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Upon entering NATO: explaining defence willingness among Swedes

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the new security situation in Europe, Sweden has decided to apply for membership in NATO. After over 200 years without war, the country must now be set to defend not just itself, but its allies as well. Are Swedes ready for this? Previous research has shown a high willingness among Swedes to defend their country. But what actually explains this high defence willingness among Swedes, given their unfamiliarity with the task? To examine the willingness of the country's population to contribute to the military, we make use of survey data collected before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It turns out that the most general explanation for defence willingness, namely threat perception, has little or no explanatory value in the Swedish context. Surprisingly, this was true before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as after. Furthermore, context-specific explanations citing the prevalence of emancipatory values among Swedes find no support either. However, this study does find robust support for gender, trust and political orientation as important explanatory factors for defence willingness. Our findings thus underscore some challenges facing Sweden as a newcomer to NATO, as political divides along lines of gender and trust widen.

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Defence willingness; NATO; Sweden; threat perceptions; trust; gender

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has sparked rapid and dramatic changes in Europe's geopolitical map. One of the most obvious is that, shortly after the invasion, Finland and Sweden applied for fast-tracked membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The political manoeuvring surrounding this decision at high political levels has drawn attention (Alberque and Schreer 2022a, 2022b, Arter 2023, Brommesson et al. 2023). In particular, analysts have focused on the new foreign and security policies developed by the two Nordic countries, and the responses they have received from current NATO members. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the question of what motivates citizens to support a military defence within the framework of a military

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alliance. Nonetheless, the rapid shift in public opinion to favour NATO membership is considered to have paved the way for both countries' application (Ydén et al. 2019, Kanniainen 2022).

In this article, we provide new data on the attitudes of the Swedish public as they relate to defence willingness, and what may explain it. We seek here to offer answers on what motivates Swedes to express a willingness to defend their country with military means in times of crises, as they make their way into the NATO family. Finland's high level of defence willingness has mainly been explained by its geographical proximity to Russia (DW 2017, Yle 2022, Braw 2023). The case of Sweden, however, would appear to be a more challenging one to understand. The country is without doubt an important actor for NATO, but the high defence willingness among Swedes appear to be less straightforward than among Finns.[1]

Swedes have not seen themselves as seriously threatened by any other states, and they have not been at war for more than 200 years; yet they have displayed a high willingness to defend their country. Rapid changes, however, have taken place in policy and opinion relating to NATO, mainly in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Swedish citizens have been warming up to the idea of NATO membership for almost a decade. From 1995 to 2012, support among Swedes for joining NATO hovered around 20 per cent. Since 2013, however, it has fluctuated between 27 and 38 per cent. A shift took place around 2013–2015, coinciding with Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. By 2022, support for NATO membership had increased to 64 per cent (Bjereld and Oscarsson 2023). Support for higher military spending has also risen since then, while trust in the armed forces has increased at a similar rate (Ydén et al. 2023). It is thus natural to assume the shift in opinion reflected, at least in part, a fear of external threats to the nation's security. However, as previous studies have observed, defence willingness can be high without the perception of immediate external threats (Listhaug 1986). Moreover, it has been argued that so-called emancipatory values, such as a belief in universal rights and in the freedom to express oneself, are negatively correlated with defence willingness – except in the case of the Nordic countries, where the opposite is true (Puranen 2014, Inglehart et al. 2015). Furthermore, several factors related to national pride, to trust in the army and in authorities, and to attitudinal factors such as political orientation, have been found to exert a significant influence on individuals' willingness to go to war (Torgler 2003). Finally, socio-economic and demographic factors, such as age, gender and income, have been found to impact the willingness to fight; however, education does not appear to be a strong predictor of the inclination to serve (Torgler 2003, Puranen 2014, Anderson et al. 2020).

To examine which factors influence the willingness to defend among Swedes, we will make use of survey data collected before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The survey allows for a natural experiment design where the role of an increased external threat in particular can be more precisely assessed. Moreover, we can investigate the extent to which defence willingness in Sweden is related to threat perceptions, emancipatory orientations, democratic values and trust, and socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Needless to say, the fact that we are studying a single country case means that country-level factors that have been found to be important in previous studies, such as having a conscription army or not (Horowitz and Levendusky 2011), cannot be assessed.

The results suggest that external threats to the country play no measurable role, and the prevalence of emancipatory values among Swedes finds no support either. The opposite is true for trust and gender variables, as well as for the political orientation of the respondents. The data we present moreover suggest that defence willingness in Sweden appears almost unchanged shortly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In our conclusions, we offer some tentative hypotheses as to why Swedes' willingness to support the military defence is largely unaffected. However, the level of defence willingness, in comparison with Europe in general, is high in Sweden. This is important to emphasise when discussing the effect of Sweden joining NATO.

We proceed in this article as follows. We begin with a look at previous research on defence willingness. Next, on the basis of this research, we set out our theoretical expectations. We then address methodological issues, data and operationalisations in connection with our study. In the penultimate section, we review our results and evaluate our theoretical expectations. In the last section, finally, we present our conclusions, and we discuss why defence willingness may be relatively unaffected by increased perceptions of threat.

Old and new perspectives on what motivates Swedes to support a military defence

Examining data on attitudes towards "war and defence" in 14 countries collected for the International Values Study in 1981–1982, Ola Listhaug noted that, in Sweden, survey participants expressed a strong willingness to defend their country (Listhaug 1986). Threat perceptions naturally play an important role in defence willingness. In the US, for example, the willingness to defend the country was high, as was the perceived risk of war. Listhaug, however, observed that respondents in Sweden shared a specific trait with their counterparts in Hungary and Norway. In all three countries, specifically, the public regarded the risk of war as low, yet their willingness to defend their homeland was high. Contrary to what we might expect, in other words, their willingness to defend their country was unrelated to the presence or absence of external or so-called sociotropic threats (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2007). Why, though, would non-threatened respondents – such as Swedes – support a strong defence? That puzzle was not investigated further, and it would remain so until about three decades later.

In 2015, Ronald Inglehart, Bi Puranen and Christian Welzel took a closer look at the willingness of individuals to risk their lives in war (Inglehart et al. 2015). Their study was certainly one of the more ambitious ones undertaken on the topic, with data from the World Values Surveys (WVS) and the European Values Studies (EVS). Using five rounds of random national samples in 90 countries, the authors tested the intricate connections between "development" and "pro-choice values", on the one hand, and the willingness to "risk [one's] life in a war", on the other. They measured "development" on the basis of perceptions about security, life opportunities, international cooperation and democratic performance in the countries included in the study. They also measured "pro-choice values" – which include one of "four components of Welzel's (2013, pp. 66–73) index of emancipative values" – according to respondents' support for, or tolerance of, "reproductive freedoms, including the freedoms of abortion, divorce, and homosexuality" (Inglehart et al. 2015, p. 422). Finally, they measured defence willingness according to how

respondents answered the following question: "Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your country?" (Inglehart et al. 2015, p. 421). It is notable that Inglehart, Puranen and Welzel never define defence willingness theoretically. This lack of any theoretical account of the phenomenon is characteristic of much previous research on the subject (see, e.g. Listhaug 1986, p. 70, Torgler 2003, p. 267f.). We understand defence willingness as the inclination of an individual to contribute, in the event of a crisis or war, to the military defence in some form or capacity. Of course, whether this propensity would in fact materialise in a real-life crisis or war is difficult to know, but the probability is certainly higher when the readiness is present.

Inglehart et al. (2015) present an explanatory model where "development" both supports pro-choice values and is negatively correlated with the willingness to fight for one's country. In addition, pro-choice values reduce this willingness. However, it should be noted that what Inglehart et al. (2015) and Puranen (2014) describe as a linear theory of development is not necessarily always so. For a large part of the sample (which drops to 40 countries when the question about the willingness to fight for one's country is included), development *is* indeed correlated with pro-choice values and with an unwillingness to fight for one's country. However, respondents in six countries do not behave in accordance with the theory. Those in Germany, Italy and Japan express unusually low levels of willingness to fight for their country. Inglehart, Puranen and Welzel explain this as due to the fact that these nations lost the Second World War. Even more intriguing for the aim of this article is the fact that respondents in Finland, Norway and Sweden give voice to a very high willingness to defend their country. This is important to try to understand, since these countries are in most waves of the WVS leading nations when it comes to support for pro-choice values or emancipatory values in general. So how can pro-choice values co-exist with a strong defence willingness?

The solution proffered by Inglehart, Puranen and Welzel is to provide a special theory for these three countries: "We interpret this as the willingness to defend an extraordinarily emancipatory lifestyle – a willingness preserved through vicinity to an empire that stands for a different model of society" (Inglehart et al. 2015, p. 432). This is an important and interesting argument, so we test parts of it in this study. The authors provide little support, however, for the proposition that a uniquely pro-choice outlook among Swedes makes them particularly prepared to contribute to their nation's defence (Puranen 2014, p. 271).

There is a need, evidently, to take a fresh look at what motivates Swedes to defend themselves and their country. With the more recent data collected for this assessment, we are able to do this. The dependent variable, as already suggested, is the willingness to contribute to the military defence. We then apply as many as possible of the variables included by Inglehart et al. (2015) and Puranen (2014) in their contributions to this topic. We cannot precisely replicate their studies, but we do at least have several indicators for what they denote as "emancipatory values" (see in particular Puranen 2014, p. 267f.).

When exploring the relationship of defence willingness to various independent variables, we also address the discourse on democratic values, social capital and state legitimacy. For as long as humans have formed larger collectives, trust and the legitimacy of authority have been indispensable pillars for keeping chiefdoms, kingdoms and states

together. However, we take as a point of departure the 1990s and the renewed interest at that time in democratic norms and values – and the social capital which facilitates them – as they are seen as essential for the legitimacy of public authority (Putnam 1992, Rothstein 2011). Here, it is particularly useful to refer to the research of Margaret Levi, who has focused on how and why citizens voluntarily comply with demands that are associated with high risks, such as the draft and conscription. Levi's work urges us to remember that state legitimacy is central for defence willingness and that we need to be aware of changes to relations built on trust that may appear when external threats increase (Levi 1997). In other words, for a state to be able to defend itself, it needs individuals who are ready to put their own lives at stake. For individuals to be ready to do so, however, it is crucial that the state be trusted and that it be seen as acting fairly. We therefore argue, along the lines favoured by Levi, that defence willingness requires cohesion between society and the state. In a democracy at least, there must be trust not just between different citizens, but between citizens and the state as well.

Furthermore, we include socioeconomic variables like education, gender and income, since such factors have been shown to be correlated to defence willingness in the previously mentioned studies (Listhaug 1986, Nincic and Nincic 2002, Torgler 2003, Burris 2008, Clements 2012, Anderson et al. 2020). We also ask whether the recent rapid increase in immigration to Sweden has resulted in a higher share of the population being unwilling to defend the country. The influx of refugees in 2015, which was the largest in modern times, had an impact on a wide array of political issues in Sweden and led to increased polarisation (Renström et al. 2021). Although we cannot examine exactly how immigration has had an impact on defence willingness, we can study the extent to which foreign background is related to the share of the population willing to defend the country with military means.

And finally, as our predecessors in this field of research have made clear (Listhaug 1986, Levi 1997, Inglehart et al. 2015), the geopolitical context matters for defence willingness. In most cases, the more individuals perceive threats to themselves and the country in which they live, the more prone they will be to support a military defence. However, as pointed out, Sweden does not fit the mould in the simple way. Therefore, we make use of data collected right before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to shed light on whether and how defence willingness by the Swedes has been affected.

Accordingly, we include four theoretical models, based respectively on the following elements: *threat perceptions*; *emancipatory orientations*; *civic engagement, democratic values, and trust*; and *socio-economic and demographic characteristics*.

Data, operationalisations and descriptive statistics

To test the models, we rely on data from the Swedish SOM (Society, Opinion and Media) survey, which measures Swedish public opinion on a yearly basis. In the national SOM surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022, respectively, we asked specific questions about defence willingness. The surveys are conducted through postal questionnaires sent to between 3,500 and 3,750 randomly selected residents of Sweden between 16 and 90 years of age. In total, 1,649 and 1,744 respondents answered the surveys. The response rate is thus 47.1 per cent and 49.8 per cent, respectively, which is in line with what can

be expected in surveys of this kind. (For more information on the survey, see the online appendix.)

Below follows a presentation of the variables included in the surveys and how we have operationalised them.

Defence willingness: the dependent variable

The purpose of the following survey question is to tap into respondents' defence willingness: "*In the event of a crisis, I am willing to contribute to the military defence*." Respondents can answer on a five-point scale, ranging from "To a very small extent" (=1) to "To a very great extent" (=5). This item constitutes our dependent variable. The way in which a willingness to defend is measured varies between different studies in the research literature, which makes comparability difficult. The operationalisation of central concepts is always debateable. However, we find that replies to our survey question – completely in line with those in other studies (e.g. Listhaug 1986, Puranen 2014, Inglehart et al. 2015) – show a generally high willingness among Swedes to contribute to the country's defence. (Tables A1 and A2 in the online appendix contain descriptive data for all of the variables included.)

Individual-level determinants: the independent variables

In order to determine what factors are associated with high and low levels of defence willingness among Swedes, we ask questions relating to the four explanatory models discussed above.

Threat perceptions

The first set of factors that may affect the willingness to defend one's country is perceived threats. Higher levels of perceived threat are expected to correlate with a greater propensity to contribute to military defence. In order to ascertain if threat perceptions are associated with high and low levels of defence willingness, we pose the following question: "*To what extent do you feel threatened by the following in Sweden today?*" Respondents can answer on a five-point scale, ranging from "*To a very small extent*" (=1) to "*To a very great extent*" (=5). We include several items that measure respondents' sense of various threats in our survey. Individuals may fear both personal threats and threats to society as a whole (sociotropic threats). Our focus is, however, mainly on whether individuals feel threatened by *foreign powers, terrorism, immigration*, *economic crisis*, *epidemics/pandemics*, and *environmental degradation/climate change*. Respondents are asked to say how much they feel threatened by each of these factors.

Emancipatory orientations

The second set of factors that may affect defence willingness is respondents' emancipatory orientations. A more pronounced emancipatory orientation is expected to correlate with a lower propensity to contribute to the military defence. This is because such individuals value the freedom to choose their own destiny. As Inglehart et al. (2015) claim, however, the Nordic countries are documented outliers in this respect. In their case, the willingness to fight for the country is expected to be high because "populations

have traversed a profound transformation in the meaning of fighting for one's country along with a changing role of the military over recent decades" (Puranen 2014, p. 271).

According to Puranen (2014, p. 268f.), emancipatory values reflect post-materialist notions and universal freedoms. The explanation she offers is based on "voice orientations", which measure the extent to which people stress the importance of citizens' having a voice; and on "choice orientations", which measure the extent to which they stress the importance of reproductive freedom. Thus, voice orientations measure the priority that respondents put on "protecting freedom of speech", "giving people more say in important government decisions" and "giving people more say in how things are done in their jobs and their communities" (Puranen 2014, p. 268). Choice orientations reflect the post-materialist values identified by Inglehart, and they measure the extent to which respondents see "homosexuality", "abortion" and "divorce" as justifiable. However, we have excluded variables measuring choice orientation because we see little reason either theoretically or empirically to expect the level of defence willingness to reflect attitudes towards homosexuality, abortion or divorce. We measure emancipatory orientations mainly on the basis of voice orientations, such as attitudes towards political freedoms. We therefore ask: "*To what extent do you agree with the following statements?*" The first statement reads: *"It is important for me to be able to express my views freely*". The second reads: "*It is important for me to be able to move freely in society, and to have the right to freedom of assembly"*. And the third reads: "*In the event of a societal crisis, it is important that everyone be able to criticize the government and its policies freely*". Answers range on a four-point scale, from "*Do not agree at all*" to "*Agree completely*". We also ask a question previously posed in the WVS, as to whether citizens primarily value freedom or security. The question reads: "*Most people believe that both freedom and security are important. If, however, you were forced to choose between them, would you choose freedom or security?*" The question has two possible answers: "*Security*" or "*Freedom*".

Civic engagement, democratic values and trust

The third set of factors we examine has to do with civic engagement, democratic values and trust, and how they are associated with defence willingness. Along the lines suggested by Levi (1997), we investigate the extent to which citizens trust state authorities. In the discourse on democratisation and social capital, it has been argued that public satisfaction with the operation of government authorities, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of said authorities, on the other, are closely intertwined. An important part of the discussion here concerns whether interpersonal trust helps to create the conditions for effective democratic government, or vice-versa (Rothstein 2011). Fortunately, we need not settle that debate here. This discourse points, however, to the importance of investigating whether there are any connections in this regard at all. It is hard to imagine that defence willingness would thrive in a political culture plagued by distrust. This may certainly include the trust between citizens. However, as Levi points out, the state has to be seen as legitimate and trustworthy for citizens if they are to be asked to protect the country with their lives. Accordingly, we examine the degree of trust in other people (i.e. generalised social trust), which scholars have claimed is associated with confidence in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy (e.g. Zmerli and Newton 2008). Thus, we ask: "*To what extent, in your opinion, can people in general*

be trusted?" Respondents answer on an 11-point scale, ranging from "*People in general cannot be trusted*" (=0) to "*People in general can be trusted*" (=10). Furthermore, we measure general satisfaction with democracy by asking: "*In general, how satisfied are you with how democracy works in Sweden?*" The answers fall on a four-point scale, from "*Not at all satisfied*" (=1) to "*Very satisfied*" (=4). We also ask respondents how much they trust authorities: "*Generally speaking, how much trust do you have in the Swedish authorities?*" Respondents answer here on a four-point scale, ranging from "*Very low trust*" (=1) to "*Very high trust*" (=4). Additionally, we ask about *civic engagement*, which is often believed to make democracy work better (Putnam 1992, 2000, Skocpol 2002). It is connected to the variables mentioned above, although civic (and political) engagement more specifically measures how active respondents are in associations that may then help generate the desired government legitimacy, or help create the interpersonal trust necessary for individuals to take risks to defend their country. We measure civic engagement with the following question: "*Are you a member of any type of association/organization?*" Similarly, we measure political engagement by asking: "*Are you a member of any political party/association?*" Respondents could answer "*No*" (=0) or "*Yes*" (=1) to these questions. General political interest is measured by: "*How interested are you in politics in general?*" Here too, the answers fall on a four-point scale, from "*Very interested*" to "*Not at all interested*".

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics

The final set of variables that we test for association with defence willingness are *socio-economic and demographic characteristics*. Here, we find individual background factors, such as gender, age, income and urban/rural residence as such evidently can contribute – although not always in a consistent or easily predicted way – to defence willingness. Women, for example, are usually less willing than men are to defend the country with arms. However, the research literature on class is more ambiguous. Income and education are not as clearly related to defence willingness as gender (Torgler 2003, Puranen 2014, Anderson et al. 2020). The same is true for age.

Gender is treated as a dichotomous variable (0=*Women*; 1=*Men*), while *Age* is divided into four categories: 16–29 years (=1); 30–49 years (=2); 50–64 years (=3) and 65–90 years (=4). The question measuring educational level reads: "*What level of education have you completed?*" Four answers are possible: *Low* (=1); *Medium low* (=2); *Medium high* (=3); and *High* (=4). *Income* is measured by an estimate of monthly income, in response to the following question: "*Approximately how much, normally, is your monthly income before tax?*" Four answers are possible: *Low* (=1); *Medium low* (=2); *Medium high* (=3); and *High* (=4). (For more coding details, see the online appendix.)

And in a time with immigration and segregation (Malmberg and Clark 2021), there have been debates about whether loyalty towards the state may be lower if an individual has a foreign background. Therefore, whether the individual or one of his/her parents grew up in Sweden or abroad (*immigrant background*) is measured by the question: "*Where did you, your father, and your mother mainly grow up?*" Those who state that they themselves or their father or mother grew up abroad – whether in another Nordic country, elsewhere in Europe or outside Europe – are given the value of 1; those who grew up in Sweden are given a value of 0. Urban/rural residence is measured by the

following question: "*In what type of area do you live?*" Only those who answered *Large city/urban area* are given the value of 1; others are given a value of 0.

Finally, political orientation is important to take into account. In the research literature, proponents who have right-wing sympathies are expected to advocate a stronger defence compared to those who hold views that are more to the left (Torgler 2003). Hence, we measure where respondents see themselves on the left-right political spectrum with the following question: "*It is sometimes said that political opinions can be placed on a left/right scale. Where would you place yourself on such a scale?*" Respondents can answer on a five-point scale, from "*Clearly to the left*" (=0) to "*Clearly to the right*" (=1).

Statistical models

Since we have cross-sectional data from two measurement occasions, we run separate ordinary-least-squares (OLS) regression models for the time before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and for the time after. In order to examine the significance of our variables, we first run separate OLS regression models for each of the different categories of variables. All the categories are then combined into a full model that includes all the variables. Finally, we control for party sympathy among respondents by including party-sympathy dummies in a final model. This dummy variable is measured by asking: "*Which party do you like best today?*" The options include all eight parties represented in the Swedish parliament; respondents can also indicate "*Other party/No party*". Since this is a categorical scale, we only include these results as party dummies in our final regression model.

Results

The willingness to defend by military means: descriptive results

In 2021, 39.6 per cent of respondents stated they are willing to contribute to the military defence "to a very high degree" or "to a fairly high degree". Moreover, 37.3 per cent answered they are willing to do so "to a fairly low degree" or "to a very low degree". The reply chosen by the remaining 23.1 per cent is: "neither to a high nor to a low degree". The distribution is thus very even between those who show a willingness to defend the country and those who are reluctant to do so. The mean value among our respondents on the military defence variable (which ranges between 1 and 5) is 3.00 (standard deviation: 1.41). Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, only small differences in the willingness to defend are reported in the national SOM survey conducted later that year. The average willingness to contribute to the military defence only rose to 3.07 (standard deviation: 1.43).

Thus, it can be concluded that the Russian invasion of Ukraine only marginally affected the willingness to contribute to the military defence, although it may be premature to draw conclusions about the longer-term effects. An immediate effect was, however, as noted earlier, that the Swedes' support for membership in NATO increased sharply in the months following the Russian aggression against Ukraine. What then explains the willingness of Swedes to contribute (or not) to the military defence of their country?

Individual-level determinants of defence willingness: multivariate results

In view of our discovery of what must be regarded as a widespread willingness among Swedes to defend their country (at least in the European context), we now seek to establish individual-level determinants of these results. The first set of variables we examine is *threat perceptions*. As can be seen in the first column in Table 1, only three of the perceived threats we have mentioned have significant effects on military defence willingness in 2021: environmental degradation/climate change ($p < 0.01$), immigration ($p < 0.00$) and economic crisis ($p < 0.05$). Immigration has the strongest effect: one step on the five-point scale is associated with an increase in defence willingness of .137, on average. The effect of perceived threats from environmental degradation/climate change is negative and slightly lower (-.103), while threats from an economic crisis are even lower (-.012). The same three factors show significant relationships that go in the same direction in the national SOM survey 2022 (see Table 2).

This means that the more threatened respondents feel by environmental degradation/climate change, the less willing they are to contribute to the military defence. At first glance this is hard to understand. Upon closer reflection, however – and as becomes apparent later in the analysis as well – it reflects a political dynamic, whereby individuals who lean to the right in politics are more willing to contribute to the military defence, while those who lean to the left are less so. Those who lean to the right are also, on average, more concerned about immigration, while those who lean to the left are, on average, more concerned about environmental degradation/climate change.

Strikingly enough, a perceived threat from foreign powers and terrorism – which we would expect to affect citizens' willingness to take up arms – does not appear to have any significant impact on defence willingness. Taken together, these results provide fairly weak support for our first set of explanatory factors. In only two of our six measures is an increased level of perceived threat associated with a higher level of military defence willingness. This set of variables explains less than three per cent of the variation in the dependent variable: the adjusted R-squared is .026 in 2021 and .023 in 2022.

Turning to the second set of variables (*emancipatory orientations*), we find that none seem to help explain the willingness to defend the country by military means, neither in the 2021 survey nor in the one conducted in 2022. None of the variables are significant, and the model explains less than .3 per cent of the variation in the dependent variable (see Tables 1 and 2). Taken together, then, these variables find only weak support in our study, contrary to what we would expect from Inglehart et al. (2015).

The third set of variables concerns *democratic values, civic engagement and trust*. One variable here proves to be significant. Political interest tends to be associated with a willingness to defend the country militarily ($p < .00$), both in 2021 and 2022. The adjusted R2 values are .024 and .019, respectively, for this model, which again can be considered quite modest (see Tables 1 and 2). Taken together, then, the impact of democratic values finds some support in our survey.

The fourth column in Tables 1 and 2 shows the results for the final set of variables: *socio-economic and demographic characteristics*. Several of these variables show a strong association with a willingness to defend the country. Men, highly educated persons, and those with high incomes tend to be willing to contribute to the military defence. For example, the B-coefficient for gender is .674 and .691 ($p < .00$), respectively,

Table 1. Individual-level determinants of military-defence willingness, 2021.

	Threat perceptions	Emancipatory orientations	Democratic values, civic engagement and trust	Socio-economic and demographic characteristics	Full model without party controls	Full model with party controls
Constant	3.294***	2.180***	2.625***	1.571***	.861	.883
	(.163)	(.307)	(.197)	(.189)	(.462)	(.594)
Threatened by environmental degradation/climate change	−.103**				−.036	−.037
	(.035)				(.038)	(.040)
Threatened by economic crisis	−.012*				−.017	−.017
	(.044)				(.048)	(.050)
Threatened by pandemic	−.075				−.030	−.026
	(.042)				(.045)	(.046)
Threatened by terrorism	−.074				−.028	−.037
	(.039)				(.041)	(.043)
Threatened by immigration	.137***				.082*	.057
	(.033)				(.040)	(.044)
Threatened by foreign powers	.047				.021	.037
	(.039)				(.041)	(.042)
Freedom of opinion		.128			.079	.040
		(.082)			(.087)	(.090)
Freedom to assemble and to demonstrate		.075			.061	.070
		(.056)			(.059)	(.061)
The right to criticise the government in the event of a societal crisis		.025			.004	.027
		(.056)			(.059)	(.061)
Freedom or security		−.030			−.049	−.005
		(.056)			(.080)	(.082)
Social trust			.035		.053*	.058**
			(.019)		(.021)	(.022)
Satisfaction with democracy			−.094		.029	.038
			(.057)		(.063)	(.066)
Trust in authorities			−.108		−.076	−.109
			(.063)		(.068)	(.071)
Party membership (yes = 1)			.104		.196	.190
			(.155)		(.160)	(.161)
Association membership (yes = 1)			.038		.042	.045
			(.076)		(.080)	(.083)
Political interest			.239***		.155**	.148*
			(.048)		(.055)	(.058)

Gender (male = 1)				.674***	.619***	.607***
				(.075)	(.084)	(.087)
Age				−.008	−.065	−.066
				(.036)	(.042)	(.044)
Education				.097*	.047	.059
				(.039)	(.044)	(.046)
Income				.102*	.098*	.107*
				(.042)	(.044)	(.046)
Immigrant background (yes = 1)				.011	.057	.061
				(.095)	(.102)	(.106)
Urban resident (yes = 1)				−.140	−.096	−.114
				(.095)	(.100)	(.103)
Left/right position				.203***	.168***	.124*
				(.031)	(.038)	(.053)
Party sympathy dummies						Included
Observations	1461	1447	1452	1361	1228	1159
Adjusted-R^2	.026	.003	.024	.115	.128	.140

Note: OLS regression analysis with "Military-defence willingness" as a dependent variable. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: ***$P < 0.001$, **$P < 0.01$, *$P < 0.05$. In the final model, we find no significant party-sympathy dummies at the 0.05 level. There is no evidence of multicollinearity, except when we include party-sympathy dummies in the final model (see the online appendix).

Table 2. Individual-level determinants of military-defence willingness, 2022.

	Threat perceptions	Emancipatory orientations	Democratic values, civic engagement and trust	Socio-economic and demographic characteristics	Full model without party controls	Full model with party controls
Constant	3.715***	2.943***	2.099***	1.419***	1.220*	.892
	(.160)	(.291)	(.196)	(.231)	(.471)	(.647)
Threatened by environmental degradation/climate change	−.114***				−.052	−.043
	(.032)				(.035)	(.037)
Threatened by economic crisis	−.084*				−.063	−.060
	(.039)				(.042)	(.043)
Threatened by pandemic	−.024				.005	−.004
	(.040)				(.042)	(.043)
Threatened by terrorism	−.069				−.007	−.005
	(.038)				(.040)	(.041)
Threatened by immigration	.099**				.032	−.012
	(.034)				(.037)	(.040)
Threatened by foreign powers	.006				.056	.056
	(.037)				(.039)	(.040)
Freedom of opinion		−.019			−.134	−.164
		(.079)			(.085)	(.086)
Freedom to assemble and to demonstrate		−.027			−.007	.005
		(.054)			(.056)	(.057)
The right to criticise the government in the event of a societal crisis		.095			.069	.085
		(.055)			(.058)	(.059)
Freedom or security		−.043			−.123	−.133
		(.074)			(.078)	(.081)
Social trust			.008		.004	.002
			(.018)		(.019)	(.020)
Satisfaction with democracy			.042		.038	.056
			(.056)		(.057)	(.060)
Trust in authorities			.069		.163*	.156*
			(.062)		(.065)	(.068)
Party membership (yes = 1)			.231		.346*	.310
			(.157)		(.157)	(.160)
Association membership (yes = 1)			.105		.081	.104
			(.073)		(.076)	(.078)
Political interest			.196***		.122*	.128*
			(.050)		(.053)	(.056)

Gender (male = 1)				.691***	.668***	.627***
				(.072)	(.080)	(.083)
Age				−.024	−.046	−.055
				(.034)	(.039)	(.040)
Education				.008	−.029	−.043
				(.037)	(.041)	(.042)
Income				.148***	.122**	.153***
				(.039)	(.041)	(.043)
Immigrant background (yes = 1)				−.163	−.170	−.185
				(.092)	(.098)	(.101)
Urban resident (yes = 1)				−.008	.013	.058
				(.094)	(.099)	(.102)
Left/right position				.165***	.158***	.085
				(.028)	(.033)	(.050)
Party sympathy dummies						Included
Observations	1581	1560	1547	1486	1348	1277
Adjusted-R^2	.023	.000	.019	.107	.129	.140

Note: OLS regression analysis with "Military-defence willingness" as a dependent variable. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: ***$P < 0.001$, **$P < 0.01$, *$P < 0.05$. In the final model, we find significant party-sympathy dummies at the 0.05 level for the Liberal party and the Sweden Democrats. There is no evidence of multicollinearity, except when we include party-sympathy dummies in the final model (see the online appendix).

meaning that men are, on average, between .674 and .691 units more likely than women to be willing to contribute to the military defence (on a scale of 1–5). Furthermore, the results show that highly educated persons are more likely to be willing to contribute to the military ($p < .05$ in 2021) than their less educated counterparts. Likewise, people earning high incomes are more likely than their low-income fellow citizens to be willing to contribute to the military ($p < .05$ in 2021 and $p < .00$ in 2022). Furthermore, we examine respondents' political orientation. Here, too, we find significant results; the more they lean to the right, the more willing they are to contribute to the military defence ($p < .00$).

Other socio-economic and demographic characteristics show no significant relationships. Interestingly, for instance, immigrant background does not seem to have any association with the willingness to contribute to the country's defence. There is thus no difference in this respect between, on the one hand, native Swedes and, on the other hand, residents who either grew up abroad or whose parents did (in at least one instance). Overall, these models have greater explanatory power than those reported previously. The adjusted R2 values for military-defence willingness are .115 and .107, respectively.

What happens when we combine all of these different explanatory factors into one model? This can be seen in the fifth column of Tables 1 and 2. As can be seen in Table 1, only one of the perceived threats – that from immigration – has a continued significant impact on the willingness to defend the country militarily ($p < .05$). However, this effect disappears in the 2022 survey, as can be seen in Table 2, when no perceived threats show a significant relationship with willingness to defend. None of the variables that measure emancipatory orientations turn out to be significant, neither in 2021 nor in 2022. Of the variables that measure democratic values, civic engagement and trust, only one is still significant in both surveys: political interest ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively). There is also an association between trust and the willingness to defend. However, in the 2021 survey, the connection is between generalised social trust ($p < .05$) and the willingness to defend, whereas in the 2022 survey, the connection is between trust in authorities ($p < .05$) and the willingness to defend. Of the variables that measure socio-economic and demographic characteristics, after controlling for all other variables, only gender and income are still significantly associated with a willingness to defend the country. Thus men are, on average, more likely than women to be willing to contribute to the military defence (as measured on a scale of 1–5). Furthermore, the significant effect of political orientation remains. The more respondents lean to the right, the more willing they are to contribute to the military defence ($p < .001$). The adjusted R2 values are .128 and .129, respectively, for the model that includes all explanatory factors.

In the final model (see the sixth column of Tables 1 and 2), we also control for respondents' party sympathies. As can be seen from this model, it resembles the previous one, although the significance level has changed in some cases. For example, the effect of left/right position on defence willingness loses significance (it was $p < .05$ in 2021, and not at all significant in 2022). This is likely explained by the high correlation between the left/right position and the party dummies included in the final model.

Summarising the results from the tests performed here, we can draw some important conclusions. Perceived threats seem to have little explanatory power for the military defence willingness. Feeling threatened by a foreign power or terrorists does not alter

the defence willingness of respondents. Similarly, it is not mainly due to any emancipatory orientation that Swedish citizens are prepared to defend their country. Rather, the following factors are significantly more important in this context: democratic values, civic engagement, trust and socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

The way that trust is related to defence willingness will require some extra analytical attention. This is one trait which changed in an unforeseen way when we compare the results before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Before the invasion, interpersonal trust meant the most in relation to defence willingness. After February 2022, trust towards government authorities became the leading trust factor.

Furthermore, general political interest contributes as well, as does political orientation: the more respondents lean to the right politically, the more willing they are to contribute to the military defence. There is also a strong gender effect: men are much more likely than women to be willing to contribute to the military defence. This is by all accounts the strongest contributing factor to defence willingness that we have discovered. Income also seems to have a positive impact.

Conclusions

Now that Sweden is joining NATO, the question of what determines the willingness of its citizens to defend their country is important, not just for Sweden itself but for the military alliance as well. Previous studies of the factors that make Swedes willing to defend their country were influenced by such things as the period or political context in which they were conducted. In the 1980s, that context was the Cold War. It was noted already then that Swedes had a high willingness to defend themselves, but that this could not be explained by perceptions of external threat (Listhaug 1986). Inglehart et al. (2015) then revisited the question later, during a period that might be described as the end of a peak for liberal freedom in the world. At the time these authors wrote their text, globalisation had advanced greatly. Global trade, cooperation and emancipatory ideals were still spreading in unprecedented ways. It was almost taken for granted that the whole world was moving towards the upper-right corner of the well-known Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map (with "Survival vs. Self-Expression Values" on the x-axis and "Traditional vs. Secular Values" on the y-axis) (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). At the time, naturally enough, there were no strong reactions against the position they advanced: that the willingness to defend one's country is normatively undesirable in general (Inglehart et al. 2015, p. 420). However, Swedes were exempted from this conclusion, since their high willingness to defend their country was thought to result from them having reached a uniquely high level of emancipatory and pro-choice orientation, which motivated them to take responsibility for emancipation in other parts of the world. However, in this study, we cannot find support for this line of thinking when we, at least, are able to test the relationship between "voice orientations" and defence willingness.

Another result, albeit a more puzzling one, is the one about the relationship between threat perceptions and defence willingness. Effects of various threats disappear when controlling for other factors. What is profoundly puzzling, therefore, is this: The geopolitical arena is much less safe now in comparison to two decades ago, and democracy has been in decline for almost as long. We know that these factors are important for the fact that Swedes have increased their support for NATO and increased military spending

(Bjereld and Oscarsson 2023, Ydén et al. 2023). However, at the same time, the defence willingness of Swedes does not change markedly when we compare responses before and after February 2022.

A case can certainly be made that defence willingness in Sweden is high, and that it has been quite stable over time. Consequently, it is not the level of defence willingness that is hard to understand. On the contrary, it is the lack of change that is puzzling. In effect, making use of the two surveys as we have done here as a natural experiment – we can provide strong support for the finding presented by Listhaug (1986) four decades ago, namely that it is not threat perceptions which determine Swedes' defence willingness. Swedes are evidently concerned by the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the perceived threat from foreign powers increased between the first survey in 2021, conducted before the Russian invasion, and the second survey in 2022, conducted after. However, this change did not impel significantly more Swedes, or fewer, to express a willingness to defend the country with military means. One possible explanation for this attitude – one that assumes rational calculation by the individuals involved – is that Swedes see deterrence as having become increasingly important, and NATO membership as accordingly called-for, but that they nonetheless judge the risk to be very small that Sweden will actually be involved in a war. In fact, the increased threat from foreign powers that Swedes perceived after the Russian invasion of Ukraine is less pronounced than that which they perceived from the economic crisis that followed in its wake. It would appear, then, that Swedes are more concerned about their economic situation than about any imminent threat from foreign powers. Another possible explanation for this counter-intuitive result could be that an increased willingness to defend as a result of the new security order may simply be delayed. It may take some time to be willing to take up arms again for a country that has not been in a war for more than 200 years.

Another important result is that we find no indication in the survey that individuals with a foreign background are less willing to defend the country than are respondents with a mainly Swedish background. Considering the public debate on the possible negative effects of immigration, and the polarisation that has ensued (Renström et al. 2021), it can be seen as good news that this survey finds that the two groups show equally strong loyalty to the nation.[2] Furthermore, we find that those who see environmental degradation as the main threat to society are less inclined to want to defend the country. This is a finding which confirms that supporters of the green movement also often have pacifist values (Jeraj 2022), whereas those who lean to the right politically and fear immigration are prone to be more willing to defend the country (Torgler 2003). The specific effects of different threats (whether climate change or immigration) disappear when controlling for all factors. However, the effect of political orientation remains: individuals who lean politically to the right are more willing to contribute to military defence than individuals who lean to the left.

Additionally, the strongest variable by far which is related to defence willingness is gender. Men are more willing than women to support the military defence, which is in line with findings in previous studies (Listhaug 1986, Eichenberg 2003, 2016, Torgler 2003, Feinstein 2017, Lizotte 2019). There is not enough space here to explore this topic fully. The fact is, however, that differences in opinions and values between women and men have never been greater during Sweden's more than a century of democratic history than they are today (Ahlbom and Karlsson 2023). This situation is likely to

have resulted, at least in part, from Swedish policies aimed at achieving gender equality, which may have been the most progressive in the world.[3] As long as the Cold War continued, two positions could co-exist. While not in perfect harmony with each other, they were not expressed in zero-sum terms. Progressive policies for gender equality were pursued at the same time that Sweden maintained a conscription-based army and an armaments industry (Kronsell and Svedberg 2001). Then, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, political support for the military dropped sharply. It was now broadly accepted across party lines that the need for a military defence had diminished sharply. Conscription was ended, and defence spending fell dramatically. This situation gave greater traction to the view that support for a military defence was equivalent to support for a patriarchal and divisive world order. Similar ideas later gave rise to the "feminist foreign policy" implemented by the Swedish government after the general election of 2014 (Egnell 2016, Wagnsson et al. 2020). This is a compelling hypothesis: progressive policies for gender equality in Sweden have been paired with pacifist values. Therefore, as the Cold War ended, the gender difference in defence willingness was accentuated. This is not to say that gender differences would not have existed without the country's progressive gender policies, but it is to say that they have become deep. However, it is important to remind the reader here that none of this explains the lack of *change* in defence willingness between the period prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and after.

The natural experiment did, however, reveal important changes that occurred in the Swedish responses. This relates to the relationship between trust and defence willingness, which is our final conclusion from our study. We have found that, prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was a positive correlation between interpersonal trust and defence willingness. The data from that period supplies no support for the contention that defence willingness requires trust towards state authorities (our proxy for state legitimacy). After the full-scale invasion, however, trust towards state authorities *has* been correlated with defence willingness – along the lines previously identified by Margaret Levi (1997). Consequently, the closer war comes to Sweden, the more support we seem to get for Levi's findings that defence willingness depends on "contingent consent". This means that citizens *both* need to trust others to do their part to defend the country, and that the government can be trusted to act in a fair manner (Levi 1997, p. 19). The threat of war is obviously the most crucial test for state legitimacy in a democracy. In a situation where a foreign power poses less of a threat, citizens mostly relate their defence willingness to whether they can trust their neighbour. When a war moves closer, it also becomes more crucial for citizens to assess whether the state is trustworthy. In this context, the challenge that Sweden faces lies in a growing divide, based on ideology, in institutional trust (Holmberg 2022). Supporters of parties to the right on the political left/right scale – who are generally more supportive of military defence – tend increasingly to distrust state authorities, although overall trust is still high in international comparison. If the trend towards growing distrust of the state continues, it may lead to a reduced defence willingness among Swedes. But the relationship is not a straightforward one. The decline in state legitimacy is mainly found among supporters of the radical-right party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), who differ from the supporters of other parties in their lower levels of institutional trust and of social trust. At the same time, however, they are the respondents in our survey who express the greatest willingness to defend the country.

We can conclude here that the defence willingness of Swedes is remarkably stable in relation to external threats. As Russia has pursued its war against Ukraine more intensely, Swedes have increasingly supported a stronger defence and membership in NATO. This has not yet affected their defence willingness. It has not increased, but it has not decreased either. From a normative point of view, then, Sweden can be seen as potentially adding a *stable* form of defence willingness to NATO. How NATO membership will affect future support for military defence is difficult to tell; coming studies will have to address that question. However, should it be seen as desirable to increase defence willingness in Sweden, it is clearly in one group of the population where the most important gains can be made. That is among the women.

Notes

1. In an opinion poll conducted in Finland around the time of the study presented here, 82 percent of respondents said yes to the following question: "If Finland is attacked, would you personally be ready to take part in national defence tasks according to your competences and skills?" This figure has remained stable at over eighty percent since the first measurement in 1995 (Advisory Board for Defence Information 2022). In 2018, the Swedish Defence Research Agency conducted a survey in which about 49 per cent of respondents declared themselves willing "to participate in Sweden's defence in the role of a combatant" (FOI 2021). Replications of the WVS question measuring the "willingness to fight for the country" have been almost eerily stable in Sweden: In the first and second waves (1981/1984, 1990/1994), the percentage of Swedes saying yes was 77 per cent. In the third wave (1995/1999), support peaked at 85 per cent. In the fourth wave (1999–2004) the question was not asked; and in the fifth, sixth, and seventh waves (2005/2009, 2010–2014, 2017–2022), support landed at 80 per cent – every time. Note that these questions differ from the one asked in our survey.
2. Respondents with a foreign background include individuals from other Nordic and European countries, as well as immigrants from other parts of the world. This group is usually underrepresented in SOM surveys.
3. Despite Sweden's progressive policies for gender equality, the Swedish Armed Forces have been accused of using organisational principles to resist implementing measures for gender equality. This may affect women's willingness to join the armed forces (Holmberg and Alvinius 2023).

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