

Chapter 11

Ever the Committed Egalitarians – or the End of Scandinavian Exceptionalism? Comparing Equality and Welfare State Preferences among Voters and Parties

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Abstract: Claims of Scandinavian exceptionalism have a long history in comparative political economy and welfare state research – not least of all regarding their approach to inequality. But are Scandinavian citizens and parties (still) committed egalitarians? This chapter contributes to this debate by investigating over time trends in Denmark and Sweden, comparing them to developments in Continental and Liberal Europe. In doing so, it explores support for redistribution and the welfare state, examining the extent to which citizens and parties of differing political persuasion have remained supportive of a broader egalitarian project. Through an analysis of public opinion and party manifesto data alongside one another, this approach allows us to investigate the strength and durability of Scandinavian egalitarian exceptionalism. We show that that egalitarianism in Scandinavia is neither particularly pronounced nor consensual – in stark contrast to the still viable political consensus around the welfare state, which finds strong support on the left and right.

The egalitarian culture and politics universal welfare states of Scandinavia stands out as a recurring theme in both politics and political science research (see, for example, Castles, 1994; Kuhnle, 2000; Horn and van Kersbergen, 2022). Discussions about a Nordic Sonderweg can be traced back as far as the 1950s (Rustow, 1955). The defining features of this alleged exceptionalism are a strong universal welfare state and very pronounced egalitarianism (e.g., Pedersen and Kuhnle, 2017). Underlying these key features are several broadly agreed upon historical drivers and scope conditions (Korpi, 1983; Rasmussen and Pontusson, 2018; Ferragina and Filetti, 2022): cross-class (red-green) political coalitions; the extensive political and societal power resources of the labour movement; and the Ghent system of semi-private voluntary unemployment insurance that helped to stabilize the bargaining power of trade unions vis-à-vis employers.

What seems more questionable is whether ascriptions of an egalitarian culture are (still) grounded in empirical differences on the level of voters and party elites. While welfare state dimensions have been frequently assessed ever since the *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* and the replication attempts it inspired (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990; Horn and Shore, 2021), the idea of a “passion for equality” among voters and parties in universalist systems has been more of an extrapolation than a demonstrated empirical fact.

Research in this vein has instead focussed on tweaking and extending the “welfare types” categorisations within the confines of “normal science” (van Kersbergen and Vis, 2015) – while the evidence in favour of Scandinavian exceptionalism has been decidedly mixed. Despite a long line of research investigating the impact of welfare state regime types on public opinion (Svallfors, 1997; Bean and Papadakis, 1998; see, for example, Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003), for example, existing studies have typically avoided challenging the “welfare types” categorisation.

Instead, much of this work has focussed on attitudes toward redistribution, either exclusively or as part of a broader measure of welfare state support (Linos and West, 2003; see, for example, Jæger, 2009; Jakobsen, 2011); yet the claim that social democratic welfare states generate higher support for redistribution has at best received mixed support (see Neimanns, 2021 for a discussion). A related strand of the literature, centred on Korpi and Palme’s (1998) paradox of redistribution, has generated related disagreements on the effect of universal, encompassing welfare states on redistributive preferences (Jacques and Noël, 2018; see, for example, Gugushvili and Laenen, 2020).

Similar tensions arise from research on the potential link between egalitarianism and support for the welfare state: even setting aside debates as to whether egalitarianism may shape attitudes toward the welfare state (Brenzau, 2010; c.f. Achterberg, Houtman and Derks, 2011), these dynamics appear to be disconnected from welfare state regime types – playing out similarly across various worlds of welfare (see Calzada *et al.*, 2014).

Indeed, there is some question as to whether welfare state regimes even matter for welfare state support more broadly, at least when it comes to programmes (such as healthcare and pensions) aimed at more “deserving” recipients (e.g., Wendt, Mischke and Pfeifer, 2011).

Despite all of this, the notion that citizens and elites alike are more egalitarian and pro-welfare in Scandinavia is often uncritically adopted – and to the extent that it is tested, only assessed at either the individual- or (much more rarely) the party-level. One reason for this may be that influential approaches such as the paradox of redistribution frame equality of the highest standards as an outcome – and a condition – underlying universal welfare policies that avoid fragmenting solidarity via means testing and targeting of the needy. Yet it remains unclear whether any such Scandinavian exceptionalism should be manifested in egalitarianism, pro-welfare state positions, or both.

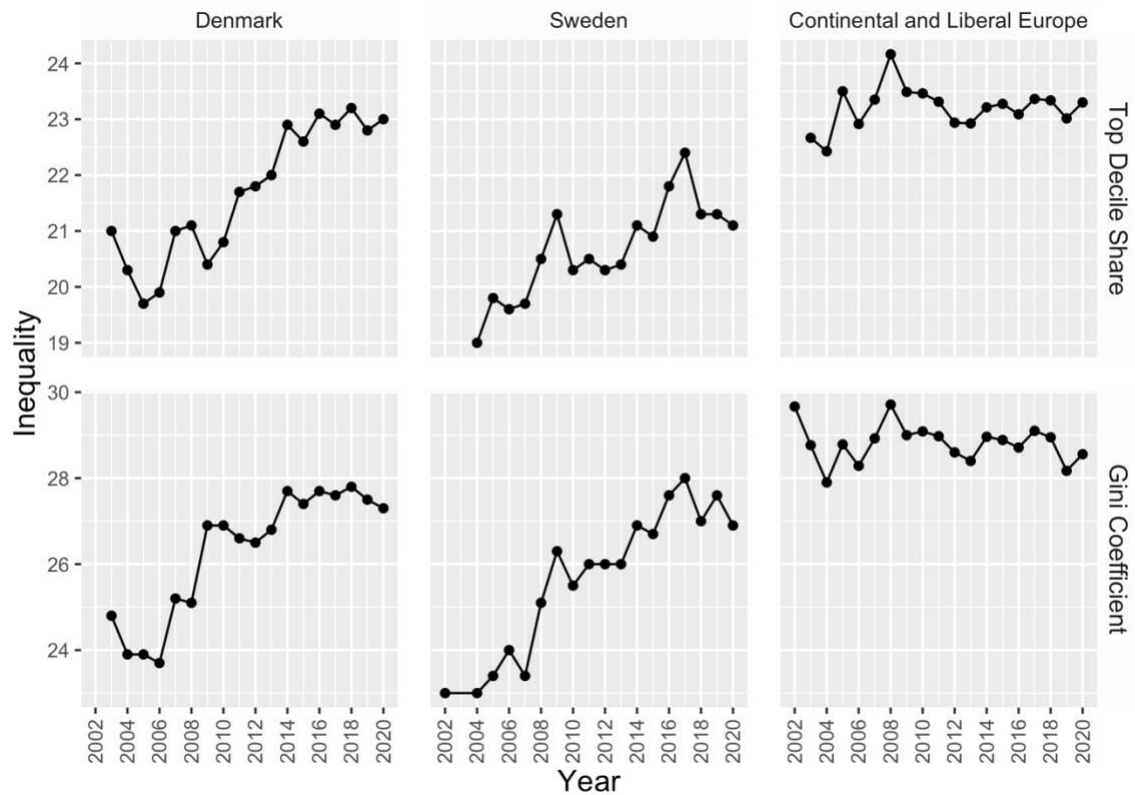
In what follows, we therefore set out to examine whether and to what extent the “Scandinavia versus the rest” distinction is reflected in reality. To do so, we use data from Eurostat (2022), the European Social Survey (ESS, 2022), and the Manifesto Research on Political Representation Project (MARPOR, also known as or CMP; Volkens *et al.*, 2021) to examine trends in inequality, public opinion, and party positioning, comparing developments in Denmark and Sweden alongside those in Continental and Liberal Europe. Results of our analysis indicate that egalitarianism in Scandinavia is neither particularly pronounced nor consensual – in stark contrast to the still viable political consensus around the welfare state, which finds strong support on the left and right.

Background

The Danish and Swedish welfare states, alongside those of Northern Europe more broadly, have been grouped together for their commitment to gender and income equality, their focus on social services, and their tendency to decentralise benefit administration (for an overview, see Greve, 2022). But researchers also clearly acknowledge that these welfare states have not simply remained static over the decades, leaving us with the question: are claims of a unified Scandinavian model (still) justifiable?

The first step in sketching an answer to this question is to examine whether and to what extent the baseline levels of income inequality in Denmark and Sweden differ, relative to both one another and other major European countries. This is a doubly useful exercise: on the one hand, shifting inequality levels may foreshadow changing attitudes or party stances; while on the other, major divergences in public opinion or party positioning might simply reflect changes in the underlying levels of inequality in these countries.

Figure 1: Trends in Income Inequality, Top Decile Share and Gini Coefficient



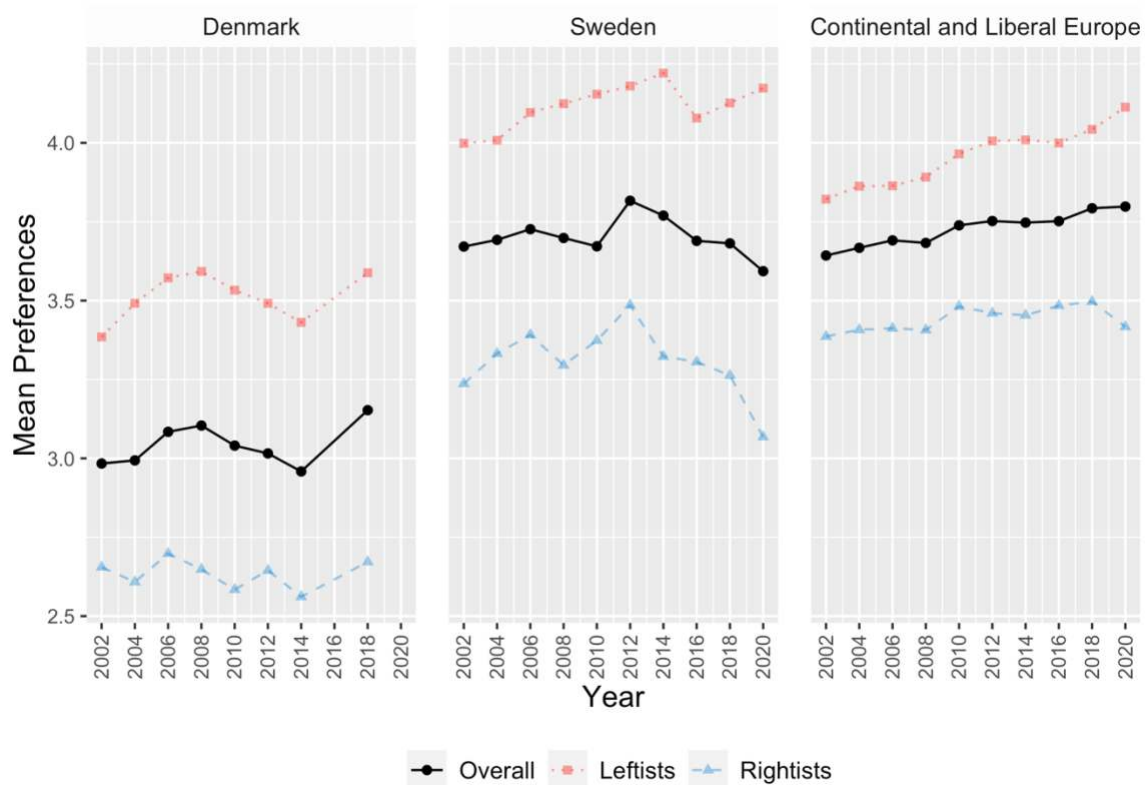
Here and below, we illustrate national-level trends in Denmark and Sweden alongside mean overall trends across a sample of Continental and Liberal welfare states included in both the ESS and MARPOR data: namely, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK.¹ This approach allows us to contextualise Danish and Swedish developments while (1) maintaining a common set of cases in both parts of the analysis and (2) foregrounding trends in the core Continental and Liberal welfare states that are commonly studied in comparative welfare state research.²

We begin by plotting over-time shifts in income inequality in Denmark, Sweden, and our broader set of Continental and Liberal countries. Figure 1 illustrates these trends using inequality data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions dataset (Eurostat, 2022), focussing on the period available for the European Social Survey data: 2002 to 2020. The top panels track changes in the top decile share of national equivalised income, while the bottom panels do the same using the Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income.

¹ Note that we include Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands within the Continental grouping to reflect current common practices, despite the fact that they were originally classified as Social Democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

² All figures in this chapter are drawn using ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016).

Figure 2: Trends in Attitudes toward Income Inequality, among Leftists, Rightists, and Overall



Results suggest similar trends in income inequality across Denmark and Sweden. Regardless of which inequality measure we focus on, inequality began a broad upward trajectory in our two Scandinavian countries from around 2007 – tapering off about a decade later but never returning to its earlier levels. These patterns contrast with the broader trends in our Continental and Liberal countries, which tended to have higher, though more stable, levels of income inequality over the entire period.

Trends in Public Opinion

But to what extent has this rise in Scandinavian income inequality been reflected in public opinion? In the first step of our analysis, we focus on attitudes toward redistribution using responses to the statement “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels”, with potential responses ranging from “disagree strongly” (coded here as 1) to “agree strongly” (coded here as 5).

Figure 2 tracks changes in these attitudes from 2002 to 2020 using data from the ESS (2022). We graph over-time trends in mean responses³ to this statement for the general

³ Here and below, public opinion analyses incorporate survey design weights.

population (marked with circles and a solid line) as well as among respondents on the political left (marked with squares and a dashed line) and right (marked with triangles and a dotted line).⁴

Turning first to consider overall trends, we note that – contrary to the inequality patterns noted in Figure 1 – Danish public opinion is the clear outlier, as Swedish attitudes more closely reflect attitudes in Continental and Liberal Europe.⁵ This “Denmark versus the rest” distinction is also visible if we examine variation in public opinion, with larger standard deviations in Denmark – but as the dashed and dotted lines reveal, this is not the product of a larger gap between the left and right (see Table 1 below as well). Indeed, attitudinal trends among leftists and rightists are relatively similar across the three panels, with one exception: the gap between the left and right has stayed relatively consistent in Denmark, but has increased over the last few years in Continental and Liberal Europe and (especially) Sweden.

Findings from Figure 2 thus suggest that trends in attitudes toward reducing inequality look very different from the trends in inequality noted in Figure 1. Whereas Denmark and Sweden displayed strong similarities in their income inequality levels and changes (whether measured by the top decile share or the Gini coefficient), Denmark is the clear outlier when it comes to redistributive preferences. Importantly, this suggests that differences in public opinion on reducing income inequality do not simply reflect different levels of income inequality.

But perhaps Scandinavian exceptionalism is less about egalitarianism and more about attitudes toward the welfare state. To assess this possibility, Table 1 provides a broad overview of public opinion on:












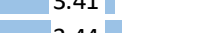



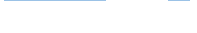
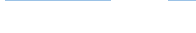

- (1) *Equality*: indicating support for the government reducing inequality, measured using the survey item mentioned above;
- (2) *Welfare*: indicating support for the welfare state more broadly, measured using a three-item index asking about government responsibility for the elderly, the unemployed, and childcare.⁶

⁴ Political ideology is calculated using the respondent’s self-placement on an eleven point left-right scale (ranging from 0 to 10). Those who placed themselves between 0 and 4 are coded as leftists, while those who placed themselves between 6 and 10 are coded as rightists.

⁵ Note that the same pattern emerges if we disaggregate Continental and Liberal Europe and examine trends in these two sets of countries separately.

⁶ The wording on these rotating module items asks, respectively, about the “responsibility of governments” to “ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old”, “ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed”, and “ensure sufficient child care services for working parents”. Possible responses range from 0 (“Should not be governments’ responsibility at all”) to 10 (“Should be entirely governments’ responsibility”). We then average the three items and re-scale the range to reflect the five-point scale of the equality measure.

Table 1: Public Opinion on Equality and the Welfare State, among Leftists, Rightists, and Overall

Country	Measure	Mean - Overall	SD	Mean - Left	Mean - Right	Gap
Denmark	Equality	 3.04	1.14	 3.51	 2.63	0.88
	Welfare	 3.48		 3.69	 3.33	0.37
Sweden	Equality	 3.70	0.94	 4.12	 3.31	0.81
	Welfare	 3.54		 3.70	 3.41	0.29
Continental &	Equality	 3.72	1.04	 3.95	 3.44	0.51
Liberal Europe	Welfare	 3.20		 3.33	 3.07	0.26

Note: Bars proportional to maximum value on the ESS scale (= 5).

The *Equality* and *Welfare* attitudinal measures are recoded to share a range from zero to five, with higher values indicating greater support, and the table lists the weighted mean values for the overall samples alongside those for left- and right-wing respondents. The table also presents data on overall variation (as measured by the standard deviation) and the gap between the mean preferences of leftist and rightist respondents.

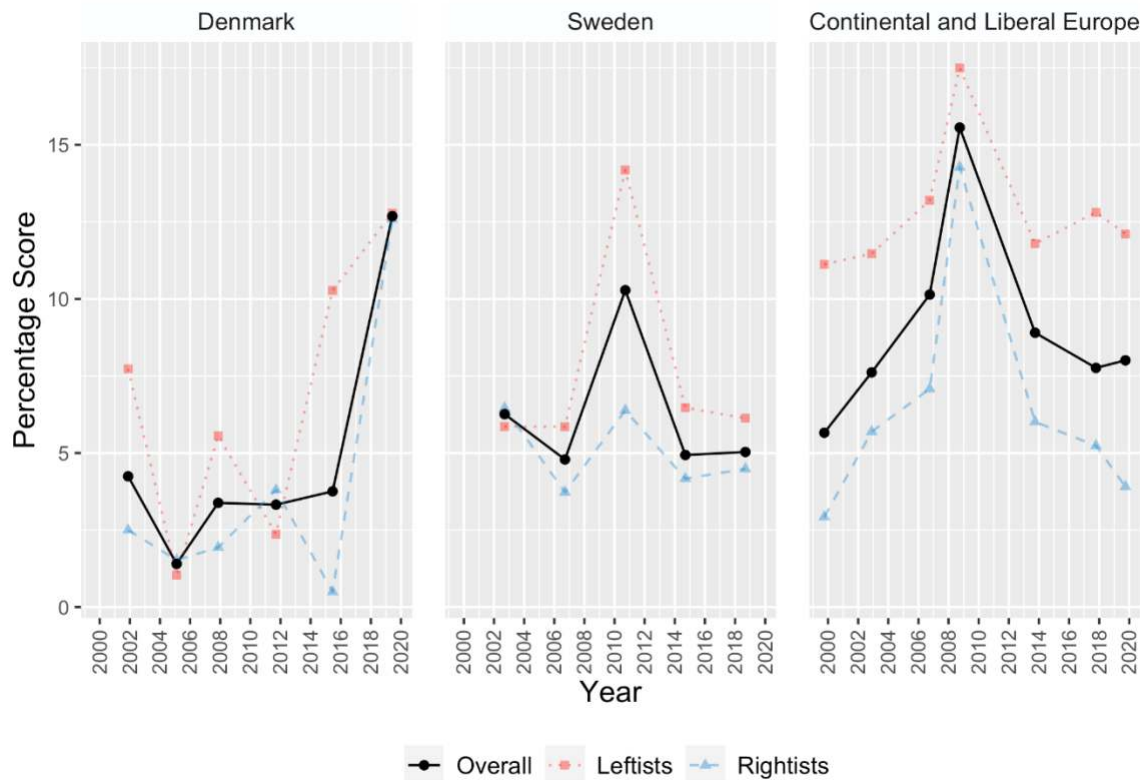
Results suggest two major takeaways. First, support for *Welfare* is notably higher than support for *Equality* in Denmark, but the opposite is true elsewhere: overall support for *Welfare* in Denmark is higher than it is for *Equality* (+0.44), whereas it is lower in Sweden (-0.16) and our Continental and Liberal countries (-0.52). Second, *Welfare* support in Denmark and Sweden is consistently higher than what we see elsewhere, and even rightists in Denmark and Sweden demonstrate support levels that are on par with or even higher than those of leftists in the other countries.

Clearly, welfare state support demonstrates a distinct Scandinavian pattern relative to support for equality. This distinction is also reflected in broader differences between the two measures across the board, with larger left-right gaps and greater variation for *Equality* compared to *Welfare* (as per their respective standard deviations). Yet the data nevertheless point to much stronger evidence of Scandinavian exceptionalism in welfare state stances rather than redistributive preferences – despite the fact that income equality itself has followed similar trajectories across our two Scandinavian cases.

Trends in Party Positioning

Mirroring our analysis at the individual level, we now turn to assess the extent to which parties in Denmark and Sweden are particularly supportive of equality. In doing so, we draw on the widely used Comparative Manifesto Project, now called MARPOR (Volkens *et al.*, 2021), and its item 503, *equality positive*. While this item has its limitations – it was previously labelled *social justice* and includes an increasing share of non-economic

Figure 3: Trends in Parties' Emphasis on Equality, among Leftists, Rightists, and Overall



aspects of equality (Horn et al., 2022) – it is the only measure at the party level that can be matched with attitudes towards inequality. In carrying out the analysis, we present percentage scores that reflect the relative emphasis parties put on equality (as a percentage of the manifesto).

We begin the analysis with Figure 3, which shows trends over time for the *equality positive* measure. Results suggest that Denmark and Sweden are not more egalitarian on the party level than the rest of our sample. Similarly, there is no evidence of an egalitarian consensus: if anything, the mean level of egalitarianism in our two Scandinavian countries is lower than elsewhere. Looking at the egalitarian trajectory over time shows the key role of crises effects in Sweden and our Liberal and Conservative countries, while what stands out in the Danish trajectory is a spike for the left in 2015 and the right in 2019. While the 2019 scores for Denmark are driven by the Social Democrats (10.28%) and the (centre-right) Liberals (Venstre, 12.59%), less successful populist and far right parties also showed pronounced values (Danish Peoples Party, 7.45%, New Right/Nye Borgerlige, 7.04%).

Turning to the variation of parties' equality positions, we draw on the standard deviation across parties and a more specific gap measure to capture the difference between left and right parties (see Table 2 for more details). When we examine the overall values across the 20-year period, neither the standard deviations nor the left-

Table 2: Party Positions on Equality and the Welfare State, on the Left, Right, and Overall

Country	Measure	Mean - Overall	SD	Mean - Left	Mean - Right	Gap
Denmark	Equality	4.09	4.44	6.47	2.81	3.66
	Welfare	14.67	7.46	14.41	14.81	-0.40
Sweden	Equality	6.06	2.68	7.70	5.04	2.66
	Welfare	14.03	7.10	19.11	10.86	8.25
Continental &	Equality	9.58	4.85	13.15	6.97	6.18
Liberal Europe	Welfare	6.90	2.73	7.24	6.66	0.58

Note: Bars proportional to maximum value (= 26; Welfare, Social Democrats, Denmark, 2005).

right gap indicates that there is a stronger egalitarian consensus in Denmark and Sweden than in the rest of our sample.

This, we believe, begs the question if egalitarianism in general – and the *equality positive* item from the Manifesto Project more specifically – is the right yardstick: theoretically, it could be argued that the universal welfare state in Scandinavia is perceived to be the purveyor and guarantor of extensive egalitarianism (Horn and van Kersbergen, 2022).

We thus also assess and compare positive references to *welfare state expansion*, with Table 2 offering an overview of mean levels, standard deviations, and left-right differences. Results indicate that notwithstanding the already extensive welfare states found in Scandinavia, average support is twice as pronounced as in Continental and Liberal Europe. On average, Scandinavian parties devoted over 14% of their manifestos to (expanding) the welfare state. In Denmark, this holds true for left and right parties, reflecting a very pronounced welfare state consensus. In Sweden, the support pattern is more polarized, as documented by a stronger left-right gradient; yet, even here the right parties show above average support for the welfare state (with a mean of approximately 11%). What is more, in both of our Scandinavian countries, the two centre right (Venstre in Denmark and the Moderates in Sweden) and the populist right parties (Danish People’s Party and Sweden Democrats) have consistently expressed growing support for the welfare state since the late 2000s.

Echoing what we reported with regard to welfare state attitudes, this means that even right-wing parties in Denmark and Sweden are much more supportive of the welfare state than left-wing parties in the Continental and Liberal countries we surveyed – suggesting that Scandinavian exceptionalism has its roots in widely held support for the welfare state. The same cannot be said for an interpretation of Scandinavian exceptionalism based on an assumed culture of equality: we find no evidence to suggest that either voters or party elites in Denmark and Sweden are more egalitarian than elsewhere.

Conclusion

Claims of Scandinavian exceptionalism have a long history in comparative political economy and welfare state research, not least of all regarding their approach to inequality. The results of our analysis, however, do not suggest that Scandinavian citizens and parties are particularly committed egalitarians. Comparing over time trends in Denmark and Sweden to developments in Continental and Liberal Europe, we found that notwithstanding evidence of a Scandinavian trend in income inequality, there was little evidence of a Scandinavian trend in redistributive preferences or party positions on equality.

Yet our analyses also point toward an established pro-welfare state consensus in Denmark and Sweden that distinguishes them from Continental and Liberal Europe: whether on the left or the right, or among the general public or party elites, support for the welfare state is much stronger in our Scandinavian countries than in the rest of our sample. For us, this suggests that the universal welfare state and the sustained support for it – rather than ingrained egalitarianism – is the driver of Scandinavia's (policy) exceptionalism.

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