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Explaining the Swedish-Danish Difference in
Immigration-Integration Policy

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ABSTRACT

Over the last couple of decades, Sweden and Denmark have come to symbolize opposite policy positions on immigration and integration; the former liberal, tolerant and multicultural, the latter restrictive, nationalist and assimilationist. The marked difference between two otherwise similar countries has puzzled comparative researchers and area specialists for more than two decades. In this paper, a series of well-known but seldom compared explanations are reviewed to gain a fuller and more multifaceted understanding of why Sweden and Denmark became so different. The explanations are divided into four main approaches with different foci: the electorate, the media, the political parties and national models. The paper ends with a short conclusion, highlighting what each of the explanations contributes to a fuller understanding of the difference, and a short note on the possible convergence of the countries post-2015.

KEY WORDS

Sweden, Denmark, immigration, integration, policy.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Christian Fernández is associate professor in political science, researcher at MIM and senior lecturer at the Department of Global Political Studies. His research focuses on issues of citizenship, diversity, integration, toleration and education.

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INTRODUCTION

The marked difference between Swedish and Danish immigration-integration¹ policy has puzzled comparative researchers and area specialists for a couple of decades. The two countries usually end up on opposing ends of liberal-multicultural/restrictive-monocultural policy indices (cf. MIPEX 2020, CITLAW 2016, MCP index 2020); Denmark being one of the most immigration and diversity-sceptic countries in the Western hemisphere, while Sweden is often viewed as the exception to an international trend of closure and civic assimilationism² in the 2000s (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012, Borevi 2014, Fernández 2019, Goodman 2010, Jensen et al 2017, Jensen and Mouritsen 2019). This divergence may be especially puzzling to external observers who tend to view Sweden and Denmark as almost identical versions of the so-called Nordic model (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011: 13). How can two countries with similar universal social welfare systems, high levels of social trust, closely intertwined cultures and political history, open economies, regulated labor markets, and similar experiences of post-War immigration, differ so much in immigration-integration policy?

In Danish and Swedish society and political life, the differing approaches to immigration-integration is not just a question of intellectual curiosity. It has become a symbolic marker of national difference and identification. In Sweden, the “Danish development” is often portrayed as an abhorrible display of xenophobia, intolerance and national chauvinism. In Denmark, Swedish politicians are often viewed as morally arrogant idealists who care more about their own image as “do-gooders” than about the will of the people. For more than two decades, the two countries have served as mutually deterrent examples to one another, thereby adding further fuel to policy divergence. Sweden and Denmark are neighboring countries, separated only by a narrow strait, yet they stand worlds apart in matters of immigration and integration.

In this paper, I present and discuss a variety of reasons to the “Swedish-Danish difference” – as I shall call it. Despite the academic and societal relevance of the comparison, few attempts have been made to review explanations in a comprehensive discussion. This paper seeks to fill some of that void. The time for such a discussion may be better than ever. In the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, the gap between Sweden and Denmark appears to be narrowing: the Swedish government has made several moves in a more restrictive direction; Swedes in general have become more sceptic towards refugee immigration; and as of the

¹ I use the composite term to refer to two overlapping and interdependent policy fields, immigration and integration. They have always been interlinked, but increasingly so in contemporary societies where transnational networks and mobilities challenge binary distinctions between processes of migration and incorporation. One example is the increasing tendency of governments to apply integration criteria to control immigration and settlement.

² Civic assimilationism can be defined as the application of (increasingly) demanding requirements for citizenship and permanent residence, tested via different measures of integration such as economic self-sufficiency, language proficiency and knowledge about politics and society in countries of immigration (cf. Goodman 2014).

2022 general election, a right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), is the second largest in Swedish politics – after the Social Democrats (SAP). If Minerva’s owl spreads her wings at dusk, now is the time to find out why Sweden and Denmark once were so different.

The article is divided into four types of explanatory approaches, none of which is sufficient in itself: the electorate, the media, political parties and national models. The main objective is not to assess which one is better, but rather to add them layer by layer to reach a fuller understanding of the subject at hand. In so doing, I hope to gradually progress toward a fuller and more multifaceted comparison. The review covers a lot of ground and will not, for reasons of space, be able to delve profoundly into any one of the explanatory approaches. The aim is overview and comparison, not close-hand examination. The article ends with a few concluding remarks on the explanations and the post-2015 development in Sweden.

THE ELECTORATE

The simplest explanation of the difference between Denmark and Sweden is voter attitudes. In a functioning representative democracy, it is both plausible and desirable to expect policy output to reflect popular opinion – albeit never perfectly, of course. On the basis of this simple observation, we may hypothesize that the average Swede is more positive to immigrants and diversity, than the average Dane. Available survey data offer support to this simple hypothesis. For instance, a Eurobarometer poll conducted in all EU member states in 2011 (Eurobarometer 2012) found that Swedes show the strongest support for increasing labor immigration from non-European countries (60 %), equal rights between natives and immigrants (93 %) and asylum law (95 %). The survey also found that Swedes are most likely to blame failed integration on discrimination (80 %), least likely to blame it on migrants’ own unwillingness to integrate (52 %) and most likely to view immigration as enriching their own country (81 %). In the latest European Social Survey with questions on immigration (ESS 2014, round 7), Sweden again comes out on top as the country with the most immigration-friendly population. Swedes are more likely to support immigration of Muslims (79 %), people from poor non-European countries (86 %), Jewish people (90 %) and Roma³ (76 %) than any other of the surveyed countries. Denmark on the other hand ends up somewhere in the middle; more positive than most East European countries, but less than most in Western Europe. The low acceptance rate for Muslims (52 %), non-Europeans from poor countries (44 %) and Roma (36 %), but not Jewish (78 %) and majority race migrants (82 %), suggests a clear ethnocentric bias (cf. Heath and Richards 2020).

The difference between Swedes and Danes is largely (but not exclusively) the result of increasing divergence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this period, Swedes became increasingly accepting of immigration and immigrants as evidenced in the yearly surveys

³ The survey applies the term “Gypsy”, probably for easier recognition and to avoid confusion with Roman (someone from the city Rome) and Romanian (someone from Romania).

conducted by the SOM-institute (cf. Demker 2016, Sandberg and Demker 2014). This should be viewed in light of increasing volumes of refugees and family reunion migrants entering Sweden, with an average of 42 000 residence permits issued per year in the 1990s, 71 000 per year in the 2000s, and more than 100 000 per year between 2010 and 2015 (Swedish Migration Board 2022). In Denmark, as in most West European countries, public opinion has also developed in a more positive direction, although not to the same extent as in Sweden (ESS 2004 and 2014, Meuleman et al 2009). All other things being equal, the experience of immigration and diversity enhances acceptance, but it also increases saliency and polarization (Demker 2016). In Denmark, this is precisely what happened in the mid-1990s when the issue of immigration-integration began to crowd out other issues (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008).

Swedes and Danes also differ in how much importance they attribute to immigration. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there has been growing saliency and politicization of immigration in Denmark, while the Swedish development has been much slower in this respect. In the mid-2000s, immigration was four times more important to the average Danish voter than to the Swedish. A decade later Sweden had almost caught up with Denmark in terms of issue saliency, but attitudes were more positive than ever (Hatton 2017: 10, 26; Eurobarometer 2004 and 2012; ESS 2004 and 2014). Voter behavior in both countries has since the inception of democracy gravitated on the conflict between labor and capital, with voter preferences largely following the division of socioeconomic class and, to lesser degree, the division between urban and rural areas. In Sweden, so-called bloc politics and class-based voting continued to be the main predictor of elections well into the 2000s, with 63 % of the workers still voting for left-wing parties in 2006 (Rydgren 2010:61). In Denmark, however, class-based voting began to decline long before the 1990s, especially among workers whose support for the left-wing parties dropped from 81 to 41 % in the years between 1966 and 2001 (Rydgren 2010:60). The realignment of Danish politics in general and the weakening of the left in particular facilitated the entry of new questions such as immigration and religious diversity, that did not fit the old mold of welfare and market. In Sweden, such realignment did not happen and party loyalties remained stronger (cf. Odman 2011). Many Swedish workers were sceptic of immigration, but they simply care more about the economy than about culture (Rydgren 2010, Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019). And so, anti-immigration sentiments among the voters have been more prominent and exploitable in Denmark than in Sweden. We will return to the party aspects of this difference in the third section, but it is obvious that the Danish voter has been more mobile from an earlier stage than the Swedish, and thereby also more prone to care about other issues than the ones pertaining to the traditional left-right cleavage.

However, there is an alternative explanation, or rather a complementary one, which concerns the correspondence between political input (voter preferences) and political output (political decisions). According to this explanation, popular attitudes on immigration-integration are not so different in the two countries, but the gap between voters and elected officials is much wider in Sweden than Denmark. Swedish politicians are significantly more

liberal than their constituents and less willing to address perceived migrant-related problems, while the Danish politicians have been more receptive to negative attitudes and trends. Is there some truth to this claim, or is it just a (populist) myth about the arrogant political elite in Sweden? Well, available data suggest that it is not just a myth. By combining surveys of voters and parliamentarians – from the SOM-institute and the Election Research Program (“Valforskningsprogrammet”), respectively – it is possible to track attitudes to refugee immigration over time. From the first comparable datasets in 1994 and up to the early 2010s, the difference between voters and parliamentarians has hovered around 40 percentage points. Since then, the gap has been shrinking as parliamentarians have moved towards the more restrictive position of the populace. The refugee crisis in 2015 gave an additional boost to this trend, which also pushed the voters further in the restrictive direction. In the latest poll from 2018, the gap is just ten percentage points (Johansson et al 2022, Oskarsson 2022). Some level of attitudinal discrepancy between voters and voted is perfectly normal, but the question of immigration seems to be different. The extent of the deviation is much greater and more stable over time than in other, more traditional questions of left and right concerning for example the scope and funding of welfare services (Johansson et al 2022: 124).

While Swedish voters in general have been less negative to immigration and diversity, as we have seen, the difference in policy output seems to be further reinforced by a larger attitudinal gap between voters and elected decision-makers in Sweden. There are several ways of explaining this gap. The most common, perhaps, goes back to the resilience of the traditional left-right spectrum in Sweden (but not Denmark), which has allowed parties to disregard other issues such as immigration without notable loss of votes (Odmalm 2011, Rygren 2010). (I will return to this explanation in section three.) Another explanation posits that the different policy models may account for the greater degree of salience and politicization in Denmark, which in turn contributes to a more restrictive orientation. The Swedish model is characterized by extensive preparatory work in appointed parliamentary and/or expert committees who deliver reports before a bill is presented to parliament. This model typically relies on bureaucratic and academic expertise, and achieves democratic legitimacy through institutionalized feedback mechanisms (“remissrundor”) from a broad range of government bodies and affected interests in the industry, labor market, civil society and so on. The Danish model, on the other hand, has no similar tradition of preparatory committees. It is more “political” and sensitive to opinion trends, one might say, and achieves democratic legitimacy via the more direct connection to the constituents and the responsiveness of elected officials. This model also offers more leeway for individual ministers to determine the orientation within their policy field, and to interfere in the bureaucratic implementation of policies (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012; Jensen et al 2017). In value-laden and identity-related policy issues such as immigration-integration, it is plausible to assume that such differences in policy-style matter to the policy-content being produced. For instance, Martin Jørgensen (2011) has found that research and expert knowledge has a greater impact on integration policy output in Sweden than Denmark. According to him,

Swedish politicians are more willing to seek guidance from academic knowledge, while their colleagues in Denmark are more prone to “pick and choose” the findings and partial evidence that suit their agenda, relatively speaking (Jørgensen 2011, cf. Fernández and Jensen 2017). However, the difference between a more academically driven Swedish style and a more popular Danish style should not be overstated. It is mostly a difference of formal and institutionalized procedures, which of course may be important enough.

Finally, educational level tends to be a good predictor of attitudes to immigration and diversity. The higher the education, the more positive the attitudes, and vice versa. Since the average voter is less educated than the average parliamentarian, we should consequently expect a gap between the two. But we have no reason to expect this gap to be wider in Sweden than Denmark, for which reason the explanation is not convincing in our comparison.

THE MEDIA

A key factor in both the formation of voter preferences and the communication between decision-makers and voters is the media. It is well-known that the media has a crucial agenda-setting and framing role in politics, which includes influencing both *what* subjects people think about and *how* they think about them – e.g. as threats, opportunities, challenges, rewards, etc. (cf. Arendt and Metthes 2014, Entman 1993, Price et al 1997). The media is a very complex phenomenon, however. Whether conceived as an agent with interests, an arena with gatekeeping functions, or both, it is far from one coherent thing. This makes it extremely difficult to get a general and reliable overview of everything from radio and tv to newspapers (broadsheets and tabloids) to the ever changing and elusive world of social media.

The media systems in Denmark and Sweden are quite similar. They share a history of influential public service broadcasters, a large and variegated press with roots in the party systems, and traditionally high levels of newspaper readership. Because Denmark and Sweden are small countries, the newspapers need to have a broad profile, addressing large segments of the population. And because most papers rely on state subsidies, they are required to have serious news content, which usually precludes more extreme forms of sensationalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Nord 2008; Syvertsen et al 2014). Although the press is under serious challenge from social media, newspaper subscriptions in both countries remain high by international standards.

Despite these structural similarities, however, some analyses of immigration-integration indicate a difference in the mainstream media climate of the two countries, contrasting the outspoken, provocative and populist style of Danish media with a more liberal, educating and politically correct style of the Swedish. An oft-cited (and perhaps overstated) example of the Danish style is the 2005 Muhammed cartoon affaire initiated by the broadsheet Jyllands-Posten, which supposedly demonstrates the Danish commitment to free speech and/or Islamophobia (depending on who you ask) (Kunelius et al 2007, Meer and

Mouritsen 2009). An example of the Swedish style would be the media image of the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats, which has combined elements of de-platforming and demonization (see Bevelander and Hellström 2011, Hellström and Hervik 2011, Hellström and Lodenius 2016). On the basis of such examples, it can be assumed that voters and policy-makers in Denmark develop their opinions in a media climate that is loud, feverish and fixated with Danish values and way of life, while Swedish voters and policy-makers develop theirs in a media climate that is politically correct, liberal and anti-populist. On this view, it is easier to express controversial and polarizing opinions in Denmark than Sweden, especially with respect to immigrants and Muslims.

There is an abundance of research on media debates concerning immigration-integration in both countries, but explicit comparisons are scarce. Most research in the field consists of case studies that cover a specific incident, period or development over time in one country (Horsti 2008; Hovden and Mjelde 2019: 139, Strömbäck et al 2017: 18). While this provides some support for the claims above, it is hard to determine how different the two countries are without systematic comparison. One of the few exceptions is the ambitious ScanPub project (<https://scanpub.w.uib.no>), which (among other things) compares newspaper coverage of immigration in the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) between 1970 and 2015. Looking at the biggest broadsheet and tabloid in each country and a selection of 4,320 manually coded articles, the project offers an unusually comprehensive and well-structured longitudinal comparison. The researchers find that media coverage of immigration has grown in all the three countries, especially in the three first decades of the period and in 2015, and with prominent spikes in relation to dramatic events such as Islamist terror attacks, “honor killings” and tragic casualties in the Mediterranean Sea. They also find a general shift in content: from a work- and welfare-oriented focus in the 1970s and 1980s to a cultural discourse in the 1990s and 2000s that is more concerned with multiculturalism, religion and racism. The former varies between two dominant frames, immigrants as victims of war and humanitarian crises or immigration as a burden on the welfare state; the latter between immigrants as threats to public order or as bearers of positive diversity, and victims of racism and discrimination. Over time, however, there is a relative shift towards viewing immigrants as a problem for society and a (related) shift from news to views, including commentary on the immigration debate itself (Hovden 2020:823ff, Hovden and Mjelde 2019:142). These findings are largely consistent with other research that shows a general correlation between accumulated immigration and media interest in immigration-integration as well as increasing politicization and polarization in the 1990s and 2000s (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012, Eide and Nikunen 2016, Strömbäck et al 2017).

What of the difference between Denmark and Sweden, then? The ScanPub researchers find a clear difference between the problem- and integration-oriented Danish debate and the more positive and multicultural Swedish one. The Swedish newspapers are more prone to write about immigration and integration in terms of discrimination and racism from mainstream society, more inclined to frame immigrants as victims or, to lesser extent,

everyday heroes of integration. The Danish papers, on the other hand, are more prone to write about the strains on the welfare state, criminality and public order, and religion (Islam), and more inclined to frame immigrants, particularly Muslims, as threats to society, especially after the turn of the century (Hovden 2020, Hovden and Mjelde 2019, Hovden et al 2018; cf. Hagelund 2020). Another interesting difference is that the Danish papers devote more debate space to the popular voice, i.e. letters to the editor, while the Swedish debate is more restricted to journalists and “professional” commentators, i.e. editorials and columns (Hovden and Mjelde 2019:143). Whether or not this is a conscious strategy to encourage respective stifle open debate is hard to say, but it might be read as a slight indication of Danish populism versus Swedish elitism in mainstream media.

Other studies (with less extensive time scopes) confirm the image of Swedish press as relatively immigration friendly and positive. Mike Berry et al (2015) compare the media coverage of migration on the verge of the refugee crisis in five countries: Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. The authors find that Swedish press is the most immigration-friendly, while the UK stands out in the opposite respect. In Sweden, humanitarian themes were prominent combined with calls for more liberal immigration and asylum policies in the EU, while threat themes (criminality, social welfare abuse, and so on) were less frequent than in the other countries. Interestingly, the report also finds a high degree of homogeneity across the left-right media spectrum in Sweden, with papers converging on the terminology, explanations and responses to the refugee situation. Moreover, Sweden and Germany display the greatest tendency to seek solutions and place blame on the EU and other member states for the suffering and deaths of refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition to this, both Swedish and German press stand out as more likely to present refugee immigration as beneficial to the receiving societies. This is largely consistent with other studies of Swedish media (Hellström 2010, Hellström and Lodenius 2016). It also confirms the notion of Swedish popular opinion as being *comparatively* welcoming and free from polarizing tensions between openness and solidarity, on the one hand, and economic prosperity and social cohesion, on the other hand (Andersson and Bendz 2015, Demker 2015).

According to most available research on the press in Sweden and Denmark, there is a clear difference that seems to follow the pattern of the previous section, generally speaking. It is tempting to conclude that the context of voter attitudes formation is vastly different in the two countries, yet we have not looked beyond mainstream media. Alternative media have become increasingly important as a source of news, especially so for populist voters who show significantly lower levels of trust in mainstream media and largely seek their news via non-traditional channels (Hagelund 2020). There is also evidence to suggest that alternative media is more powerful than traditional media in shaping immigration attitudes of the reader/viewer in both leftist and rightist fora (Theorin and Strömbäck 2020). This is of course partly a result of such media’s tendency to encapsulate the users into ever narrower echo-chambers without dissenting views. But people are obviously drawn to such sites because of opinions they already have, and because of mainstream media’s reluctance to address them. In both Sweden and Denmark there is clearly an element of estrangement

in the way that the major newspapers address the reader and speak of populist parties as the “other”, which contributes to pushing away the populist voter, especially in Sweden where populist issues and concerns rarely get extensive coverage by the press and public service (Hagelund and Kjeldsen 2021; Mjelde 2020). On this view one might suspect that alternative media is particularly important to the populist (non-mainstream) media consumer in Sweden. Comparative studies of such patterns are extremely hard to come by, however, and even harder to generalize from. It is in the very nature of alternative media to be fragmented and divided into narrow niches. They do not make up a national public sphere in the same sense as mainstream media, although they often react to content that originate from newspapers, tv and radio.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Looking at the supply-side explanations of immigration-integration policy, the most obvious factor is the existence or not of an anti-immigration populist party, especially if that party holds seats in parliament. This is so for two reasons: firstly, because it is likely to carve out space on the political agenda for immigration related issues; and secondly, because it offers voters a means to communicate preferences for and against immigration, and to penalize other parties for their policy-decisions on such issues. Some researchers even believe this to be the single most important driver of immigration-integration policy output (e.g. Howard 2009). In the more specific cases of Denmark and Sweden, the vastly different trajectories of the two populist parties, the Danish People’s Party and the Sweden Democrats, are frequently invoked to explain policy divergence. The thing to explain here, then, is why one party but not the other has had a direct impact on immigration-integration policy. Two aspects deserve a closer look. The first has to do with the right-wing populist parties themselves, namely their ability to gain votes and parliamentary influence. In this respect, the Danish People’s Party had a clear “head start” over the Sweden Democrats and we need to understand why. The second aspect has to do with the rest of the party system. In this case we need to explain why no other Swedish party (on the center-right) has been willing to collaborate with the SD, while such collaboration happened quickly in Denmark.

At first glance, the two parties may seem quite similar. They follow the typical populist pattern of mistrust against the elites and craze for the ordinary people, EU-skepticism and anti-cosmopolitanism, defense of traditional values and ethnocultural nationalism, and, of course, anti-immigration. They stand further to the right than the bourgeois parties on sociocultural issues, and further to the left on socioeconomic issues such as taxes and public spending (Backlund and Jungar 2019, McDonnell et al 2021, Rydgren 2010). Beneath the surface, however, the two parties differ in background, ideological roots and, as a consequence, public image.

The Danish People’s Party (DF) is the offspring of the Danish Progress Party, an anti-establishment and neoliberal party that was founded in the early 1970s. After years of internal turmoil and weak leadership, a group of members led by Pia Kjærsgaard broke out

in 1995 and founded a new party with a pronounced anti-immigration ideology and less focus on taxes and welfare state critique. The new party rapidly became more successful than the mother party, gaining 7.4 % of the votes in its very first election in 1998. Throughout the 2000s, election results hovered between 12 and 14 % up until its best result in 2015, when it managed to get 21.1 % of the votes and 37 seats (of 179) in the parliament. The party has been indisputably successful in setting the agenda of the Danish immigration-integration debate, tapping into a growing base of disgruntled blue-collar voters. For a period of ten years between 2001 and 2011, DF was a fundamental support party to the center-right governments of Anders Fogh-Rasmussen and Lars Løkke Rasmussen. It was a decisive, formative moment that set the direction of Danish immigration-integration policy even for the years when DF has been in opposition. The disastrous result in the latest election of 2019, which brought a drop to 8.7 % and 16 seats, may be read as a sign of relative redundancy after years of restrictions on immigration.

The Sweden Democrats (SD), on the other hand, originate from the neo-Nazi movement Keep Sweden Swedish (“Bevara Sverige svenskt”, BSS) that was founded in 1979 and dissolved in 1986. SD was founded in 1988 by former members of the movement and some from other organizations on the extreme right. Unlike the Danish People’s Party, SD is a bottom-up movement that has grown from below. Throughout the 1990s it remained a fringe phenomenon, too extreme and marginal to matter in mainstream politics. But a series of internal purges of radical elements and external adjustments of the political profile under the leadership of the so-called “Gang of four” (Jimmy Åkesson, Richard Jomshof, Mattias Karlsson and Björn Söder) in the 2000s and 2010s gradually made the party a serious contender for blue-collar voters from both left and right. Through a gradual build-up via campaigns in church, local and EU Parliament elections, the party managed to pass the 4 % bar to the Swedish parliament in 2010 with a total of 5.7 %. In the following three elections, the party got 12.9 % (2014), 17.5 % (2018) and 20.6 % of the votes amounting to 73 seats (of 349) at present (2022). Despite these electoral successes, however, the party was blocked for a long time from influence by a “cordon sanitaire”, erected and maintained by the other parties in parliament.

If we are looking at internal party factors, the main reason for the differing trajectories of DF and SD is the extremist, neo-Nazi background of the latter (cf. Hellström 2016). It is a stain that has been extremely difficult to wash away, partly because of party members who continue to be attracted to such ideological currents resulting in recurring public scandals, and partly because of the public image created around the party. While the mainstream media has been generally “unkind” to both parties, the demonization of SD in Sweden stands out (Hagelund and Kjeldsen 2021; Hellström and Hervik 2011). (In fact, for some years DF carefully avoided association with SD because of the ideological differences.) The SD has, simply speaking, been a pariah that no party wants to touch, the media hates and most people fear to be associated with. Even people who voted for them were ashamed to admit it, which for a long time made pollsters consistently underestimate SD’s election results.

The success or failure of a right-wing populist party is largely determined by the power-seeking behavior of other parties. What may stand out the most about the Swedish case, especially in the eyes of foreign observers, is the persistent refusal of the other parties to have anything to do with the Sweden Democrats. The pariah status of the party continued after the 2018 election, despite it being the third largest in parliament and despite the four-months' deadlock in government formation. Two liberal parties, the Center Party (C) and Liberals (L), preferred to abandon their old alliance partners, the conservative Moderates (M) and Christian Democrats (KD), rather than forming a new center-right alliance government with the support of populists⁴. How can this be? In Denmark, on the other hand, it did not take long for Venstre and Conservatives to strike a deal with the Danish People's party in exchange for government power after the election in 2001.

The first difference between the party systems that needs to be pointed out is the gravity of power. While the social democratic party has a strong legacy in both countries, the hegemonic status of the Swedish version is unparalleled even in the Nordic countries. It was simply more dominant for a longer period of time than its other sister parties. This in turn has meant that the bourgeois opposition rarely found itself in a position to govern, and when it did (1991-1994 and 2006-2014), it relied on the support of the parties in the middle, which are the most immigration friendly of all. In Denmark, by contrast, the demise of the social democrats began earlier than in Sweden and from a less dominant position. Danish social democratic governments have typically been minority governments or minority coalitions. The party system's center of gravity is farther to the right, and right-wing governments rely less on the center parties than in Sweden. In other words, there were stronger incentives (and lesser trade-offs) for right-wing parties in Denmark, in particular for Venstre and the Conservatives, to politicize immigration, and to campaign on restrictive reforms (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008).

However, we should also look at the issue positions of the two right-wing populist parties in relation to the center-right parties in the two countries. The Chapell Hill Expert Survey among party representatives conducted in 2014 reveals, unsurprisingly, that both DF and SD are more left-leaning than the other center-right parties on economic issues, and more right-leaning on social issues. Both parties manifest more extreme opinions on the EU and immigration, especially the former, which is consistent with populist parties in the rest of Europe. However, while the Danish People's party only lands two "clicks" away (on a scale from 1-10) from the conservative parties on immigration, the Sweden Democrats land four and a half clicks away from their closest ally at the beginning of this period and a staggering seven clicks away at the end of it. What is more, the distance between the four governing center-right parties in Sweden at this time is consistently low, less than one click. In Denmark the parties are more dispersed – almost four clicks between Venstre and Liberal

⁴ The Liberals have since then shifted position and joined forces with the right-wing bloc, although reluctantly so and at great pains and internal conflicts.

alliance –, which explains the strategic incentive of conservatives to go right rather than left in matters of immigration (McDonnell et al 2021).

The strategic calculations that parties make are not solely made on the basis of maximizing votes and ministerial posts through strategic coalitions (power-seeking). They are also made on the basis of optics and credibility. In the case of Sweden, two conditions set the Sweden Democrats apart from most other. Firstly, unlike most of its populist sister parties in Europe, it has an extreme, neo-Nazi origin. It is not just that voters and parties are repelled ideologically by this fact, but they consider it inopportune to be associated with. Voting for the Sweden Democrats carried a social stigma that made people hesitant to speak openly about their political preferences. The potential cost for members of other parties were even higher, and it has been vital for parties to signal distance to the SD, to SD issues and to SD terminology to avoid smear-campaigns from other parties. Secondly, the fact that there was a Danish populist development before there was a Swedish one mattered. Most of the Swedish commentariat of journalists, politicians and public intellectuals were appalled by the so-called “Danish development” of purportedly unabashed Islamophobia, nationalism and obsession with Danish culture in the late 1990s and 2000s. This public outrage, for lack of a better word, built up to a tacit agreement never to let the same thing happen in Sweden. It imposed a tremendous constriction on the parties because it implied a total ban on any type of association with the Sweden Democrats. Whatever gains a party could make in shared mandates from collaboration with SD, it would pay with a loss of credibility (for hypocrisy) and other partners.

The “reversed domino effect” of the Danish development on Sweden is usually under-estimated in research, especially by non-Scandinavian researchers who are less familiar with the relation between the countries. But there are elements of Swedish immigration and integration policy that are difficult to explain without taking it into account, such as the five years that preceded the refugee crisis. This may have been the most open and liberal migration era of modern Swedish history, and it was only opposed by the Sweden Democrats. The louder their protests and the larger their electoral success, the more liberal the policy of the government, as if its credibility relied on upsetting the populists. In the end, it would take an exogenous chock, the refugee crisis, to reverse this dynamic and reset the party system into a more graded spectrum of immigration positions (See Demker and Od-malm 2022; Emilsson 2018; Fernández 2020).

NATIONAL MODELS

The consistency of the Swedish-Danish difference across electoral, media and party factors suggests that there is something deeper at play than “just” political climate and strategic calculations. Indeed, much of the comparative research on immigration-integration builds on the assumption that there are path-dependent national traditions that governments stick to when they develop and revise policies. Somewhat simplistically, such explanations are often referred to as the national models perspective. Proponents of this perspective argue

that conceptions of national identity and societal cohesion are deeply ingrained in a political culture that configures how political problems are framed and addressed (cf. Brubaker 1992, Favell 1998 and 2006, Goodman 2014, Jensen and Mouritsen 2017, Mouritsen 2013, Borevi 2013 and 2014, Jensen 2014 and 2019, Zimmer 2003). These conceptions can be thought of as “cultural idioms” (Brubaker 1992) or “public philosophies” (Favell 1998) that confine decision-makers and opinion-makers when new policies are drafted, explained and justified to the populace (Jensen 2019:621). Ultimately, these idioms/philosophies influence how society is reproduced over time, not the least in the face of growing immigration and diversity.

Do Sweden and Denmark represent different national models in this sense? Many scholars think so, despite the obvious similarities between the two countries in other respects. I will distinguish between two somewhat interrelated explanations. One type emphasizes the differing conceptions of the nation and national identity, and the other the differing conceptions of society and the welfare state. Let us address each in turn.

Both Denmark and Sweden are examples of early and “successful” nation-building processes that established unified and administratively functional nation-states well before the era of nationalism and revolutions in Europe (cf. Hobsbawm 1988). Both nations have relied on predominantly ethnic conceptions of the people, which have been facilitated by comparatively high degrees of linguistic, racial, religious and sociocultural homogeneity (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012). They also share a past as imperial powers with overseas colonies, partly overlapping with one another, although most of the colonies were in neighboring territories and never resulted in significant and visible ethnic diversity in the imperial centers. Unlike more recent and global empires, such as the British or French, the Danish and Swedish ones were less widespread and enduring. Hence, they were also less confronted with ethnic and racial diversity, and consequently less prone to accommodate pluralism in the social imaginary of nation-building. The most notable exceptions, the indigenous Greenlanders (Denmark) and Sami (Sweden), have been kept geographically isolated, marginalized and discriminated for most, if not all, of modern history.

According to the literature on nationalism, integration and citizenship, such conditions are not conducive to high acceptance of immigration and diversity (cf. Brubaker 1992; Koopmans et al 2005, Alba and Foner 2015). Still, as many scholars have noted, the Swedish experience of post-War immigration seems to have resulted in a remarkably quick and relatively painless shift toward a political and civic conception of the nation, whereas the Danish reaction to the same phenomenon has been more strained and prone to reinvigorate ethnocultural identities (Brochmann and Seland 2010; Schall 2016, Midtbøen 2015). While Swedish national identity seems to have developed into a late/post-modern and post-ethnic – and perhaps more private and anemic (Fernández 2019) – version that clashes less with diversity, Danish national identity remains intact or even, some would argue, increasingly reactionary and excluding (Brochmann and Midtbøen 2021). The presumed effect is two distinct models of migrant incorporation, Swedish multiculturalism versus Danish assimilationism.

The multicultural model by which migrants have been received and incorporated into Swedish society is based on the official view of integration as a process guided by freedom of choice, encouragement and mutual adaptation between migrants and the host society (Soininen 1999, Borevi 2017). While there has been notable variation within this model over time, a defining constant is the notion that integration works best when it does not force migrants to choose between majority and minority culture, but rather encourages them to cultivate both. Support for mother tongue instruction, immigrant organizations and media outlets are concrete expressions of this philosophy (cf. Borevi 2002), as is the so-called *own accommodation* (“eget boende”) law from 1994, which allows newcomers to find accommodation on their own – e.g. close to family and co-nationals.⁵ Sweden also has a fairly extensive policy on anti-discrimination with an ombudsman for (ethnic) discrimination and specific hate crime legislation, which reflects a strong emphasis to address and change majority society’s attitudes to immigrants and diversity (Brochmann and Midtbøen 2021:159). Political participation is encouraged through generous voting rights and liberal naturalization criteria. Moreover, admission to citizenship is typically viewed as an encouragement to integration and inclusion, not a hard-won reward at the end of the road (Jensen et al 2017, Fernández 2019).

In contrast to the Swedish policy of free choice and mutual adaptation, the Danish one is usually described as pervasive and one-sided with a stronger focus on majority culture and values (Jensen et al 2017, Brochmann and Midtbøen 2021, Mouritsen and Olsen 2013). There is a stronger tendency to enforce integration through limitations of individual choice, for example in settlement options and residential deconcentration of co-ethnics, and greater willingness to ensure the priority of a leading national culture (“leitkultur”), for example through officially sanctioned culture canons and knowledge requirements (Tawat 2012, Mouritsen 2013 and 2019, Fernández and Jensen 2017). While the Danish state has a long tradition of encouraging grassroots organization for management of schools and other public goods, it does not provide special support for minority cultures in the form of mother tongue instruction or other targeted measures. Nor has it been keen on developing specialized state institutions for the accommodation of migrants. Like in Sweden, most political rights are extended to migrants with permanent residence, but this status and especially that of citizenship are now tightly protected by high requirements of civic knowledge, language proficiency and economic self-sufficiency (Jensen et al 2021:1050).

The second type of explanation homes in on the conception of the welfare state, which shows many similarities but also some important differences between the two countries. In both welfare systems, social benefits have traditionally applied universally to the whole population, regardless of employment history and other past contributions to the national tax base. Both systems are comprehensive as they apply equally to a wide array of needs – e.g. public health, schooling and housing – as well as highly institutionalized,

⁵ Some of these policy measures also include a good dose of pragmatism. The accommodation reform, for instance, has allowed the state to outsource a cumbersome responsibility to the migrants themselves.

making welfare assistance more a matter of social rights than of charity (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012: 5ff; cf. Esping-Andersen 1990). The economic system of redistribution required to sustain this model includes: firstly, high and progressive income taxation, whereby everyone contributes according to the size of the wallet; secondly, a widespread willingness to participate and contribute to the common good through work (the “work-line” norm); and thirdly, a high degree of trust in others and the institutions that operate the system in a supposedly fair and efficient manner.

Swedish and Danish integration policies are similar in that this welfare model has been central to the conceptualization of migrants and migrant incorporation. The ideology of social egalitarianism that brought about the model in the first place, was aimed at the socioeconomic hierarchies of class society and designed to reduce inequalities between workers and capitalists. In this welfare scheme, the migrant has been modelled on the previous notion of the worker, namely someone whose rightful inclusion in mainstream society requires equal access to public goods. Notwithstanding the differences between Swedish multiculturalism and Danish monoculturalism, the means to achieve such inclusion has largely been the same: individual rights that apply to everyone, but especially cater to the needs of the worst off. The two countries are also similar in that the labor unions have been essential in protecting and expanding such rights for (working) migrants. The two countries differ, however, with respect to the perceived consequences of (voluminous) immigration to the welfare state. While many migrant groups – especially family reunion, refugees and asylum-seekers – show significantly higher levels of unemployment and social welfare dependence than natives in both countries, the Danish reactions have been more negative and vociferous. Sentiments of “welfare chauvinism” clearly exist in both countries, but they are more prevalent in public debate and more influential in policy-making in Denmark (Hellström and Tawat 2020, Koning 2019, Jørgensen and Thomsen 2016). The increasingly restrictive rules of entry and residence in Denmark are in large part driven by welfare protectionism. The contrasting Swedish position – which may be faltering as a consequence of the refugee crisis 2015 – is confidence in the integrative capacity of the welfare system and the long-term gains of immigration.

International observers often marvel at Sweden’s combination of openness to migrants and diversity, and generous welfare state with extensive social rights for everyone, because it contradicts a common belief that there is a tradeoff between liberal immigration laws and socioeconomic egalitarianism (e.g. Freeman 1986 and 2004, Alesina and Glaeser 2004, Martin and Ruhs 2008, Ruhs 2013). The key to this conundrum may very well have something to do with the (image of the) “miraculous welfare machine”, as Carly Elisabeth Schall (2016) calls it. The miraculous welfare machine is conceived as an effective apparatus of socialization that turns migrants into institutionally compatible residents and citizens. It is of little consequence why they come and wherefrom. Exposure to and engagement with the institutions of the welfare state will teach the migrant all s/he needs to know to be a functioning member of society. This top-down approach to integration emphasizes politics over culture, rights over obligations, and (in a sense) class over ethnicity (Berman 2006;

Borevi 2012 and 2014; Jensen et al 2017; Schall 2016). The Danish conception is more horizontal and organic, according to this line of reasoning, in which state institutions are viewed as deeply embedded in society. The goals and values said institutions are set to deliver and protect ultimately rely on the beliefs and actions of the members of society. To be deserving and functioning members of the welfare state the migrant must first assimilate into the majority culture (Borevi 2014; Jensen et al 2017: 7-8; Mouritsen and Olsen 2013; Jønsson and Petersen 2012).

As already mentioned, the two types of explanations are interrelated. In the Danish model, the state appears as a vulnerable construct that can only be sustained by a pre-existing, culturally defined people. This makes for a more organic view of society, both in the ethnocultural sense of nationhood and the socio-political sense of the social contract. The modern historical experiences of war, loss of territory (to Prussia 1864) and foreign occupation (by Germany 1940) constitute a traumatic reminder of the need for society to be strong when the state is weak (cf. Østergård 1992). “We are a small country” (“Vi er et lille land”), Danes like to say to remind themselves of this shared social fact. Sweden, on the other hand, has not experienced war or foreign occupation in over 200 years. The post-War economic boom (the “record years”) paved the way for a large-scale industry, internationalism, hyper-modernism, social engineering and, perhaps most importantly, popular confidence in the state as the creator of a better society (Bengtsson and Borevi 2015, Brochmann and Seland 2010).⁶ It is likely that these diverging experiences have impressed different conceptions of the relation between state and society, and more specifically of society’s capacity to accommodate migrants and diversity.

CONCLUSION

The Swedish-Danish difference is a “high-profile subject”. The explanations presented and discussed here should sound familiar to most scholars and practitioners of immigration-integration policy in the two countries, most of whom probably have their own favorite explanation. But the Swedish-Danish difference does not lend itself to simple monocausal explanations. The objective of this paper has been to show what we can gain by combining them, layer by layer, into a fuller picture. In that spirit, let me briefly conclude with a few remarks on what each of them brings (and do not bring) to that picture and a note on the state of the Swedish-Danish difference today.

Surveys of voter attitudes give us a fairly good overview of the gap between Danes and Swedes. On this view, the policy divergence between the two countries is both logical and legitimate, because it reflects a roughly corresponding difference in the respective

⁶ It is of course as easy to exaggerate these convenient national tropes as it is impossible to prove their precise (causal) relevance to the outcome. Everything is not determined by select historic circumstances, but they matter as collective memories that predispose decision-makers to frame and react to events in certain (path-dependent) ways.

electorates. But what explains the gap in the first place? Is it the inertia of the old left-right cleavage in Swedish politics, which for a long time made the Swedish voter more invested in questions affecting the wallet than cultural identity? Or is the answer the larger attitudinal gap between voters and elected officials in Sweden, which “short circuits” the mechanisms of voter representation in questions of immigration-integration? Both answers are partly true and help explain the lower issue saliency in Sweden and the higher degree of politicization in Denmark, but they do not fully explain the difference in the *substantial values* that Danes and Swedes have. If issue saliency were the driver of attitudes, we should see a development towards more negative voter attitudes in Sweden after the turn of the century. Yet we do not. Not until the refugee crisis. This protracted difference between Swedes and Danes is intriguing and needs to be understood in a wider context.

The media is one such context. As an arena where political disagreements, standpoints and opinions play out at public display, it gives us a sense of how immigration-integration is talked about in a society – the frequency, the frames, the voices and the degree of consensus. Moreover, we can assume (but not prove) that the national audience of media consumers are affected by these patterns when they develop and revise opinions about immigration-integration. It is interesting to note, then, how electoral attitudes and media coverage display similar inclinations in each of the countries – more liberal and positive in Sweden, more restrictive and negative in Denmark. Imperfect as all these media studies may be – e.g., for reasons of selection and coding of sources –, taken together, they convey a fairly consistent pattern that is difficult to ignore. Clearly, the public debate on immigration-integration is different in the two countries, which is likely to affect (but not determine) how people vote and how policy-makers set their political agendas. However, none of this explains *why* the media climate is different in the two countries, it just shows us that is.

The most direct (causal) link to policy formation is of course the policy-makers themselves. Obviously, parliamentarians and cabinet ministers have to answer to their constituents, but maybe there is a significant difference between the party systems that accounts for diverging policy output. Well, there is: The Danish voters were supplied with a serious anti-immigration alternative much earlier than the Swedish voters.⁷ The role of the Danish Peoples’ Party in mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiments in Denmark can hardly be overestimated, but its influence on policy-development also relied on the willingness of other parties to collaborate. This is another vital difference to Sweden; until recently, the Sweden Democrats have been treated as pariahs. The center of gravity of the two-party systems, which is further to the right in Denmark, is part of the explanation. Yet, one of the most overlooked reasons for the Swedish cordon sanitaire against populism is the reversed domino effect of the Danish development. This particular aspect is rarely understood by

⁷ I write “serious” because the party New Democracy (Ny demokrati), which made a spectacular political entrance with a populist, neoliberal and anti-immigrationist agenda in the early 1990s, did not leave a positive legacy after its implosion in the mid-1990s. If anything, it showed most voters that right-wing populists could not be entrusted with something as important as seats in parliament.

international scholars of populism and party politics, but it was crucial to the policy of zero tolerance for right-wing populism that the mainstream parties developed as the Sweden Democrats started to grow in the early 2000s.

The consistent Swedish-Danish difference that cuts across voter attitudes, media climate and party politics, suggests that there are deeper, structural differences between the two countries. Proponents of the national models perspective attempt to unveil such structures by studying path-dependent conceptions of state and society that confine political disagreements within (loosely) defined yet well-established public philosophies about the nature and social reproduction of the political community. By reconstructing such philosophies in the two countries, we find significant differences that go some distance in explaining the diverging immigration-integration policies: ethnocultural nationhood in Denmark that require assimilation before inclusion versus civic/political nationhood and multiculturalism in Sweden that pursues integration via full inclusion and rights. This explanatory approach has less to do with attitudes and legislation *per se*, and more with how policies gain legitimacy by drawing on ideas that are already loaded with value and meaning. Studies of this kind emphasize the continuity of philosophies, and the difficulty of replacing – or even reorienting – existing policy paradigms. In the case of Sweden and Denmark, there is clearly continuity in the different ways of conceptualizing the relation between nation, society and diversity, as we have seen. But there are also shifts that are hard to explain, such as increasing divergence between the two countries from the mid-1990s or signs of convergence after 2015.

Is Sweden finally becoming more like Denmark? If we look at recent policy developments, the answer is yes. The refugee crisis paved the way for a re-evaluation of the migration-integration policy nexus and an urge to deviate less from legislation in other EU countries. With respect to immigration, the access to asylum and family reunification has been significantly restricted, first through a temporary law passed in 2016 and extended in 2019, and then through a permanent amendment to the Foreigner Law (2005:716). It restricts the grounds for protection, limits most residence permits to temporary residence, and raises the demands on economic self-sufficiency and ability to provide for family members. The motivation of the reform is to have a policy that is sustainable in the long term and does not deviate much from other EU countries (Prop. 2020/21:191). With respect to integration, two commissioned reports have suggested language and knowledge tests as requirements for both permanent residence and citizenship (SOU 2020:54 and SOU 2021:2, respectively). Both reports emphasize the importance of convergence with the Nordic states and other EU countries. The requirements for permanent residence are meant to underscore the importance of integration and the immigrant's intention and willingness to become a fully included participating member of society (SOU 2020:54, p.216). Following the keyword "solidarity" of the 2014 citizenship act, the citizenship committee further highlights the symbolic and inclusive meaning of citizenship. The status of citizenship, it argues, should be reserved for members who are integrated enough to feel solidarity with Sweden. Such integration presupposes the ability to understand and speak Swedish, and having

knowledge of Swedish society (SOU 2021:2, p.153f). No bill on language and knowledge tests has been presented to parliament yet, but the proposals indicate a potential turn toward civic assimilationism in Sweden.

If we look at the realignment of the party system, the answer is also yes – Sweden is becoming more like Denmark. As the final lines of this paper are written, a new conservative government is under construction. It will be completely dependent on the support of the Sweden Democrats, now the biggest party on the center-right. The new government will be a fragile construction, for it requires appeasement between liberals and populists, formerly sworn arch-enemies. Regardless of its success, however, the system’s center of gravity has shifted to the right and a new conservative block has emerged. Unlike Alliance for Sweden, the liberal-bourgeois predecessor of the mid-2000s to 2010s, the current conservative block is ideologically united by tougher policies on immigration-integration, crime, and law and order in general. Again, regardless of its success, it is likely to push the Swedish party system further into the cultural and identitarian universe of GAL-TAN conflicts.

However, if we look at how most of the implemented and proposed policies are motivated thus far, Sweden is still different from Denmark. The restrictive turn that followed the refugee crisis has largely been explained and justified as a pragmatic adjustment to the changing European reality of unprecedented volumes of asylum-seekers and failed burden-sharing within the EU. Unlike Denmark, the Swedish restrictions have not (yet) been defined as defensive measures against unwanted migrants and the corrosive effects of diversity on national culture. Rather, the main (official) argument has been protection of a well-functioning welfare state that maintains its capacity to generate social inclusion and equality. The stated goals and ideals of the Swedish model remain the same, at least to the center-left, but the means and conditions to achieve them have changed, so to speak (cf. Fernández 2020, Hagelund 2020). Still, admitting that the “miraculous welfare machine” (cf. Schall 2016) can no longer cope with liberal-humanitarian immigration laws is no small thing in Sweden. It is to recognize that the progressive dilemma between openness and egalitarianism is real – even in Sweden.

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