

## *A Bedrock of Support? Trends in Welfare State Attitudes in Sweden, 1981-2010*

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### **Abstract**

*This article reports findings about Swedes' attitudes towards the welfare state from 1981 to 2010, building on data from the Swedish Welfare State Surveys. Attitudes towards social spending, willingness to pay taxes, attitudes towards collective financing and public organization, suspicion about welfare abuse, and trust in the task performance of the welfare state are tracked. Overall, there is a large degree of stability in attitudes, and where change is registered, it tends to go in the direction of increasing support. More people state their willingness to pay higher taxes for welfare policy purposes; more people want collective financing of welfare policies; and fewer people perceive extensive welfare abuse in 2010 than was the case in previous surveys. Class patterns change so that the salaried and the self-employed become more similar to workers in their attitudes. Hence, the unprecedented election loss of the Swedish Social Democrats in 2010, and the rise of the Moderates (conservatives) as the dominant party cannot be explained by changing attitudes towards the welfare state. Nor can any corrosive effects from increased marketization of the Swedish welfare state on public support for welfare policies be detected.*

### **Keywords**

*Welfare state; Social policy; Attitudes; Sweden; Class*

### **Introduction**

In this article, we report findings about Swedes' attitudes towards the welfare state over the course of the last quarter-century. The article is built on findings from the Swedish Welfare State Surveys (SWS), in which the attitudes towards different aspects of the welfare state have been tracked in repeated surveys of the adult population. We ask to what extent the views of the public about various aspects of the welfare state – such as social spending, collective financing, public organization, 'free-riding', etc. – have changed in recent times. We also show how class patterns in attitudes have changed. Class is perhaps the

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most fundamental division with regard to welfare policies. Contemporary class politics are to a large extent played out in the welfare policy arena, and Swedish politics have to a larger degree than perhaps anywhere else been organized on a class basis and with welfare policies as the focus (Svallfors 2004, 2006). An analysis of changing or persistent class patterns in attitudes is therefore key to understanding the formation of welfare attitudes in Sweden.

There are several reasons why these issues have recently become urgent. One is the changing political power balance in most European countries. Social democratic parties have done spectacularly badly in recent elections in a number of European countries, including Sweden. In the Swedish case, the election result in 2010 was the worst for the Social Democratic Party since 1915. It prompted both the resignation of the party leader and a far-ranging soul-searching within what used to be the strongest social democratic party in the world. It is reasonable to ask whether these electoral results and trends are to some extent a reflection of changing public attitudes towards the prime social democratic achievement: the welfare state.

Connected to this are the policy changes of what traditionally has been the main opponent of high taxes and encompassing social policies: the (conservative) Moderate Party. Re-launching themselves as 'the new workers' party' before the Swedish 2006 election, they embraced several key tenets of the social democratic welfare state and moved sharply towards the political middle ground in their rhetorical appeal. The change was very successful; the Moderate Party made significant gains and was able to oust the Social Democrats from power, in coalition with three smaller right-of-centre parties. In the 2010 election, they retained power in the midst of a major economic crisis. To what extent does this success reflect or affect welfare state attitudes in the population? Are the repeated electoral successes of the right-of-centre coalition indicative of slow changes away from the social democratic welfare state, perhaps especially among growing groups of middle-class voters? Or is it the very fact that the Moderates have come to embrace the welfare state that is the ground for their success? Since Sweden has been widely regarded as the archetypal welfare state, what lessons are to be drawn from these recent developments that should also be of interest outside this small north-European country?

Yet another reason to probe welfare attitudes at the current moment is that they allow us to address the issue of how economic crises affect attitudes towards the welfare state. As is presented, the series of surveys that we base our analyses on were conducted in the midst of two major downturns in both the Swedish and the world economy, as well as in less troubled times. It may be asked how attitudes towards welfare policies are affected by such downturns: Does support for the welfare state grow because of increased precariousness and insecurity, or does it decline because of concerns about costs and taxes? Or does it increase in some respects and decrease in others? Previous research has not been able to address these questions because of the dearth of broad long-term time series, but the current situation and survey series allow us to take a stab at them.

A final reason why these analyses now seem imperative is that the Swedish welfare state has gone through important changes over the last couple of

decades. This is most clearly visible in the increase of the number of private care and service providers (Bergh 2008a, 2008b; Bergh and Erlingsson 2009). In the 1980s, care and service was still almost exclusively delivered by the public sector. The situation is now considerably different, with a substantial proportion of schools, day-care centres and elderly care centres run by private enterprises (and to some extent co-operatives) rather than public organizations. Although such services are still fully funded by taxes and mandatory contributions, it still amounts to a substantive change of the social democratic welfare state. Add to this: (1) increased use of market-emulating mechanisms within the public sector; (2) a major pension reform which makes public pensions more dependent on achievements in the labour market; and (3) recent cutbacks in replacement levels in social insurance, and the result is a quite wide-ranging marketization of the Swedish welfare state over the course of the last two decades, much of it taking place under social democratic watch (Bergh and Erlingsson 2009).

The literature on the relation between institutions and attitudes tends to emphasize that institutional changes have important feedback effects on attitudes (Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993; Soss 1999; Soss and Schram 2007; Svallfors 2007). However, it is not clear what kind of feedback effects we should expect from the gradual marketization of the Swedish welfare state. Should we expect people to embrace further privatization of service delivery, once the alternatives to the public sector become more visible? Should we expect 'spillover' effects such that increased privatization of the *financing* of welfare services and social insurance also become more acceptable? Or should we, on the contrary, expect a longing to return to tried and time-worn ways to finance and handle the welfare state?

Previous analyses of trends in welfare state support tend to emphasize stability and strong support. Analyses from Sweden show basically very little change over the course of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, indicating strong support for high social spending, collective financing and public sector organization (Svallfors 1989, 1995, 1996, 2004). This picture of basic stability in welfare state attitudes is replicated elsewhere, and also with comparative data (see for example Roller 1992; Jenssen and Martinussen 1994; Evans 1998; Andress *et al.* 2001; Mau 2003; Arriba *et al.* 2006; Larsen 2006; summary in Svallfors 2010). But most of this research is by now quite dated, and new analyses are sought.

This is especially so because recent analyses of comparative attitude data show a decline in support for government intervention in Western Europe, combined with an increased support for such intervention in North America (Edlund 2009; Edlund and Svallfors 2011 forthcoming). Behind this trans-Atlantic convergence lie two more specific trends: decreased support for unemployment policies in western Europe, and increased demands for income redistribution in the USA and Canada (Edlund, 2009; Edlund and Svallfors 2011 forthcoming). Although the changes in the Swedish case are not dramatic, they do seem to suggest a somewhat weaker support for welfare state measures. However, the data on which these comparative analyses built are of a quite general kind, and it should be asked whether conclusions hold up when more specific policy questions are addressed.

## Dimensions of Support

One could ask how an 'optimal' public support for universal and public welfare policies should look. What conditions should be met in order for us to speak of a strong public support for the welfare state?

First, there should be trust that the welfare state can actually solve its tasks (Meuleman and Van Oorschot 2012 forthcoming). This trust could be expressed both as a belief about the general task performance of the welfare state and as a subjective feeling of being protected against the vicissitudes of market exposure and life-course risks. Second, since extensive welfare policies are expensive, there should be support for high social spending and for taxes used for welfare policies. And since the welfare state is a collective financial commitment, there should be support for collective forms of financing over private insurance and user fees for services. Third, there should be trust in, and support for, public authorities as providers of care and services. If there are widespread feelings that service providers other than public authorities are best suited, then there is a problem of support. Lastly, there should not be widespread suspicion about cheating or 'free riding' in the welfare state. If large numbers of people believe there are many others who abuse welfare policies, the legitimacy of the welfare state is threatened.

It should be emphasized that this support is 'optimal' only in the sense of offering as strong and underpinning a support for extensive welfare policies as possible. Such attitudes could well be completely dysfunctional in other respects: for example, when ingrained attitudes hinder necessary or desirable reforms of existing policies, or when they clash with other values and perceptions.

This exposé of the optimal support for the welfare state also suggests that attitudes towards welfare policies are best seen as multidimensional. People may well support the welfare state in some respects but have less positive attitudes towards other aspects. Previous research does indeed show that attitudes towards welfare policies are multidimensional. Both simple interpretations and descriptive/exploratory methods (Svallfors 1991, 1995; Taylor-Gooby 1982, 1983, 1985) and more advanced confirmatory analyses (Van Oorschot and Meuleman forthcoming 2011) point in the same direction.

In the Swedish case, strong support for various aspects of welfare policies has been combined with fairly widespread suspicion of abuse, and low trust regarding some aspects and policy areas of the welfare state (especially pensions and care for the elderly) (Svallfors 1995; Edlund 2006). So there are strong reasons to tap attitudes to the welfare state with a broad spectrum of questions. Trends are not necessarily the same across different dimensions and aspects of the welfare state.

## Data: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys

The analyses in this article build on Swedish Welfare State Surveys (SWS), a survey series where attitudes towards the welfare state have been investigated in replicated surveys since the mid-1980s (1986, 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2010). Some of the items for the first survey were selected from a previous survey of

attitudes towards taxation conducted in 1981 (Hadenius 1986; Laurin 1986), and some of the other survey items were included in a different survey in 2006. As will be obvious from the presentation, new questions have been added in later surveys. Depending on exactly which aspects of welfare attitudes are in focus, we have two to six measurement points covering eight to 29 years.

Surveys were administered by mail with repeated reminders and telephone follow-up. Response rates for the surveys vary between 76 per cent (1992) and 57 per cent (2002 and 2010).<sup>1</sup> The achieved samples contain no gender bias. In 2002 and 2010, response rates are lower among young people than among middle-aged and older people. Response rates also tend to be somewhat lower in the Stockholm region compared to the rest of the country, and slightly higher among higher income-earners. The achieved samples are overall very similar to the gross samples, although the 2002 and 2010 achieved samples contain slightly fewer young people than the gross samples. However, since the small biases are fairly consistent over time, and almost identical in 2002 and 2010, it seems unlikely that trends should be much affected by varying response rates. But as always, fairly little is known about those who chose not to participate.<sup>2</sup>

The survey questions will be described in the results section; they cover – by length of the time series – (1) attitudes towards welfare spending; (2) financing; (3) service delivery; (4) perceptions of abuse of welfare policies; (5) welfare risk perceptions; (6) individual willingness to pay taxes for welfare policies; and (7) perceptions about the task performance of the welfare state. In combination, they cover the ground of possible dimensions of welfare state support as outlined in the previous section.

The class variable will be indicated by the Swedish socio-economic classification (SEI). This classification scheme is based on the educational requirements for different kinds of occupations, as well as the division between blue-collar and white-collar occupations. It much resembles the well-known Erikson-Goldthorpe class schema (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 2000) and the European socio-economic classification (Rose and Harrison 2009). The SEI codes have been recoded into six classes: unskilled workers, skilled workers, lower non-manual, middle-level non-manual, higher-level non-manual and the self-employed.

## **Trends in Welfare State Support**

Starting with the aspect for which we have the longest time series, table 1 shows attitudes towards spending for different welfare policy purposes from 1981 to 2010. The table shows the percentage wanting to increase spending for a particular policy (+) and the percentage wanting to decrease it (–). The remaining percentage comprises respondents who want to keep spending at its present level or who cannot choose.

We find that there is a large degree of stability in attitudes towards spending. Support for increased spending grew substantially in the crisis of the 1990s – probably as a reaction to substantial cutbacks in the public sector at that time. The current crisis has not prompted similar reactions. We find a more mixed pattern, in which somewhat fewer people ask for increased spending on

Table 1

Attitudes to public expenditure. Answers to the question 'Taxes are used for different purposes. Do you think that the amount of tax money used for the following purposes should be increased, remain the same or decreased?'

Wanting to increase spending (+) (%) Wanting to decrease it (-) (%)	1981	1986	1992	1997	2002	2010
Medical and health care	+45 -3	+47 -4	+53 -4	+77 -2	+79 -2	+66 -2
Support for elderly (pensions, care for the elderly)	+30 -1	+37 -3	+60 -2	+70 -2	+70 -1	+70 -2
Support for families with children (child allowances, child care)	+31 -12	+43 -8	+32 -15	+41 -11	+34 -8	+27 -8
Housing allowances	+13 -36	+13 -36	+13 -38	+14 -34	+8 -48	+11 -25
Social assistance	+16 -22	+17 -22	+13 -26	+21 -21	+15 -21	+22 -15
Comprehensive and secondary schooling	+26 -7	+32 -2	+50 -1	+70 -1	+71 -1	+60 -1
Employment policies	+69 -6	+56 -10	+62 -7	+47 -20	+34 -19	+45 -9
State and local government administration	+2 -56	+2 -55	+3 -71	+3 -68	+3 -62	+3 -58
(n-minimum)	(949)	(978)	(1489)	(1297)	(1070)	(3754)

*Source:* The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

health care and schools, while more people want to increase spending on social assistance and employment policies. The dividing line between support for more universal programmes and for those aimed at ameliorating weak market positions has become somewhat less accentuated in the last survey round. The weakening support for employment policies between 1981 and 2002 was reversed in 2010, although support for higher spending is still far from what used to be the case in (the far better labour market situation of) the 1980s. In all, there are no signs of any large shifts in attitude towards spending for different policy purposes.

But does this general support for high welfare state spending combine with individuals' stated willingness to pay higher taxes for these purposes? It is easily conceivable that many people would like to increase spending but at the same time see themselves as unable to pay more taxes (Edlund and Johansson Sevä n.d.). In table 2, we find the proportion that 'definitely' or 'probably' would be willing to pay more taxes themselves if those taxes went to the specific purposes shown in the table.<sup>3</sup>

There are two remarkable findings in table 2. One is the sharply increased willingness between 2002 and 2010 to pay more taxes. While attitudes are very stable from 1997 to 2002, the proportion that is willing to pay more taxes for welfare policies jumps dramatically between 2002 and 2010. The second

Table 2

## Individual willingness to pay taxes for welfare policies

Willing to pay more taxes if they are used for . . . (%)	1997	2002	2010
Medical and health care	67	65	75
Support for elderly (pensions, care for the elderly)	62	60	73
Support for families with children (child allowances, child care)	42	39	51
Social assistance	29	25	40
Comprehensive and secondary schooling	62	61	71
Employment policies	40	31	54
(n-minimum)	(1290)	(1075)	(3800)

Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

Table 3

## Attitudes to financing welfare policies. Answers to the question 'How do you think the following services should be financed?'

'Primarily through taxes and employer contributions' (%)	1986	1992	1997	2002	2006	2010
Education	79	75	75	76	86	81
Health services	90	90	92	93	91	95
Child care	63	63	66	69	74	78
Care for the elderly	—	92	89	91	91	93
(n-minimum)	(970)	(1480)	(1297)	(1073)	(1172)	(3785)

Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

finding is that for all listed policies, the proportion that is willing to pay more taxes is actually *larger* than the proportion that wants to increase overall spending for that policy (cf. table 1). This was clearly not the case in earlier surveys and is indeed a surprising finding.

What about attitudes towards collective or privatized financing of care, services and social insurance? Tables 3 and 4 provide answers. In table 3, we find a large degree of stability in attitudes towards the financing of care and services. The table shows the percentage that chooses collective forms of financing before increased user fees (*'should to a larger extent be financed by fees from those who use the services'*). As shown, there is strong and stable support for collective financing. The one important trend in the table is the gradually increasing support for collective financing of child care.

In Table 4, we find stability and increasing support also when it comes to the collective financing of social insurance, even when respondents are presented with the prospects of lower taxes (the alternative option to the one in

Table 4

## Attitudes to financing of social insurance

'Should as now primarily be paid by taxes and employer contributions, which are kept at their present level' (%)	1992	1997	2002	2006	2010
Sickness insurance	78	74	79	74	85
Unemployment insurance	71	68	66	62	66
Pensions	77	73	74	72	81
(n-minimum)	(1501)	(1305)	(1078)	(1183)	(3801)

Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

Table 5

## Attitudes to service delivery. Answers to the question 'Who do you in general consider best suited to deliver the following services'

'State or local authorities' (%)	1986	1992	1997	2002	2006	2010
Education	91	87	85	87	86	85
Health services	91	85	90	87	80	83
Child care	55	57	62	68	70	69
Care for elderly	81	83	82	86	80	78
Social work	91	89	88	90	91	85
(n-minimum)	(953)	(1501)	(1301)	(1070)	(1162)	(3773)

Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

the table reads *should to a larger extent be paid by the individual through insurance fees, at the same time as taxes and employer contributions are lowered*). In fact, support for collective financing increases for all three insurance policies. The deteriorating support for unemployment insurance from 1992 to 2006 reverses, and the support for collective financing of sickness insurance and pensions increases substantially from 2006 to 2010.

What about delivery of care and services? Here we find the largest policy changes in recent times in the Swedish welfare state, as outlined in the introductory section. Does the increased privatization of care delivery lead to increased support for providers other than public authorities as best-suited service deliverers? Table 5 shows that this is hardly the case. It shows the proportion that chooses 'state or local authorities' when faced with a number of alternative service providers.<sup>4</sup> A large degree of stability is found in the table. The single clear trend is that support for public authorities as best suited to deliver child care increases over time (at the expense of 'family and relatives').

Table 6

Perceptions about abuse of welfare policies. Answers to the question 'How usual do you think it is that social benefits and services are used by people who don't really need them?'

'fully agree' (%)	1986	1992	1997	2002	2006	2010
Many of those using health services are not all that ill	14	17	10	9	13	9
Many of those receiving unemployment benefits could get a job if they only wanted to	42	29	28	34	30	20
Many of those receiving social assistance are not really poor	29	29	19	15	12	9
Many of those receiving housing allowances should move to smaller and cheaper dwellings	24	29	28	22	17	16
Many of those who report themselves ill are not really ill	27	28	14	16	21	11
(n-minimum)	(972)	(1489)	(1299)	(1074)	(1168)	(3792)

*Source:* The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

Yet another issue for which we have a long-term time series concerns suspicion of welfare abuse. Table 6 shows the percentage that 'fully agree' to certain propositions regarding abuse of welfare policies.<sup>5</sup> We should emphasize that these propositions not only cover outright cheating, but also more general perceptions of 'moral hazard' and 'over-consumption'.

As shown in table 6, we find a clear decline in welfare suspicion, first in the crisis of the 1990s, and then again in the last survey. Especially large changes are registered for the question of whether the unemployed really want a job, and whether those who report themselves sick are really sick. Suspicion about welfare abuse is now at its lowest level ever and substantially different from what was the case in the mid-1980s. These attitudinal trends are all the more striking since they coincide with a more extensive political and media debate about welfare cheating and abuse (Johnson 2010; Lundström 2011). Debate and reporting on welfare abuse increase, and yet suspicion among the public goes down. The worsening labour market situation and more stringent conditions in sickness insurance seem rather to drive perceptions in this regard.

Let us finally have a look at risk perception and evaluation of task performance of the welfare state. This question is in one sense prior to all the others, but is yet the one for which we have the shortest time series. In table 7, we find a large degree of stability in welfare-related risks from 2002 to 2010.<sup>6</sup> The most striking point about this is that figures are substantially lower in 2010 than in the last economic crisis. It is clearly not the case that the current economic crisis has made Swedes feel more insecure in relation to their own sustenance problems.

In table 8, we find an interesting mixture of increasingly positive evaluation of public care and services, and decreasing trust in the task performance of

Table 7

## Perceived risk for sustenance problems

How likely do you think it is that you . . . ('Likely' %)	1997	2002	2010
Will become unemployed within the next few years? (18–65 years)	20	14	16
Will not get the health care you need in case you get ill?	27	23	17
Will not manage a month on sick leave without serious economic consequences? (18–65 years)	30	21	20
Within the next few years have to abstain from visiting a doctor because you cannot afford it?	17	11	9
Have to move from your current accommodation within the next few years because you cannot afford it?	15	11	11
Receive a public pension that will not give you an acceptable living standard as pensioner?	56	47	45
(n-minimum)	(1281)	(1046)	(3737)

*Source:* The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

Table 8

## Task performance of the welfare state

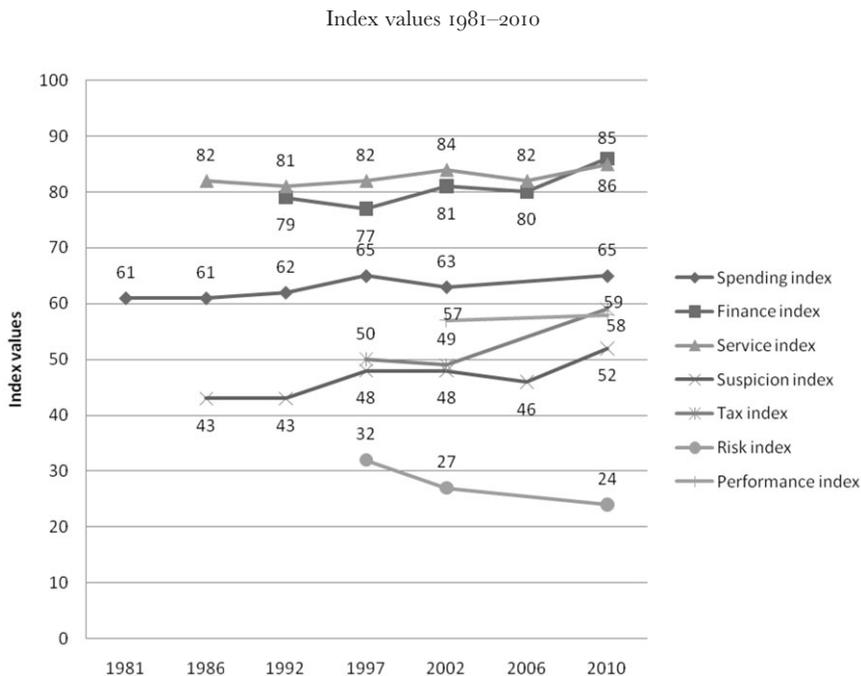
To what extent do you think the public sector in Sweden manages to . . . (%)	Very/fairly small extent 2002	Very/fairly small extent 2010
Provide good child care?	22	10
Provide a good education for children and young people?	34	20
Maintain a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed?	22	26
Maintain a reasonable standard of living for people on sick leave?	23	35
Provide the sick with the health care they need?	38	25
Guarantee a reasonable standard of living for old age pensioners?	49	48
Provide good care for the elderly?	51	46
(n-minimum)	(1075)	(3800)

*Source:* The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

social insurance.<sup>7</sup> Since the government after 2006 made spending on care and services a priority, and made conditions harsher in the social insurances (stricter eligibility and disqualifying rules, and increased individual costs for unemployment insurance), figures show that this shift is clearly recognized by the public. Trust in task performance is especially low for policies related to the elderly, something we could also see reflected in the high level of perceived risk in relation to pensions in table 7.

As a summary of trends, a number of summary indices were constructed, covering the different aspects of attitudes covered in the surveys. All indices

Figure 1



Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

were constructed so as to vary between 0 and 100; they all display satisfactory reliabilities (for detailed information, see Appendix). The seven resulting summary indices are the Spending index (100 = high support for spending), Tax index (100 = high willingness to pay taxes), Finance index (100 = high support for collective financing), Service index (100 = high support for state and local authorities), Suspicion index (100 = low suspicion), Risk index (100 = high perceived risk) and Performance index (100 = positive evaluation of task performance).

Figure 1 summarizes the trends. The overall impression is one of overwhelming stability. Focussing on the development over the 2000s, the statistically significant changes are the increased support for collective financing from 2006 to 2010, the decreased suspicion about welfare abuse for the 2006–10 period, and the increased willingness to pay taxes for welfare policies over the 2002–10 period. As already indicated by the previous tables, there are absolutely no signs of any weakening support for the welfare state in any respect.

### Class Differences

Are all classes affected similarly by the attitudinal trends observed in the previous section? Or do we find convergence or divergence among classes? In the last Swedish economic recession in the 1990s, a clear split within the

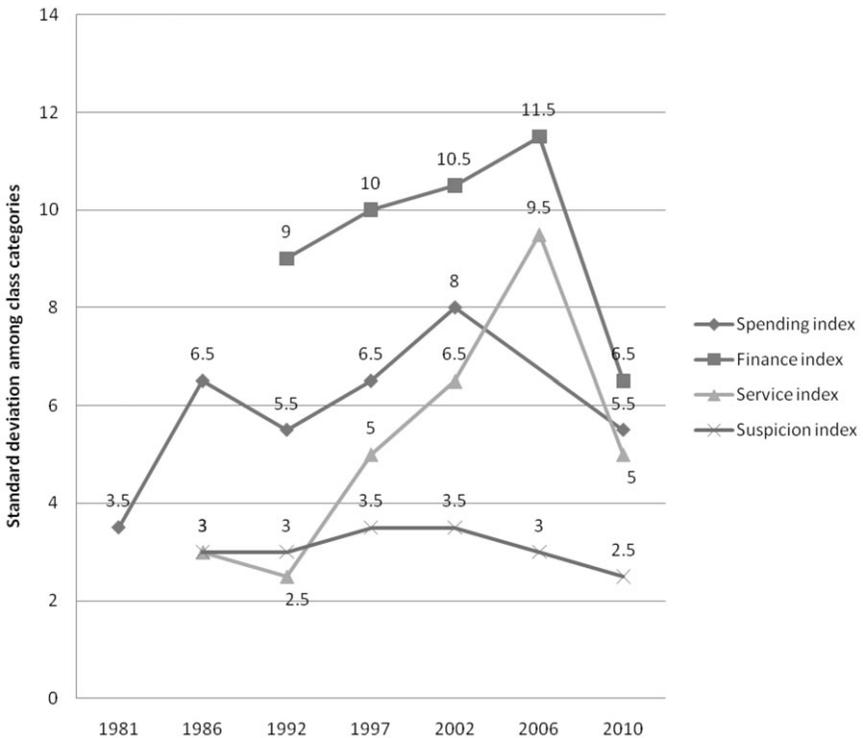
middle class could be detected in welfare policy attitudes. Lower- and middle-level non-manual groups increased their support for welfare policy spending and collective financing; in these respects, they became more similar to workers, while attitudes in the higher-level non-manual groups went in the other direction (Svallfors 1999). Do we find similar trends this time as well? As discussed in the data section, we constructed a class variable with six categories: unskilled workers, skilled workers, lower-level non-manuals, middle-level non-manuals, higher-level non-manuals and the self-employed.

We use values for the four indices from the previous section for which we have fairly long time series to indicate welfare state attitudes among classes. As a summary measure of the dispersion of attitudes between classes, we use the standard deviation of index values among classes.<sup>8</sup> This gives the best overall measure of how different attitudes are between classes.

As shown in figure 2, we find some fascinating trends. Overall class differences increase over the course of the 1990s and up to 2006, most clearly so for

Figure 2

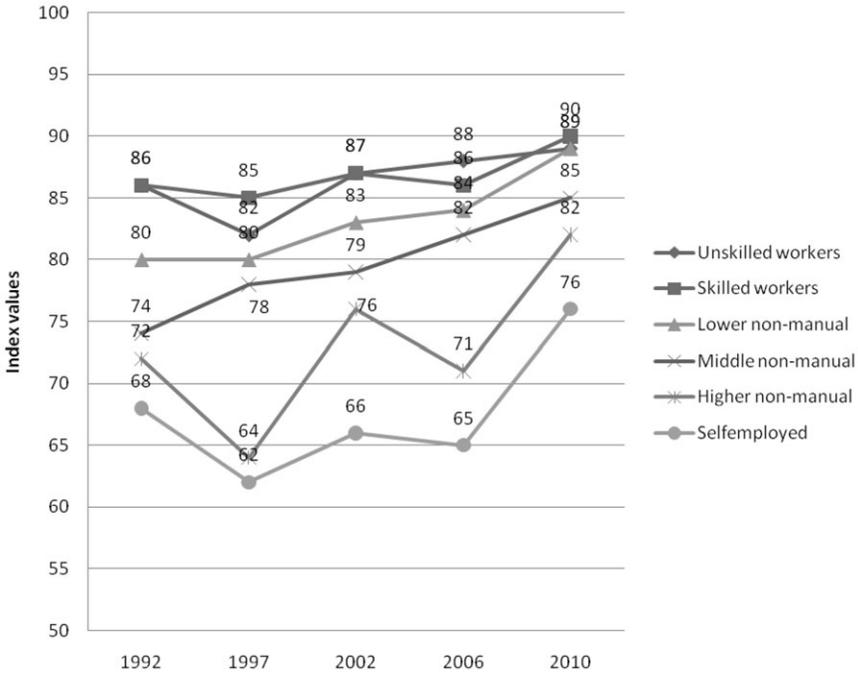
Class dispersion in index values



Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

Figure 3

Finance index 1992–2010, by class



Source: The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

the Service index.<sup>9</sup> In 2006, they are almost on a par with those found for the Finance index. The question of collective financing of welfare policies is the most class divisive issue, while class differences are fairly small regarding suspicion of welfare abuse.

In the last survey, however, there is suddenly a sharp decline in class differences. The dispersion in index values among classes declines substantially for all three indices where there was any substantial dispersion to begin with. Classes clearly differ much less in their attitudes towards welfare policies in 2010 than they did four to eight years earlier.

What patterns lie behind this decline in class differences? In figure 3, we show index values for all classes for one of the indices, the Finance index (similar but less clear-cut patterns occur for the Service and Spending indices). As shown, what happens over time is that the middle-class non-manual groups become gradually more similar to the workers. The lower- and middle-level non-manual groups increase index values continuously from 1992, and in 2010 the former group is on a par with the workers. The higher-level non-manuals and the self-employed are quite distinct from the other classes even until 2006,

but in 2010 their index values increase dramatically by ten percentage points. So the middle class is now firmly included among the supporters of collective financing of the welfare state.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what may be said about the state of Swedish attitudes towards the welfare state? First, there are absolutely no signs of any decreasing public support for welfare policies. Overall, there is a large degree of stability in attitudes, and where change is registered, it tends to go in the direction of increasing support. More people state their willingness to pay higher taxes for welfare policy purposes; more people want collective financing of welfare policies; and fewer people perceive extensive welfare abuse in 2010 than was the case in previous surveys. Class patterns change so that the salaried and the self-employed become more similar to workers in their attitudes.

Hence, it seems well founded to argue that the unprecedented loss of the Swedish Social Democrats in 2010 and the rise of the Moderates as the dominant party cannot be explained by changing attitudes towards the welfare state. It is rather the Moderates' shift towards the political middle ground, and their embracing of the key aspects of the Swedish welfare state, that have made their political fortune.

A clear indication of the fact that welfare policies are less of a party-dividing issue now than previously is that differences between Social Democratic Party sympathizers and Moderate Party sympathizers decline substantially in the last survey. The average distance in index values between Social Democrats and Moderates for the four indices for which we have a fairly long time series (cf. figure 2) was 25.3 in 1992, 22.8 in 1997, 25.3 in 2002, but only 16.9 in 2010. The decreased distance is particularly marked for the Finance index, from 35.5 in 2002 to 19.0 in 2010. This shrinkage of the distance is completely due to increased index values among Moderate Party sympathizers. Even supporters of an extensive and collectively financed welfare state now feel they can vote for the Moderate Party.<sup>10</sup>

In a longer-term perspective, what is indicated by the surveys is the gradual integration of the middle class in the welfare state. The universal welfare state was always predicated on integrating large sections of the salaried groups in the core of the welfare systems. But it was always combined with substantial resistance from the higher echelons of the class structure against higher taxes and the socialization of care and services. What seems to have taken place in the last few years is that since their main party – the Moderates – has embraced the core aspects of the welfare state, even the higher salaried and the self-employed have increasingly become supporters of a collective welfare state. The Social Democratic Party may be in dire straits electorally, but the social democratic welfare state is more popular than ever. However, the support for the welfare state is no longer automatically translated into support for the Social Democrats, once the Moderates shed their market-liberal leanings.

A few final conclusions regarding the broader aspect of welfare state development and attitudinal change are in order. One important observation is that the current crisis has not made Swedes feel more insecure. Perceived risks

and judgements about the task performance of the welfare state show little change from 2002 to 2010, and Swedes feel less exposed to risks themselves than was the case in the economic crisis of the 1990s. This is in itself a powerful testimony about the cushioning effects of the welfare state. At the same time, it may explain why the current crisis has not been translated into any decreasing support for the government in power. Swedes feel on average no more insecure in the midst of the crisis than they did previously; hence, there is little reason to blame the government.

At the same time, we should not forget that for some welfare state areas – especially those related to old age – trust is not impressive. Swedes clearly feel that the task performance of the welfare state leaves a lot to be desired in these respects. Whether this is indicative of any long-term trends is impossible to judge since we have no such data; the only thing we know is that this lack of trust has become neither worse nor better in recent years.

Taking into account the institutional changes in the Swedish welfare state over the last decade, where privatization of the service delivery of welfare policies has been substantial, we can observe that this does not seem to have any clear-cut effects on attitudes to private vs. public service delivery – at least not in the sense that we observe any shifts in the aggregate views about who is the best care and service provider. Whether this is the result of different people changing attitudes in different directions, so that overall changes cancel out, or a true non-effect of the increased privatization is hard to judge.<sup>11</sup> Nor do we find any tendencies for increased support for private financing, so any ideas about spillover effects to other aspects of the welfare state are unfounded. Neither the hopes of the market-liberal right nor the fears of the political left get much support from these findings.

Hence, no corrosive feedback effects from changing welfare policies may be detected in the Swedish public. It seems rather that the changes in institutional practices and political rhetoric that have taken place in the 1990s and 2000s have further strengthened middle-class support for the welfare state. In an ironic twist of fate, market-emulating reforms of the welfare state and the changed political rhetoric of the political right-of-centre completed the full ideological integration of the middle class into the welfare state. The electoral base for any resistance against a high-tax, high-spending, collective welfare state now looks completely eroded. While the Social Democratic Party suffers, the social democratic welfare state thrives.

## **Appendix: Attitude Indices**

The individual items in tables 1 to 8 were summarized into seven separate indices in order to create summary measures of the development over time and to show class differences in attitudes.

The first of these, the Spending index, includes six items on increasing or decreasing public spending on medical and health care, support for the elderly, support for families with children, housing allowances, social assistance, and employment policies (table 1).<sup>12</sup> The responses have been coded in such a way that all those who want to see spending increased are assigned a value of 2; those who want it to remain unaltered, a value of 1; and those who

Table A1

Index distributions and reliabilities, 2002 and 2010

	Mean		Standard deviation		Cronbach's alpha	
	2002	2010	2002	2010	2002	2010
Spending index	62.9	65.0	18.6	18.0	0.70	0.69
Tax index	48.8	59.1	25.1	23.9	0.90	0.89
Finance index	80.8	85.6	25.8	20.9	0.75	0.67
Service index	83.9	84.6	24.2	24.6	0.69	0.72
Suspicion index	47.9	52.3	21.3	20.9	0.81	0.82
Risk index	26.9	23.7	19.9	19.0	0.75	0.75
Performance index	59.1	58.5	18.6	18.0	0.84	0.84

*Source:* The Swedish Welfare State Surveys.

want to see it decreased, a value of 0. The Finance index contains six items on how the following welfare services and social insurances should be financed: health care, childcare, care for the elderly, sickness insurance, unemployment insurance and pensions (tables 3 and 4).<sup>13</sup> These items have been coded so that those who want to see no change in collective financing are assigned a value of 1, and those who want to see a greater element of private financing, a value of 0. The third index, the Service index, includes all five questions about who is best suited to manage the following welfare services: education, health services, childcare, care for the elderly and social work (table 5). These have been coded so that those who answered 'state and local government' are assigned a value of 1, and all others, a value of 0. The Suspicion index contains all the abuse items (table 6), recoded into 0 (fully agree), 1 (partly agree; partly disagree) and 2 (fully disagree) and summed. The Tax index contains all six items related to individual willingness to pay taxes (table 2), recoded into 0 ('no, definitely not'), 1 ('no, probably not'), 2 ('yes, probably') and 3 ('yes, definitely'), and then summed. The Risk index contains the six items related to perceptions of welfare related risks (table 7). These were recoded into 0 ('very unlikely'), 1 ('fairly unlikely'), 2 ('fairly likely') and 3 ('very likely'), and summed. The Performance index is composed of the items related to the perceived task performance of welfare policies (table 8). They were recoded into 3 ('very large extent'), 2 ('fairly large extent'), 1 ('fairly small extent') and 0 ('very small extent'), and summed.

Finally, all index values have been divided by their respective maximum value and multiplied by 100 to give more easily comparable indices ranging between 0 and 100.

An exploratory factor analysis (which may be obtained from the author) shows that a seven-factor solution orders the items in the way suggested by the theoretical considerations.<sup>14</sup> This result is very stable from 2002 (which was the first survey where all the items in question were included). And as shown in table A1, the resulting seven indices display satisfactory reliability measures

(Cronbach's alpha). Only results for 2002 and 2010 are displayed, but reliability measures for previous years are quite stable and available from the author.

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## Notes

1. For further descriptions of non-responses, see (Svallfors 1989: Appendix A; Svallfors 2003: Appendix A; Johansson Sevä 2010). The gross samples varied from 1500 (1981, 1986), to 2000 (1992–2006) and 7000 (2010).
2. No weighting for correction in response rates has been applied. Weighting rests on the unproven assumption that those in a particular population segment that chose to participate are very similar to those who chose not to participate. Therefore, in the case of attitude surveys we do not know if weighting makes the sample more or less representative. In practice, weighting for the slight age bias and the even smaller region biases in the 2002 and 2010 surveys hardly affects results at all.
3. Not shown in the table is therefore the percentage that 'probably not' and 'definitely not' would be willing to pay more taxes, and those who do not know. This question was not introduced in the SWS until 1997.
4. In addition: 'private enterprises', 'family and relatives', 'cooperatives', 'trade unions' and 'charity organizations'.
5. The response scale: 'fully agree', 'partly agree', 'partly disagree', 'fully disagree'. Trends remain the same even if 'fully' and 'partly' agree are merged.
6. The response scale: 'very likely', 'fairly likely', 'fairly unlikely', 'very unlikely', 'don't know'.
7. Response scale: 'very large extent', 'fairly large extent', 'fairly small extent', 'very small extent', 'don't know'.
8. In multivariate analysis this is known as the Kappa Index (Brooks and Svallfors 2010; Hout *et al.* 1995).
9. The trends for the 1980s and 1990s are fascinating against the background of the 'death of class' arguments that were espoused in the very years that class differences in attitudes actually increased (cf. Pakulski and Waters 1996; Kingston 2000).
10. Explaining what then explains the misfortunes of the Swedish (and European) social democratic parties' misfortunes in recent elections lies beyond the scope of the present article. But a key aspect seems to be the failure to address rising and persistent unemployment in any convincing manner. This is reflected in declining confidence in the competence of the Swedish Social Democrats in the field of (un)employment, which has already started in the 1990s (Martinsson 2009: Chapter 5). In the Swedish case, a number of shorter-term issues related to political leadership and the relative attraction of the coalition partners added to the electoral disaster.
11. There are no clear changes in the overall dispersion of any of the index values, indicating that differences among the population at large have neither increased nor declined.
12. The other spending items (education, administration) are too weakly correlated with the items in the index to be included in a summary measure.
13. The item of financing of education is too weakly correlated with the other financing items to be included in a summary measure.

14. Using the conventional criterion of Eigenvalue  $> 1$ , ten different components are discerned. The spending items then divide into two components (spending on health care, elderly and families with children vs. spending on social assistance, housing allowances and employment policies), and the financing items divide into financing of services vs. financing of social insurances. Items related to children load on a last separate factor. However, using these shorter indices results in measures with lower reliabilities and yields no additional information to what is displayed in figures and text.

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