

Privatizing Education: Free School Policy in Sweden and England

SUSANNE WIBORG

The aim of this article is to investigate why Sweden, the epitome of social democracy, has implemented education reforms leading to an extraordinary growth in Free Schools in contrast to liberal England, where Free School policy has been met with enormous resistance. Conventional wisdom would predict the contrary, but as a matter of fact Sweden has bypassed England by far in outsourcing schools to private providers. The comparative argument promulgated in this article is that the combination of three interconnected variables—(1) type of political system, (2) party policy changes along the Left-Right dimension, and (3) the responses of the Left toward market-led reforms of education—are key in explaining this difference in Sweden and England.

Introduction

Sweden, the epitome of social democracy, has implemented education reforms leading to an extraordinary growth in Free Schools in contrast to liberal England, where Free School policy has been met with enormous resistance. Conventional wisdom would predict the opposite, but Sweden has bypassed England by far in outsourcing schools to private providers. This policy variance merits an investigation whereby factors that account for this contribute to the development of a comparative theory of Free School policy. The hypothesis is that Sweden has experienced a remarkable cross-party consensus on Free School policy in contrast to England, which has witnessed notable partisan differences over the issue. In Sweden, this consensus emerged as a result of the Social Democrats endorsing market-oriented policies on education.¹ This is an unexpected act, which will be scrutinized to understand why Free Schools (*Friskolor*) became an ensconced part of the Swedish education system. In the case of England, I argue that no such consensus ever existed between Labour and the Conservatives. In the education policy literature it is commonly held that the Coalition governments' (2010–) introduction of the *Academies Act 2010* (which included Swedish-

¹ In this article the term “marketization” is used to refer to the use of market mechanisms in the delivery of educational services. The term covers mainly contracting out, for example, Free Schools to private providers, and the use of voucher schemes.

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style Free Schools) was merely to expand the scope of the previous Tony Blair government's City Academy program. This may be considered as a cross-party consensus; however, I demonstrate that this view is a misinterpretation of education policy and establish the contrary, namely, that the parties have pursued conflicting objectives for education reform. The crux of the matter is then why the Swedish Social Democratic party accepted privatization of education, while Labour has largely chosen to reject such a course of action in reforming English education. In Sweden, not only were private providers of schools allowed to enter the "education market" but were permitted to be profit making. In stark contrast, private providers operating in England are denied profit making within the public school sector. This contrast becomes all the more perplexing when the traditional understanding about the left-wing parties in the two countries is taken into account. Labour, in its New Labour manifestation under Tony Blair, has made notable moves to the Right, while the Swedish Social Democratic party is the archetypical bastion of left-wing hegemony. While it may be expected of right-wing parties to embark on an out-sourcing strategy for education, it is unclear why a left-wing party would even consider in engaging in such an act.

The case-oriented method (Przeworski and Teune 1970, 33; Mahoney and Rueshemeyer 2003, 101; Landman 2008, 70) will be applied to Sweden and England in an effort to uncover key features behind the variance of Free School policy. This method seeks to explain where a particular outcome varies across similar countries by identifying variables that account for this. While controlling for those features common to the countries, the outcome of interest is the presence of a Free School program in two cases, Sweden and England; the independent variables behind its variance are: (1) type of political system, (2) party policy changes along the Left-Right dimension, and (3) the responses of the Left toward market-led reforms of education. The variables have been identified through examination of previous explanations of privatization of education that failed to explain the cross-country variation. The inclusion of two cases only has limited capacity in building a generalized explanation, but the variables put forward in this article can serve as a basis for future applications on further sets of cases to advance the explanatory power of the Free School theory. The article is divided in two parts. The first part describes the Free Schools in Sweden and England. This is followed by an analysis of previous explanation of theories of education privatization. Part two will proceed to analyze the independent variables informed by theories accumulated in political party systems, welfare state regimes, and education policy literature.

What Is a Free School?

In seeking to privatize education, both England and Sweden introduced similar types of state-funded but privately run Free Schools. The Free

Schools operate outside local government control, are funded directly by government, and run, for example, by charities, groups of parents, religious organizations, and, in the case of Sweden, businesses for profit. The schools are granted a high level of independence, perhaps more so in the case of England where they for example are free from the national curriculum. In Sweden, Free Schools have since 2009 been made subject to same regulative framework as municipality schools and are bound by various ordinances and curricula requirements. The Free Schools in England operate their own admissions authorities, whereas in Sweden places are strictly allocated on a “first-come, first-served” basis. In both countries the Free School initiative represents the most overtly market-oriented policy as it explicitly promotes nonstate actors to set up schools while the state is “rolled back” to mainly grant subsidies and inspect schools (Erixon Arreman and Holm 2011; Hatcher 2011; Vlachos 2011).

In Sweden, in 1991, a quasi-voucher scheme was introduced so that Free Schools became entitled to 85 percent, later raised to 100 percent, of the per-student spending in state schools for each child they taught. A sharp growth in Free Schools resulted, not because of great interest among community groups in setting up new schools, but for-profit providers who were allowed into the “school market.” In 2011, 20 percent of compulsory school children attend Free Schools in Sweden (at upper secondary level), and 10 percent attend Free Schools (at primary/lower secondary level). Over 65 percent of all of these schools are for-profit, which translates into 13 percent all Swedish schools (Sahlgreen 2011). The not-for-profit Free Schools, usually offering special pedagogy or religious education, is a niche within the private school sector and extremely slow growing.

In England, Free Schools were introduced later (in 2010) by the Coalition government (2010–15). Since then about 174 Free Schools have been established (Department of Education 2013) with schools in the pipeline waiting for approval by the Department of Education. The Free Schools present a small number in the education sector. This may be because it is still relatively recently that this school type has been implemented; however, it is very unlikely they will expand at a Swedish rate if for-profit providers are banned from setting up and running schools in the country. It is this very issue that has sparked an intense and polarized debate in England inhibiting a Swedish-like consensus.

Previous Attempts at Explaining Market-Led Reforms of Education

There is a growing research interest in Free Schools, but the education policy literature offers mainly country-specific accounts of their development.² These are rarely analyzed relatively if comparison is understood as

² See Wiborg 2010; Erixon Arreman and Holm 2011; Hatcher 2011; Vlachos 2011; Higham 2013.

the process of eliminating rival explanations in building generalized theories valid across countries (Landman 2008, 4). Free Schools are commonly treated as part of the market-oriented reform agenda and explained according to theories that, I argue below, face difficulties in accounting for cross-country variation.

One influential explanation of marketization of education is the “global economy” thesis, which argues that the shift in policy toward neoliberalism is a result of the increasingly global orientation of the world economy (Dale and Robertson 2002; Anderson-Levitt 2003; Verger 2012). In the words of Olsen (1996, 351) the transition from a “capitalist world economy” to a “world capitalist economy” involves the transformation of multinational corporations into transnational corporations defined as those who have expanded their international production at the expense of their domestic market. International foreign exchange, capitalist markets and newly created or modified supranational agreements—as well as organizations such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the European Union (EU), and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—play an increasingly central role in liberalizing world trade. These global institutions have facilitated the erosion of the power of national states. Consequently, Keynesianism, social planning, and the welfare state have often yielded to monetarist policies, even under social democratic governments. This change was propelled by the macroeconomic problems that the OECD countries experienced in the 1970s and privatization of public services, including education, was pursued to make cuts to the welfare state.

One hypothesis that arose from this thesis is that countries that faced the gravest macroeconomic difficulties embarked on market-oriented reforms to the greatest extent. This would predict that England, which has experienced greater financial problems during the post-war period than Sweden, would out-source schools to private providers to a further extent. This is not the case; financial crises certainly put strong pressure on governments, and their response to them could include their willingness to implement privatizing reforms. However, the economy thesis fails because it cannot adequately justify why these reforms were regarded as viable in better economic times as witnessed in the 1990s. If economic constraints were the key factor propelling education reforms, more extensive reforms would be implemented during periods of unfavorable economic condition than in more prosperous times. This is obviously not the case since reforms aiming at privatizing education were implemented during the 1990s both in Sweden and England when economic conditions were comparable to those of the thriving days of the 1960s (Scharpf and Schmidt 2000). Although the economy thesis has obvious inconsistencies, it should not be rejected outright but rather tested further both empirically and comparatively.

The political thesis, which has acquired a prominent position in education policy literature, seeks to explain market-led reforms of education by focusing on what drives politicians to reform in the first place. Politics is fundamentally about the exercise of public authority and the struggle to gain control over it—not least in times of institutional reform (Moe 1990, 221). The political thesis is usually associated with the “global policy” or “neoliberal” agenda of the 1980s, and on this basis, it is argued that market-led reforms of education have been implemented to a larger degree in countries with long-serving, right-wing governments. Following this line of argument, one would expect that England, with long-serving Conservative governments, would go much further in privatizing education than in Sweden, which has had many fewer years of center-Right governments. This did not happen. The Danish case offers an even better example why the argument fails. In spite of two long-serving right-wing governments (1982–1993, 2001–2011), a total of 19 years, privatization of social services, including the education sector, hardly occurred in Denmark. Green-Pedersen (1999, 256; 2002, 272) asserts that when the Social Democrats returned to power in 1993, after being in opposition for 10 years, the Danish welfare state was in better shape than in 1982; it had been further developed (i.e., by expanding universal, flat rate, and tax-financed benefits), its economic foundations were much improved, and public support remained unabated.³

If the political thesis were valid in explaining cross-country variation, England would have gone further than Sweden and Denmark even further. There is no positive correlation between the duration of right-wing governments and the extent of contracting out and use of market mechanisms in reforming education across the European states. Another problem with this argument is that the role of the Left in enacting such reforms is usually neglected or, at best, described as merely continuing right-wing governments’ policies unable or unwilling to break away from it. In the case of Sweden, as we will see later, this argument ignores the fact that many of the most important changes in market-regulating education were initiated, or accelerated, by the Social Democrats in 1990 and 1991, just before they lost power; this happened on a scale that, in England, Tony Blair and his government never even attempted to reach.

A third argument behind market-led education concerns the role played by the middle classes. Although there has been very little research, there is a growing view among education scholars that the middle classes in the pur-

³ The same holds true for Germany. In 1982, a coalition government there consisting of the Christian Democrats and the Liberal Party launched a neoliberal program along similar lines to those in the United Kingdom and United States. However, their market-oriented public sector reforms had no real policy impact, and interestingly, creating a more market-regulated and demand-oriented education system had even less (Klitgaard 2007a, 2007b).

suit of advance education and opportunities for their children promote privatization of education. In a rare comparative study about state sanctioning of alternative education provision in Sweden, England, and France, Johnston and van Wijnbergen (2010) argue that the middle class, an essential constituency for the Right and Left parties, is most likely to benefit from consumer choice, having both the voice to demand and the information to obtain quality but not the means to go fully private. However, in relation to the Free Schools, the middle class's support appears to be relatively low and highly divided. This particular issue has not yet been researched, but recent polls give some support to this claim. In the 2010 Ipsos Mori Poll, 44 percent of parents considered schools run by private companies, religious groups, charities, or groups of parents a bad idea, compared to 24 percent who supported them. Sixty-two percent thought that the local authorities were best placed to run schools (NASUWT/Unison 2010). A survey a year later by the National Union of Teachers (2011) revealed that parental support for Free Schools was low, just 25 percent, and that the support was much higher among private school parents than state school parents (National Union of Teachers 2011). In Sweden, an increasing number of middle class parents make use of school choice, but recent polls (Vlachos 2011) showed that they remain highly skeptical about the profit motive of the Free School providers (Wiborg 2009, 2010). The middle class argument has some capacity to explain the push toward privatization of education, but comparatively viewed it is inconclusive.

Explanations stressing macroeconomic constraints, right-wing politics, and the role of the middle classes indeed contribute to understanding what drives market-led education reforms, but they cannot sufficiently explain cross-country variance. Analysts of these theories tend to assume global forces act in the same way in shaping policy in all countries, thus neglecting local political histories when examining educational policy. It still remains a question why Free Schools, as part of this privatizing agenda, could flourish in Social Democratic Sweden, whereas they struggle to manifest themselves in liberal England.

Sweden: Consensus Politics

In the case of Sweden, it is frequently argued in the education literature that the Conservative-led coalition government that came to power in 1991 is to be squarely blamed for initiating privatization of education.⁴ As the country's first neoliberal government, it deliberately set out to radically transform the Swedish welfare state. In addition to the welfare cuts, credit market, and tax reforms, it deregulated, privatized, and introduced a variety of

⁴ See Richardson 1999; Lundahl 2002, 2005; Bunar 2008, 2010.

other measures to encourage competition and “restore” the market.⁵ Many of these changes were hastened by the prospect of membership in the European Union, which encouraged such developments. In education, a major reform was passed in 1992, which allowed privately run schools to offer primary and secondary education and to receive public funding for each student at a level similar to that of state schools.

While it is correct that this right-wing government took a big step toward outsourcing schools to private providers, the argument ignores the fact that many of the most important changes were in fact initiated or brought to fruition by the Social Democrats before they lost power in 1991. For example, in 1990 they enacted a quasi-voucher model that allowed parents to choose between state schools and hundreds of new state-financed Free Schools.⁶ The voucher scheme ensured that the Free Schools could compete against state schools for students on an almost equal financial basis. Why would they do this? Even in comparison to neighboring Denmark, Sweden—in building a universal welfare state—often stood out in the discouragement of, and even hostility to, private providers, especially within the health and education sectors. By the 1960s, most of the pre-existing private providers were phased out largely through funding cuts. For instance, less than 1 percent of school children in the 1960s until early 1990s attended a private school. While such private alternatives can be considered desirable for a nation that had not previously experienced much choice in the welfare system, they tend to increase differential access, two-tier provision, and social inequality. The question here is why Social Democratic governments would risk such consequences. Since the Social Democrats held power uninterrupted for about 50 years during the middle of the twentieth century, resulting in a weak and fractious right-wing bloc, analyzing their behavior concerning the privatization of education should yield great insights into the entire question of such reform.

The Political System and Consensus Culture

The consensus culture in Sweden, affecting all political processes and promoting accord between the Social Democrats and sections of the Right, is an essential factor in the comparative theory of Free School policy. Sweden’s multiparty system has since the early interwar period fostered a tradition of consensus building across political blocs. By the turn of the twen-

⁵ For example, telecommunication and broadcasting monopolies, the national telephone company, postal services, and state alcohol authority and retail company have been subject to deregulation, while municipal cleaning services and parts of the public transportation system have been contracted out.

⁶ It also included creation of private alternatives in health care, and the provision of public funding for private day care.

tieth century the Swedish electoral system, which mirrored an international pattern, changed from majority to proportional representation, allowing for the representation of numerous parties in Parliament. This multiparty system, in which minority government was and still is commonplace, facilitates a process of cross-party bargaining and negotiation even with the opposition. In addition, interest organizations—particularly the teacher unions—have been involved or consulted in the policy-making process. By sharing power with the opposition and interest organizations and so including them in the rule of the country, governments seek to achieve consensus-based majority. Thus, there is a “hidden” majority within the Swedish minority governments. To quote a Swedish expression, it is an unwritten tradition that the aim of governments, even small ones, is to “anchor” their politics within a broad agreement constituting the majority. Even during the 1970s and 1980s, where a two-bloc system with shifting governments emerged, many agreements were reached across this bloc cleavage. During the following decades and up to the present, cooperation and consensus between parties dominates, although there has been a slight erosion of this tradition since the early 1990s.⁷ The multiparty system with its typical minority governments, which has fostered a consensus-building tradition, goes some distance in explaining why the Left and Right without much disagreement could agree on the Free Schools policy. However, it does not really address why the Left “acted Right” in reforming Swedish education in the first place, only that consensus agreement for the above-mentioned reasons was likely to be reached.

The Social Democrats on the Left-Right Dimension

Why did the Left act Right? To answer this question, it is beneficial to scrutinize the positioning of the Social Democrats on the Left-Right dimension. The most comprehensive data on policy preferences are from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al. 2001; see also Lowe et al. 2011), which gathers the results of coding of more than 3,000 election manifestos for more than 650 parties in about 50 countries since 1945. In political science research, the CMP is primarily used to locate policy positions for political parties on Left-Right scales and parties’ distances to each other. Budge et al. (2001, 39) show that the Swedish Social Democrats during the 1960s and 1970s made a Left turn in politics as a consequence of being dependent on support from the Communist Left. The two parties had been leapfrogging in the earlier post-war years, but with the diminishing Communist power in the 1970s, the Social Democrats started to move to the Right, particularly after the emergence of the Greens in the 1990s. This brought them closer to the smaller “bourgeoisie” parties, the Liberals and the Centre Party, but they

⁷ See Einhorn and Logue 1986, 207; Blom-Hansen 2000; Arter 2008, 156; Sejersted 2011.

are still clearly distinguished from the conservatives, who are marked by a generally stronger rightist stance than their Danish and Norwegian counterparts, a feature that can be traced all the way back to the mid-nineteenth century. The Social Democrats' support draws from the Centre Party, the Liberals (who were and still are strongly involved in education policy), and the Christian Democrats. Each of these parties is more centrist than the largest right-wing party, the Moderates, and during most of the 1990s, they were indistinguishable from the Social Democrats on the CMP's Left-Right dimension. This trend has persisted to the present. As the Swedish Social Democrats since the 1990s have developed policy preferences closer to those of the Right also aids in understanding how this unprecedented consensus could be reached. However, what brought them to give up their original socialist stance in the first place and make a move toward the Right and, for the interest of this study, what consequences this has had for Free School policy, still needs further analysis.

Social Democratic Response to Free School Policy

According to the power resource theory (PRT), which focuses on the role of social democracy in the development of welfare regimes,⁸ the Social Democrats' effort to protect the welfare state they (mainly) created and muster electoral support, upon which the maintenance of that state depends, compelled them to make a strategic move to the Right. Welfare states in which the Social Democratic labor movement has been successful in building its power resources, notably the Scandinavian countries, are remarkable for their development of a universal welfare state. The Social Democrats thus rely heavily on the maintenance of the welfare state to muster political support and win elections. Gösta Esping-Andersen (1985), a leading scholar within the PRT tradition, argues that not only was the provision of universal welfare programs a political agenda of the Social Democrats; it was also an explicit political instrument that brought them to power. The Social Democrats aimed at designing the welfare provision to be of such quality and comprehensive availability that private providers would recede. In education policy, this implied developing a highly egalitarian school system while restricting access to private schools. The crucial point is that most citizens at some point in their lives have been beneficiaries of welfare and as such are strongly inclined to support it and thus the Social

⁸ The power resource theory (PRT) was borne out of welfare state research, particularly advanced by Scandinavian scholars (Korpi 1980, 1983, 1989; Esping-Andersen 1985, 1990) whose comparative investigation of the relationship between social policy and labour mobilisation enabled them to distinguish between the evolution and outcomes of welfare states across industrialized states. The PRT approach is employed in analyzing a broad range of welfare sectors such as health care, pension, and housing. Education, except for childcare, has been subject to much less attention, but recently a few studies have sought to include this sector too in the study of welfare state types (Iversen and Stephens 2008; Busemeyer 2009).

Democrats in the national elections. Therefore, it is important for the Social Democrats to utilize the “welfare state” as means of mustering political support.⁹

In as much as the Social Democrats have a reason to believe a particular policy issue is a threat to welfare state legitimacy, they may be prepared to implement market-type reforms if these are considered to prevent loss of legitimacy and declining welfare state support. The strategy of the Social Democrats is thus to take the risk of effecting market-oriented reforms in order to protect the universal welfare state, which is their most valuable institutional weapon. Since they depend on the welfare institutions to realize their political ambitions, they are prepared to allow market forces even if they produce greater social stratification.

The Social Democrats have encountered a threat to “their” welfare state from the increasingly powerful center-right wing parties. By the mid-1980s, the Conservatives were joined by two centrist parties, the Peoples’ party and the Centre party, in promoting privatization and consumer choice, creating for the first time in the post-war period a bulwark against Social Democratic welfare policies. When the Social Democrats assumed power in 1985, they were compelled to respond this threat and hence initiated a decentralization process whereby some social services were transferred to municipalities as well as offering citizens the possibility of choosing between public benefits on the one hand and private but publicly financed benefits on the other. The Social Democrats anticipated that this concession would preempt the right wing from making further demands for privatization reforms. The Social Democratic party was not united in this stance, but the views of the factious pro-market wing in the party, which revolved around the Minister of Finance, Kjell-Oluf Feldt, came to represent the official party line (Green-Pedersen 2002; Klitgaard 2007b).

The Social Democrats, during their period in government from 1986 to 1991, decentralized the education system by transferring the administration of Swedish schools to the municipalities, while the central state involvement was restricted to decision making concerning general aims for education and providing general funding and inspection.¹⁰ The decentralization process in Sweden was probably the most turbulent period for education in the post-war period as it triggered an array of reforms, changing completely the governance of education. Sweden thus went from a highly centralized system in which municipalities and schools had very limited influence over education to one of the most decentralized systems in Europe in a relatively short period of time (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006).

⁹ See Esping-Andersen 1985; Green-Pedersen 2002; Anderson 2006; Klitgaard 2007b.

¹⁰ The previous Conservative government, 1976–82, had opened the way for this by transferring state subsidies to the municipalities.

In addition to the decentralization reform, in 1990–91 the Social Democrats (as mentioned earlier) introduced parental choice in conjunction with a voucher system. Social Democrats had anticipated that school choice would be restricted to the public sector only, but since the new funding scheme (introduced by the previous government) allowed Free Schools to receive public funding on equal terms with state schools, school choice was inevitably extended to the private sector as well. The Social Democrats, who had strongly opposed public funding of private schools during the 1980s, collided with the Conservatives and Liberals over the issue. In a parliamentary committee, in which the government bill proposing the new funding scheme was debated, the Centre party, who was the main political ally of the government, suggested that municipalities should allocate resources to all schools irrespective of whether these were public or private. However, the Social Democratic government had in actual fact already endorsed this viewpoint by allowing parents to choose between state schools and public-funded private schools (Richardson 1999; Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Klitgaard 2007b).

The Conservative-led coalition government under Carl Bildt's leadership from 1991 to 1994 heralded a further shift toward marketization of education. The government replaced the funding scheme, means-tested grants to schools, with a new scheme, which gave Free Schools the right to receive a sum per pupil of 85 percent of the average cost of a pupil in state schools. This change in funding policy, which enabled these schools to compete with state schools on an almost equal financial basis, resulted in a sharp growth in Free Schools, from 60 in 1991 to 709 in 2009–10. The paucity of interested parental and community groups in setting up schools, since they preferred to leave it to the state, made it easy for private business to expand their interests (Erixon Arreman and Holm 2011).

Between 1994 and 2006, the Social Democrats returned to power and continued to support the Free Schools. Since they had already embraced Free School policy, it no longer appeared credible to revert to a position similar to that of pre-1980s. Regardless of internal disagreements, the party nevertheless accepted the legitimacy of private providers of social and educational services. In the government bill from 1995 it is stated: "Independent schools have for a long time had a place within the Swedish education system. They constitute a part of the entire education provision. Independent schools [Free Schools] are different and contribute to the diversity of the education system. Diversity in itself is positive and it is not in contradiction to either equality or good quality. On the contrary, diversity is, as a rule, a prerequisite of development and educational innovation" (Bill 1995/96: 200, 37; my translation).

The Social Democrats abolished previous Conservative-led government (1991 and 1994) policy that approximately 15 percent of Free Schools' op-

erational costs should be covered by user fees. They argued that the financial situation of parents should not determine the educational opportunities of their children. Instead Free Schools should be fully state funded so that attendance would be free of charge. Free Schools were thus generously state funded and built on the principle of equal conditions with the state schools. Subsequently, legislation has been put in place that requires Free Schools to comply with the same requirements as those regulating the state schools. The cross-party consensus about the Free Schools remains unabated to the present day, despite the fact that the Social Democrats have suffered unprecedented losses in the last three successive elections.

England: Partisan Politics of Education

It is commonly held by education researchers that the British political parties' stance on education reveals such small differences that it is difficult to tell the parties apart. For example, Clyde Chitty and John Danford assert that "it is possible to argue that New Labour has accepted much of the Conservative Government's education agenda ... on a broad front, the Conservative education program has remained remarkably intact" (1999, 150). Anne West and Hazel Pennell (2002, 218) conclude in their analysis of New Labour's education policy choices that "the Labour Government can be seen to have embraced the quasi-market with enthusiasm similar to that of its Conservative predecessors. The main structures of the quasi-market are still in place—choice, open enrolment, funding following pupils, school diversity, and publication of league tables." Diane Reay (2008, 639) reached similar conclusion by stating that "beneath the rhetoric, Blair's legacy has been one of consolidating and reinforcing [*sic*] previous Conservative policies." Moving on to the Coalition government, it is frequently asserted that the Academy program is merely a continuation of the New Labour's program (Avis 2011; Hatcher 2011; Ball 2013).

This emphasis on the similarity between parties' education policies is exacerbated in research using the Network approach (Brans 1997; De Bruijn and Ringeling 1997; Kickert and Klijn 2000). This approach, which originated in political science and public administration, has grown in popularity within education policy research in England.¹¹ Although it has its obvious advantages—for example, the mapping of relationships between different actors in policy processes—some of its inherent problems are transferred into education research, most notably its inevitable stress on consensus. The theoretical basis of the network approach is that actors are seen as mutually dependent, so policy can only be realized on the basis of cooperation. Policy outcomes are then regarded as a result of collaboration

¹¹ See Ball 2008, 2009; Ball and Exley 2010; Braun et al. 2010; Exley et al. 2011.

and interaction strategies of various actors. If these are unsuccessful, they are explained due to failure of interactions between actors caused by, for example, lack of power resources, disagreements, or institutional structures. Only when actors are able to bring their perceptions together and formulate common interests will the policy games lead to satisfactory outcomes. In the words of Klijn and Koppenjan (2000, 143) “the emergence of concerted action is explained through the acknowledgement of mutual dependencies, converging perceptions, and the existence of incentives that foster cooperation.” Hence strong focus is put on mediating, coordinating, and consensus, consequently ignoring or underestimating conflict power and power differences.¹²

It may not be a surprise that this approach to policy analysis was originally developed on the basis of countries with coalition governments, a strong consensual political culture, and decentralized state system. Thus, it remains a question if it can be applied successfully to unitary states with majority systems without overemphasizing consensus in policy making. The electoral system in Britain, with its single member constituencies and plurality winners, has facilitated the creation of parliamentary majorities and single-party governments (with very few exceptions); as a result, according to the political scientist Ian Budge (2008, 53), policy has become more ideological and less aggregative. Even under the Coalition (2010–15), which should have produced a more consensual form of government, education policy remained highly partisan. The weight the network theorists put on collaboration and agreement in education policy in their UK-focused research underestimates the rather different objectives for education that the political parties are pursuing; the very lack of consensus about Free Schools policy, which was eventually found in Sweden, confirm this.

Majority Governments and Conflictual Politics

The lack of consensus building capacity in British politics can to a far extent be explained by the political system itself. Since 1945, the United Kingdom has been, broadly speaking, a two-party majoritarian democracy with a centralized and unitary state, in which political parties are not expected to share office, unlike in multiparty consensus democracies such as Sweden, where they do. Until 1970 the United Kingdom had a two-party system, but subsequently the number of “minor” parties has increased, most notably the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors. Britain has what Blondel describes a “two-and-a-half-party system” (Blondel in Webb 2000). The Liberal Democrats is a smaller but still significant party, since, in Giovanni Satori’s words, it has “coalition” and “blackmail” potential (1976, 122–23).

¹² For example, network approach is criticized of considering government merely as an “actor among other actors” when describing multilayers of networks.

The increased number of political parties, resulting in “moderate pluralism,” has fostered more interaction and cooperation between the parties, but there is no doubt that this is still far more prevalent in the consensus democracy of Sweden. Moreover, the party system in the United Kingdom, even in its moderated form, entails alternation of power between competing parties. Since the large parties are capable of governing on their own and not obliged to share power with rival parties, two-party systems are almost bound to result in competitive behavior. According to Webb (2000, 7), alternation of power is indeed one of the main aspects of competitive behavior found in two-party systems. Whereas power is shared in a majoritarian democracy between the parties consecutively, that is, one party at a time, Webb (2000, 8) succinctly states that it is shared concurrently in a consensus democracy. In striking contrast to Sweden, the British political system is not conducive toward consensus-building policy making, which goes some distance in explaining why education policy remains more conflict-ridden than in Sweden. This also depends on the positioning of the political parties on the Left-Right dimension to which I will now turn, focusing particularly on the Labour party movements on this dimension and contrasting it to its Swedish counterpart.

The Positioning of the Labour Party on the Left-Right Dimension

As demonstrated by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Bara and Budge 2001; Budge et al. 2001), historically the Labour party, in comparison to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, has fluctuated on the Left-Right dimension more extensively. Initially (in 1945) the Labour party moved sharply away from the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, which was followed by movement by the Conservatives toward the Labour party in the 1950s (the Age of Consensus). Subsequently, the Labour party moved toward Conservative positions although to a much lesser degree in the 1960s. Labour headed leftward again in the 1970s up to 1983, then rightward in 1987, and leftward in 1992.

From 1992 to 1997 Labour moved sharply to the Right; according to Bara and Budge (2001, 594), for the first time in post-war history, in 1997 Labour revealed a predominance of right-wing political positions over left-wing ones. Meanwhile, the Conservatives moved fairly consistently rightward from 1959 onward. They remained quite steady throughout the 1980s, because of the strong appearance of the New Right. In other words, they remained relatively far from Labour in the rightward direction. From 1964 the Liberals took up a center position between the two major parties, although much closer to Labour from 1974 onward (Bara and Budge 2001; Budge et al. 2001).

Examining Labour further in more recent times, Tony Blair, by moving to the Right, has been commonly credited with “seizing” the center-ground

in his party's pursuit of "Middle England" in the run-up to the election of 1997. A major reason behind the rightward orientation of Labour (and the Liberal Democrats), Bara and Budge (2001) argue, was the issue of efficient delivery of public services, which interestingly also was what prompted the Swedish Social Democrats to move toward the Right. On the basis of comprehensive textual analysis of Labour manifestos, they demonstrate that the right turn by Labour is in fact much exaggerated. Although in relative terms Labour became the centrist party, it far from whole-heartedly endorsed a Thatcherite stance; in fact, a deep cleavage ran between the two parties. When Labour consolidated its centrist stance and retrieved its electoral position, producing a landslide election in 1997, it then moved back toward its ideological home on the left.

This was evidenced in particular by Gordon Brown's imposition of a levy on recently privatized industries and, in 1998, a marked increase of allocations for social spending. After 2001, Labour then moved further Left but only slightly as they still occupied the right-wing side of the measure scale. The long-standing divide between Labour and the Conservatives primarily concerns welfare, and this is due to Labour's traditional and continuing support of it. The biggest difference the parties show regarding the relative importance of policy issues (out of 16 policy areas compared) is, interestingly, in the domain of education, where Labour favors expansion of schooling to a much greater degree than the Conservatives would ever endorse (Bara and Budge 2001, 595; 2008; Fielding 2003).

Given the entire history of the developments described above, we can tentatively conclude that Labour policy preferences are still clearly separate from the Conservatives, particularly in relation to education, regardless of the fact that the Labour party moved toward rightist positions starting in the mid-1990s until about 1997 before it retreated to the left. How does the ideological positioning of Labour compare to that of its Swedish counterpart? Timothy Hicks (2011) shows that in the period between 1997 and 2006, during which both parties were in power in their respective countries, the Swedish Social Democrats were, perhaps as expected, to the Left of Labour, but—crucial to point out here—after 2006 and up to the present, they were far Right of Labour (fig. 1). This further Right position may explain the variation in Free School expansion between Sweden and England. I will now turn to the English education situation before making comparative inferences.

Labour's Response to Academies and Free Schools

This section will make two points: first, that the Conservative and Labour policies on Academies and Swedish-style Free Schools differ very much from each other; second, that Labour's response to the Conservative-led Coalitions' *Academies Act 2010* (which includes Free Schools) is dismissive,

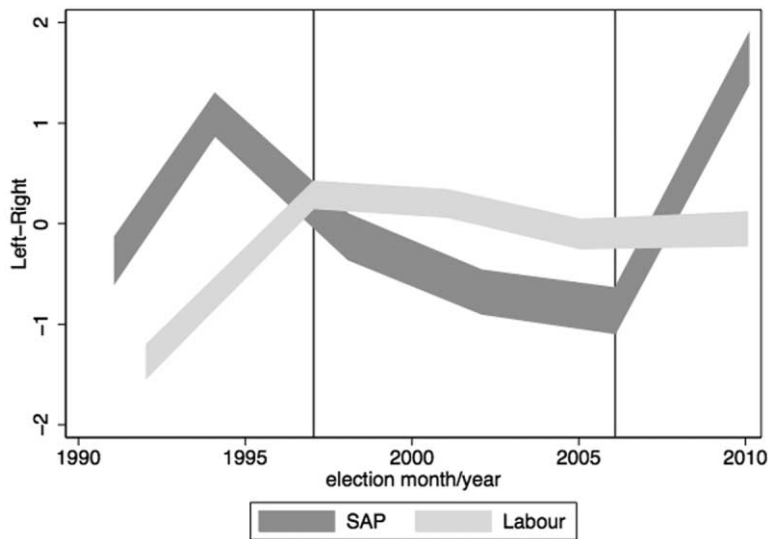


FIG. 1.—Relative position of Swedish Social Democrats and British Labour Party (Hicks 2011)

not supportive. At the time of writing (2014), it is only possible to analyze Labour's response to the Academies and Free Schools over the past 5 years and in its capacity as an opposition party. In the Swedish case, one had the advantage point of looking back at about 30 years to see how the Social Democratic party, both in its role as a governing and opposition party, responded to the Free Schools there. However, when looking back at the Labour party's reaction from the late 1980s to the Conservatives' City Technology Colleges and the more extensive grant-maintained schools (school types upon which the Academies and Free Schools are largely built), we know that Labour repeatedly expressed stiff opposition to the grant-maintained schools and pledged their abolition. Particularly "old" Labour politicians were highly critical of them, and successive party conferences passed resolutions that would require a Labour government to return these "opted-out" schools to the local education authorities (LEAs). When Labour came to power in 1997, it subjected the grant-maintained schools to greater control by the LEAs and brought their expansion to a definitive end (McCulloch 1989; Fitz et al. 1993).

In 2010 the Coalition government introduced the Academies Bill, which passed into law in July 2010. This provided for the introduction of earlier mentioned two new school types, the Academies and the Swedish-inspired Free Schools. In the act there are no clear conceptual differences between them. But in reality the Academies are already established schools, usually

high performing ones, converted to Academy status, whereas Free Schools are entirely new schools (sometimes called start-up Academies), established mainly by group of parents who are teachers, charities, religious organizations, and academy chains. Free Schools have similar governance arrangements to academies but with fewer restrictions in regards to the kind of organizations that are allowed to manage such a school. The Free School is the political flagship of the Coalition government and represents the strongest initiative to privatize education despite the fact that profit making is not allowed. The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, expressed in 2010 no “ideological objection” to businesses running state schools for profit, but due to immense opposition, Gove has been unable to allow this.

Scholars frequently draw comparisons between the Academies and Free Schools and the City Academies introduced by the previous (New Labour) government, since a strong affinity appears to exist between them—for example, school autonomy and the involvement of private business. The New Labour City Academy (“City” was later dropped) appeared in the Labour Party’s General Election Manifesto from 2001 and was pursued vigorously through the party’s second term by a leading advisor to Tony Blair, Andrew Adonis. The Academies were established in disadvantaged areas and, when the Coalition government came into power, were expanded into a system-wide model (Hatcher 2011; Higham 2013).

This narrative of cross-party consensus, I argue, is ill conceived as Labour and the Conservatives have fundamentally different scopes for and rationales behind the Academies. New Labour restricted the Academies to a limited number of areas (the initial target for Academies was set at 200, a figure that was raised to 400 in 2007), whereas the Conservatives regard the Academy as a model applicable for all schools. Unlike their universal comprehensive school model of the 1960s, Labour designed Academies, backed with generous capital investments, to be a radical “fresh start” for failing schools in areas of high deprivation and historically low achievement (Chitty 2013). The policy was explicitly developed as a measure to narrow the attainment gap between schools with advantaged and disadvantaged intakes. As Curtis shows (2008, table 7), academies have consistently taught a proportion of students eligible for free school meals that is between two and three times higher than the national average for nonacademies (29 percent for academies and 12.8 percent for all other schools). In the Conservatives’ version of the Academy, which does not come with additional funding, the focus has moved away from underperforming schools toward outstanding schools. Schools rated “outstanding” by OFSTED are automatically preapproved for transfer to Academy status under the provision of the Act. The Conservatives regard the Academy as a universal school model, not just a model for schools with challenging intakes, poor attainment, and low aspiration.

Furthermore, Labour took measures to protect against unfair admissions and, via targeted funding streams, to save unpopular schools, usually in disadvantaged areas, from being rapidly destabilized. Labour introduced a code of practice on admission in 1998, strengthened it in 2002, and again in 2007. The Coalition government introduced a new simplified and less prescriptive code and also removed the requirement for local authorities to have admissions forums or to report regularly to an adjudicator. Moreover, Labour retained a role for local authorities in managing local markets by controlling the number of surplus places and having responsibility for decisions about the opening of new schools. The Coalition does not require local authorities to support the creation of new schools or to reduce surplus places. Schools can be established in areas already with a surplus of school places. This is intended to liberate the market to function freely (Goodwin 2011; Hatcher 2011).

In terms of scope, rationale, and admission policies, the Academy program of the Conservatives clearly diverges from the original Labour formula, and thus the Coalition's enactment of it cannot be regarded as a simple facsimile of New Labour policy. Labour pursued traditional Labour policies by establishing City Academies in deprived areas, supporting them with generous capital investment, often in the form of expensive new buildings, and restricting their use to the underprivileged. The Conservatives revamped the Labour Academy model to expand it into a more general policy in which schools serving the middle classes are enabled to break free from state control. This constitutes a clear break from Labour policies.

The Free Schools program reveals even more clearly the differences in policy objectives between Conservatives and Labour. It was the first major education initiative developed by the Conservatives and was announced well in advance of the general election in 2010. The rationale for the policy was to deregulate the supply side of education, allowing new suppliers such as parents, teachers, or private companies to open schools with relaxation of some of the restrictions on school places, school buildings, and curriculum. As mentioned, around 85 such schools have opened in mainly affluent middle class areas. The Conservatives' commitment to supply side deregulation, emphasis on demand side provision, and funding for surplus places are a far cry from Labour policies (Goodwin 2011).

However, the Liberal Democrats serving in the coalition, despite party convergence of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats between 2006 and 2010, have constituted a Left-leaning check on the policies of the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats, with its strong Social Democratic roots, have opposed strongly the Conservatives' Free School policy and pursued an egalitarian policy through a "pupil premium" scheme that attaches more funding to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. By doing so, they appear to have been able to halt a dramatic policy drift to the Right. But the

Labour party, in opposition, has been even more ferociously opposed to the new directions taken for the both the Academies and Free Schools program.

The successive shadow education secretaries, Ed Ball, Stephen Twigg, and Tristan Hunt have been outspoken critics of the Academies and Free Schools. They want to bring the Free Schools program to an end, allow Academies only where they are needed, and rule out profit-making schools. They argue that this measure should help to put an end to the fragmented, divisive system (Goodwin 2011). While the Coalition government may appear to be using a Labour-invented policy tool, in fact their dramatic expansion of the Academy and Free School program fundamentally changed it. Whereas Labour was focused on implementing a policy that channeled resources and expertise to schools in deprived areas, the Conservatives have pushed academies in favor of the middle classes without additional funding. On the surface it appears a policy consensus, but as argued here the political parties divert strongly on the matter.

Comparative Analysis and Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the variation in the extent of outsourcing schools to private providers in Sweden and England showed that political histories of the respective countries go far in explaining this variation. Sweden has a multiparty system with a strong center, fostering consensus policies, and England, broadly speaking, has a two-party system, which produces much stronger Left-Right conflicts. The Swedish Social Democratic party constituted a united party against a more disparate right-wing bloc made up of liberals, conservatives, and agrarians. Coupled with long periods of electoral hegemony, the corporatist mode of interest mediation became firmly part of the political process, even when the party was occasionally out of government. Olof Petterson (1994, 34) argues that the aim of political decision making has been to avoid divisive conflicts; an emphasis on compromise and pragmatic solutions has led to a political consensus culture. Thus, governments, typically minority ones, tend not to have the ability to force through legislation without the support of some sections of the opposition. This process has resulted in broad agreements of education policy over a long period of time. In striking contrast, England with its by and large two-party system has meant that power between parties is not shared in office (which encourages party collaboration) but rather consecutively (which increases partisan politics). Despite the appearance of cross-party consensus, partisanship over education policy plays and still continues to play a profound role. This strong contrast between the political systems helps explain why Sweden could reach consensus about the Free Schools, as opposed to England, where strong disagreements about them continue to persist. However, it does not adequately

explain why the policy of outsourcing schools was pursued in the first place. It is customary in the education literature to argue that right-wing governments are directly responsible for this, but such a stance ignores the role the Left has played in this development. For instance, in Sweden it was the Social Democrats, not a right-wing government, who introduced school choice, which was necessary for the Free Schools to flourish.

The positioning of the Swedish Social Democrats and the British Labour on the Left-Right dimension aided further in the explanation of the Free School variance. As shown by the Comparative Manifesto Project, in the period between 1997 and 2006, during which both the Social Democrats and Labour were in power in their respective countries, the Social Democrats were to the Left of Labour, but after 2006 and up to the present, they were to the Right of Labour. Their location further Right helps to explain why the Swedish Social Democrats were in a position to endorse the Free Schools program, originally designed by a right-wing government. The Swedish Social Democrats were pushed by increasingly powerful right-wing parties to reform the welfare state/public sector. Since they dominated government and felt strong “ownership” toward “their” welfare state, the perceived problems of its inflexibility inevitably became a party issue, to which they were compelled to respond. Hence, they were put in a situation that forced them to make a strategic move to the Right. This brought the Social Democrats closer to the smaller right-wing parties, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Centre Party, but not the Conservatives. Except for the latter, each of these parties is more centrist and during most of the 1990s up to the present, they were indistinguishable from the Social Democrats on the CMP’s Left-Right dimension. With policy preferences closer to the Right, the Social Democrats were therefore more likely to endorse rather than object to the Free Schools. However, conflicts over Free Schools were certainly not absent, and the Social Democrats indeed tried to resolve some of the negative outcomes of the Free Schools. Importantly, they chose not to bring the program to an end, accepting it as a universal school model.

From 1992 to 1997 in England, Labour, for the first time in its history moved sharply to the revealing of a predominance of right-wing political positions over left-wing ones. In strong contrast to its Swedish counterpart, this did not lead the party to accept the previous Conservative governments’ grant-maintained schools and apply it as a system-wide model. Instead, the City Academy was created, which indeed bore a “neoliberal” imprint, notably by ensuring autonomy and involving private business, but this school type was only meant to improve poor educational attainment in a restricted number of deprived areas. By focusing on disadvantaged neighborhoods, the Labour party was pursuing traditional left-wing politics. After the Labour victory in 1997, the party retreated to its left-wing position, and the

Academy program was pursued even more vigorously. According to Bara and Budge (2001), Labour's move to the Right is much exaggerated in the debate about British politics. This strongly appears to be the case in the education policy literature.

In regards to the Coalition's Academies and Free School act of 2010, education scholars have frequently suggested that a cross-party consensus has emerged, since the new Academies resemble those of New Labour's. As argued in this article, while the Coalition government appears to be using a Labour-invented program, the dramatic expansion of the Academies, but not the Free Schools, constitutes a fundamental change in the program. In stark contrast to Labour's intention, the Coalition turned the Academies and Free Schools into a universal model. Whereas the New Labour Academies typically involved closing down an existing poorly performing school and opening a new one in a new building, there is no rationale for doing so by the Coalition as it encourages schools with outstanding results, not failing schools, to apply for Academy status. In this sense, this policy is undeniably Conservative.

The Labour party, in opposition since 2010, regardless of being somewhat equivocal about what a future Labour government would do to the Academies and Free Schools program, has indeed expressed a strong criticism of them. However, the question is whether Labour would either accept these schools and mitigate some of the negative social effects they may cause, or take more radical steps to close down the Free School program entirely and return the Academies to the local authorities. This depends on where Labour is to be found on the CMP's Left-Right dimension when it returns to government. The Labour party has fluctuated on that dimension more than any other British party in the post-war period; but possibly it will, as in its recent past, move to the Right in the run-up to a national election and, if winning it, subsequently return to its leftist positions. Only time will tell. However, as evinced in the Swedish case, the Labour party's endorsement of and push toward out-sourcing education is crucial if Free Schools are to expand in England. The Swedish Social Democrats' position further to the Right than the Labour party, forging consensus, is the factor necessary and sufficient to explain why the traditional social democratic Sweden bypassed liberal England in the pursuit of Free Schools.

There is a much needed rethinking of previous analysis of Swedish and English privatization reforms of education. Suffering from insufficient engagement in comparative analysis, it results in a tendency to overemphasize particular causes reserved only to one country. Even though policy studies have provided us important detailed and rich accounts, for example, in highly descriptive maps of complex networks of policy making in education, comparative methods help in building more complete policy theories. Comparison of countries thus allows rival explanations to be ruled out, and hy-

potheses derived from theoretical perspectives to be tested through examining cross-national variances. This article is a small step in this direction. The theory of Free School policy presented here can be further developed only through analysis of additional sets of country cases and possible factors.

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