

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Age as a yardstick for political citizenship Voting age and eligibility age in Sweden during the twentieth century

Bengt Sandin* and Jonathan Josefsson

Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies, Linköping University Sweden

*Corresponding author. Email: bengt.sandin@liu.se

Abstract

In this article we analyse the changes in the age of voting and eligibility for office in Sweden during the twentieth century. We scrutinise arguments, actors, and contexts. Age proved to be an important yardstick for political citizenship and a source of political conflicts of importance for the development of democratic institutions which is largely neglected in earlier research on universal suffrage. Democratisation processes not only have led to the inclusion of new groups of citizens, but also exclusions. Our study demonstrates the importance of shifting understanding of young people, family formation, demographic shifts, intergenerational power balances and constitutional dilemmas.

1. Introduction

One hundred years after the introduction of ‘universal and equal suffrage’, the right to vote is still regarded as crucial for the breakthrough and development of democracy. In the hundred-year history of purportedly universal and equal suffrage, various restrictions on voting rights have been gradually removed to allow more groups to participate in the political process. For citizens, however, there is still a significant restriction on the right to vote, namely, age.¹ The group of young people and children under the age of majority today make up 20–50 per cent of national populations around the world, but do not have the right to vote and may not stand for election to municipalities, county councils, or the Swedish national parliament (Riksdag).

The age of 18 as the threshold for the right to vote and to stand for election in Sweden, which like many other countries has remained unchanged since the 1970s, may today seem self-evident, but as this historical analysis will show, upward and downward adjustments of the voting and eligibility age have been a recurrent feature of democratic development and have been the subject of lively political debate. In this article, we wish to highlight the way changes in age limits in the twentieth century became a critical yardstick for political citizenship and an expression of how processes of democratization involved not only a development towards the

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

inclusion of new groups of citizens, but also the exclusion of other groups of citizens. What actors, arguments and processes impacted the shifts in age limits, and thus the changing boundaries of political citizenship, and what explains these processes and shifts?

As earlier international research has demonstrated, barriers to voting rights reflect social and cultural norms about gender, ethnicity, race, and class as well as social status and behaviour.² The historical roots and social processes underwriting the historical study of democratisation are also important from a comparative perspective. Today, Sweden exercises a certain degree of influence abroad through moral leadership as a welfare state and a leader of social reform and defender of human rights.³ From that point of view, it is interesting to note that Sweden was the last of the Nordic countries to introduce women's suffrage and differed by raising the voting age significantly at the introduction of universal suffrage from a lower level than other European countries.

Previous research has written extensively about gender, class aspects, and non-citizens in relation to voting rights, but age is clearly a neglected aspect in international and Swedish research. The question of age has not been prominent in research into the breakthrough of universal suffrage or, for that matter, research on democracy by political scientists and historians in the twentieth century more generally.⁴ The dominant discussions of democratic theory have regarded suffrage, eligibility, and political participation as something to which only adults and 'full' citizens are entitled, without looking into the varying age-compositions of the 'adult' population.⁵ These theoretical doctrines have undeniably also influenced contemporary and historical studies of democratization, for example, through the study of electoral laws, institutions, and voter behaviour, often in comparative perspective and using quantitative methods, based on the assumption that those who are minors in this sense are not political citizens.⁶

In recent years, research on age, voting rights, and eligibility has focused, on the one hand, on comparative and quantitative studies of topics such as age in relation to voter turnout, attitudes, standing for political office, civic competence and the political effects of reforms, and on the other hand, it has emphasized theoretical normative political analyses of whether children and young people should be given the vote and be elected, and if so, on what grounds and at what age.⁷ In addition, scholars have become increasingly interested in children and youth as political actors and have pointed out the need for a critical scrutiny of what is perceived as an 'ageist democracy', and how restrictions in age, like wealth, race and gender, imply an inherently suspect requirement in a purported democracy.⁸

More recently, political scientists have drawn attention to the need for historical analysis in the study of democratization. Capoccia and Ziblatt, for example, have called for a 'historical turn' and more thorough empirical research, obviously including qualitative analyses of the breakthrough and development of democracy.⁹ They (and others) highlight the necessity to look for multiple causations of what historically have been driving processes of democratisation as well as the dynamic between those demanding electoral influence and those with power to grant or withhold such privileges. In that vein of analyses, it is also important to discuss both the episodes of change and the long-term structural transformations that underwrote changing electoral policies. Historians have for their part undertaken

little detailed historical analysis of changes in age limits and their varying meanings throughout this period.¹⁰ In this context Sweden stands out as a particularly interesting object of study when it comes to democratisation and age. Not only was Sweden late with the introduction of women's suffrage, but Sweden also introduced new age barriers by increasing the voting age when other voting restrictions were abandoned at the 'democratic breakthrough' in the beginning of the twentieth century, contrary to the development in the rest of Europe.¹¹ These changes give us an excellent chance to scrutinize how the processes of democratic inclusions of an extended electorate also were combined with exclusions of other parts of the electorate.

In this text we provide a comprehensive survey of the changes in the age of voting and eligibility for office that took place in Sweden during the twentieth century and analyse the arguments, actors, factors, and contexts that explain and drove these changes.¹² There are several central questions in this analysis. What arguments were put forward in connection with the changes to age limits? Who were the actors that propelled these discussions, and what views on the role of children and young people in society were put forward? To what extent and in what way can the changes of voting ages be explained by the social, political, and demographic transformations of Swedish society?¹³

Our source material consists of parliamentary papers, laws, debates, parliamentary bills, and proposals by the members of parliament (*Riksdagstrycket*). We have also used published and unpublished memoirs and private papers in public archives. In addition, we have used newspaper articles, mostly from *Dagens Nyheter*, as well as published historical statistics.¹⁴ We have identified three periods during which the voting and eligibility ages were raised or lowered and were the subject of intensive discussion. Figure 1 shows when the changes in age limits were implemented (the minimum age for voting, eligibility, and the age of majority). These periods reflect different political processes, structural changes, and central episodes of change, as well as the multiple registers of causation that can be used to explain why the age of voting became a central facet, first of the resistance to democratic reform, and later for the inclusion of a younger generation in the electorate. The changes in age are analysed during three periods: 1909–1921, 1921–1950, and 1950–1974. These periods correspond to the main sections of the article, which ends with a conclusion.

2. Working-class youth paid the price for women's suffrage

The democratic reforms implemented in Sweden from 1909 to 1921 meant that political citizenship, in the form of voting rights and eligibility, was extended to more groups in the society. In particular, economic barriers were removed and the right to vote and be elected was extended to women. Yet, at the same time as the electorate was expanded, it was also restricted, not least of all by the raising of the age of suffrage, from 21 years of age to 24 (i.e., the year after 24) in 1909. In 1918–1921 the voting age was lowered to 23 for the Second Chamber and increased to 27 years of age for the First Chamber. From an international perspective, the raising of voting ages in Sweden during this period, together with economic barriers, contrasts with a more general pattern whereby many countries retained their voting age at, for example, 21 years or at an even higher level of 25 years.

Year	Voting age				Age of eligibility to stand as elected representative in				Age of majority (legal age)	
	Municipal council	County council	First Chamber ¹	Second Chamber	Municipal council	County council	First Chamber	Second Chamber	Men	Women
1866	21	21	21	21	25	25	35	21	21	25 (unmarried only)
1884										21 (unmarried only)
1909				24						
1919	23	27	27							
1921				23				23		21 (also married)
1937		23	23					25		
1941	21	21	21							
1945				21	23	23				
1949							35	23		
1953							23			
1965	20	20	20	20						
1969					20	20	20	20	20	20
1974	18	18	18		18	18	18	18	18	18

Figure 1. Year of implementation of decisions on changes in the ages of suffrage, eligibility, and legal age in Sweden from 1866 to 1974.

Note: The years stated are the years in which a reform came into force, not the year in which the decision was made, unless specifically stated. In 1970, the bicameral parliament was abolished in the partial constitutional reform which was implemented in 1971. The right to vote applied to those who reached the voting age in the year preceding the election, until 1974, when the right to vote was valid from the 18th birthday. Second Chamber information is bold to indicate the values that also appear in Figure 2, to highlight a comparison. The First Chamber was appointed by the county councils and by electors from the borough councils of the towns that were not part of a county council. Source: The parliamentary records of the Swedish Riksdag, Retrieved through the digitized archive, <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/>.

Sweden was in that way more elitist than nations like Germany, France, Norway, Finland, Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand, and several South American nations. Comparable European nations such as France, Greece, and Italy lowered their voting ages to 21 in the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Figure 2 reveals the dramatic increase of the age barrier during the extension of the universal suffrage reforms and the gradual decrease over the following decades up until 1974.

It is important to note that the historical data on shifts in age limits in different countries focus on the Second Chamber, while there is a lack of data for First Chamber, as well as local and regional elections, which from a Swedish perspective, as Figure 1 indicates, have followed distinct trajectories, of importance for the evolution of voting rights for the Second Chamber in Parliament. To understand what actors, arguments and social and political processes impelled the shifts in voting age

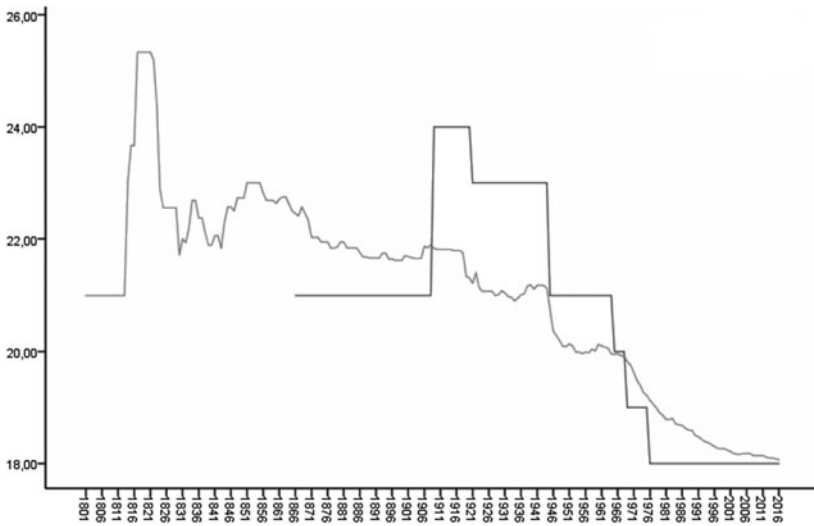


Figure 2. Average voting age in all independent states (jagged line) with general elections compared with the voting age to the Second Chamber in Sweden (dark straight line).

Note: Figure from Ludvig Beckman, 'Rösträttsåldern och demokratins avgränsningsproblem', in Katarina Barrling and Sören Holmberg eds., *Demokratis framtid* (Stockholm: 2018), 81–110, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-163175>. Dataset that includes 204 countries between 1801 and 2016 (14,973 observations).

and eligibility age, as well as the importance that age limits came to have in the discussions during these dramatic years, we first need to go back to the democratic reforms that were implemented at the beginning of the century.

2.1. Electoral reforms and democratization with guarantees

A first episode of significance for our understanding of why the universal suffrage reforms in Sweden also came with the raising of the voting age is to be found in the period 1900–1909 when new electoral reforms were introduced. The basic idea that shaped the voting rules in connection with the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century was that those who had a greater stake or vested interest in the local community based on their property or economic contributions through taxes or investments were entitled to a greater share of political influence.¹⁶ In Sweden the restrictions on voting rights, as Ebba Berling Åselius points out, together with some other Nordic countries, were more far-reaching than in other European countries in connection with the extension of the suffrage.¹⁷ This applied both to the voting rights to the parliament and the local councils, where Sweden stands out as having a particularly elitist electoral system, also in comparison with other Nordic countries. The expansion of male suffrage to the Second Chamber in 1907–1909 was combined with several explicit grounds for disqualification. Voters had to be registered as taxpayers and indeed to have paid their taxes, they could not be dependent on poor relief, nor have been punished for certain crimes or declared bankrupt, and they had to have done their military service.

Moreover, they had to be 24 years of age, a clear distinction from the age of majority that was 21 for men and unmarried women.¹⁸

The arguments presented for a high age of suffrage and eligibility emphasised how this would ensure stability, good judgement, and independence. In the political debate a picture emerged in which the family represented by the man could be given influence and at the same time provide a guarantee against rapid upheavals. A higher age often went hand in hand with responsibility for a family, it was claimed. As it was presented, a higher age normally brought social stability and better economy. In this connection, age became a foundation against which the other limitations – known as *streck* or barriers – were clarified. For men who had reached the right age, exclusion due to any of the other suggested limitations was an indication of something deviant and abnormal, symbolizing a lack of civic competence, independence, and conscientious behaviour.¹⁹ In the 1907–1909 reform, the Conservatives were given guarantees of a minority influence with a proportional electoral system, while simultaneously the age at which men could vote in elections to the Second Chamber was raised to the year after their 24th birthday. The number of votes that a person could cast in local elections (and consequently for the regional government and the First Chamber as those assemblies were based on the outcome of the municipal elections, through the nominations of electorates) was now limited. The number of votes per person ranged from 0 to 40, set in proportion to the level of income and wealth and cast on party tickets, whereas earlier there was a much higher upper limit to the number of votes a person could cast. With the introduction of the proportional electoral system, the different political parties in each constituency obtained mandates in relation to the number of votes received and allotted to the candidates on the party ticket in priority order established by the party.

Although the economic qualifications for the municipal election in practice limited the voting electorate to older members of the constituency, the age of voting for municipal elections was not changed and remained 21 years of age. As previously mentioned, there was no economic voting scale for the Second Chamber elections, but voters were required to be male and 24 years of age, registered as taxpayers, paid their local and national taxes and had done their military service. In addition, you could not vote if you were dependent on poor relief, were bankrupt or imprisoned.²⁰

The decision demonstrated the close link between the different dividing lines and barriers. The 40-grade voting scale made the votes of an individual or a juridical person in municipal elections proportional to income and wealth in steps, yet with a maximum of 40 votes per person. The decision thus put a limitation on the influence of wealthy industrial companies (legal persons) in small rural communities which pleased conservative and liberal agrarian voters sceptical about the ongoing industrialization and urbanization. Earlier an industrial enterprise, a sawmill, a factory, or a mining company could have the large majority of the votes in an agrarian community. The owners of these companies could at the same time hold a large number of votes as wealthy individuals in the communities where they lived. These changes of the voting rules were directed at the effects of the new capitalist economy. But it is also obvious that raising the voting age for the Second Chamber was a result of fear of the urban population and the younger working people –

mobile, unstable, and unmarried – in the smaller industrial conurbations in rural areas, and rapidly growing major cities, that were perceived as problematic. They formed in some places a significant portion of the population that could balance the influence of the minority of wealthy individuals, or appeared so to those who saw their influence threatened. In Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, along with several smaller industrial communities these strata of the population were dramatically over-represented.²¹

2.2. 'Universal suffrage' with age restrictions

The constitutional issue came to a head once again in the autumn of 1918, when the raising of the voting age became a central feature of the discussion. The debates were about the right to vote in elections to municipalities and county councils, and an extraordinary session of the Parliament was authorized to decide on a possible change in the right to vote in parliamentary elections to the Second Chamber. That decision was then formally taken by subsequent ordinary sessions of the Parliament in 1919 and 1921.²² On 22 November 1918 the bill on municipal suffrage was presented, and on the same day the Social Democrat Erik Palmstierna noted in his diary some positive formulations about the possibility of raising the age limits for the right to vote to please the conservatives.²³

The proposal in the bill was based on municipal voting rights, as previously, applying from the age of 21 on condition that taxes were paid; in other words, a person had to be liable for income tax and had to have paid taxes during the past three years, not gone bankrupt, not been punished for certain crimes, and not declared legally incapacitated.²⁴ The proposed age of eligibility to county councils was 25. The proposal also stipulated that married women (without an income of their own) would be entitled to vote in municipal elections if their husbands were liable for income tax, and that the 40-grade voting scale would be abolished.²⁵ By supporting the proposal, the Social Democrats, who were in government together with the Liberals, also accepted that tax liability was a prerequisite for voting rights.

The construction of women's suffrage as linked to their husbands' economic situation, was retained; this move was justified in wording reminiscent of the arguments put forward earlier in the year, but then by the Liberals and the Conservatives. It was about the political benefits of a higher voting age, such as social stability and cohesion. The position of the settled population was strengthened, according to the government bill, in that:

*the wives of men liable to pay municipal tax shall also acquire the right to vote, obviously placing the emphasis in decisions on municipal matters on those who have formed a family within the municipality and are thus most strongly bound by the common interests of the municipality.*²⁶

This stance also underlines that the system made it possible for women or men who were unable to attend municipal meetings and elections to vote by proxy.²⁷

The ensuing proposals in the parliament accepted the basic premises in the bill. But critics in parliament insisted that a higher age of voting was a central way to uphold social and political stability in an age of turmoil and instability and retain

the power of the established political interests. In several of the parliamentary proposals the age of the voters was at the heart of the argument.²⁸ Karl Johan Ekman, a Conservative politician from Jönköping, suggested an extra vote for men and women who had reached the age of 35.²⁹ He argued that this was not unfair because it affected everyone equally but kept the younger working class from exerting too much influence. In other words, the core problem of democracy was the conflict between the older, experienced, and stable elements in the community and the younger, inexperienced, and more volatile elements of the working class. According to Ekman, the latter elements, 'where they are numerous, seize all the power for themselves and make older people kneel down to them'.³⁰

The problem was most palpable in the towns and the more populated industrial municipalities in rural areas.³¹ Here the generational conflict seems dramatic, but it was also a conflict between the classes. The volume, mobility, and lack of responsibility of the younger working-class generation appeared to be a threat to the stability of society. Ekman thus suggested universal suffrage but with greater influence 'for the older, more experienced and more stable elements of society'.³²

According to Palmstierna, the Social Democrats had no alternative but to accept the compromise. Without it, the chance of social legislation to benefit the working class, a central ambition in the Social Democrats' move for power, would have disappeared.³³ All the parties supported the decision except the Swedish Social Democratic Left Party, which had been formed by the youth wing of the Social Democratic Party the year before.³⁴ In a comprehensive reservation they argued forcefully that the higher age limits were a blow to the younger working class; the power of the right-wingers, the old and the wealthy, had won a victory over a young and dynamic generation of workers. This generation already had the right to vote to some extent but had now partially lost it through the higher age limit. In other words, while raising the age limit was crucial in the negotiations for reaching a compromise, the Social Democrats, in the opinion of the Left, had simultaneously betrayed the working class.³⁵

As regards the first period (1909–1921), almost 570,000 young citizens thereby paid the price for the implementation of a controlled transition to democracy. Priority was given to women and the lowering of some of the economic restrictions rather than the broad stratum of young working men and women, some of whom, in this process, also lost their right to vote. The development in Sweden stands out in an international perspective. The suffrage extensions led to eradicating voting restrictions based on gender and income, but also to granting priority to the parts of the electorate that might be more socially stable and responsible – the older and, hopefully, married part of the population that was not dependent on poor relief and had paid their outstanding taxes.

How can this retention and raising of age barriers be explained? A general and immediate context for the political reform of voting rights can be sought in two central episodes of change. The first episode is to be found in the political crises during the period 1900–1909, including a conflict over the parliamentary two-chamber system between the Liberals and Social Democrats on one hand, and the Conservatives on the other. The insistent demands of the Social Democrats and Liberals to broaden the electorate voting rights forced conservatives in government to initiate electoral reforms that could guarantee political stability with the aid

of extensive barriers to voting rights, including a higher age of voting. The Liberals, when in government in 1906, supported the need for barriers including the higher age of voting when they later presented a bill, also founded on an ambition to strengthen the role of the Second Chamber in the Riksdag. As that bill failed to gain support, the following Conservative government returned with a proposal, with extensive guarantees that could not upset the relationship between the chambers of parliament and the hold of conservative interests.³⁶ The proposals in 1907–1909 included concessions to the Social Democrat and Liberal demands to broaden the electorate, and it also responded in parts to worries about the influence of industrial enterprises and wealthy property holders that had dominating voting rights in small townships and communities. These concerns were shared by Liberals and some Conservatives. Their agrarian constituencies did not appreciate the onslaught of industrialization in the countryside, nor did they appreciate the growing urban political influence generally.³⁷

In sum, the Liberals failed to gain support for their version of parliamentarism modelled on the British system, the Conservatives were able to defend the position of maintaining the Conservative First Chamber by advancing an extension of the male voting age, making it universal but with strict limitations for those that had not paid taxes. In this context, both the Liberals and the Conservatives supported the raising of the voting age as a way to maintain political stability. Furthermore, as only one eighth of the First Chamber was to be elected every fourth year, the turnover of delegates was slow and the effect of shifting opinions in the electorate would be consequential only in the long run.

A second episode of change that is key to explain why Sweden not only preserved its higher age limits, but also partly raised them even further, took place in 1917–1918. Sweden experienced a significant shortage of food which spurred both the general political criticism of the government and a demand for immediate constitutional reforms. In addition, the international development, with revolutionary movements around the Baltic Sea, risked supporting the threat of a domestic revolution unless the government took quick action.³⁸ For the Social Democrats the acceptance of the compromise also meant that they opted for a reformist strategy over a revolutionary one. The captains of the dominant industrial organizations around the powerful Wallenberg family lobbied with the conservative MPs to accept a reform to avoid a violent outcome, as finally members of the royal family did as well. The political turmoil clearly also reflected the development of the political parties with distinct political agendas concerning the issues of universal suffrage.³⁹

From a longer historical and structural perspective, the transformation to an industrial society and the consequent changing class structure clearly affected the class bases of the political parties. The demands for a change in electoral laws was in addition underpinned by a long-term development of changing social, economic, and political conditions in Sweden that pushed for further democratisation of the parliamentary system. Liberals and Conservatives were numerically a minority of the population in Sweden, while still in a strong political position in the parliament. Their privileged political position was jeopardised by urbanisation and the size and growth of the urban population since their central political base was in the countryside.⁴⁰ The urban population was clearly dominated by the age group 20–30

and the average marriage age was between 25 and 30. It was this youthful generation that seemed to signify the problem of a universal suffrage reform and embody the need for a democracy with guarantees.⁴¹ The ultimate decision to introduce changes was consequently grounded in the complexity of a long-term demographic transformation that was reinforced by urbanization and significantly impacted the course and urgency of the political transition.

3. Criticism of an incomplete democratic reform

After the electoral reform of 1921, it was only a few years before new proposals to lower the voting age for both men and women were presented in the Parliament.⁴² Members of the Swedish Communist Party and later also members of the Social Democratic Party and the Farmers' League were critical of how the suffrage reform had been implemented, and they demanded a lowering of the voting and eligibility ages.⁴³ Yet although arguments had been voiced in the 1920s for lowering the age limits, it was not until the 1930s that these arguments had an impact, with the result that the voting ages to the First and Second Chamber, regional and local elections were lowered in steps until they all were synchronized at age 21 in 1945. Consequently, as Sweden lowered voting ages in the 1930s and 1940s, it joined a global trend of democratisation with many other countries that had already established an international norm of 21 as the voting age.⁴⁴

3.1. *Class struggle, the vitality of youth, and the essential difference between the chambers*

During the 1920s and 1930s, Communist members of parliament continued to submit parliamentary proposals for a lowering of the voting and eligibility ages.⁴⁵ The proposals tabled by the Communist Party called for a reduction in the voting age to 21 based on arguments that would also be put forward in the coming decades.⁴⁶ The debates reveals a clear dissatisfaction with the compromise reached a few years earlier, and the Communists claimed that 'the "universal" suffrage within the framework of the capitalistic anarchy in society' was nothing more than 'the ideological reflection in the political sphere of modern industrialism and capitalism, that is, of the bourgeoisie'.⁴⁷ According to the Communists, the electoral reform had been pushed through 'sluggishly, hesitantly, and incompletely'. The core of the criticism was that 'the relative progress is offset by a very significant reactionary setback: a substantial rise in the voting age'.⁴⁸

Despite a fundamentally sceptical attitude towards parliamentary democracy, the Communists felt that lowering the voting age could nevertheless be a tool in the class struggle. By lowering age limits, a voter base could be mobilized to improve social conditions, to change social legislation, and to pursue the political demands that the Social Democrats had abandoned.⁴⁹ A central argument for the Communists was that the reform affected a large group of citizens who would already have had the right to vote, or who would have been granted the right to vote, if the Parliament had decided to set the voting age at 21. Citing figures from the national statistical agency, they noted that there were 568,675 people, or

about 10 per cent of the Swedish population, who had been deprived of their right to vote, based on age, by the 1909–1921 reforms.⁵⁰

The Constitutional Committee consistently dismissed the demands in the parliamentary proposals during the 1920s. The Committee noted that the decision on age limits had been taken by the Parliament as recently as 1918 and was an appropriate solution ‘with regard to the requirements for *understanding, maturity, and public interest* that should be made for participation in public life’ and that for this reason ‘the minimum age may be considered fully warranted’.⁵¹ The Committee also emphasised that the higher age limit of 27 for elections to the First Chamber had been introduced in order to ‘maintain a difference in kind between the two chambers’. The age limit was therefore also, as the Constitutional Committee saw it, the prerequisite for the constitutional structure with two chambers elected by separate processes. This argument recurred in the 1920s and 1930s and had also been central in the policies of the Conservatives and the Liberals 1917–1918. The Committee interpreted the constitution to mean that the First Chamber should be a ‘restraining element’ and ‘secure against abrupt reversals and the excessive influence of temporary opinion’.⁵² The voting age was thus closely linked to the question of how to preserve the essential difference between the chambers and block an erosion of the position of the First Chamber.

3.2. A new political landscape and opting for lower voting ages

In the early 1930s, there was a shift in the debate about age limits that paved the way for a lowering of the voting and eligibility ages. The arguments were, as we shall see, similar in many ways to those put forward in the 1920s, but now these arguments were heeded more. One reason for this shift was that the political landscape had changed thanks to more stable democratic institutions and the stronger parliamentary position of the cabinet. The Social Democrats formed a government in coalition with the Farmers’ League in 1932, while a steadily growing national youth movement began to exert an influence in the general political discussion.⁵³

In 1933 one of the communist members of parliament tabled proposals calling for a lowering of the voting age. The Constitutional Committee admitted that there was good reason to investigate the matter.⁵⁴ The Committee stated, however, that it could not accept a lowering ‘to the age of 20, that is, below the age of majority’.⁵⁵ As for the higher voting age of 27 for elections to the First Chamber, the Committee was no longer as convinced of its necessity in order to maintain the differences between the chambers. It was rather through the longer term of office and the gradual renewal of members of the First Chamber that the essential difference between the chambers was to be maintained.⁵⁶ The Committee decided to propose a further investigation of the matter, but the proposal was voted down in Parliament.⁵⁷

In discussions during the following years, there was growing criticism of the higher age limit for elections to the First Chamber. The question of the essential difference between the chambers remained central. It was not only the Communists who were critical of this difference, but also members of the Farmers’ League and the Social Democratic Party. Demands to lower the voting age to the First Chamber also came from far out on the right wing through the three members from the National League of Sweden, a pro-Nazi organization.⁵⁸

Despite opposition from members of the Conservative and Liberal parties, the Constitutional Committee, in its statement in 1936, proposed a lowering of the voting age to the First Chamber from 27 to 23.⁵⁹ A few days later, the two chambers approved this lowering, thus giving a uniform voting age of 23 for elections to municipalities, county councils, and both chambers of parliament. Evidently, the stronger political position of the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League was crucial here. In connection with the lowering of the voting age, however, it was also decided to propose raising the age of eligibility to 25 for the Second Chamber and for county councils.⁶⁰ Raising the age limit for eligibility passed without comment in the Constitutional Committee and in the press. Presumably, the intention was to balance the lowering of the voting age with the raising of the eligibility age to get the proposal through or to mitigate the criticism.⁶¹

In the chamber debate on the proposal to lower the voting age to the First Chamber, a more positive attitude was revealed for the ability of young people to take responsibility and live up to their obligations. It was pointed out that many were in fact over 30 years of age before they were allowed to vote for the first time, and that by this age they had already fulfilled many civic obligations.⁶² At the same time, members of the majority were not in full agreement that the proposed lowering of the voting age for county councillors and electors, from 27 to 23 years of age, would solve the need for a democratization of the voting age.⁶³ Moreover, concern was expressed about the political consequences of 'not granting the legitimate demands of young people for civic trust'.⁶⁴ In the early and mid-1930s one could thus see a change in society in the perception of young people, who were now regarded as more mature, better educated, and prepared to assume the burdens of social responsibility. This trend reflects the emerging alliance between the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League.

A few years later, in 1941, the Farmers' League pointed out in a motion to the First Chamber that the duty and responsibility for the defence of the fatherland came at the age of 21. It did not make sense to exclude those who had just come of age from the right to vote, especially considering 'the upright and responsible youth in rural areas, with their realistic view of social problems'.⁶⁵ On the issue of the ageing population, the motion stressed how important it was that 'even younger and healthier currents in different groups of the people should be given increased opportunities to assert themselves and assume responsibility within our political life'.⁶⁶ After the Parliament in 1936 heeded the call to lower the voting age in county council elections to 23, a series of parliamentary proposals called for a further lowering to 21 in all elections. The opinion expressed by the Constitutional Committee in 1941 was also in favour of 21, referring to the maturity and social responsibility of young people.⁶⁷ The decision by the Parliament was that the municipal voting age should be lowered in 1941 by two years, from 23 to 21. At the same time, the Parliament adopted a dormant bill for a corresponding lowering of the voting age for elections to the Second Chamber, a bill that was finally passed by the 1945 session. The age was lowered from 25 to 21. The justification for the bill was that:

young people might now assume responsibility and undertake burdens fully corresponding to those which rested on the shoulders of the country's citizens of

*more mature age. Moreover, Swedish youth was increasingly distinguished by political interest and political maturity as a result of the meritorious work of political enlightenment conducted by the political youth organizations.*⁶⁸

After more than two decades of demands by minorities in both chambers to lower the voting age and eligibility ages, the changing social and political landscape had now enabled and encouraged a further lowering of the age limits to 21 years in the 1930s and 1940s.

What explains these shifts? First, at a political level, the changes were a consequence of the reshaping of political alliances during the 1930s. Attempts to change the age of voting during the political aftermath of the 1921 first election, with the new constitution, had failed repeatedly as a result of the social and political conflicts between minority governments. The Liberals and the Social Democrats found it now increasingly difficult to cooperate around how to organize welfare and industrial relations. Parts of the conservative caucus identified as an agrarian party and created a new political party, the Farmers' League. Class conflicts were obvious in the way the state managed labour relations and strikes during the late 1920s. The international economic crises from 1929 to 1932 also had severe effects on youth unemployment. It was in this situation that the Farmers' League and the Social Democrats found an opportunity to bridge the conflicts through 'horse trading' in 1933, followed by an agreement between the employer's association and the Social Democrats about industrial relations and a system of collective bargaining. The declining birth rate made population growth, agrarian support schemes, and social welfare top political priorities. Consequently, the Farmers' League abandoned their earlier sceptical relation to the Social Democrats and replaced the Liberals as the closest allies to the Social Democrats. The alliance between Social Democrats and the Farmers' League was central for Sweden's ability to avoid a non-democratic development as in Germany, through a range of social reforms.

Second, the 1930s and 1940s was a time that witnessed controversies as well as a shift in public discourse and norms about youth as citizens. The politically active youth was viewed as increasingly responsible yet feared as its political engagement might be channelled into extremist political parties. Youth organisation, youth crime, and youth culture also attained a central position in the public debates at the same time that the unemployment rates were high.⁶⁹ Both the left-wing and the right-wing parties tried to capitalise on the fact the younger generation was excluded from participating in elections, and the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League could now agree on lowering the age of voting. Yet, as is clearly visible in the parliamentary debates during this time, a more positive view of youth as well educated, well organised and as contributing to society underpinned many of the arguments for lowering the voting and eligibility age.

Thirdly, there were also other kinds of structural explanations to the lowering of voting ages that connected to the political arguments in the parliament at the time. The alliance between labour and farmers made it possible to include the younger and perhaps unmarried generation in the electorate to avoid young people drifting towards politically extreme positions. The demographic transformation with an ageing population also shifted the focus from the older generation as a source of stability and competence to a social burden and to the young generation as the

sustainable future of the nation. An increase of the birth rate required both the social support of young families and a reliance on the commitment and efforts of the young.⁷⁰

In the political compromise that was established in 1917–1918, one prominent argument was that the raising of the voting age to 27 years for county councils and the First Chamber was an instrument to maintain the ‘difference in kind’ between the First and the Second Chambers. However, as was made evident by the Constitutional Committee at the beginning of the 1930s, the high voting age to the First Chamber had played out its role as an instrument for limiting the electorate and upholding the difference between the chambers, also in the view of the parliamentary Constitutional Committee. The very fact that only one eighth of the First Chamber was elected every fourth year was clearly now considered enough to uphold the difference.

4. Voting age, adulthood, and the age of majority

Discussions on voting rights did not stop after the reforms of the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1960s and 1970s the voting and eligibility ages were further lowered, and in 1974 they were finally made to conform to the age of majority, with an age limit of 18 for voting and eligibility in municipal, county council, and parliamentary elections. This was a period when a range of countries lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. For example, the UK lowered it to 18 in 1969 and the USA in 1971. The new international context included the civil rights movements, youth participation in war and opposition to war (notably in Vietnam), and political issues with strong intergenerational and future-oriented dimensions such as the environment and world peace, all climbing high on political agendas.

In a Swedish context, the political discussions about the age of voting and eligibility were triggered because fundamental issues of citizenship, democratic influence, and the social contract between the generations were being debated, especially in connection with the review of the Swedish constitution. From a parliamentary perspective, the changes in voting and eligibility ages during this period can be explained by a growing support from a broad political spectrum for the lowering of age barriers, with the most salient argument being that the young generation in fact lived a life as adults, with the right to marry, sign work contracts, take loans to study at university without the consent of parents, and serve in the military. This shift in the political discourse was in turn an outcome of both long-term structural changes in Swedish society and short-term societal transformations. The long-term restructuring of Swedish society and the building of the welfare state, with a modest start in the 1930s had resulted in much more comprehensive and thorough reforms during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, of the labour market, the housing market, the educational system, childcare, and the pension system that made society increasingly dependent on the large cohorts of the young, well-educated, and tax-paying generation born in the 1940s. This propelled political pressure to give this group full political citizenship by the lowering of voting and eligibility ages. In addition, young people’s extensive public protests in the 1960s and 1970s in conjunction with civil rights, anti-war and students’ movements,

internationally and in Sweden, pushed for immediate political transformations to abolish barriers to the political influence of the younger generation.

4.1. *The competence and de facto legal capacity of youth*

At the end of the 1950s, the discussion of the voting age took off once again. New parliamentary proposals were introduced, for example, in the Parliament in 1958 in which Centre Party (formerly the Farmers' League) members called for the right to vote in Second Chamber and municipal elections (and thus also indirectly to the First Chamber) to apply from the calendar year when a person reached the age of 21, and not the year after turning 21 as in existing law.⁷¹ The proposals were opposed by the Constitutional Committee with reference to the ongoing constitutional inquiry and were rejected by the Parliament.⁷²

Between 1960 and 1964, various calls were heard for a lowering of the voting and eligibility ages. Here we may note proposals to lower the voting age to 18 or demands for an inquiry into the possibility of doing so, from Social Democrats, the Centre Party, Liberals, Conservatives, and Communists. Among those tabling such parliamentary proposals we find, once again, the same leading Centre Party members who now in 1964, together with their party colleagues, proposed the right to vote from age 18.⁷³ In the same year, the Constitutional Committee was in favour of lowering the voting age, but not to 18, as suggested by a majority of the parliamentary proposals. The Committee argued that it would be inappropriate for the voting age to be lowered so much that minors would be able to take part in general elections. Instead, the Committee felt that the voting age should coincide with the age of majority, which at that time was 21, in other words, those who have 'reached the age of 20 in the preceding calendar year'.⁷⁴

In the assessment of the Minister of Justice in the 1964 bill, these complications formed 'a basis for the demands for a lowering of the voting age proposed from different political standpoints' and in the press. The issue of declarations of legal incapacity was also problematic and needed further investigation. The final proposal was to lower the voting age so that those who had turned 20 the year before an election could vote. The principle underlying the bill, as the head of the ministry put it, was that virtually everyone who had reached the age of majority should have the vote.⁷⁵ The opinion of the inquiry and of the Ministry of Justice about the ability and responsibility of young people, along with their perception of public opinion, encouraged them to propose a lowering of the voting age.⁷⁶

The parliamentary proposals from the early 1960s show that belief in the competence and significance of young people had also risen in comparison with the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. It was not just a question of young people becoming mature and responsible as soon-to-be adults; now it was emphasized more strongly that young people were in fact already living adult lives with responsibilities, obligations, and political action. The age of majority entailed the legal right to marry and full criminal responsibility, with abstention from prosecution no longer possible.⁷⁷ A new aspect was added to the argument as well. The specific knowledge and experience of younger citizens was needed in political institutions. The age of eligibility therefore needed to be lowered for specific areas in which the competence of young people was necessary, for instance on child welfare boards and

judicial bodies such as district courts. It was emphasized that younger people in these contexts were better able to communicate with young offenders and children from vulnerable backgrounds and should therefore be given the opportunity to participate. In a manner of speaking, both young people's youthfulness, experiences, and competences and their de facto adult lifestyle became an argument for a change.⁷⁸

That young people were de facto adults, living adult lives with rights and obligations, before they had the right to participate in the political elections, was a stance adopted both by the Conservatives and by the Swedish Communist Party through its leadership and motion proposers.⁷⁹ In 1964 the Conservative leader proposed a motion in which he pointed out that the ageing population had changed the balance of power between the generations, that this imbalance should be offset by extending the suffrage, and that the question of lowering the age of majority to 18 should be investigated at the same time.⁸⁰ He declared that all the parties' youth associations supported calls for further lowering of the voting age, and he highlighted young people's political commitment and participation.⁸¹ We recognize this type of argument from both the 1920s and the 1930s. In a motion to the Second Chamber in 1965, the Communist Party (SKP) shared the Conservative Party position:

*Conscription and paying tax are compulsory. Young people under the age of 21 are represented in large numbers in the labour and housing market. The age of 18 is already an age at which significant changes in the rights and obligations of young people take place. A woman then has the right to marry, in some cases even without parental consent. At that age, according to current rules, full criminal responsibility begins and the possibility of abstention from prosecution ceases... The age of marriage shows a continued tendency to fall. Because young people are leaving home earlier, forming a family and becoming an independent economic unit, they face the same problems as older people.*⁸²

This motion likewise highlighted the problems of the balance of influence between the different generations. According to those who presented the proposals, the ageing of the population meant that 'the non-productive age groups carry more weight in decisions about society' than younger generations. Compared to previous generations, it was argued, young people knew more about society. As in the Conservatives' motion, the Communists pointed out that all youth associations were behind the demands for lowered voting and eligibility age. Both the Communists and the Conservatives argued for lowering the age of majority to 18.⁸³ The arguments about the numerical size of the generations and the balance of power between them were similar in several ways to the arguments put forward in the discussions about lowering age limits in the 1930s and 1940s.

Leading Liberal parliamentarians emphasised in a motion in 1968 the importance of the age of eligibility and the voting age being the same, preferably as low as 18.⁸⁴ The lowering of the voting age was also a central feature of two similar parliamentary proposals by Liberals in the First and Second Chambers, with the same arguments. The important thing was that the right to vote should be linked to de

facto economic independence and to the formation of one's own household, that a person was reckoned as criminally responsible, and so on.⁸⁵

As a government party, the Social Democrats were in favour of lowering the voting age, but with some hesitation since they wanted to await the change to the constitution. The opposition parties, however, were obviously prepared to pursue the issue without waiting for the constitutional inquiry and the resolution of the constitutional issue.⁸⁶

4.2. Voting rights, eligibility, and the abolition of the First Chamber

The members tabling parliamentary proposals to lower the voting age belonged to the Social Democrats, the Liberals, the Centre Party, and the Communists. It was clear that there was a broad foundation for this view among the political parties, but it was not as clear in the government.⁸⁷ In 1970 the parliamentary proposals were considered once again by the Constitutional Committee, which had already discussed the matter in 1968 and 1969 in connection with the proposal for a constitutional reform, that is, the change to a unicameral parliament. The Constitutional Committee backed a proposal to lower the voting age to 19 but did not want to propose a further lowering to 18 and wanted once again to delay a decision, citing the impending constitutional reform. However, the Committee was not unanimous in its opinion. As early as 1968, the decision of the Committee was challenged by six members out of a total of nineteen present. It was the members from the Liberal Party and the Centre Party who believed that an 18-year limit could be implemented. The Parliament followed the suggestion of the Committee majority and rejected the parliamentary proposals. Further parliamentary proposals then raised the issue anew in 1969 and 1970, and these were once more rejected by the Constitutional Committee, but with continued reservations from the Liberals, the Centre Party, and the Conservatives. According to the dissenting opinions, there were good arguments for lowering the voting age for democratic reasons, and it was suggested that, pending the completion of the work by the committee drafting the constitutional reform, a decision could be taken for a dormant constitutional reform to be implemented in time for the 1973 elections. The head of the ministry pointed out the complexity of the matter, for instance the fact that the relationship between the age of majority and the declaration of legal incapacity made the voting age into a constitutional issue that had to await a complete reform of the constitution. As before, however, the head of the ministry referred to the forthcoming position of the drafting committee and did not propose any change in the voting age.⁸⁸ When the decision to reduce the voting age to 18 was finally taken, it was within the framework of the revision of the Constitution and the establishment of a unicameral parliament.

So, what factors explain the dynamics of change and the lowering of the voting and eligibility age to 18 years during this last third period of our analyses (1950–1974)? First, from the perspective of parliamentary politics and political discourse, one can see how parliamentary proposals to lower the voting age were tabled by nearly all the parties during the period, but especially by parties that were not in government. The political support for lowering age barriers grew stronger in a broad political spectrum where the most salient argument was that the young

generation in fact lived a life as adults, with the right to marry, sign work contracts, take loans to study at university without the consent of parents, and serve in the military. The relatively slow and gradual process of lowering age barriers was thus not due to lack of consensus or any significant political opposition but is rather explained by (a) the cautious attitude of the Social Democrats who were the governing party at the time, and (b) the delay caused by the merger of the constitutional review with the changes in the voting age.

Second, the growing consensual political support for the lowering of age limits must be viewed in connection with more long-term structural changes in Swedish society as well as short-term societal transformations. From a long-term perspective, starting in the 1930s, this was a historical period that was characterized by the building of a welfare state in cooperation between Social Democrats and Liberals and the Centre Party (the old Farmers' League) with shifting parliamentary majorities. That also involved a large-scale immigration of a labour force from Europe and a major societal shift: women increasingly started to work outside the domestic sphere. The financing of future pension schemes and the building of the welfare state resulted in an increasing dependency on the contributions from the young working and taxpaying generation. From the 1960s onwards the government emphasized the expansion of university education, including generous government loans and grants. From a historical perspective we can thus note how a line of different and asynchronic reforms and developments basically shaped an independent generation that *de facto* lived a life of adults, which in turn propelled the discussion about the voting age.

From a short-term historical perspective, there were in addition particular episodes and conflict-ridden transformations in the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s that explain why the political issue of lowering the voting and eligibility age became even more pressing. In Sweden and internationally youth became engaged in civil rights movements, in protests against the Vietnam War, and with demands to abolish barriers to the political influence of young people, clearly also outside the parameters defined by the electoral system. Public protests, riots and university occupations put pressure on governments for a radical political change and new reforms in a wide range of areas. In the Swedish context, universities were occupied by the very same students that now benefited from the free tuition. The welfare reforms were questioned from the left for not being radical or feminist enough, at the same time as the bourgeois parties struggled to present alternative visions for a future that could engage the young. A broader transnational pattern of lowering the voting ages to 18 also may have played a role. Swedish opinion makers were well aware of what was going on in the world. Strong emphasis was placed on individual rights to participate and have a say in political and social matters, which also made its mark on workplace democracy in many contexts: factories, offices, and universities. One central explanation for the slow pace by which the lowering of the voting age and the age of majority progressed, after the adjustments during the 1930s and 1940s, is linked to the more fundamental constitutional review of the bicameral parliament.

5. Bring age into the historical analyses of democracy

In the historical survey above, we have examined how and why voting and eligibility ages have changed and have gradually been renegotiated in relation to a variety of political processes, issues, arguments, and actors in twentieth-century Sweden. The historical analysis of age and limits to suffrage and eligibility offers a complement to research focused on gender, class, and foreign citizenship, and to normative arguments about whether children and young people should be given the right to vote and where the age limits should be drawn. Although this investigation has been situated in a Swedish context of democratization, important lessons can be learnt also for the more general patterns of historical shifts in voting regulation and in thinking that age matters for how democracies were constructed and developed in relation to other ways of limiting and defining the electorate and political citizenship. We would argue that age as an analytical category adds to the understanding of historical processes of democratisation in important ways.

When 'universal' suffrage was introduced in the early twentieth century, age was a key issue regarding both the right to vote and the right to stand for election. The issue of voting and eligibility age, and in particular the raising of the age limits, was absolutely crucial at that time for reaching a compromise and implementing so-called 'universal and equal suffrage'. The question was closely linked to the matter of other voting restrictions and interacted with issues of the organization of poor relief, pensions, marital law, women's rights, the formation of municipalities, county councils, parliament, temperance, and legislation on working hours. The debates were also influenced by social unrest in European nations and risks associated with the threat of imminent domestic revolution.⁸⁹

Throughout the twentieth century, the shifts in voting ages were connected to discussions of several other widely differing political issues. These included changes of the age of majority, declarations of legal incapacity, conscription, and military preparedness during the Second World War, as well as the importance of the political involvement of young people and their *de facto* place in society, such as taking government loans for university studies, serving in local community boards, signing contracts, and paying taxes.

In a longer-term perspective of parliamentary politics, we can see how the parties' stances on the question of age limits in the twentieth century changed. For example, the Social Democrats accepted a rise in age limits as part of the compromise with Liberals and Conservatives in 1918, while in the 1930s and 1940s they worked more actively with the Farmers' League and the Left for a lowering of the voting age. When they became politically stronger, both their management of and responsibility for the constitutional issue and their stable control of the First Chamber had a restraining influence on the Social Democrats' willingness to introduce any reform. Thus, during this later period, it was instead parties like the Conservatives and the Liberals that pushed for a lowering of the age limits. In the period 1909–1921 they had advocated higher age limits to maintain control and preserve social stability. Communists and members of the Left Party appear to be the ones who, throughout the period, consistently advocated lower age limits for suffrage and eligibility, as did the right-wing party during the 1930s.

In addition, episodes of immediate political and public pressure for the rights of young people such as the political turbulence between 1917 and 1918, the political polarization during the inter-war years, and youth mobilization during the 1960s intersected with the more long-term structural change in Swedish society. Long-term changes involved urbanisation, fundamental demographic changes, and the development of welfare institutions. This illustrates how processes of democratisation are not necessarily caused by a linear and synchronic development of democracy, but rather that the development of democratic institutions, such as the lowering of voting age and age of majority, must be explained by multiple causal factors. Our historical analyses demonstrate that the age categorisations and shifts in age limits cannot be attributed or reduced to the consequence of one-dimensional causal factors, but rather are dependent on the interaction between long- and medium-term structural changes as well as short-term episodes of change.

In conclusion, our study has shown how age as an analytical category can offer new insights into the emergence and development of democracy, a perspective that has often been lacking in studies of democratisation. A generation of Swedish citizens under the age of 18 is still excluded from being able to exercise the right to vote in elections to municipalities, county councils, and parliament. Yet today, calls for the lowering of the voting age and claims of political inclusion have grown internationally as young people have mobilized for intergenerational climate justice and democratic reforms, and against racism and oppressive violence. In this way, age remains a controversial yardstick for political citizenship. This historical review suggests that the discussions will continue.

Acknowledgements. This article is part of a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council 2018–2021 (VR 2017-00778). It is led by Fia Sundevall (Associate professor, Dept of Economic history, Univ. of Stockholm) and consists of an interdisciplinary group of scholars (Annika Berg, Martin Ericsson, Jonathan Josefsson, Mattias Lindgren, Julia Nordblad, Bengt Sandin).

Notes

1 Bengt Sandin and Jonathan Josefsson, “‘The reform that never happened’: a history of children’s suffrage restrictions”, in John Wall ed., *Exploring children’s suffrage: interdisciplinary perspectives on ageless voting* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

2 Richard Katz, *Democracy and elections* (New York, 1997); Alexander Keyssar, *The right to vote: the contested history of democracy in the United States* (New York, 2000).

3 Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Cambridge, 1990); Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens, *Development and crisis of the welfare state: parties and policies in global markets* (Chicago, 2001).

4 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, ‘Why did the west extend the franchise? Democracy, inequality, and growth in historical perspective’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115 (2000), 1167–99; Lars Berggren and Kjell Östberg, ‘Reformism eller revolution: arbetarrörelsen inför rösträttsbeslutet 1918–1919’, in Ulrika Holgersson and Lena Wängnerud eds., *Rösträttens århundrade: Kampen, utvecklingen och framtiden för demokratin i Sverige* (Göteborg, 2018); Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, ‘The historical turn in democratization studies: a new research agenda for Europe and beyond’, *Comparative Political Studies* 43, 8–9 (2010), 931–68; Christina Florin, *Kvinnor får röst: kön, känslor och politisk kultur i kvinnornas rösträttsrörelse* (Stockholm, 2006); Katz, *Democracy and elections*; Keyssar, *The right to vote*; Staffan Lindberg and Jan Teorell, ‘Demokratins utveckling i världen: tendenser under och efter rösträttens århundrade’, in Ulrika Holgersson and Lena Wängnerud eds., *Rösträttens århundrade*; Adam Przeworski,

'Conquered or granted? A history of suffrage extensions', *British Journal of Political Science* 39 (2009), 291–321.

5 Michael S. Cummings, *Children's voices in politics* (Oxford, 2020); Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its critics* (New Haven, 1989), 233; Francis Schrag, 'The child's status in the democratic state', *Political Theory* 3, 4 (1975), 441–57; John Wall, 'Can democracy represent children? Towards a politics of difference', *Childhood* 19, 1 (2012), 86–100; John Wall, *Give children the vote: on democratizing democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

6 Ibid. Katz, *Democracy and elections*; Carl Henrik Knutsen, Jan Teorell, Tore Wig, et al., 'Introducing the historical varieties of democracy dataset: political institutions in the long 19th century', *Journal of Peace Research* 56, 3 (2019), 440–51; Przeworski, 'Conquered or granted?'; Acemoglu and Robinson, 'Why did the west extend the franchise?'; Capoccia and Ziblatt, 'The historical turn in democratization studies'.

7 Ludvig Beckman, 'Rösträttsåldern och demokratins avgränsningsproblem', in Katarina Barrling and Sören Holmberg eds., *Demokratins framtid* (Stockholm, 2018), 81–110, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-163175>; Philip Cowley and David Denver, 'Votes at 16? The case against', *Representation* 141, 1 (2004), 57–62; Cummings, *Children's voices in politics*; Jan Eichhorn and John Bergh eds., *Lowering the voting age to 16: learning from real experiences* (Basingstoke, 2020); Daniel Hart and James Youniss, *Renewing democracy in young America* (New York, 2017); Aksel Sundström and Daniel Stockemer, 'Conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining youths' relative absence in legislatures', *Political Science & Politics* 54, 2 (2021), 195–201; Wall, *Give children the vote*; Tak Wing Chan and Matthew Clayton, 'Should the voting age be lowered to sixteen? Normative and empirical considerations', *Political Studies* 54, 3 (2006), 533–58.

8 Daniel Bray and Sana Nakata, 'The figure of the child in democratic politics', *Contemporary Political Theory* 19 (2020), 20–37; Samantha Goodwin, 'Children's oppression, rights, and liberation', *Northwestern Interdisciplinary Law Review* IV, 1 (2011), 247–302; Michael Cummings, *Children's voices in politics* (place?, 2020); Matthews Gareth B. and Susan M. Turner eds., *The philosopher's child: critical perspectives in the western tradition* (Rochester, 1998), 203–32; William T. Gormley, *Voices for children: rhetoric and public policy* (Washington, 2012); Jonathan Josefsson and John Wall, 'Empowered inclusion: theorizing global justice for children and youth', *Globalizations* 17, 6 (2020), 1043–60; Laura Lundy, 'In defence of tokenism? Implementing children's right to participate in collective decision-making', *Childhood* 25, 3 (2018), 340–54; Ann Quennerstedt, 'Children's rights research moving into the future – challenges on the way forward', *International Journal of Children's Rights* 21 (2013), 233–47; Didier Reynaert, Maria Bouverne-de-Bie, Stijn Vandeveld, 'A review of children's rights literature since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *Childhood* 16, 4 (2009), 518–34; Martin D. Ruck, Michele Peterson-Badali and Michael Freeman eds., *Handbook of children's rights: global and multidisciplinary perspectives* (New York, 2017); John Wall, *Children's rights: today's global challenge* (Lanham, 2017); Wall, *Give children the vote*.

9 Capoccia and Ziblatt, 'The Historical turn in democratization studies'.

10 See above endnote 5.

11 Beckman, 'Rösträttsåldern och demokratins avgränsningsproblem', 81–110.

12 See for example Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, *Political discourse analysis: a method for advanced students* (place, 2013). In our study we do not conduct a philosophical argument analysis by e.g. investigating the logical structures of arguments or assessing the plausibility or legitimacy of claims from a certain normative position. Rather, our study aims to scrutinize the content of arguments and ideologies, the role of political actors and societal structural factors in changing historical contexts over time.

13 With our analysis, we do not aim to examine the sustainability and legitimacy of arguments from a normative perspective, but instead to specify the content of the arguments, the roles of the actors and their historically defined and changing conceptual and ideological meanings. See for example Fairclough and Fairclough, *Political discourse analysis*.

14 The parliamentary records are retrieved through the digitized archive, <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/> (see also <https://www.riksdagen.se/en/documents-and-laws/>). The newspaper articles have been downloaded from the Royal Library's digital search engine <https://tidningar.kb.se/>. In our study of parliamentary records and newspaper reporting the central key words for retrieving and selecting documents have been 'ålder' (age), 'rösträttsålder' (voting age), 'rösträtt' (voting right), 'streck' (voting barrier) and 'valbarhet' (eligibility).

- 15 Katz, *Democracy and elections*, 218; V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v10, Varieties of democracy (V-Dem) project, 2020.
- 16 Ebba Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder: rösträttsstrecken i svensk politik 1900–1920* (Stockholm, 2005), 26.
- 17 Katz, *Democracy and elections*, 218; Przeworski, 'Conquered or granted?.'
- 18 Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder*, 27–35.
- 19 Bengt Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser* (Makadam förlag, 2023); Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1902:65, 3, 14–15, 18, 22–30.
- 20 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1906:55; Åke Holmbäck, 'Karl Staff: Anteckningar kring en biografi', *Svensk Juristtidning* 42 (1966), 42–4; Leif Lewin, *Konsten att bilda regering när ingen har majoritet* (Göteborg, 2020); Staffan Runestam, *Förstakammarhögern och rösträttsfrågan 1900–1907* (Uppsala, 1966); Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder*, 20; Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*.
- 21 Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*; Åselius, *Rösträtt med förhinder*, 20–21.
- 22 Carl Göran Andrae, *Revolt eller reform: Sverige inför revolutionerna i Europa 1917–1918* (Stockholm, 1998), 247–51.; Sverker Oredsson, *Nils Edén: Demokratins statsminister* (Stockholm, 2017), 238–48.
- 23 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition, urtima 1918:34; Andrae 1998, 253–60; Erik Palmstierna, *Orostid: Politiska dagboksanteckningar 2 1917–1919* (Stockholm, 1953), 245.
- 24 Annika Berg and Martin Ericsson eds., *Allmän rösträtt? Rösträttsbegreppningar i Sverige efter 1921* (Göteborg, 2021).
- 25 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition, urtima 1918:34, 42–7, passim. See also the problems this raised with regard to rural crofters and tenants who did not have a taxable income, for example Motion AK urtima 1918:53.
- 26 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition urtima 1918:34, 47.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK urtima 1918:58, 2; Motion FK urtima 1918:20; Motion AK urtima 1918:55; Motion AK urtima 1918: 56; Motion FK urtima 1918:16; Motion FK urtima 1918:18; Motion FK urtima 1918:19.
- 29 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK urtima 1918:16, 2–3. He thus accepted women's suffrage, and the proposal applied to all persons entitled to vote, but the pronoun used is 'he' – 'the qualified person is entitled to vote if he [sic] has attained the age of thirty-five', *ibid.*, 5.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Palmstierna, *Orostid*, 256–7.
- 34 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande, Tredje särskilda utskottet Urtima 1918:1, 27.
- 35 Vennerström's reservation, *ibid.*, 117.
- 36 Nils Stjernqvist, *Tvåkammartiden: Sveriges riksdag 1867–1970* (Stockholm, 1966).
- 37 Ingemar Norrlied, 'Kommunen som bolag? En studie i liberal rösträttspolitik före första världskriget', *Scandia* 36/1 (1970), 46–120.
- 38 Carl Göran Andrae, *Revolt eller reform: Sverige inför revolutionerna i Europa 1917–1918* (Stockholm, 1998).
- 39 Sven Anders Söderpalm, *Storföretagarna och det demokratiska genombrottet: ett perspektiv på första världskrigets svenska historia* (Lund, 1969).
- 40 Stjernqvist, *Tvåkammartiden*.
- 41 Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*.
- 42 Motion AK 1923:85, 86. A similar motion with these requirements was tabled in the Riksdag in 1919. Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1919:141, 142. See also: Vennerströms reservation till det särskilda utskottet vid urtiman 1918. Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande, Tredje särskilda utskottet Urtima 1918:1.
- 43 Sveriges kommunistiska parti (SKP) was formed in 1921 and consisted of a group of oppositional left-wingers excluded from the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SAP) in 1917. Up until 1921 the expelled members were organized under the name Sveriges socialdemokratiska vänsterparti (SSV) and consisted of a broad and heterogeneous political grouping.
- 44 Katz, *Democracy and elections*, 218; Przeworski, 'Conquered or granted?', 292ff.; V-dem database.
- 45 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1923:85, 86; Motion AK 1924:33, 34; Motion AK 1925:3, 4; Motion FK 1928:77, 78, 79; Motion AK 1928:8, 9; Motion FK 1928:134, 135, 136; Motion FK 1930:287; Motion AK 1930:445; Motion FK 1931:65; Motion FK 1932:219.

- 46 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1923:85, 86.
- 47 Ibid, 1.
- 48 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1923:85, 86, 4.
- 49 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK:85, 86; , Motion 1924 AK:7, 8; Motion 1928 AK:8, 9; Motion 1928 FK:77, 78, 79; Motion 1928 AK:134, 135, 136; Motion 1930 FK:187; Motion 1930 AK:445.
- 50 Ibid., 7.
- 51 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1923:14, 3; 1928:26, 10f.
- 52 Ibid.; Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1918:416, 8.; Sandin, *Politikens åldersgränser*; Lewin, *Konsten att bilda regering när ingen har majoritet*, 99–113.
- 53 Henrik Berggren, *Seklets ungdom: retorik, politik och modernitet 1900–1939* (Stockholm, 1995).
- 54 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1933:5; Motion FK 1933: 6; Utlåtande KU 1933:13, 2.
- 55 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1933:13, 3.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid. Reservations were made by the members of the Conservative party, the Liberal party, and the Farmers' League.
- 58 Riksdagstrycket, Motion 1936 AK:517, 7; Protokoll FK 1936:20, 12. Formerly known as the Swedish National Youth League (Sveriges nationella ungdomsförbund), the youth wing of the Conservative party, it was expelled from the party in 1934 on account of its anti-parliamentary and pro-Nazi stance. Eric Wärenstam, *Sveriges nationella ungdomsförbund och högern 1928–1934* (Stockholm, 1965). Berggren, *Seklets ungdom*.
- 59 Riksdagstrycket, Protokoll FK 1936:20, 9 ff.; *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 March 1936, 19.
- 60 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1936:29.
- 61 Ibid.; Riksdagstrycket, Protokoll FK 1936:20; Protokoll AK 1936:20.
- 62 Riksdagstrycket Protokoll AK 1936:20, 26–32.
- 63 Ibid., 27, 43.
- 64 Riksdagstrycket, Protokoll FK 1936: 20, 43.
- 65 Riksdagstrycket, Motion 1941 FK: 23. See also Beckman, 'Rösträttsåldern och demokratis avgränsningsproblem'.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1941:13.
- 68 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1945:353, 10.
- 69 Berggren, *Seklets ungdom: Retorik, politik och modernitet 1900–1939*.
- 70 Bengt Sandin, 'Infanticide, abortion, children, and childhood in Sweden, 1000–1980', in Paula Fass and Michael Grossberg eds., *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (London, 2013). Bengt Sandin, 'More children of better quality: pricing the child in the welfare state', in Anna Sparrman, Bengt Sandin and Johanna Sjöberg eds., *Situating child consumption: rethinking values and notions of children, childhood and consumption* (Lund, 2012).
- 71 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1958:154 B1, Motion AK 1958:219.
- 72 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1958:3, Proposition 1964:20, 199–212.
- 73 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1964:19, 24; Proposition 1964:140; Motion FK 1963:1; Motion AK 1963:1; Motion FK 1963:2; Motion AK 1963:3; Motion 1964:320; Motion AK 1964:305; Motion 1964:455; Motion AK:546; Motion AK 1964:470; Motion AK 1964:989; Motion AK 1964:3.
- 74 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1964:20, 201; Utlåtande KU 1964:19, 101.
- 75 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1964:140, Departementschefen.
- 76 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1958:219 B.?
- 77 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1964:455, 8; Motion AK 1965:76; Motion FK 1963:1; Motion AK 1963:1; Motion FK 1963:2; Motion AK 1963:3; Motion 1964:320; Motion AK 1964:305; Motion 1964:455; Motion AK:546; Motion AK 1964:470; Motion AK 1964:989; Motion AK 1964:3.
- 78 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK, 1965:61; Motion FK 1965:51.
- 79 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1964:455, 8; Motion AK 1965:76.
- 80 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1964:455, 9.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1965:76. 6–7.
- 83 Ibid. Riksdagstrycket Motion FK 1964:455, 9.
- 84 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1968:646, 12, 13.

85 Riksdagstrycket, Motion AK 1968:11, 59; FK 1968:899.

86 Riksdagstrycket, Proposition 1968:92.

87 Riksdagstrycket, Motion FK 1968:211; Motion 1968 FK:211; Motion 1968 FK:514; Motion AK 1968:637. Motion AK 1968:268; Motion AK 1968:1159; Motion AK 1968:638; FK 1968: 212; FK 1968:177; FK 1970:177; AK 1970:205.

88 Riksdagstrycket, Utlåtande KU 1970:9, 2–4.

89 Katz, *Democracy and elections*, 218, Przeworski, *Conquered or granted?*

French Abstract

Dans cet article, nous analysons l'évolution de l'âge pour accéder au droit de vote et celui pour l'éligibilité, en Suède au XXe siècle. Les arguments, les acteurs et les contextes sont passés en revue. L'âge s'est avéré être un critère important pour acquérir la citoyenneté politique tout en constituant une source majeure de conflits concernant le développement des institutions démocratiques. Cette réalité est largement négligée dans les recherches antérieures sur le suffrage universel. Les processus de démocratisation non seulement ont entraîné l'inclusion de nouveaux groupes de citoyens, mais ils ont aussi provoqué des exclusions. Notre étude met en lumière la nécessité de modifier la façon dont nous abordons la question des jeunes, la formation de la famille, les changements démographiques, les rapports de force intergénérationnels et les dilemmes constitutionnels.

German Abstract

In diesem Beitrag analysieren wir die Veränderungen im Mindestalter für das aktive und passive Wahlrecht in Schweden während des 20. Jahrhunderts und nehmen dazu Argumente, Akteure und Kontexte unter die Lupe. Das Alter erwies sich als wichtiger Gradmesser für politische Büregrrechte und als Quelle politischer Konflikte, die wichtig für die Entwicklung demokratischer Institutionen waren, was jedoch in der bisherigen Forschung zum allgemeinen Wahlrecht vernachlässigt wurde. Demokratisierungsprozesse führten nicht nur zur Inklusion neuer Gruppen von Staatsbürgern, sondern auch zu Exklusionen. Unsere Studie unterstreicht die Bedeutung der Veränderungen im Verständnis von jungen Leuten und der Familienbildung, von demographischen Verschiebungen, intergenerationellen Machtbalancen und konstitutionellen Zwangslagen.