

STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE TRADITIONAL SWEDISH WELFARE STATE 1986–2019¹

LENNART NILSSON

Sammanfattning

Den svenska välfärden är starkt förankrad hos den svenska allmänheten. Efter år av omstrukturering och marknadsanpassning har svenskarnas inställningen till privatisering blivit allt mer negativ. Det gäller inte minst i frågan om ökad privatisering av skola, vård och omsorg. Ideologisk identitet och partisympati är, inte helt oväntat, viktiga förklaringsfaktorer till skillnader i synen på privatisering. Samtidigt finns det inte bland några partiers sympatisörer stöd för att tillåta vinstutdelning i välfärdsbolag. Men trots en relativ enighet i befolkningen om att inte tillåta vinstutdelning, har tidigare studier visat att många partier står långt ifrån sina väljare i denna fråga. Det gäller framför allt de liberala och konservativa partierna, en skillnad som givet resultatet i 2019 års SOM-undersökning sannolikt har ökat.

Welfare states have many nation-specific characteristics and they are classified in several different ways, e.g. in terms of ideal types, characteristics of systems in specific countries, or classifications of countries/systems based on comparative statistical analyses. Classifying countries is complicated, primarily because welfare programs include both transfer payments and service production, areas with many different components. Despite these difficulties, the final groupings are strikingly consistent, and the Nordic countries distinguish themselves with general welfare policies and a strong welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Johansson, Nilsson & Strömberg, 2001; Lindbom, 2011; Svallfors, 2016).

Welfare rests on three spheres: the family, the market, and the government. Responsibility is distributed differently in welfare systems, the goal is to provide citizens security and service (Esping-Andersen, 2002, 2009). What characterizes the welfare state is the central role played by the public sector in providing social security for the population. In recent decades, substantial changes have occurred in the Swedish welfare state toward increased marketization.

In the 1980s the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in Great Britain and the United States, implemented neo-liberal reforms strengthening market forces and reducing public sector influence with privatizations and tax reductions. A comparative study of Sweden, Japan, and the United States, found that globalization *per se* had not caused the changes in welfare systems in the respective countries, but that internal factors had played a decisive role (Pierre, 2013). However, as consequence of the economic globalization, the regional level has become more

important in coordinating the public and the private sectors in the field of economic development (Tsuchida, 2011). In Sweden, the restructuring of the welfare state started in the beginning of the 1980s and the deep economic crisis around 1990 created a breeding ground for far-reaching changes inspired by neo-liberal ideas. Earlier freedom of choice within the public sector, program budgeting, and other experiments had been carried out by social democratic governments but now fundamental changes of the Swedish welfare state were implemented (Therborn, 2018).

During the Center/Right government 1991–1994, the public sector was reduced by tax cuts and privatizations with commercial actors providing tax-funded healthcare, schools, elderly care, and childcare. The municipalities and the county councils had been responsible for almost all the publicly financed services but now dramatic changes took place. Two decades later, in 2015, 42 percent of the primary care clinics were privately owned (in the Stockholm region 65 percent). The development is similar but slower for education and social care (Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019). While the for-profit companies have expanded over the years, similar expansion has not occurred for non-profit actors (Sandberg, 2014). Controversial public private partnerships have been introduced (Sundström, 2018, 2019) and the social insurance systems have changed concerning pensions, unemployment benefits, and health insurances (Oskarson, 2013; Lindbom, 2016).

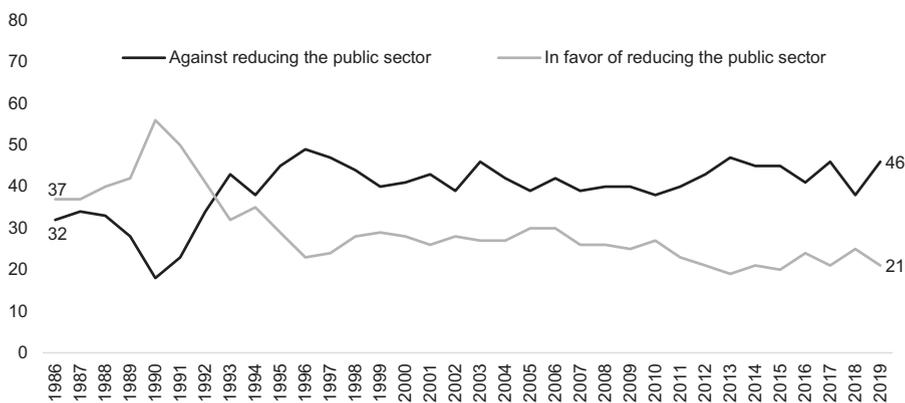
Analyzing different aspects of the restructuring of the Swedish welfare state over time is of central importance, and the national SOM survey offers opportunities to study developments in public opinion. In this chapter, public attitudes to the Swedish welfare state will be analysed in three respects: the size of the public sector, taxes, and privatizations. When analyzing attitudes to the welfare state focus is on the role of the voter and the long-term trends during changing economic and political situations. A core problem is the balance between the public sector and the market and the role of pro-profit and non-profit organizations in the production of publicly financed services. Therefore, the attitudes to profits in the welfare sector will also be analysed. The time period in focus is 1986–2019, with particular focus on previous years.

Maintain or reduce the size of the public sector?

Until 1988, the opinion on size of the public sector was relatively stable in the population with about as many wishing to maintain it as wishing to reduce it. However, in the late 1980s, support was reduced and during the 1990s economic crisis, three times as many were in favor of reducing it as were opposed to such a measure (see Figure 1). Developments in Eastern Europe, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, were also important factors underlying the dramatic opinion change in 1990, as was the right-wing wave sweeping through the Anglo-Saxon countries under Thatcher and Reagan – a wave that reached Sweden at a relatively late stage (Hadenius & Nilsson, 1991).

After these developments followed a break in the trend; in 1993, the year in which the public sector financial deficit was at its greatest, those who opposed making further public sector reductions for the first time had an advantage over those who advocated it (Figure 1). During the following years, support for the public sector increased so that, in 1996, there was a deep rift between those who wished to preserve the public sector and those who wanted to reduce it. With improvements in the Swedish economy, the difference decreased continuously until 1999. During the subsequent ten years, public opinion remained essentially stable with a clear majority opposing reducing the public sector, although there were small fluctuations from year to year. After 2010, support for the public sector increased and twice as many opposed reducing it compared to those who advocated such a measure (Bendz, 2014). In the election year 2018, the support decreased but in 2019 it increased again to the same level as two years earlier.

Figure 1 Attitudes to the public sector in Sweden, 1986–2019 (percent)



Comment: The question was worded: “What is your opinion on following proposals? – Reduce the public sector” and the given response set was “Very good proposal”, “Fairly good proposal”, “Neither good nor bad proposal”, “Fairly bad proposal”, and “Very bad proposal”. Respondents who did not express an opinion was coded as “No opinion”. Number of respondents in 2019 was 1 612.

Source: The National SOM Survey 1986–2019.

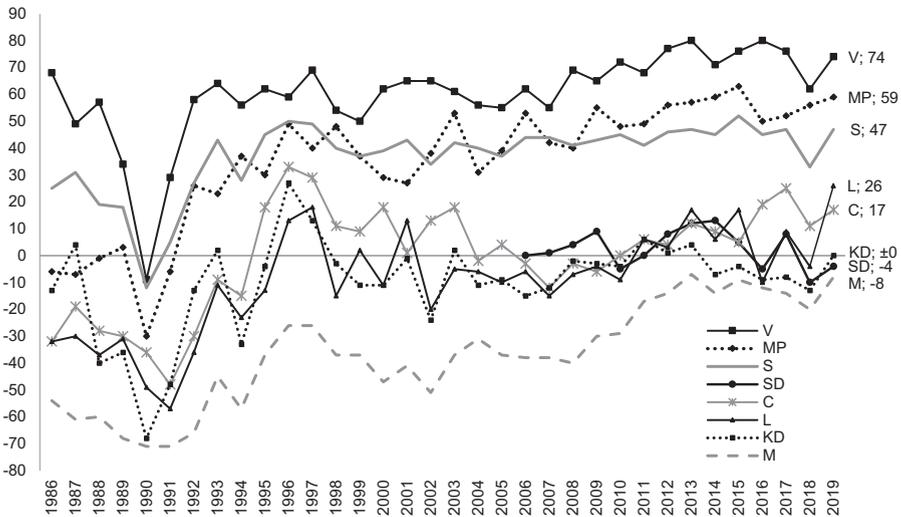
This is an important left-right issue, and it is no surpris to find that there are considerable differences between the positions taken by sympathizers of different political parties, even though it varies over time. Left Party sympathizers have always had the most positive attitude toward preserving the size of the public sector, whereas Conservatives have had the most negative attitude.

During the period 1986–1988, opinions were essentially stable within the different parties as well. Subsequently, the positions in all parties shifted to attitudes

that were more negative. In 1990, dramatic changes resulted in a negative opinion balance for all parties (see Figure 2). In particular, sympathizers of left-wing parties, i.e., those who had the most positive attitudes toward the public sector, had come nearer the negative positions of the Conservative/Liberal voters.

After 1990, attitudes to the public sector again became more positive. Up until 1996/97, sympathizers of all parties except from the Conservative Party thought it was a bad idea to reduce the public sector. The changes were particularly significant among Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Center partisans. Later on, the opposition against reduction decreased somewhat, only to increase again at the turn of the millennium, when Left Party sympathizers shifted further to the left and Conservatives further to the right, thus resulting in an increased polarization.

Figure 2 Support for the public sector among party sympathizers, 1986–2019 (balance of opinion)



Comment: For the wording of question and given response set, see Figure 1. Balance of opinion is the proportion of 'bad proposal' minus the proportion of 'good proposal' responses and runs from +100 (all answering bad proposal) to -100 (all answering good proposal). Parties and abbreviations: Left party (V), Social Democratic Party (S), Green Party (G), Center Party (C), Liberal Party (L), Christian Democrats (KD), Conservative Party (M), and the Swedish Democrats (SD). Minimum number of respondents in 2019 was 66 (Liberal Party)

Source: The National SOM Survey 1986–2019.

In recent years, a pattern has emerged where Left Party sympathizers strongly oppose against reducing the public sector. Among Green Party and Social Democratic sympathizers, there is a preponderance of opinion for preserving the size of the

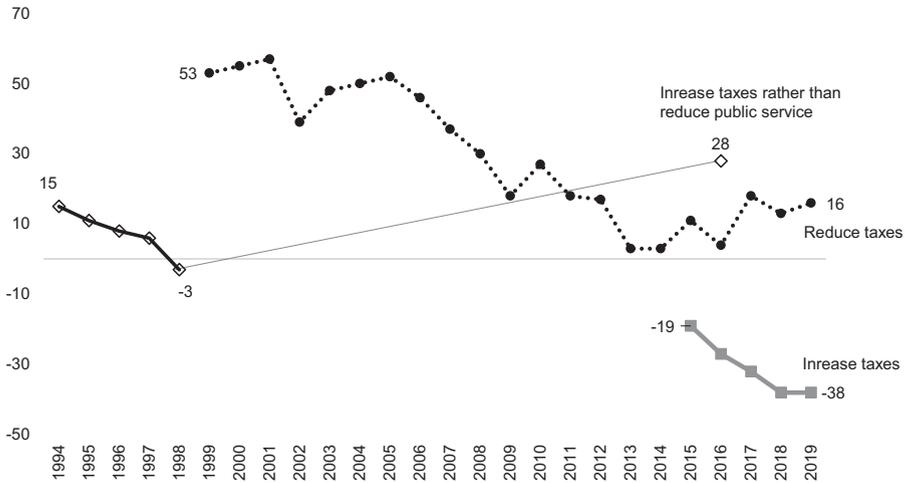
public sector; sympathizers with the respective parties are close to one another on this issue. Since 1994, Green Party sympathizers have been somewhat to the left of Social Democrat sympathizers during election years; recently, this has been the case every year. For several years, the Center Party, the Liberal Party, and the Christian Democrats was a group, in which the proportion of those who advocated cuts was essentially equal to the proportion wishing to maintain the present size. In recent years, Center Party sympathizers have become more negative toward a reduction while Christian Democrat sympathizers have come closer to the Moderate Party. In this left-right issue, the Swedish Democrats have joined the conservative/liberal parties. Conservatives have continuously advocated making cuts of the public sector, but support for this decreased after 2008. In the election year 2018 in the bourgeois parties, those in favor of a reduction were the most numerous except the Center party sympathizers.

There are limited differences between socio-economic groups in the attitudes to reducing the public sector. There are small differences between age groups and educational levels. Men are more positive than women are. Differences are relatively small even with regard to professional sector but people in the private sector are somewhat more positive to cut down and entrepreneurs have more positive attitudes to a reduction of the public sector than blue and white-collar workers. Place of residence, urban or rural, are also of minor importance in this respect.

Public opinion on taxes and services

At all times and in all countries, people have complained about taxes. Though, in welfare states with high levels of universal services and extensive transfer payments to households, the willingness to pay taxes have been high (Peters, 1991; Rothstein, 2016). Studies from late 1960s revealed that the majority of Swedes considered taxes too high even in relation to public benefits, whereas studies from the 1980s and 1990s, showed that the majority felt taxes were reasonable in relation to benefits (Vogel, 1970; Åberg, 1993). Results from the 1986–2010 Swedish Welfare State Surveys (SWS) showed a high collective and individual preparedness to pay for welfare measures (Svallfors, 2013, 2016).

Questions about taxes have been included in the SOM survey since 1994 (see Figure 3). During the 1994 election year, with budget deficits and increasing national debt, there was a greater will to *increase taxes rather than reduce public services*. However, with the improved economic situation, support for tax increases transformed into slight opposition to increase taxes in relation to public services four years later. The question about increased taxes in relation to public services has been posed five times, and each time the preponderance of opinion has been positive.

Figure 3 Attitudes to taxes, 1994–2019 (balance of opinion)

Comments: The question was worded: “What is your opinion on following proposals?” followed by the proposals presented above. The given response set was “Very good proposal”, “Fairly good proposal”, “Neither good nor bad proposal”, “Fairly bad proposal”, and “Very bad proposal”. Balance of opinion refers to the proportion of “good proposal” minus the proportion of “bad proposal” responses and runs from +100 to -100. Respondents who did not express an opinion was coded as “No opinion”. Number of respondents in 2019 was 1 709.

Source: The National SOM Survey 1994–2019.

In early 2000s, a majority of the Swedish public advocated tax cuts. Then the preponderance of opinion favoring a reduction gradually decreased after 2005, and in 2013 the proportion who wanted to reduce taxes was record low. The share of respondents who were opposed to a tax cut was nearly the same as those who advocated one. However, in 2017, national support for a tax reduction increased again. Since 2015, the SOM survey included a proposal to raise taxes. A majority has been against this proposal and the opinion has become even stronger over the past years.

The Swedish public has made these judgments against the background of far-reaching tax cuts (cf. Bendz, 2014). Since 2009, ‘*reducing taxes*’ has been advocated by fewer than those who wish to ‘*increase taxes rather than reduce services*’ (see Table 1). The latter tax proposal has enjoyed support from all parties, but in 2016 among Conservative and Christian Democratic sympathizers there was a small preponderance in favor of tax reductions even if services is reduced. However, issues of lowering or raising taxes clearly discriminate between the political parties.

Table 1 *Attitudes to taxes among party sympathizers, 2016 and 2019 (balance of opinion)*

	V	S	MP	C	L	KD	M	SD
Reduce taxes (2019)	-41	-7	-41	+8	+22	+40	+63	+58
Increase taxes (2019)	+32	-10	+5	-38	-45	-55	-78	-70
Increase taxes rather than reduce public services (2016)	+69	+62	+53	+13	+3	-5	-4	+9

Comment: For response alternatives, see Figure 1. For party abbreviations, see Figure 2. Balance of opinion refers to the proportion of “good proposal” minus the proportion of “bad proposal” responses and runs from +100 to -100. Minimum number of respondents in 2019 was 74 (Liberal Party).

Source: The National SOM Survey 2016 and 2019.

Sympathizers of the Conservative Party, Christ Democrats, and Sweden Democrats (M, KD, SD) are clearly in favor of lowering taxes in 2019, whereas sympathizers with the Left and Green Parties (V and MP) oppose tax cuts (see Table 1). Left Party sympathizers are the only ones in favor of increasing taxes. Sympathizers of the Conservative block strongly oppose such a change. Green Party sympathizers are against reduced taxes, but neither support nor oppose an increase. For sympathizers of Center Party the ratio is opposite.

The taxes is a classic left–right issue and there are only limited differences found in attitudes between socio-economic groups. Women are less inclined to reduce taxes, as are people with higher education and those working for local government, while entrepreneurs are more positive. The entrepreneurs are also more negative towards increased taxes as people working in the private sector. Those living in the countryside like those with lower education are more negative towards higher taxes.

There is a strong link between attitudes toward the public sector, on the one hand, and toward taxes, on the other. Those who wish to reduce the size of the public sector are also more inclined to reduce taxes and conversely. The public sector and taxes constitute central issues in the political debate and ideology and sympathy with political parties largely structures the opinions. Likewise, taxes have also been important issues for policymaking bodies and in the political parties’ internal discussions. In an international perspective, taxes are high in Sweden but the tax structure with no taxes gifts and inheritance are favorable for more wealthy people, which is an important factor explaining wealth cleavage which have increased dramatically in Sweden and more than in other Nordic countries. Income distribution has also become more unequal (Therborn, 2018).

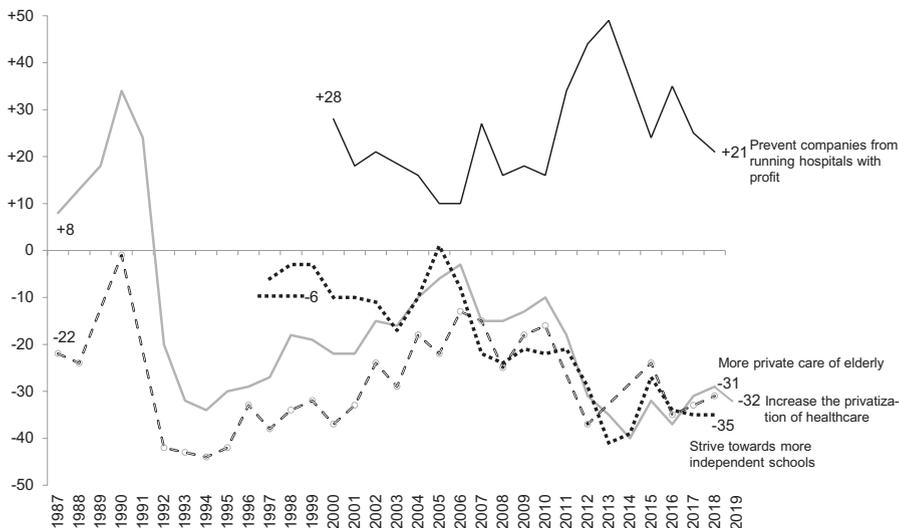
Public opinion on privatization

There is essentially two reasons to advocate privatization as a political strategy in welfare politics: to reduce costs/increase efficiency and to offer individualized options and greater freedom of choice (Esping-Andersen, 1996, 2002). The primary arguments against privatization are the risk that it may lead to more inequality and segregation, and that democratic control may decrease (Bendz, 2011; Kastberg, 2010). *The Freedom of Choice Act* (SFS 2008:962) regulates what is to apply when procurement agencies expose services to competition by allowing users to select among providers in a free choice system. New Public Management with business perspectives also in the public sector has expanded in Sweden and neo-liberal public-private-partnership projects have been implemented (Therborn, 2018; Sundström, 2018, 2019). There are two main dimensions of privatization production and financing. Here focus is on the responsibility for production since the responsibility for financing – public or private – has been discussed in relation to taxes.

The SOM survey respondents were asked about their opinions on privatization in the sense of a transition to a greater proportion of private production. Two proposals concern a shift to more private health care and independent schools but not necessarily a transition to a primarily non-public model (see Figure 4). The remaining two questions concern allowing private elderly care and prevent companies from running hospitals with profits. The shift in attitudes toward privatization follows the same basic pattern as for attitudes toward the public sector as a whole. Opposition to privatization decreased during the period 1988–1990. In 1990, which was an exceptional year there was clear support for privatizations within healthcare, whereas regarding elderly care, just as many were in favor of privatization as were against it. However, during the economic crisis of the early 1990s, public support for private alternatives decreased considerably. In all areas, more were negative towards further privatizations, and this shift was particularly marked in healthcare. During the period 1993–2006, opposition to privatization within healthcare and elderly care diminished.

After 2006, there was a change in public opinion and opposition to privatization in these areas increased again, particularly after 2010, culminating in record low support for privatization in 2013. However, even after that year, public opinion has been negative with regard to all areas and the opinion is polarized. There was a negative feedback on the increased privatization and the thermostat changed (Bendz, 2014).

Figure 4 Attitudes to privatization of public services, 1987–2019 (balance of opinion)



Comment: Response alternatives were: “Very good proposal”, “Fairly good proposal”, “Neither good nor bad proposal”, “Fairly bad proposal”, and “Very bad proposal”. Balance of opinion refers to the proportion of “good proposal” minus the proportion of “bad proposal” responses and runs from +100 to -100.

Source: The National SOM Survey 1994–2019.

In the spring of 2007, the Parliament voted to repeal “the stop law against private hospitals” (Government Bill, 2006/07:52). At the same time, public support for such a law increased; the past few years have seen a clear preponderance of opinion in favor of not allowing for-profit hospital care. Concerning this issue, there has been lack of agreement between voters and elected representatives, on both the national and the regional level (Karlsson, 2013). Attitudes toward private elderly care have been consistently negative, but gradually less so up to 2006, after which attitudes again become clearly negative (see Figure 4). Furthermore, support for independent schools have too gradually decreased.

The overall effects of the considerable fluctuations in public opinion on privatization are also very clear if we look at political party sympathy. The national survey reveal that during 1987–1999, the difference in attitudes regarding the areas healthcare, education and social care between sympathizers with the Red and Green vs. the other parties was cut almost in half, the reduced discrepancy resulting from both left- and right-wing party sympathizers moving toward the middle (see Table 2).

Table 2 *Proposals for privatization and party sympathy, 2018 and 2019 (balance of opinion)*

	V	S	MP	C	L	KD	M	SD
Increase privatization of healthcare (2019)	-87	-65	-59	-25	-1	-8	+17	-15
Prevent companies from running hospitals with profit (2018)	+85	+54	+51	-16	-2	-9	-27	+12
Let private companies assume responsibility for elderly care (2018)	-78	-69	-58	-11	±0	±0	+10	-17

Comment: Response alternatives were: “Very good proposal”, “Fairly good proposal”, “Neither good nor bad proposal”, “Fairly bad proposal”, and “Very bad proposal”. Balance of opinion is the proportion of “good proposal” minus the proportion of “bad proposal” responses and runs from +100 to -100. Respondents who did not express an opinion was coded as “No opinion”. For party abbreviations, see Figure 2. Minimum number of respondents in 2019 was 70 (Liberal Party).

Source: The National SOM Survey 2018 and 2019.

At the turn of the millennium, opinions polarized, with the Conservatives shifting to the right on all issues and the Left Party sympathizers moving to the left. Less uniform changes occurred for the remaining parties. Regarding healthcare and elderly care, there was considerable consensus among Social Democrats, Green Party, and Left Party sympathizers, who opposed privatizations in these areas and supporting a law to stop pro-profit enterprises from running hospitals. Then Conservative/Liberal party sympathizers clearly moved to the left. This was particularly apparent among Center Party sympathizers. Conservatives have been least negative to privatization initiatives and was in 2018 the only party where there was a preponderance in favor of private elderly care (see Table 2). However, when comparing the outcome of attitudes to increased privatization of healthcare some significant change between 2018 and 2019 can be seen. In 2018, both Christian Democratic and Conservative sympathizers were in favor of more private health-care (+21 and +19). A year later, Conservative sympathizers were the only ones still in support for privatization of healthcare (+17), since sympathizers of Christian Democrats suddenly stressed more of hesitation (-8).

The opposition against reducing the public sector through privatization is strong among sympathizers to the red and green parties (V, S, MP, and C). Considering socio-economic groups, there are rather limited differences. Young respondents are generally more uncertain and their balance of opinion is lower. People working in the private sector, white-collar workers, and entrepreneurs, are less negative towards private alternatives and it is only within these groups we can find small preponderance for privatizations. People working within the public sector are on the other hand generally more negative towards privatizations.

Making profits on welfare services has been a highly controversial political issue with a wide span between parties supporting a ban of profit distribution in tax-funded healthcare, etcetera, and parties opposing to such a ban (Nilsson, 2020). Focusing on respondents in the SOM survey, few differences are found between socio-economic groups regarding attitudes to tax-funded healthcare, education, and social care (cf. Nilsson, 2018). Differences are small even with regard to place of residence, urban and rural. Stockholm County do not deviate in this regard, even though privatization has gone further in the City of Stockholm and the Stockholm County than in other parts of the country (cf. Sundström, 2018). However, people working in the private sector appear less positive than other groups.

Sympathizers of the Left Party, Social Democrats, and the Green Party, are clearly in favor of a ban toward profits in the welfare sector in 2019 (see Table 3). Even those who sympathize with Sweden Democrats, the Liberal Party, and the Center Party favor such ban and for the latter group (C) support for regulations has increased between 2018 and 2019 (+13 vs. +25). Only Conservative sympathizers have a negative balance since those rejecting a ban are slightly more than those in favor.

Table 3 *Party sympathies and the proposal that Profit distribution shall not be allowed in tax-funded healthcare, education and social care, 2019 (balance of opinion)*

	V	S	MP	C	L	KD	M	SD	Total
2019	+82	+55	+56	+25	+22	+12	-4	+31	+35

Comment: Response alternatives were “Very good proposal”, “Fairly good proposal”, “Neither good nor bad proposal”, “Fairly bad proposal”, and “Very bad proposal”. Balance of opinion is the proportion of “good proposal” minus the proportion of “bad proposal” responses and runs from +100 to -100. Respondents who did not express an opinion was coded as “No opinion”. For party abbreviations, see Figure 2. Minimum number of respondents in 2019 was 78 (Liberal Party).

Source: The National SOM Survey 2019.

Surveys of voters and their elected representatives show similarities as well as differences in how sympathizers and representative of specific parties relate to profits within the welfare sector. For example, agreement was considerable between red-green voters and the representatives they elect, but not between liberal-conservative voters and their representatives (Nilsson, 2020). Although welfare issues have been important in the elections, parliamentarians representing the Center Party, Liberals, Christian Democrats, and the Conservative Party have had opinions quite different from those of their sympathizers. It points to an asymmetrical representation concerning the party sympathizers and elected members of the Parliament: The Red-Green parliamentarians reflected the opinions of their voters quite well, whereas the elected representatives of the former Alliance parties (C, L, KD, and

M) were very far from their sympathizers when it came to the issue of making profits on welfare services (Nilsson, 2020).

In the new political landscape after the Swedish election 2018, the Liberal parties (L and C) cooperate with the Social Democrats and Green Party (S and MP) in government and the former Alliance does not exist any longer. On welfare issues, the Liberal parties are more in agreement with the Red and Green parties than Conservative parties (M and KD) are. As sympathizers of these parties have become more sceptic to profits in welfare in 2019, the asymmetrical representation still stands.

The Swedish public on the restructuring and marketization of the welfare state

There is strong support for the traditional welfare state among the Swedes and in most socio economic groups. Support for the public sector is quite considerable, and willingness to lower taxes has seen a decreasing long-term trend. At the same time, criticism of privatization has grown through the years. This applies to the proposal to promote more private healthcare centers and schools as well as to attitudes toward private elderly care and hospitals. These attitudes are marked by ideology and party sympathy with increased polarization between the parties. However, the legitimacy of the welfare system is not only dependent of the support of the people, but also on the capacity of the system to fulfill the political commitments. When citizens evaluate public services, users are most satisfied and those without direct or indirect contact with the services are less satisfied (Nilsson & Westerståhl, 1999a, 1999b).

Several measures confirm the wide support for limiting profits and for banning dividends within tax-funded healthcare, education, and social care. At the same time, two thirds of the public perceive freedom of choice as important. However, even most supporters of freedom of choice favor a ban of profits. This also applies to groups of people who themselves, or whose next of kin, use private alternatives. The Swedish public does not primarily want to see pro-profit organizations as alternatives to municipalities and counties/regions; they would prefer non-profit, idea-driven organizations.

How could these profound changes of the welfare system take place in Sweden with strong public support for the traditional welfare state? In their analyse of the strategies of business organizations in the welfare sector, Svallfors and Tyllström (2018) reveal that strategic actors consider influencing the perceptions, organizing actors, and facilitating communication as most important. Representatives of business think tanks and lobbying groups also frequently publish articles on editorial pages in the Liberal and Conservative media. These strategies have been very successful in promoting the pro-profit welfare policies although widespread negative attitudes in the society. It has been argued that that difference on the question of profits in welfare has uncovered a problem in democracy and created a business corporative system (Widmalm, 2017).

The changes in welfare policies have distanced Sweden from other Nordic countries in various respects (Kroll & Blomberg, 2013). This concerns the increase of pro-profit enterprises' responsibility for welfare services, whereas the operations of idea-driven non-profit organizations remain very limited. It also concerns venture capital enterprises' activities within the welfare sector. The recent new directions in welfare policy in Sweden mean that, at present, the public sector plays a less central role in the Swedish welfare state than it did previously and greater importance is attached to the market although strong public support for the traditional welfare state.

Note

- ¹ Delar av texten har publicerats i: Lennart Nilsson (2020). *Strong public support for the traditional Swedish welfare state during restructuring and marketization*. SOM-rapport 2020:40. Göteborg: SOM-institutet vid Göteborgs universitet.

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