

The Legitimacy of Conscription in Democracy: Connections between Conscription Politics and Public Opinion in Parliamentary Debates in Finland and Sweden in the 2010s

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Conscription is a political institution that may socialize individuals to acquire such values as a sense of patriotism and duty toward state. In democratic countries, public support for conscription is vital. In this article we study the effects of public opinion on Swedish and Finnish politics from 2008 to 2010 and from 2017 to 2021. Based on an analysis of political language, we argue that the use of such language is central to seeking legitimacy for controversial issues. To that end, political discussions and interpretations of public opinion are central ways of creating and legitimizing policy. By conducting a qualitative, conceptual, and contextual analysis of digitized parliamentary documents in Sweden and Finland, this article suggests that in both countries political elites have spoken about public opinion to support the crafting of defense policy, particularly when speaking about the necessity to reform conscription so as to maintain citizens' engagement with defense and their acceptance of conscription as a core institution of national defense.

Introduction

Conscription is an institution that is connected to profound cultural, societal, and historical issues, in addition to providing the means by which states counter external security threats (Cohen 1985; Mjøset and Van Holde 2002). Cohen (1985) refers to conscription as a political

institution in which individuals are socialized to internalize such values as a sense of patriotism and duty toward state. However, in democracies the political system and conscription interact in a reciprocal relationship, since conscription is an institution that requires not only citizens' willingness to engage and participate in military service and duties, but also their continuing acceptance of the principles applied to conscription (Peters 2014, 389–91). This raises the question of how to legitimize conscription within democracies, where a foundational principle of the political system is the people's will.

In this article we study the meanings that public opinion, or its interpretations, have had on the politics of two Nordic democracies—Sweden and Finland—using conscription as a case study. “Public opinion” is not easy to define, and its influence on policy-making processes is not always clear or easy to pinpoint (Davis 2012; Foyle 1997; Hucker 2012, 775; Holsti 1996; Page 1994). Public opinion can refer to people's views about certain questions or topics based on some surveys or polls. Public opinion can also be a more abstract issue in democracies, where public opinion—and especially the ways to interpret and measure it—is at the core of how contemporary democracies reflect legitimacy. By analyzing Finnish and Swedish parliamentary documents, we discuss (1) if and in what kind of contexts public opinion survey data have been used politically when the politics of conscription have been debated in the Swedish and Finnish Parliaments; and (2) whether political elites use other ways of speaking about public opinion to elicit popular support for proposed policies or for arguments regarding conscription.

We find that references to public opinion serve as a political tool to legitimize political elites' interpretations and demands. This was clearly seen in Finland during the spring of 2022, when a small number of opinion surveys greatly affected the state's decision to apply for NATO membership. In theoretical terms, the relationship of public opinion to political legitimacy can be interpreted as how the “will of the people” is enacted in a democratic system. Therefore, our focus here is on how public opinion about citizens' attitudes and engagement with national defense has been referred to during political debates on conscription and on the possible need to reform that institution. This article argues that political elites in both countries have cited public support for defense policy when speaking about conscription reform, arguing for its necessity in order to maintain citizens' engagement with national defense and acceptance of conscription.

Sweden and Finland have traditionally relied on conscription as well as on policies of military non-alignment, and during the past decades they have attempted to reform conscription based on their national defense needs and (to some extent) on societal demands. In Sweden conscription was deactivated in 2010, but it was reactivated in 2017, when it was reintroduced in a gender-neutral format. In the case of Finland, however, male conscription has been in place since the 1920s, with women having the option to serve on a voluntary basis since the 1990s. Studying the political language of conscription policy in these two culturally and historically linked countries that are located near a great power whose political system and values are quite different from theirs allows us to explore the ideas and concepts political elites in each country use to closely connect citizens to issues of national defense. However, instead of conducting a systematic comparative analysis of the two countries, this article discusses the unique features of each state separately to illustrate the special, context-bound characteristics of public opinion on national defense in each country.

To this end, our empirical analysis of parliamentary sources focuses on (1) the years 2008–10, when an ad hoc committee explored reforming conscription in Finland, and when Sweden embarked on a path to deactivate conscription; and (2) the years 2017–21, when Sweden reactivated conscription and a parliamentary committee on conscription was convened in Finland to produce a report. Within these two time periods, we conducted word searches of digitized parliamentary documents to identify plenary debates on conscription and to locate other conscription-related documents, such as reports, memoranda, or proposals that governmental or legislative representatives had produced. The primary keywords we applied were words related to “public opinion” (*allman åsikt*, *gallup*, *undersök**, *yleinen mielipide*, *tutkimu**, *mielipidemit**) and to “conscription” (*värnpli**, *asevelv**), but we were also sensitive to context-bound concepts (indirectly related to public opinion) such as *maanpuolustustab** and *puolustustab** in Finnish or *folkförankring* in Swedish.¹

1. Translations: *allman åsikt* = public/general opinion; *gallup* = gallop; *undersök* = investigate/examine; *yleinen mielipide* = public/general opinion; *tutkimu** = survey; *mielipidemit** = survey/polls. In Finnish, *maanpuolustustabto* or *puolustustabto* means people’s willingness to defend Finland, and in Swedish, *folkförankring* refers to people’s engagement with national defense. “Conscription” is *asevelvollsuisus* in Finnish and *värnplik* in Swedish.

After identifying the key debates and documents related to conscription, we analyzed these sources qualitatively using conceptual and contextual analyses (see Ihalainen and Palonen 2009; Müller 2014; Ihalainen, Ilie, and Palonen 2016). The purpose was to (1) identify concepts and expressions that contemporary MPs used when speaking about public opinion in the context of conscription, (2) interpret micro-level argumentative functions of the speeches promoting certain political ideas, and (3) discuss the macro-level semantic and thematic development of political debates on public opinion and conscription. Our aim was to illustrate the main elements of political discourse on public opinion and to consider these elements from the perspective of the political legitimacy of conscription. Therefore, we make particular reference to the context-related, reflective arguments that were shared by or which divided elites, if such references can indeed be found in our sources.

Public Opinion as an Element in Political Debates

This article is based on the theory that political language reflects contemporary political thought and that political language, or specific discourses, can be used to legitimize political purposes that, for example, political parties, ruling coalitions, or individual parliamentarians propose (Reyes 2011). We apply this approach in a parliamentary context where both the legislative context and its established procedures serve as a representative institution that is used to seek legitimacy for issues, viewpoints, and policies that are under debate (e.g., Ihalainen and Palonen 2009; Palonen 2008). Our study connects ideas regarding the importance of the use of political language with the theoretical idea that public opinion may be used during political debates to connect people to defense politics. Thus, we study public opinion as an instrument used in political debates where competing values, ideas, and conceptions are being argued (Wiesner, Haapala, and Palonen 2017). Since the ideal form of parliamentary democracy emphasizes that the role of debate is to discuss differing viewpoints, arguments, and policies *pro et contra* (Palonen 2008), politics can be seen as a discursive act—one in which politicians and parliamentarians utilize politically motivated interpretations of issues that appear on the political agenda to promote certain viewpoints. Information, as well as the way evidence is interpreted to support an argument, can go from *doing politics* to *creating a policy* and, thereby, improve the quality of political debate (Schlaufer, Stucki, and Sager 2018), including the debate on conscription.

Opinion polls on different policy issues are one means by which the public may communicate its preferences and offer feedback to the executive branch, national legislature, and different political entities such as political parties, party factions, and committees (Berinsky 2017). However, public opinion only becomes politically relevant for doing politics and creating policy if and when it is discussed and interpreted politically. From this perspective, public opinion surveys may offer information that can be utilized in political argumentation and debate, potentially leading to the shaping of different societal institutions, such as conscription. However, scholars who have studied the relationship of public opinion to foreign and defense policies argue that political references to opinion poll data constitute only part of the process of utilizing public opinion for political purposes. They maintain that the beliefs of political elites regarding public opinion—beliefs not necessarily based on any polling data—are also important. Thus, politicians may utilize their perceptions of public opinion when making an argument, rather than referring to specific poll data (Shapiro 2011, 999; Hucker 2012, 779–81; Foyle 1997, 144). In the parliamentary context, such discussions take place in documents, such as in committee reports and memoranda, but especially in public plenary debates. In all of these “places,” information or political elites’ interpretations of public opinion become a tool for doing politics and (potentially) for creating policies, such as policies toward conscription.

It is important to note, however, that from a theoretical perspective, public opinion survey data can be a problematic source when drawing unequivocal conclusions about citizens’ attitudes and opinions. Respondents may know very little about the issue in question, and a slight change in the wording of a question can affect survey results dramatically. Despite such shortcomings, respecting the “will of the people” remains a fundamental feature of democratic rule, which highlights why public opinion should be reflected in politics (Althaus 2003, 1–4). Nonetheless, we should note that the role of public opinion in political decision-making processes may be selective, since policy makers tend to pay attention to public opinion when it meets their needs (Giegerich 2018, 291; Davis 2012, 313). As a result, if popular attention on a particular issue is low, national leaders may only be weakly constrained by it when making policy choices, and the role of public opinion may be rather meager in such cases (Knecht and Weatherford 2006, 705). By contrast, public opinion may have a greater impact on public policy when issues are more salient (Page and Shapiro 1983).

Finally, we believe that conscription provides a case study where the role of public opinion may be significant, since conscription is a political institution that, in addition to various military-related reasons (such as the efficient recruitment of soldiers, the maintenance of a large and cost-effective reserve, and the construction of a deterrent and credible national defense), is often supported by traditions within society, such as historical reasons to maintain an institution linking the people to defense, as well as reflecting the interest of the state to democratize the organizing of defense (Levi 1996; Asal, Conrad, and Toronto 2017). At the same time, the system of conscription requires that citizens accept the institution and engage in it. Thus, its social acceptance is vital. As a result, public opinion of conscription may have direct implications for its popular legitimacy, and its public acceptance could be used to establish and maintain the political acceptance of the conscription system (Peters 2014, 389–91).

In other words, references to public opinion made, for example, by parliamentarians during political debates on conscription can be seen as a way to seek legitimacy from the public for their political demands. Political legitimacy is closely connected to sources of authority (see Peter 2017), and public opinion might serve as one source of such an authority when parliamentarians seek support for their arguments concerning conscription. Public opinion and, especially, ways to interpret public opinion are at the core of conveying the legitimacy of conscription as an institution that relates not only to organizing the armed forces to provide defense but also to the state's monopoly on the use of violence (see Weber 2008, 160–61).

Measuring Public Opinion in Sweden and Finland

In Finland and Sweden, supportive public opinion has traditionally been a valued part of political discourse on defense. The idea of emphasizing people's attitudes about defense began during the early Cold War period when both countries perceived defense as a society-wide effort, despite the fact that conscription and the question of defense-related values and societal cohesion had predated the World War II, especially in Finland (Soikkanen 1983). In both countries, fostering certain values (such as patriotism) was pivotal to supporting each country's political system during the Cold War ideological struggles that dominated international relations in this period. Since supportive public opinion was politically visible, the idea of psychological defense proved to be the necessary

instrument that would counter the impact of the existing ideological struggle (Rainio-Niemi 2014; Ahlbäck 2014).

Indeed, since the Cold War, both countries have followed a tradition of having a state institution conduct public opinion surveys on security, foreign, and defense policy. In Finland, the Advisory Board for Defence Information (2022) (ABDI) is a permanent parliamentary committee that studies public opinion related to foreign and security policy as well as national defense (ABDI 2003–2021). In Sweden, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällskydd och beredskap [MSB]) studies public opinion on similar issues (e.g., MSB 2009, 2018). Thus, both the ABDI and the MSB regularly conduct surveys and report public opinion data on such issues as the willingness to defend the country, support for the institution of conscription (or for defense policy in general), trust toward the armed forces, and attitudes toward joining a military alliance. As measured by these national agencies, the significance of conscription to defense in Sweden or the support for conscription in Finland have shown some fluctuation over time, but they have also shared broad public acceptance. In Finland, for example, 70–80 percent of respondents over the last decade have consistently supported conscription in its current form; in Sweden, conscription was seen as being significant by 47–73 percent of respondents between 2011 and 2018 (ABDI 2020; MSB 2018).

Among other things, surveys conducted by the ABDI and the MSB have indicated that a clear majority of respondents in both countries express a strong willingness to defend the country in the case of an armed conflict. The survey results concerning people's willingness to defend (*maanpuolustustahto* in Finnish, *försvarsvilja* in Swedish) have attracted special interest in public and political discourse in Finland and, to a certain extent, in Sweden. In fact, previous research has already illustrated that in Finland, politicians have historically referred to people's willingness to defend the country when they have needed to emphasize the credibility of a foreign and/or defense policy (Häkkinen, Kaarkoski, and Tilli 2020; Kaarkoski 2020; MSB 2009, 2018).

In both countries, members of the national legislatures have considered the acceptance of and future of conscription. Seeing how these elites have utilized public opinion for their own political purposes sheds light on the interaction between the political system and the institution of conscription. Focusing on the use of public opinion references in a specific institutional forum—the legislature—offers a suitable approach and context for studying how public opinion (or its interpretation by elites)

is intentionally used by them for political purposes. Indeed, when it comes to interpreting public opinion, elected parliamentarians play a pivotal role, since they have to both complete work associated with their role as MPs as well as understand the potential impact of public opinion on elected politicians, parliamentary parties, and the legislative agenda.

In the analysis that follows, we concentrate our discussion not only on references to actual public opinion data but also on arguments where public opinion was discussed or mentioned by parliamentarians without pointing out any specific survey data. More precisely, our analysis concentrates on references to opinion poll data as well as other kinds of arguments concerning citizens' attitudes toward national defense and their engagement with conscription.

Sweden: Anchoring People to National Defense

The institution of conscription has a long tradition in Sweden, having been in place since 1901. Indeed, military service and its corresponding ideals of collective responsibility, duty, equality, and solidarity had long been connected with Swedish values (Lindberg 2019). In 2004, however, a review of defense policy suggested that military service should be voluntary (Regeringens proposition 2004), and Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt's center-right coalition government embarked on a path to abolish compulsory military training. As a result, a defense review process was launched in 2007. The review led the government to deactivate conscription in 2010, which would only be reactivated in 2017 due to the deterioration of the European security environment and the failure of the all-volunteer recruitment effort to provide the necessary number of trained personnel (Ministry of Defence 2017; see Lindberg 2019).

The history of Swedish strategic culture in the post-World War II period features changing attitudes regarding the necessary means to defend the country. Indeed, people-based defense supported by conscription has not always been viewed as the most credible defense for a neutral country such as Sweden. Occasionally, some have emphasized the need for a more technologically oriented approach to defense. However, since the Soviet Union/Russia has traditionally been seen as a potential aggressor to Sweden, this threat perception has meant that the country's defense policy has focused on deterrence through the policy of total defense in which the country's defense is seen as the responsibility of the entire society (Åselius 2005).

Despite this, in 2007 the government began to explore the possibility of doing away with compulsory military service. It gave four reasons for the potential shift: (1) changes in threat perceptions on the global, regional, and national levels; (2) the deepening of European Union defense cooperation; (3) advances in military-related technology, and (4) changes in the tasks of the Swedish Defense Forces (SDF) from territorial defense toward more intervention abroad (such as crisis management). Moreover, the size of the armed forces had declined from 400,000 to 30,000 in the ten years prior to the Swedish deactivation of conscription. This decrease in the need for recruits affected the selection criteria for the annual recruitment of new conscripts. At the same time, opinion polls indicated that broad interest existed among individuals who wanted to serve in the armed forces. Thus, not everyone interested in serving could be called to service. While the government saw that it was vital to maintain this service obligation, it began to reform the conscription system to better reflect the current context, which reflected a decreased need for manpower but with a seemingly large enough potential pool of recruits for voluntary service to succeed, as the 2007 opinion polls conducted by the Swedish Defense University suggested (Kommittédirektiv 2007, 5–7).

Given the above, the government launched an inquiry to explore the possibility of moving from conscription to voluntary military service. This political decision was followed by a series of other inquiries in which additional aspects of transforming military recruitment were discussed. Aware of the success of voluntary recruitment in other countries, it was decided that the SDF should embark on opinion-shaping activities, such as advertising, that would help them recruit enough voluntary personnel (Utredningen om totalförsvarsplikten 2008, 112–13).

As noted above, the policy of total defense, in which different societal sectors were expected to participate in the country's defense, has a long tradition in Sweden. When the question of abolishing compulsory military service entered the political agenda, it was generally agreed that citizens' total defense obligation should remain part of the legislation. However, opinions toward deactivating peacetime compulsory military service varied. Thus, the Swedish Parliament's decision to end peacetime conscription as part of the 2009 Defense Decision was hardly an easy one. While the center-right government's policy was accepted on June 16, 2009, with 153 votes in favor and 150 votes against, the vote signaled a weak majority of support for such a significant decision. All

opposition parties (the Social Democrats, the Left Party, and the Greens) voted against the government's proposal (Riksdagen 2009a).

According to surveys conducted by MSB and its predecessor (prior to 2009), Swedes were divided on the question of how defense should be organized. From 2000 to 2009, the period preceding the deactivation of conscription, surveys showed some fluctuation in support for conscription. When respondents were allowed to choose between a fully professional armed force, an armed force of conscripts, a fully volunteer armed force, or had no opinion, conscription was supported by approximately 37–51 percent of respondents during this period. And while conscription enjoyed the most support when compared to other alternatives, the results hardly indicated enthusiastic support for maintaining compulsory military service (MSB 2009, 175–76).

To answer the question of whether public opinion plays a legitimizing role, the short answer is yes; public opinion played a supplementary role. In various reports, memoranda, and comments produced by the government, by parliamentary committees, and individual MPs concerning reforms to the structure of armed forces recruitment, references to public opinion were rare. Political debates focused more on whether the reformed armed forces would be able to fulfill its tasks cost-effectively and whether they would be able to recruit sufficient personnel voluntarily (see, for example, the final debate before the vote, Riksdagen 2009b, §5). What is quite telling is that Oscar Rosén, chairman of the Conscription Council (Värnpliktsrådet), an organization that represented conscripts, was the only individual who directly referred to opinion surveys during the committee's work on the 2009 Defense Decision. In his hearing, Rosén argued that surveys showed "strong support for [defense] duty" (Försvarsutskottet 2009, 129).

Additionally, some MPs also emphasized cultural ties between national defense and the citizenry. Specifically, the concept of *folkliga förankring* (popular anchoring) was utilized to describe a form of cultural tie in which the armed forces are expected to reflect society in terms of their values and attitudes. After the Cold War, this concept had seemingly replaced the more militant concept of *försvarsvilja* (willingness to defend). However, the government's rationale for utilizing the concept included an interest in focusing people's attention on shared values as well as on the economic burden of defense (Utredningen om frivillig försvarsverksamhet 2008, 44–46). Because of this, the Social Democrats utilized *folkliga förankring* to underpin their opposition to the all-voluntary force, preferring a reformed conscription system that would

entail a shorter service requirement for men and women alike (Kommittédirektiv 2007; Riksdagen 2009c, Riksdagen 2009d).

The significance given to how the citizenry would feel about attachment to defense showed that people's attitudes were considered important, and the attitudes of the citizens were certainly seen as part of legitimate defense policy. However, it appeared that simply surveying people's opinions was not enough to either describe or to explain the state of this cultural connection either before the deactivation of conscription or shortly thereafter. While a review of the total defense obligation and voluntariness was published in 2009, MSB's predecessor, the Swedish National Board of Psychological Defense (Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar), commented that based on a number of defense reviews and the ongoing political debate, the population needed even more precise defense information (Utredningen om totalförsvarsplikten 2009, 209–10).

Later, the results of a 2016 MSB opinion survey revealed that Swedes were not very confident about the country's foreign and defense policy, although a clear majority—about three-quarters—believed that Sweden should be defended in case of an armed attack. Forty-two percent of respondents signaled trust in the country's foreign policy, and 31 percent trusted its defense policy. Further, it is interesting to note that while 53 percent of respondents supported conscription, only 10 percent believed the country was capable of meeting an armed attack (MSB 2016, 11). While we should emphasize that such opinion surveys do not offer deep explanations regarding the view of respondents, they may reflect the situation that Sweden was facing in its foreign and defense policy at that time, namely, that (1) an armed attack was considered an increasingly possible scenario, (2) the SDF was not able to recruit the necessary number of personnel with the voluntary system, and (3) the credibility of the Swedish concept of total defense had become a political issue since Sweden had difficulties in recruiting enough manpower on the basis of voluntary military service and simultaneously the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 highlighted the importance of national defense (e.g., Försvarsdepartement 2017, 2019). Given this context, on March 2, 2017, the coalition government comprised of Social Democrats and Greens decided to reactivate conscription.

It is important to note that this decision to reactivate conscription, unlike the decision to deactivate conscription in 2009, which was taken by the Swedish Parliament, was a decision made solely by the government. As such, Allan Widman (Liberals) pointed out in Parliament on

May 18, 2017, that the decision was not “anchored” by the elected representatives of the Swedish people. A similar critique was expressed by Hans Wallmark (Moderate) (Riksdagen 2017).

Indeed, an analysis of the 2017–18 parliamentary debates on reactivating conscription reveals that public opinion was seldom directly mentioned and that the results of opinion surveys played no significant role in legitimizing reactivation. This does not mean, however, that people’s attitudes were irrelevant in the political debates. On the contrary, two reports by the Ministry of Defence about resistance (*motståndskraft*) and defense capability published in 2017 and 2019 emphasized the citizens’ willingness to defend (*försvarsvilja*) and the people’s “anchoring” (*folkförankring*), which was argued to be the basis of mobilizing the population for credible or “total defense” (Försvarsdepartment 2017, 32, 64, 81; Försvarsdepartment 2019, 108). The 2019 report referred to the 2018 public opinion survey of the MSB in which 72 percent of respondents believed that Sweden should defend itself against an armed attack even if the outcome appeared uncertain (Försvarsdepartment 2019, 42). In the report, people’s anchoring to defense was connected with the SDF’s ability to contribute to peacetime crises and to the requirement that women serve in the SDF (Försvarsdepartment 2019, 150, 238). Thus, the importance of the psychological defense, which had been considered important during the Cold War period in both Sweden and Finland, was once again emphasized in politics, as was the role of the MSB to provide defense information and hence to support positive attitudes and the anchoring of people to national defense (Försvarsdepartment 2017, 31, 132; Försvarsdepartment 2019, 108).

The concept of *folkförankring*, which, as we have seen, connected the idea of public opinion with conscription policy, also appeared in parliamentary debates in which reactivating conscription was discussed. The political interpretation was that people’s attachment to defense had weakened and hence that citizens were not willing to fulfill their military service voluntarily. In this context, parliamentarians argued that reactivating conscription would have a positive effect on people’s attachment to defense, since, as right-wing MP Mikael Jansson (Sweden Democrats) argued, the process of conscript education was a way of making people feel more involved in national defense. Peter Helander (Centre Party) also argued that people had to feel that they could be involved in defense (*bidra*) and that *folkförankring* was the most important defense capability. According to Lotta Johnsson Fornarve (Left Party), reactivating conscription in a way that called both men and

women to service was an important step for anchoring defense (Riksdagen 2018, 155–58).

In the Swedish context, the political rhetoric regarding the anchoring of people to national defense can be considered an expression of patriotic sentiments. Political elites aimed to strengthen this sentiment by considering values such as equality when reforming conscription. As the following section discusses, Swedish arguments had some similarities with the Finnish arguments by emphasizing the relationship between conscription and the willingness to defend.

Finland: Emphasis on the Relationship between Conscription and the Willingness to Defend

Unlike what occurred in Sweden, the role and position of conscription in Finland remained quite stable. Conscription there has traditionally been an institution that has been broadly supported, seldom contested, and linked to national and cultural characteristics (Laitinen and Nokkala 2005; Levi 1996, 139–40; Sirén 2009). However, competing discourses on using and reforming conscription existed, especially in the early 2010s. In these discourses, conscription was reflected through various viewpoints. Perhaps the most significant of these were different interpretations of security, the relationships between public attitudes, and the opinions toward conscription as an institution. In short, conscription was not only the way to provide needed resources to defend Finnish territory. It has also been a part of the narratives that were used to build a sense of national identity among Finns (Laitinen and Nokkala 2005).

However, modern-day Finland has experienced changing discourses about conscription as well as about its purpose and meaning (Tainio 2015). Government Reports on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, which are probably the closest equivalents of Finnish foreign and defense policy doctrines written in single documents, have maintained the role of conscription as an important part of Finnish defense. Moreover, while Swedish elites only referred to the role of public opinion indirectly when debating the deactivation of conscription, Finnish elites used public opinion more directly to maintain the legitimacy of conscription.

In Finland, three types of public opinion have played the most significant role based on ABDI opinion polls: (1) a broad acceptance of conscription among the population as a basis of national defense (ABDI 2020, 10, 13–17); (2) a high level of willingness to defend Finland that

has consistently been manifested by over 65 percent of the population since the late 1980s (ABDI 2020, 30); and (3) trust in the Finnish Defense Forces (FDF). According to a 2019 survey conducted by the right-of-center think tank Finnish Business and Policy Forum (*Elinkeinoelämän valtuuskunta*), the FDF were, together with the police and the President of the Republic, the most trusted institutions in Finland. This trust of the FDF was not new, having been reported by others previously (Haavisto 2019, 2). Thus, such positive attitudes regarding defense and the FDF could be utilized in political discourse to shape the legitimacy of conscription and its role in Finnish defense policy.

As early as 2009, an ad hoc Conscription Committee, with the aim of representing all of society and to reach consensus on the issue of conscription, was established by Minister of Defense Jyri Häkämies to investigate conscription's societal impact. It is interesting to note that the Conscription Committee's 2010 published report underlined each of the public opinions listed above: conscription was viewed as an institution that garnered broad acceptance, the FDF was seen as an organization that enjoyed widespread trust, and a particular emphasis was placed on the fact that the willingness to defend Finland was a bedrock of the country (Asevelvollisuustyöryhmä 2010, 10). Viitasalo (2013, 47) has drawn attention to the circular relationship between conscription and the high level of willingness to defend among the country's population. As the Conscription Committee discussed in its 2010 report, this relationship meant that conscription leads to a high willingness to defend, and a high willingness to defend leads to maintaining high levels of public support for conscription (Asevelvollisuustyöryhmä 2010, 22–23).

Indeed, this view reflected how political elites viewed the relationship between conscription and citizens' attitudes and engagement. Opinion surveys conducted by the ABDI provided evidence that could be referred to in elite discourse. This was particularly true since surveys consistently showed broad public support for conscription as well as a strong willingness among respondents to defend the country (ABDI 2020, 30).

However, some counter-discourse was also present. For example, in 2010 the Green League adopted a program maintaining that conscription should only be carried out on a selective basis (Vihreät 2010). Even before, Pekka Haavisto, Johanna Sumuvuori, and Tarja Cronberg—experienced Green League politicians—argued that, according to international comparisons, the high level of willingness to defend in

Finland should not be linked to conscription in general. Sumuvuori even suggested that conscription was related more to identity politics than to security threats (e.g., *Valtiopäivät* 2009, 89–90; *Valtiopäivät* 2006a, 2006b; see also Cronberg 2006). Nonetheless, as already alluded to, most public opinion surveys conducted between 2006 and 2013 reinforced the legitimacy of conscription in two ways. First, high levels of willingness to defend, as measured by the ABDI, were frequently indirectly referenced but, occasionally, were referred to in a more direct fashion as well when the speaker was associated with the ABDI. And second, since the ABDI was a permanent parliamentary committee, there were always MPs who were assigned roles in the ABDI. References to poll data collected by the ABDI were usually used to assert that Finns support conscription and that both the willingness to defend and the support for conscription as an institution were significant factors contributing to the country's defense credibility (e.g., *Puolustusvaliokunta* 2009, 18; *Valtiopäivät* 2009, 4). Indeed, in 2007 the Defense Committee voted to support the idea that conscription and the willingness to defend could be linked to each other (*Puolustusvaliokunta* 2007). Thus, while not all parties were fully in support of conscription, an examination of Finnish parliamentary debate shows that public opinion was utilized to support current defense policy as well as the role of conscription.

Later, in the final years of the 2010s and during Prime Minister Sanna Marin's (Social Democratic Party) term in office, political interest in reconsidering Finnish conscription intensified again. Ideas circulated among the public of a possible wider civil service model that was suggested by the think tank Elisabeth Rehn Bank of Ideas (2018). While the proposed model did not receive widespread support, these public opinion trends did encourage the government to establish an ad hoc parliamentary committee on conscription in 2020. The government connected the establishment of the committee to the centrality of public opinion, especially the effect that the people's willingness to defend Finland traditionally had had on Finnish defense politics. In short, the willingness to defend has consistently been cited as a fundamental principle of Finnish defense, constituting a part of the national defense that was articulated in the Finnish government's reports on security and defense policy (Kaarkoski 2020, 148–70).

The ABDI public opinion survey offered support to the argument that the willingness to defend Finland was exceptionally high among the public. From 2010 to 2017 over 70 percent of respondents answered yes to the ABDI question that measured people's willingness to defend

Finland (ABDI 2021, 53). A year later, the results of the 2018 ABDI public opinion survey caused such widespread political and societal reaction that its results were thought to be shocking, as only 66 percent of the respondents expressed a willingness to defend (ABDI 2018, 9–10). The percent of those willing to defend Finland was considered so small that the Finnish Parliament decided to hold a special debate in December 2018 to discuss the state of people's willingness to defend the country. If nothing else, this decision is clear evidence of just how seriously opinion surveys on this specific question were taken by the government and Parliament. During that parliamentary debate, MPs considered whether the current form of conscription was related to people's ideas of equality or with possible threat scenarios that society could possibly face (Kaarkoski 2020, 168–69).

In 2019, maintaining people's willingness to defend was incorporated into Prime Minister Marin's Government Program, which also mentioned the establishment of a broad-based parliamentary committee to explore the possibility of developing conscription while meeting the country's national defense obligations. The aim of the committee was to maintain a high level of willingness to defend as well as to strengthen social equality among Finns (Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government 2019). Thus, while the committee prioritized the country's national defense needs, it was also tasked with strengthening the will to defend and enhancing social equality in Finland (Valtioneuvosto 2020). In short, public opinion (particularly Finns' willingness to defend Finland) was a central driving force behind the establishment of this parliamentary committee that convened between March 2020 and October 2021.

In the 2020–21 parliamentary conscription debates, MPs continued to refer to the ABDI's opinion survey results both to garner legitimacy for their conscription reform ideas and to deny that any significant changes were needed. The results of the ABDI opinion surveys indicated that the willingness to defend Finland was weakening, especially among women and the younger generation. As a result, data were presented in the parliamentary debates to highlight the fact that certain changes in the conscription system were needed to bolster the attitudes of women and youth. Indeed, public opinion data regarding the willingness of both groups to defend Finland were presented in such a manner that the committee was given little option but to find solutions to this phenomenon (Valtiopäivät 2020, 143–49).

Despite this, the parliamentary committee was not encouraged to introduce any radical changes, and the more moderate position was especially supported by Social Democratic and Centre Party MPs as well as by Minister of Defense Antti Kaikkonen (Centre Party). The argument made by this group of MPs was that, while the results of public opinion surveys clearly revealed that people's attitudes were changing and that people's attitudes were important, Finns' support for conscription and their willingness to defend the country were still high compared to international standards. Hence, no dramatic conclusions can be drawn about the effect of public pressure on conscription reform (Valtiopäivät 2020, 143–45; Valtioneuvosto 2021, 380).

Altogether and across party lines, Finnish MPs argued that, from the military's perspective, the existing conscription system was working reasonably well and the military's needs to reform conscription were more moderate than the needs arising from public opinion and societal attitudes where the question of equality was emphasized. Several MPs, such as Ilkka Kanerva (National Coalition Party), who served as chair of the parliamentary conscription committee, and Atte Harjanne (Greens), argued that the future feasibility of the Finnish defense and conscription systems required citizen trust, acceptance, and appreciation (Valtiopäivät 2021a, 7–9). When the committee submitted its final report in November 2021, its recommendations included such items as extending the call-up system to all eighteen-year-olds, including both men and women. It also recommended the establishment of a new military service classification that would allow people to serve in the armed forces despite certain health limitations.

In December 2021 the ABDI published the results of a new public opinion survey in which 52 percent of respondents expressed support for the current conscription system. Moreover, 68 percent answered yes to the question that asked about their willingness to defend, compared to 65 percent who had answered yes the previous year (ABDI 2021, 12, 22). Pointing to these results, some MPs of the right and Minister of Defense Kaikkonen interpreted these results as proof that people's willingness to defend the country was growing. Further, they referred to the surveys as "research," which, we believe, illustrates the value placed on public opinion surveys in Finnish politics (Valtiopäivät 2021b, 14; Valtiopäivät 2021c, 50). Nonetheless, it is important to note here that one could justifiably argue that these speeches made in Parliament gave misleading interpretations of ABDI results. It is particularly important

to note, for example, that the small increase in people's willingness to defend Finland was actually within the margin of error. At this time, it also remains to be seen whether the parliamentary committee's recommendations to reform conscription will be implemented and whether those reforms will satisfy the public's sense of equality and its willingness to accept conscription, or whether public opinion will evolve in a direction that compels political elites to consider additional conscription principles such as gender equality.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to study the use and interpretation of public opinion in two Nordic democracies with conscription—Sweden and Finland. It is important to emphasize that, in terms of this special issue on patriotism, key documents on conscription in the two countries pay little direct attention to patriotism or to other, similar concepts of attachment or allegiance to the state. Conscription, however, provides an institutional context that obliges citizens to participate in the state's defense. It is in this context that political speeches about public opinion can be seen as expressions of attachment toward the state.

We have seen that, in Sweden, explicit references to public opinion survey data were not very common in political debates and argumentation. Still, public opinion was referred to indirectly in an attempt to legitimize various viewpoints on conscription. Within Parliament, the central question was whether defense policy in general and conscription in particular were organized according to principles and practices that help anchor people to national defense. When the decision was being taken to deactivate conscription, opinion surveys raised expectations that an ample pool of potential volunteers existed for voluntary service. Later, to highlight the necessity of anchoring the citizenry to national defense, it was argued that the armed forces should reflect society in terms of its values and attitudes. Whereas it was considered important that the people as a whole had to feel an attachment to defense, political elites had come to believe that people's attachment to defense had weakened. Thus, moving to gender-neutral conscription and providing information on defense through the MSB were presented as important steps that would anchor people to national defense.

In Finnish politics, public opinion was used more directly to maintain the legitimacy of conscription as an institution. An emphasis on the relationship between conscription and public opinion (especially

regarding people's willingness to defend, which is high in Finland) has been commonly used in political discourse to legitimize conscription and its role within Finnish defense policy. A common political interpretation has been that conscription and the willingness to defend are linked, and attempts to question this narrative have not been successful. In fact, this may be a central reason why conscription maintained its political legitimacy in Finland even during the first decade of the 2000s when the possibility of an armed attack was even more unrealistic than it had previously been (or would be later). Changes in public opinion, as presented by the ABDI, have led parliamentarians to consider whether conscription in its current form aligns with citizens' ideas of equality or regarding threats that the country may face. Because political elites have focused primarily on the opinions of women and youth in Finland, the proposals of the parliamentary committee on conscription reflect this.

As stated at the outset of this article, at the very foundation of parliamentary democracy is the legitimacy that politicians and political institutions enjoy. The empirical cases discussed here illustrate that public opinion is a central source of legitimacy in political debates on conscription. In the absence of direct democracy (in the form of plebiscites) to determine the future of conscription, the people's will is reflected through elections as well as through elected officials' interpretations of public opinion. As such, the results of public opinion surveys provide political elites with an instrument by which to legitimize their own views by anchoring people to national defense. At the same time, however, politicians can justify these demands for the reshaping or modification of conscription by claiming that a change in policy would strengthen people's engagement with national defense and, hence, reflect public opinion.

In conclusion, conscription has traditionally been a way of organizing defense in both countries. That is to say, a sense of duty toward society, feeling a sense of patriotism, and a sense of allegiance have been culturally embedded and have become part of both Sweden's and Finland's long-term traditions. However, one could also claim that the Swedish concept of anchoring defense to the people or the Finnish emphasis on the willingness to defend are also indicators of this sense of allegiance. Both concepts are reflective of behaviors that are related to citizens' willingness to participate in defense. Therefore, in the absence of competing and equally demanding ways to demonstrate allegiance to the state, one could claim that ideas and attitudes related to conscription are indeed a reflection of individuals' relationship with their state and, thus, their sense of allegiance.

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