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Political intolerance in comprehensive welfare states: Evidence from Sweden

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that comprehensive welfare states are effective at bridging ethnic divisions and promoting political tolerance of marginalized groups. Do these results hold up in the face of the great influx of migrants into European welfare states following the 2015–16 refugee crisis? In this case study of Sweden, we map the general level of political tolerance and test various individual-level explanations for it. Based on a survey of about 3500 citizens, our results show that the level of ethnic antipathy in Sweden is low. Other groups, however—such as supporters of the Sweden Democrats, a radical-right party—are widely disliked, as are abortion opponents and anti-vaccinationists. The individual-level explanations we have tested—in connection with threat perceptions, civic and political engagement, and socio-economic factors—turn up mixed results. Our conclusion is that the results we have found reflect something of a liberal-democratic backlash, whereupon a certain kind of political intolerance has become widespread.

KEYWORDS

democracy, political tolerance, refugee crisis, Sweden Democrats, welfare states

INTRODUCTION

Scandinavian welfare states have attracted admirers around the world. The so-called comprehensive welfare state (CWS) found in the Nordic region has been praised for providing what is greatly needed today (Kangas & Kvist, 2018). By virtue of its extensive and universal character, the CWS tends to bridge social, economic, and ethnic divisions. By guaranteeing social security for everyone, it tends to reduce conflicts wherein groups fear losing social status or suffering disadvantage relative to others. Thus, the CWS not only creates a more egalitarian society,

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but it also fosters solidarity and tolerance among the native population towards out-groups, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities (Crepaz & Damron, 2009; Van Der Waal et al., 2013). The idea is that people who feel secure tend to be more tolerant, both in terms of accepting socio-cultural differences within society, and in terms of acknowledging the political rights of others—even those they find objectionable (Kirchner et al., 2011; Rapp, 2017). Or as Crepaz and Damron put it, "the more comprehensive the welfare state is, the more tolerant natives are of immigrants" (Crepaz & Damron, 2009, p. 437).

Others claim, however, that cultural and ethnic homogeneity is a prerequisite for a comprehensive and universal welfare state of the Scandinavian type. According to this argument, the greater heterogeneity resulting from immigration will lead eventually to a lower level of redistribution, because ethnic divisions will reduce the sentiment of solidarity that sustains the CWS (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Eger, 2010; Mau & Burkhardt, 2009). It has therefore been suggested that the positive effect of the CWS in terms of promoting social and political tolerance may not hold for countries where the degree of ethnic diversity has become substantial (Rapp, 2017). If members of the in-group—that is, the native population—start to view their own social status as threatened by rising immigration, they may seek to deny welfare-state benefits to immigrants; and political tolerance towards out-groups may begin to wane (van der Waal et al., 2013). As a result, therefore, of increased immigration in the wake of the European refugee crisis of 2015–16, welfare states are facing new challenges—as growing ethnic diversity changes the composition of European societies (Hernes, 2018).

This particularly applies to Sweden, which received significantly more asylum-seekers than most other European Union (EU) countries during the refugee crisis. In addition, the ability of the CWS to foster tolerance in a society characterized by large-scale immigration takes place against the background of major political successes for populist radical-right parties in Europe. These parties see immigration as a major problem that needs to be addressed, and they usually call for reductions in generous welfare-state programs for immigrants (Hooijer & King, 2021; Rathgeb & Busemeyer, 2022). In Sweden too, the anti-immigration message of such a party has gained resonance. The Sweden Democrats (SD)—a far-right party founded by neo-Nazis, with an explicit anti-immigration agenda—obtained the second largest number of votes in the 2022 national election (Aylott & Bolin, 2023; Rothstein, 2023). Despite extensive research on the increased importance of the SD in Swedish politics, it is still largely unknown how their prominence has affected political tolerance towards out-groups such as immigrants and ethnic minorities.

One way to make a first assessment of how Sweden is faring is therefore to take a closer look at whether, in a context of increasing ethnic diversity and the surge of the anti-immigration SD party, the Swedish CWS encourages tolerance towards out-groups. What is the current state of political tolerance among Swedes? Are immigrants and ethnic minorities particularly exposed to intolerance? If so, what are the situational and individual-level factors driving such attitudes? As we see it, studying Sweden may provide answers relevant to other CWSs too, and for the future prospects of liberal democracy besides.

Political tolerance means a willingness among citizens to accept that groups and individuals they dislike should nonetheless enjoy equal political rights. Without broad support for this principle, democracy cannot prosper (Dahl, 1989). In this article, therefore, we assess the current situation in Sweden with the help of a survey based on a national representative sample of 3500 randomly selected citizens, carried out in the fall of 2021. Our aim is to ascertain whether democracy in Sweden is resistant to the challenges of today, or whether it suffers instead from levels of political intolerance that are cause for worry.

We proceed in this paper as follows. We begin with a look at previous research on political tolerance. We then develop our hypotheses on the basis of earlier research on CWSs, with a focus on situational and individual-level explanations for political tolerance. Next, we address methodological issues, data, and operationalizations in connection with our study. In the

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penultimate section, we review our results and evaluate our theoretical expectations. In the last section, finally, we present our conclusions.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE AS A CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY AND THE WELFARE STATE

A thorough test of political tolerance requires that we first ask citizens which groups they dislike, if any, and then ask whether they are willing to provide said groups with political rights (assuming the disliked group is not anti-democratic).[1] For democracy to exist, citizens must accept the right of other citizens—even those they dislike—to participate in politics. Political tolerance is thus the willingness to grant political rights to those with whom one strongly disagrees (Gibson, 1992; Stouffer, 1955; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). One of the early pioneers in studying the extent of political tolerance was Samuel Stouffer (1955), who used national surveys to measure support among Americans for civil liberties. Stouffer's groundbreaking findings called into question the general assumption that US citizens had internalized the "rules of the game" in American democracy. An overwhelming majority of citizens, he discovered, were willing to deny civil and political rights to unpopular groups, such as communists and atheists. That is, they applied double standards, according to whether or not they disliked the group in question. In later studies—conducted during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—similarly high levels of political intolerance were registered, but there was a shift in which groups incurred the greatest dislike. Communists and atheists were no longer as salient in this regard as before, while other unpopular groups—among them racists and right-wing extremists—evoked high levels of intolerance (Sullivan & Transue, 1999, pp. 628–631).

Political tolerance has also been studied outside the United States: in Western Europe (Duch & Gibson, 1992; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007; Weldon, 2006); in post-communist countries in the East (Guerin et al., 2004; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007); in less developed democracies, including Russia (Gibson, 1998; Gibson & Duch, 1993), and in some countries of the Global South (Gibson, 2006; Widmalm, 2016). The most common finding in this research, according to Peffley and Rohrschneider (2003, p. 243), is that "while most citizens across the world support democratic rights in the abstract, just as the democracy literature shows, these same publics are usually considerably less likely to extend these rights to disliked groups." Sweden, for its part, has only featured to a limited extent in studies of political tolerance (e.g., Kirchner et al., 2011; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Petersson et al., 1998; Rapp, 2017; Rothstein et al., 1995; Weldon, 2006). Among scholars who have looked into the matter, however, there seems to be a broad consensus that Swedish society is characterized by a high level of social and political tolerance, not least towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. The few comparative international studies that have been done generally portray Sweden as a country marked by far-reaching tolerance (e.g., Kirchner et al., 2011; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007; Weldon, 2006). On the basis of World Values Survey data from the mid-1990s, for example, Peffley and Rohrschneider (2003, pp. 247–249) describe Sweden as one of the most tolerant nations featured in a comparative study of 17 countries. Citing data from the same survey, moreover, Weldon (2006, pp. 335–338) finds that Sweden was the third most tolerant country politically (after Finland and Spain).

[1]We consider it important not to include groups that are openly and unequivocally authoritarian. Acceptance of such groups measures something other than what we seek to capture here: that is, an attitude of support for political equality as long as it concerns groups that do not oppose democracy (Popper, 2020 [1945]). However, determining which groups are anti-democratic is often difficult. In our case, for example, we have excluded the Nordic Resistance Movement (Swedish acronym: NMR) and other Nazi movements in Sweden from the group of democratic movements and parties; whereas we have included the Sweden Democrats therein, despite that party's indisputable Nazi roots. The SD, namely, has chosen to distance itself from its anti-democratic past (although the party is often accused of still harboring such views), and the party is now represented at all political levels in Sweden (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 450).

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Furthermore, large-scale comparisons between countries show that political tolerance is greater in stable democracies which have endured over time, as well as in countries that have pursued ambitious policies of redistribution (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). Previous studies have accordingly suggested that a country's institutional setting, such as its welfare regime (e.g., Crepaz & Damron, 2009; Kirchner et al., 2011), can help to promote tolerance. Neo-institutional theories may offer an insight here, with their suggestion that political institutions shape not only the preferences and behavior of individuals, but also their attitudes and their affective orientation towards others (Kirchner et al., 2011, p. 208; Hall & Taylor, 1996). Crucially, a CWS is considered to promote social security for all individuals, so that fewer will feel that their own status is threatened by others. This widespread sense of security will foster feelings of solidarity across different societal groups, including vis-à-vis immigrants (Weldon, 2006). By treating all citizens equally, fairly, and impartially, a universal welfare state prevents discrimination and fosters social trust among citizens (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003, p. 196). Institutions that embody equality thus have spill-over effects on citizens, making them more likely to trust others and to be tolerant towards them. Extrapolating this insight from the literature on trust, Reeskens and van Oorshot (2017, p. 183f) conclude that in "a context in which people perceive that government is treating all equally before the law, and actively reduces socio-economic disparities, such perceptions might spill over into positive opinions towards newcomers." In other words, a CWS can be expected to foster political tolerance, including towards out-groups such as immigrants and ethnic minorities.

The obvious question that then arises is whether, in the aftermath of the European refugee crisis and the electoral success of the anti-immigration SD party, we see any signs of the opposite: that is, of widespread intolerance towards immigrants and minority groups. As things stand, we do not really know whether Sweden is more resistant than other countries to anti-minority sentiments in times of crisis. In fact, and to the best of our knowledge, no study has been done of political tolerance in Sweden since the refugee crisis of 2015–16, when the country took in large numbers of refugees from wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE IN COMPREHENSIVE WELFARE STATES: TWO SYSTEM-LEVEL HYPOTHESES

CWSs are known not just for going further than other states in protecting their citizens through the provision of health care, education, elder care, family support, and unemployment benefits. Their high levels of social expenditure have also enabled them to promote equal opportunities in working life, in both the public and the private sector. Admittedly, many of the states long labeled as welfare states have changed since the 1990s, as a result of neoliberal economic policies and New Public Management reforms. Nonetheless, a cluster of states yet remain that spend more than 25% of their GDP on social welfare (Burgoon & Rooduijn, 2021). These countries are still seen as being in a class of their own when it comes to economic redistribution, and Sweden is one of them.

Since CWSs provide a strong safety net for their citizens, we would expect such citizens to be tolerant both socially and politically. Welfare provisions are universal in such systems: "[A]lmost everybody contributes and almost everybody receives" (Crepaz & Damron, 2009, p. 449). The benefits are "undivisive, encompassing, and inclusionary in character" (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003, p. 197), thereby promoting solidarity among citizens and encouraging generalized trust. Moreover, CWSs do more than just bridge class divisions; they also make it possible for "welfare chauvinism"—the belief that immigrants mainly steal jobs, housing, and social services from the population of the host country—to be countered. Crepaz and Damron (2009, p. 457) thus conclude, based on a cross-country comparison, that "universal provision of welfare

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leads to a more collective, organic, and egalitarian society in which racist and welfare chauvinist voices are more muffled, where trust thrives and tolerance can be constructed." In line with this reasoning, we hypothesize (H1) that *the general level of political tolerance in Sweden will be high*.[2]

However, some scholars (e.g., Rapp, 2017) has called into question the notion that, by extending political and social rights to unpopular groups, CWSs serve to promote tolerant attitudes: "The fear that the welfare state is exploited by increased immigration undermines the hitherto positive effects from welfare state expenditures on tolerance towards immigrants" (Rapp, 2017, p. 41). Thus, with increasing numbers of immigrants that can be perceived as a financial threat to the native population, we might expect political intolerance towards ethnic minorities to have grown as well. The growth in support for the SD could be taken as confirmation of such a trend. The SD has repeatedly criticized Sweden's immigration policies, and the costs they are presumed to entail for the country's welfare state (Loxbo, 2023). Evidently, the European refugee crisis gave rise to tensions between the comprehensive Scandinavian welfare state and its capacity to deal with a high level of immigration from poor countries (Hernes, 2018). With a rising level of ethnic heterogeneity, members of the native population may start to see their own social security as threatened by increasing immigration, which may in turn have the effect of reducing feelings of solidarity with immigrants and ethnic minorities, as well as tolerance for them (Eger, 2010; Mau & Burkhardt, 2009; Van Der Waal et al., 2013). Against the background of these challenges, we hypothesize (H2) that *the level of political tolerance towards ethnic minorities and immigrants in Sweden will be low*.

DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE: THREE INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL HYPOTHESES

For various reasons, the findings in the above-mentioned studies of political tolerance are hard to compare across countries. They use different measures of tolerance, they refer to different time periods, and they highlight different explanatory factors. Furthermore, as we only have data from one point in time and one country, we are unable to determine whether a given shift in the level of tolerance results from changes in the welfare state or from changes in the ethnic composition of the population. However, a number of factors have been suggested in previous studies to explain individual-level variations in political tolerance. These factors form the starting point for our attempt to assess the driving forces behind the level of political tolerance in Sweden.

These studies have shown that, above all, it is perceptions of threat that are correlated with the level of political tolerance (Duch & Gibson, 1992; Gibson, 1992; Stouffer, 1955). Other situational and individual-level factors highlighted as influencing this level include civic and political engagement (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Sullivan et al., 1981, 1982), and support for democratic norms and attitudes (Gibson, 1992; Sullivan et al., 1981, 1982).

We will mainly highlight two main types of explanatory factor. First, *threat perceptions*, which suggests that people who are more disposed to perceive threats are generally less tolerant than people who are more easily reassured (Sullivan & Transue, 1999, p. 632). Unsurprisingly, therefore, granting political rights to others—and in particular to disliked groups—becomes increasingly difficult when insecurity starts to spread. The more an individual stands to lose, the less he or she will tend to trust others with political power.

[2]It is obviously hard to determine unequivocally what qualifies as a high level of political tolerance or a low one. The points of reference against which our stance in this regard can be compared are mainly the results from the studies mentioned in the previous section, bearing in mind the differences in how tolerance is measured.

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The suggested correlation between perceptions of threat and the level of political tolerance is particularly interesting in the Swedish case, because that country has experienced a sharp rise in gang violence and fatal shootings over the past 10 years. The grim wave of gang violence, which has received much attention in both the domestic and the international media, has been linked to well-established criminal gangs, largely run by second-generation immigrants who live in segregated suburbs of the big cities (Milne, 2023; Savage, 2023). In line with this, the 2022 national election represented a break with the past: questions of law and order, which had never before been high on the agenda in Swedish election campaigns, now dominated the scene (Rothstein, 2023). Nor was it just the SD, a party of the far right, which blamed failed integration and earlier immigration policies for the unprecedented violence; instead most parties did this, to varying degrees. Even the long-reigning "Social Democrats showed no compunctions about connecting criminality with immigration—a link that had once been taboo for all parties except SD" (Aylott & Bolin, 2023, p. 1053). Due to the political connection made between immigration and rampant crime—most fiercely by the far-right SD—it seems reasonable to expect the level of tolerance towards immigrants and ethnic minorities to have been affected.

It is important to note that perceived threats can differ in many ways, depending for example on whether they are aimed directly at individuals, or whether instead they mainly appear at an aggregate level such as that of a nation (a.k.a. sociotropic threats) (Stevens & Vaughan-Williams, 2014). In this context, it is of particular interest whether individuals perceive immigration as a threat and link it to increased levels of violence. We believe that these two specific types of threats will affect political tolerance more than other conceivable threats. Thus, we hypothesize (H3) that *the more individuals perceive threats from immigration and open violence, the less tolerant they will tend to be*.

Second, studies have shown that *civic and political engagement* leads to democratic learning. This occurs through socialization and the internalization of democratic norms, which work as a "vaccine" against intolerant attitudes (Sullivan et al., 1981, 1982). This learning effect essentially means that a longer exposure to democratic norms increases the probability that these norms will be internalized. In new democracies, where democratic norms are not as rooted, they can easily erode (Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007). There are many ways in which democratic learning and internalization can take place: For example, through socialization and contact with groups other than one's own (Allport, 1954); through experience and practice (i.e., involvement and activism in democratic institutions) (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Verba et al., 1996); or simply through exposure to educational institutions in democratic societies, which tend to socialize citizens into democratic norms (Gaasholt & Togeby, 1995; Golebiowska, 1995; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007). Membership in voluntary associations—which is believed to increase an individual's social capital (Putnam, 1993)—can also be expected to promote a higher level of tolerance, although the causal relationship between membership in voluntary associations, generalized trust, and political tolerance is disputed (Cigler & Joslyn, 2002; Iglič, 2010; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Furthermore, being active in a political party has been found to increase political tolerance, through a process of political socialization (Sullivan et al., 1993). In accordance with these expected effects of civic and political engagement, therefore, we hypothesize (H4) that *the more exposed individuals are to the theory and practice of democratic politics, the more tolerant they will tend to be*.

In addition, certain *socio-economic factors* and demographic characteristics are associated with the level of tolerance. Among them are gender, age, income, political ideology, and whether one was born abroad or lives in an urban area. Older citizens are often less tolerant than younger ones (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Sullivan et al., 1981, 1982), and men are often more tolerant than women (Golebiowska, 1999; Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). Having a high income and living in an urban area are often associated with greater tolerance (Marquart-Pyatt & Paxton, 2007; Wilson, 1991). Additionally, being born in a country with a long democratic tradition can be expected to increase the probability

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of exposure to democratic norms that foster a high level of political tolerance (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). Political ideology (left/right placement) can also affect levels of political tolerance (Duch & Gibson, 1992), although findings on the impact of political ideology are somewhat mixed (e.g., Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Lindner & Nosek, 2009).

DATA, OPERATIONALIZATIONS, AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

To test our hypotheses, we rely on data from the Swedish SOM (Society, Opinion, and Media) survey, which measures Swedish public opinion on a yearly basis. The survey is conducted by means of postal questionnaires sent to 3500 randomly selected residents of Sweden between 16 and 85 years of age. In total, 1649 respondents answered the survey, providing a good representation of the population overall. The response rate is thus 47.1%, which is in line with what can be expected in a survey of this kind. A presentation follows below of the variables included in the survey, and of how they were operationalized. (For more information on the survey and the operationalizations, see the online appendix.)

Political tolerance: The dependent variable

Inspired by the pioneering studies of political tolerance done by Stouffer in the 1950s, Sullivan et al. (1981, 1982) developed the "content-controlled" method that we use here. Accordingly, political tolerance is initially measured by asking respondents which group in society they dislike most. This is followed by questions about which political rights and freedoms these groups or individuals should enjoy. We have identified a large number of groups in advance that might be disliked. They include, among others, various religious groups, all of the parties represented in parliament, and groups based on ideas, identities, or interests. Extreme groups that reject or openly oppose the democratic system are not included. In the survey, therefore, we begin with the following question: "*Here is a list of different groups in society that one can have different opinions about*." We then present a list of 46 different groups (see Figure 1), followed by the question: "*Do you strongly dislike any of the groups above?*"

We then ask whether members of the most disliked group should have the basic rights that Sweden's laws and constitution say should apply equally to everyone, including freedom of assembly, of expression, and of association. Thus we ask: "*Do you think people who belong to the group you dislike the most should be allowed to do the following?*" Six options follow: "*Organize and participate in demonstrations*"; "*Express their opinions in speech and writing*"; "*Form an organization for the group's activities*"; "*Work in health care or elder care*"; "*Run in parliamentary elections*"; and "*Become Prime Minister.*" The response options to each of the six questions are binary ("*No*" = 0; "*Yes*" = 1). Our main dependent variable is constructed as an additive index ("*Political tolerance index*") consisting of six items, which we then divide by the number of responses given by each individual; the variable thus ranges between 0 (Maximum intolerance) and 1 (Maximum tolerance). The mean value on the tolerance index among our respondents is .59 (Std.dev .36). Table A1 contains descriptive data for all of the variables included. (For alternative dependent variables, see Table A6.)

Threat perceptions: Independent variables

In order to determine what factors are associated with high and low levels of tolerance among Swedes, we tap into respondents' *threat perceptions* by asking several questions about different

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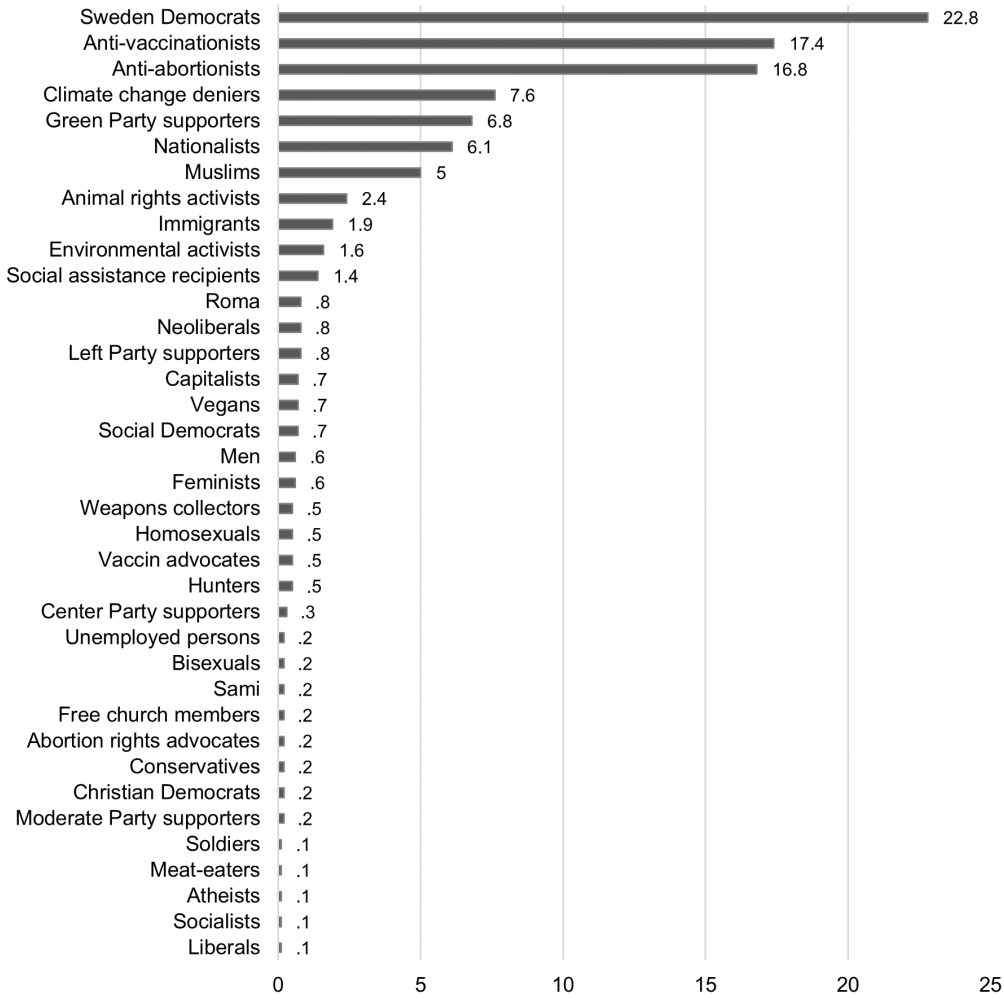

FIGURE 1 Groups in society that respondents strongly dislike, 2021 (%). The question asked in the survey is: "*Here is a list of different groups in society that one can have different views about. Do you strongly dislike any of the groups above?*" A total of 1502 people answered the question, of which 883 answered "*yes*" and then indicated which group they disliked the most; 191 answered "*yes*" without stating which group they disliked the most; and 428 people answered "*no*." The figure shows the proportion of respondents who indicated which group they disliked the most among the 46 offered. Nine groups were never mentioned in this connection: Jews, Christians, security guards, medical staff, transsexuals, heterosexuals, women, police officers, and conscientious objectors. *Source*: The national SOM Survey, 2021.

threats in our survey. (For information on operationalizations and response options, see the online appendix.) Individuals may fear threats both to their person and to society as a whole. Our focus, however, is mainly on whether individuals feel personally threatened by *immigration*, *economic crisis*, *epidemics/pandemics*, *environmental degradation/climate change*, or *violence and abuse outside the home*.

Civic and political engagement: Independent variables

The second set of variables concerns *civic and political engagement*. We measure civic and political engagement by asking whether respondents are *members of any type of association/*

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organization or any *political party/association*. We also examine the degree of *trust in other people*, which scholars have claimed is one of the main positive outcomes of civic engagement (e.g., Putnam, 1993). Another factor reflecting civil and political engagement is the respondents' *political interest*, which we asked about. Our survey includes few measures of the extent to which democratic norms and values are learned and internalized, so we can only use a single proxy for the learning effect: *level of education*. A higher educational level is expected to result in greater exposure to, and thus greater internalization of, democratic norms and values.

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics: Control variables

The final variables are used as controls. Here we find individual background factors such as *gender*, *age*, *income*, *left/right placement*, *urban/rural residence*, and whether the individual *grew up in Sweden or abroad*.

RESULTS

Descriptive results: Disliked groups and their rights

In the survey, a list of 46 different groups was presented to respondents, followed by the question: "*Do you strongly dislike any of the groups above?*" Of the 1502 respondents to this question, 59% answered "*Yes*" (a total of 883 respondents) and then indicated which group they disliked the most. 13% answered "*Yes*" (191 respondents), but refrained from specifying any such group. Just under a third of respondents (29%, corresponding to 428 respondents) answered "*No*" to the question. In total, as many as 72% of respondents said they strongly disliked one of the groups mentioned (adding up to 1074 respondents). It is important to reiterate, however, that political intolerance is not the same thing as singling out a disliked group; it also implies, namely, a desire to deprive the members of said group of their political rights.

The distribution of answers between the different groups is shown in Figure 1. One interesting finding is that groups which are often thought particularly vulnerable are found only to a limited extent among the most disliked groups. For example, Jews, homosexuals, transgender persons, and members of the indigenous Sami minority are hardly ever mentioned (.5% or fewer of the respondents chose these alternatives). Moreover, occupational groups such as police officers and security guards figure only rarely among the most disliked groups. The same is true of large social groups such as unemployed persons and women.

Muslims and immigrants, however, are chosen to a greater extent (5 and 2%, respectively). Yet the group singled out by the greatest number of respondents as the most disliked are Sweden Democrats (23%)—that is, the group that has most clearly described immigration as a threat that needs to be addressed. Anti-vaccinationists and abortion opponents come in second and third place (17% each). These groups are followed by climate-change deniers (8%), environmentalists (7%), and nationalists (6%). These results should be interpreted with some caution, because relatively few respondents indicated any groups save the largest ones. Nevertheless, the results relating to immigrants and minority ethnic groups are largely in line with the expectations set out by those who argue that CWSs are effective at bridging divides and promoting tolerant attitudes. It may be true that support for the SD has grown because people object to liberal immigration policies, but our results clearly run counter to the arguments we presented in Hypothesis 2. It seems the considerable dislike we have detected is not aimed primarily at immigrants or ethnic minorities, but instead at the group that most clearly perceives these groups as a threat.

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We then ask whether the most disliked group should be allowed to enjoy the fundamental rights which the Swedish constitution says should apply equally to everyone, including freedom of speech and of the press, freedom of assembly and of association, and the right to run for parliament. This can be seen as a litmus test of the strength of political tolerance in a society. In a strong democracy, groups and individuals who are disliked enjoy equal rights nonetheless.

What we find, however, is a strikingly common tendency among respondents to want to restrict fundamental rights and freedoms for the group they dislike most. About one in five people (21%) called for revoking the constitutional right of members of the group in question to express their views orally and in writing. An even greater share of respondents—between 34% and 38%—were prepared to revoke the right of such persons to demonstrate or to form an organization. Almost half (45%) thought members of the group should not be allowed to run for parliament. As many as two-thirds (64%) took the view that no member of the group should be allowed to become prime minister. Finally, 44% of respondents thought members of the disliked group should not be allowed to work in health care or elder care.

Naturally, questions of this kind often leave considerable room for interpretation. We must bear this in mind when assessing the results. It is quite remarkable, however, that almost half the respondents who indicated a disliked group wished to deny members of that group the right to run in parliamentary elections. This finding is in contrast to the expectation expressed in Hypothesis 1—that the general level of tolerance will be high in a CWS like Sweden (although it is obviously hard to determine what exactly qualifies as a high or low level of political tolerance). (The distribution of no answers (i.e., things that members of the disliked group should not be allowed to do) is shown in Figure A1 in the online appendix.)

Seeking further corroboration of this result, we calculated the "Political tolerance index" for the disliked groups as a combination of all the rights and freedoms we asked about in the survey. What we find is that tolerance towards Muslims and immigrants appears to be much lower than that shown towards Sweden Democrats, whose confidence interval overlaps with the three groups with the highest values on the index: climate-change deniers, Green party supporters, and abortion opponents. So, while Sweden Democrats are often singled out as disliked, they are generally met with a higher degree of tolerance. The relationship is reversed for Muslims and immigrants, who are singled out less often but enjoy a lower degree of political tolerance (a finding which is in line with Hypothesis 2). Again, however, it is important to note that some groups have been singled out by few respondents, so the estimates are uncertain. (Index values for all of the groups are presented in Table A2 in the online appendix; and 95% confidence intervals for nine of the most disliked groups are illustrated in Figure A2.)

Multivariate results: Individual-level determinants of intolerance

In view of our discovery of what must be regarded as widespread intolerance, we now seek to ascertain individual-level determinants of these results. The next step in our analysis is thus to test hypotheses 3 and 4, which concern factors that affect levels of tolerance. In so doing, we analyze the degree to which respondents who said they disliked a group (even if they did not specify which one) expressed intolerance towards said group.

Our third hypothesis is that, the more individuals experience threats from immigration and open violence, the less tolerant they will tend to be. As can be seen in the first column in Table 1, three of the perceived threats we have mentioned have significant effects on tolerance: immigration ($p < .00$); epidemics/pandemics ($p < .01$); and violence and abuse outside the home ($p < .05$). Immigration has the strongest effect: one step on the five-point scale is associated with a decrease in tolerance of .045 on average, which corresponds to a decrease of almost five percentage points. The effect of perceived threats from epidemics/pandemics and from violence and abuse outside the home is slightly lower. A perceived threat from economic crisis

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TABLE 1 Individual-level determinants of tolerance.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	.960*	.076	.474***	.535***	.731**
	(.052)	(.052)	(.080)	(.086)	(.105)
Threatened by climate change	.004		−.004	.007	.005
	(.010)		(.010)	(.011)	(.011)
Threatened by economic crisis	−.017		−.017	−.014	−.024
	(.013)		(.013)	(.013)	(.013)
Threatened by pandemic	−.036**		−.032**	−.024	−.020
	(.012)		(.012)	(.012)	(.012)
Threatened by open violence	−.024*		−.016	−.030**	−.031**
	(.011)		(.011)	(.011)	(.011)
Threatened by immigration	−.045***		−.031***	−.018	−.020
	(.009)		(.009)	(.011)	(.012)
Education		.071***	.050***	.027*	.030*
		(.011)	(.011)	(.013)	(.013)
Association membership (yes = 1)		.010	.002	−.003	−.002
		(.023)	(.023)	(.023)	(.023)
Party membership (yes = 1)		.035	.005	.009	.006
		(.044)	(.044)	(.044)	(.043)
Trust		.020***	.015**	.016**	.023***
		(.005)	(.005)	(.006)	(.006)
Political interest		.062***	.066***	.070***	.070***
		(.014)	(.014)	(.015)	(.015)
Gender (male = 1)				.030	.025
				(.024)	(.024)
Age				−.067***	−.064***
				(.011)	(.012)
Grew up abroad (yes = 1)				−.139***	−.121***
				(.029)	(.030)
Urban resident (yes = 1)				.088**	.094***
				(.028)	(.028)
Income				.046***	.044***
				(.013)	(.013)
Left/right position				−.002	−.009
				(.011)	(.015)
Party-sympathy dummies					Included
Observations	1000	995	961	893	858
Adjusted-R^2	.082	.100	.136	.207	.225

Note: OLS regression analysis with "Political tolerance index" as the dependent variable. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. In Model 6, we find significant party-sympathy dummies at the .05 level for all parties. There is no evidence of multicollinearity (see the online appendix).

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

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or from environmental degradation/climate change does not appear to have any significant impact on the level of political tolerance. Taken together, these results provide support for our third hypothesis, inasmuch as our measures of threats from immigration and open violence both indicate that an increased level of perceived threat is associated with a lower level of tolerance. This set of variables explains about 8% of the variation in the dependent variable, as the adjusted *R*-squared is .082.

Our fourth hypothesis is that, the more exposed individuals are to the theory and practice of democratic politics, the more tolerant they will tend to be. As can be seen from the second column in Table 1, two of the variables connected with civic and political engagement appear to have no effect on the level of political tolerance. Membership in a political party or other association has no significant impact. On the other hand, we find clear indications that education ($p < .00$), trust ($p < .00$), and political interest ($p < .00$) are associated with higher levels of political tolerance. One step up the four-step educational ladder is associated on average with a .071 increase in tolerance—that is, about 7 percentage points. Regarding trust, one step along the 11-point scale of trust is associated on average with a .020 increase in tolerance, which corresponds to about two percentage points. Similarly, the more interested in politics individuals are, the more tolerant they will tend to be. Thus, the variables measuring the impact of civic and political engagement on the level of political tolerance present us with mixed results: three of the five are significant. However, these variables explain a higher percentage of the variation in the dependent variable than the variables which measure threat perceptions: that is, about 10% (the adjusted *R*-squared is .100).

The next step in our assessment is to run both sets of variables in a single model, as illustrated in the third column of Table 1. It is clear from this model is that only two of the variables associated with threat perceptions remain significant when we check for other variables: perceived threats from pandemics ($p < .01$), and from immigration ($p < .00$). Among the variables connected with civic and political engagement, education ($p < .00$), trust ($p < .01$), and political interest ($p < .00$) remain significant. This model includes both types of factors mentioned in the literature as central for explaining the level of political tolerance, and it explains about 14% of the variation in the dependent variable (the adjusted *R*-squared is .136).

In the fourth model, presented in the fourth column of Table 1, we add socio-economic and demographic control variables. The results show that one of the variables connected with threat perceptions now remains significant, even though it was not significant in the previous model: threats from open violence and abuse ($p < .01$). Among the variables connected with civic and political engagement, education ($p < .05$), trust ($p < .01$), and political interest remain significant ($p < .01$). Furthermore, we find several significant effects among the control variables: younger people are significantly more tolerant ($p < .00$), although the effect is not large; and people with higher incomes ($p < .00$), who live in big cities ($p < .01$), and who grew up in Sweden ($p < .00$) all tend to be more tolerant. However, we find no significant effect for gender or political orientation (i.e., placement along the left/right scale). In total, this model explains about 21% of the variation in the dependent variable (the adjusted *R*-squared is .207).

In the fifth and final model, presented in the fifth column of Table 1, we add dummies in order to check for different party sympathies. The results remain largely unchanged. The variation explained in the dependent variable now comes to about 23% (the adjusted *R*-squared is .225).

Our next step in the analysis is to study more closely which factors are associated with singling out the three most disliked groups in our survey: Sweden Democrats, anti-vaccinationists, and abortion opponents. We have also analyzed the factors associated with singling out Muslims, although relatively few respondents indicated this option and our conclusion

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regarding this group must therefore be drawn with great caution.[3] When we run our full model with all of the independent variables—including party-sympathy dummies—we find the following: Three factors are significantly associated with identifying Sweden Democrats as the most disliked group. The less threatened you feel by immigration ($p < .01$), the more likely you will be to single out the Sweden Democrats as the most disliked group. Similarly, the more you lean to the left on the left/right scale ($p < .01$)—and the more you support parties on the left flank in Swedish politics—the more likely you will be to dislike the SD. Finally, your propensity to single out the SD will be greater if you are not a member of any association ($p < .05$). (See Table A7 in the online appendix.)

Regarding anti-vaccinationists, one variable in particular is associated with singling out this group as the most disliked, namely age ($p < .01$). The older you are, the more likely you will be to dislike anti-vaccinationists. This can be explained by the fact that age was the most important risk factor for contracting serious illness from COVID-19. For the elderly, therefore, vaccination against the virus was a vital issue. Also, if you are a supporter of the Christian Democrats, the more likely you will be to dislike anti-vaccinationists. Concerning abortion opponents, two factors seem to play a role for singling out this group: gender and age. If you are female ($p < .01$) and younger in age ($p < .00$), the probability increases that you will single out this group as the most disliked. As regards Muslims, finally, only two factors are significantly associated with singling out this group as the most disliked. If you feel threatened by immigration ($p < .00$), and if you support the Sweden Democrats ($p < .05$), the probability increases that you will single out Muslims as your most disliked group. In fact, supporters of the Sweden Democrats single out Muslims (and immigrants) as the most disliked group to a much higher degree than do supporters of all the other parties (see Tables A3–A5 in the online appendix).

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We set out to examine the level of political tolerance in Sweden a few years after the European refugee crisis of 2015–16. Many of our results show that situational and individual-level factors cited in previous research as associated with the level of political tolerance are important for understanding Sweden too. It is clearly the case that threat perceptions, civic and political engagement, and socio-economic factors are all related to the level of political tolerance. Perceptions of threat promote intolerance. By contrast, people with higher education and a proclivity to trust others are more tolerant. So are individuals who take an interest in politics. The same applies to people who are younger, who have higher incomes, who live in urban areas, and who grew up in Sweden. These are the key characteristics that distinguish politically tolerant persons.

Nevertheless, there are different welfare-state models in different Western countries, and it has been argued that comprehensive welfare states are better than other welfare models at promoting political tolerance. Our main finding is that intolerant attitudes towards ethnic minorities are relatively uncommon in Sweden. This supports the contention of previous studies that CWSs are effective at bridging ethnic divisions. Some scholars, however, have argued that pressure from increased immigration may undermine the hitherto positive effects of high welfare expenditures on the level of tolerance towards immigrants (e.g., Loxbo, 2023; Rapp, 2017). Sweden has managed, however, to live up to many of the promises associated with having a CWS. States of this kind, the argument goes, serve to reduce welfare chauvinism

[3]A simple calculation of Sample size (using the Power/Sample Size Calculator at ubc.ca, https://www.stat.ubc.ca/~rollin/stats/ssize/n2.html) suggests that, with proportions between .48 and .67 (which is the case with our most disliked groups), a sample of at least 106 respondents will be required if the desired power is .8 (a frequently applied criterion), given that α is .05. We therefore refrain from an in-depth analysis of groups with fewer respondents (e.g., immigrants), with Muslims as an exception.

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and to counteract negative attitudes towards various ethnic groups and minorities (Crepaz & Damron, 2009; Van Der Waal et al., 2013). Our results too corroborate this claim, inasmuch as immigrants and ethnic minorities are rarely the target of political intolerance in Sweden. However, although Muslims and immigrants are singled out less frequently, respondents are prone to deny them more rights than other selected groups.

Furthermore, we also see surprising results that do not fit common explanatory frameworks. Our findings have revealed that Swedes express widespread intolerance towards other disliked groups in society, such as Sweden Democrats, abortion opponents, anti-vaccinationists, and to some extent climate-change deniers and nationalists. Since these findings land outside the previous discourse on how the welfare state may foster political tolerance, other interpretations are needed. When we examine which groups are selected as highly disliked and which ones are exposed to political intolerance, we find an ideological divide in some cases—but not in all. To begin with, respondents with political sympathies to the left feel the strongest antipathy towards the SD, while respondents with political sympathies to the right do not feel as hostile towards that party (Renström et al., 2023). Our study thus supports the finding from recent research of a pronounced *affective polarization* among supporters of centre and centre-left parties vis-à-vis the SD: that is, these voters have sharply negative feelings towards the SD, and this essentially follows how voters position themselves along the left/right dimension (Bettarelli et al., 2023; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). When it comes to anti-vaccinationists, however, the left/right dimension is less clear. Several leading members of the SD have taken an openly anti-vaccinationist stance; however, anti-vaccinationists are disliked not only by left-leaning voters, but also by supporters of all parties, including the SD. The same is true for abortion opponent activists. Here too, voters who align themselves with both the left and the right tend, with a few exceptions, to dislike this group strongly. Thus, responses to these two widely disliked groups—anti-vaccinationists and abortion opponent activists—fail to fit neatly on to the left/right spectrum.

What we see here is that the challenges the Swedish welfare state is facing, combined with crises and increased threats in society, have created something of a *liberal-democratic backlash*, whereupon a certain kind of political intolerance has become widespread. Over a long period of time, the Swedish welfare model was able to develop in a strongly liberal-democratic, high-trust, homogeneous, and prosperous setting. These features had mutually reinforcing effects (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). The situation started to change in the 1990s, with major reforms of the welfare state that coincided with economic decline and several crises. Moreover, the Swedish version of a CWS turned out to be poorly prepared for a large influx of immigrants in the 1990s, and then a still larger one in 2015–16. These developments have had negative effects on support for the universal Swedish welfare state (Eger, 2010), and questions have been raised from various political camps whether it is sustainable over the long run. Not least the SD has blamed immigration for undermining the welfare state, and capitalized on the view that welfare benefits should be limited to the native population (Loxbo, 2022). Yet, despite the SD's electoral success, Sweden's long standing as a world-leading welfare state is still the most plausible explanation for why minority groups—in particular immigrants—are not yet bearing the brunt of reactions to the increase in open violence.

It is clear from our results, furthermore, that the SD's surge in popularity has created a strong sense of resentment towards that party among people who sympathize with centre and centre-left parties. Many of those who shun the far right even seem willing to withhold political rights for Sweden Democrats—at least to some extent—in order to slow or to halt the current trajectory of that party. This kind of resistance to populist far-right parties occurs in many countries, and it can be based on a variety of attitudes where tolerance is concerned. As Bourne (2022, p. 510) observes, differing approaches to dealing with far-right parties reflect "long-standing debates about how to address the dilemma of 'tolerating the intolerant' in liberal democracies." Our findings show that, among Swedes, there is a widespread tendency to endorse intolerant measures against groups seen as intolerant.

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This reflects the seemingly self-contradictory notion that, in order to uphold tolerance, a society must refuse to tolerate intolerance (Popper, 2020 [1945], p. 581). The idea is that, if a society practices tolerance in a manner inclusive of intolerant groups, the latter will ultimately become dominant. They will eliminate the rights of their tolerant fellow citizens in time, and the practice of tolerance with them. One possible explanation, then, for the reactions we have seen among respondents is that they demonstrate a willingness to defend values which they believe to be under threat from supporters of far-right parties. The same kind of reasoning would appear to be valid for those with a strong antipathy towards anti-vaccinationists, abortion opponents, and other disliked groups.

It would appear, then, that Sweden has managed to handle the several crises of recent years without any outbreak of widespread intolerance aimed at ethnic minorities and immigrants. Other groups have been chosen instead. This development can be viewed, in Popper's terms, as a liberal-democratic counter-offensive. There is no simple answer to the question of how far such a defense can be allowed to go before it starts undermining the very principles it defends. The fate of Sweden, a country identified as one of the world's leading democracies and welfare states, thus has far-reaching implications for the future prospects of liberal democracy. Will divisions in the population widen, and become yet harder to bridge? Or will Sweden emerge as a resurrected CWS in which citizens and political parties manage to show each other tolerance? Without broad support for this fundamental principle, democracy cannot prosper. Accordingly, the lessons to be learned from developments in this country extend far beyond the Swedish case. Defending liberal democracy from those who propagate contrarian views may prove counterproductive if the response to them is allowed to undermine the values on which liberal democracy rests.

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