

The forgotten revolution: Challenging conventional wisdom on Sweden's transition to democracy

Johan Karlsson Schaffer, PhD
Norwegian Centre for Human Rights
University of Oslo, Norway
j.m.karlsson@nchr.uio.no

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Abstract

A long, established tradition suggests that Sweden's process of democratisation was characterised by its gradualness and reformism. In contrast to other countries, such as Denmark, Sweden did not have an abrupt, democratic revolution, this tradition holds. In this paper, I argue that this conventional view is flawed: In the course of a decade in the early twentieth century, Sweden went from being one of the least democratic countries in Europe to become a full-fledged, stable democracy. This signifies a fast, dramatic process of democratisation – a democratic revolution.

The paper proceeds in four parts: First, I review the established conventional view of Swedish democratisation. Second, I present quantitative comparative data and historical evidence that seem to falsify the conventional view, and indeed indicate that Sweden's democratisation was anything but slow and gradual. Third, I explore some reasons why the conventional view has gained hold, looking both at the way in which academic researchers have reached the conventional conclusion and how the conventional view might be understood in relation to the victorious parties in the struggle to gain recognition and legitimacy. In the concluding part, I consider how this historical narrative lives on in present-day politics, discussing how Swedish development aid seeks to export this historically faulty myth that successful democratisation must be slow and gradual, rather than revolutionary.ⁱ

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Conventional wisdom on Sweden's democratisation

Existing research confirms the generally held opinion that Sweden became democratic through a stepwise, gradual process, from constitutional reforms in 1809 up to the breakthrough of democracy roughly a century later. Moreover, Sweden is contrasted to the case of Denmark, which, researchers in this tradition argue, did go through a revolutionary process of democratisation in the early twentieth century, and compared to the case England, with its stepwise democratisation over the course of the nineteenth century. T.A. Tilton summarises this view, which has been echoed almost verbatim by many scholars after him:

“Swedish democracy does not owe its origins to a revolution, but to a series of reform acts in 1866, 1909, and 1918 extending the franchise in a way reminiscent of the English Reform Acts.”¹

Some even argue that Sweden's democratisation is made exceptional by its slow, continuous and gradual transition to democracy: “Swedish history has been marked by a remarkable continuity, which has enabled the country to democratize in a very gradual manner.”²

Stein Rokkan has reinforced this view of Swedish democratisation. He argues that the development from autocracy to democracy was gradual in Sweden, and contrasts it to Denmark, where the process was more sudden and abrupt. Rokkan even claims to find a formula of democratic transitions, whereby a strong and vivid representative tradition, such as in Sweden, leads to piecemeal, stepwise transition to democracy, whereas a sustained period of autocracy often leads to a sudden, revolutionary expansion of political rights.³ Knudsen & Rothstein similarly argue that the reason for the slow, gradual democratisation of Sweden might be found in its long tradition of representation:

“The old system based on the representation of estates (including peasantry) formed the foundation of a slow, step-by-step democratization (1866, 1907, 1917).”⁴

All in all, while Sweden's transition to democracy was completed in the second decade of the twentieth century, prevailing research locates the causes of the allegedly slow and gradual transition to democracy in historical developments dating back to early modern representative institutions, presumably king Gustav Vasa's *Riksdag* assemblies in Västerås in 1527 and 1544, and even further back to a medieval tradition of independent, self-owning peasants as a form of ancient proto-democratic equality.

The notion, that Sweden's transition to democracy was exceptionally gradual and piecemeal, regularly reproduced not only in scholarly works citing Tilton, Rokkan and others, but also in university text books, hence reproducing this idea to new generations of politics students, as well as in official historical narratives.

¹ Tilton 1974

² Knudsen & Rothstein 1994

³ Petersson 1995: 19

⁴ Knudsen & Rothstein 1994

As a rather sole voice dissenting to this dominant narrative of piecemeal reform, Dankwart Rustow, dubbed the father of transitology, argued some 40 years ago that Sweden's transition to democracy was "late and rapid."⁵ While his claim better matches historical evidence, I shall argue, it has been eclipsed by the gradualist narrative about Sweden's transition in both academic and official discourse.

Thus, from the mainstream of existing literature, we can extract two propositions about Sweden's democratisation:

1. Sweden's transition to democracy was a slow, gradual process, following a series of reform acts in 1866, 1907 and 1917, which successively expanded the franchise.
2. Unlike Denmark, Sweden did not undergo a democratic revolution. Rather, Sweden's process of democratisation is similar to England's.

In the next section, I shall challenge both of these claims, arguing that quantitative comparative data falsify both of them, and that Sweden's transition to democracy should rather be understood as a revolutionary process. (By revolution, I simply refer to the pace and quality of change: In this general sense, a revolution is a fast and thorough process of change from one state to another, as distinguished from slower, gradual processes of change. It need not imply violent overtake of power, mass mobilisation, etc.)

Sweden's democratisation in comparative retrospective

Thus far, I have showed that conventional academic wisdom holds that Sweden's democratisation was a slow, gradual process stretching over a period of more than 50 years, comparable to England's democratisation, but not to Denmark's. However, this narrative hardly matches empirical data. Figure 1 below shows the degree of autocracy/democracy (Polity IV) for twelve European countries between 1800 and 1930.

[Figure 1 about here]

As late as in 1906, Sweden was one of the least democratic countries in Western Europe. This is where the transition to democracy begins. Within a decade, roughly, full-scale democracy is introduced and consolidated. What is this, if not a democratic revolution?

Moreover, the data fits poorly with the second conventional claim, which suggests that Sweden's transition to democracy was similar to the UK's, and quite different from Denmark's abrupt, revolutionary transition. Denmark's democratisation between 1900 and 1915 and Sweden's transition a few years later are similar, in that a giant leap in terms of democracy is taken within the course of a few years, while the United Kingdom displays a completely different path to democracy: a gradual, stepwise process of successive reforms over the course of a century, with important reforms being made in the 1830s, the 1870s and around 1920.

⁵ Rustow 1971: 12

Extension of the franchise

The more specific claim that the franchise in Sweden was expanded gradually is dubious, too. From 1866, franchise was not extended significantly in Sweden until 1907–1919/21, and by then, it expands dramatically – the revolutionary phase in Sweden’s democratisation. As we can see in Table 1, out of twelve Western European countries, Sweden had the smallest average total franchise in the period of 1881–1914. The electorate consisted of only 15,2 percent of the population aged 20 or older.

Table 1. Average total franchise (electorate as percentage of population 20 and older).⁶

<i>Country</i>	<i>Till 1880</i>	<i>1881–1914</i>	<i>1920–1938</i>
Finland	n.a.	66,2	74,4
Denmark	25,7	29,2	85,9
Netherlands	5,0	17,8	82,5
Austria	n.a.	38,0	90,6
Norway	8,8	55,1	89,3
Sweden	10,2	15,2	79,5
United Kingdom	8,6	26,4	80,4
France	19,1	42,4	39,9
Germany	35,9	37,6	52,1
Italy	3,6	35,0	52,1
Belgium	2,8	24,2	45,3
Switzerland	n.a.	37,7	41,0

In the elections of 1905, 31 percent of the adult male population was enfranchised. In 1909, the franchise was expanded to encompass almost all men aged 24 or older, which increased the electorate from 15,8 percent to 32,8 percent of the adult population. In 1917, suffrage was expanded again to all adult men, and for the first time in the 1921 elections, adult women were also granted suffrage. These reforms resulted in expanding the number of citizens empowered to participate in elections from 218,000 to 1,747,000. Thus, Sweden came late in the first wave transitions to democracy, but once the process started, it was fast.

Thus, the transition to democracy in Sweden was rather like a ketchup effect: While they might have prepared the ground for democratisation, the liberal reforms of the nineteenth century had done little to democratise the country. In the early years of the twentieth century, Sweden was still one of the least democratic countries of Europe. And then everything changed abruptly in the

⁶ Aidt et al. 2006

course of just a decade, where the extension of the franchise successively fuelled further reforms, in an almost self-propelling process.

Revisiting the revolution: From 1905 to 1917

As these quantitative measures might seem too crude, it might be helpful reconsidering Sweden's path to democracy. What happened during that dramatic period? As Dankwart Rustow has argued, before the 1890s, there was a broad consensus in support of the existing oligarchic regime, a consensus which was shattered in the decades up to 1920 as "democracy vs oligarchy became the major theme of political conflict."⁷ After that, however, a new consensus on democracy was established relatively quickly. The transition, thus, is a shift from a steady state to another.

In a deeper sense, a number of potentially conflictual issues were also uncontested and agreed on. Territorial integrity, linguistic and religious unity, and a common, centralised state bureaucracy created a strong sense of national unity. Moreover, Sweden had a tradition of rule of law, liberal legislation, representation and separation of powers. While these might factors might be important preconditions for a democratic transition, "They are not, however, enough to explain it — precisely because they were traditions that had been in effect long before the transition to democracy began."⁸ Likewise, Sweden's rapid industrialisation and unprecedented economic growth after 1870 facilitated democracy, but not because economic growth in itself leads to democratisation, but because an increasing number of people fulfilled the plutocratic criteria for suffrage of 1866.⁹

After the elections to the Second Chamber of the Riksdag in 1905, liberals and social democrats together gained a majority, and king Oscar II saw no other option than to appoint Karl Staaff, leader of the liberal Party, as Prime Minister, rather than the incumbent Christian Lundeberg, who had lead the coalition cabinet which successfully disintegrated the union with Norway. While Staaff's cabinet was not excessively partisan, the main issue on his agenda was suffrage reform. In 1906, Staaff presented his proposal to extend suffrage to all adult men, but also to change the electoral system in cities to two-tiered majority elections in single-mandate constituencies. Staaffs proposal faced numerous alternative motions, the most important of which proposed, instead, proportional elections for both the Second and First Chamber. As conservatives retained a majority in the First Chamber, Staaffs proposal fell and his cabinet resigned. Sensationally, however, conservatives were now united — and in favour of electoral reform; less radical, no doubt, than Staaff's, but unthinkable for conservatives only a few years earlier. Conservative Arvid Lindman was appointed PM, with a mandate from the Riksdag to carry through an electoral reform which gave virtually all adult men equal suffrage in Second Chamber elections.

⁷ Rustow 1971: 13f

⁸ *ibid*: 15

⁹ *ibid*: 19: "The fact that for some of them this inclusion seemed precarious — reversible if bad times reduced their wages below the suffrage limit of 800 kronor — is likely to have sharpened their sense of urgency."

The electoral compromise of 1906 increased the number of voters by half a million in the 1911 Riksdag elections, which dealt conservatives a severe blow, and an equal success for the social democrats. Taking the consequences of this vote of confidence, the Lindman cabinet resigned, and king Gustav V saw no other alternative than to grudgingly appoint Staaff as prime minister, in coalition with social democrats. Eventually, Staaff resigned in protest, as the king mobilised farmers against him in the so-called courtyard crisis in 1914. After another conservative cabinet and the elections of 1917, liberals and social democrats again formed a coalition government, which introduced universal and equal suffrage, and established the practice of parliamentarism.

Hence, in retrospect, the power shift in 1905 opened for a radical redistribution of power in Sweden, which terminated in the breakthrough of democracy after 1917. While political conflicts were hard and sharp, *l'ancien regime* was not a monolithic entity but dynamic, as Rustow points out. On a number of successive issues before and after the transition, interest coalitions changed. For instance, while farmers were united in opposition against industrialists and state officials in the protracted struggle over *Indelningsverket*, agriculturalist and livestock farmers were on opposite sides in the subsequent struggle over free trade. Likewise, progressives were a conditional and contingent coalition: While liberals allied with social democrats in several cabinets and in campaigns for electoral reform, the general strike of 1909 indicated the new conflict between, on the one hand, conservatives and liberals and, on the other hand, social democracy that would dominate much of the century.¹⁰ After the breakthrough of democracy, a new consensus formed relatively fast. While conservatives went from opposition to support for democracy in less than a generation, social democrats quickly abandoned their more extreme standpoints (pacifism, republicanism and anti-clericalism).¹¹

While telling the story of Sweden's transition in this way should not be news to anyone, the myth of a gradual, piecemeal transition seems so strong that scholars fail to acknowledge it. This should lead us to ask why this myth remains so dominant, which I address in the next section.

Some possible reasons for the gradualist myth

Having so far argued that the conventional wisdom about Sweden's democratisation a century ago is historically inaccurate, let us first ponder some tentative explanations for why this flawed historical narrative has gained hold, and then, in the concluding setting, consider its present day relevance.

Confusing modernisation with democratisation

As far as academic research is concerned, one explanation might be that researchers have confused modernisation with democratisation. As crucial reforms gradually leading to democracy, this historical explanation might emphasise, in due order, the constitution of 1809, which put an end to

¹⁰ Hadenius et al. 1993: 59f

¹¹ Rustow 1971; Olsson 2000

autocracy and introduced a measure of power-sharing between the king and the Riksdag; the liberal reforms of the 1840s, expanding press freedom and economic freedom; the representation reform of 1866, which replaced the old Riksdag of Four Estates with a two-chamber parliament; and the electoral reforms of 1907. On this account, Sweden went from autocracy in the early nineteenth century to modern constitutional democracy about a century later, and can pride itself to have one of the longest traditions of constitutional and representative government.¹²

Reforms during the nineteenth century might have transformed Sweden into a modern state, and thus serve as prerequisites for modern democracy, by creating the institutional hardware necessary for further modernisation. But modernisation, such as the emergence of a constitutional state, cabinet governments and parliamentary representation, does not necessarily signify democratisation.¹³ Introducing this set of institutions is not a sufficient condition for democratisation. Indeed, many modern states have had constitutional rule, cabinet governments, separation of powers, and parliamentary representation, perhaps even a party system, while being all but democratic (in terms of free, fair and equal elections with universal suffrage, for example). Singapore comes to mind as a contemporary example of a state of this kind. The presence of constitutionalism, cabinet government, separation of powers and parliamentary representation are probably necessary features of modern democracy, but they are not sufficient conditions, and modern democracy does not necessarily result from either or all of these institutions. Indeed, precisely because these institutions had been in effect for decades before the transition to democracy began in Sweden, they are not enough to explain the sudden phase shift in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁴

This conclusion might lead us to reconsider the concept of democracy employed in previous research and the way that it is operationalised in the indicators used above. My argument seems to presuppose that the extension of the franchise to encompass virtually all adults is a defining feature of a democracy, which seems to be a fairly accepted criterion for democracy.¹⁵

The victor's history: A new regime mobilising tradition in order to justify itself

But not only researchers have shared the view that Swedish democracy was introduced slowly and gradually – this narrative has also gained widespread hold in official discourse. It seems to be a puzzle just as intriguing: Why would official history claim that Sweden's democratisation was a slow, extended, and stepwise process, and consequently play down the importance and novelty of the democratic revolution?

As a tentative explanation, the reformist narrative plays a particular role for the new, democratic regime – especially for the Social Democrats – and its search for legitimacy. By emphasising a history of stepwise, gradual reforms, the new regime can gain legitimacy and connect to historical tradition, conjuring up medieval egalitarian traditions etc. For the main victor, the Social Democratic Party, the reformist narrative bestows legitimacy to their pretensions for the role as a state-

¹² Cf. Rustow 1971: 15

¹³ Navari 2007

¹⁴ Cf. Rustow 1971: 15

¹⁵ Dahl 1989

carrying party, which they successfully held for most part of the twentieth century. As Åsa Linderborg concludes in her historiographical study of how the SAP has written its own history: “By drawing a straight line from the self-owning peasant to the SAP, the party transmits the message of being an integrated part of a millennial Swedish history.”¹⁶ Hence, the gradualist myth serves as an ironic trope: We say one thing (stability, order, piecemeal reform) in order to (retrospectively) justify its opposite (revolution, phase shift, radical break-off).

But the losers – the ancient regime, the conservatives who lost power (almost for good) – could also use the narrative of gradualness and reformism to tone down the radical newness of democratisation: If it was just a stepwise process, founded in medieval Swedish traditions of representation and self-owning peasants, it couldn’t be all that bad.¹⁷ In this light, democratisation – understood as piecemeal constitutional reform – might even seem to confirm a certain conservative moderation. As Linderborg points out, bourgeois intellectuals, seeking to find their place in the new order, participated in writing social democratic reformism into Swedish history.

Of course, there are elements of Swedish history that confirm the narrative of stepwise reform, its success being anchored in a medieval system of representation and proto-democratic equality. But there are also counteracting tendencies. In many ways, nineteenth century Sweden was an exceptionally backwards country, and on top of that highly unequal; socially and economically as well as in terms of civil liberties and political rights. The point here is not to disprove the dominant, gradualist narrative by pointing to historical facts, but rather to argue that precisely this opposing narrative is sometimes used to justify (social) democracy, too: The glaring socio-economic and political inequalities of pre-democratic Swedish society represent the historical opposite of the social democratic welfare state. According to this narrative, there is anything but continuity and a gradual change from pre-democratic Sweden to democracy.

Moreover, historical hindsight might have blurred the distinction between the reformist *strategy* of the actors pushing for democratisation and the actual *process* of democratisation. While liberals and social democrats in Sweden were moderate, pragmatic and reformist (as were their allied social movements), the process was not necessarily piecemeal and gradual per se. As Sheri Berman and others have argued, the Swedish Social Democratic party embraced revisionist social democracy wholeheartedly and, from its inception in 1889, had a flexible and undogmatic view of Marxism.¹⁸ Unlike more orthodox socialist parties on the continent, Swedish social democrats were willing to cooperate with other reformist groups and to use the existing institutions of the authoritarian, bourgeois state instrumentally for purposes of social and political change, rather than simply to wait for capitalism to run its course and produce its own demise. This pragmatism also became a successful strategy for social democrats in power for most part of the twentieth century. But just because Liberals and the SAP pursued a reformist and pragmatic strategy, that does not mean democratisation per se was gradual and slow, too, as I have argued here. Rather, one could argue that

¹⁶ Linderborg 2001: 458

¹⁷ cf. Olsson 2000

¹⁸ Berman 2006

the SAP's official reformist narrative has served to discipline the party cadre and the working class and to shut out revolutionary tendencies.¹⁹

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the conventional wisdom of Swedish democratisation as a gradual process stretching over the course of half a century, or more, is inaccurate. A look at comparative data rather suggests that Sweden went from being one of the least democratic countries in Western Europe to a full-fledged democracy in little more than a decade.

So why does it matter? First, it shows that we might have to reconsider conventional wisdom. Researchers simply seem to reproduce the idea that Sweden's democratisation, unlike Denmark's but like the United Kingdom's, was a slow, gradual process, although available quantitative comparative data and historical evidence tell the opposite story. We need to reconsider established knowledge about one of the most important events in Sweden's modern history: The transition to democracy.

Getting Sweden's transition to democracy right is, however, not just a matter of academic or historic relevance, since the conventional view of a slow, gradual process continues to inform official history and identity-making in Sweden. One area where this becomes evident – and problematic – is Swedish foreign aid and democracy promotion. Governments engaging in democracy promotion abroad tend to promote their own model of democracy and democratisation, under the presumption that democratising developing countries ought to build democracy in a manner similar to the own nation.²⁰ Sweden, too, engages in this sort of democracy promotion, but interestingly, it has been founded on the historical myth of slow, gradual, piecemeal democratic reform, rather than the actual process of a swift shift to democracy over the course of a decade. For example, a 1998 governmental publication adduces the conventional wisdom of Swedish democratisation to draw the following conclusion:

“Thus, the transition to democracy is often a gradual process. The first election can take years to prepare. It takes decades to build democratic institutions; it takes generations to develop a democratic culture. All democratic forces must have reasonable expectations and show patience.”²¹

This conclusion becomes even more out of tune as it was written only a few years after a wave of remarkably peaceful and quick democratic revolutions: in Eastern Europe, toppling Communist regimes; in South Africa, successfully transitioning from apartheid to democracy; in Latin America, where military juntas were replaced by democratic governments; and similarly in South Korea and

¹⁹ Cf. Linderborg 2001

²⁰ Crawford 2001

²¹ "Demokrati och mänskliga rättigheter i Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete" (1998), cited in Jennische 2008: 23

the Philippines.²² Just as was the case with these third wave transitions to democracy, the conclusion to draw from Sweden's history is that a transition from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy is often a swift, dramatic process – a democratic revolution. Thus, this insight does have political relevance today, as it turns upside down a fundamental assumption of Swedish foreign aid policy. More generally, my conclusion underscores Sandra Halperin's claim that "much current thinking about democracy and how it can be promoted is based on myths about how democracy was achieved in the West."²³

ⁱ I'm grateful to Erik Jennische for drawing my attention to the topic of this essay.

²² Thompson 2000

²³ Halperin 2009

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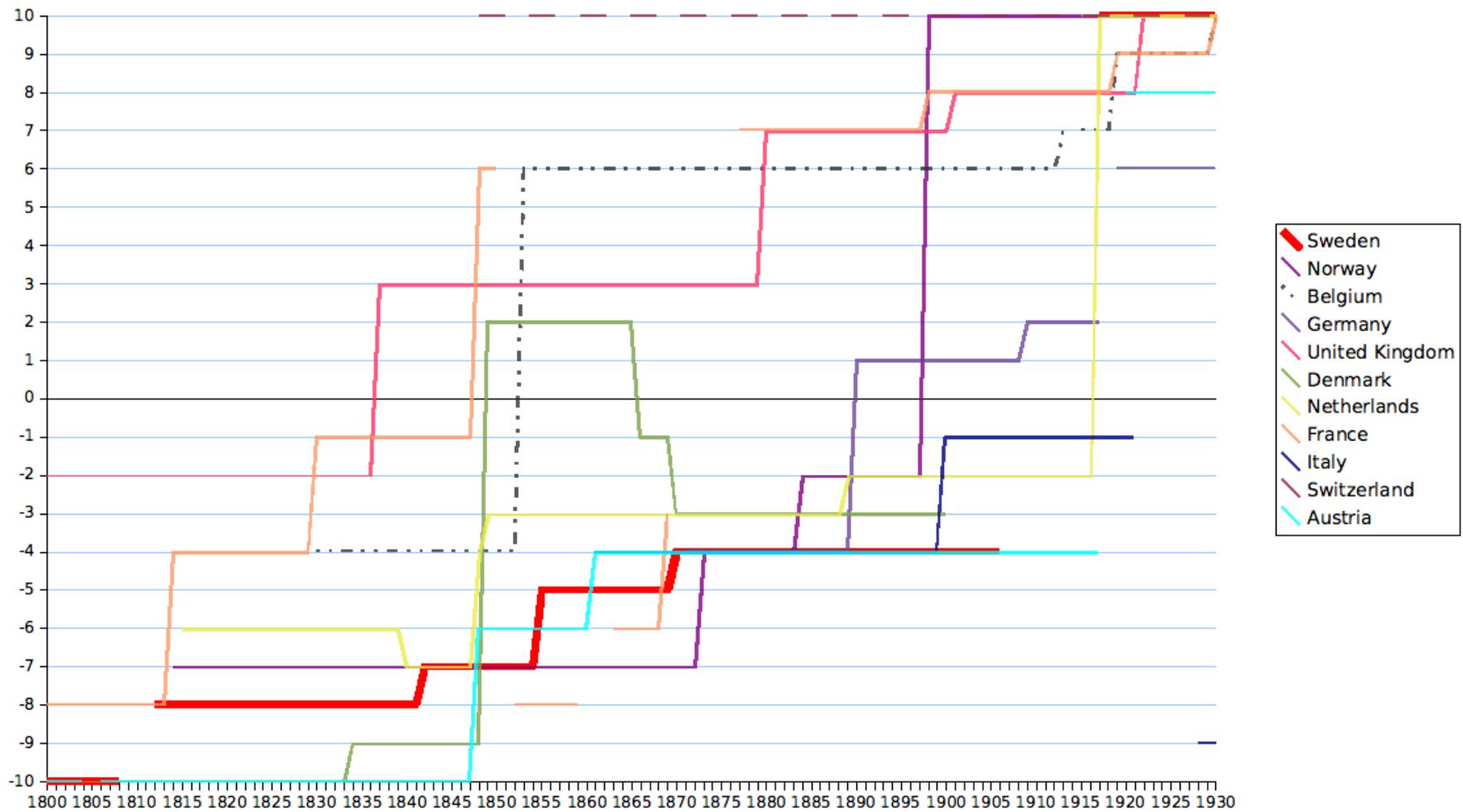


Figure 1. Democratic transitions in western Europe, 1800–1930 (Polity IV).