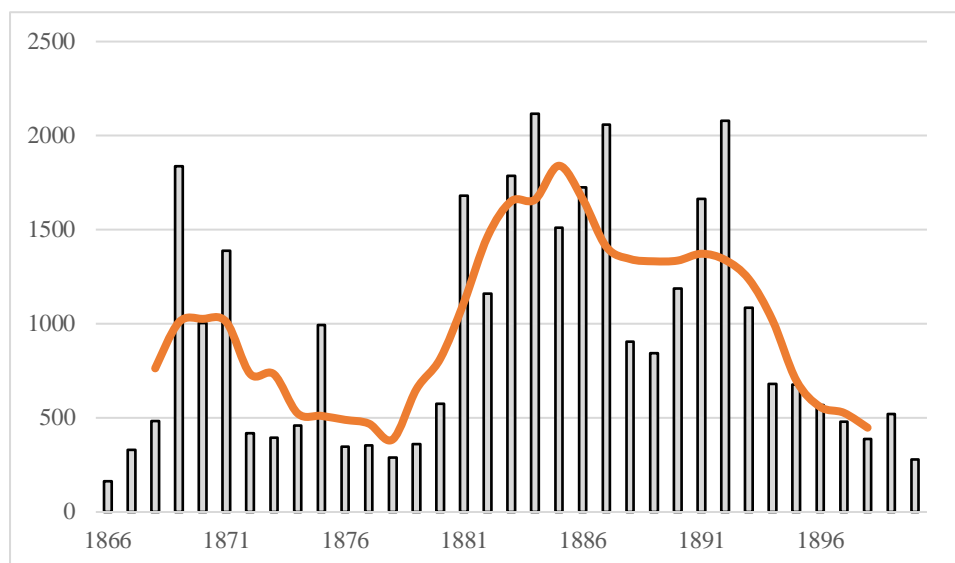
the 1920s and 1930s is discussed in Andersson, *Tradition och förändring*, ch. 2. It was quite diverse. See also Lägnert, *Valmanskåren*.

³² Lundkvist, *Folkrörelserna*, ch. 3.

³³ See Eric Holmqvist's nice but anecdotal study, *Aristokrater, bönder och byråkrater*. Wallin, *Valrörelser och valresultat*, p. 142, argues regarding the 1860s that the “oppositional relationship between the estate-owning nobility and the rest of the agrarian population” meant that the farmers united behind their own candidates, which meant that, given the lower share of farmers in the population in Scania than elsewhere, it was ironically the farmers who were more dominant in the Scanian elections to the second chamber than the elections elsewhere.

³⁴ Lewin, *The Swedish Electorate* (1971), pp. 192–193. The Left is here defined as Free Traders in 1887 and as Social Democrats plus Communists in the 1928 and 1968 elections.

Figure 1. Newspaper mentions of “*folkmöte*” in Sweden as a whole, 1866–1900



Note: Search at <https://tidningar.kb.se> 19 August 2021. In total, there are 32,810 articles. The grey bars show the actual number of articles and the orange line shows the moving five-year average.

The first of these peaks and the lull in the late 1870s is as expected, given that the late 1860s was the time of the New Liberal campaign and the 1870s are recognized as a period of stagnation in Swedish politics.³⁵ The causes of the 1881–87 and 1890–93 peaks are less obvious. The decline at the end of the period is as expected; the term *folkmöte* became less important in the late 1890s and as a political term, it was more and more replaced by “demonstration”, “meeting” and other more familiar terms.³⁶

Restricting the sample to Scania, there are 5,913 articles in this period, i.e. 18.0 per cent of the national total, which is slightly more than Scania’s share of the population, 12.2 per cent in 1900.³⁷ The spread over time is shown in Figure 2; the pattern is very similar to that of the country as a whole, which is reassuring.³⁸

³⁵ Cf. Wallin, *Valrörelser*, ch. 9; Esaiasson, *Svenska valkampanjer*, ch. 3.

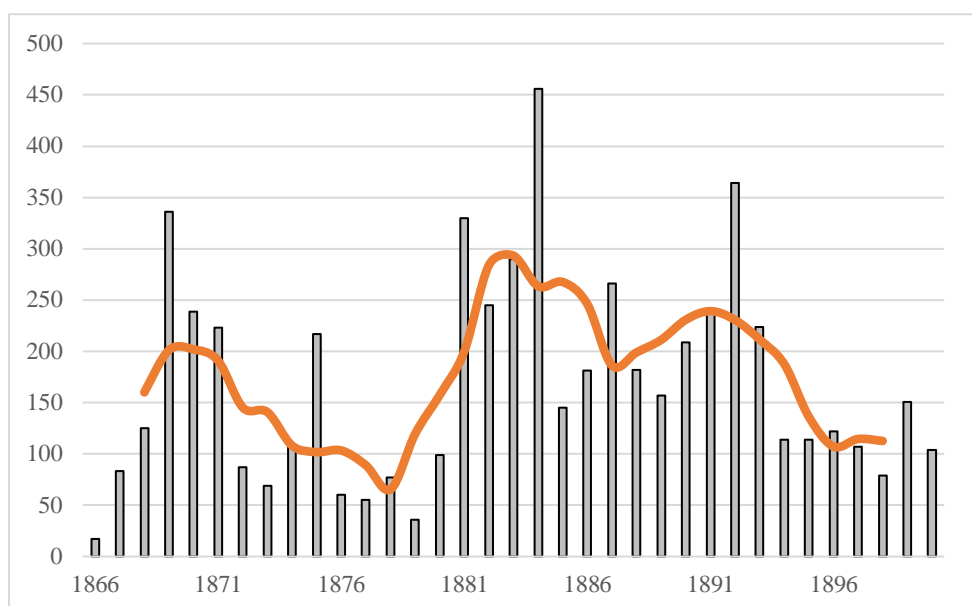
³⁶ Olofsson, “Frihet med förhinder”, p. 72.

³⁷ SCB, *Historisk statistik*, Table 9.

³⁸ We may wonder if trends are driven by changing terminology. A search in the same way for “political meeting” (*politiskt möte*) yields only 718 hits in Scanian newspapers 1866–1900. This is hardly used at all in the 1860s and 1870s, but increases to about 20–80 uses per year in Scanian newspapers in the 1890s. The movements in the use of “political meeting” do not change the picture given by the *folkmöte* search. In the late 1880s, *arbetarmöte* (workers’ meeting) starts to be used, but it is less common than *folkmöte*. There are 2,105 hits in Swedish and 211 in Scanian newspapers between 1866 and 1900.

Another concept is electoral meeting, *valmöte*. This is used by all the Swedish newspapers 38,079 times in the above period and 6,492 times in Scanian newspapers, i.e. about 10 per cent more than *folkmöte*. It has a very clear temporal trend with an increase over time, and, of course, a fluctuation over the electoral cycle. Before 1881, it is hardly used at all, at most 62 times in 1878. Then, for the electoral years: 1881, 175 times; 1884, 359

Figure 2. Newspaper mentions of “folkmöte” in Scanian papers, 1866–1900



Note: Search at <https://tidningar.kb.se> 13 August 2021; there are 5,913 articles. The grey bars show the actual number of articles and the orange line shows the moving five-year average. The years studied here had 2,685 articles, so these form the basic source of this paper.

Given the strong political tendencies of newspapers in this period, it is crucial that the studied papers should provide variety over the political spectrum, which the sample very much does.³⁹

The Scanian articles are dominated by nine papers: *Öresundsposten* (1033 articles), *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* and its previous incarnation *Snällposten* (538 + 73), *Folkets Tidning* (513), *Kristianstadsbladet* (463), *Arbetet* (325), *Helsingborgs Tidning/Dagblad* (270 + 232,

times; 1887, 584 times, 1890, 539 times, 1893, 797 times, 1896, 928 times, and 1899, 1185 times. Studying *valmöte* articles would be a worthy different study but since I want to focus on the broader civil society, *folkmöte* is better here; studying the *valmöten* would rather be a follow-up study to Esaiasson’s pioneering *Svenska valkampanjer*.

The word *socialismöte* has 2,541 hits in Swedish newspapers 1866–1900 with the first appearance in 1872 and with a peak 1881–1893. In Scanian newspapers, it has 430 hits, with the same time profile as the country in general.

The word *nykterhetsmöte* (sobriety meeting) has 36,840 hits in Swedish newspapers from 1866–1900, and 2,088 hits in Scania in the same years.

³⁹ It is worth pointing out that in this period, Swedish newspapers very much “borrowed” each other’s materials, and of course they also depended on the same news sources in some cases, especially for foreign news. This means that while the empirical basis for this study is 2,685 articles, they are not 2,685 unique articles. Often, the same article is printed by several newspapers (and so counted several times). It is, then, not the raw numbers of articles that is crucial here, but rather the representation of newspapers on various positions on the political scale. This also means that even though the digitalized database used here will grow further, there is no reason to believe that the addition of further newspapers would change the results of this study. On plagiarism and dependency on telegram bureaus in the Swedish press at this time, see Johannesson, “Med det nya”, pp. 186–190.

name change in 1884), *Skånska Posten* (254), *Korrespondenten* (229), and *Malmö Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (211). This covers the entire political spectrum, since *ÖP*, *FT* and *MHST* were papers of the radical-liberal tradition; *SydD* was conservative, as was *HT* and *SP*; *KB* and *K* were liberal papers close to the free churches and temperance movements; and *Arbetet*, started in 1887, was one of the first major socialist papers in Sweden.⁴⁰ Thus, the newspaper sample covers the political spectrum of Sweden at the time and the biases of the various papers balance each other.⁴¹

4. The evolution of popular politics in Sweden: *folkmöten* in Scania, 1866–1900

4.1 *The 1860s and 1870s*

We know from previous studies of the New Liberals that liberal and radical disappointment with the conservatism of the 1866 representation reform, as well as with the “rule of money” (*penningavälde*) in the municipalities, was articulated into a wave of *folkmöten* in 1868–70.⁴² However, the study here of Scanian papers from 1866 to 1870 shows two variants of political criticism advanced in the *folkmöten* of these years. The two tendencies are related, and both criticise the “rule of money” as well as the bureaucracy and the private banks. One tendency is the New Liberal, constitutional social critique; the other is similar, but more nationalist and less markedly democratic.

It is the latter tendency, which I refer to as National Liberal, which appears first in the sources.⁴³ On 8th June 1867, *Korrespondenten* reported that “a large *folkmöte* for the

⁴⁰ Wallin, *Valrörelser*, p. 135, mentions *Öresunds-Posten*, *Malmö Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, and *Folkets Tidning* as radical-liberal papers. At least Ö-P and FT were in important ways affiliated with the New Liberals. On the radical press of this time, cf. Johannesson, “Med det nya”, pp. 198–202. Wallin, *Valrörelser*, pp. 105–107, names *Snällposten* as one of only two newspapers in the country that opposed the 1865–66 representation reform. For the press historians, however, *Snällposten/Sydsvenska Dagbladet* is rather remembered from its early days as the paper that brought the quality daily to Scania. Johannesson, “Med det nya”, pp. 159–166. The local competitors *Helsingborgs Tidning* and *Öresunds-Posten* were in a feud in the late 1860s as they took opposite political stances: Johannesson, “Med det nya”, pp. 172, 178. There is a liberal tilt to the material which seems to be typical of small-town newspapers in Sweden at this time: Johannesson, “Med det nya”, p. 177.

⁴¹ The sample is also broad in its geographical composition. ÖP and HT/HD were based in Helsingborg, SydD, *Arbetet* and *MHST* in Malmö, FT in Lund, KB and SP in Kristianstad, and K in Landskrona.

⁴² See Olofsson, “What do the New Liberals” p. 13; and Esaiasson, *Svenska valkampanjer*, pp. 70–71. Esaiasson underestimates the importance of the New Liberal campaign outside of Stockholm; of course, he did not have access to a searchable digitalized newspaper database such as the one used here.

⁴³ For a discussion of National Liberalism in nineteenth century Sweden see Stråth, *Sveriges historia*, pp. 105–117, who says that “the 1860s was a National Liberal decade in Sweden” (p. 115). The importance of nationalist

whole province of Scania is supposed to be held this summer in Stehag to express an opinion against the unreasonable municipal suffrage. The meeting was pan-Scandinavian⁴⁴, and Stehag was chosen as a village on a railway line, accessible from Norway and, especially, Denmark as well as for the Swedes, and the time for the meeting was chosen to be between the hay harvest and the rye harvest. While *Korrespondenten* – a liberal paper – emphasizes the struggle for extended suffrage, it is also very clear from the sources how important the issues of national rejuvenation were for the meeting’s organizers and participants. The late 1860s was a period of national unification in Europe and it is made clear how present these projects were in the minds of the Swedish *folkmöte* participants by the report from an 1868 meeting that the opening psalm singing of 10,000 participants “was a ‘Polish prayer for freedom’, sung in Sweden!”⁴⁵ *Öresundsposten* reported *in extenso* on the speeches in Stehag, and the tenor of the meeting appears to have been Scandinavian-nationalistic – ‘we Scandinavians are one people and we have never known Asiatic despotism, etc.’ – but also reform-oriented, for a more inclusive polity.⁴⁶ The meeting attracted about 20,000 people, and the practicalities were not uncontroversial, in view of the bickering afterwards about the quality of transport to Stehag, etc.⁴⁷

The connection between liberalism and proposals for constitutional reform – widened and more equal suffrage in municipalities and the country – is clear also in the more fundamentally Liberal stream of *folkmöten*. *Folkets Tidning*, a New Liberal paper, reports in 1869 from a meeting whose chairman of the meeting stated that “if the Swedish people should see its future safe from outer and inner violence and its independence, its freedom and its nationality not extinguished from the soil, which hides the dust of our fathers, then we must rise up as one man from our long stupor and agitate through meetings, associations, petitions

symbols like king Karl XII and of Scandinavianism for mid-century Liberals is also discussed by Lönnroth and Delblanc, *Den svenska litteraturen*, pp. 64, 144–146. Kurunmäki and Nevers, “Nordic Liberalisms”, p. 189, argue that the Polish struggle for national unity and the Italian unification were key references for mid-nineteenth century Swedish liberals, who referenced Mazzini and Garibaldi as much as de Tocqueville and J.S. Mill. This rings quite true in relation to the *folkmöten*.

⁴⁴ There was at least one more Scandinavian *folkmöte* in Scania in 1867, when a Danish workers’ association visited Malmö in September and were greeted by the Malmö burghers’ singing association. See *Skånska Posten* 1867-09-14. Swedes also travelled to a Scandinavian *folkmöte* in Hilleröd outside of Copenhagen in Denmark in July 1869; cf. the report in *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-07-10. The advertisement for this meeting in *Snällposten* 1869-06-17 was even printed in Danish.

⁴⁵ *Folkets Tidning* 1868-07-28, reporting on the meeting in Attarp.

⁴⁶ *Öresundsposten* 1867-08-08.

⁴⁷ *Snällposten* 1867-08-10; *Öresundsposten* 1867-08-08, 1867-08-27.

and the like to be able to fight for our civil rights”.⁴⁸ Here we see very clearly a rhetoric of national rejuvenation, of awakening – and through civic reform. The two most important *folkmöten* in this (New Liberal) tendency in 1866–70 were held in Eslöv in 1867 and Attarp in 1868.

The Eslöv meeting in October 1867 was held under the label of *folkmöte* and “reform meeting”, and was arranged partly by the people who had been behind the Stehag meeting in August of that year, but veering more to the side of radicalism. Ola Jönsson in Kungshult, a radical farmer and MP, opened the meeting and addressed the participants as “Ye honest and nationally minded men”⁴⁹, which highlights how important the national rhetoric was also for the radicals of this period – in the radical rhetoric, to be “nationally minded” could also imply to desire democratic reforms, to make the nation more inclusive. The speakers were not completely united; the MP DB Olsson argued against the personality principle, arguing that “the so-called lower classes would elect recklessly” and claimed that a graded voting on a scale of 10 would be best, but he was not able to convince the others. This meeting stood out for the belief that every adult citizen who decided for himself and his property and paid any tax to the municipality should have municipal suffrage, and that the inequalities of the voting scale should be reduced to three steps.⁵⁰ To adopt meeting resolutions is very typical of the *folkmöten*; this is before the existence of national continuous political organizations and the resolutions were key to putting forward political demands vis-à-vis society at large and the politicians, as well as to uniting the participants themselves.⁵¹

The Eslöv meeting also decided to organize a new large outdoor meeting in the summer of 1868, and this meeting took place on 26th July 1868 in the village of Attarp. The

⁴⁸ *Folkets Tidning* 1869-04-20. Meeting in Sollebrunn i Westergötland The quote is in Swedish: “Om svenska folket skall se sin framtid betryggad för yttre och inre våld och sin sjelfständighet, sin frihet och sin nationalitet ej tillintetgjorda och bortsopade från den torfa, som gömmer våra fäders stoft, så måste vi som en man stå upp från vår långa dvala och agitera genom möten, föreningar, adresser och dylikt för att kunna tillkämpa oss de medborgerliga rättigheter, som vi äro berättigade att hafva.”

⁴⁹ *Öresundsposten* 1867-10-24. In Swedish: ”I redbare, fosterländskt sinnade män”.

⁵⁰ *Öresundsposten* 1867-10-24; *Korrespondenten* 1867-10-25. Jönsson in Kungshult was among the speakers both in Stehag and Eslöv, but the more conservative Professor Hamilton was a speaker in the Stehag meeting while radical newspapermen FT Borg (*Öresundsposten*) and Bülow (*Folkets Tidning*) were speakers in the Eslöv meeting.

⁵¹ Mral, ”En vanlig agitationsskampanj”, p. 63, comments that the resolutions taken at the political meetings – her context is Socialist meetings in the mining districts in 1896 – served three purposes: (1) unite the participants behind a common cause; (2) create a feeling of community inwards; and (3) demonstrate strength and activity to society at large. This meeting format, ending with a resolution, appears to have been the standard for *folkmöten* from the 1860s to the early 1900s, when the stronger organization of political parties made these expressions of opinion if not redundant, at least less than crucial.

meeting, according to the organizers, attracted 8,000 to 10,000 people (the sceptical *Kristianstadsbladet* stated 6,000) and began with a clergyman who quoted the Bible: “If ye set the coin as valuation of the man, ye make an evil difference and God cannot suffer it”⁵² The conflict between the money principle and the personality principle was the pole star for these organizers. The meeting took a stance for equal municipal suffrage for all who paid taxes, and accepted the New Liberal party program.⁵³

Municipal suffrage was the foremost issue of the *folkmöten* 1866–1870, both for the more “National Liberal” and for the New Liberal meetings⁵⁴, but besides this were five other recurrent issues. One was national suffrage: according to the personality principle, every adult (or at least every man) had the right to vote. The second was schooling: six years of school had been made mandatory in 1842, but schools had low pedagogical ambitions and a strong Christian tendency, and the New Liberals wanted more comprehensive and ambitious schooling with less religious teaching.⁵⁵ The third was army reform, often complaining about the expensive army and sometimes advocating instead a people’s militia model.⁵⁶ The fourth was banking critiques and a desire for a stronger National bank (*Riksbanken*).⁵⁷ The fifth was

⁵² The quote is from *Öresundsposten* 1868-07-28. In Swedish: ”Om I ställen penningen till gradmätare för menniskan, gören I en ond åtskillnad och Gud kan ej lida det.” For an extensive discussion of this speech, with its interpretation that “freedom, equality, brotherhood” had a basis in the Holy Scripture, see *Skånska Posten* 1868-07-29. See also: *Folkets Tidning* 1868-07-28; *Kristianstadsbladet* 1868-07-29. That a clergyman from the state church participated in a radical political meeting was not uncontroversial. Cf. *Folkets Tidning* 1868-10-09 on differences of opinion within the church; and for conflicts when clergymen supported folkmöten, see for example *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-04-03 (Boda church).

⁵³ The local organizations of the New Liberal party were called “Democratic societies” and were formed in Scania in these years and in Kalmar County in 1869. *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-06-09. On the Scanian organization see Wallin, *Valrörelser och valresultat*, pp. 155–156; Olofsson, *Tullbergsska rörelsen*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ *Folkets Tidning* 1869-08-20 gives an example of a *folkmöte* (in Södertälje) which espoused a relatively restricted suffrage reform but made a critique of banks and bureaucrats that is very similar to those of the New Liberals.

⁵⁵ For example *Snällposten* 1868-04-09, 1868-08-10. A meeting in Margreterorp in September 1869 met in front of a banner reading “Popular enlightenment” (*Folkupplysning*): *Korrespondenten* 1869-09-21. For demands to separate from Church and State, especially on schooling issues, see for example *Kristianstadsbladet* 1870-01-15 and *Snällposten* 1870-01-24 (meeting in Lund), *Öresundsposten* 1870-07-11 (meeting in the northern county of Västernorrland where the Baptists had a strong presence), *Öresundsposten* 1870-12-05 (also a northern meeting).

⁵⁶ For a typical combination of the issues see *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-05-26 on a meeting in Osby in May 1869 which took a stance on universal municipal suffrage, on a strong national bank with offices in the countryside that would make all private banks superfluous, replacement of the army by a people’s militia, and state support for folk high schools.

⁵⁷ For banking critiques see for example *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-02-22 (meeting in Vista härad), *Öresundsposten* 1869-03-27 (meeting in Snöstorp), *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-08 (meeting in Hudiksvall), *Folkets Tidning* 1869-04-09 (meeting in Gersås), *Folkets Tidning* 1869-04-20 (meeting in Sollebrunn), *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-05-26 (meeting in Osby). On the popularity of the Riksbank among farmers in the 1840s, see Christensen, *Bönder och herrar*, pp. 268–273.

a more or less Populist critique of the bureaucracy and waste of public funds.⁵⁸ The *folkmöten* of the late 1870s were essentially about the same issues as in 1866–70: especially municipal and national suffrage, and the reforms of taxation and defence, which in Sweden were connected at the time, since the army absorbed such a large share of the state’s outlays.⁵⁹ The liberals who wanted these reforms had had no success in the 1866–70 period, so perhaps it is not surprising that they kept going back to the same issues.⁶⁰ The lack of success was also plain to see for the radicals themselves, and as Figure 2 above reveals, the *folkmöte* activity in 1876–1880 was a pale shadow of the radical wave of 1869–71.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Calls for cuts in the public sector: for example *Öresundsposten* 1868-12-29, p. 2 (meeting in Hallsberg), *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-01-27 (meeting in Gersås), *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-02-22 (meeting in Vista härad), *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-01, p. 3 (meeting in Rättvik), *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-08, p. 2. (meeting in Hudiksvall), *Snällposten* 1869-05-18 (meeting in Töreboda), *Öresundsposten* 1869-08-14, p. 4 (meeting in Södertelje), *Öresundsposten* 1869-08-19 and *Korrespondenten* 1869-09-04 (meeting in Årila), *Snällposten* 1869-08-30 (meeting in Nässjö). On the farmers’ critiques of the bureaucracy in the 1860s and 1870s, see Hultqvist, *Riksdagsopinionen och ämbetsmannaintressena*.

⁵⁹ An example of a meeting which debated exactly these three issues is the meeting in Örkelljunga covered in *Kristianstadsbladet* 1878-08-19. This was in relation to an upcoming riksdag election. The meeting in Ängelholm, organized by a farmers’ society (*landtmannaförening*) and covered in *Kristianstadsbladet* 1878-07-20 had precisely the same agenda.

⁶⁰ The connected issues of taxation and defence – national defence seen as the main task of the state, so whether representation was inherently connected to taxation and who should pay for the army and navy, were the main political issues in parliament from the representation reform of 1865 to the late 1880s. Politics moved very slowly on these issues. The definitive treatments are those of Hultqvist, *Riksdagsopinionen* and *Försvaret och skatter*. On the lack of accomplishments by the radicals, cf. Kihlberg, *Folktribunen Adolf Hedin*, p. 77; Kihlberg comments on Hedin’s return to parliament in 1877 after a few years’ absence that “He has so much to accomplish there. Most work from his earlier years as MP is unfinished... he was not spoiled by success in the first period.”

⁶¹ In one of the few Swedish *folkmöten* of 1879, a farmer proposes a resolution for universal suffrage but is immediately met with the statement that, since parliament has not accepted even a modest increase of enfranchisement, such a radical resolution now is useless. Instead the meeting settles for a suggestion for a voting threshold to the second chamber of 400 kr. *Öresundsposten* 1879-04-21. The sense that the farmer-based radical movement of the 1860s has now run its course is also palpable in *Öresundsposten* 1878-07-17, reporting on a *folkmöte* in Ängelholm. The paper points out that the political farmers’ association in the Ängelholm area is one of the few left in Scania from the previous political period; the farmers’ associations are now mostly led “af dels godtrogne, dels tvetydige, dels för de store herrarne krypande tallrikslickare, hvilka framför allt söka att inbilla folket, att det är synd att Landtmannaföreningar sysselsätta sig med annat än gödning o. d., ja oförlätlig synd om de befatta sig med någonting så farligt som politik”. Similarly, *Skånska Posten* 1876-08-24 comments on the decline of three movements from the last ten years: the *folkmöten*, the workers’ associations, and the sharp shooter movement. SP probably refers to the workers’ associations related to the New Liberal movement in the late 1860s, cf. Kihlberg, *Folktribunen*, pp. 43–44; this is a case of Stockholm in 1866 but the association was called the New Stockholm Workers’ Association. For the example of an earlier Stockholms association, in 1850, see Björkman, “*Må de herrskande*”, pp. 304–309 and Lundberg, *Folket, Yxan*, pp. 30–32. These early but fleeting organizations deserve further research; the digitalized newspaper archive would be one way. A search for “arbetareförening” until 1900 gives 86,334 hits, of which 29,125 before the arrival of the well-known Socialist labour movement in the 1880s. Soon forty years ago Torkel Jansson, *Adertonhundratalets associationer*, wrote a pioneering study of civil society organizations in Sweden 1800–1870; the time is ripe for further studies in this vein. Stråth, *Sveriges historia*, p. 145, remarks that “the associations failed in the long run”

To understand the social and ideological character of the *folkmöten* of the 1860s and 1870s, we should treat the two final issues mentioned above – the banking issue and the critique of the bureaucracy – as key. They are indicative of the very strong basis that the *folkmöten* of this period had, among the farmers: both demands for lower interest rates and lower taxes on land were very much in the interest of the farmers.⁶² The anti-bureaucratic line and thrift with public funds is ever recurrent; in the New Liberal meetings there are constant calls for lower wages and pensions for public servants and fewer jobs in the civil and military bureaucracy; the “bureaucrats” are typically portrayed, together with the “money men”, as the enemies of all reform and progress.⁶³ The radicalism is striking when the New Liberals demand that the office of bishops and county governors – traditional symbols of authority in Swedish society – should be abolished; the populist streak in this critique is also clear when it is put forward jointly with the demand to abolish the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm.⁶⁴

The critiques of banks and the bureaucracy show the similarity of the radical Liberals in Sweden in the 1860s and 1870s to the American Populists of the time.⁶⁵ Like the Populists, the radical *folkmöten* also had their social basis, especially in the farmer class. Farmers in the

and that there was a transition to the popular movements (*folkrörelserna*); it would be interesting to investigate further the continuities between the waves of popular organization and mobilization.

⁶² For explicit criticisms of the taxes on the land, see for example *Öresundsposten* 1868-12-29 (meeting in Hallsberg), *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-01-27 (meeting in Gersås), *Folkets Tidning* 1869-03-16 (meeting in Lennäs), *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-08 (meeting in Hudiksvall), *Skånska Posten* 1869-07-17 (meeting in Katrineholm). The demands are not only for lower taxation but also for more even taxation of different types of land. There are also demands for abolishment of farmers’ obligations to deliver transport services to the public sector (skjutsskyldigheten): *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-01 (meeting in Rättvik), *Öresundsposten* 1869-06-12 (meeting in Ölmbrotorp), *Folkets Tidning* 1869-07-16 (meeting in Walskog), *Snällposten* 1869-08-05 (meeting in Töreboda), etc. These demands also reveal that the *folkmöte* movement of the late 1860s especially has its social basis among the farmers.

⁶³ A typical critique is that from the radical editor Bülow in the Eslöv meeting of 1867, when Bülow brings up the example of the way that the money men ruling the municipality gave a public servant much too high a salary. *Öresundsposten* 1867-10-24

⁶⁴ *Öresundsposten* 1869-06-12, p. 2, on a meeting in Ölmbrotorp’s schoolhouse, in the vicinity of Hylsta bruk’s railway station. See also *Snällposten* 1869-08-30 on a meeting in Nässjö, a more reactionary meeting – it voted no to increased religious freedom – but one in agreement with the radicals on the need for thrift and, for example, less money to the theatre. In the same Populist style is the anecdote from a *folkmöte* in Närke, when a farmer narrates that he had to visit a ministry in Stockholm and that he met well-fed and affluent men who had nothing to do – these men were the janitors. *Snällposten* 1869-11-06. *Folkets Tidning* 1869-04-09 also reports on a meeting from Gersås which wanted to abolish the state funding of the Royal theatre; also *Folkets Tidning* 1869-07-16 (meeting in Walskog). Criticisms of the Royal theatre was a recurrent motif in nineteenth century Swedish politics; cf. Lönnroth and Delblanc, *Den svenska litteraturen*, pp. 253–254.

⁶⁵ One could characterize much of the economic critique in the Swedish *folkmöten* as Elizabeth Sanders characterizes the People’s Party program from 1892: anti-corporate but not anti-capitalist. Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, p. 131; see also pp. 232–261, on the Populist critiques of banks. On populism in Sweden in the 1880s and 1890s, see Lundberg, *Folket, yxan*.

mid-nineteenth century often had quite large debts, so there was a material basis for the recurrent complaints about high interest rates, and the demands for cuts to the public sector were combined with demands for land tax cuts – also an issue of obvious relevance to farmers.⁶⁶ There are very few mentions of manual workers in the 1860s and 1870s: a unique article in *Snällposten* in 1869 reported on a carpenters' strike where the striking workers organized "a kind of *folkmöte*".⁶⁷ When the problems of vagrancy and begging in the difficult years of the 1860s appear in the *folkmöten*, the framing of the issue brings out which demands one could make on those who "could work but refuse to" and the hassle that vagrants expose honest people to.⁶⁸ Sweden lived through years of very bad harvests from 1867 to 1869, which led to starvation in the north of the country, but there were few specific discussions of this in the *folkmöten* in Scania in these years. When the subject of famine is brought up, as in a meeting in central Sweden in 1869 reported in *Folkets Tidning*, it is part of a wider argument on the unjust politico-economic order in the country. This meeting was actually chaired by an estate owner, who introduced the meeting with a harsh attack on the "leeches" (bureaucrats), and the tone of the meeting stayed shrill: the freeholder Otto Persson made the first speech, describing a country on its way to slavery, where the government had allocated 198,000 riksdaler for the princess on her wedding and the bureaucrats lived in luxury, "while people here and there in the country starve to death".⁶⁹ Persson explicitly put the question 'what are the roots of the suffering in society?' and answered that the main reason was the

⁶⁶ On farmers' debts see Erikson, *Krediter i lust och nöd*. On the politics of taxation in the 1860s and 1870s see Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter*.

⁶⁷ *Snällposten* 1869-08-21. The working class is otherwise seldom addressed as such. One exception, from Stockholm, is a meeting in the summer of 1869 around Karlberg castle, with hundreds of people, "mostly belonging to the working class" according to *Kristianstadsbladet* (1869-06-09), where the New Liberal party program was proposed. Here the meeting gave rise to an organization that would communicate the policies to workers in "the capital's larger factories and workshops". This is a wholly fascinating and ahead-of-its-time characteristic of the New Liberal movement: its cross-class awareness, shared by many journalists and intellectuals, but also farmers, and workers in cities and the rural areas. However, it is unusual for the 1860s and 1870s.

⁶⁸ For example, *Öresundsposten* 1870-09-17 (meeting in Sjönevad: should we establish workhouses?), *Folkets Tidning* 1870-08-30 (meeting in Skivarp), *Snällposten* 1870-06-21 (meeting in Anderstorp, arguing that most beggars are able to work).

⁶⁹ *Folkets Tidning* 1869-03-16 (meeting in Lennäs, report building on reporting in the Nerikes Allehanda). On the centrality of anti-bureaucratic propaganda and the message of thrift for radicals in Sweden cf. Lundberg, *Folket, yxan*, p. 278. Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism", pp. 171–175, speaks of a "producerism" in the English radicalism of the 1840s, with an inheritance going back to the 1770s, presenting workers and farmers as "productive", but bureaucrats, noblemen, "middlemen" and paupers as "unproductive". Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 85, speaks of "conventional radical obsessions" with public thrift. "Thrift" was also a crucial component of Scandinavian farmer politics in the nineteenth century – at least in Norway (Nerbovik, *Bondevener*, pp. 45–48, 54–55) – and Sweden (Hultqvist, *Riksdagsopinionen*).

luxury surrounding the palace, the throne and the bureaucracy. The *folkmöten* in these years rarely ventured into a purely economic critique and, as this example shows, even when they did, they tended to allocate much explanatory power to the state: the monarchy and above all the bureaucracy. The radicalism of Swedish *folkmöten* in the 1860s and 1870s was focused on constitutional issues and was not much concerned with conceptualizing the position of the working class in the political economy of the country; it is telling that Adolf Hedin, the leading New Liberal ideologue, knew of Karl Marx but thought that the German was an “over-rated” thinker.⁷⁰ Socialists like Marx are not referenced in the 1860s and 1870s but it should be mentioned that while we know that radicals like Hedin were influenced by thinkers like J.S. Mill, Tocqueville and Constant, these are also not referenced in the meetings, at least not in the speeches reported in the newspapers. As shown above, the discourse appears as more loosely populist and grounded in the Bible and in analyses of the existing Swedish political system.

The *folkmöten* were, however, associated with the liberal side of politics, and faced strong criticisms from the conservative camp. The mockery from the conservative paper *Snällposten* is typical when it claims that *folkmöten* might have importance for the “awakening” they give to ordinary people, but that the opinions expressed at *folkmöten* should not be taken very seriously, because the participants “with their state of education lack the capacity to penetrate the issues deeply”, and therefore sometimes yell ‘bravo’ to one speaker, and then the next one too, even though the two speakers contradicted one another.⁷¹ The somewhat condescending and ironic manner of the critique is also exemplified by a satire of “a radical-New Liberal Stockholm democrat from Eslöv” (as we have seen, there was an important meeting in Eslöv in 1867) acted out by students of the university town of Lund in 1869.⁷²

⁷⁰ Kihlberg, *Folktribunen*, p. 257; cf. 220. Hedin was more inspired by British liberals and by German reformers and *Kathedersocialisten* like Lujo Brentano and Albert Schäffle (Kihlberg, pp. 101–102, 253). A search for “Karl Marx” in the newspaper database (13 August 2021) yields only three hits in the corpus of Swedish newspapers before 1870, which indicates that in Sweden Marx attracted very little interest at this period.

⁷¹ *Snällposten* 1869-06-10. The quoted parts are in the original: “den väckelse de gifva åt allmogen”, and ”Allmogen, som beivstar dessa möten, saknar med sin nuvarande bildning förmåga att tränga till djupet af frågorna”. For similar criticisms see the report from a meeting in Ålsten, outside of Stockholm, in *Snällposten* 1869-07-05; the criticism of the New Liberal party in *Snällposten* 1869-07-19; and *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-07-10. For views of *folkmöten* in the papers, cf. Wallin, *Valrörelser*, p. 157.

⁷² *Kristianstadsbladet* 1869-05-05. Ridicule was not an uncommon strategy against the *folkmöten*; cf. the description by the arrangers of a *folkmöte* in Blekinge in *Öresundsposten* 1869-06-07, s. 2. *Öresundsposten* 1869-06-08, s. 2 compares Sweden with England where the *folkmöten* are no longer mocked (*hånade*).

A more direct debate between reformers and defenders of the established order took place at a meeting in Lund in 1870. This New Liberal meeting proposed universal and equal suffrage in the municipalities, a lower census for being elected to the first chamber in parliament, and expanded education. In this debate the radical newspaperman Bülow stirred emotions when he claimed that the current system was a “money men’s” mockery of the people – exemplified by the fact that Malmö city had 25,000 inhabitants but only 800 who had the right to vote in the municipality. Rare for a *folkmöte* of these years, conservatives also participated. Count von Essen argued that suffrage reform was unnecessary, since any industrious labourer could save up to 1,000 riksdaler and get the right to vote, and Professor Hamilton⁷³ argued that we must expect capability and independence of an MP – and could we know if a man had that without a certain level of income or wealth. The debate became heated, but the meeting decided in favour of the New Liberal policy of universal suffrage, against the protests of von Essen and Hamilton. This outcome awoke a very interesting critique in the conservative *Snällposten*: that the meeting had been rigged!⁷⁴

This debate goes to the heart of political change in Sweden in this period. As we have seen, the official political system built on an ideology of independent men as politicians: wealthy, tax-paying, with no obligation to take instructions from or take heed of the views of their constituents (still less of those without suffrage). The New Liberal meeting campaign of the late 1860s and early 1870s challenged this ideal by issuing, from party headquarters, instructions for the same issues – municipal suffrage, national suffrage, taxation – to be discussed at every meeting, and for each meetings to adapt a resolution in favour of the New Liberal policy proposals on these issues. This kind of politics – centralized, coordinated, and including also people without suffrage – went against the core of the oligarchical kind of politics. As the radical newspaper *Öresundsposten* stated in 1869, “people in all parts of the country appear to have a feeling and have begun to understand that the only way to accomplish a better order of things in this country is to discuss their issues among themselves”.⁷⁵

⁷³ Professor Hamilton was a laissez faire liberal in economic policy, who named one of his sons after the liberal economist Bastiat. Kilander, *Den nya staten*, pp. 72-76.

⁷⁴ *Snällposten* 1870-01-24. Criticism against the *folkmöten* was common. *Öresundsposten* 1869-06-22, p. 3 goes into the debate with a critique from the conservative paper *Stockholms Posten*, which branded as “terrorism” the way that decisions were made at *folkmöten*. The hyperbole is not atypical of the political rhetoric of the time.

⁷⁵ *Öresundsposten* 1869-02-15. In Swedish: ”Folket i alla delar af riket tycks ana och börja begripa, att den enda utväg för åstadkommandet af en bättre sakernas ordning i landet är, att sjelft diskutera sina frågor.” See also *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-01, p. 3 for the same argument, building on a report in the Stockholm newspaper

The New Liberal movement faded away in the early 1870s, and one cannot claim that the *folkmöte* campaigns of this period achieved any reforms. In the 1870s, condemned by radicals as “the meaningless decade”, parliamentary politics was a stale, slow-moving affair.⁷⁶

Swedish politics of the 1870s can be characterized with a citation from *Kristianstadsbladet* in the summer of 1870: the two major political parties, the rurally based Country Party and the more urban Intelligence Party, were in fundamental respects the same, defending the oligarchic system, and the paper asked rhetorically: “can one demand that the people should be satisfied with a representation that is ‘grey in grey’?”.⁷⁷

4.2 The 1880s and 1890s

The *folkmöten* of the 1860s and 1870s were generally similar in character, even if the intensity of social critique and political participation waned in the late 1870s. But the 1880s saw a shift in the character of the *folkmöten*. Those held in the 1860s and 1870s were generally led by farmers, as we have seen, typically took place in rural settings, and had a their concept of the economy that was generally close to the interests of farmers: criticism of high interest rates and indebtedness and demands for landowners’ taxes to be reduced. There was much continuity into the two final decades of the nineteenth century – indeed, the continued use of the term *folkmöten* itself denotes such a continuity. But this continuity also showed a streak of change. The shift can be summarized by the term, “the social question”. Wage labour and the working class play larger roles as themes for the meetings, and workers also play a larger role as participants. The rural sector and the farmers are still the predominant element of the meetings, but a larger share of meetings is held in towns and cities. This accompanies the greater participation of workers, but also the growth of civil society organizations – the “popular movements” – with their own buildings, which could host meetings.⁷⁸ This gives a new sense of ideological continuity to the meetings, which since

Dagens Nyheter. The Baptist paper *Veckoposten* made a similar argument in 1869: that “the workers are beginning to think for themselves”. Referenced in *Öresundsposten* 1869-04-27.

⁷⁶The quote is from Esaiasson, *Svenska valrörelser*, p. 72; he concurs that not much happened in this decade (pp. 72–74). See also Wallin, *Valrörelser och valresultat*, ch. 10.

⁷⁷ *Kristianstadsbladet* 1870-06-29. “Grey” was a recurring slur from the radicals against mainstream parties; cf. S.A. Hedin in his “Hvad folket väntar”, letter I. August Strindberg in his famous 1880s novel *Röda rummet*, with many traits of the roman à clef, renames as *Gråkappan* (“Grey coat”) what he sees as the insufficiently radical paper *Aftonbladet*. Kihlberg, *Folktribunen Adolf Hedin*, p. 97.

⁷⁸ A very entertaining report in *Skåning* 1898-09-10 on a *folkmöte* in a chapel in Hässleholm comments extensively on the chapel’s tasteful decor. By 1900 the labour movement in several cities, like Malmö, had its own urban venues, such as Folkets Park; see for example *Arbetet* 1900-07-19. The temperance movement of VestråGöinge had a *folkmöte* in Ignaberga mission chapel in October 1900, see *Kristianstadsbladet* 1900-10-13.

the breakdown of the New Liberals in 1871 had been more loosely joined around a populist and liberal social critique.

The first year of the 1880s already shows the new element in the *folkmöten*. In August of this year, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* reported that a “reform society” (*reformförening*) had been formed in Malmö – the largest city in Scania, but which until then had had no *folkmöten*, according to the materials studied here – with the aims of “political and municipal progress”.⁷⁹ In the paper the day after, the society issued an invitation to a “general popular meeting” (*allmänt folkmöte*) where the well-known Positivist medical doctor Anton Nyström from Stockholm would speak, and where three issues would be debated: municipal suffrage, national suffrage, and defence policy.⁸⁰ We recognize very well the uniting issues from the 1860s and 1870s, but now radical organization had started a new wave to succeed the New Liberals after their wave succumbed in the early 1870s. Nyström was anti-socialist, but is recognized as the organizer of the first Swedish working-class movement. Around 1,000 people took part in the meeting in Malmö, which was chaired by Malmö’s newly elected MP, the printer Andersson – the fact that the city has elected a worker as MP is also indicative of a new era.⁸¹ The meeting began with a speech by Nyström, who argued for universal suffrage. In Stockholm, a reform society which had been set up a year before, now decided to organize *folkmöten* all over the country to “express opinion, which could act as a driving force”, and to collect as many meeting resolutions as possible to present to the government on 1 November.⁸² The bookkeeper Mattson and editor Westenius argued that this action was too

See also the very happy reporting in *Öresundsposten* 1868-07-11 on a new association building in Helsingborg city. On the problem of venues for political meetings, cf. Hurd, *Public Spheres*.

⁷⁹ Report: *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 1880-08-19. Ad: SD 1880-08-20, also reported in *Korrespondenten*, 1880-08-21. Report after the meeting: *Korrespondenten*, 1880-08-25. The first time Nyström appears in the materials is in *Folkets Tidning* 1879-12-05 but this is a report on a meeting in Stockholm. August 1880 is the date of his first meeting in Scania in these materials. *Kristianstadsbladet* 1880-12-06 and *Öresundsposten* 1880-12-14 report on the handing in of the petition to the government and Prime Minister Arvid Posse.

⁸⁰ On the positivist, worker-friendly anti-socialist Nyström, cf. Åkerstedt, *Den litterate arbetaren* (1967), pp. 24–30; and Leander, *Folkbildningens födelse*.

⁸¹ *Öresundsposten* 1880-12-14 counterposes the “humble” printer Andersson with Malmö’s alleged reputation as “a markedly crass rule of money, carried by a few matadors, whom the people [småfolk] didn’t dare to provoke”. In Swedish: “Det är icke ett par årtionden sedan länets hufvudstad Malmö gjorde sig känd för ett ytterst krasst penningvälde, uppuret af några få matadorer, mot hvilka småfolket icke vågade mucka, det kom aldrig ens i tillfälle att uttala några opinioner om samhällets angelägenheter, ty det hade icke en gång frisinnade och sjelfständiga tidningar, det var fåväldets isperiod. Huru annorlunda nu! ...”

⁸² “Public opinion” (*allmänna opinionen*) was of course a controversial concept in nineteenth century Swedish politics, evoking precisely the opposition discussed above between an oligarchic and a democratic understanding of politics. The oppositional “people’s tribune” of the 1860s, August Blanche, argued against the elite: “Men jag har folket, har opinionen”. Quoted in Lundberg, *Folket, yxan*, p. 65. For a more in-depth discussion see

hasty and that it would be better to work for a lowering of the income census (for the second chamber) to 400 kronor. They were loudly jeered, as people shouted “Down with the census!” (*Bort med strecket!*) The decision of the meeting was that every adult, well-behaved (*välfrejdad*) person should get the vote. On the municipal suffrage, the discussion was started by Westenius who advocated a 5-step scale. Bookkeeper Nilsson recommended 10 steps and Nyström, the doctor, agreed with both, against what *Kristianstadsbladet* called “an advanced politician – tailor to the profession – who wanted money to play no role at all in municipal arrangements”. The meeting decided on a 5-step scale. In the third issue of the debate, defence policy, voices were raised both for disarmament and for more defence spending and no consensus was reached. The discussion ended by a speech from the chairman, Andersson, praising the current system and condemning conscription, with which the meeting expressed agreement.

I have dwelled on the Malmö meeting of 1880, because it was such an innovation in the context of Scanian politics. Looking at the further materials, it is clear that it was a harbinger of things to come. The second half of the 1880s shows further examples of the new urban and working-class tendencies. In January 1886, the socialist labour movement appears for the first time in the newspaper material, when *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* reported that the “Socialist leader” August Palm called a meeting in Malmö about a newly published article by C.O. Berg on temperance and socialism, to oppose the article and Berg’s views.⁸³ About 700 to 800 attended the meeting and the most of them shared Palm’s (Socialist) views. Palm, the most important Socialist agitator in Sweden in the 1880s, was a stalwart in the newspapers in this decade. In June 1886 *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* reported another meeting in Malmö, “with both scum and respectable people” participating, where Palm “in his usual way bellowed against the ‘upper class’”, warned people about a financial crash, attacked farmer MPs, was interrupted by police officers but replied only “Soon! Soon!”⁸⁴ Equally interesting is when striking workers in Helsingborg organized a *folkmöte* in August 1886, much to the chagrin of

Johannesson, “August Blanche”, pp. 84–90; he also discusses Blanche’s use of the maxim “Vox populi, vox dei”.

⁸³ *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-01-12. On Palm’s tours as an agitator, his rhetorical style, and his biography, see, Josephson, *Mäster Palm talar* and Palmgren, *Född till agitator*. Before 1886, socialists appear in the newspaper material only in the context of France (*Öresundsposten* 1867-09-14), Denmark (*Öresundsposten* 1876-09-27), Germany (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1877-03-02, *Öresundsposten* 1878-06-03 and other articles in 1878), and England (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1879-12-12).

⁸⁴ *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-06-15. ”samlades så småningom en ganska stor mängd människor der, både slödder och hyggligt folk...” For further articles on Palm’s meetings which were stopped by the police see *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1886-10-29 (Uppsala); *SydD* 1886-08-11 (Ovik); *SydD* 1887-07-05 (Bro); *Arbetet* 1887-08-06 and *MHST* 1887-07-27 (Korsnäs).

liberal *Öresunds-Posten*, which found the language of the meeting's organizers "raw and uncouth" and their politicization of the strike a hindrance in resolving it.⁸⁵

By the late 1890s the socialist labour movement was very well established in Scania – indeed, since 1887 it had also had its own paper, *Arbetet* ("Labour"). An example from 1896 shows continuity and change combined in the *folkmöten*. On 18th May 1896 *Arbetet* reported a large meeting in Stockholm on Norway's national day, 17 May, at which the Social Democratic party leader Hjalmar Branting spoke, as well as V. Andrén, from the people's parliament, who spoke against militarism, saying that people got no suffrage from the riksdag, "only guns and rifles with prayer books attached".⁸⁶ The elites can no longer argue that "we" do not pay any taxes: the latest evaluation shows that those without suffrage pay 44 million SEK in taxes every year (presumably mostly indirect taxes), while those with suffrage pay no more than 18 million. Instead they now blame "us" for being immature. The socialists Thorsson and Palm defended the use of a general strike as a pressure weapon for suffrage: the suffrage question had by then, of course, for three decades been the main mobilizing issue of the *folkmöten*, but the idea of using a general strike as a political weapon emerged with the labour movement of the 1880s.

The shift in political life, which occurred when working-class people – and people who claimed to speak in various ways for them – started to take a leading role in *folkmöten*, is related to another shift: a broadening of the conception of the economy. Much of the *folkmöte* debates in 1886-1887 centred on the situation of the economy. In January and February 1887 *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* reported from a Socialist demonstration in Stockholm, with August Palm among its speakers, protesting against the high rate of unemployment (*arbetslöshet*) and demanding the creation of public jobs.⁸⁷ More than 2,000 people participated in this meeting, where Mr J.M. Engström exhorted his audience to join in the life and death struggle against capitalist society, and ended his speech with a hurrah for the class struggle. The labour movement and other meeting organizers all shared the view that the economy was in a

⁸⁵ *Öresundsposten* 1886-08-14. Other examples of urban workers' *folkmöten* are the Iron Workers' Union in Malmö in April 1887, *Malmö Handels- Och Sjöfartstidning* 1887-04-16; socialist demonstration for suffrage in Stockholm in *Malmö Handels- Och Sjöfartstidning* 1887-07-13; socialist meeting in Malmö in *Malmö Handels- Och Sjöfartstidning* 1887-07-27.

⁸⁶ *Arbetet* 1896-05-18. See also *Arbetet* 1896-07-06 (summer agitation in Malmö).

⁸⁷ *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1887-01-31, and 1887-02-01. From the second article: "Hr J. M. Engström manade till strid på lif och död mot det kapitalistiska samhället och slöt med ett lefve för klasskampen." See also report in *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1887-02-03. For Socialist critiques against the older radicals, see *Skånska Posten* 1886-02-10 where August Palm lambasts the old New Liberals around *Fäderneslandet* and Julius Mankell for their "faithful clutching to the Manchester theories".

desperate state and various reforms were discussed, strikingly often, the lowering of interest rates and the abolition of private banks.⁸⁸ Again, we see the combination of the new and the old – the concept of “the unemployed”, as opposed to “beggars” and “vagrants”, but also the scapegoating of private banks and the complaints about interest rates, inherited from the farmer-centred political economy, which dominated the 1860s and 1870s.⁸⁹

A further crucial shift in Swedish politics and in the *folkmöten* in the late 1880s is the appearance of the protectionism issue. In Swedish political history, the turn to protectionism in 1887-88 and the political strife associated with this are typically seen as somewhat of a *deus ex machina*, which gave rise to a modern party system with oppositional and competing relationships between the parties.⁹⁰ Electoral participation (among those with suffrage) grew from about 25 percent to about 50 percent from 1884 to 1887.⁹¹ From the viewpoint of the *folkmöten*, protectionism still appears as a very important issue but that it emerges at the same time as the labour movement also highlights the underlying, broader change of a broadening politicization of the economy, and an admission that social and economic circumstances are a matter of politics. This aside, the customs issue appears in several articles about *folkmöten* in 1886: for example, a report of a meeting in Åkarp, attended by about 200 persons, when the farmer MP Ivar Månsson i Trää argued for customs tariffs and convinced the participants – at least, if we believe the (Conservative) *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*; according to *Kristianstadsbladet*, “some spoke for grain customs duties, others against, and the importance of the meeting was therefore zero”.⁹² The spring of 1887 was completely dominated by the election and the protectionism issue; the Socialist Palm made an enraged

⁸⁸ For example, *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1887-08-15, a farmer-dominated meeting in Grefvie; *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-08-05 (meeting in Edbergs Sanna); HD 1887-03-22 (meeting in Åstorp); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1887-08-23 (meeting in Blekemåsa).

⁸⁹ The sociologist Sarah Babb, “A True American System”, provides a fascinating study of how the ideological frame of Greenbackism and populist critiques of the banks was adapted by organized labour in the USA, even though the organized workers themselves could hardly have had the same problems as a deeply indebted farmer.

⁹⁰ The conventional view is presented well by Lewin, *Ideologi och strategi*, p. 48, who refers to the tariffs issue of 1888 as the issue “vilken lade grunden till det moderna partiväsendet och väckte svenska folket ur dess politiska apati”. On the importance of the customs conflict for the rise of Swedish parliamentarism see Sundberg, *Ministärerna Bildt och Åkerhielm*. The Country Party was split in two by the conflict; cf. Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken*, pp. 53–54.

⁹¹ Esaiasson, *Svenska valkampanjer*, pp. 83–84.

⁹² *Kristianstadsbladet* and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, both 1886-01-11. Other examples of meetings on this issue in 1886: *Korrespondenten* 1886-01-12 (meeting in Malmö took a stance for the customs), *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-01-13 (meeting in Ystad, against customs).

speech against such protectionism (or rather against the politicians who proposed it), while the farmers were mobilized into free trade societies or protectionist meetings.⁹³

One could say that in the years after 1887 Swedish politics were polarized. The men on the Left saw the policies of the new protectionist government as “the new system”, and under this system nationalism intensified on the Right at the same time as socialism grew on the Left. This new, stronger contention is related to the greater participation in politics. Interestingly enough, however, the Left that appears in the late 1880s is not only the SAP per se, but also a broader movement. In June 1886, *Helsingborgs Dagblad* reported that over Pentecost a meeting with about 5,000 participants had been convened by some “workers and peace communities in southern Scania”.⁹⁴ Two major issues were up for discussion. First, the relationship between “peace, sobriety, and workers’ issues”. The meeting agreed that all three issues pointed to the same goal: “human improvement”. The second issue for discussion was “why are crafts, agriculture, and the working class in distress?” A. Svensson, a schoolteacher, argued that the cause was the unequal distribution of taxes. The meeting ended with a hurrah for humanity, and the participants extended their evening on two dance floors and a carousel. The recurring “peace movement” is part and parcel of the age of imperialism as well as the aftermath of the national settlements in Europe of the 1860s and 1870s; the newspaper articles on *folkmöten* frequently report on Romania, Greece, Bulgaria and the Balkans. This reporting does not occur in the late 1860s but appears in all three of my other sample periods, and is always related to the national question and compared with the situation in Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.⁹⁵ Beyond the best-known “social question” and protectionism

⁹³ When customs (*tullar*) are mentioned in the *folkmöten* in the 1860s and 1870s it is as custom duties on luxury items, as a part of the populist critique of the elite. In 1880, customs for everyday consumer goods are discussed (*Folkets Tidning* 1880-02-27, a meeting in Trollhättan). In 1887 grain customs are debated everywhere. Palm: *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1887-03-21 (meeting in Malmö). We may wonder what the importance of the free trade line was for radicalism and for the Left. Finn, *After Chartism* (1993), pp. 58–59 in her study of British radicalism points in an interesting way to the relationship between Chartism and Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840s. Both these organizations were major inspirations for the Swedish New Liberals of the 1860s. Free traders:

Helsingborgs Dagblad 1887-03-22 (two separate articles on meetings in Hörby and Åstorp), *Öresundsposten* 1887-04-12, (meeting in Blekemossa). Protectionists: *Kristianstadsbladet* 1887-03-26 (meeting in Tollarp), *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1887-04-02 (meeting in Lindholmen). Mixed meetings: *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1887-04-01 (meeting in Åby), *Kristianstadsbladet* 1887-04-07 (meeting in Osby). On the importance of the sorting of people into free traders and protectionists for nascent party formation, see Hadenius, “Riksdagspartier”.

⁹⁴ *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1886-06-16. ”ett talrikt besökt möte, hvartill inbjudning utfärdats af åtskilliga arbetare och fredsföreningar i södra Skåne”. I have translated “arbetsklassen” as “the working class”.

⁹⁵ For example, articles on independence for Crete (*Helsingborgs Dagblad* 1897-02-20; *Arbetet* 1897-02-22); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-05-11 (Greece); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1897-03-10 (a great meeting in London’s Hyde Park in favour of Greece); *Snällposten* 1869-01-21 and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1896-12-05 (Bukarest); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1878-07-24 (meeting in Italy on geopolitics and the control of the Balkans); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1876-10-04 a great meeting in Athens).

issues, then, Swedes also mobilized politically in the 1880s and 1890s for peace; a movement arose which strove to establish an international tribunal that would arbitrate for peace.⁹⁶

The final comment I want to make on the *folkmöten* of the 1880s and 1890s concerns the very basic question: who could participate? The reader may have noticed that no named women have so far been mentioned in relation to the *folkmöten*. This is because until 1889, no women were named as speakers, organizers or functionaries of any of the meetings. The first woman to play such a role was Elma Sundkvist, who made a speech in favour of universal suffrage at a Socialist meeting with a few thousand participants, in Sätöfta woods in the summer of 1889.⁹⁷ This is a further indication of the broadening of the *folkmöten* of the 1880s and 1890s from the farmer-dominated meetings of the 1860s and 1870s. The theme of who could participate and who should participate in *folkmöten* was also explicitly debated in the later decade. In 1880, *Öresundsposten* reports on a meeting where a schoolteacher makes the argument that *folkmöten* are so important precisely because they give “the politically disenfranchised ... the same freedom of speech as the enfranchised”.⁹⁸ Similarly, the chairman at an 1887 meeting asked the participants whether those who had no right to vote to the second chamber should have the right to express themselves at the meeting; the question was universally answered in the affirmative.⁹⁹ In the 1860s and 1870s, farmers dominated the meetings and they were still a central element in the 1880s and 1890s, but over time participation seems to have become broader, attracting derision or praise from the newspapers, depending on their view. Some of the ways in which the participants are described are “many stupid tenant farmers, who have seldom left their parish and can neither

⁹⁶ Swedish: *skiljedomstol*. For such reporting see *Kristianstadsbladet* 1886-12-15 (meeting in Varberg); *Arbetet* 1896-08-11 (meeting in Vemmenhög's härad for and against Andersson i Nöbbelöf); *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1897-01-19 (a meeting in Philadelphia speaking out for a *skiljedomstol*). Another fascinating piece of reporting on the peace movement is *Arbetet* 1896-03-28 on a meeting of the free church in Södermanland which had sent an open letter to the Minister of War insisting that he, as a good Christian, should resign and instead devote his life to working for peace. Palmgren, *Född till agitator*, p. 276 points out that for the leading Social Democrat August Palm in the 1890s, the *skiljedomstol* was still a crucial idea for restoring international order and for his anti-militarist stance. See also Egefur, *Gränslösa rörelser*, p. 21 for a discussion of the arbitration movement, which Egefur labels the “bourgeois peace movement”.

⁹⁷ *Arbetet* 1889-08-13; *Öresundsposten* 1889-08-14. *Arbetet* spells her name “Sundkvist” while ÖP spells it “Sundqvist”. *Folkets Tidning* reports 1889-07-19 on a “flaming red” speech by Sundkvist, referred to as “a Swedish Louise Michel”, at a meeting in Malmö, but this meeting is described as a “*demonstrationsmöte*” and so is not included in the *folkmöte* material.

⁹⁸ *Öresundsposten* 1880-01-05: a meeting in Flen where schoolteacher Karlsson argued that the *folkmöten* are so important since “de politiskt omyndige hafva samma yttranderätt som de myndige” there.

⁹⁹ *Öresundsposten* 1887-04-02, a *folkmöte* for Norra Åsbo härad in Åby. “Ordförandens fråga om äfven sådana som icke egde rösträtt till riksdagsman i Andra kammaren, skulle lemnas tillfälle att yttra sig, blef med enhälligt ja besvarad.”

read newspapers nor any other book than a religious one”¹⁰⁰, “common people”¹⁰¹, “both scum and honest people”¹⁰², “of various social classes”¹⁰³, “Sunday-dressed workers and other interested people”¹⁰⁴, “diligent workers”.¹⁰⁵ Establishing the precise social composition of the meetings is of course impossible – there are by definition no membership rolls from these elusive events – but the coverage does indicate the principal point that the disenfranchised – workers, and, rarely, women¹⁰⁶ – could find a political venue in the *folkmöten*.

In the 1890s a new theme also appears, the opposite of the right of lower-class people to participate in *folkmöten*: the presence of very elite people. In the late 1880s, the radical papers complain that only one Swedish government minister has ever taken part in a *folkmöte*, and compare the country unfavourably with Norway where ministers are more open to participation.¹⁰⁷ But in 1890 it actually happened that the marshal of the court, Reutersvärd visited a *folkmöte* – and it did not end well. 300 agricultural workers and blacksmiths were present, speaking about universal suffrage in such a way that Reutersvärd demanded that the local police should dissolve the meeting; this call to the police, along with Reutersvärd’s contemptuous dismissal of the participants as “a band of thieves” became a *cause célèbre* in the radical press.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ *Snällposten* 1870-06-20. The longer quote is, “omkring 1000 personer, af hvilka kanske 800 voro fullvuxna män, häraf dock många enfaldiga frälsebönder, som sällan varit utom sin socken och som hvarken läsa tidningar eller andra böcker än de religiösa. Men bland massan fanns onekligen ett icke ringa antal kunnige och tänkande landbrukare och andra personer.”

¹⁰¹ *Kristianstadsbladet* 1876-09-23. “ganska talrikt besökt, synnerligen af allmogen”. “Allmoge” is a Swedish concept almost as complex as “folk” but denoting non-noble, non-burgher, non-clergymen, i.e. farmers and the lower classes.

¹⁰² *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 1886-06-15. ”både slödder och hyggligt folk”

¹⁰³ *Eslöfs Tidning* 1887-07-07. ”af olika samhällsklasser”

¹⁰⁴ *Arbetet* 1896-05-18. ”söndagsklädda arbetare och andra intresserade”

¹⁰⁵ *Arbetet* 1896-06-03. ”idog arbetarebefolkning”.

¹⁰⁶ Other women had taken part in the *folkmöten* before Sundkvist, of course, but as general participants.

Examples from the sources: *Öresundsposten* 1870-08-11 (men and women singing “patriotic songs” at a *folkmöte* in Klintarp); *Arbetet* 1888-10-02 (meeting in Bjuv, ”Mötet var mycket talrikt besökt, arbetarne gingo, både män och kvinnor, nästan man ur huse.”), *Arbetet* 1899-07-08 (meeting in Bökeberg, ”omkring ett tusen personer, däraf två tredjedelar kvinnor och barn, voro i går samlade i Bökeberg”); etc.

¹⁰⁷ *Arbetet* 1887-10-08: the new Minister of War, Peyron, is the only minister ”som på ett folkmöte uppträd och framlagt sina åsigtter samt sålunde visat sig hylla den offentliga kandidaturen.” *Öresundsposten* 1888-08-04, regarding Jakobverdrup’s participation in a *folkmöte*: ”Det är glädjande att se regeringsmedlemmar nedlåta sig att tala på folkmöten; men i Sverige [sic] kommer det nog att dröja innan de våra bli så ’gemena’.”

¹⁰⁸ *Kristianstadsbladet* 1890-08-09; *Folkets Tidning* 1890-08-12; FT is upset that the Marshal referred to the suffrage supporters as “a band of thieves” (*skojarpack*). *Kristianstadsbladet* 1890-08-18 further comments on Reutersvärd’s actions and argues that he is supremely shortsighted in failing to understand that a worldwide historical break is under way and that the speakers for the new movements should not be dismissed as “bands of thieves” and “*vinkelpredikanter*” (a contemptuous term for free church preachers).

However, the wind was blowing in the direction of the *folkmöten*. The final *folkmöte* article in the materials here, from the last of December 1900, is a very telling one for the direction that Swedish politics took. This report in *Kristianstads Läns Tidning* on a meeting in the north of Sweden states that those who complain about the “irresponsible rhetoric of the *folkmöten*” have mostly been enthroned at home, letting everything pass. The report concludes: “Maybe we will learn also in Sweden at some point, that if you want something, you need to work for it, even if the theoretical reasons for what you want are clear as day”.¹⁰⁹ By this point, even moderates – those who believe that it is obvious that their policy positions are correct – have accepted that in politics, you need to organize.

5. Conclusions

When the Great Depression spread over the industrialized world after the Wall Street crash of October 1929, democracy in Sweden was only eight years old, if we count the implementation of universal and equal suffrage as the start of the democratic age. Nevertheless, Sweden, along with its Scandinavian neighbours, was among the few European states where no serious threat – neither Fascist nor Communist – troubled the democratic order in these years.¹¹⁰ Why is this so? The political scientists Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning have recently argued that a legacy of democratic rule – using a minimalist definition such as electoral competition – was an important determinant of democratic survival in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹¹ In only three countries in their 30-country sample did democracy survive in the interwar period despite not having at least a ten-year legacy before World War I: one of those three was – Sweden.

The present study can contribute with a piece of the puzzle of the stable democracy of Sweden. Swedish politics before 1909 was oligarchical. But the plutocratic nature of the official political system was combined with a degree of civil liberties and of political

¹⁰⁹ *Kristianstads Läns Tidning* 1900-12-31. ”ovederhäftiga folkmötespratet”; ”mest förnämt suttit hemma och låtit allt gå sin gilla gång. Kanske skola vi också i Sverige en gång lära oss, att vill man något, så får man lof arbeta och verka för hvad man vill, äfven om de teoretiska skälen för hvad man vill äro så solklara som möjligt.”

¹¹⁰ Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, pp. 227, 234, makes this remark in a comparative context. Lindström, *Fascism in Scandinavia*, is a great investigation of why Fascism failed to become a mass movement in these three countries. Lindström in his conclusions, pp. 300–308, points to (a) the lack of disputed borders, (b) the reformist, not revolutionary, bent of the labour parties in Scandinavia, which was less provocative to the bourgeoisie; and (c) successful economic and social policies in response to the Great Depression. He also makes this very relevant point: “The strength of fascist organizations and leadership is inversely related to the strength of pluralist democracy” (p. 308). The present investigation, of course, proposes to help explain the evolution and strength of pluralist democracy in Sweden.

¹¹¹ Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning, “The Real Lessons”, p. 20.

mobilization which created the “vibrant civil society” conducive to stable democratization.¹¹² Swedish history in the decades after 1866 is marked by a particular constellation of a lively civil society without actual suffrage reform. This meant that a very broad array of actors – liberals and socialists, trade unionists and teetotallers – could unite around the simple but fundamental goal of achieving universal suffrage. This aim was previously proposed in the New Liberal wave of the late 1860s, but met no success, and after 1866 the work for democratic reform in the face of oligarchy took effect throughout the decades. In this way, the broad coalition for democracy discussed in different ways by Ruth Berins Collier and Madeleine Hurd could evolve.¹¹³

The *folkmöten* were, I would argue, a crucial arena for democratic socialization in oligarchic Sweden. The empirical investigation of this paper demonstrates that a multitude of meetings were held in Scania between 1866 and 1900, often with a great many participants: 20,000 in Stehag in 1867, 8,000 to 10,000 in Attarp in 1868, 1,000 in Åsadal in 1870, 1,000 in the suffrage meeting in Malmö in 1880, 5,000 in the workers’ and peace meeting in Löfvestad in 1886, 2,000 in the farmer-dominated meeting in Gärsnäs in 1886, 2,000 in the peace meeting in Glimminge forest in 1887, 7,000 in the Socialist-led suffrage demonstration in Malmö in 1887, 3,000 in Sätöfta in 1893, and so on. The meetings display a fascinating variation in terms of locality and social composition but all constitute a growing participation in politics.

Of course, the present investigation leaves many questions open. The ideologies of the *folkmöten* have been sketched only roughly, and deserve further research in more detailed studies. I have suggested that there were in the late 1860s elements of National Liberalism as well as New Liberalism, with partly overlapping agendas based on a loosely “populist” critique of taxes, bureaucrats and banks that speak to a farmers’ interest, along with constitutional liberalism and a focus on suffrage. These issues were still very much present in the 1880s and 1890s but were then combined with questions about the conditions for the working class, protectionism and grain duties, and war and peace. Covering one third of a century, the analysis of politico-ideological change here has necessarily been shallow; a shorter time frame would have allowed more detail and depth. It would be of special interest to study the continuities of radicalism from the 1860s to the 1900s among their well-known Liberals and Social Democrats; studies from other countries as well as a few studies of

¹¹² Cf. Miller, “Democratic Pieces”, and Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning, *Democratic Stability*, ch. 3.

¹¹³ Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy*; Hurd, *Public Spheres*.

Sweden indicate that there can be more such continuity than is obvious from studies which take one particular party or organization as their object.¹¹⁴ A second route for further research would be to connect the *folkmöten* to the formal political institutions and elections in a systematic way. A focus on the 1880s and early 1890s, comparing the situation before and after the protectionism row of 1887 – given its centrality to the political history literature¹¹⁵ – would be interesting; my expectation is that it would show, as Figures 1 and 2 indicate, that political interest was already heating up when the tariffs issue exploded in 1887. Notwithstanding these reservations about the limitations of the present study, it does provide a new look at Sweden’s politics in the final third of the nineteenth century, and the dynamic between oligarchy and democracy in this country.

¹¹⁴ Studies from other countries: Stedman Jones, “Rethinking Chartism”; Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*. In the Swedish case, Trägårdh, *The Concept of the People*, and Lundberg, *Folket, yxan*, have in various ways investigated unexpected ideological continuities and undercurrents.

¹¹⁵ For example Lewin, *Ideologi och strategi*, ch. 2; and Esaiasson, *Svenska valkampanjer*, ch. 4.

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