



The Reform that Never Happened: A History of Children's Suffrage Restrictions

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will discuss the history of children's voting rights in Sweden, or more to the point, the restrictions on voting rights for children below the age of 18. Internationally, Sweden stands out as a provider of substantial foreign aid and a defender of human rights in the international community, not least with regard to children and young people (Lindkvist, 2018; Stern, 2014). Sweden was the first nation to prohibit corporal punishment in the family in 1979, and Norway was the second to institutionalise a child ombudsperson, reforms that reflected a long-term change in the understanding of children's rights (Sandin, 2018; Sandin et al., 2022).

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Despite the striking advances in implementing children's rights in Sweden in the latter part of the twentieth century, and despite the fact that proposals to expand children's right to vote have continuously been filed, as we will demonstrate, this has so far had no effect on lowering the voting age. At the same time, we may note how a growing number of countries have lowered the voting age to 16 or 17 during the same period (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). In that light, we are curious about why the strengthening of children's social and political rights in Sweden during the period after 1974, when the voting and eligibility age was set at 18, did not also result in a further lowering of the voting age? Why has the lowering of the voting age not continued?

The history of voting rights has thus far focused on how voting barriers have been taken away and what the consequences have been, presenting normative and political philosophical arguments for lowering the voting age (Beckman, 2009; Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Sandin & Josefsson 2022; Katz, 1997; Przeworski, 2009). Much research suggests a linear view of democracy as steadily including more and more groups, "the usual story of progress and development based on the normative notions of today's values of democracy" (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010). Given the Swedish political tradition, with a continued strengthening of children's rights, the very establishment of a policy field defined as childhood politics, along with proposals from different actors to lower the voting age, one might expect a clearer joint positive stand on expanding children's voting rights.

In this chapter we will explore historical restrictions on children's voting rights and possible explanations why age limits to voting rights have not been lowered in recent decades. It is a study of how various initiatives and proposals thus far have not been able to find a place at the centre of Swedish political debates. We will seek the answers to this lack of change in how the age barriers on voting have been situated in relation to other political questions, to party-political dynamics, and to how the institutional framework around children's rights has developed (Capoccia, 2016; Magnusson & Ottosson, 2009; Rixen et al., 2016; Steinmo et al., 1992). Our argument is that the voting age has not been reduced largely because of institutional, policy, and political barriers to change as a part of the development of democratic institutions. The Swedish case can serve as an illustration of the complexity of the historical factors that influence changes in the age of voting, and the interplay between national and international processes.

BACKGROUND

During the early twentieth century, age played a central role in the democratic reforms that are commonly referred to as the breakthrough of universal suffrage. The democratic reforms implemented in Sweden from 1909 to 1921 meant that political citizenship was extended to include women. Extensive economic barriers were also removed, although some remained for individuals who had committed crimes, been bankrupt or imprisoned, or been dependent on poor relief (Berg & Ericsson, 2021). Voting rights and eligibility to join the parliament were also defined in age terms and set at a higher age. Thus, at the same time as voting rights expanded, part of the population was also excluded from the electorate because of an increase in the voting age (Sandin & Josefsson, 2022).

The age of suffrage changed from 21 years of age to 24 in 1909 when men were granted universal suffrage. In 1918–1921 the voting age for both men and women was set at 23 for elections to the second chamber and increased to 27 for the first chamber. Unmarried women had previously been able to vote from the age of 21 if they paid tax and had a minimum income. Voting rights were granted to all women in 1921, but the same year the voting age was raised from 21 to 23, which in fact meant that women (and men) aged 21–23 could not vote, and some also lost their voting rights. The background to these changes correlates with the social conflicts resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation. It was a way to enable a stable and stepwise transition to democracy acceptable to the governing elites. An expanding and unmarried working class in urban environments was clearly associated with a lack of social and economic stability that made these people unacceptable as members of the electorate to the established interests in the final compromises concerning voting rights in 1918–1921 (Sandin, 2022).

The raising of voting ages in Sweden during this period was unique in an international perspective, as many countries retained their voting age at, for example, 21 years or started to lower it from around a higher level of 25 years (Katz, 1997, pp. 218ff). The Swedish electoral system was in many ways more elitist than in nations like Germany, France, Norway, Finland, Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand, and a number of South American nations (Katz, 1997; Przeworski, 2009, pp. 291–321; Ziblatt, 2006).

The 1930s and 1940s brought a lowering of the voting age to 21. This was made possible with the establishment of a political alliance between

the centrist Farmers' Party and the Social Democratic party. The Social Democrats, now the largest but not dominant political party, battled the economic crises of the 1930s by making a deal with the farmers on social welfare reforms and the rules of the labour market with the Swedish Employers' Confederation. Arguments for these changes cited the contribution of the young generations to society and the fear that they might become attracted to the radical left or the radical right wing. In that sense, the youth remained both a threat and a promise, but now the emphasis was placed on the younger generation's constructive contributions as young citizens (Sandin and Josefsson 2022).

In the discussions during the 1950s and the 1960s that resulted in a new constitution in 1974 and a one-chamber parliament, voting age and eligibility age for all levels of office-holding were lowered to the age of 18. Sweden thus followed a broader wave of lowering voting ages to 18 in a range of countries around the world during the 1970s (Katz, 1997, p. 218). A central aspect of the debate was the relationship between the age of voting and the legal age of majority that was lowered to 18 years of age. One could not easily be changed without the other. The legal age was tied to age limits such as that for marriage, signing for mortgages and loans for education, and so on. A change could be justified by the fact that the legal age was lower than the voting and eligibility age and that they must be the same. It could also be an argument for not lowering the voting age until one could lower the age of majority (Sandin & Josefsson 2022, see Table 7.1). This, as we will come back to, has had obvious effects for the debates about voting age up until the present day.

HISTORICISING SUFFRAGE REFORMS

In the following sections, we comment on several significant features in the above processes that may explain the resistance to a continued lowering of the voting age after 1974. Such explanations, as indicated above, will be sought in institutions and political traditions that were established during the period after 1921. It is also a matter of public debate and party politics as well as changing cultural norms about children and youth (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Sandin & Josefsson 2022; Katz, 1997).

The changing of political systems and democracy cannot be attributed to a single cause or a linear development. Capoccia and Ziblatt propose a research strategy with a historical focus as an alternative to writing the usual story of progress and development based on the normative notions

Table 7.1 Year of implementation of decisions on changes in the ages of suffrage, eligibility, and majority in Sweden from 1866 to 1974

Year	Voting age			Age of eligibility				Age of majority		
	Municipality council	County council	First Chamber ^a	Second Chamber	Municipality council	County council	First Chamber	Second Chamber	Men	Women
1866	21	21	21	21	25	25	35	21	21	25
1884										21 (unmarried only)
1909				24						
1919–1921	23	27	27	23						21 (also married)
1937		23	23					23	25	
1941	21	21	21							
1945				21	23	23				
1949								23		
1953							23			
1965	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
1969										
1974	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18

Comment: The years stated are the years in which a reform came into force, not the year in which the decision was made, unless specifically stated. In 1970, the bicameral parliament was abolished in the partial constitutional reform which was implemented in 1971. The right to vote applied to those who reached the voting age in the year preceding the election, until 1974, when the right to vote was valid from the 18th birthday. Sources: Riksdagstrycket, <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/>.

^aThe First Chamber was appointed by the county councils and by electors from the borough councils of the towns that were not part of a county council

of today's values of democracy. With that ambition they also programmatically seek to apply the historian's perspective with an open eye to lost cases and failed attempts. That is the thrust of this article. They point not only to the different waves of democratisation and their different characteristics, multiple causations, and dependence on earlier political institutions, but also to how unevenly the development of democratic institutions progressed (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010). In addition, as Ziblatt notes, "the different elements of democracy (civil liberties, responsible executives, and universal suffrage) do not always travel together"; indeed "one can argue that democracy emerged historically as an amalgam of discrete institutional reforms that at times undercut each other" (Ziblatt, 2006, p. 338).

An analysis consequently also must account for a contradictory process of change, conflicting cultures and paths, counterwaves, and interests in excluding groups of potential citizens (Collier, 1999; Przeworski, 2009). Institutions clearly categorise and influence cultural constructions through policy but can at the same time be challenged by bottom-up processes (Capoccia, 2016, pp. 9–13; Jenson, 1989). In that light, age categories and understandings of youth and childhood in Sweden were shaped by institutions and the political processes associated with the establishment of universal suffrage reforms that were clearly also challenged. They also followed, and sometimes diverged from, international developments. Consequently, we will discuss the institutional arrangements (laws and regulations) around voting rights and how they were associated with other legal frameworks and institutions as well as the laws regarding the role of government organisation (government agencies) on child rights.

Institutional Barriers: Change and Dependencies

In the years after the democratic reforms of 1921, the voting age continued to be an issue of conflict that could not be resolved between left, liberal, and conservative groups in the parliament. The period was marked by considerable political conflicts over economic and social policies. The practical alliance between the Liberals and the Social Democrats that made the reforms of 1918–1921 possible broke up over conflicts about economic and social policies. In the 1920s, there was no political room for parliamentary majorities to lower the age of voting. The balance of power shifted several times during this period between different alliances of centrist and conservative parties and the Social Democrats. All initiatives to

lower the voting age and restore the position the Social Democrats had had before the compromise in 1921 were blocked by the other parties (Sandin & Josefsson 2022).

Once the voting age was set at 21 years of age during the 1940s, it also re-established an important new institutional bond between the age of voting and the age of majority. That decision meant that the age of voting became a signifier of being a full citizen in the legal sense. Such homogenisation of the age structure of voting and eligibility was set in relation to the overall age structure of society during the following decades. During the 1960s, the broader links with other aspects of the age structure of society could obviously also undermine the barrier to altering the age of voting with reference to its dependence on the age of maturity. The age of majority of young people was discussed in the parliament during this time as being less tied to the actual legal age of majority and more associated with the lived life of young people: signing contracts, marrying with or without parental consent, setting up independent households, taking government loans for studying without parents as sureties, learning to master fighter aircrafts in the defence of the nation, taking a driver's licence, and so on (Sandin & Josefsson 2022).

All those changes were also part of a significant drive to create a democratic educational system open to all children from all social classes and to break the upper-class domination of higher studies. An important reform for our discussion was the introduction of government-sponsored loans for university studies. Students could take such loans without parents signing and without any other collateral from the age of 18, even while still being a minor in the legal sense and without the right to vote. The student loan reform supported the creation of a young generation with significant self-determination. It worked in the same direction for change as the age of marriage, and so on, to create a generation of young people that was *de facto* adult: in practice living life as adults. The reforms were not related directly to the need to alter the age of voting but could be, and were, mobilised in that cause (Sandin & Josefsson 2022). Most importantly, however, the process upheld a link between the voting age and the age of majority with the age of graduation from high school, obligatory conscription, and age of marriage, even if it deviated from important age limits for drinking and purchasing alcohol.

Yet another factor was of central importance. The changes in age limits were dependent on the parliamentary process of revising the new constitution in the 1960s and 1970s. The lowering of the age for voting during

the 1930s and 1940s could obviously be effected without a constitutional change of that sort. At that time, the Social Democrats wished to fulfil the ambitions from the struggle up until 1918 to establish an age of voting at 21 years of age. But when the demand to lower the voting age from 21 (to 18, 19, or 20, all of which were suggested) was first raised during the late 1950s, the Social Democrats did not immediately promote such changes but referred the query to the long-planned review of the constitution (Sandin & Josefsson 2022).

The connection between voting age, the constitutional issues, and the age of majority created powerful institutional dependencies and barriers that came into conflict with other institutional arrangements around age. Again and again, the party in power, the Social Democrats, stalled and delayed the discussion with reference to the work with the new constitution. There are also indications that the Social Democrats, who now benefited from their political hold of the first chamber in parliament, were reluctant to push for constitutional reform for that reason (Sandin & Josefsson 2022). Furthermore, the lowering of the voting age was not only dependent on a revision of the age of majority, which was complicated in its own terms, but was also conditional on the revision of the laws of the declaration of incapacity of citizens (Berg & Ericsson, 2021).

That conflict was exploited by the opposition during the 1960s. The opposition, from the communist to the conservative party, and some individual members of the Social Democrats, also tried to argue that these questions were not dependent on each other; the constitution and the age of majority should be looked upon as separate political issues. The opposition was partly successful, some changes were made, and both the age of majority and the voting ages were changed step by step. First the voting age was lowered to 20, then to 19. But the final step when the voting age was lowered to 18, and the age of eligibility was changed to the same age, was not taken until the final constitutional decision was made in the early 1970s (Sandin & Josefsson 2022).

Policy Barriers: Child Rights, Democracy, and Youth Policy

So far, we have explained institutional barriers to lowering the voting age as found in path dependencies that were established through agreements on voting rights and constitutional reform up until 1970s. But what about the changes in the understanding of children's rights and children's participation that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century? Could

such changes not indicate a further lowering of the voting ages? In the following we would like to point out how the defence of children's rights and the institutionalisation of such rights led to a somewhat paradoxical conflict with extending voting rights to children. It is also worth noting that the implementation of children's rights was not about letting children or young people represent themselves in politics, but rather to represent the voice of the underaged through other institutional arrangements. Children's individual rights were clearly up-graded, but a glass ceiling was established to their political participatory rights.

In 1978, a governmental inquiry titled "The Rights of the Child" constituted an early phase of what later became the separate area of child rights politics in Sweden (Sandin, 2018; SOU 1978:10). The investigators identified the child as a rights subject in areas of child protection and in the context of family law and social welfare legislation, including children's rights to represent themselves in legal proceedings, for example in custody cases (SOU 1978:10). Some legal experts also advanced the idea that children should have the right to divorce their parents, which resonated positively in child rights non-governmental organisations (Jacobsson, 1978). The emphases were clearly placed on children's human rights and an independent voice in all matters of importance for children. However, no attention was paid to the issue of lowering the voting age or children's opportunities to participate in political decision-making.

About a decade later, the Swedish government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Proposition 1989/90:107). Here too the focus was primarily on what the opportunities were for children to make their views and voices heard in areas such as social services, schools, and legal processes. The bill acknowledged children's constitutional rights such as freedom of expression and opinion as applying to all Swedish citizens regardless of age (p. 42). At this point, mirroring the CRC, there was nothing in the convention specifically addressing the issue of voting age and voting rights. Evidently, the drafters of the convention decided on a very general formulation of Article 12, where the ideas about children's right to express their views freely and to be heard were mainly to apply to the family and to court proceedings (particularly adoption, juvenile justice, child custody cases). To some parties, children were explicitly not approved to take part in public matters (Holzscheiter, 2010, p. 211). In the drafting history of Article 13 of the CRC on the general right to freedom of expression, it was acknowledged that children also had civil and political rights that are largely the same as those of adults,

“although it is generally recognized that children do not have the right to vote” (Detrick et al., 1992; United Nations, 2007). In other words, there was at the time no international push to interpret children’s right to participation and freedom of expression as a matter of giving them a right to vote, and the Swedish politicians did not stray from the path created by the Convention. In the ratification process of the CRC, children’s suffrage was basically a non-issue.

In the same year, however, 1990, a parliamentary proposal (Motion, n.d.) was submitted by the Green Party where they discussed a proxy vote for children by their parents and a lowering of the voting age (Motion 1990/91:K222). Already in the middle of the 1980s Swedish paediatric physicians had suggested that a governmental inquiry should investigate such a possibility. A proxy vote would be a means to achieve a more child-friendly society by making parents more politically important. These proposals, however, did not find any resonance in the Swedish government. As we shall see in the next section, occasionally the voting age appeared in parliamentary sessions on children’s rights in the latter part of the 1990s, though still somewhat at the margins. In 1996, the Swedish government decided to appoint a parliamentary committee to clarify how the “spirit and meaning” of the CRC were expressed in Swedish legislation and practice. The committee, consisting of MPs from all political parties together with appointed experts, delivered a report in August 1997 that included the recommendation to “make children and young people involved in decision-making” (SOU 1997:116). The committee explicitly excluded rights to vote:

There may be some advantages to lowering the voting age, but we believe that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Above all, we believe that it would be very unfortunate for the connection between the age of majority, the age of eligibility and the voting age to be broken. (SOU 1997:116)

It was concluded that children had neither the responsibility nor the independence to vote and that confidence in the democratic process could be damaged. While this report recommended maintaining a voting age of 18, a formal reservation was registered by the committee member from the Green Party, Ragnhild Pohanka, that proposed a reduction of the voting age to 16 at all three levels of municipal, regional, and national elections. The argument was that they wanted to give real influence to older children so that they could impact their future (SOU 1997:116). The

Swedish Children's Ombudsperson (Barnombudsmannen, BO), invited to comment on the proposal, argued likewise for lowering the voting age to 16 in municipal elections and municipal referenda as a way to strengthen the position of young people in society and revitalise political work (p. 27). No other opposing views were officially filed in the parliamentary records and the new child rights strategy did not include any proposal to lower the age of voting (Proposition 1997/98:182). The implementation of Article 12 was instead framed differently, presenting children and youth as "users" (in Swedish: *brukare*) of local community services. This led to an emphasis on children's right to *be heard* in matters affecting them at an individual level in areas such as education, custody, housing, and traffic planning (p. 32).

In the following decades the Swedish government launched several new child rights strategies and inquiries to strengthen the implementation of the CRC but without coming back to the question of lowering the voting age (Proposition 2009/10: 232; SOU 2016:19; SOU 2020:63). The fact that children's right to vote basically was a non-issue in the international drafting and adoption of the CRC (Detrick et al., 1992), as well as during ratification by Sweden, underwrites our explanation of why the question of voting rights was marginalised from the Swedish child rights policy. The CRC puts emphasis on the developing competences of children but does not include a claim that children below 18 should have an individual vote. Had the CRC launched the notion of children's right to vote, one might expect that this would have led to a national discussion about the role of, say, the Swedish Child Ombudsperson to support such an initiative. The issue of children's voting rights was largely absent in the work of this central children's rights institution (Leviner, 2018, 2019). The Child Ombudsperson's office was given as its main task to propagate and implement the CRC in realms of children's lives by its establishment in 1993 (SFS 1993:335; SFS 1993:710). This task, it turned out, did not include propagating for children's voting rights. Although the Child Ombudsperson, in the late 1990s, voiced the belief that children should be given voting rights from the age of 16 in local elections, this did not make any particular mark in policy discussions.

In the 1990s, child law emerged not only as a separate legal field but also as a separate policy field, "child right politics", that signified strong Swedish governmental support for children's rights (Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Quennerstedt, 2015, p. 8; Proposition 2009/10: 232; Sandin, 2022). This led to an extensive inquiry into the meaning of the rights of

children and child-oriented family and social policy (Littmark, 2017; Sandin, 2014). Yet, as we suggest, this development left out the issue of children's voting rights from the start. The proposals to lowering the voting age never made it into the mainstream political discourses, nor were they picked up in governmental child rights strategies or inquiries. In addition, the possibility for children to vote did not enter Swedish debates about larger voting issues according to gender, class, social background, nor into bipartisan parliamentary investigations on immigrant voting rights in local elections.

At the same time, the issue of lowering voting ages appeared, although quite cautiously, in political initiatives and inquiries focusing on strengthening democracy, citizenship, and the participation of young people in society. In this way, the framing of child and youth policy structured the political discussions about lowering the voting age, discussions that also tied into the international debate about the rights of children and youth that grew in the 1960s and 1970s (Farson, 1974; Holt, 1974; Margolin, 2014, pp. 441–452; Schrag, 1975, pp. 441–457). The question of youth voting did arise in relation to declining voter turnout and proposed measures to increase citizens' participation and involvement in the democratic system (Dir. 1998: 100; 2000:1; Skr. 2003/04:110; SOU 2016:5). However, the 18-year age limit was maintained because of its relation to other contexts for civil rights and obligations such as the capacity to act under civil law, perform military service, and marry (SOU 1975:15; SOU 1972:15 p. 12; Proposition 1973:70, pp. 162 f.; SOU 2000:1, p. 149; SOU 2016:5, p. 47).

In the governmental investigation "Politics for young people" (Swedish: "Politik för Unga" (SOU 1997:71), the Youth Policy Committee emphasised that young people must have a real opportunity for power, influence, and participation, but was not ready to commit to a final position. It sided with the Age Limit Inquiry (SOU 1996:111) and the Child Ombudsperson on the question of voting age limits. The Committee proposed a pilot project with a reduced voting age to 16 years in local elections in 1998. However, they questioned whether people below 18 could stand for elected office, but trials with local elections might be a possibility (SOU 1997:71, p. 98). In the latest comprehensive governmental democratic inquiry, "Let more people shape the future" (Swedish: "Låt fler forma framtiden!"), SOU 2016:5), the investigators once again addressed the issue of lowering the voting age to 16 in municipal elections and suggested a trial period that could be followed up and evaluated. A reduction

of the voting age to 16 in local elections would in practice mean, the investigators stated, that the average age of first-time voters would be 18 years, down from the current 20 years (SOU 2016:5, p. 47). Even though the suggestion of the investigators was a cautious move towards lowering the voting age in Sweden, in 2022 the proposal has yet to be referred to the central cabinet office for consideration. Once again, by being taken so slowly, the issue has not been given high priority in policy making.

POLITICAL BARRIERS: ACTORS AND ISSUES IN THE CENTRE AND ON THE PERIPHERY

Another barrier to lowering the voting age is to be found in the dynamics of party and parliamentary politics. In certain periods, the issue of voting and eligibility age has been placed at the centre of public debates and on party-political agendas, in other times on the periphery. As the history of voting restrictions teaches us, whether the demands to lower age limits are heeded or not is related to the political influence of party-political and societal actors pursuing the issue, as well as how the issue connects with other political issues and public opinion.

One important explanation for the lowering of voting age in the 1930s and 1940s from 23 (second chamber and municipalities) and 27 (first chamber and county councils) to 21 was that the Social Democrats achieved a parliamentary majority by forming a government coalition with the Farmers' Party. Yet the lowering of voting ages was also propelled by the desire to include the growing amount of young people in representative democracy in order to avoid a radicalisation of youth in extra-parliamentary actions and also to mobilise young people to defend the country. In the 1970s, the international wave of lowered voting ages to 18 resulted from a combination of coalitions between political parties and civil society, the centring of age issues in a political context of the Vietnam war, civil rights movements, and the fact that young people were in fact "adults" in many other respects (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Sandin & Josefsson 2022; Katz, 1997, p. 239). In contrast, demands and arguments to lower voting ages have had little success when strong party-political and civil society coalitions have been lacking and when the issue has remained on the periphery of political debate.

From the mid-1980s, proposals about giving all children the right to vote, independent of age, came from different directions in Swedish

society. One of the most prominent attempts to put the issue on the political agenda was made by the Swedish paediatric society. In 1985, the chief physician of child health care at Falun Hospital, Berndt Eckerberg, proposed that children should have the right to vote through their parents (Dagens Nyheter, 28 January 1985; Gustafsson, 2001, p. 199ff). The first argument was based on the idea that all people are of equal value and that children are human beings and therefore have the same rights as adults, in this case to vote. The second argument was more of an instrumental one and based on the idea that the position of children and families with children would be strengthened if children were given the right to vote. The paediatricians argued that an inquiry should be set up to investigate the matter (Gustafsson, 2001, p. 200). The proposal was rejected by the government with the main argument that voting by proxy is not acceptable based on the principle of “one man, one vote” being one of the cornerstones of democracy (Gustafsson, 2001).

The Green Party had a different twist on their proposal in 1991 when they argued that the political influence of non-voting children and young people ought to be organised in a more democratic way. Two of its main suggestions were to lower the voting age to 12 or 16, and to establish a “Child Chamber,” a consultative decision-making assembly that would be appointed in general elections at the same time as the parliamentary elections by all young people and children over a certain minimum age (Motion 1990/91:K222). They were not willing to give parents and families with children a disproportionate influence on matters that were not of particular concern to them. The vote should be in the hands of children themselves. The proposal was rejected by the Constitutional Committee, which referred to the precedent decisions in 1974 and the idea that the age limit of 18 was linked to other rights and duties such as extensive civil law capacity, the conscription age, and the right to marry (KU 1990/91:32). Regarding the establishment of a consultative decision-making assembly for children, they argued that political organisations should find ways to involve young people under the voting age in politics. The rejection by the committee illustrates how the constitution that was established in the 1970s created an institutional path-dependency that blocked further changes in voting age.

From the 1990s until today, a wide range of parliamentary proposals to lower the voting age have continuously been tabled by representatives from all Swedish parliamentary parties (in total nine parties) except the right-wing and conservative parties, New Democracy (Ny Demokrati,

1991–1994) and Sweden Democrats (2010–). These proposals were attached to various governmental inquiries into children's rights, youth politics, age limits, and civil engagement issues (SOU 1996:111; SOU 1997:71; SOU 1997:116; SOU 2000:1; Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 1997/98:26; 2000/01:11; 2006/07:11). Broadly speaking, the proposals focused on the lowering of the voting age to 16 in elections to municipalities, at least on a trial basis (e.g. The Centre Party, Motion 2000/01:K296; The Left Party, Motion 2020/21:3932; Liberals, Motion 2020/21:1515), or in effect (e.g. The Left Party, Motion 1999/2000:K339; or The Centre Party, Motion 2019/20:1766), or to all elections to municipalities, county councils, and parliament, as well as national referenda (e.g. The Green Party, Motion 2000/01:K401; Motion 2021/22:3405; The Social Democrats, Motion 2014/15:1746). The proposals also suggested that the government initiate a governmental inquiry into lowering the voting age to 16 (e.g. The Liberals, Motion 1999/2000:K293; The Moderates, Motion 2012/13:K259), or to change election laws so that those who turn 18 during *the calendar year* are given the right to vote, instead of on *the day* they reach 18 years of age (The Left Party, Motion 2001/01:K234; The Christian Democrats, Motion 2005/06:Kr4).

Even though we may note some shifts and variations in the more specific positions in parliamentary proposals during the period, the positions have followed a continuum. The arguments for lowering the voting age roughly follow some of the lines which are also recognisable from earlier periods of debates throughout the twentieth century. A first argument is based on voting as a human right. To have influence over one's own life is considered a human right that includes both younger and older citizens, even if they are not above the age of majority (Motion 2000/01: K401; 2017/18: 2117). Secondly, we find what can be called an instrumental inclusion argument. A well-functioning democracy presupposes that different groups, including the younger ones, can make their voices heard (Motion 2000/01: K401; 2017/18: 2117; 2020/21: 105; 2020/21: 1515). Thirdly, there is an argument about impact. Children and young people are the groups that are most affected by certain policy areas such as school, care, and the climate, and by lowering the voting age they would gain a greater real influence over the development of society (Motion 2014/15: 1746; 2020/21: 105).

Fourthly, a range of proposals put forward an argument invoking competence (Motion 2014/15:1746; 2017/18:2117). They argue how, for

example, young people are competent enough to vote because their interest in politics and social issues has increased in recent years and they are more well-informed about the world, science, and politics than voters ever before (Motion 2014/15:1746; 2017/18:2117). Fifthly, experiences from the range of other countries that have lowered the age limit are generally positive (Motion 2000/01: K401; 2017/18: 2117; 2014/15: 1746; 2019/20: 1766). Sixthly, the age argument is made that there is no obstacle to having a voting age that differs from the age of eligibility or the age of majority, given also that Sweden has a number of different “ages of authority” such as for compulsory schooling, criminal justice, the right to buy alcohol, and so on (Motion 2019/20:1766; 2020/21: 1515; 2019/20: 1766).

As noted above, there has thus hardly been any lack of parliamentary proposals to lower the voting age, rather the opposite. But how do we explain that, despite that fact that representatives from more or less all parties of the parliament continuously over at least three decades have proposed lowering the voting age, these proposals have not led to any changes? A central and important reason is continued opposition from the Constitutional Committee based on arguments about the link between the age of voting and the age of majority, marriage, and other age limits (Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 1990/91:32; 2000/01:11; 2006/07:11). The committee has also stalled the process by referencing the need to hear the result of comprehensive public inquiries (Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 2011/12:3; 2015/16:13) about the constitution (Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 2006/07:11; SOU 2008:125) and Swedish democracy (SOU 2016:5). From 2018, in wake of the finalisation of the Democracy Inquiry, and until the present day, the committee has referred to the Democracy Inquiry’s report being prepared within the Cabinet Office and has stated its unwillingness to anticipate the results (Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 2018/19:25). The Centre Party (successor to the Farmers’ Party) and the Left Party have made reservations, now however with a focus on voting rights being granted on the first day of the year one turns 18 or after trials with age 16 are conducted (Konstitutionsutskottets utlåtande 2018/19:25 p. 41).

Roughly speaking, three explanations might be offered in the dynamics of parliamentary politics for barriers to lowering the voting age. Firstly, it appears as if the proposals that have been put to the parliament have had no firm foundation in the parties at large, but are rather initiatives from individuals, groups, or factions of members in the parties. It is only the

Green Party that in 2020 formally recognised the need to lower the voting age to 16 in all elections as part of their party programme (Dagens Nyheter, 3 November 2021). Secondly, none of the major and potentially governing parties is pushing the issue with the same systematic intent as was the case during the 1930s and even more so during the 1960s. Thirdly, the issue has had no great public support and has not been strongly linked to any other significant political issues, such as the overhaul of the constitution or mobilising the defence, even though at times it seems as if the environment had such a potential, along similar lines as the inclusion of youth to avoid conflict or disengagement in the 1930s. In addition, public support for lowering the voting age has been relatively weak in Sweden according to opinion polls, where in fact no more than about 10% think that lowering the voting age to 16 in all elections is a very good or quite good idea (Ekengren-Oskarsson, 2016).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Child rights advocates and scholars have sometimes suggested that the implementation of the CRC and its principles could support the lowering of the voting age (Amnesty UK campaign; Cummings, 2020; Wall, 2021). If one focuses on children's participation in the CRC, the lowering of the voting age may appear like a logical outcome. Such suggestions indicate an important issue that shapes the general context of this article. It is important to ask, however, what political processes and preconditions, as well as what political traditions, institutions, and cultures, may stand in the way.

Our analyses demonstrate that the long historical process and compromises that established universal adult suffrage in 1921 also created a number of institutional conflicts around the age of voting, such as the difference between the age of majority and the age of voting as well as the different ages for voting for different levels of government. These issues were resolved step by step between the late 1930s and the early 1970s. In this process, it was firmly established that voting is associated with the age of majority, and, furthermore, that the age of voting is an issue of constitutional importance that must be resolved in the context of constitutional considerations. This process did not exclude change. On the contrary, during the 1960s, reforms accommodated both a novel understanding of the role and value of the participation of the younger generation that warranted a voting age and age of majority of 18 years of age. And they adapted voting age to ages of marriage, military service, and the

conclusion of high school. These developments constituted in many ways a conclusion to a series of twentieth-century parliamentary reforms that resulted in the establishment of a unicameral parliament. The notion that the voting age stands in intimate relationship to the political and consensual changes of the constitution was reinforced during the 1950s and 1960s.

The voting age then became clearly associated with a whole cluster of indicators of the difference between the young and adults that were of central cultural and legal importance. During the years after 1974, the rights of children were strengthened but without including a discussion of voting rights. On the contrary, the implementation of children's rights in this period involved subordinating questions of voting age to issues of children's rights to participate in other ways (SOU 2016:5). With the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman in 1993, children were also given a state representative—since supplemented by a Children's and Pupils' Ombudsman at the Swedish Schools Inspectorate—who can represent individual children and ensure that they receive the education to which they are entitled under Swedish law. The question of further lowering the age of voting and eligibility in Sweden has thus been complicated by the fact that children and young people are now considered to be adequately represented by these agencies. In this sense, children's social and participatory rights have been strengthened without a change in their individual political rights. In a similar way, Swedish youth politics, despite emphasising the inclusion of young people in democracy, has not pursued inclusion through voting, but rather through educating youth to become future full-fledged political citizens, as well as participating in separate spheres of politics such as youth councils of municipalities or at the national level.

At the same time suggestions to further lower the age of voting have not been out on the political agenda of the most important political parties and tend to be suggested by individual members of parliament and interest groups with little political clout, as for example with the association of paediatric physicians. In comparison with the 1960s, it is evident that there does not seem to be any other political issue to which the age of voting can be associated, even if the climate crisis has this potential. As the environmental debate has gained a more central role in political discussions, it has also been transformed from a youth issue to a central mainstream question that is no longer only a generational issue.

The lack of interest in extending the vote to younger individuals seems also to have been reinforced by the close association between the child ombudsman and its prescribed role of implementing the CRC. Even though the Child Ombudsperson has made arguments for trials of a lower age of voting, it has no central role in the formulation of voting policies, which may be a consequence of such policies not being a central aspect of the CRC. The important point is that children and young people are thought, not to be excluded from politics, but rather included by means of democratic institutions and processes similar to other groups that might be regarded as having a marginal influence in democratic processes. However, unlike the case of other such groups, this does not necessarily lead to a greater emphasis on the capacity of children and young people to participate in voting. On the contrary, the Child Ombudsperson and the CRC put the emphasis on the developing capacities and voices of children, rather than their abilities and competences to take part in voting itself.

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