

The 1973 General Election in Sweden

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The polls 1 year before the election in September 1973 were very unfavorable for the Social Democrats. The defeat of the government in the next election seemed hard to avoid. However, the Social Democrats were able to remain in power, although the margin could not have been smaller. The seats in the new *Riksdag* are shared evenly by the two blocs: 175 seats for the Social Democrats and the Communists and 175 for the three bourgeois parties.

The Social Democratic party lost ten seats in the *Riksdag*. The party's share of the vote (43.6 percent) had not been so small in a *Riksdag* election since the early 1930s. The party suffering the heaviest loss was, however, the Liberal party. Their electoral support was diminished by about 40 percent. Less than one tenth of the electorate voted for the party. Never before in modern political history had a Swedish liberal party had such a small fraction of the vote.

The Conservatives and the Communists increased somewhat, but the winner of the election was undoubtedly the Center party. The old Agrarian party, in the mid-fifties quite a small party, continued its advancement from the 1960s and gained 25.1 percent of the vote.

1. The Election Campaign

The *Riksdag* decision in May 1973 to establish a pension fund with authority to buy shares in private enterprises never became the controversial issue observers had expected. A government scheme presented in August, in which the pension contribution was proposed to be paid by the employers instead of the taxpayers, diminished the importance of the taxation controversy. The large number of unemployed workers was, of course, an issue in the campaign, and the Center Party's slogan, 'a hundred thousand new jobs', could possibly have influenced the election outcome, but the hope of a better economic situation and the absence of a real large-scale attack from the bourgeois opposition contributed to make the issue less threatening for the Social Democrats. What came to be a central theme in the campaign was the so-called 'government issue'. The Social Democrats repeatedly focused attention on the fact that the three bourgeois parties did not have a platform in common, thus questioning the credibility of the bourgeois opposition as an alternative to Social Democratic government.

The Social Democratic campaign was in some respects very defensive. The offensive directives of the late 1960s were now gone. Instead Prime Minister Palme several times stressed that 'this is a good country' and talked about national unity rather than existing class differences. The defensive strategy is illustrated by a central Social Democratic slogan: 'Do not vote away social security'. This slogan is rather peculiar: political catchwords are not usually constructed as linguistic negations.

Considering the lukewarm election campaign, one might ask whether the voters decided how to vote later than usual. Available data indicate that this was not the fact (Table I). The 1973 election campaign in this respect did not differ from the two previous ones. Most had decided how to vote 'a long time ago'.

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Table I. Time of voting decision*

Time of voting decision	1968	1970	1973
A long time ago, %	76	73	72
Earlier during the autumn and summer, %	11	13	14
During the week preceding the election, %	12	13	14
Do not know, %	1	1	0
Total, %	100	100	100
N	2764	4194	881

* Sources. 1968 and 1970: election studies carried out jointly by the Institute of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, and the National Central Bureau of Statistics. (Data from 1970 are presented in Bo Särilvik, 'The 1970 election', *General Elections 1970*, Vol. 3 (SOS). Stockholm, National Central Bureau of Statistics, 1973.) 1973: postelection telephone interview, Swedish Broadcasting Corporation Survey Center (SR/PUB). (Data from the University of Gothenburg 1973 election study are not yet available).

Intermittently, party politics was replaced by two other events in news reports. The illness and death of the king and a bank robbery in Stockholm received extensive media coverage and almost interrupted the campaign. However, these extraordinary events probably had little impact on the election outcome.

2. Electoral Mobilization

The 1973 turnout (90.8 percent) is the highest ever recorded in Swedish election history. Since the last three elections have been characterized by a comparatively high turnout, it looks as though electoral mobilization has stabilized at around 90 percent. It seems thus to be hard for the parties to recruit a large number of new voters, but one has to keep in mind that in the present parliamentary deadlock even a very small increase for one party can alter the government situation.

It has sometimes been argued that high electoral mobilization is advantageous to the Social Democrats. For example, in the 1968 election the turnout was very high, and the Social Democrats won a large victory. This hypothesis is, however, not supported by electoral statistics. During the postwar period the correlation between turnout and Social Democratic performance is very close to zero.² The 1973 election is an example of an election in which the electorate was highly mobilized but in which the Social Democratic party got a fairly small share of the vote.

3. Election Outcome

Table II shows the election results from 1970 and 1973. In the third row the 1973 percentages have been subtracted from the 1970 ones. If the sign in front of this difference is omitted, an interesting pattern among the *Riksdag* parties can be discovered. The magnitude of the change is largest at the center of the party spectrum and smallest at the extremes. That is to say, there was a considerable amount of turnover between 1970 and 1973, but the change could not be interpreted as political polarization – or anything resembling it. The 1973 election only led to some rearrangement in the middle of the left–right continuum.³

Table II. Party distribution (percent) of the vote in the Swedish Riksdag elections in 1970 and 1973*

Election	Parties represented in the Riksdag							KFML	KFML(r)	SKP	Total percent
	Communist party	Social Dem. party	Center party	Liberal party	Conservative party	Christ. Dem. party					
1970	4.8	45.3	19.9	16.2	11.5	1.8	0.4	-	-	-	99.9
1973	5.3	43.6	25.1	9.4	14.3	1.8	-	0.2	0.4	-	100.1
Change	+ 0.5	- 1.7	+ 5.2	- 6.8	+ 2.8	0	-	-	-	-	-

* Abbreviations: *KFML* = Marxist-Leninist; *KFML(r)* = Marxist-Leninist (revolutionaries); *SKP* = Swedish Communist party.

The party here labeled 'The Communist party' is *Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna*, literally translated 'The Left Party Communists'. This is the old Communist party, renamed in 1967 under the influence of New Left winds. For quite a while now the party has adhered to parliamentary principles and has dealt with *Riksdag* proposals rather than with revolutionary propaganda. The party increased its share of the vote both in 1970 and 1973 and now has 5.3 percent. It had no problem reaching the 4 percent necessary to obtain representation in the *Riksdag*. The two latest successful elections only mean, however, that the party has again reached its normal level since the late 1940s. In the 1968 election the party suffered a heavy loss, partly because of the Czechoslovakian crisis, but in 1973 those injuries had been repaired.

In absolute numbers the Social Democrats lost only a few thousand votes, but because of the increased turnout the party dropped 1.7 percent, obtaining 43.6 percent in 1973. Only 5 years earlier, in the 1968 election, the Social Democrats had won an absolute majority of the votes (50.1 percent), but lost 4.8 percent 2 years later. In the latest election the Social Democrats did not succeed in recovering this loss and also lost another 1.7 percent.

Shortly before the government coalition between the Social Democrats and the Center party (then named the Agrarian party) ended, the two parties declined in popularity. In the 1956 election the Agrarian party dropped to below 10 percent. The coalition was dissolved in 1957, the name was changed to the Center party, and the party began to pursue a more independent policy. The following elections were successful and the Center party stabilized at around 13 percent in the early 1960s. From 1968 the Center party has continuously expanded. The most profound change in the Swedish party system during the postwar period is the recent growth of the Center party. One quarter of the electorate in 1973 voted for the Center party.

The 1973 election was the worst in history for the Liberal party. Its proportion of the vote decreased by 6.8 percent, and its number of seats in the *Riksdag* was reduced to 34. The Liberal party is now the smallest of the three bourgeois parties. During most of the postwar period the Liberal party was the leading bourgeois opposition party, but after the 1968 election it was passed by the Center party, and in 1973 the Conservatives also outnumbered the Liberal party.

The Conservative party vote increased by 2.8 percent. One has to remember, however, that the Conservatives suffered from losses both in 1968 and 1970. The 1973 result only meant that the party regained its normal level of the last two decades.

In the 1970 election a new party emerged. The Communist League Marxist-Leninists, *KFML*, stood in sharp opposition to the established *Riksdag* parties, especially the Social Democrats and the old Communist party. Shortly after the 1970 election *KFML* split into two parts: the Communist League Marxist-Leninists (revolutionaries),

KFML(r), and, from early 1973, the Swedish Communist Party, *SKP*. *KFML(r)* advocated Comintern 'class against class' principles and has tried to establish factory cells in large industrial plants. *SKP* is an exponent of populist sentiments in the Swedish left and has tried to unite 'the mass of the people' by forming popular fronts on day-to-day issues. *KFML(r)* gained 0.2, *SKP* 0.4 percent of the vote. Their support is very local and they do not express any widespread political trends.

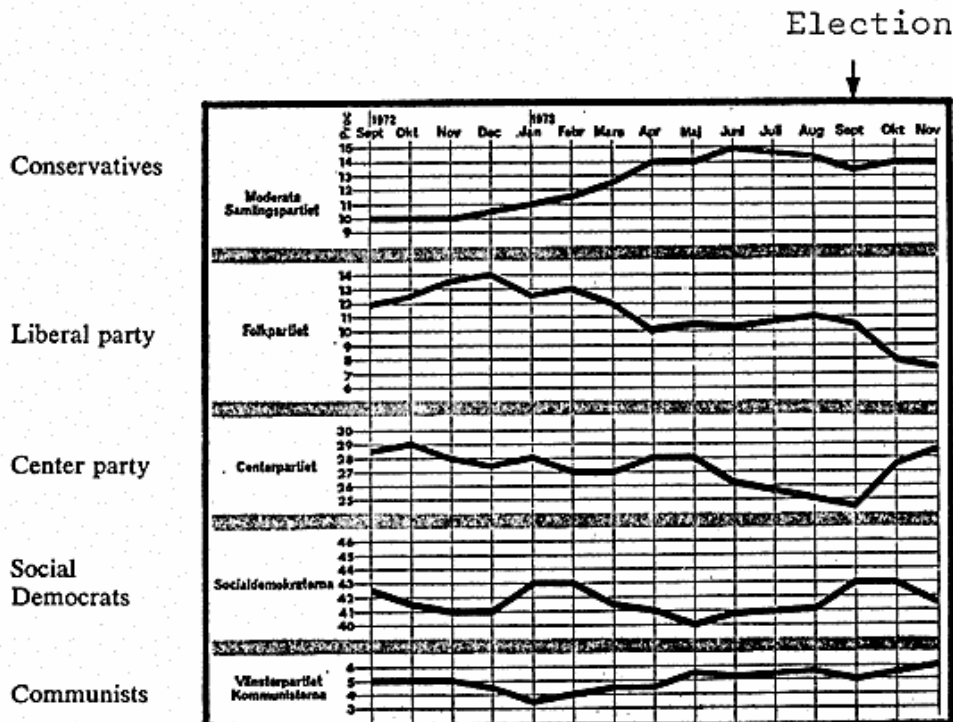
The Christian Democratic proportion of the electorate is constant - 1.8 percent.

Table III. Party distribution of seats in the Swedish Riksdag 1970 and 1973

Election period	Communist party	Social Democrat party	Center party	Liberal party	Conservative party	Total	Social	Bourgeois
							Democrats and Communists total	parties total
After the 1970 election	17	163	71	58	41	350	180	170
After the 1973 election	19	156	90	34	51	350	175	175
Change	+ 2	- 7	+ 19	- 24	+ 10	-	- 5	+ 5

The 1973 election resulted in a parliamentary deadlock. The seats are evenly divided between the two blocs: the Social Democrats and the Communists together obtained 175 seats, and the three bourgeois parties also have 175 seats.

When analyzing the performance of the parties in the 1973 election, one may take into account short-term forces during the year preceding the election. The SIFO Institute carries out polls every month (except July), measuring the strength of the parties. In Figure 1 the scores are given for each of the *Riksdag* parties.



Source: SIFO and DN-GP-SDS. *Dagens Nyheter*, December 9, 1972.

Figure 1. The SIFO polls September 1972 - November 1973.

The Conservative rise can be seen to occur during the period from November 1972 to April 1973. During the same time the Liberal Party support was reduced from 14 to 10 percent, and the party was not able to recover from this decrease. After the election in September the party support continued to diminish, possibly the result of a bandwagon effect. On inspection of the Center party graph, the victory no longer seems to be quite so impressive. In fact, the party reached almost 30 percent 1 year before the election but obviously fell back a few percentage points during the election campaign. Still the election result was a clear increase compared with the 1970 score, and, according to the polls, the Center party support continued to increase during the postelection months. The Social Democratic support reached two peaks during the period. The first one, in January and February 1973, can probably be attributed to the massive Social Democratic campaign on the Vietnam issue. The second one, at the very end of the election campaign, is probably an effect of the full mobilization of the combined party and trade union campaign machine.

In the polls chart (Figure 1) a *Social Democratic increase* seems to be coupled with a corresponding *Communist decrease*. This is an illustration of one important function of the Communist party in the Swedish party system: it often serves as occasional residence for dissatisfied left-wing Social Democrats, thus working as a safety valve. The core of *stable* Communist voters is so small that it is barely visible in survey studies.⁴

4. Regional Variations⁵

The 1973 election meant that the Center party fortified its new strongholds in the big cities. Even though the party had a clear success in all constituencies, the advancement was strongest in the metropolitan areas. The recent Center party capture of the cities is the exception in the very stable regional pattern of Swedish politics.

Although the Center party support increased greatly in the big cities, the strongest Center party constituencies still are the farming areas in the south of Sweden. Not only has the party succeeded in attracting new urban groups, but it has also kept and strengthened its rural support.

The increase in the Conservative party support was also concentrated in the metropolitan areas. In other constituencies the performance was not so good – in some places the party did not even succeed in recovering from its 1970 losses.

The election winds blew strongest in the big cities, where the Center party and the Conservatives won great victories. They increased at the expense of the third bourgeois party. The Liberal party support decreased greatly in all constituencies, but especially in the metropolitan areas the election was a catastrophe for the Liberal party. In the traditional stronghold of Gothenburg, to mention the most prominent example, the party decreased from 31.9 to 18.9 percent. In Malmö the Liberal party lost more than half of its electoral support.

The Social Democratic party probably lost some votes to the Center party, but the regional changes are not very drastic. The Social Democrats lost a few percentage points in most constituencies, but in three the election resulted in a small increase. One of these three constituencies was the city of Gothenburg. The Social Democratic party, although it decreased 3.2 percent in Stockholm, obviously did not suffer from a uniform negative tendency in the urban areas. The Center Party growth can only to a limited extent be attributed to gains from the Social Democrats.

The Communist party increase was predominantly concentrated to Stockholm and the surrounding areas. In the strongest Communist constituency (Norrbotten, in northern Sweden) the party lost 0.2 percent, despite the positive national trend. This is

probably a reflection of the altered Communist electoral base, which will be commented on later.

The Marxist Leninists, *KFML(r)*, have their regional base on the west coast, particularly Gothenburg, while *SKP* is concentrated around Stockholm.

The basic regional pattern of Swedish party politics has remained constant for a long time. Figure 2 shows that the Social Democrats and the Communists together receive a majority of the seats mainly in the northern constituencies, whereas the bourgeois parties are more concentrated to the south. The squares on the map represent the 28 constituencies; the size of each square is proportional to the number of voters entitled to vote in that particular constituency.⁶

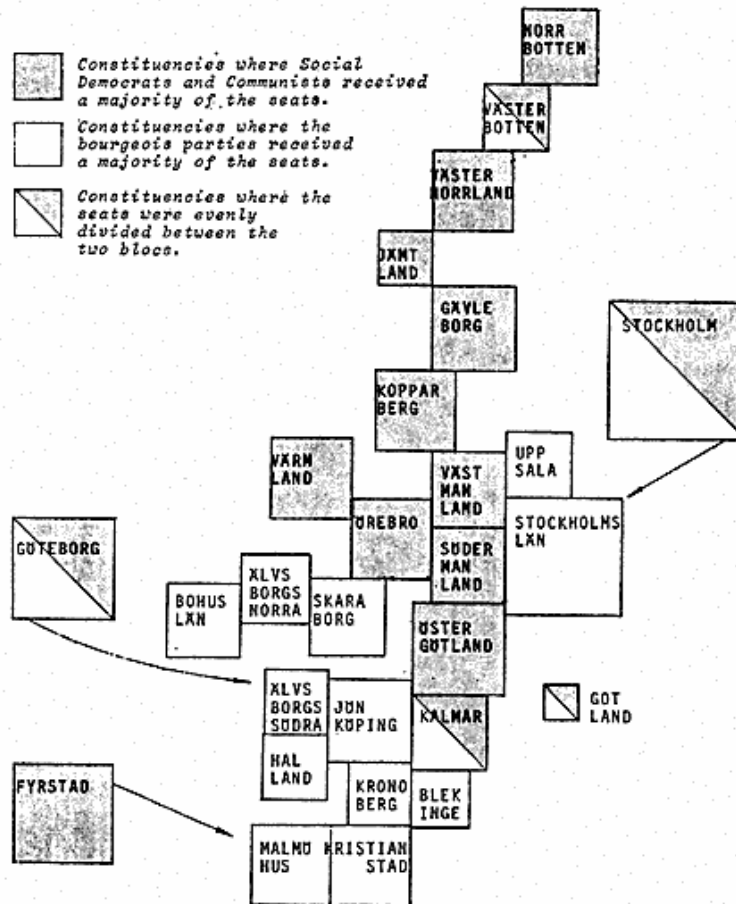


Figure 2. Distribution of seats in the Swedish constituencies after the 1973 Riksdag election.

5. Split Votes

One of the core elements of the new election system is contemporaneous elections. Since 1970 the *Riksdag*, county, and local representatives have been elected at the same time. Table IV shows the difference between *Riksdag* and local performance for each of the parties.

The extent of ticket splitting seems to have increased in the 1973 election. The election statistics show that at least 240,000 persons voted for different parties in *Riksdag* and local elections, but the number is probably larger. In 1973 all parties except the

Table IV. Split votes 1970 and 1973*

	1970	1973
Communists	+ 0.4	+ 0.2
Social Democrats	- 0.3	+ 0.4
Center party	+ 0.4	+ 1.4
Liberal party	0.0	- 1.0
Conservatives	- 0.2	+ 0.4
Christian Democrats	0.0	- 0.3
Marxist Leninists	0.0	-
Marxist Leninists (revolutionaries)	-	0.0
Swedish Communist party	-	0.0
Others	- 0.4	- 1.1

* Difference between *Riksdag* and local elections. Positive sign indicates stronger in *Riksdag* than in local election.

Liberal party gained more *Riksdag* votes than local votes. The case was just the opposite for the Social Democrats and the Conservatives in 1970.

The 1973 election results show a considerable amount of split votes among Center party and Liberal party adherents. Obviously, quite a few people voted for the Liberal party at the local level but for the Center party – the largest opposition party – in the *Riksdag* election.

Politicians, in commenting on the occurrence of split votes, were mostly positive. When the contemporaneous elections were introduced, some people had expressed fear that local issues would be drowned in the national *Riksdag* campaign. The split votes, however, were now interpreted as evidence of the vitality of independent local political campaigns.⁷

6. Change in Electoral Support

In some respects the 1973 election resulted in rather large changes in the Swedish party system: the Liberal party was sharply reduced, and the Center party continued to grow. The election outcome can, however, be assessed quite differently. The first part of the 1970s had been filled with social and economic unrest. Several strikes, high prices, unemployment, and regional dissatisfaction in the north had been salient factors for most people. Compared with the recent turbulences of the Danish and Norwegian party systems, there were remarkably *small* changes in the 1973 Swedish election.

A central issue concerning the Center party progress is whether the new voters come from any particular social class or stratum. The answer is no. Between 1968 and 1970, for example, the Center party increased within all social strata. This has led to a considerable broadening of the mass base of the Center party. Still in 1956, 77 percent of the Center party voters were farmers. This proportion continuously declined during the 1960s and reached 23 percent in 1970.⁸ The proportion of farmers was probably even lower in 1973.

To what extent has the Center party been able to retain the rather heterogeneous class composition of its new electoral base? In one respect the Center party has been quite successful. Recent interview studies show that the new Center party adherents are beginning to feel more and more 'psychological' identity with their new party.⁹ Thus, the party's election successes can be explained not only as temporary protest voting but has also to some extent attained permanency. Over a longer time span, however, it is doubtful if it is possible to keep a party together with such a socially mixed mass base.

The electoral base of the Liberal party has traditionally been composed of two parts. The party has strong support from members of the free churches (Protestant sects) but has also had a strong position among non-religious, urban middle-class strata.¹⁰ The 1973 election signified a sharp decline in urban middle-class liberalism. The heaviest losses were in the metropolitan areas.

The Social Democratic party's position in the working class is still very strong. Although the Social Democratic parliamentary position is now the weakest in decades, and although the party has lost some voters to the Center party, the social composition of the Social Democratic electorate is mainly unaltered.

Traditionally, age has never been a good predictor of party choice in Sweden. The proportion voting for a particular party has been roughly equal within all age strata. In 1970, however, a new pattern began to appear, which, according to available post-election poll data, seems to be even more pronounced in the 1973 election.¹¹ Among young voters the recent political trends are remarkably amplified. The winners of the two latest elections, the Center party and the Communists, have a stronger support among young than among old voters. For the Conservatives and the Liberals the relation is reversed: their share of the vote is larger in the older strata. The Social Democratic proportion of the vote is about the same within all age groups, although the performance among first-time voters in 1973 seems to have been below average.

The correlation between age and Communist voting is restricted to highly educated voters. The proportion of Communists is about the same among young and old voters when considering only voters with low education. A low Communist proportion can also be found among old voters with high education. In the highly educated young group, however, the Communist proportion is remarkably high. This pattern cannot be found in election studies from the 1950s or 1960s but emerged in the 1970 election. The Communist party, the old worker party, has established a new stronghold in the universities.

Certainly there are distinctive processes of change going on in the Swedish electorate. But compared to the recent election storms in Denmark and Norway, the Swedish changes must be considered a mild breeze. Especially the Danish election upset Swedish politicians. Why did all established parties decline while some obscure poujadist politicians in a rather short time managed to attract a substantial number of voters? One or two commentators were perhaps more astonished that it did *not* happen in Sweden than that it did happen in Denmark, but the question remains: Why did the Danish party system almost break down, while the Swedish one remained intact? Some indisputable differences between Denmark and Sweden must be taken into account. The first one concerns the economic situation. Although there had been apparent price increases in Sweden, the Danish EEC entry caused greater economic grievances among middle strata and petty bourgeois groups than in Sweden. Secondly, the organizational structure is weaker in Denmark than in Sweden. The strength of trade unions and the close connection between the Social Democratic party and the unions are important levers of settling social conflicts in Sweden. Thirdly, the Danish parliamentary situation during the last decade has been characterized by several different governments succeeding each other. In Sweden, the Social Democrats have been in power for about 40 years. For dissatisfied Swedish voters the established bourgeois parties still constitute a viable alternative to the present regime; in Sweden, the politics of discontent is still channeled through the existing party structure.

7. The Parties After the Election

Like the other parties, the Social Democrats remained expectant some weeks after the election. Having pondered the parliamentary deadlock, the government took the

political offensive. In the middle of October Prime Minister Palme and Finance Minister Sträng surprisingly presented a scheme that included a wide range of economic measures, some of which the opposition had fought for in the campaign one month earlier. Two weeks later the government was reconstructed. Four new ministers entered the government, and three new departments were created. At the end of the year the energy crisis also helped by focusing public attention on the government, not on the opposition.

The big issue in Swedish politics in the autumn of 1973 was the jailing of two reporters who revealed the secret Swedish intelligence organization – the so-called 'IB affair'. The bourgeois opposition did not attack the government on the issue, but the gap between the Social Democratic government and the radical youth and intellectuals widened. The government stand was also disapproved of in several Social Democratic organizations.

Since the Center party had become by far the largest opposition party, many bourgeois voters expected powerful attacks on the government after the election. The party leadership, however, fell short of expectations. When the Social Democrats immediately after the election declared its intention to remain in power, the Center party pursued a wait-and-see policy.

The Liberal party, chocked by the magnitude of its losses, began to examine the party line. It was clear that the Center party had surpassed the Liberal party. The new line seemed to care less about unity within the bourgeois bloc but to pronounce more the independent, liberal line. During the autumn the Liberal party abstained from attacking the government.

Only the Conservative party demanded a new election. Of the bourgeois parties, the Conservative leader launched the strongest attacks on the government.

The Communists won two seats, but it is doubtful that their parliamentary influence will increase in the new *Riksdag*. The government attacked the Communists rather strongly after the election and turned to the right rather than the left.

8. Parliamentary Situation

On the eve of the new *Riksdag* session the parliamentary situation is unclear. The two blocs are exactly equal in size. The Social Democratic government can no longer only rely on the Communist votes. If a roll call is drawn, the decision is decided by lot. In the long run, 'lottery rule' is impossible. The government must either proclaim a new election or seek support from the Liberal party or the Center party.

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NOTES

1. A review of the new *Riksdag* can be found in Björn Molin, 'Sweden: The First Year of the One-Chamber Riksdag', pp. 283–286 in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 7/72. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1973.
2. The same result is reported in Bo Särilvik, 'Political Stability and Change in the Swedish Electorate', pp. 203 ff. in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 1/66. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1966.
3. One has to keep in mind the problem of analyzing processes of change when one only knows the marginal distributions. A more detailed inquiry can be made only when the University of Gothenburg 1973 election study is completed.
4. Cf. Bo Särilvik, 'The 1970 election', *General Elections 1970*, Vol. 3 (SOS). Stockholm, National Central Bureau of Statistics, 1973.

5. The regional variations in the 1973 elections are further studied in Olof Petersson, '1973 års val', *Samhällsdebatt* 1973: 2.
6. The basic map has been drawn at the Institute of Geography, University of Gothenburg, for The Swedish Representative Democracy Research Project, Institute of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.
7. See e.g. Erik Huss in *Dagens Nyheter*, September 26, 1973; Tage Erlander in *Dagens Nyheter*, September 28, 1973; and Hilding Johansson in *Dagens Nyheter*, October 9, 1973.
8. Särilvik 1973, op. cit., p. 103.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 72 ff.
10. A detailed analysis on the role of religion in Swedish politics is presented in Bo Särilvik, 'Socioeconomic position, religious behavior, and voting', in *Quality and Quantity* 1970: 4.
11. *Politisk strukturrappport*, Autumn 1973. Stockholm, SIFO, 1973 (unpublished data report). *Partisymptiundersökningen november 1973*, Statistical Reports no. Be 1973:16. Stockholm, National Central Bureau of Statistics, 1973.