



LUND UNIVERSITY

Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration

The 1975 Extension of Voting Rights to Resident Aliens in Sweden

Ericsson, Martin

Published in:
Immigrants & Minorities

DOI:
[10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138)

2020

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ericsson, M. (2020). Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration: The 1975 Extension of Voting Rights to Resident Aliens in Sweden. *Immigrants & Minorities*, 38(3), 233-253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138>

Total number of authors:
1

Creative Commons License:
CC BY

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



Immigrants & Minorities

Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fimm20>

Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration: The 1975 Extension of Voting Rights to Resident Aliens in Sweden

Martin Ericsson

To cite this article: Martin Ericsson (2020) Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration: The 1975 Extension of Voting Rights to Resident Aliens in Sweden, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 38:3, 233-253, DOI: [10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1877138>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 193



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Enfranchisement as a Tool for Integration: The 1975 Extension of Voting Rights to Resident Aliens in Sweden

Martin Ericsson

Department of History, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

In 1975, Sweden extended voting rights in local elections to immigrants without Swedish citizenship (resident aliens). In this essay, motives behind the reform are analysed and it is argued that these were based on a wish to speed up the integration of immigrants rather than on normative ideas about the nature of democracy. In fact, the reform was seen as a part of the emerging Swedish integration policy of the 1970s. The discursive construction of 'the immigrant' was another important factor. Most immigrants at the time came from other Nordic countries, and politicians saw them as culturally similar to Swedes. However, this would change after the reform was enacted as Nordic labour immigration was superseded by non-European refugee immigration and the new asylum seekers were seen as more or less 'different' to Swedes. Domestic political arguments such as these, rather than philosophical arguments, shaped the outcome of the Swedish decisions regarding voting rights for resident aliens.

KEYWORDS Resident aliens; voting rights; enfranchisement; integration; Sweden

A Democratic Challenge

Although many people consider the right to vote a human right, in almost all modern democracies it is a right for *citizens*. After the emergence of modern nationalism in the 19th century, a link was forged between voting rights and national citizenship throughout Western Europe and North America.¹ Today, this situation has become problematic due to increasing migration since World War II.² Almost all current Western democracies have significant populations of immigrants living and working as permanent residents while lacking the right to vote as they lack national citizenship. The presence of such disenfranchised 'denizens',³ or resident aliens, poses a growing challenge for modern democracies – polities based on the assumption that 'all' adults should have the right to vote.⁴

CONTACT Martin Ericsson  martin.ericsson@hist.lu.se

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Voting rights are limited in all democracies.⁵ For example, no democracy enfranchises children. Nevertheless, these limitations have changed historically. In the early years following World War II, voting rights were exclusively reserved for citizens in almost every democratic state. Today, the situation is somewhat different. Only a handful of countries, such as New Zealand and Uruguay, give resident aliens the right to vote in national elections. But since the 1970s, at least forty-five democracies have introduced some form of voting rights for resident aliens, at least in local or regional elections.⁶

In 1975, as one of the first states in the world to do this, Sweden introduced local and regional voting rights for all resident aliens regardless of origin, with three years of residence as the only condition. This issue was debated for many years following the reform: left-wing parties tried to extend suffrage to national elections as well, while right-wing parties opposed such an extension.⁷ Sweden therefore provides an informative case study of the historical mechanisms, agents and arguments which have been decisive in the granting of voting rights to resident aliens. This paper will discuss why voting rights were introduced in 1975 and the arguments used to support this. I will show that, somewhat paradoxically, this event of democratisation (extending local and regional suffrage to more than 210,000 adults) was not really framed as a 'democracy reform'. It was perceived in much more instrumental terms as a way to promote the integration of immigrants into Swedish society. I will also show that the discursive construct of 'the immigrant' was important. When voting rights were given, the way in which legislators perceived the group affected by the reform mattered.

Several scholars have approached the question of how voting rights and citizenship are related, but they tend to do so using a normative, philosophical approach.⁸ They discuss whether voting rights *should* be given to resident aliens. For example, it is asked whether voting rights should be given to those who are the most affected by political decisions: the 'all affected' argument?⁹ Or, alternatively, whether they should be given to those who are forced to obey the laws of a state: the 'all subject' argument?¹⁰ These normative studies are important, but, as noted by Christina M Rodríguez, they do not tell us much about which arguments have been used in the voting right extensions that have actually been carried out.¹¹

There are a few empirical studies hinting that the motivations leading up to reforms have been quite complex.¹² In some cases, voting rights for

certain groups of resident aliens have been introduced as a way to broaden a ruling party's electorate, such as in certain authoritarian South American countries up until the 1980s.¹³ When local voting rights were introduced in the Netherlands in the 1970s, the reform was mainly thought of as a way to integrate Moluccan resident aliens (formerly fighting in the Dutch colonial forces in present-day Indonesia) into society.¹⁴ There, voting rights were seen as a tool for integration in a way that resembles the Swedish case analysed. When New Zealand adopted voting rights for resident aliens in national elections in 1975, this was not seen as a reform affecting large groups of far-away immigrants (which is the population mainly affected by this law today). Rather, it was thought of as only affecting former British subjects (white and English-speaking with a British culture) who chose to live in New Zealand but not to become New Zealand citizens.¹⁵ The case of New Zealand highlights the importance of how 'the immigrant' as a category is perceived and discursively constructed. This was important in the case of Sweden as well.

To sum up, this paper will consider whether it was normative arguments based in democratic theory or more instrumental arguments of the kind mentioned above that led to the Swedish introduction of local and regional voting rights for resident aliens. The analysis is set within the framework of the historical study of voting rights for immigrants and also the 'historical turn' of democratisation studies, emphasising 'what actors were actually fighting about'.¹⁶

The Rise of a Multicultural Integration Policy

For a long time, Sweden had very restrictive immigration legislation. During World War II, the country granted asylum to some refugees, but this was seen as an exception from a general rule of restriction.¹⁷ These refugees mostly came from other Nordic countries and the basis of Swedish immigration policy at the time has been called the 'Nordic prerogative': a notion that Sweden had a greater responsibility in terms of protecting Nordic citizens and that Nordic citizens were thought of as easy to integrate into Swedish society compared to other immigrants.¹⁸

Immigration patterns changed from the late 1940s and for two decades after due to labour shortage. Large numbers of labour migrants entered the Swedish workforce, mainly as workers in the rapidly expanding industrial sector. Some came from European states such as Italy,

Yugoslavia and Austria, but the majority came from Nordic countries and especially from neighbouring Finland. Already in 1955, 116,000 foreign citizens worked in Sweden, and 60% of them were Nordic citizens. In the mid-1960s, approximately 50,000 individuals migrated to Sweden each year.¹⁹

Post-war Sweden was dominated by the Social Democratic labour movement, and trade unions were in a good position to influence immigration policy. In 1968–72, labour migration was restricted due to trade union demands, and practically all non-Nordic labour migration ceased. The nature of immigration started to change as labour immigration was gradually replaced by refugee immigration in the 1970s, with asylum seekers from, for example, Chile, Turkey and Palestine.²⁰

European countries have addressed the integration of immigrants into society in different ways. Post-war West Germany adopted a well-known 'guest worker' system, in which immigrants had few rights and were expected to leave the country relatively soon.²¹ Sweden chose another strategy. Partly as a result of the insistence of trade unions and partly as a consequence of the general welfare-universalistic ideology of the Social Democrats, Sweden granted almost the same social and economic rights to resident aliens as to Swedish citizens.²² This did not, however, include the political right to vote, and it was not clear how the state would act when it came to cultural rights.

Traditionally, Sweden had implemented a strict assimilation policy. Immigrants were expected to adapt to Swedish culture and abandon their own languages. In the second half of the 1960s, this policy came under criticism from intellectuals, bureaucrats and immigrant activists. They promoted multiculturalism as an alternative, giving immigrants the possibility of maintaining their own culture and language while living in Sweden. These ideas were initially met with scepticism, but in the early 1970s, they started to transform Swedish integration policy. Indeed, it can be argued that multiculturalist ideas created 'integration policy' as a political concept. This change, however, was not a consequence of sheer benevolence to immigrants. Politicians and bureaucrats also expressed fears of future segregation and social conflicts between immigrants and Swedish citizens unless an integration policy was not immediately developed.²³

The new, multiculturalist integration policy was enacted by means of political consensus (immigration and integration issues did not polarise Swedish party politics in general until the 1990s).²⁴ The strategy was

formulated by Parliament in 1975 with the words ‘freedom of choice, equality and cooperation’.²⁵ Immigrants should have the right to choose the extent of their cultural adaptation and have the right to maintain their own languages, they should have the same basic economic and social rights as Swedish citizens and the state should work together with immigrant organisations to enforce this.²⁶ A number of reforms were included in the strategy, such as minority language education in school. In many respects, Swedish municipalities – the local level of the polity – were given the responsibility to enact these costly reforms. This, as shown below, was a major reason for the local enfranchisement of resident aliens in late 1975, some months after Parliament’s approval of the new integration policy.

Hard Beginnings

The debate on voting rights for resident aliens, however, did not start in 1975. This idea was present in the debate on integration policy already in the late 1960s, but it would be inaccurate to say that it met with immediate enthusiasm. On the contrary, until 1974–75, the prospect of a voting rights extension actually looked quite bleak. For example, there was an absence of grassroots campaigns. Certainly, some organisations of Finnish immigrants had voting rights on their agenda in the early 1970s,²⁷ but the majority of immigrant organisations did not engage in large-scale, political claim-making in relation to the issue.²⁸ This distinguishes Sweden from several other countries where the enfranchisement of resident aliens has been debated. In the US, to mention one such case, immigrant organisations have often been the main agents bringing reforms up to discussion.²⁹

Another example is provided by the debate which took place within the Social Democratic Party. Winning the support of the Social Democrats was key for anyone who wished to grant voting rights to resident aliens since the party had more than 40% of the votes in the elections at the time. However, although individual party members promoted the idea in the late 1960s, nothing indicated that the party as a whole would do the same. A few motions suggesting enfranchisement for resident aliens were discussed at the national Social Democratic Party congresses in 1968, 1969 and 1972. They framed voting rights as a way to promote the ‘acclimatisation’ of immigrants into society, to prevent the formation of ‘isolated’ immigrant enclaves and as a way to transform Sweden into

a 'pluralistic' society.³⁰ However, all motions were rejected by the delegates and met with scepticism in the debates. This was perhaps not all that surprising as the Social Democratic Party still had not generally started to embrace multiculturalism as a political strategy in the years around 1970.³¹ Hence, just a few years before the 1975 enfranchisement reform (proposed by a Social Democratic government), the Social Democratic Party officially *opposed* voting rights for resident aliens.

However, the proponents of enfranchisement did not limit their endeavours to work inside the Social Democratic Party. Starting in 1968, individual members of Parliament also took initiatives. They came from all parties except for the Conservatives (in Swedish: 'Högerpartiet' until 1969, thereafter 'Moderaterna'). Even in these early parliamentary debates, voting rights were predominantly seen as a way to foster integration. Admittedly, 'all affected' arguments were present in the very first motion in 1968, as Social Democrat Kaj Björk wrote that it was 'unsatisfactory' that some adults residing in Sweden lacked the right to affect political decisions at the ballot box. But he also framed voting rights as a tool for integration: immigration was a positive thing but caused 'problems of adjustment', and enfranchisement would be a way to speed up 'processes of integration'.³² This instrumental view would dominate motions in the following years. As an example, the Centre Party ('Centerpartiet', the former Agrarian Party) put forward a motion in 1971, proposing voting rights for resident aliens in local elections and hoping that such a reform would 'create a feeling of solidarity ["gemenskap"] and affinity ["sambhörighet"] to the new home country' among immigrants and that it would serve as an incentive for immigrants to 'gain knowledge of how the Swedish society functions'.³³

The only outcome from these initiatives was that Parliament handed over the issue to a committee drafting a new Swedish constitution. In 1973, Sweden repealed its old constitution from 1809 and enacted a new one (still current). The committee, which was instructed to consider voting rights for resident aliens a short time before it had to present its final draft, rejected the idea without much discussion. It was hard, the committee wrote in 1972, to separate national political issues from local issues, making it hard to determine whether resident aliens should have the right to vote in national and/or local elections.³⁴

This could have been the end of the story. The ruling Social Democratic Party had said no to enfranchisement and the initiatives taken by a few parliamentarians had failed. Only three years later, Sweden introduced

voting rights for all resident aliens in local and regional elections. How was this major political change possible?

Quick Changes

In 1973–75, two major factors drastically changed the basis for a voting rights reform. One had to do with international circumstances, namely Sweden's relations to its Nordic neighbours, especially Finland. The other was the breakthrough of the new integration policy based on multicultural ideas that was codified in Parliament's 1975 integration strategy.

As mentioned above, a large number of immigrants in Sweden came from Nordic countries, and especially from Finland. Since the 1950s, a steady flow of Finnish labour migrants had been settling in Sweden, where wages were higher and job opportunities more plentiful. This was enabled by the 1954 establishment of a common Nordic labour market, and Finnish migration to Sweden was exempted from the general restriction on labour migration in 1968–72.³⁵ For Finland, the social, political and economic conditions for the large group of emigrated Finnish citizens was a prioritised issue.

In the early 1970s, Finland worked inside the Nordic Council to promote the idea of reciprocal voting rights for all Nordic citizens in all Nordic countries, at least in local elections. The Finnish government expressed similar demands directly to its Swedish counterpart. In 1974, Finnish president Urho Kekkonen even held a public speech in Stockholm, asking Sweden to grant local voting rights to the Finnish labour migrants.³⁶ At the same time, the Finnish efforts to influence the Nordic Council met with success, as the Council in 1975 decided to support the idea of reciprocal, local voting rights for all Nordic citizens. Incidentally, this support was also motivated using instrumental arguments aimed at promoting integration, as local voting rights were said to 'stimulate local municipalities' attempts to counteract the special hardships immigrants may experience' and to 'advance their solidarity' with their new country.³⁷

At the same time, the multiculturalist breakthrough of a Swedish integration policy took place, resulting in the integration strategy enacted by Parliament in 1975. In the years 1973–74, multiculturalism had also been embraced by the Social Democratic Party. Together with the pressure from Finland and the Nordic Council, it is fair to assume that this breakthrough constituted an important factor in terms of changing the Social

Democratic position on voting rights for resident aliens. In 1972, the party congress had rejected voting rights. Three years later, the party held its next congress. Anna-Greta Leijon, chairperson of a party committee drafting a Social Democratic integration programme, now entered the arena, talking of the enfranchisement of resident aliens as a 'reform for justice' and an important 'extension of democracy'.³⁸ Her positive assessment of a reform met with no opposition from the delegates – almost as if it had never faced any resistance!

By then, the Social Democratic government had already appointed a committee tasked with drafting voting rights legislation, with the goal of granting voting rights to resident aliens in some form. This appointment was made in the spring of 1974. The objective, Prime Minister Olof Palme said, was to 'emphasise the affinity' between Swedes and immigrants ['markera samhörighet'].³⁹ Palme's statement was an indication of the integration-related hopes that the government tied to the reform. This was further underlined in the formal instructions to the committee, as the Minister of Municipal Issues Hans Gustafsson wrote that voting rights would be good for the 'adjustment' ['anpassning'] of immigrants to Swedish society.⁴⁰

Local Enfranchisement: The Reform Process in 1974–75

The committee, made up of representatives from the political parties in Parliament, worked fast and presented its report in March 1975. It had reached a unanimous agreement: voting rights and the right to run for office would be granted to resident aliens in local and regional elections. One party, the small and at the time communist Left Party ('Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna' until 1990, thereafter 'Vänsterpartiet') wanted to go further and also introduce voting rights on the national level.

The committee's report only briefly outlined the more theoretical aspects of the issue. Certainly, it mentioned that immigrants had an interest in voting in the community where they 'lived and worked', thus touching upon the 'all affected' argument. But this was not the predominant argument used by the committee. On the contrary, it framed the reform in a very instrumental way. First, local and regional voting rights were said to be a way to foster integration. The report warned of a potential future in which immigration to Sweden created dangerous social conflicts. This, the committee argued, was a risk due to the fact that a growing number of immigrants had started to arrive from countries 'far

away', speaking different languages and accustomed to 'other societal and living conditions and having different religions'. It was thus urgent to implement voting rights as a way to promote the 'solidarity to Swedish society' of these groups. Second, the report tied voting rights to the implementation of the new, multicultural integration strategy passed by Parliament. The success of the new strategy depended on the will of local municipalities to enact it. If immigrants had local voting rights, local politicians would be given an incentive to actually realise the desired but costly reforms, such as school education in immigrant and minority languages.⁴¹

This standpoint, framing voting rights not as something that was good for democracy as such, but as something that was good for a successful integration of immigrants and as a tool for implementing the reforms visualised in the new integration policy, met with approval in the public debate as well. In accordance with Swedish bureaucratic tradition, the report was sent out to NGOs, trade unions and a number of governmental institutions, who were given the opportunity to express their views. Although some of the respondents suggested a few technical changes in the drafted legislation, there was consensus regarding the basic proposals. Not a single respondent rejected the idea of giving resident aliens the right to vote in local and regional elections, and some influential organisations such as LO ('Landsorganisationen', the National Association of Trade Unions) even wanted to extend voting rights to national elections as well, at least in the long term.⁴²

Should voting rights for resident aliens be designed in the same way for all immigrant groups? In the end, that was what the committee suggested: all resident aliens, regardless of origin, should be given local and regional voting rights after three years of residence in Sweden. But this conclusion had not been self-evident for the committee. In fact, in an early draft, the committee suggested that immigrants from Nordic countries should have to wait for only two years, thus treating Nordic immigrants more leniently than other immigrants. This was driven by the assertion that Nordic immigrants were more similar to Swedes and had a greater potential to quickly integrate compared to other groups.⁴³ As discussed earlier in this essay, this was not a new idea. Rather, the 'Nordic prerogative' had shaped much of Swedish immigration policy since World War II. It was based on ethnic as well as civic nationalism, assuming that Nordic citizens had similar languages (at least in the case of Danes, Norwegians and Swedish-speaking Finnish citizens), a shared history,

culture and religion, as well as similar political institutions. In the final report, the notion of different qualification times for different immigrants was dropped, just as in the government's formal proposal of legislation presented to Parliament.⁴⁴ Exactly why it was dropped, however, is unknown.

The inclination to draw a boundary between Nordic and non-Nordic immigrants was present among agents outside the committee as well, although the vast majority of people engaged in the debate supported equal qualification times for all groups. Dissenting views were expressed by such diverse organisations as the Seamen's Trade Union, which claimed that only Nordic immigrants had 'deeper knowledge of how Swedish society works', and the Conservative Party's Youth Association, which even suspected that many non-Nordic immigrants were 'opponents of Sweden's democratic and parliamentary system'. They should thus slowly be introduced to democracy before they could be given voting rights.⁴⁵

Perhaps most interesting, this ethnic boundary-drawing was sometimes carried out by immigrant organisations as well, a fact that cautions us from viewing immigrants as a homogenous category with completely similar interests. As Mats Wickström correctly points out, immigrants should be seen as political subjects and not only as 'objects of Swedish political and discursive power'.⁴⁶ However, immigrants navigated this discursive terrain in different ways. As an example, the Association of Greek Immigrants embraced equal qualification times. The Association of Swedish-Speaking Finnish Citizens, on the other hand, argued that Nordic citizens (a group that the association's members belonged to) should be given a shorter qualification time due to the 'political, cultural and religious homogeneity' among the Nordic peoples.⁴⁷ This was a clear example of discursive, ethnic boundary-drawing, producing a line between an allegedly homogeneous group of Nordic immigrants and 'other' immigrants.⁴⁸

Local and Regional Voting Rights, but Not Further

In late 1975, Parliament passed legislation giving voting rights and the right to run for office to all resident aliens in Sweden regardless of origin, with an equal qualification time of three years of residence. Every party represented in Parliament voted in favour of the reform, and speakers motivated their votes with different arguments. For

example, the Liberal Torkel Lindahl used the 'all affected' argument, claiming that immigrants without citizenship were affected by municipalities' decisions just as much as Swedish citizens, while Social Democrat Frida Berglund had a more instrumental view: local voting rights would be a stepping stone on the way to realising the new integration strategy.⁴⁹ The reform was applied the next year, and in the 1976 general election, approximately 60% of all adult resident aliens in Sweden voted. This was seen as a good number, but in the long run, voter turnout would drop. Since the 1990s, only 30–40% of all resident aliens entitled to vote have used this right.⁵⁰

The fact that the reform was passed unanimously could lead us to think that voting rights for resident aliens would cease to be a political issue after the mid-1970s. This, however, would be wrong. For ten years, this issue led to conflicts between the left and the right. How could this be?

No one challenged local and regional voting rights. But soon after 1975, the Swedish labour movement, radicalised throughout the decade, started to demand voting rights for resident aliens in national elections as well. The Left Party had already done so for some years, but in 1977 (when the Social Democrats had lost power to a Liberal-Conservative-Centre Party coalition government), Olof Palme signed the first Social Democratic motion in Parliament explicitly demanding an extension of voting rights to national elections.⁵¹ Perhaps the change was caused by the standpoint taken by LO, the National Association of Trade Unions, which had strong ties to the Social Democratic Party. In 1976, the LO congress embraced the idea of national voting rights for resident aliens, partly using partisan arguments. Immigrants tended to be workers, a couple of speakers at the congress claimed, and thus tended to vote for left-wing parties.⁵²

At the same time, the question of national voting rights for resident aliens was tied to another question, namely whether Swedish citizens living abroad should have the same right. Internationally, most democracies in the first half of the 20th century denied citizens living abroad voting rights; however, during the last decades, many have chosen to enfranchise this group (in 2007, 177 states had some form of voting rights of this kind).⁵³ In Sweden, citizens living abroad lacked voting rights for a long time. Social Democrats were opponents or at least sceptical of enfranchisement, and unrestricted voting rights for this group were not introduced until 1976, when Liberals, Conservatives and the Centre Party for the first time in many decades were able to form a non-socialist

government. The Social Democrats, however, still opposed unrestricted enfranchisement.⁵⁴

After 1976, right-wing politicians accused Social Democrats of denying Swedish citizens democratic rights while wanting to give national voting rights to immigrants. Conversely, Social Democrats and the Left Party accused Liberals and Conservatives of ignoring the interests of immigrants living and working in Sweden – these immigrants, the left argued, were more affected by political decisions made by Parliament than Swedish citizens who choose to live in other countries for many years.

The debate on voting rights became more theoretically oriented after 1975, and politicians started to use arguments that are recognisable also in the modern, scholarly debate on the theory of democracy. Opponents of national voting rights for resident aliens based their rejection upon what has been called a ‘principle of membership’, according to which voting rights are a sign of membership in a community and where only full members can have voting rights.⁵⁵ Since the birth of the modern nation state in the 19th century, citizenship has been regarded as the most important sign of membership. Proponents instead used the ‘all affected’ argument, claiming that resident aliens were just as affected by Parliament’s decisions as Swedish citizens. They also took the consequences of this argument, insisting that resident aliens should be enfranchised in national elections while Swedish citizens living abroad should be at least partially disenfranchised, a standpoint that outraged right-wing politicians.⁵⁶

The debate became even more polarised after the 1982 election, as the Social Democrats regained power. The Social Democratic government appointed a new committee and instructed it to draft legislation extending national voting rights to resident aliens and, in one way or another, restricting voting rights for citizens living abroad. The instructions, written by Minister of Justice Ove Rainer, were based on the ‘all affected’ argument: ‘the possibility of influencing political decisions should in principle be given to the ones who are the most affected by these decisions’.⁵⁷

The committee presented its report in 1984. In stark contrast to the 1974 committee, it had failed to reach an agreement. On the contrary, the members took three different positions. The Left Party representative wanted to give voting rights as well as the right to run for office to all resident aliens, while restricting voting rights for citizens living abroad. The Liberal, Conservative and Centre Party representatives vehemently defended unrestricted voting rights for citizens living abroad and

completely rejected the idea of giving resident aliens national voting rights. The Social Democrats, making up the majority of the members, tried to occupy the middle ground. While partially restricting voting rights for citizens living abroad, they wanted to give national voting rights (but not the right to run for office) to resident aliens – but only to immigrants from other Nordic countries. Their motivation was an echo of the ‘Nordic prerogative’, drawing a discursive boundary between allegedly easily integrated Nordic immigrants and immigrants from far-away countries. It would be easier for Nordic immigrants to ‘familiarise themselves with the circumstances in Sweden’ due to the political similarities between the Nordic countries, they argued.⁵⁸

As in 1975, the report was sent out to NGOs and governmental institutions for comment. Back then, all respondents had embraced the idea of giving resident aliens local and regional voting rights. Now, only 10 respondents clearly approved the majority’s proposal, while 18 completely rejected it. The fact that the Association of Swedes Living Abroad was negative is perhaps not all that surprising. But even the National Association of Trade Unions, LO, opposed it – despite the fact that LO had supported national voting rights for resident aliens since 1976. Now, however, LO argued that it would be discriminatory to only give voting rights to Nordic immigrants, while excluding non-Nordic immigrants (making up a considerable portion of the trade union’s members).⁵⁹

Another argument hinted that something important had happened in the public debate on immigration in Sweden. As mentioned earlier, throughout the 1970s, labour migration from (predominantly) Nordic and European countries was replaced by refugee migration from (mainly) non-European countries. In the early 1980s, Swedish politicians started to express a more negative view on immigration than before, and especially asserting that non-Europeans were culturally and religiously ‘different’ from Swedes compared to other Europeans and thus harder to integrate. At the same time, Sweden saw a rise in right-wing extremism and even neo-Nazi organisations, movements framing refugees as a threat and blaming immigrants for economic recession and criminality.⁶⁰

Some respondents expressed a fear of provoking slumbering anti-immigration opinions. The Swedish Migration Agency [‘Invandrarverket’], for example, had wholeheartedly supported the 1975 reform. But in 1984, the agency argued against further voting rights extensions for resident aliens. It would be unwise, the agency wrote, to implement a reform that could ‘be used in public debate to strengthen anti-immigration

sentiments'.⁶¹ This was a somewhat paradoxical standpoint, as xenophobia was to be counteracted by not giving too many rights to the immigrants actually affected by xenophobia.

The same argument was used in April 1984 by the Social Democratic Minister of Immigration, Anita Gradin, when she announced that the government would not propose any new voting rights legislation after all. A reform, she said, could only be successful if consensus among political parties could be reached. Such consensus was now impossible as a result of opposition from Liberals, Conservatives and the Centre Party. In the minister's worst case scenario, the next election could be turned into an election 'for or against immigrants', which had to be avoided at all costs.⁶² After this announcement, the Social Democrats basically gave up the idea of further voting rights extensions for resident aliens. The issue would never again be a major political issue, despite efforts by the small Left Party and the Green Party ('Miljöpartiet', entering Parliament in 1988).⁶³

Bringing Politics Back into the Analysis

In this essay, I have analysed the political processes that led to the local and regional enfranchisement of resident aliens in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s, a reform passed unanimously by Parliament. I have also analysed how political agents on the left tried to extend these voting rights to national elections and how these efforts failed in the mid-1980s, partly due to rising anti-immigration sentiments and partly due to the now suddenly powerful opposition against such a reform from Liberals, Conservatives and the Centre Party. Relating my findings to international scholarship on the relationship between voting rights and citizenship, I would argue that the case of Sweden enables us to draw three major conclusions.

The first touches upon the question of whether voting rights for resident aliens tend to be enacted by left-wing or right-wing regimes. Previous studies have reached different conclusions. In countries such as, for example, the US and Greece, it is clear that the left has taken such initiatives while the right has opposed them.⁶⁴ However, David C Earnest has found examples of right-wing regimes taking similar initiatives and argued that support versus opposition does not always correlate with ideological positions.⁶⁵ This essay underscores the complexity of the issue. In Sweden, there was a clear left-right divide in the debate on

national voting rights for resident aliens, whereas local and regional voting rights were embraced by Liberals, Conservatives and the Centre Party, as well as by the Social Democrats and the Left Party. Hence, it is not always possible to determine whether the left and the right have been 'for' or 'against' voting rights. Their positions may depend on which kinds of voting rights are actually debated.

The second conclusion concerns the arguments used in favour of and in opposition to voting rights for resident aliens. In Sweden, a wide variety of arguments were used. Some of them take the form of political-philosophical arguments discussed in contemporary scholarly debates. For example, 'all affected' arguments were used in the period around 1976–84, when the left tried to extend voting rights to national elections, while a form of 'membership' argument was used by the right-wing parties opposing such an extension. But these arguments were not always the most important. When voting rights (in local and regional elections) were implemented in the 1970s, theoretical arguments were almost entirely lacking. Instead, instrumental arguments played a much more decisive role.

In fact, local and regional voting rights for resident aliens in Sweden were never introduced mainly in order to extend the limits of *democracy*. Just as in the Dutch case mentioned in the beginning of this essay, they were thought of as a tool in the creation of a new, multicultural Swedish *integration* policy. The act of voting was seen as a way to foster a sense of belonging, or even 'loyalty', to the Swedish society among immigrants. Hence, we should not confuse political-philosophical arguments on voting rights in our own time with the arguments that have actually been used to promote, defend or restrict voting rights in historical situations. Studying the changing relationships between voting rights, immigration and citizenship, we should make sure that 'actual debate and politics are brought back into the analysis'.⁶⁶

The third conclusion concerns the construct of 'the immigrant' as a discursive category. As pointed out by Cristina Escobar and Kate McMillan, how immigrants are perceived by politicians matters. For example, it seems as if immigrant groups depicted as culturally 'similar' to the citizens of a country are more frequently given voting rights than immigrants depicted as 'different'.⁶⁷ This essay proves this point. The case of Sweden resembles that of New Zealand mentioned earlier, as the notion of Nordic immigrants as culturally similar to Swedes, and thus easy to integrate, was important when local and regional voting rights were introduced in the early 1970s. The reform came into being at a time when Nordic, and especially Finnish, immigrants made up

a substantial part of the resident alien population in Sweden. In 1970, 250,000 Finnish-born individuals lived in Sweden, and 'the immigrant' was often thought of as a relatively easily integrated Finn.⁶⁸ This changed after circa 1975, when labour migration was replaced by refugee migration. From then on, 'the immigrant' was more frequently perceived as a non-Nordic individual from far away, allegedly harder to integrate. This discursive change is discernible in the debate on national voting rights in the 1980s, when the new committee (echoing the 'Nordic prerogative' of the previous decades) chose to limit a proposed extension to Nordic resident aliens alone, thus drawing a sharp line between different immigrant groups.

Hence, this essay shows the importance of basing our studies on the relationship between voting rights and citizenship in empirical studies grounded in history and taking the discursive construct of 'the immigrant' into consideration. Only then can we discern the mechanisms, processes and arguments that have actually affected the changing boundaries of the *demos* in the era of modern migration – arguments that do not necessarily resemble the normative, philosophical arguments used by modern scholars engaging in debates on the limits and boundaries of democracy.

Notes

1. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; and Caramani and Grotz, "Beyond Citizenship and Residence?" 800.
2. Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 96 – 107.
3. Hammar, *Democracy and the Nation State*, 13.
4. Benhabib, *The Rights of Others*, 1 – 6.
5. Katz, *Democracy and Elections*, 216.
6. Beckman, *The Frontiers of Democracy*, 63; and Earnest, "The Enfranchisement of Resident Aliens," 863 – 6.
7. Resident aliens in Sweden still have the right to vote in local and regional elections after three years of residence. In 1997, immigrants from EU and Nordic countries were exempted from the three-year rule.
8. See, for example, Beckman, "Citizenship and Voting Rights"; Song, "Democracy and Noncitizen Voting Rights"; Hayduk, *Democracy for All*; López-Guerra, "Should Expatriates Vote?"; and Ziegler, *Voting Rights of Refugees*.
9. Beckman, "Citizenship and Voting Rights," 154; and Song, "Democracy and Noncitizen Voting Rights," 609.
10. Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 59.
11. Rodríguez, "Noncitizen Voting and the Extraconstitutional Construction of the Polity," 31.

12. See, for example, Escobar, "Immigrant Enfranchisement in Latin America"; Jacobs, "Giving Foreigners the Vote"; McMillan, "From 'The Commonwealths Most Dutiful Daughter' to 'Young Multicultural Nation'"; and Triandafyllidou, "Reform, Counter-Reform and the Politics of Citizenship."
13. Escobar, "Immigrant Enfranchisement in Latin America," 930, 942 – 3.
14. Jacobs, "Giving Foreigners the Vote," 128 – 9.
15. McMillan, "From 'The Commonwealths Most Dutiful Daughter' to 'Young Multicultural Nation,'" 124 – 7.
16. Capoccia and Ziblatt, "The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies," 940.
17. Åmark, "Sweden and the Refugees, 1933–45."
18. Byström, "When the State Stepped into the Arena," 617 – 8.
19. Svanberg and Tydén, *Tusen år av invandring*, 328 – 33.
20. Schall, *The Rise and Fall of the Miraculous Welfare Machine*, 87 – 8, 103 – 4.
21. Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 100 – 1.
22. Schall, *The Rise and Fall of the Miraculous Welfare Machine*, 88, 110.
23. Wickström, *The Multicultural Moment*, 162, 309.
24. Borevi, "Sweden: The Flagship of Multiculturalism," 59 – 64; and Rydgren and van der Meiden, "The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism," 444.
25. *Riksdagstrycket*, Proposition no. 1975:26, p. 60.
26. Borevi, "Sweden: The Flagship of Multiculturalism," 40 – 4.
27. Hammar, *Det första invandrarvalet*, 35.
28. Rath, "Voting Rights," 134.
29. Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 83, 104, 200.
30. *Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarepartis 23:e kongress*, Motion no. 131 – 132; *Socialdemokraternas 24:e partikongress*, Motion no. G7; *Socialdemokraternas 25:e partikongress*, Motion no. I5.
31. Wickström, *The Multicultural Moment*, 306.
32. *Riksdagstrycket*, Motion no. 1968 FK:94.
33. *Riksdagstrycket*, Motion no. 1971:227.
34. *SOU 1972:15*, 126.
35. Svanberg and Tydén, *Tusen år av invandring*, 330 – 8.
36. Hammar, *Det första invandrarvalet*, 34.
37. *NOU 1975:4*, 92.
38. *Socialdemokraternas 26:e partikongress*, Minutes vol. 3, 896.
39. "Kommunal rösträtt för invandrare", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30 April 1974.
40. *SOU 1975:15*, 20.
41. *Ibid.*, 100 – 103.
42. Letters from LO, the Metal Workers' Trade Union and the Municipal Worker's Trade Union (Riksarkivet, *Kommundepartementet*, Regeringsakt no. 34, 23 October 1975).
43. Memorandum, 5 October 1974 (Riksarkivet, YK2875, vol. 1).
44. *Riksdagstrycket*, Proposition no. 1975/76:23.
45. Letters from the Seamen's Trade Union and the Conservative Party's Youth Association (Riksarkivet, *Kommundepartementet*, Regeringsakt no. 34, 23 October 1975).
46. Wickström, *The Multicultural Moment*, 157.

47. Letters from the Association of Greek immigrants and the Association of Swedish-Speaking Finnish Citizens (Riksarkivet, *Kommundepartementet*, Regeringsakt no. 34, 23 October 1975).
48. Brubaker, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism," 32 – 4.
49. *Riksdagstrycket*, Minutes no. 1975/76:39, 131, 141.
50. *Voter Turnout in the General Elections 2018*, 36.
51. *Riksdagstrycket*, Motion no. 1976/77:586.
52. *Landsorganisationen i Sverige: 19:e ordinarie kongress*, 810, 814.
53. Beckman, *The Frontiers of Democracy*, 76; Lafleur, "The Enfranchisement of Citizens Abroad," 841 – 3.
54. See, for instance, *Riksdagstrycket*, Proposition no. 1976/77:75; Motion no. 1976/77:1390.
55. For a discussion on this principle, see Beckman, "Citizenship and Voting Rights," 154; and Ziegler, *Voting Rights of Refugees*, 121 – 2.
56. A similar argument is made in López-Guerra, "Should Expatriates Vote?" 228.
57. *SOU 1984:11*, 26.
58. *Ibid.*, 174.
59. Letters from the Association of Swedes Living Abroad and LO (Riksarkivet, *Justitiedepartementet*, Regeringsakt 8 October 1987).
60. Johansson, "Beyond Swedish Self-Image," 274 – 6.
61. Letter from the Swedish Migration Agency (Riksarkivet, *Justitiedepartementet*, Regeringsakt 8 October 1987).
62. "Rösträttsfrågan nedlagd", *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 April 1984.
63. Ericsson, "Partierna, rösträtten och medborgarskapet," 142 – 5.
64. Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 83, 200; and Triandafyllidou, "Reform, Counter-Reform and the Politics of Citizenship," 57.
65. Earnest, "Neither Citizen nor Stranger," 268 – 72.
66. Jacobs, "Giving Foreigners the Vote," 125.
67. Escobar, "Immigrant Enfranchisement in Latin America," 942 – 3; McMillan, "From 'The Commonwealths Most Dutiful Daughter' to 'Young Multicultural Nation'," 124 – 7.
68. Wickström, *The Multicultural Moment*, 44, 227. This is not to say that racism or xenophobia directed against Finns did not exist in Sweden during this time. For a discussion on this topic, see Laskar, "Den finska rasen och görandet av svenskar," 93.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council [VR 2017-00778].

Bibliography

- Åmark, K. "Sweden and the Refugees, 1933–45." In *Reaching a State of Hope: Refugees, Immigrants and the Swedish Welfare State, 1930–2000*, edited by M. Byström and P. Frohnert, 39–53. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2013.
- Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Beckman, L. "Citizenship and Voting Rights: Should Resident Aliens Vote?" *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 2 (2006): 153–165. doi:[10.1080/13621020600633093](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020600633093).
- Beckman, L. *The Frontiers of Democracy: The Right to Vote and Its Limits*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Benhabib, S. *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Borevi, K. "Sweden: The Flagship of Multiculturalism." In *Immigration Policy and the Scandinavian Welfare State, 1945–2010*, edited by G. Brochmann and A. Haglund, 25–96. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Brubaker, R. "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 21–42. doi:[10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115916](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115916).
- Byström, M. "When the State Stepped into the Arena: The Swedish Welfare State, Refugees and Immigrants 1930s–50s." *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 3 (2014): 599–621. doi:[10.1177/0022009414528259](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009414528259).
- Capoccia, G., and D. Ziblatt. "The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond." *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 8–9 (2010): 931–968. doi:[10.1177/0010414010370431](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010370431).
- Caramani, D., and F. Grotz. "Beyond Citizenship and Residence? Exploring the Extension of Voting Rights in the Age of Globalization." *Democratization* 22, no. 5 (2015): 799–819. doi:[10.1080/13510347.2014.981668](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.981668).
- Castles, S., and M. J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. New York: Guilford Press, 2009.
- Earnest, D. C. "Neither Citizen nor Stranger: Why States Enfranchise Resident Aliens." *World Politics* 58, no. 2 (2006): 242–275. doi:[10.1353/wp.2006.0024](https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0024).
- Earnest, D. C. "The Enfranchisement of Resident Aliens: Variations and Explanations." *Democratization* 22, no. 5 (2015): 861–883. doi:[10.1080/13510347.2014.979162](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.979162).
- Ericsson, M. "Partierna, Rösträtten Och Medborgarskapet: Riksdagsdebatten Om Utlandssvenskars Och Ickemedborgares Rösträtt Efter År 1921." *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 122, no. 2 (2020): 133–160.
- Escobar, C. "Immigrant Enfranchisement in Latin America: From Strongmen to Universal Citizenship." *Democratization* 22, no. 5 (2015): 927–950. doi:[10.1080/13510347.2014.979322](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.979322).
- Hammar, T. *Det Första Invandrarvalet*. Stockholm: Liber, 1979.
- Hammar, T. *Democracy and the Nation State: Aliens, Denizens and Citizens in a World of International Migration*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1990.
- Hayduk, R. *Democracy for All: Restoring Immigrant Voting Rights in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Jacobs, D. "Giving Foreigners the Vote: Ethnocentrism in Dutch and Belgian Political Debates." In *Comparative Perspectives on Racism*, edited by J. Ter Val and M. Verkuyten, 117–137. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- Johansson, C. "Beyond Swedish Self-Image: Discourses on Migration and the Nation State in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Reaching a State of Hope: Refugees, Immigrants and the Swedish Welfare State, 1930–2000*, edited by M. Byström and P. Frohnert, 270–288. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2013.
- Katz, R. *Democracy and Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Lafleur, J.-M. "The Enfranchisement of Citizens Abroad: Variations and Explanations." *Democratization* 22, no. 5 (2015): 840–860. doi:[10.1080/13510347.2014.979163](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.979163).
- Laskar, P. "Den Finska Rasen Och Görandet Av Svenskar." In *Ras Och Vithet: Svenska Rasrelationer Igår Och Idag*, edited by T. Hübinette, 71–95. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017.
- López-Guerra, C. "Should Expatriates Vote?" *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 216–234. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00221.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00221.x).
- McMillan, K. "From 'The Commonwealth's Most Dutiful Daughter' to 'Young Multicultural Nation': Non-Citizen Voting Rights and New Zealand's Citizenship Regime." In *Citizenship in Transnational Perspective: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand*, edited by J. Mann, 117–138. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Rath, J. "Voting Rights." In *The Political Rights of Migrant Workers in Western Europe*, edited by Z. Layton-Henry, 127–153. London: Sage, 1990.
- Rodríguez, C. M. "Noncitizen Voting and the Extraconstitutional Construction of the Polity." *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 8, no. 1 (2010): 30–49.
- Rydgren, J., and S. van der Meiden. "The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism." *European Political Science* 18, no. 3 (2019): 439–455. doi:[10.1057/s41304-018-0159-6](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0159-6).
- Schall, C. E. *The Rise and Fall of the Miraculous Welfare Machine: Immigration and Social Democracy in Twentieth-Century Sweden*. Ithaca: IRL Press, 2016.
- Song, S. "Democracy and Noncitizen Voting Rights." *Citizenship Studies* 13, no. 6 (2009): 608–620. doi:[10.1080/13621020903309607](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020903309607).
- Svanberg, I., and M. Tydén. *Tusen År Av Invandring: En Svensk Kulturhistoria*. Stockholm: Dialogos, 2005.
- Triandafyllidou, A. "Reform, Counter-Reform and the Politics of Citizenship: Local Voting Rights for Third-Country Nationals in Greece." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 16, no. 1 (2015): 43–60. doi:[10.1007/s12134-014-0343-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0343-7).
- Voter Turnout in the General Elections 2018*. Örebro: Statistics Sweden, Department of Population and Welfare Statistics, 2019.
- Wickström, M. *The Multicultural Moment: The History of the Idea and Politics of Multiculturalism in Sweden in a Comparative, Transnational and Biographical Context, 1964–1975*. Turku: Åbo Akademi University, 2015.
- Ziegler, R. *Voting Rights of Refugees*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Printed sources

- Landsorganisationen i Sverige: 19:e ordinarie kongress*. Stockholm: LO, 1976.
- NOU 1975:4. Nordisk kommunal rösträtt och valbarhet*. Oslo: Nordiska rådet, 1975.

Riksdagstrycket ('Printed Records of the Swedish Parliament'). Stockholm: Riksdagen, 1968–.

Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarepartis 23:e kongress. Stockholm: Socialdemokraterna, 1968.

Socialdemokraternas 24:e partikongress. Stockholm: Socialdemokraterna, 1969.

Socialdemokraternas 25:e partikongress. Stockholm: Socialdemokraterna, 1972.

Socialdemokraternas 26:e partikongress. Stockholm: Socialdemokraterna, 1975.

SOU 1972:15. Ny regeringsform, ny riksdagsordning. Stockholm: Justitiedepartementet, 1972.

SOU 1975:15. Kommunal rösträtt för invandrare. Stockholm: Kommundepartementet, 1975.

SOU 1984:11. Rösträtt och medborgarskap: Invandrades och utlandssvenskars rösträtt. Stockholm: Liber, 1984.

Newspapers

Dagens Nyheter.

Svenska Dagbladet.

Archives

Riksarkivet (National Archives of Sweden), Stockholm:

Justitiedepartementet

Kommundepartementet

Rösträttsutredningen (YK2875)