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MAGNUS WENNERHAG

Patterns of protest participation are changing

Abstract

Since the late 1960s, participation in political protests has become more common in Sweden. Today, a large majority of Swedes have at one point joined a demonstration or would be willing to join a demonstration, and around six percent of the population participates in a demonstration at least once a year. This article uses survey data to discuss the changing protest patterns in relation to the country's traditional corporatist political culture, with a focus on which groups participate in contemporary political protests.

Keywords: protest participation; social movements; normalization of protest

WITHIN BOTH POPULAR accounts and scientific research, Sweden is often depicted as a society in which political conflicts are settled around the negotiating table between well-organised stakeholders representing large groups of citizens and economically powerful actors. Apart from electoral competition, the aggregation of interests, opinions, and grievances has been seen as an act of co-operation among these stakeholders working within a corporatist framework. While it is true that Swedish post-war history is indeed full of examples of significant extra-parliamentary mobilisations and the use of contentious protest forms (Peterson et al. 2017), street protests and more contentious forms of politics have often, according to more prevailing stereotypes, been seen as something happening elsewhere, such as in France, Spain, or Greece. Despite the fact that the corporatist arrangements that are traditionally seen as integral for "the Swedish model" have been fundamentally reorganised in recent decades, with new actors entering the policy arena (Svallfors 2016), the picture of Sweden as a country with few protests and a low level of political contentiousness seems to persist.

This is, however, not what various social surveys tell us about protest participation in Sweden. For instance, the Swedish Level-of-Living Survey (LNU) shows that the percentage of Swedes who had taken part in at least one demonstration was 14 percent in 1968, 16 percent in 1974, 23 percent in 1981, 25 percent in 1991, and 27 percent in 2000. The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) asked a similar question in two recent rounds, and this showed that in 2004, 27 percent of the respondents had partaken in at least one demonstration, and in 2014, 29 percent

has done so. In comparison to other national populations surveyed by the ISSP, the Swedes ranked as one of the more protest-experienced populations in Europe (only outdone by Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and Iceland, varying from 30% to 49%).

Such a level of civil protest is well in line with the overall developments seen in many Western countries in recent decades. Research on social movements and political participation has noted that citizens in liberal-democratic societies have become increasingly inclined to take part in demonstrations to express their political stances. Since the 1960s, the staging of street protests has become a central repertoire of action among a wide variety of social movements, and authorities have come to regard demonstrations as a legitimate form of political action (Norris 2002). Subsequently, demonstrations have become an increasingly "normalised" form of political participation (Van Aelst & Walgrave 2001).

When looking into *how often* Swedes take part in demonstrations, an analysis of data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2002–2010 shows that on average 6 percent of the Swedes had demonstrated at least one time during the previous year, a figure that places Sweden in the mid-range of the European countries surveyed by the ESS (Torcal et al. 2016: 333). While a quite large proportion of the Swedish population has experience in demonstrating, those engaging in such activities on a more regular basis are fewer.

What is particularly striking for Sweden is that a very large proportion of the citizenry see demonstrating as something that one "might do". The 2014 ISSP survey showed that 29 percent of the respondents had at one time taken part in a demonstration, but also that 43 percent had never participated but "might do it" (28% said they "would never do it"). Only Iceland and Norway had higher figures (51% and 44%, respectively), and after Sweden came Denmark (40%). This clearly indicates that demonstrating is regarded as a very "normal" form of political participation in the Scandinavian countries. Amnå and Ekman (2014) use the concept of "standby citizen" to highlight that a low degree of political participation does not necessarily equal "political disillusionment". They characterise standby citizens as those who are highly interested in politics and "are willing and able to participate if needed" (ibid.: 262), and they claim that this type of citizen is more common in the Scandinavian countries due to the prevalent political culture. Apparently, this is also true for "standby protestors" who have never taken part in a demonstration but still believe they might someday do so.

Another aspect of the "normalisation" of protest is what has been described as the "normalisation of the protester", meaning that demonstrators today are increasingly from a cross-section of the general population (Van Aelst & Walgrave 2001). One can, however, still find that some groups are more inclined to take part in demonstrations than others. When it comes to socio-demographic characteristics, particularly the well educated and the young take part in demonstrations more often (ibid.), and regarding political orientation, left-wing oriented citizens are more inclined to demonstrate (Torcal et al. 2016).

Table 1. Demonstration participation among various socio-demographic, political, and organisational groups in Sweden, 1999–2006. The table shows the percentages of each group among those who had participated in at least one demonstration during the previous year.

	1999	2000	2001	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Have demonstrated in the previous year	5.7	6.7	5.3	5.5	5.1	5.6	5.6	5.3	5.0	5.6	6.8	6.6	7.1
<i>One time</i>	3.2	4.3	3.3	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.1	3.2	3.5	4.2	4.0	4.6
<i>Two or more times</i>	2.5	2.4	1.9	1.8	1.6	2.0	2.0	2.2	1.9	2.1	2.7	2.7	2.5
Gender													
Female	5	6	6	6	5	6	5	5	5	6	7	7	7
Male	6	8	5	5	5	5	6	5	5	5	6	6	8
Age													
16–29 years	8	11	11	11	9	11	10	11	10	12	14	15	13
30–49 years	7	6	4	5	4	5	6	6	6	5	8	7	8
50–64 years	5	7	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	6	6	8
65–85 years	1	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	3
Country where one grew up													
Sweden	5	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	6
Other country	9	11	11	12	9	10	11	10	6	9	10	9	11
Education													
Low or medium	6	7	5	4	4	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	6
High (University)	6	7	5	8	6	8	8	7	7	7	11	10	9
Political left–right orientation													
Clearly left	17	23	14	18	17	19	20	19	17	19	26	28	29
Somewhat left	6	8	7	7	6	7	8	8	7	6	8	9	10
Neither left nor right	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	5	4	3	4
Somewhat right	3	4	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Clearly right	3	7	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
Organisation membership													
Political party	18	19	12	20	17	19	19	22	19	25	25	26	26
Trade union	6	8	6	5	6	7	7	6	7	7	9	8	8
Total (N)	1,696	1,734	1,796	1,598	3,169	4,755	4,781	4,571	4,516	4,768	6,658	7,985	1,527
Have participated in specific types of demonstrations during the previous year													
Pride parades	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.5	–	–	–	–	3.4
May Day demonstration	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3.2	–	–	–	–	3.8
Total (N)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3,080	–	–	–	–	1,626

Who then is the typical protestor in today's Sweden? And has this changed during the last two decades? An (almost) annually recurring question in the Swedish national survey by the SOM Institute allows us to scrutinise this more in detail. Table 1 shows the percentages of those having demonstrated during the previous year, both across the general population and within specific groups.

When it comes to socio-demographic groups, the largest differences are in regard to age, education, and country of origin, where the young, well educated, and foreign-born are more inclined to take part in demonstrations. Differences due to gender are very small. However, it is primarily organisational membership and political orientation that matter the most for citizens' likelihood to take part in protests. Demonstration participation is much more common among political party members and among those self-identifying as "left". Apparently, those already connected to institutionalised politics through party membership are also more likely to take part in street protests. Furthermore, those self-identifying as "clearly right" are among those being least likely to demonstrate, which suggests that the media attention given recently to radical right-wing protests has been about a quite marginal phenomenon, at least in terms of sheer numbers.

The survey results also show that of those having demonstrated during the previous year, only a minority had done so more than once. In the SOM Institute surveys of 2011 and 2016, it was also asked if one had taken part in a Pride parade or a May Day demonstration during the previous year. Compared to the overall level of protest participation, the percentage of Swedes taking part in these annually reoccurring demonstrations was very high. This suggests that a large proportion of actual annual demonstration experiences stem from these two types of events.

Compared to many other liberal-democratic countries, demonstrations on May 1st are still important events for the Swedish labour movement and the political left, allowing these actors to gain both public attention and gather members and supporters. Even though the figures of participation might have decreased in recent decades, May Day demonstrations are still arranged across the country in many local municipalities (Peterson & Reiter 2016). The Pride parades of the LGBT movement have recently started following the same pattern and are today organised annually in more than 50 municipalities in Sweden (Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag forthcoming).

Perhaps it is the dominance of more "ritualised" – but still political – forms of protest, such as the annually occurring May Day and Pride parades, that explains the prevalence of the stereotype of Swedes as not taking to the streets when making political demands. Apparently quite many Swedes have demonstrated, and even more are prepared to do it, even though they don't do it every year; but when they do demonstrate, they primarily do so in more institutionalised forms of protests that are staged by actors who are quite well integrated within the political system.

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Corresponding author

Magnus Wennerhag

Mail: magnus.wennerhag@sh.se

Author

Magnus Wennerhag is Associate Professor in Sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, Sweden. His research mainly concerns social movements, political participation, and social stratification.