

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

This version: September 23, 2010
Work in progress – comments are appreciated!

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

Words: 4 729

Characters: 27 176

The gradualist myth of Sweden's democratisation

Conventional wisdom holds that Sweden's transition to democracy was almost exceptionally gradual, stepwise and non-revolutionary, similar to England's extended sequence of democratic reforms. According to this popular view, Swedish democratisation was a process drawn out over more than half a century, starting with the parliamentarism reforms of 1866 and ending with the introduction of parliamentary supremacy and universal suffrage in 1917, leading to the first truly democratic elections in 1921. The notion that Swedish democratisation was gradual, piecemeal and drawn-out is continually reproduced not only in academic research and university textbooks, but through official historical narratives, too.

In this paper, I shall challenge conventional view. Indeed, I shall argue that Sweden's democratic breakthrough was late and rapid – indeed a democratic revolution. I shall offer comparative, historical evidence against this gradualist myth of Sweden's democratisation, elaborate why it has exerted such an influence on both research and official history, and explicate how Swedish foreign policy today seeks to export a misunderstanding of its own history through democracy promotion in developing countries. But first, let us look closer at what the conventional view actually says.

Swedish democratisation in political research

Perhaps more than anyone else, Stein Rokkan has contributed to establish among political scientists the thesis that Sweden's democratisation was slow, gradual, and similar to England's.¹ In their divergent paths to mass democracy, Rokkan argues that Sweden and Denmark match closely the striking contrast between representative-reformist England and absolutist-revolutionary France:

“Sweden was able to keep up its estate representation through most of the era of absolutism and moved very gradually, step by step, toward mass democracy; Denmark, by contrast, was an absolute monarchy from 1660 to 1839 and moved quite suddenly to near-manhood suffrage already in 1849.”²

On Rokkan's account, Sweden's “smooth transition” to mass democracy is not merely a function of its representative tradition, but of deeper socio-economic and geopolitical factors. Because of its convenient distance from imperial Rome's political and cultural power and from the trade-belt of strong independent cities stretching from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, Sweden was able to consolidate its internal and external territorial sovereignty at an early stage of state formation. Its culturally and linguistically homogenous population made the subsequent process of standardising nation-building exceptionally straightforward. Thus, having established an uncontested nation-state and a representative system at an early phase, Sweden's was bound for a smooth and gradual transition to democracy.

¹ Rokkan, “Dimensions of state formation and nation-building: A possible paradigm for research on variations within Europe.”

² *Ibid.*, 588.

Barrington Moore has also contributed to maintaining the gradualist thesis, albeit indirectly. For certain, in his pathbreaking study on the social origins of democracy and dictatorship, Moore did not address the case of Sweden.³ Analysing the divergent paths to modernity of Britain, France, the United States, China, Japan and India, he justified omitting smaller countries on the grounds that since they depend economically and politically on great powers, “the decisive causes of their politics lie outside their own boundaries”.⁴ But precisely this omission in Moore’s work inspired several criticisms, some of which apply his five historical conditions for the emergence of the democratic variant of capitalism to the case of Sweden.⁵ Castles and Tilton both find that Sweden fulfills some of Moore’s conditions – for instance, much of its early modern history was a tug-of-war between the crown and the aristocracy, which both in turns relied on the support of the commoners, ensuring a balance of powers. While disagreeing on the details of whether, how and when Sweden satisfies Moore’s other conditions, both, however, emphasise that Sweden strikingly lacked the fifth and crucial condition for a transition to democratic capitalism: A revolutionary break with the past. “[T]here is no event in Swedish history that can reasonably be construed as such a revolution. Moore’s fifth and strongly emphasised condition simply does not appear.”⁶ Thus, just as the line of research that draws on Rokkan, scholarship that falls back on Barrington Moore underscores the idea that Sweden’s transition to democracy was non-revolutionary.

Hence, there is agreement in this literature that Sweden’s democratisation was slow, gradual and non-revolutionary, which also implies that the transition started comparatively early, with the parliamentary reform of 1866. Indeed, on the basis of Rokkan and Moore one might trace the lineage of Swedish democracy even further back in history: to the constitution of 1809, based on a separation of powers between the king and the Four Estates; to the Age of Liberty in the mid-eighteenth century, where the Four Estates at times reduced the king’s powers to a quite literal rubber stamp; to the representative institutions established by Gustav Vasas Riksdag assemblies in 1527 and 1544 and Arboga Meeting in 1435; or even further back to a medieval tradition of independent, self-owning peasants and electoral monarchy providing a form of proto-democracy. Unsurprisingly, such historical explanations tend to privilege history and continuity over radical, qualitative change.

In contrast to this gradualist consensus, Dankwart Rustow claims that Sweden’s transition to democracy was “late and rapid.” In contrast to the structural factors emphasised by Moore and Rokkan, and distancing himself from the functionalism of his contemporary democratisation re-

³ Moore, *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy; lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵ Castles, “Barrington Moore’s thesis and Swedish political development”; Tilton, “The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy: The Swedish Case”; Stephens, “Democratic transition and breakdown in Western Europe, 1870-1939: A test of the Moore thesis.” Castles 1973; Tilton 1974; Stephens 1989. Rokkan also critically engages Moore’s thesis, although he does not systematically address the five conditions. (Rokkan, “Dimensions of state formation and nation-building: A possible paradigm for research on variations within Europe.”)

⁶ Tilton, “The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy: The Swedish Case,” 567. Their Moore-ish explanation for the absence of a revolution holds that Sweden lacked a strong, landed aristocracy (instead, agriculture was dominated by self-owning peasants) and therefore the ruling elite did not see a monopoly of power as necessary for its economic survival.

search, which regarded democratic development as single, cumulative process to be demonstrated by statistical correlations, Rustow sought to present a genetic explanation of democratic transitions as a dynamic, non-linear process. And he takes Sweden's democratisation to represent a prominent example of such a dynamic, rapid transitory process: Sweden was a stable oligarchy at the outset of the twentieth century, yet transitioned to a stable democracy in little less than a decade.

While Rustow's claim better matches historical evidence – as I shall argue in the next section – it has been eclipsed by the gradualist narrative about Sweden's transition.⁷ Timothy Tilton summarizes the dominant view, which has been echoed almost verbatim by several 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.”⁸

Hence, from the mainstream of existing scholarly 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 democratise through a 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 comparative and historical 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]

⁷ Indeed, academic publications hardly cite Rustow's article at all, whereas Tilton's and Castle's articles from the same era have been cited several dozens of times. And citations for Rokkan's key article on the topic, with its broader comparative focus, range in the hundreds.

⁸ Tilton, “The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy: The Swedish Case”; cf. Knudsen and Rothstein, “State Building in Scandinavia”; Collier, *Paths toward democracy : the working class and elites in Western Europe and South America*; Acemoglu and Robinson, “Why did the West extend the franchise? Democracy, inequality and growth in historical perspective”; Petersson, *Nordisk politik*.

As late as in 1906, Sweden was one of the least democratic and most authoritarian 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.

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).⁹

<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 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 con-

⁹ Aidt, Dutta, and Loukoianova, "Democracy comes to Europe: Franchise extension and fiscal outcomes 1830-1938."

sensus which was shattered in the decades up to 1920 as “democracy vs oligarchy became the major theme of political conflict.”¹⁰ After that, however, a new consensus on democracy was established relatively quickly. The transition, thus, is a shift from one 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 factors might be important pre-conditions 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.”¹¹ 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 1866.¹²

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 led 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. Staaff’s 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, Staaff’s 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.

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.

¹⁰ Rustow, “Sweden’s transition to democracy: Some notes toward a genetic theory,” 13f. Rustow 1971: 13f

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² 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.”

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, a line of conflict which would dominate much of the century.¹³ After the breakthrough of democracy, a new consensus on the political system 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).¹⁴

Telling the story of Sweden's transition in this way should not be news to anyone. But 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 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.¹⁵

¹³ Hadenius, Molin, and Wieslander, *Sverige efter 1900: En modern politisk historia*, 59f.

¹⁴ Rustow, "Sweden's transition to democracy: Some notes toward a genetic theory"; cf. Olsson, "Den svenska högerns anpassning till demokratin."

¹⁵ cf. Rustow, "Sweden's transition to democracy: Some notes toward a genetic theory," 15.

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.¹⁶ 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, Russia, Belarus and Iran comes to mind as contemporary examples 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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-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.”¹⁹ Hence, the gradualist myth serves as an ironic

¹⁶ Navari, “States and state systems: democratic, Westphalian or both?”

¹⁷ cf. Rustow, “Sweden's transition to democracy: Some notes toward a genetic theory,” 15.

¹⁸ Dahl, *Democracy and its critics*.

¹⁹ Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia: Historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892–2000*, 458.

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 of conservatives who lost power (almost for good), but also the liberals, increasingly sidestepped by social democrats – 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. In this light, democratisation – understood as piecemeal constitutional reform – might even seem to confirm a certain conservative moderation.²⁰ 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.²¹ Unlike more orthodox socialist parties on the continent, Swedish social democrats were willing to cooperate with other reformist groups and to use the existing institutional machinery 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 the SAP's official reformist narrative has served to discipline the party cadre and the working class and to shut out revolutionary tendencies.²²

²⁰ cf. Olsson, "Den svenska högerns anpassning till demokratin."

²¹ Berman, *The primacy of politics: Social democracy and the making of Europe's twentieth century*.

²² Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia: Historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892–2000*.

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 historical 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.²³ 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.”²⁴

This statement seems 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 the Philippines.²⁵ 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

²³ Crawford, *Foreign aid and political reform: a comparative analysis of democracy assistance and political conditionality*.

²⁴ "Demokrati och mänskliga rättigheter i Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete" (1998), cited in Jennische, *Det blir ingen demokrati om inte demokraterna kommer till makten*.

²⁵ Thompson, "Whatever happened to democratic revolutions?."

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."²⁶

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

²⁶ Halperin, "Power to the People: Nationally Embedded Development and Mass Armies in the Making of Democracy."

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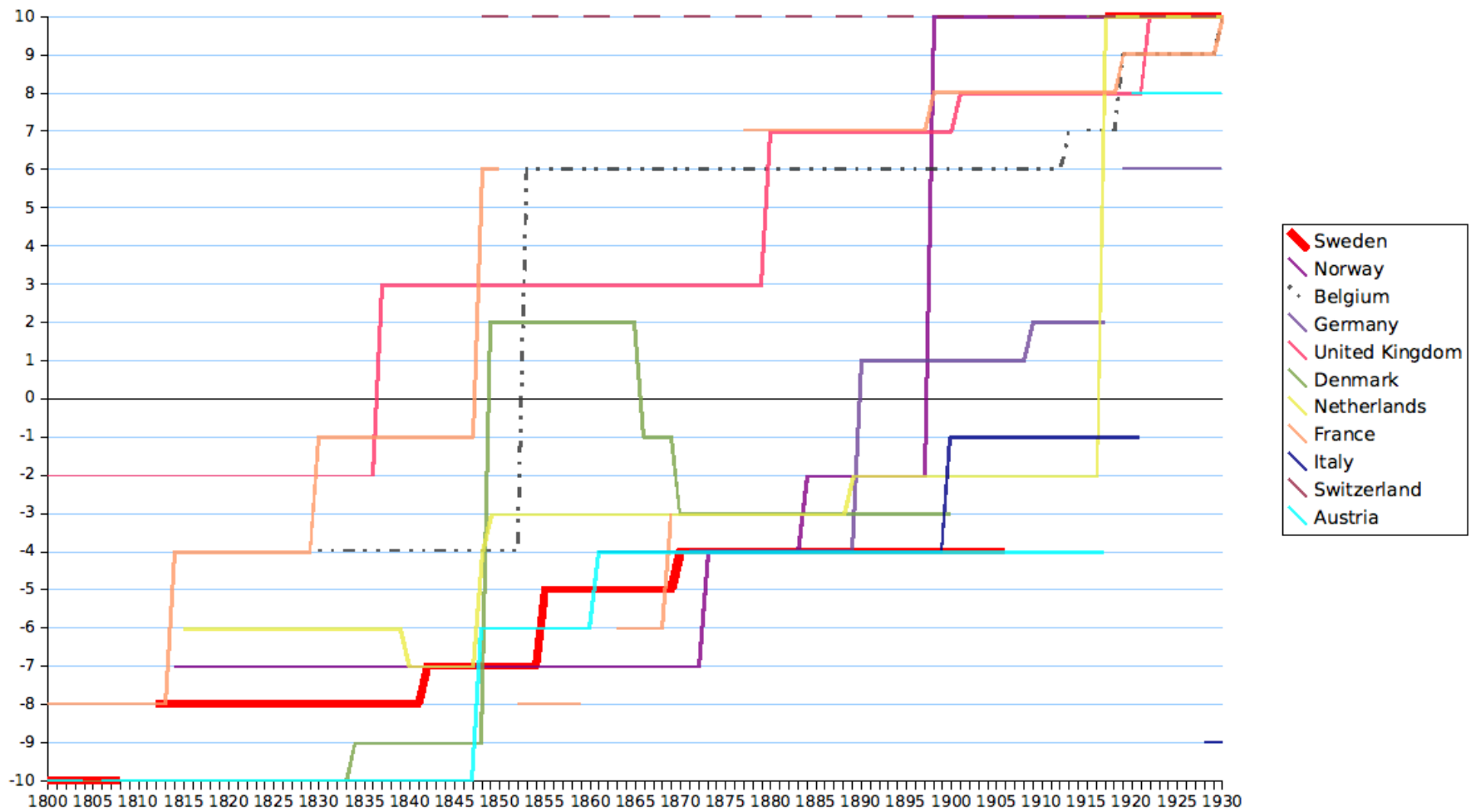


Figure 1. Democratic transitions in western Europe, 1800–1930 (Polity IV).