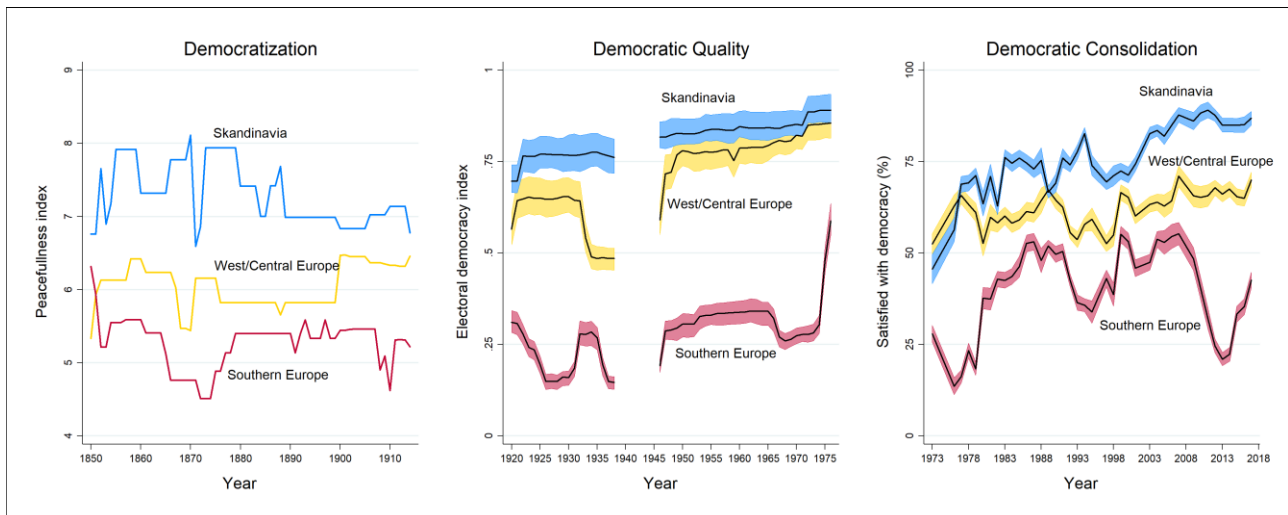


**IRFD Project Description**  
**Disentangling Scandinavian Democratic Exceptionalism**  
**Svend-Erik Skaaning**

Sustainable democracy is currently at the center of attention in Europe. Freedom of expression has been compromised in Hungary and Poland, and corruption scandals, parliamentary deadlocks, economic crises, and democratic dissatisfaction seem to be the current trend in countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece. Even in Britain, Germany, and France, frustration over poor governance and lack of responsiveness has grown into a democratic legitimization crisis.<sup>1</sup> In short, democracy seems to be in crisis across the European continent.

In this sea of democratic trouble, the Scandinavian countries stand out with comparatively well-functioning democracies both historically and today.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the Scandinavian democratic exceptionalism. Compared to other parts of Western Europe, Scandinavian *democratization* was uniquely peaceful with few violent societal groups (reversed societal violence index from V-Dem);<sup>3</sup> subsequent *democratic quality* was extraordinary (electoral democracy index from V-Dem);<sup>4</sup> and *democratic consolidation* in the form of citizen support and satisfaction with democracy (Eurobarometer) is pronounced. But what explains this Scandinavian democratic exceptionalism?

**Figure 1: Scandinavian democratic exceptionalism**



The literature on democratization has been dominated by studies of developing countries, while comparatively well-functioning countries have been neglected. No studies have systematically examined the Scandinavian democratic exceptionalism in a comprehensive framework and compared it to the rest of Western Europe, although scholars and pundits increasingly point to the Scandinavian trajectories as benchmark models for stable democracy worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Given the recent democratic

challenges in Europe, this gap is unfortunate. We therefore seek to narrow it by offering overarching theoretical propositions and systematic analyses based on novel data.

**Table 1: Outline of the project**

<b>Democratic development</b>	Democratization (WP I)	Democratic quality (WP II)	Democratic consolidation (WP III)
<b>Period</b>	19 <sup>th</sup> to early 20 <sup>th</sup> century	Post-WWI	Recent decades
<b>Explanatory factors</b>	Level of equality Impartial state institutions	+ Level of polarization in the party system	+ Democratic norms among political elites and citizens
<b>Design</b>	Comparative historical analysis partly based on own data collection	TSCS and IV regression analysis based on new V-Dem data. Qualitative case-studies	TSCS regression analysis based on new V-Dem data. Conjoint survey experiment

Note: “+” means that the explanatory factors of the former stage are also relevant here.

Overall, we hypothesize that two factors have created path-dependencies between all three phases of democratic development, where democracy is understood as inclusive, contested elections supported by freedom of speech and association.<sup>6</sup> We examine our framework in three work packages summarized in Table 1 above. In brief, we propose that the level of rural equality<sup>7</sup> and impartial state institutions<sup>8</sup> contributed to *peaceful democratization* in Scandinavia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Demands for land reforms and rural disputes were most often about civil liberties such as the right to own property, privacy, and bodily integrity as well as the equal access to justice. The relative rural equality most likely decreased the potential to mobilize peasants for violent uprising. In addition, a stronger separation between politics and administration tended to separate bureaucrats from specific class interests. Therefore, we expect raised beliefs that demands had a fair chance of being adopted and raised trust among the landed and bourgeois elites that the state apparatus could not be turned against them should they lose government power by the ballot. In turn, there should be relatively fewer outbursts of violence in Scandinavia in connection with peasant demands.

The peaceful democratization processes in Scandinavia led to a de-polarized party system in which cross-party consensus facilitated the continued development and fine-tuning of *high-quality democratic* institutions in the interwar years and beyond. General social equality (a historical continuation of rural equality in Scandinavia) expectedly reduced intra-party disagreements about redistribution while state impartiality reduced the abuse of state power for economic exploitation and political oppression and, in turn, decreased inter-party antagonism. Based on cross-party cooperation, Scandinavian democracies built corporatist systems that tied most social groups to the political system. This political model with high levels of trust in political institutions and between parties made it possible to protect and deepen democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the gradual deepening of democracy laid the foundation for *consolidated democracies*, characterized by mutual toleration between competing parties and exercise of restraint by those in power as well as high levels of citizen support for and satisfaction with democracy. We expect that the historical legacies of social equality and state impartiality have made it easier for Scandinavian political elites and citizens to separate procedural and substantive aspects of democratic politics,<sup>10</sup> thereby bolstering support for democracy during crises when economic performance has been poor or social expenditure has been curtailed.

### **Work package 1: Scandinavian Peaceful Democratizations in a Comparative Perspective**

Why were the paths to democracy so much more peaceful in Scandinavia as opposed to the rest of Europe? Extant research has either focused on individual countries from an ideographic perspective<sup>11</sup> or has only mentioned the Scandinavian countries in passing (mainly due to their small size and language barriers). It largely explains European democratizations by unexpected outcomes of historical events<sup>12</sup> or conditions settled before the era of mass politics.<sup>13</sup> Instead, we use a comparative-historical approach to bridge the gap between generalization and historical detail.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, we make use of archives to collect new, systematic evidence on 1) the practices of recruitment (merit or non-merit) to the higher and lower courts and echelons of administration, 2) the content of land and pro-democracy reforms and the quality of their implementation by central and local authorities, and 3) the number and types of uprisings linked to land and pro-democracy reforms. We then use our contacts to relevant historians in Scandinavia to validate our interpretations of the data.

Based on this data collection, we plan to write two papers focusing on political liberalization in monarchies and the subsequent democratization process, respectively. The first paper investigates the origins and administration of land reforms and rural disputes in Scandinavia with a comparative outlook to Germany/Prussia, France, and Spain during the age of liberalization from late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century (target journal: *Journal of Historical Sociology*). The second paper focuses on the impartiality of state institutions and investigates the demands for free and fair elections, government accountability, and suffrage extensions and elite reactions to them during the age of mass democratization between early 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in this set of countries (target journal: *CP*).

### **Work package 2: Scandinavian Democratic Quality in Comparative Perspective**

Why did Scandinavian democracies succeed in building relatively high-quality democracies? Several studies of individual Scandinavian countries examine the conditions underlying this development in the interwar and postwar periods,<sup>15</sup> and there are comparative analyses of how European countries managed the Great Depression in the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> However, based on the argument presented above we

offer a new perspective that systematically compares and examines the determinants of democratic quality in Western Europe across the post-WWI period (excluding the WWII years).

We propose two papers that complement each other by employing quantitative and qualitative methods, respectively. The first paper carries out a statistical time-series, cross-sectional analysis of the general relationship between social equality, state impartiality, and democratic quality in post-WWI Western Europe (target journal: *CPS*). This analysis primarily makes use of the V-Dem dataset, which offers long time series (1789-2017) of fine-grained, disaggregated indicators of democracy and state impartiality with uncertainty estimates derived from a Bayesian IRT measurement model.<sup>17</sup> To address issues of endogeneity, we supplement the main analysis with a 2SLS instrumental variable approach, where we use the timing and intensity of geopolitical competition around 1450 as a source of exogenous variation in bureaucratic quality in the modern era.<sup>18</sup> In addition, we suggest that the average level of global economic growth and trade can be used as a source of exogenous variation in domestic levels of inequality.<sup>19</sup>

The second paper follows up on the correlational analysis with process tracing analyses (target journal: *WEP*). We use qualitative evidence, such as political speeches, newspaper accounts of critical events, and secondary sources (e.g., biographies of leading politicians and political histories of individual countries), to dig deeper into the role of civil servants and perceptions of inequality for the ability and willingness of parties to compromise and to agree on the containment of anti-systemic movements. Again, the high performing Scandinavian experiences are compared to those of Germany, France, and Spain.

### **Work package 3: Scandinavian Democratic Consolidation in Comparative Perspective**

Why do Scandinavian democracies persistently enjoy high levels of public support and satisfaction? Recent studies conclude that mutual toleration of political opponents and exercise of restraint by those in power determine democratic survival.<sup>20</sup> However, such accounts have failed to study the structural preconditions of these norms among political elites.<sup>21</sup> We therefore examine our historical argument in two papers utilizing macro- and micro-level evidence, respectively. The first paper carries out statistical analyses to investigate the covariation between social equality, state impartiality, and elites' adherence to democratic norms in post-WWII Western Europe (target journal: *EJPR*). We use V-Dem indicators on political deliberation to measure mutual toleration and executive embezzlements and respect for the constitution to measure exercise of restraint.

The second paper shifts focus to a citizens' perspective and examines Scandinavian citizens' ability to distinguish performance from fundamental regime traits compared to citizens in other Western European countries (target journal: *JOP*). To do this, we run a conjoint experiment<sup>22</sup> with surveys in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, and Spain with representative samples of around

1000 respondents in each country. We present them with a series of fictive cases that randomly vary on key procedural aspects of democracy and the rule of law: inclusive suffrage, clean multiparty elections, government responsibility to the electorate, freedoms of speech and association, checks and balances, and equal access to justice. Moreover, we include a range of aspects relating to substantive aspects (e.g., economic inequality, unemployment level, crime level, access to health care, and the number of immigrants) that are not regime traits from a procedural point of view but are nevertheless sometimes included in regime classifications. We then ask the respondents to rate the regimes according to the level of democracy, enabling us to assess whether Scandinavian citizens, on average, focus more on procedural aspects than others.

### **Project group and research plan**

The project is led by SES, who is responsible for WP II and coordinates the research group, which includes a fulltime postdoc (DA) and an assistant professor (SK). The department has agreed to add one year of teaching to the two-year postdoc, which means that DA will be employed for the full project period and is able to qualify for tenure. SES is ideally placed to head this project as he has done extensive comparative research on democratic transition and consolidation. Moreover, he has broad experience with project management and has a large network of scholars in Scandinavia (Oslo, Bergen, Lund, Uppsala, and Gothenburg) and beyond, who work on democratization, quality of government, and social inequality. SES is closely connected to the V-Dem project, which provides key data for several of the proposed papers. DA has detailed knowledge of the literatures on state impartiality and democratization, is familiar with Scandinavian political history, and is an advanced user of case-study methodology. He is responsible for WPI and is involved in the case-studies in WP II and the elite study in WP III. SK is an expert on political economy, regime change, public opinion towards democracy, and quantitative methods, including cross-sectional, time-series analysis and survey experiments. He is responsible for WP III.

The group thus offers an excellent match of competences for carrying out the research agenda. What is more, the project members can benefit from discussions with the many scholars at the department with overlapping research interests, who frequently meet for small seminars and arrange workshops with external scholars. The project plan generally follows the sequence of the work packages with one year for each package. It is our goal to complete the project by combining the insights in a book (target publisher: *Routledge*). Regarding wider dissemination, we will offer a common MA course on the topic, write an article for each WP to a Danish weekly (*Weekendavisen*) and *openDemocracy*, and produce a ten-minute YouTube video (in Danish and English) to be used in high school teaching.

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- <sup>2</sup> Ferrín and Kriesi (2016); Norris (2011); Stråth, B. (1988). *Democratisation in Scandinavia in Comparison*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg; Andersen, J.G. and J. Hoff (eds.) (2001). *Democracy and Citizenship in Scandinavia*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
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- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Ansell, B. and D. Samuels (2014). *Inequality and Democratization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Rothstein, B. (2011). *The Quality of Government*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- <sup>9</sup> E.g. Luebbert, G. (1991); Hilson, M. (2008).
- <sup>10</sup> See Møller, J and Svend-Erik Skaaning (2011).
- <sup>11</sup> E.g. Knudsen, T. (2001). *Da demokrati blev til folkestyre*. København: Akademisk Forlag; Möller, T. (2011). *Svensk politisk historia 1809-1975*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, p. 56-66; Sejersted, F. (2011), p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> E.g. Ziblatt, D. (2017). *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Treisman, D. (2017). *Democracy by Mistake*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series.
- <sup>13</sup> E.g. Moore (1966); Downing, B. (1992). *The Military Revolution and Political Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- <sup>14</sup> See Lange, M. (2012). *Comparative-Historical Methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- <sup>15</sup> E.g. Sejersted (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> E.g. Katzenstein, P. J. (1985). *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Luebbert (1991); Capoccia, G. (2005). *Defending Democracy. Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Lapuente, V. and B. Rothstein (2014). "Civil War Spain versus Swedish Harmony: The Quality of Government Factor." *Comparative Political Studies* 47(10): 1416-1441.
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