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Party Competition and Conflict:
Recent Developments in the Swedish Parliament

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Before I start, I would like to thank Gerry for giving me the opportunity to deliver this talk. Also, I want to express my gratitude to IGS for inviting me to stay here as a Visiting Scholar this academic year. The summer vacation is approaching and I will soon return to Sweden. I am sad about that, since I have enjoyed my stay here at Berkeley in general and particularly in particular.

The topic of my talk today is inter-party competition and conflict in Sweden in recent decades and the nucleus of my argument is simple: Despite increased inter-party competition in the last two decades, political conflict of interest has not increased. Instead, the increased competition among the parties has resulted in increased activity in parliament and lead to a vitalisation of Swedish Politics. In the course of my talk I'm going to present some tentative evidence to my argument and elaborate somewhat on its theoretical implications for the field of comparative politics.
Traditionally, Swedish politics bears the hallmark of peaceful decision-making among political parties and centralised interest organisations both on the political arena and on the labour market. Foreign observers, such as Dunkwart Rustow and Thomas Anton, have been astonished by the matter of factness which Swedish politics is pursued with and the ability to solve political dissensus through negotiations and compromises. The politics of compromise in Sweden infers that the political parties play down their distinct ideologies. A policy consensus in parliament was substituted for profound conflict over the role of the government in society, and the proper boundaries between the public and the private sectors. The literature on the "End of Ideology" took Swedish politics as a typical case. For that reason, Herbert Tingsten and Seymour Martin Lipset picked out Sweden as one of their favourite examples of their thesis.
However, in recent years, a great many students of Swedish politics have claimed that the picture of Sweden as an idyllic democratic spot in the world has been wrecked. The date of the occurrence varies between the observers, but most date it to the early 1980s. The level of conflict in politics has, according to this line of argument, increased. They base the argument on general observations. Only few scholars have actually tried to measure the level of conflict. Anders Sannerstedt and Mats Sjölin have carried out the most ambitious study in that respect. They have analysed the number of minority reports to committee reports in the Riksdag. Their main results are displayed in Figure A in the handout which I have distributed to you.

FIGURE A ABOUT HERE

The figure shows a relatively stable share of committee reports with attached minority reports until the beginning of the 1980s. The level decreased somewhat during the second world war, we faced a strong external threat and Sweden was governed by a broad coalition of all parties except the communists, but indicate otherwise a level around 1/3. In the beginning of the 1980s, however, the share increased dramatically. The share of committee reports with minority reports doubled to a level around 2/3.

Sannerstedt and Sjölin claim that this dramatic increase of minority reports indicates that Swedish politics is more conflictual now than before the 1980s. I dispute that conclusion. They do — as do many Swedish scholars — mix the level of activity with the level of political conflict. I do also disagree with those who claim that this development is a threat to democracy. I think that activity in parliament, including minority reports in the committees, indicates a vitalisation of Swedish politics, not a threat. Let me explain why I have come to that conclusion.
Not so many years ago, Sweden was a society with deep cleavages between the classes, between the haves and the have nots. When the first modern political parties were created at the turn of the century, it was thus not surprising that they became class based and mainly spread on one dimension: the left-right dimension. The party system froze, in Rokkan's terms, in the 1920s, and remained frozen until the 1980s. Swedish economy developed, however, with an astonishing pace and the GNP increased with a record speed. The standard of living increased generally and the differences between the classes decreased gradually as did the hindrances for social and geographic mobility. Figure B Shows how income inequality has decreased and Table A and Table B show how social mobility has increased during the period 1968-1981.

FIGURE B, TABLE A AND TABLE B ABOUT HERE

The tables on social mobility are picked from a study conducted by Robert Erikson. Among his main conclusions were that (1) the women's position has altered from being housewives to being employed; (2) the size of the lowest class (class III in the tables) has decreased while class I has increased; and (3) social mobility has increased (Erikson 1987).

You might say that the change in social mobility is only very little, but I think that the indications in the table underestimate the dramatic change that has in fact taken place. Talking about classes in Sweden might still be relevant, but their relevance has definitely decreased.
A consequence of the reduced importance of classes is that the party identity and class voting has decreased. Studies of the Swedish electorate reveal that party loyal voting is less common today than it was before.

FIGURE C

Figure C shows a sharp decrease of party identifiers and the result has been that voters change party more frequently now. Primarily, they change between the non-socialist parties, but there is also a tendency for changes crossing the block border and for split tickets between two or more parties in the general election which always is held simultaneous for the national regional and local levels.
The decreasing party loyalty has increased inter-party competition in the elections. Before 1970, the elections did not really determine what party should govern. Since the electoral support of the Social Democratic Party was too strong and the opposition too divided, it was no doubt who should govern. Moreover, the election system and the bicameral riksdag was organised so that large parties were favoured and responsiveness to electoral results delayed. The governmental position of the Social Democrats was secure. The situation left the opposition a poor choice of strategy. Gustaf Andersson, a leader of an opposition party once wrote that:

Our conduct toward the government and its majority in the Riksdag can of course have various forms. One way is to sit back and let things take their course. Another is to oppose at every turn just for the sake of opposition. Finally, the third way is to take an active part in dealing with and deciding on the matters in hand to the best of our ability, and on every occasion act as if we had a part in the responsibility for what happens. Obviously we ought to take the last-mentioned course (quoted from Stjernquist 1966:136).

Negotiations between the government and the opposition had the character of being dependent on the "good will" of the government, not of any necessity to form majorities. The Social Democratic Government was prepared to negotiate primarily when the opposition made the approach an was willing to co-operated to improve the Government Bills, but not if the opposition wanted to revise the goals or the intentions of the reforms proposed.
Nonetheless, the Social Democrats chose to co-operate with the opposition on many issues. The Social Democratic governments could usually count on the Communists in their parliamentary base, but were not eager to be dependent on them, especially not during the cold war. Instead of relying on the Communists, the Social Democrats embraced the Agrarians (later the Centre Party) and continued to co-operate with them as they had done since the early thirties when the well-known log-rolling was initiated between the parties. The co-operation was, however, difficult to continue after the Social Democrats had introduced a new pension system including all wage earners. The initiative resulted in a division between the socialist and non-socialist parties. The Riksdag accepted the new pension system in 1957 with the smallest possible support after severe political confrontation.
In the period from about 1970, the strong position of the Social Democratic Party weakened and the competitiveness increased in the elections. The emergence of new issues that did not follow the left-right-dimension led to instability in the party system. An era of uninterrupted Social Democratic hegemony ended (Särlvik 1983:97). A necessary factor for that was that the bourgeois bloc united and could govern together (Møller 1986). Different non-socialist governments were in power 1976-82 and then again from 1991 to 1994. This period has been called the era of bloc politics. Nils Stjernquist claims that a lack of co-operation across the divide between the two blocs characterises this period. In its extreme form, block politics means that "... the parties do not debate matters, they vote on them" (Stjernquist 1987:295).

Of all the governments formed since 1970, only two have deviated from the block pattern.

Table <> and Figure <> summarise the line of argument in this part. Figure <> shows increasing inter-party competition and figure <> shows types of government ruling from <>.

FIGURE <> AND FIGURE <> ABOUT HERE

Table C a R b
Decreased party loyalties together with increased inter-party competition have given way to fractionalisation of the party system. New parties have entered the political scene and been able to gain seats in the Riksdag. To gain mandates, a party must receive at least 4 percent of the votes or at least 12 percent of the votes in one constituency. This threshold was previously enough to prevent new, small parties from gaining seats in the Riksdag, but in the general elections 1986 and again in 1994, the Green party received enough votes to enter the Riksdag. In 1989, two non-socialist parties gained the same achievement. The stable base of the social democrats has, at the same time, deteriorated. As a result, fragmentation of the party system increased. Figure shows Rae's fractionalisation index.

**FIGURE**

 ABOUT HERE
Finally, I will introduce a factor which also contribute to the line of argument: the mass media. The 1970s and 1980s also saw a change in journalism which may have affected the political behaviour. Modern journalists have a more critical approach to politicians than their forerunners and the evaluation of newsworthiness is different. According to Gudmund Hernes, news in modern media-oriented society is regularly simplified, polarized, and wording is incisive (1978). In modern journalism, news evaluation gives priority to conflicts (Westerståhl 1992:122 et passim).
In sum, economic development and increased equality; party realignment and dealignment; increased inter-party competition; and changes in journalism together have created a necessity for the politicians to advertise their positions more distinctly and above all, more loudly. Party leaders do not disagree more on policy issues today than before, to the contrary, but they must certainly say that they do more frequently now. One way of doing that is to submit minority reports in the parliamentary committees. Other ways available in the Riksdag are to ask questions to the ministers during Question Time or to submit Private Member's Bills. Indeed, this is what has happened. Figure 5 shows the number of questions asked 1945-1991/92 and Figure 6 shows the number of Private Member's Bills 1970-1992.

FIGURE 5 AND FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE
Have, then, the differences in policy positions increased between the parties? I believe not, but since the possibilities to measure policy positions objectively is difficult, and we lack good data, we are bound to be uncertain. There is, however, every indication showing that policy differences has reduced. (1) The flank parties in Swedish politics have moved towards the political centre of the left-right party scale. The Conservative Party moved towards the centre during the 1970s in order to mobilise a credible alternative to a Social Democratic government. About the same time, the communists moved in the opposite direction towards the centre. It changed its name and dropped its communist label. It is today a general left party which is mostly distinguished by its resistance to the Swedish membership of the European Union. (2) All parties accept the welfare state overall, but differ still on some minor issues, such as how the welfare state should be most effectively organised. (3) The two main competitors in Swedish politics, the social democrats and the conservatives, struck the most comprehensive bargain ever in economic politics in 1991. Admitadly, they bargained unwillingly, but nonetheless, such co-operation was unherad of until that date. (4) Bargaining between the parties are today pursued on a more equal basis between the parties. The social democrats still hold a dominant position in the coalition game, but it cannot always rely on automatic support from a majority in the Riksdag. Instead, the social democrats have to negotiate with the opposition to form a majority for its bills, and they do. The latest example is the agreement on economic policy with the centre party this spring. Although the government could have passed the bill with the support of varying coalitions, it choose to compromise with one opposition party. Just as it has done during the so called golden days of compromise politics.
This leads me to believe that while inter-party competition has increased, policy differences have not. I think that the decision-making style in Swedish politics is deeply rooted in its political institutions. Swedish politics is to a significant part flavoured by the state bureaucracy. The politicians easily adopt the technocratic approach to politics that Swedish bureaucrats have. One might call Sweden a bureaucracy-state (Ambetsmannastat), and the decision-making style in the bureaucracy, of which the politicians are heavily dependent, has not changed. Dependence and reliance on the state bureaucracy played an important role in the peaceful transition to democracy and to parliamentary government in the beginning of the century; to the creation of the Swedish model in the 1930s; to the management of the increasing welfare state in the 1960s to the 1970s; and I believe that the Swedish bureaucratic style of decision-making (i.e., matter-of-factness and compromises) is a more fundamental variable to the political decision-making style than are the degree of fractionalisation of the party system or the level of activity in the Riksdag.

Moreover, we should not mix increased activity with polarisation. A difference between the Swedish and American conceptualisation of democracy is that in Sweden, we too often regard competition as a threat to stability, whereas Americans — it seems to me at least — regard competition as a central feature of democracy. Americans encourage competition, whereas Sweds cover it. This difference is clearly identified if we compare the basic structures of the constitutions. The Swedish constitution is monistic whereas the American constitution, on the other hand, relies on the division of powers. I think that the increased competitiveness will improve the Swedish democracy and create an increased openness in the political debate.
In theories of democracy, we often find a fear for factions or fractionalisation. That is obvious in the American tradition through Madison and it is valid for Sweden too through central politicians like Louis DeGeer. In modern theories, Giovanni Sartori has maybe best expressed it. He connects fractionalisation and polarization of the party system to severe instability in countries like Weimar Germany, the French fourth Republic, and Italy (1976; 1994). We have regularly regarded the Nordic countries as the exception which confirms the rule: fragmented party systems lead to instability. In light of recent developments in Sweden, as well as in its Nordic neighbours, several scholars have now concluded that the Nordic countries have lost its former position as deviant cases. Sweden faces, they claim, similar problems with instability. I do not think that is a correct conclusion for reasons that I have explored in this talk and I also think that we should not fear the increased fragmentation of the party system and the increased political activity in the Riksdag, but welcome it as signs of vitalisation.
In my talk, I have claimed that increased competition among the parties in the elections has caused increased activity among the parties in the parliament. However, intensified inter-party competition has not caused an increase of the general level of conflict in Swedish politics.\(^1\) To the contrary, it appears to be a lack of conflict (i.e., a high degree of consensus on policies prevails) which contributes to increasing competition between the parties on the electoral arena. The causal effect is indirect. Basic structural features of the Swedish society, such as a long term increased social mobility, geographic mobility, economic equality and economic prosperity, have lead to decreased party identity. The voters are less faithful to a party today than before since the social basis — the connection between classes and parties — for the parties have become blurred. The Swedish party system has seen a basic realignment and a dealignment in recent years. The policy positions of the parties have simultaneously converged. In such a situation, characterised by increased competitiveness and decreased policy dissensus, the parties have an incentive to emphasise the differences that remain and for the opposition in particular to increase parliamentary activity, making it into a constant election advertisement campaign.

In short, despite increased volatility, the decline in partisan vote and welfare state backlash in the late 1980s (due to economic difficulties), political conflict has not risen. The rumours about the death of compromises in Swedish politics are, indeed, exaggerated!

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\(^1\)Conflict refers here to both conflict of interests and policy differences between the parties. (does it?)