

Adman, Per

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**Who cares about the democratic mandate
of education?
A text analysis of the Swedish
secondary education reform of 2009**

Per Adman

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Postal address: P.O. Box 513, 751 20 Uppsala

Visiting address: Kyrkogårdsgatan 6, Uppsala

Phone: +46 18 471 70 70

Fax: +46 18 471 70 71

ifau@ifau.uu.se

www.ifau.se

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Who cares about the democratic mandate of education? A text analysis of the Swedish secondary education reform of 2009¹

by

Per Adman²

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Abstract

For several decades after WWII, Swedish education reforms were justified extensively based on democratic and equality arguments. The Social Democrats, the party in governing power during this era, considered a uniform education system crucial to their endeavors towards a greater democracy and greater equality. According to current research, arguments of this kind are being used increasingly rarely to justify general reforms to public primary and secondary education. It is however unknown whether this is also true for the leftist/green opposition parties and not only the current center-right governing parties. The subject of this study is parliamentary debate and the text of the government bill concerning the latest key upper-secondary school reform of 2009, which entailed greater differentiation between students. Consequently, strong criticism from the leftist opposition from the democratic and equality perspectives was to be expected. On the contrary, this study shows that the opposition – like the center-right government – used democratic and equality arguments only to a minor extent. The results are consistent with fears, expressed with regard to Sweden and globally, that the democratic mandate is being ignored in the design of education systems for the future.

Keywords: Education reforms; Sweden, upper-secondary education; democratic arguments; equality arguments
JEL-codes: I280, H750

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² Statsvetenskapliga institutionen Uppsala universitet, 751 20 Uppsala. per.adman@statsvet.uu.se

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1 Introduction

The concepts of power and equality are utterly fundamental to democracy. In the footsteps of sociologist T.H. Marshall, we can declare that good democracy is predicated upon true citizenship, where all citizens enjoy adequate and equal civil, political, and social rights and resources, not only on paper but in reality (Marshall 1950; see also e.g. Borevi 2002, ch. 1). Individual citizens should furthermore have equal real resources and opportunities to pursue and defend their political rights – that is, some form of genuine political equality should prevail (Nie et al 1996, chs 1–2).

Democracy has however not been fully realized in these senses. Empirical research is still finding real and tangible disparities in Sweden with respect to political resources and influence: disparities that can be related to factors including class, immigration status, and gender (see e.g. Petersson et al 1998; Myrberg 2007; Bergqvist et al 2008). From a comparative perspective, Swedish democracy is highly functioning but democratic ideals have nonetheless not been realized.

Education and the nature of the educational system is one factor that has been studied in this context. This is said to have a strong differentiating function, that is, strong impact on students' future socioeconomic and political resources (for empirical evidence, see e.g. Verba and Nie 1972; Nie et al 1996; Petersson et al 1998; see also however Kam and Palmer 2008, whose study disagrees). The earlier students are differentiated, the greater become the disparities later in life (Hertzberg 2008).

One critical distinction between educational systems has to do with the orientation towards specific skills or general skills. The former are intended to equip students in vocational study programs with special skills directly applicable to the occupation the program is intended to train them for, while the latter are intended to give students more broadly applicable skills (with specialized training left up to their future employers). Empirical research suggests a balancing of interests: specific-skills systems are associated with lower unemployment, since they seem to facilitate the transition to working life. At the same time, the options of vocational program students are more limited with respect to future higher education and socioeconomic advancement (see e.g. Shavit and Müller 2000). As these students are often working class, the educational system may thus contribute to perpetuating socioeconomic and political inequalities (see e.g. Broady and Börjesson 2005). Vocational programs both recruit from and

socialize for working class positions (Nylund and Rosvall 2011).³ It is thought that more academic and abstract skills provide greater capacity to scrutinize prevailing power relationships and social conditions and to consider more abstract things from various perspectives and, generally, to confer on those who have these skills greater power to influence society and their own lives. While practical, vocational skills are also worthwhile, in that they provide the ability to perform certain more specific tasks, they do not offer the individual the same opportunities with respect to power and influence in society (see e.g. Bernstein 2000; Nylund and Rosvall 2011, p. 84). It has also been empirically determined that more comprehensive education in subjects such as languages and civics particularly reinforces political resources (for an overview, see Swedish National Agency for Education 2011).⁴

Democratic aspects have traditionally played a central role in Swedish education policy. The importance of fostering critically thinking, knowledgeable, and democratic citizens has been consistently argued when the education mandate has been formulated in government bills and public inquiries (see e.g. Gerrevall 2003). Ambitions to promote greater equality have also prominently figured. The Social Democratic education reforms of the postwar era were characterized by endeavors to bring about socioeconomic equalization and equip citizens with the most equal opportunities possible later in life (see e.g. Almgren 2006; Meghir and Palme 2005; Rothstein 1996). Student differentiation has gradually occurred at all later stages.

From an international perspective, it is said that developments have, at least in recent decades, been of another kind. Democratic and equality arguments are seemingly being ascribed diminishing importance when future education systems are designed and reforms defended, according to several scholars (see e.g. Lundahl et al 2010; Nussbaum 2010; Lister et al 2007). This change in trend seems also to have occurred in Sweden. According to current research, neither equal opportunities nor civic education are emphasized these days to any appreciable extent (Lundahl et al 2010; Nylund 2010; see also Unemar Öst 2010). With respect to upper-secondary education, this is particularly apparent in the latest comprehensive reform implemented in 2009 by the “Alliance for Sweden”, the center-right coalition government (“Higher Standards and Quality in the

³ About half the students are in vocational programs (Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2008:27).

⁴ Significant variations may be found within the confines of a clear division between vocational and academic programs, however, and not least so at the upper-secondary level. This especially concerns the scope and orientation of academic subjects in vocational programs, which may vary considerably.

New Upper-Secondary School”, Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199). Through this reform, the Alliance aimed to achieve greater differences between academic and vocational upper-secondary programs, that is, to implement a substantial change towards greater concentration on specific skills. Among else, the proportion of academic subjects in vocational programs was cut sharply in favor of more practical, vocational skills. Democratic and equality aspects were relegated to an obscure role in arguments in favor of the reform (Lundahl et al 2010).

The arguments of the leftist opposition parties concerning the reform have yet to be studied. Strong criticism, particularly from an equality position, is probably to be expected. The Social Democratic Party, supported by the Left Party, implemented a controversial reform in 1991 that might well be called the zenith of their endeavors towards equality in the education system in terms of small differences between vocational and academic programs: all programs were to last three years and would include basic eligibility for university admission. The center-right reform of 2009 was diametrically opposed to the intentions of the earlier reform. In other words, it seems highly likely that a Swedish leftist opposition would criticize the reform based on democratic and equality arguments, considering how the left has traditionally argued concerning issues of this kind (in line with a most likely case logic).

This working paper studies the arguments of the leftist opposition concerning the reform. To what extent does the opposition discuss the function of education with reference to democratic and equality aspects? If they do, what kind of democratic and equality arguments do they use? What similarities and differences emerge in the arguments of the government and the opposition? The purpose here, in other words, is to study the occurrence and type of democratic and equality arguments expressed by the opposition parties and governing parties in the government bill and the associated parliamentary debate. The method is a detailed qualitative textual analysis, sometimes referred to in Sweden as qualitative content analysis (see e.g. Bergström and Boréus 2005; ch 4).

I develop an analytical apparatus that encompasses three different types of democratic/equality ideals. The question is whether the arguments stress the value of *responsible citizens*, *autonomous citizens*, or *equal citizens*. Also taken into consideration is whether the arguments concern the more traditional political arena –

with its representative institutions and more overarching social power aspects (“large-scale democracy”) – or the more intimate and mundane lives of citizens (“small-scale democracy”). It is not obvious that arguments of the latter type should be considered democratic (see e.g. Barnes and Walker 1996). Including them here makes it easier to detect all possible democratic arguments in the parliamentary debate and the bill. In addition, a more detailed categorization can be done than in earlier research of the democratic and equality arguments that are actually employed. The approach may also say something about how the parties would like to see citizens (and, indirectly, democracy) change in general – towards becoming more responsible, more autonomous, and/or more equal.

As said, the results are also interesting from an international perspective. Is Sweden still distinguished by the copious use of democratic and equality arguments – at least with respect to the Social Democrats and other left-wing parties – or is the political discourse converging with that of other countries?

2 An overview of Swedish upper-secondary education reforms

As early as 1946, the Education Committee emphasized the importance of fostering democratically capable citizens, responsible and equipped to influence their own life circumstances (Swedish Government Report SOU 1948:27). This idea has been particularly prominent in Sweden and has consistently recurred when the education mandate has been formulated in government bills and government inquiries (see e.g. Gerrevall 2003). Several key education reforms have been justified on the grounds that they were expected to strengthen democracy and citizens’ power over their lives. Greater political and social equality has always been a central ambition of Social Democratic education policy (see e.g. Rothstein 1996).

The upper-secondary education reform of 1968 provides a clear example of reduced student differentiation. Under this reform, all education that followed immediately after primary (compulsory) school was integrated within the upper-secondary schools. The three more separate orientations – upper-secondary, continuation school, and vocational school – that had existed prior to this were merged into a single upper-secondary system (see e.g. Lindensjö and Lundgren 2010). The reform was the first in which academic and vocational programs were given a more uniform design (Lundahl et al 2010, p. 48).

The zenith in this respect, and with respect to Social Democratic strivings towards equality in upper-secondary education in general, is said to be the 1991 reform (Swedish Government Bill 1990/91:85; cf Persson and Oskarsson 2009). It brought even more uniform upper-secondary programs when upper-secondary education was extended to three years and conferred general eligibility for university admission on all graduates. A certain number of academic subjects became required, which involved a substantial increase for vocational programs. The reform was unique from the international perspective as well; similar ambitions to merge vocational and academic upper-secondary education programs are rare (Lindberg 2003; Ekström 2003; Lindensjö and Lundgren 2010).

The upper-secondary dropout rate increased in the latter 1990s, as did the number of students who left school with incomplete grades, especially in vocational programs. Criticism of the 1991 reform gathered strength; the Social Democrats themselves began to suggest changes and passed a reform intended to be implemented in 2007 (“Gy 07”), which involved a “reinforcement” of vocational programs (Government Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 51). The recommendations included increasing the number of hours of vocational training in the workplace and reinstating apprenticeships.

The center-right coalition won the general election in 2006 and the Social Democratic reform was never implemented. The center-right parties had promised substantive change to the education system and thus designed a number of reforms. The reform analyzed here is of crucial importance to upper-secondary education. The main problem, according to the government, was the high dropout rate for vocational programs and that far too many students failed to find jobs after they graduated (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199). The government’s solution was to make vocational programs less academic, improve their content, and adjust them more closely to the needs of the labor market. Several of the recommendations were also found in the Social Democratic “Gy 07” reform, such as increased workplace training and the introduction of apprenticeships. But the center-right coalition went one step further, not least through a substantial increase in the number of hours devoted to vocational subjects and the corresponding reduction of academic subjects such as Swedish and civics. The center-right parties also wanted to eliminate the common core introduction

to mathematics and replace it with courses adapted to vocational programs (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199; in particular pp 78-83).

The reform established greater differences between academic and vocational programs (see e.g. Nylund 2010). It was strongly emphasized that the former are university-preparatory while the latter were intended to lead to employment (or entrepreneurship) after graduation. It would still be possible to go to university after graduating from a vocational program, but the programs were now less well-adapted to preparing students for higher education and additional courses were usually required (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199; in particular pp. 37–39 and 50–51).

As mentioned, civic education and equality arguments have been common features of Swedish education policy. Arguments also appeared in the last decade that emphasize individual freedom of choice and opportunities for people to influence their everyday lives; some scholars argue that these should also be seen as a kind of democratic argument (see in particular Lundahl et al 2010; cf “autonomy arguments related to small-scale democracy” below). Meanwhile, democratic and equality arguments in general seem to be waning. This has been found by Sara Carlbaum in her dissertation, in which she studies public and political texts on the desirable consequences of education written in the last four decades (2012). In a dissertation on the education policy of the 1990s Maria Olson (2008) observes that a “historic national citizenship discourse” – with focus on democratic values – had retreated. And Josefina Erikson finds (2013) that there was surprisingly little use of democratic and equality arguments to justify the comprehensive reform of 1991, especially considering that it is often referred to specifically as an equality reform.

The cited studies of the 2009 reform are relatively general and based on discourse analyses of long periods of time. The reform has usually been studied together with several other reforms and government inquiries etc. (I refer here in particular to Båth 2006; Olson 2008; Carlbaum 2012). Two exceptions should be mentioned however, which concern the government inquiry that preceded – and was an important basis of – the 2009 reform (“The Road to the Future”; Swedish Government Report SOU 2008:27). Both studies find that the civic mandate of upper-secondary education is given even less scope than before (Arneback and Bergh 2010; Nylund 2010, p. 48). Finally, Lundahl et al (2010) deliver a relatively thorough analysis of the government

bill and find hardly any democratic arguments at all. However, they do not provide any more detailed analysis of the democratic/equality arguments that occur. The parliamentary debate and the opposition arguments are not analyzed. Earlier research thus provides no closer information about what kind of arguments the opposition employ – in the discussions of this reform – or which democratic and/or equality ideals the arguments in such case concern.

3 Analytical apparatus

The analytical apparatus of this working paper is based on three central and classic democratic ideals, which are presented here in greater detail.

Responsible citizens: A well-functioning democracy and a good society are dependent upon democratically responsible citizens. Since education in particular is thought to have the potential to develop and refine the individual in such a direction, education should primarily be designed for the purposes of “civic education.” This is the classic argument in favor of general education espoused by several political philosophers, J.S. Mill among them. Contemporary political philosopher Amy Gutmann also belongs to this tradition (Gutmann 1987; see also Sundgren 1996). Academic subjects are often considered especially important, particularly those of a civic-oriented nature.

Autonomous citizens: In the footsteps of T.H. Marshall, arguments are often made for fully realized citizenship in which all citizens enjoy, in practice and not only on paper, adequate civil, political, and social rights and resources (Marshall 1950; see also Petersson et al 1989 and Borevi 2002, ch. 1). A well-functioning democracy requires that every individual member of society has real resources and opportunities to pursue and defend their political rights and interests. Proponents of this ideal often refer to reports and research that have shown that education has strong positive impact on the individual’s political resources. According to this position, education should be designed so that civic resources are reinforced as much as possible (see e.g. Verba 1996); longer education is generally assumed to be better than shorter education and civic-oriented subjects and languages are usually emphasized in particular.

Equal citizens: This ideal may also find its point of departure in Marshall’s ideas about rights. The addition strongly emphasizes the key democratic value of equality. All citizens should have not only adequate political resources but also *equally good*

resources to affect politics and defend their interests. The arguments are often based on research that has shown the strongly differentiating function of education: the earlier and the more clearly students are separated in terms of different orientations and programs, the greater seem to be the unequalizing effects relative to socioeconomic status and political influence. It is considered especially serious if disparities in real opportunities are associated with social group affiliations such as gender, sex, and ethnicity. For this reason, proponents of the ideal usually argue for as little differentiation as possible within the school system. This line of argument was espoused among else by the progressivism movement in the 1970s (with reference to names like John Dewey and Jean Piaget; see e.g. Erikson and Jonsson 1993).

Note that parties to the left *and* to the right of the political spectrum may argue for different educational designs while still basing their arguments on the same general democratic and/or equality position. Parties to the left might prefer minimal differentiation and thus the least possible difference between academic and vocational programs based on arguments about what promotes the creation of responsible, autonomous, and equal citizens. The center-right parties, on the other hand, might argue that only students who have the intellectual and motivational prerequisites should study comprehensive courses in academic and civics-oriented subjects. Others should not be forced to do this, as it may have unwanted consequences in the form of dropouts and unemployment, which in turn may lead to greater inequality and more democratically irresponsible citizens. For the sake of democracy, it is therefore better that the latter are given a more vocationally oriented education, for which they are motivated and which will in the long run facilitate their social and political integration.

The ideals of democracy and equality overlap, since skilled and capable citizens are emphasized in all three positions. The ideals also contain elements that set them apart, where the first ideal emphasizes the individual's responsibility for the collective democracy project, the second focuses on individuals' capacity to defend their own interests, and the third stresses the importance of everyone having equally good abilities. In addition, each position may in turn encompass differences, such as the extent of equality that is emphasized. The analytical apparatus should be regarded as an instrument for organizing, more generally, what type of democratic and equality arguments occur.

Along with the three democratic/equality ideals, yet another analytical dimension is taken into account: whether the reference is to “large-scale democracy” or “small-scale democracy” (cf Goul Andersen and Robteutscher 2007; Petersson et al 1989).⁵ The former refers to what has traditionally been designated the political arena – and which has been associated with political institutions, more overarching decisions and balances of power, as well as general public issues. Small-scale democracy refers to the individual’s more mundane and personal life situation – opportunities and influence in areas such as the person’s own work. All three democratic/equality ideals may thus be more closely defined with reference to the distinction between small-scale and large-scale democracy. It is thus possible that a particular education system might be defended because it is assumed to lead to responsible, autonomous, and/or equal citizens relative to the traditional political arena (large-scale democracy) and/or other more mundane arenas such as an individual’s job/working life (small-scale democracy).

Something should be said about how the various ideals may emerge in the material. Quotations that connect to the ideal of the responsible citizen are, for example, “education should develop the student to become a responsible member of society” (or “to become responsible at work”, to take an example that concerns small-scale democracy). The ideal of autonomous citizens can be recognized in quotations such as “education should strengthen students’ opportunities to defend their democratic rights” (refers to large-scale democracy) or “education should give students the power to shape their own lives” (refers to small-scale democracy). The equality ideal may be discerned in expressions similar to the aforementioned autonomy examples with the addition that “everyone” should have such opportunities that are “equally good” (terms such as rights, power, and influence may also occur), or in expressions where it is said that “reduced political and social inequalities” would be desirable. An example referring to small-scale democracy might be that “education should, as far as possible, give all individuals equally good opportunities to shape their lives as they so wish.”

The statements and documents originating from politicians are not always clear and it can sometimes be difficult to determine to which ideal the statement should be attributed. Such difficulties will be reported and discussed as they arise. A high incidence of such statements may partly be considered a result of the study; that is, the

⁵ These concepts are used in a strict analytical sense. There is no value judgment that one social arena is worth more than the other.

democratic or equality arguments that in fact occur are relatively vague and not easily categorized. I thus believe that it will be interesting in and of itself if the analysis below shows that the discussions of democracy and equality are vague. It may still be possible to say which categories seem to be touched upon and to which one or more categories no connection is made.

The material for the study is the cited government bill and the associated parliamentary debate. Private members' bills from opposition parties were also studied. The material is limited; if time had permitted, it could have been augmented with material taken from mass media debate, for example. On the other hand, the material studied here consists of the most central political documents that have direct impact on policymaking. The view on the value of education, in this material, is immediately relevant to social policy as there is no doubt that how politicians discuss and express themselves in parliament is important. It is possible that democratic and equality arguments are given greater scope in internal discussions and deliberations within the Ministry of Education and Research ("Utbildningsdepartementet") and the National Agency for Education ("Skolverket") and that such aspects are nevertheless included – albeit more tacitly and in the background – when reforms like the one studied here are prepared and implemented. This does not diminish the importance of knowing which arguments are actually put forth in forums as central to democracy as bills and parliamentary debates. Moreover, it seems wise to study *both* the government bill and the parliamentary debate, as the justifications may be more incisive in the parliamentary debates and thus easier to analyze than is the case with the bill; on the other hand, the oral arguments are frequently not carefully considered. The reverse applies to private members' bills and the government bill and thus both types of material should complement each other when the arguments are analyzed.

The focus is thus on the rhetoric and on the arguments. Analyzing motives and more underlying intentions of the reform would have required more exhaustive material, including in-depth interviews, which was not possible within the limits of this working paper.

4 Analysis of opposition arguments

Responsible citizens argument. The idea that education will stimulate students to become responsible citizens is suggested in the private member's bill presented by the Social Democrats, at least in passing. The text of the bill states that "Education should promote students' development into responsible people who actively participate in and improve working life and the society" (private member's bill 2008/09:Ub36, p. 2). The same applies to the Left Party bill, where the party argues in favor of retaining more hours of civics instruction in vocational programs. This is said to be important so that the students will be able in the future to "exercise their democratic rights and duties" (private member's bill 2008/09:Ub34, p. 7). While the word "rights" certainly triggers thoughts about the autonomy or equality ideal, "duties" brings to mind the responsible citizen ideal. The latter quotation is connected to large-scale democracy. Otherwise, there are no arguments of this kind in the opposition parties' bills and contributions to the parliamentary debate.⁶

Autonomous citizens arguments. The opposition uses no obvious autonomy arguments at all in either the parliamentary debate or in the private member's bills (certain borderline cases do occur however vis-à-vis the equality ideal; see the next section).

Equality arguments. On a few occasions, representatives of the Social Democrats argue from an equality standpoint. One example is the initial speech by Agneta Lundberg (Social Democrat), a member of the Education Committee, in which she argues against cutting the number of academic subjects in vocational programs: "This is ... civic knowledge that everyone needs" (speech 51), Lundberg declares without further elaboration. In passing, she also says that the government wants to "create wider gaps between those who have knowledge and those who do not have knowledge." The statement may seem to embody elements of the autonomy ideal; judging by the context however, the notion of equality is probably predominant considering the talk about gaps between the knowledge haves and have-nots. This probably refers to both small-scale and large-scale democracy, as phenomena such as knowledge and civic knowledge may be considered desirable in both arenas.

⁶ The Green Party's bill thus contains no responsible citizen arguments (private member's bill 2008/09:Ub37).

The Green Party's bill mentions, in a brief passage, that inequality prevails in Sweden relative to class, ethnicity, and parental academic background: "Sweden should not be a country where men and women should be told to accept their lot in life. The compensatory mandate of the public school system is extremely important" (private member's bill 2008/09:Ub37, p. 4). It is therefore said to be especially important to have more individualized teaching than would be the result of the reform. The statement is vague relative to the distinction between large-scale and small-scale democracy, and it is possible that the reference is to both arenas.

A few arguments made in the parliamentary debate are however very different from the others – those of Left Party MP Rossana Dinamarca, member of the Education Committee and education policy spokesperson for her party. Dinamarca employs clear equality arguments in several speeches. She accuses the center-right coalition of wanting to return to an older social order in which only some have access to knowledge and thus power (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 83).⁷ Among else, Dinamarca says:

Unlike Björklund and the government, the Left Party believes knowledge is a democratic right and must therefore be available to all. For the Left Party, everyone's right to knowledge is the most important education policy objective. Knowledge is power and good schools are thus part of the endeavor to achieve greater equality and reduce social inequalities. (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 52).

Dinamarca further criticizes the government for wanting to cut instruction in civics and Swedish in vocational programs:

Why is it less important that students in vocational programs will only have half or one third, however it turns out, in Swedish compared with students in university-preparatory programs, when we know that the working class is the group that reads the least and reads the least to their children? ... It is so obvious that this is a school system for the elite. We will be categorizing and excluding." (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 57).

Dinamarca also argues that three years of upper-secondary education with an unchanged number of academic subjects is important "not only because you need to be able to work, but to make it in society in general, to have power over your own life" (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 74). "Everyone should have the right to the fundamental knowledge that is important to be able to use both in working life – and perhaps above all – in societal life ... people should be able to demand their rights in order to have power over their own lives" (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 83). The talk about class inequalities and the phrase "perhaps above all in societal life" suggests large-scale

⁷ It should be added that this perspective also occurs in the Left Party private member's bill, albeit not as explicitly. The bill also contains criticism of the reform using labor market-based arguments of roughly the same kind as the arguments used by the Social Democrats and the Green Party (private member's bill 2008/09:Ub36).

democracy while the arguments about people having power over their own lives points to small-scale democracy. Dinamarca thus emphasizes both arenas.

Other types of arguments. Since democracy and equality arguments constitute such a minor element of the parliamentary debate, the government bill, and the private member's bills, it may be interesting to mention how the debate was otherwise pursued. The opposition criticizes the reform primarily from the perspective of what is most beneficial for the labor market reasons, both in the parliamentary debate and in the party bills. Education should be designed deliberately to correspond to the needs of the labor market. Contrary to the government, the representatives of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party believe that vocational programs that make students eligible for admission to university are necessary: academic elements are valuable because the labor market needs individuals with general skills. The following contribution to the debate by Social Democratic MP Agneta Lundberg is typical (Green Party MP Mats Pertoft argues in about the same way; Report 2009/10:UbU3, speeches 53 and 76):

Basic eligibility is not only for those who intend to apply to university; it is a demand imposed by business and industry in order to obtain knowledgeable workers who have the capacity to further develop in their occupation or adjust to entirely new tasks. (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 51).

In its private member's bill, the Left Party also devotes quite a lot of space to roughly the same kind of labor market-based arguments as the other opposition parties.

5 Analysis of government arguments

Responsible citizens arguments. With respect to the actual government bill there is one quotation in the section on fundamental principles that brings civic education to mind. It is said there that upper-secondary education should "be aimed at ensuring that students acquire knowledge and skills and develop into responsible people in working life and societal life" (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 36). It is reasonable to assume that this refers to both small-scale and large-scale democracy, since the government talks about working life (small-scale democracy) and societal life (large-scale democracy). The argument is given short shrift however and is not further elaborated. This type of argument is otherwise wholly absent from the government bill, other than when history is suggested for inclusion among the required ("upper-secondary common core") subjects. A change of this kind is said to facilitate participation in societal life and public debate by strengthening understanding of the

present era and the world, which is, according to the government, necessary in modern multicultural society (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 82). This is also mentioned in the parliamentary debate by Liberal Party MP Fredrik Malm (then an alternate member of the Education Committee). Terms like “understanding” and “multiculturalism” clearly lean towards the ideal of responsible citizens. “Society” and “the world” reveal that focus is on large-scale democracy. Otherwise, no arguments of this kind are presented by the center-right parties.

Autonomous citizens arguments. The section of the government bill that discusses fundamental principles states that “education is a human right that gives the individual an opportunity to open new doors, see new perspectives, and opens more options to the individual. Education gives people the power and the possibility to shape their own lives” (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 35). The talk about increasing the options open to the individual, and strengthening the individual’s power and possibilities, undeniably brings the autonomy ideal to mind and the focus on “their own lives” shows that the focus is on small-scale democracy.

It is emphasized in a few other places in the government bill that education should facilitate “active participation in societal life” (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, pp. 37, 51, and 79). It is difficult to determine what kind of democratic ideal this involves. The capacity to participate actively in societal life may be emphasized based on all three democratic ideals (see the section on the “Analytical apparatus” above). Judging by how the government and its representatives argue elsewhere in the government bill and the parliamentary debate, the allusions are probably primarily to the autonomy ideal and small-scale democracy.

The government further emphasizes skills in “entrepreneurship,” a general ability to start and run a business alongside the practical skills the occupation demands (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, pp. 37; 55). Entrepreneurship skills, the government argues, are both prized by employers and valuable to the individual: “Entrepreneurial skills ... such as recognizing opportunities, showing initiative, and putting ideas into action are also valuable to the individual and to society in a wider sense” (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 37). The autonomy ideal may be suggested when things such as the individual’s opportunities are mentioned and in such case – again –

within small-scale democracy. Such a conclusion is however based on a very generous interpretation of what can be considered democratic arguments.

Equality arguments. The center-right parties present no clear equality arguments in either the government bill or the parliamentary debate, other than a few rebuttals to Left Party MP Dinamarca's speeches (presented above). According to Center Party MP Sofia Larsen (then chair of the Education Committee) and Moderate Party MP Mats Gerdau (then a member of the Education Committee), the Social Democratic and opposition's education policy would entail more severe differentiation than the proposed reform because a line of demarcation is upheld and deepened between the dropouts – who become unemployed – and those who complete their education, who usually get jobs. For example, Gerdau argues that “The Social Democratic upper-secondary, and that of the Left Party and Green Party for that matter, is an exclusionary school. The dropout rate is stratospheric and leads to unemployment for far too many young people” (Mats Gerdau, Moderate Party, Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 67; see also speeches 56, 64, 73, and 84). Words like “differentiation,” “exclusion,” and “lines of demarcation” between dropouts and others may have to do with the equality ideal, combined with, for example, concern about high local and central government expenditures.⁸

Other types of arguments. There is an interesting passage in the government bill where democratic and equality arguments are considered in relation to other types of arguments. It is said that “a balance must be struck between the share of instruction that should be devoted to subjects that are important from a civic perspective and the share that should be used for the program-specific subjects.” The priorities become clear shortly thereafter in a categorical statement that upper-secondary school must better prepare students for working life (and higher education), that the core subjects must therefore not be too numerous, and that vocational education programs must not have too comprehensive “general content” (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 79). Thus, there is said to be a conflict between democratic values and other values, where the latter are oriented more towards working life and higher education.

⁸ The terms “exclusion/categorization” are obviously used in different ways. The government is referring to dropping out of school and into unemployment, while the opposition is referring to barriers to pursuing higher education.

Generally speaking, both the government bill and center-right contributions to parliamentary debate are dominated by economic and labor market-oriented arguments (Swedish Government Bill 2008/09:199, in particular pp. 36, 38, 41, 51, 55, and 147-148). In short, revised vocational programs – with greater elements of practical, vocational subjects and fewer academic subjects – are thought to be a better fit with the needs of the labor market in general and the skills that are in demand by business and industry, to facilitate new job creation and entrepreneurship, and to entail reductions in central government costs in the form of various types of benefits by lowering the dropout rate and the rate of program switches. The quality of education is determined primarily by whether students get hold of jobs or start businesses in their occupational field. Terms that recur frequently in the government bill are “skills provision,” “entrepreneurship,” and “employable/employability.” The reform is defended in the parliamentary debate using roughly the same arguments (see in particular Report 2009/10:UbU3, speeches 54, 56, 66, 67, 80, and 81, where the reform is most clearly justified).

The occurrence of economic and labor market-based arguments should not be considered surprising. In parallel with the democratic and equality arguments, it has always been emphasized in Swedish debate that education should meet the needs of the labor market and promote entrepreneurship, economic growth, and social welfare (see e.g. Lundahl et al 2010). Even as arguments of the former type have become less common (see the review of earlier research above), the latter have come to dominate increasingly over the last few decades (Båth 2006; Olson 2008; Arneback and Bergh 2010; Nylund 2011, p. 48; Carlbaum 2012; Erikson 2013). These developments in Sweden are otherwise not unique. An economic growth perspective is increasingly characterizing views on education all over the world and terms like entrepreneurship and employability are becoming more common in discussions of the function of education (see e.g. Lundahl et al 2010; Nussbaum 2010).

The study material is, as mentioned, limited and we can certainly ask whether analysis of other material would have yielded different results. We can only speculate here, of course. It would be surprising if at least a few individual debaters had not brought up democratic and equality aspects in the mass media debate; my guess,

however, is that the leading party representatives on these issues have engaged in debate in roughly the same way in the media as in the parliamentary arena.

6 Comparison of government and opposition arguments

The importance of educating *responsible citizens* is rarely emphasized by the government or the opposition. The justifications that nevertheless occur are similar. Both the government and the opposition seem to focus somewhat more often on large-scale democracy than small-scale democracy.

The opposition uses essentially no *autonomy arguments*. This type of argument does not dominate center-right thinking either even though it is their most frequently occurring democratic and equality argument. When it is used, the argument mainly has to do with giving students more options for the future and strengthening their capacity to shape their own lives as they see fit: autonomy within small-scale democracy.

Equality arguments are presented primarily by the Left Party. When party representatives talk about the importance of greater equality and reduced social inequalities, they seem to be referring to both small-scale and large-scale democracy. It may be possible to discern certain elements of this ideal in other parties. Minister of Education Jan Björklund's dismissal of the Left Party's arguments is striking, however, in how little importance is ascribed to equality aspects and how peculiar the ideal is thought to be: "[I] see here that even the prospective coalition partners are starting to look down at the benches when what Rossana Dinamarca is saying here starts to sound like at a speech at a Young Left demonstration on International Workers Day. Ultimately, you cannot take it seriously." (Report 2009/10:UbU3, speech 84).

7 Conclusion

Democratic and equality arguments are being afforded diminishing scope in education policy discussions and reforms all over the world (see e.g. Lundahl et al 2010; Nussbaum 2010; Lister et al 2007). Earlier research has also found that Swedish center-right parties seem to be following this international trend in their modern education policy. In other words, the parties are departing from the traditional Social Democratic stance, since neither equal opportunities nor civic education are emphasized to any appreciable extent (Lundahl et al 2010; Nylund 2010; see also Unemar Öst 2010). How

the leftist Social Democratic/Green Party/Left Party opposition argues, among else in respect to the most central center-right upper-secondary education reform of the last decade, in 2009, has not however previously been studied.

The aim of this working paper was therefore to study the extent to which the leftist opposition used democratic and equality arguments when the center-right reform was discussed. In the introduction, I posited that the arguments of the former bloc may be seen as a case where democratic arguments, and perhaps especially equality arguments, are the most likely case. The government could be accused of deprioritizing democracy and equality because it wanted to move upper-secondary education in a specific-skills direction and make deep cuts to the scope of academic core subjects: a change diametrically opposed to traditional Social Democratic endeavors to reduce differentiation.

The arguments of the center-right government have also been analyzed in order to enable comparison. The study material is limited but concerns a key element of the discussion about contemporary Swedish education policy. The occurrence of arguments concerning three different democratic and equality ideals has been studied: the importance of responsible, autonomous, and equal citizens. In addition, arguments concerning small-scale democracy – and not only the large-scale/traditional political/democratic arena – have been taken into account. The approach has in other words been deliberately generous so that all possible traces of democratic and equality arguments could be picked up.

The study shows that both democratic and equality arguments are strikingly few, not only relative to the center-right parties but also the Social Democrats and the Green Party. The arguments that do occur are relatively vague. The Social Democrats and the Green Party are mainly preoccupied with the responsible citizen and equality ideals. The formulations often occur in paragraphs characterized by other considerations, particularly those related to the labor market. The arguments are not entirely easy to categorize based on the distinction between small-scale and large-scale democracy, but the latter arena seems to occur somewhat more commonly. It is also interesting that the democratic and equality arguments are put forth in such vague and general terms. Consequently, even when they do occur, it is often difficult to gain any clarity as to why education is considered important to democracy and equality.

The pattern is similar when it comes to the government. When democratic and equality arguments occur, the importance of education relative to small-scale democracy is emphasized somewhat more often than relative to large-scale democracy. Otherwise, the arguments concern the responsible citizen and autonomy ideals. The results are relatively consistent with what Lundahl et al (2010, p. 47) argued may be expected from right-wing versus left-wing regimes: the former are presumed to emphasize the individual level to a greater degree and the latter a collective/societal level. The Left Party departs significantly from the other parties with its clear equality arguments, which seem to concern both small-scale and large-scale democracy.

It is no surprise that labor market-related arguments enjoy a central position. It goes without saying that politicians want to fight unemployment and thus design upper-secondary education in line with this ambition. The peculiar thing is that the debate does not also involve the democratic and equality aspects to any appreciable extent. There are arguments available, should they choose to use them, and this applies not only to the left but to the right as well. The center-right parties could link their positive view of vocational skills and practical subjects in general to opportunities to achieve reduced unemployment and – by extension – more politically autonomous citizens. Considering the advances of the populist, nationalist Sweden Democrats Party as well as the public conversation about unemployment and segregation in relation to intolerance and declining political trust, a few careful civic education arguments might even be viable. All of this stops however with a few vague allusions, when terms like “categorization” and “exclusion” are mentioned.

Many political philosophers have argued that education has critical impact on democracy, both with regard to civic education and political participation and quality. A relatively comprehensive body of empirical research seem to have shown results essentially consistent with this argument (see e.g. Hertzberg 2008; Nie et al 1996; Verba et al 1995; Verba and Nie 1972; see however Kam and Palmer 2008). However, when values like democracy or equality are hardly discussed at all, it is difficult for citizens to identify any differences of opinion there may be between the parties. It also becomes more difficult to form an understanding of what makes for a well-functioning democracy at the general societal level and the significance of education in this context. The impression may be that the values of democracy and equality are not at stake.

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