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THE LEGITIMACY OF CHANGE

A qualitative study explaining the democratic legitimacy of Sweden's NATO membership application

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Abstract

In May 2022, Sweden's government led by Magdalena Andersson, decided to apply for membership in the military alliance NATO. The decision ended more than 200 years of Sweden's non-military alignment and represented a major policy shift by the Andersson cabinet. Through the use of the principal-agent theory, this thesis evaluates this decision. Data from public opinion polls represents the preferences of the electorate, while statements and decisions made by members of the Andersson cabinet represents the preferences of the cabinet. This data has been captured and compared in three distinct time periods beginning in November 2021, when the Andersson cabinet took office, and ending in May 2022, when the decision to join NATO was made. The analysis of the preferences of the electorate and the cabinet shows that the cabinet's actions aligned with the preferences of the electorate. Because the preferences of the electorate and the cabinet were fully congruent when the decision to join NATO was made in May 2022, this thesis evaluates Sweden's application for NATO membership as being democratically legitimate from a principal-agent perspective.

Keywords: democratic legitimacy, NATO membership, principal-agent theory

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1. Introduction

The concept of legitimacy has been studied and analysed by philosophers, political scientists and other scholars and the concept is an important one within the social sciences. Most political systems legitimise themselves by attaining the consent of the people over which they rule and thus achieve *democratic legitimacy* (Heywood, 2015). Popular consent is most commonly expressed through elections and referendums (ibid). In Sweden, referendums have occasionally been used to legitimise a major political decision in particular as it relates to Sweden's accession to an international community. The last two Swedish referendums are examples of this: the 1994 referendum regarding Swedish membership in the European Union and the 2003 referendum regarding Sweden's adoption of the Euro as its official currency (Sveriges riksdag, 2023). Yet, when the Swedish government led by then-prime minister Magdalena Andersson, made the decision to apply for membership in the military alliance NATO in May 2022, no referendum was held. Only six months earlier, when she took office as prime minister, Andersson declared before the Swedish parliament that "our non-participation in military alliances serves our country well and contributes to stability and security in northern Europe. Sweden will not apply for membership of NATO" (Government of Sweden, 2021, p. 13). Nevertheless, six months later, the cabinet she led decided to apply for membership in NATO, bringing to an end more than 200 years of Sweden's military non-alignment. The overarching aim of the thesis is to understand this profound change in Sweden's position and whether the cabinet's decision to join NATO was legitimate. This overarching research aim is divided into the subsequent research questions:

- *How did the cabinet's position on a potential Swedish NATO membership change during the cabinet's first six months in office?*
- *What was the electorate's preference on a potential Swedish NATO membership during the same time period?*
- *Did the cabinet's decision to apply for membership in NATO in May 2022 reflect the preferences of the electorate?*
- *Was the cabinet's decision legitimate from the perspective of the principal-agent theory?*

In order to answer these research questions, the thesis firsts presents a theoretical perspective on the issue of legitimacy: the principal-agent theory, where the electorate is treated as principal and the cabinet as agent. The theory presupposes that the principal delegates power to the agent and the agent is then to act on the behalf and in the interests of the principal. According to the theory, if the decision of the Andersson cabinet (the agent) to join NATO in May 2022 reflected the interests of the electorate (the principal), the cabinet's decision can be regarded as legitimate. To evaluate the the alignment of preferences between principal and agent, the thesis traces the changes in the preferences of the electorate (principal) and the Andersson cabinet (agent) over a period of six months: from when the Andersson cabinet took office in November 2021 to when it made the decision to apply for NATO membership in May 2022. The preferences of the agent are operationalised as statements and actions by individual cabinet ministers or the cabinet as a whole, while the preferences of the principal are derived from public opinion polling data. As the preferences of principal and agent are documented, the thesis evaluates the congruence of the preferences of the electorate and the cabinet and, consequently, the legitimacy of the application for NATO membership from the principal-agent theory's perspective.

1.1 Literature

By evaluating the eventual congruence of the cabinet's and the electorate's preferences and its implication on the democratic legitimacy of the decision to join NATO, this thesis contributes to the literature on democratic legitimacy in a parliamentary consensus democracy through the examination of elected representatives' adaptability to changing preferences of their electorate. Sweden's application for NATO membership is a case of democratic legitimacy. There are several definitions of democratic legitimacy, particularly since there are different views of what democracy is and what form it should take (Wagner, 2005). A political system can be described as democratically legitimate when it rests on the "consent or agreement of the people" (Heywood, 2015, p. 134). This consent is most commonly expressed through popular participation in elections (ibid). Jürgen Habermas specifies that it is necessary that the public participates in the "justificatory processes of deliberative democracy" in order to ascertain political legitimacy (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017). According to him,

only a deliberative democracy can generate political decisions which will be accepted by the general public (ibid). Alice Baderin (2016) writes, on the basis of David Estlund's ideas, "that democratic legitimacy involves honouring people's decisions rather than tracking their preferences". While this may seem as an argument against this thesis (which seeks to empirically evaluate the proposition that Sweden's NATO application was democratically legitimate by evaluating the aligned preferences between the Swedish electorate and its government), Baderin (2016) also highlights examples where research including public opinion polls provides a proper perspective of the electorate's preferences. One example she gives is the 1999 Australian referendum on a republican form of government: opinion polls showed that there actually was strong support for a republic in Australia in the lead up to the referendum, despite the fact that a majority voted against a republic (ibid). Baderin (2016) argues, however, that democratic legitimacy means respecting the decisions of the people and not merely gauging their preferences.

Previous research has been made on the legitimacy of referendums relating to EU membership (Detlef & Storsved, 1995) as well as on the legitimacy of referendums versus parliamentary decisions relating to the United Kingdom's exit from the EU (Bellamy, 2019). Other scholars have also focused specifically on the EU and its democratic legitimacy by using the principal-agent theory. In his report on the legitimacy of the EU's defence and security policy, Wolfgang Wagner (2005, p. 8) writes that "a policy is deemed legitimate to the extent that the decision-making process has been open to participation by citizens. Whereas elections are a key mechanism allowing citizens to participate in the selection of programmes and persons, parliament is the key institution to which citizens delegate the competence to make laws and supervise their execution. Referendums and civil society's activities may also add to the democratic legitimacy". Wagner (2005), therefore, acknowledges that a decision can be democratically legitimate as long as citizens have participated in the process somehow and that referendums only serve as an addition, not a basis, for legitimacy.

1.2 Purpose and Contribution

The literature shows that decision-making processes in which the general public are participating, such as a consensus parliamentary democracy, can be seen as democratically legitimate. Scholars and philosophers have been focused on the democratic legitimacy of a political system, while this thesis wants to contribute to this particular field by explaining the democratic legitimacy of a political decision. The thesis seeks to fill a research gap as it relates to the literature on democratic legitimacy by focusing on a specific case in which the electorate's preferences changed in a short time period and the elected representatives had to adapt to these changing preferences to ensure that the decision was legitimate. The thesis will show whether politicians in a parliamentary consensus democracy adapt to the preferences of their electorate even when that preference reverses long-standing precedent, such as Sweden's policy of military non-alignment.

1.3 Disposition

This section briefly presents the layout for this thesis. It begins with an introductory section presenting the research questions, literature and the purpose of the thesis. The following section presents the theoretical framework which is the principal-agent theory and the section following that is the method section. Then a brief background of the subject of this study is given before the evidence section is presented. This is then followed by a detailed analysis of the presented evidence. The final section presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis and potential areas of future research.

2. Theoretical framework

This thesis utilises the theoretical tools of the principal-agent theory as its theoretical framework. This section will define concepts, assumptions and propositions central to the theory and of relevance to the research questions.

2.1 Principal-agent theory

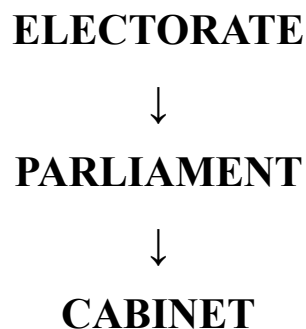
The principal-agent theory has its roots in economics but has been used and applied in other fields, including political science (Bendickson et al., 2016). The theory supposes that there are two actors: a *principal* and an *agent*. According to Rebecca Mitchell and David Meacham (2011, p. 151), “agency theory is based on the relationship between one party, the principal, who designates certain tasks and decisions to another party, the agent”. The theory suggests that the practical reason for delegation is the *agent* having certain resources at hand, which the *principal* lacks. It is, therefore, practical for the *principal* to delegate power and responsibility to its *agent* (Strøm, 2000). The ideas of delegation and accountability are central to the theory. Just as there is a chain of delegation from *principal* to *agent*, there is also “a corresponding chain of accountability that runs in the reverse direction” (Strøm, 2000, p. 267). Different mechanisms in each political system can help the principal control or demand responsibility from its agent. *Ex-post mechanisms* can be used by the principal after an action has been taken by the agent to hold the agent accountable (ibid). To illustrate, in a parliamentary democracy, the electorate (the principal) can withdraw their support from a political party or a politician (the agent) in an election if it feels they are not properly representing its interests. Consequently, the ideas of *accountability* and *delegation* are not only central to the principal-agent theory but to representative democracy. Kaare Strøm (2000, p. 267) argues that “what makes democratic regimes democratic, is precisely that they contain mechanisms by which the people, the ultimate principals in democratic societies, can select and control their representatives”.

2.2 Principal-agent theory and Sweden

The chains of delegation and accountability look different depending on the political system (Strøm, 2000). This section will apply the theory to Sweden's parliamentary system. The delegation chain begins with the electorate, who is the *ultimate principal* as they are never in the role of agent. The chain ends with the public servants whose task is to implement policy (ibid). The chain is divided into several smaller chains between *principals (P)* and *agents (A)*. This is illustrated below using the ideas of Kaare Strøm (2000) and applying them to parts of Sweden's parliamentary system (Sveriges riksdag, 2016):

1. The electorate (**P**) elects MPs to parliament (**A**)
2. The parliament (**P**) elects the prime minister (**A**)
3. The prime minister (**P**) appoints the ministers (**A**)

The chains of delegation and accountability are not always as clear as illustrated above. Scholars (Bucur, 2013; Bäck, 2009 & Müller, 2000) have also studied political parties as having a major role in the chain of delegation, both as agents and as principals. This will be particularly important for this study since the cabinet that decided to apply for NATO membership was a one-party cabinet consisting only of ministers from the Social Democratic party (Omni, 2021). The illustration below demonstrates the beginning of the chain of delegation under Sweden's parliamentary system:



As this illustrates, the cabinet's immediate principal is not the people, but the parliament since Sweden's cabinet is responsible to parliament (Sveriges riksdag, 2016). However, this thesis

presupposes that there is a chain of delegation and accountability between the people and the cabinet due to the institutional design of the Swedish parliamentary system. Since the cabinet has to rely on parliamentary support to be in office, and since the electorate elects parliament, one can presuppose that the cabinet is, by extension, accountable to the electorate. Furthermore, the Swedish political system has not faced major agency problems in comparison to other countries, with *ex-post* mechanisms having “worked fairly well”, according to Torbjörn Bergman (2006, p. 615).

2.3 Agency problems

The principal-agent theory is sometimes referred to as the principal-agent *problem*, as the theory identifies certain problems regarding the delegation of power from the principal to the agent. One such issue is *information asymmetry* (or asymmetric information). This issue stems from the difficulty for the principal to monitor the agent (Miller & Whitford, 2016). This is important for this thesis as the electorate are unaware of all the details behind Sweden’s NATO application. The information asymmetry also manifests in the difference in knowledge on matters of importance to the interests of the agent and/or principal (Poth & Selck, 2009). While the Swedish public has broad access to public documents according to law, the constitution restricts access to documents concerning “the security of the Realm or its relations with another state or an international organisation” (Sveriges riksdag, 2016, p. 174). According to the theory, this is problematic as it may incentivise the agent to take actions that are not in the interest of the principal, as it becomes more difficult for the principal to monitor its agent. Asymmetric information can lead to *agency loss*, a central principal-agent problem (Kassim & Menon, 2003). Agency loss may also arise when the principal and agent have different interests, and the agent uses delegated powers to further their own interests rather than the principal’s (Martínez-Gallardo & Schleiter, 2015).

2.4 Theoretical expectation on legitimacy

As is common for the principal-agent theory (Strøm, 2000), in this thesis the electorate (namely, the Swedish voters) is assumed to be the principal and the cabinet (namely, Magdalena Andersson's cabinet) is assumed to be the agent. When the preferences of the principal align with those of the agent, it suggests that the agent is effectively carrying out the will of the principal. In other words, the agent's actions reflect the mandate given to them by the electorate and, therefore the agent's actions are legitimate. However, if the preferences of the principal and the agent diverge, and the agent acts on its own preferences, this poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the agent's actions. If the principal is the electorate, one can draw conclusions not only of the legitimacy of the agent's actions, but of democratic legitimacy. Therefore, if the analysis finds the alignment of preferences between the principal (the voters) and the agent (the Andersson cabinet) in May 2022, then the cabinet's decision to apply for membership in NATO is democratically legitimate from the perspective of the principal-agent theory. The divergence of preferences would signify a lack of democratic legitimacy.

2.5 Summary

To summarise, the principal-agent theory assumes that there are two actors: a principal and an agent. The principal delegates power to the agent and holds the agent accountable through different mechanisms. At the same time, the principal-agent theory identifies several agency problems which complicate the delegation and accountability process between the principal and agent. Legitimacy, according to the theory, is achieved when the preferences of agent and principal are aligned. Should the preferences of the electorate and the Andersson cabinet be aligned as of May 2022, the cabinet's decision to apply for membership in NATO should be evaluated as being democratically legitimate, as per the principal-agent theory.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

To answer the research questions, one must empirically evaluate the alignment of preferences between the principal and agent, as per the principal-agent theory. In order to evaluate the extent to which the preferences of principal and agent were congruent, this thesis gathers their respective preferences across three distinct time periods labelled as T_1 , T_2 and T_3 . The principal's preferences are operationalised using data from public opinion polls on Swedish NATO membership, while decisions made by the cabinet and statements issued by three pivotal cabinet members concerning foreign and defence policy serve as operational measures of the agent's preferences. This thesis examines the evolution of both the agent and the principal's preferences and assesses their congruency using process tracing. Process tracing is a particularly relevant method to use in a study like this one as the focus is on the process and not the outcome of the process, the outcome being Sweden's bid for NATO membership (Esaiasson et al., 2017).

3.2 Process tracing

In order to answer the thesis's research questions, one needs to trace the process leading up to the cabinet decision to join NATO. This tracing will encompass the period from when Andersson's cabinet took office in November 2021 until May 2022, when the decision to apply for NATO membership was made. By examining this six-month period, the thesis aims to elucidate the motivations for Andersson's cabinet making a significant change to Sweden's foreign policy. Furthermore, in pursuit of explaining the democratic legitimacy of the decision within the framework of the principal-agent theory, a critical examination of the congruency of the principal and agent's preferences is also essential. In order to do so, the process tracing will be applied to three distinct time periods labelled as T_1 , T_2 and T_3 :

1. T_1 : November 2021 - February 2022
2. T_2 : March 2022 - April 2022
3. T_3 : May 2022

In T_1 neither the principal nor agent had a preference in favour of NATO membership, while in T_3 both were in favour of NATO membership. In T_2 the preferences of the principal were changing and the evidence from this period is crucial to understand how the agent adapted to these changes in order to avoid *agency loss* and to achieve democratic legitimacy for the decision to join NATO. This allows one to see the changing preferences of both agent and principal since evidence shows that in T_1 they were congruent against NATO membership and in T_3 they were congruent in favour of NATO membership.

3.3 Evidence & Considerations

In order to ascertain the congruence of the preferences of the agent and principal, this thesis uses public opinion poll data in which the electorate have answered questions regarding a potential NATO membership to capture the principal's preferences. In total, the results of 12 public opinion polls, published during the three time periods, are operationally defined as the preferences of the principal. The thesis utilises opinion poll data from polling institutes Novus, Ipsos, Demoskop & Sifo. Oral statements by the relevant cabinet members serve as the evidence for the agent's preferences: 16 statements made by three cabinet members during the three time periods constitute the preferences of the cabinet. The three cabinet members whose statements serve as evidence are:

- Magdalena Andersson, *prime minister*
- Peter Hultqvist, *defence minister*
- Ann Linde, *foreign minister*

As these individuals held cabinet positions with responsibility for Sweden's foreign and defence policy, it was also these who provided the most statements regarding Sweden's NATO membership application. Given thesis feasibility considerations, not every statement

made by every cabinet member during the examined time period was analysed. The statements from direct sources were prioritized, thereby ensuring their accuracy.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Analysis of empirical material

Due to the differences in the empirical material representing the principal and the agent's respective preferences, they are analysed in two different ways. The preferences of the principal (the electorate) are analysed through the framework of majoritarian democracy, meaning that if public opinion polling shows a majority or even a plurality of the electorate supporting or opposing NATO membership then that is regarded as the preference of the electorate. While the empirical material operationalised as the preferences of the principal are quantitative in the form of data from public opinion polling, the preferences of the agent are qualitative in the form of statements. The preferences of the agent are determined through a qualitative text analysis of the statements by the three cabinet members. More specifically, this thesis uses a system of classifications to analyse texts, with some modifications to this way of analysis as it is outlined in the book *Metodpraktikan* (Esaiasson et. al, 2017). In order to classify what preference a particular statement is exhibiting, questions are asked to the text. The two main questions it will ask are:

- *Is the text arguing in favour of NATO membership?*
- *Is the text arguing against NATO membership, i.e. in favour of continued military non-alignment?*

These questions are forthright and mutually exclusive which is a key component of an analysis using classifications as a statement can not be regarded as benign in favour and against NATO membership at the same time. Furthermore, the statements that serve as evidence for the preferences of the agent tend to be forthright thus eliminating the need for any deeper analysis determining which preference they are expressing. However, it is still

worth classifying the statements as this will simplify a comparison with the preferences of the principal and therefore will reveal whether the preferences were congruent when the decision to join NATO was made.

3.4.2 Analytical framework

Drawing on the insights from the principal-agent theory, the analysis seeks to determine whether the preferences of the agent and principal were congruent when the decision to join NATO was made. A congruence of preferences between the two actors would imply, according to the theoretical framework, a democratically legitimate decision.

Additionally, the analysis will explore the influence of other potential principals and what implication they might have on the democratic legitimacy of the decision including the grassroots organisations of the Social Democratic party and the political parties crucial for the cabinet's parliamentary support.

3.5 Validity & Reliability

This section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical material in terms of validity and reliability. First to note, the issue of accuracy of polling data. *Metodpraktikan* states that "If, for example, 45 percent of people in a sample of Swedish citizens state that they are in favour of Swedish NATO membership, we can not be sure that the corresponding proportion of the population of Swedish citizens is, in fact, 45 percent" (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 180). Every opinion poll data has a margin of error and therefore there is a certain degree of uncertainty attached such data. Nevertheless, a well-conducted opinion poll, employing proper methodology and utilising a representative sample, should effectively capture the opinions of the electorate (Strömbäck, 2014). The public opinion data employed in the thesis is sourced from reputable polling organisations, mitigating concerns regarding the accuracy of the opinion poll results in representing the electorate's preferences.

It is also worth discussing the reliability of the ministers' statements serving as empirical evidence. As previously mentioned, many of the statements are captured by video from press conferences, interviews or public speeches meaning that they can be verified as correct and ensures that they have not been inaccurately paraphrased or misquoted. Furthermore, the statements are reported in reliable news sources from well-established Swedish media companies.

3.6 Summary

This section has discussed the methodological issues pertaining to this study. The thesis utilises the process tracing method to examine the evolution and congruence of preferences of the principal and agent over a six-month period leading up to Sweden's application for NATO membership. This six-month period is divided into three distinct sections in which the preferences of the Andersson cabinet and the electorate are documented and compared. The first time period, T_1 , pertains to the preferences from the time point when the cabinet took office, while the last time period, T_3 , pertains to the preferences when the cabinet made the decision to join NATO. The thesis's particular focus is the middle time period, T_2 , during which the evolutions of the preferences was likely to take place. This section has also presented the analytical framework and discussed the validity and reliability of the sources.

4. Background

4.1 NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, was founded by the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. Today, the alliance has 32 member states, including the United States, Canada and several European countries (NATO, 2024). The fifth article of the North Atlantic Treaty is regarded as the most central one which states that an attack against one member state will be regarded as an attack against NATO as a whole (Dahl, 2019). From its founding until the early 1990s the alliance played a major role in the Cold War, with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact regarded as its main adversary (ibid). Following the end of the Cold War, NATO expanded towards the East by admitting former Warsaw Pact member states to the alliance (ibid). Sweden formally became a member of NATO in March 2024 (NATO, 2024).

4.2 Swedish neutrality & military non-alignment

Sweden has not participated in active warfare for over 200 years and the country has had a long tradition of neutrality and military non-alignment. When Sweden was neutral, its policy was to stay out of military alliances and to declare its neutrality if war was to break out (Brommesson, Ekengren & Michalski, 2022). Sweden successfully stayed out of both world wars in the 20th century. However, the country also breached its neutrality, for example when the then-government allowed Nazi Germany to transit its troops on Swedish railways during World War II. While Sweden maintained its neutrality during the Cold War, it also secretly cooperated with NATO and the United States (ibid). With Sweden becoming a member of the EU in 1995, the principle of neutrality was abandoned in favour of military non-alignment. In May 2022, the Swedish government decided to apply for membership in NATO, ending Sweden's centuries-long military non-alignment (ibid).

4.3 Public opinion

Data from the SOM Institute reveals that public opinion on Swedish NATO membership was consistently, and with a large margin, against NATO membership from the mid-1990s until 2013 (Göteborgs universitet, 2023). From 2013 until 2022 public opinion was relatively equally split on the issue. However, data from the SOM Institute shows that public opinion shifted sharply in favour of NATO membership in 2022 (ibid). The following section will demonstrate this shift in further detail.

5. Measuring preferences

5.1 T₁: November 2021 - February 2022

5.1.1 Agent's preferences

In the first speech that Magdalena Andersson held as newly-appointed prime minister on 30 November 2021, she stated that “Our non-participation in military alliances serves our country well and contributes to stability and security in northern Europe. Sweden will not apply for membership of NATO” (Government of Sweden, 2021, p. 13). On 6 November, defence minister Peter Hultqvist gave a speech at the Social Democratic party convention, where Hultqvist strongly rejected a future membership of NATO for Sweden and stated that he would not contribute to an application for membership as long as he serves as defence minister (Socialdemokraterna, 2021a). Hultqvist, however, welcomed having dialogue and cooperation with NATO and its members (ibid.). Magdalena Andersson reiterated this position on NATO membership in a press conference on 8 December. Andersson stated that while Sweden seeks to cooperate with NATO, membership in the alliance was off the table (Statsrådet, 2021). In a parliamentary debate on 12 January 2022, Annie Lööf of the Centre party spoke out in favour of Sweden formally declaring that the country maintains the right to apply for membership in NATO if it wishes to do so, the so-called ‘NATO option’ (Sveriges riksdag, 2022a). Andersson rejected this as she stated the importance of Sweden maintaining the *status quo* for the sake of stability (ibid.). Peter Hultqvist stressed, in a televised discussion on 30 January, that it is more important to focus on preparations for a potential crisis than on the issue of NATO membership (Socialdemokraterna, 2022a). On 16 February, foreign minister Ann Linde said in parliament that the government does not intend to apply for membership in NATO (Government of Sweden, 2022a). She stated, however, that Sweden’s foreign policy is based on a “deepened partnership with NATO” (ibid., p. 2). This evidence suggests that the cabinet was, in this period, against NATO membership but was not necessarily against having close ties with the alliance. On 24 February 2022, Russia began a

military invasion of Ukraine which was condemned by Magdalena Andersson as “unprovoked, illegal and indefensible” (Sveriges Television, 2022a).

5.1.2 Principal’s preferences

Opinion polling conducted by the polling institute Ipsos in December 2021 showed that 36% of the Swedish electorate opposed NATO membership, with 31% in favour (Holmström, 2022, 10 January). The share of proponents stating that they do not know or are unsure about NATO membership was even lower: 33% (ibid.). An opinion poll from Sifo, published on 17 January 2022, showed that 35% of respondents supported an application for membership in NATO, while 33% were against it, showing a small lead of only 2% for the proponents (TV4, 2022). Furthermore, data from the poll revealed that almost two-thirds (66%) would be open to a future NATO membership application if Sweden’s security environment were to deteriorate (ibid). A poll conducted by Novus (2022a) in the same month showed the same small lead of 2% for the proponents of NATO membership: the polling institute noted that this was within the margin of error (ibid). With several opinion polls published in this time period showing a similar share of opponents and proponents of NATO membership, it is clear that the preferences of the principal at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 were not clearly in favour of nor against NATO membership.

5.1.2 Summary of preferences in T₁

Principal: comparable levels of support in favour of and against NATO membership

Agent: strongly against NATO membership but in favour of cooperation with NATO

5.2 T₂: March 2022 - April 2022

5.2.1 Agent’s preferences

Initially, the cabinet's preferences seem to have remained unchanged from the previous time period, despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At a press conference on 8 March 2022, prime minister Magdalena Andersson rejected calls for an application for NATO membership from opposition leader Ulf Kristersson, arguing that it "would destabilize security in Europe" (Reuters, 2022). The following day, defence minister Peter Hultqvist stated that the government was not in favour of NATO membership. Still, he appeared to leave the door open for a future application by saying that "one should never say never" (Silva, 2022, 9 March). The same sentiments were expressed by Andersson in an interview on the same day (Olsson, 2022, 9 March). On 16 March, the Swedish government made the decision to establish a working group "to deliberate on the changed security environment following Russia's aggression against Ukraine" (Government of Sweden, 2022b, p. 3). All eight parliamentary parties were represented in the group under the leadership of foreign minister Ann Linde with defence minister Hultqvist taking part as well (ibid). On 30 March, Magdalena Andersson was interviewed by Swedish television. When asked about her personal position on Swedish NATO membership, Andersson stated that she would wait for the report of the parliamentary working group before deciding on the matter. In addition, she stated that "I am not, in any way, ruling out NATO membership" (Sveriges Television, 2022b). This represents a considerable shift in the agent's preferences since the government had firmly ruled out NATO membership just three weeks earlier and in *T₁*. In the same interview, Andersson referred to an internal discussion within the Social Democratic party on the matter and to the importance of any government decision on NATO membership to be anchored within the party (ibid.).

In the following month the government remained undecided on Swedish NATO membership and prime minister Magdalena Andersson continued to refer to the outcomes of the investigation by the parliamentary working group established in March. At a press conference with her Finnish counterpart, Sanna Marin, held on 13 April, Andersson pressed on the importance of considering all advantages and disadvantages of membership and that the security situation for Sweden is very serious without expressing a formed position for or against NATO membership (Norberg, 2022, 13 April). On the same day, the newspaper

Svenska Dagbladet reported that the governing Social Democratic party has in secret decided to join NATO, something which was denied by aides to the prime minister (Sveriges Radio, 2022a) and by foreign minister Linde (Sveriges Television, 2022c). Just like Andersson, Linde stated that the government was waiting for the report on Sweden's security situation from the parliamentary working group as well as there being internal discussions within the Social Democratic party on the matter (ibid.).

5.2.2 Principal's preferences

On 4 March 2022, Ipsos published the results of an opinion poll showing that 46% of respondents supported Swedish membership of NATO, with 29% opposing it (Olsson, 2022, 4 March). This demonstrates a shift in the principal's preferences, with the share of people favouring NATO membership being considerably higher than those who opposed it. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that there was a lack of support for NATO membership among Social Democratic voters in March 2022: an opinion poll by Novus (2022b), released on 23 March, showed that only 26% of the party's voters were in favour of NATO membership with 33% being against. However, the same opinion poll showed that a majority of Social Democratic voters (59%), as well as a majority of the electorate as a whole (63%), would support an application for membership if Finland were to join NATO as well (ibid). An Ipsos opinion poll released on 27 March showed 46% of the electorate supporting an application for NATO membership, with 30% opposed (Rosén, 2022, 14 May).

During the month of April, several public opinion polls showed an increased level of support for Swedish membership in NATO. An opinion poll by Demoskop, released on 20 April, showed the highest ever level of support for NATO membership: 57% for, 21% against (Granlund, 2022, 20 April). An opinion poll by Novus (2022c), released on the same day, also showed a majority of respondents (51%) being in favour of NATO membership. This was the first time that a majority supported NATO membership in a poll conducted by Novus. One week later, on 27 April, a Novus' (2022d) poll showed a slight increase (54%) in support for NATO membership. The preferences of the electorate (principal) were shifting towards

favouring NATO membership and doing so substantially in a relatively short time. One can conclude that there was adequate popular support for a Swedish application in April. The preferences of the principal regarding NATO membership changed in T_2 compared to T_1 .

5.2.3 Summary of preferences in T_2

Principal: in favour of membership of NATO

Agent: open for a future membership application, publicly undecided

5.3 T_3 : May 2022

5.3.1 Agent's preferences

On 13 May, the report concerning Sweden's security environment was presented by the parliamentary working group formed in March. The report concluded that "Swedish NATO membership would raise the threshold for military conflicts and thus have a deterrent effect in northern Europe" (Government of Sweden, 2022b, p. 40). All eight political parties endorsed the report as a whole, while the Left party and the Green party rejected some parts of the report, particularly the parts regarding NATO membership (Government of Sweden, 2022b). On 15 May, the Social Democratic party's governing board decided that the party should work towards a Swedish membership in NATO (Socialdemokraterna, 2022b). The following day, 16 May, the government formally decided to apply for membership in the military alliance (Government of Sweden, 2022c). At a press conference with Moderate party leader Ulf Kristersson, Magdalena Andersson expressed her confidence that there is public support for joining NATO but that she also respects that there are some people who are of a different opinion on the matter (Sveriges Radio, 2022b). In a parliamentary debate held on the same day, Andersson stated that an application for membership in NATO together with Finland would be the best course of action for Sweden's national security (Sveriges riksdag, 2022b). This evidence suggests that the agent's preference was very clear: Sweden should become a member of NATO. Sweden and Finland formally handed in their applications for membership

to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 18 May, and the leaders of the NATO member states formally invited the two countries to join the alliance on 29 June (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2024).

5.3.2 Principal's preferences

In the following month, May, public opinion remained unchanged from the previous month. A Novus (2022e) opinion poll published on 3 May showed that 48% of respondents support Swedish NATO membership, almost double the percentage of those who oppose it (25%). Data from this polling also revealed that a majority of the electorate rejects holding a referendum on the issue: 62% of respondents were said to be against a referendum, with 29% in favour of a referendum (ibid.) In another Novus (2022f) poll published on 10 May, a majority of respondents (53%) supported a Swedish NATO application. Data from the same polling reveals that 48% of voters for the Social Democratic party were in favour of a Swedish NATO application, a significantly larger number than those opposed (23%) (ibid.). Data also showed that 63% of Social Democratic voters believe that it would be a correct decision if the Social Democratic party were to decide to be in favour of NATO accession (ibid.). In a Novus (2022g) poll released on 16 May, the same day the government formally decided to join NATO, 58% of respondents favoured NATO membership. This was the first time a majority of respondents in a Novus (2022g) poll were in favour, with the margin of error taken into consideration.

5.3.3 Aftermath

In this section, evidence regarding the principal's interests from the time period following May 2022; after the decision to join NATO was made, will be presented as an extension of T_3 . In the summer of 2022, support continued to grow for NATO membership among the electorate. 64% of respondents in a Novus (2022i) poll released on 17 July supported Sweden's application for NATO membership, more than three times the percentage of people opposing it (21%). The results from the general election held on 11 September 2022 also

serve as empirical evidence, as the Social Democratic party saw its share of the vote increase compared to the previous election held in 2018 (Valmyndigheten, 2022). Furthermore, the two parliamentary parties which saw their share of the vote increase the most, the Social Democratic party and the Sweden Democrats (ibid.), had both changed their preference for NATO membership in the months leading up to the election, from being against to being in favour of membership (Sveriges Television, 2022e). Data from exit polling conducted at the time of the election reveals that 66% of the overall electorate supported Swedish NATO membership, with 16% opposed (Sveriges Television, 2022g). The same share of supporters for NATO membership (66%) could be found among those who voted for the Social Democratic party, according to the same exit polling data (ibid).

5.3.4 Summary of preferences in T₃

Principal: in favour of membership of NATO

Agent: in favour of membership of NATO

6. Analysis

6.1 T_1 : November 2021 - February 2022

In the first time period T_1 the interests of the agent and principal were somewhat aligned as neither showed a preference for joining NATO. However, the evidence suggests that the agent was in favour of cooperating with NATO, despite being against membership, while the principal showed similar levels of support against and for NATO membership. Nonetheless, data from the opinion polling does not reveal what kind of relationship the principal wished for Sweden to have with NATO. This lack of evidence makes it difficult to argue that the preferences were completely aligned in this first time period. However, one can, perhaps, argue that the agent chose a middle position: being against NATO membership, but in favour of cooperation, to reflect the preferences of the principal. Furthermore, one issue in this time period is the agent's knowledge of its principal's preferences. Fewer opinion polls were conducted and published before February, before the invasion of Ukraine. It is difficult or even impossible for an agent to act on its principal's behalf if the agent has little or no information about the principal's preferences. Some of the opinion polling conducted during this time period gave inconclusive results upon which the agent would find it difficult to legitimise its actions. Opinion polling from this period shows a split electorate with no side of the argument having a convincing majority and a high share of the electorate being unsure on the issue. One can infer that, given this, the agent chose not to make any changes in its defence and security policy but rather continue with the *status quo* Hultqvist doctrine, which implies cooperation with NATO and its member states without an application for membership in the alliance. Furthermore, with 2022 being an election year in Sweden and with Magdalena Andersson being a newly-elected party leader, the agent might have been compelled to focus on issues that in this time period were of higher importance for the principal, such as, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, according to opinion polling from Novus (2022h), healthcare was the most important issue for the Swedish electorate in January 2022, with almost two-thirds of voters regarding it as important. Defence was the twelfth most important issue, with just 19% considering it important (ibid). Within the context of an upcoming

general election, and given the empirical evidence illustrating the respective preferences of the principal and the agent, one can infer that making no changes to Sweden's defence and security policies was the best course of action for the agent in this time period as this minimised the risk of the electorate demanding responsibility from the cabinet through the use of an *ex-post mechanism* in the general election.

6.2 T₂: March 2022 - April 2022

There is evidence from this time period suggesting that the cabinet (the agent) began reconceptualising the principal, meaning that the cabinet began viewing Sweden's national security and the overall electorate as a whole as its principal, rather than the voters supporting the governing party. Indeed, if Andersson's cabinet, a one-party cabinet with ministers only from the Social Democratic party, regarded its own voters as a principal, a NATO application would, at this point in time, be equivalent to *agency loss* by *policy drift* since the evidence shows that there was no support for NATO membership among Social Democratic voters in this time period. However, as presented in the evidence section, a majority of Social Democratic voters would support a Swedish NATO membership application if Finland were to join as well. This reveals the relatively weak opposition towards NATO membership among the Social Democratic party's voter base. It also signals to the agent that this principal is open to changing their preferences if circumstances were to change. It is plausible to argue that the weak opposition among Social Democratic voters may explain why, in the end, it was the interests of the overall electorate which trumped the interests of the voters supporting the governing party and why the cabinet did not take its voters' preferences into account in this time period.

One can argue that the preferences of the agent and the principal were divergent in April 2022, with there being public support for Swedish NATO membership while the cabinet seemed reluctant to make any official decisions in the matter. The cabinet's position seems to have remained the same as the previous month: neither ruling out NATO membership, nor endorsing it. At the same time, public opinion polls began showing a majority rather than a plurality in favour of membership in the alliance. The evidence suggests that the principal and

agent were both moving towards the same direction in their preferences: towards NATO membership. However, it seemed that at this point, the principal had shifted closer and faster towards NATO membership than its agent. As mentioned in the evidence section, both Magdalena Andersson and Ann Linde referred to the fact that they were waiting for the report by the parliamentary working group before making a final decision on NATO membership. The principal-agent theory can help explain the agent's reluctance to act in the interest of the principal in this time period. One has to first consider that there may be other principals restraining the cabinet. In T_2 , there was no consensus within the governing Social Democratic party on the issue of NATO membership. Several organisations within the party, such as its youth wing SSU, opposed NATO membership altogether (Jakobson, Jones & Lund, 2022, 4 May). One can say that the interests of the grassroots party and the parliamentary party (and thereby the cabinet) were somewhat divergent. While the cabinet seemed open to a NATO membership application (depending on the awaited report from the parliamentary working group), there seemed to be a lack of consensus within the governing party. One can perhaps argue that the cabinet, in this time period, chose a middle position between two of its principals. The main principal, the electorate, strongly favoured NATO membership according to opinion polling data. The other principal, the grassroots of the party, was rather reluctant or undecided on the issue. To avoid *agency loss* in this period, the government did not state an official opinion and chose to wait until the report from the parliamentary working group had released its findings on Sweden's changed security environment. Due to this, it can be argued that the cabinet successfully avoided betraying either one of its principals.

As previously mentioned, this study presupposes that the electorate is the principal of the cabinet (the agent). While it is possible to regard the electorate as the principal due to the institutional design of Sweden's parliamentary system, one has to keep in mind that the immediate principal of the cabinet is the parliament, as explained in the theory section, whose powers derive from the electorate. As the Social Democratic cabinet of Magdalena Andersson relied on the support of three other parties as well as a non-partisan member of parliament (Flores, Tanaka & Lund, 2021, 29 November), one must consider that these may also have restrained the agent from acting in the interest of its main principal; the electorate. Two of the

three parties supporting the cabinet, the Left party (Vänsterpartiet, 2022) and the Green party (Miljöpartiet, 2022), are against Swedish NATO membership. Without their support, the cabinet would not be able to continue in office, as it would not be tolerated by a parliamentary majority (Sveriges riksdag, 2016). This can further explain the cabinet's reluctance to make any formal decisions in this time period despite growing support for NATO membership among the electorate. The cabinet could continue to refer to the report from the parliamentary working group as a reason for not aligning itself closer to the electorate's preferences. This is important since representatives from all parliamentary parties, including the Green and Left parties took part in the working group (Government of Sweden, 2022b), thus providing it with greater political legitimacy. In addition, while any party can withdraw its parliamentary support from the cabinet at anytime for any reason, there is no evidence suggesting that the Green party nor the Left party ever threatened to do so over the issue of a potential NATO membership. This can help explain why the parliamentary situation did not restrain the cabinet from, in T_3 , deciding to join NATO. It also explains why the cabinet felt the need to wait for the report from the working group, despite already adequate support for NATO membership among the electorate in T_2 , as this would perhaps appease the two anti-NATO parties supporting the cabinet.

6.3 T_3 : May 2022

With the decision to join NATO, Magdalena Andersson's cabinet reversed not just a more than 200-year-old precedent of military non-alignment but also quickly shifted its position on NATO membership in the span of just six months. As the empirical evidence presented suggests, the electorate (the principal) also shifted its position on the matter. This final time period (T_3) of the analysis was a time in which there was strong support for NATO membership among the electorate, as evidenced by data from multiple opinion polls. With the decision to join NATO, the agent has acted in the interest of its ultimate principal, the electorate. *Agency loss* has, therefore, largely been avoided between the principal and agent in this case. Despite the lack of consensus which existed within the party in the previous time period, the governing board of the Social Democratic party and, thereafter, the cabinet made

the decision to be in favour of NATO membership. One of the reasons for this could be the Social Democratic party structure lacking *ex-post* mechanisms (Socialdemokraterna, 2021b). For example, the party rules provide for its constituent organisations, many of which are critical of NATO membership, such as the youth wing SSU, to be represented in the party's decision-making bodies. However, there is no *ex-post* mechanism for such decision-making bodies to oust the party leader (ibid). Party leaders in Sweden are "fairly secure" once elected as leader and "loyalty to party leaders is something of a Swedish tradition" (Aylott, Blomgren & Bergman, 2013, p. 168). This could mean that the cabinet does not see the grassroots of the party as its main principal or perhaps even as a principal at all, as there is no real threat from the party to oust the leader, who in this case also is the prime minister.

The fact that the decision to join NATO was taken just four months before the general election held on 11 September may have contributed to the fact that the agent acted primarily in the interest of the electorate as a principal rather than the party membership. Elections serve as a major tool for *delegation* and *accountability* in a principal-agent relationship between the electorate and the politicians. Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski and Susan C. Stokes (1999, p. 29) write that: "Because they anticipate the judgement of voters, governments are induced to choose policies that in their judgement will be positively evaluated by citizens at the time of the next election." Elections can be used by the electorate to both reward and punish the politicians, and while the cabinet in Sweden is not directly elected by the people, there is a direct chain of delegation and accountability from the directly-elected legislature to the cabinet. The electorate would, therefore, soon after the decision to join NATO was made, have the opportunity to punish or reward those politicians it felt agreed or disagreed with their view on NATO membership. With this in mind, the cabinet's decision to join NATO is logical and legitimate both from a democratic and principal-agent perspective.

However, evidence may suggest that on the matter of a potential Swedish NATO membership, there was no efficient and legitimate delegation from the principal (the electorate) to the agent (the cabinet). According to the theoretical framework, an efficient delegation would be the principal having a certain interest and the agent taking actions in accordance with those interests. The decision to join NATO may not have been the result of such a delegation

process between principal and agent, but rather the result of the agent acting on behalf of other information it had access to regarding Sweden's national security. Such information could, for example, have been regarding a threat to Sweden from an adversary, which could have driven the cabinet to act quickly on the matter and to change its previous position on NATO membership in a matter of months. Before the formal decision was made to apply for NATO membership, foreign minister Ann Linde stated the need for making a quick decision due to what she described as Russian aggression and brutality in an interview on 29 April 2022 (Sveriges Television, 2022d). One must assume that she was referring to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, she and the rest of the cabinet might have had additional information which showed a potential threat to Sweden in particular. This illustrates the issue of *asymmetric information* in this delegation of power. There is likely to be a difference of knowledge regarding the issue of NATO membership; one can presume that the cabinet is more knowledgeable on matters of national security than the electorate. However, while an asymmetry in information tends to be regarded as a problem in a principal-agent relationship, this thesis argues that this does not necessarily have to be the case in this instance. The reason for this is that the agent might initially not have acted based on the preferences of its principal but rather based on classified information that it has access to, which the principal does not. However, as the evidence for T_3 shows, the preferences between the principal and the agent were aligned when the cabinet made the final decision to apply for NATO membership. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the delegation process was happening in the opposite direction with the principal changing its preferences based on the agent's preferences, rather than the other way around. One example of this is the fact that a majority of Social Democratic voters in T_2 would support NATO membership *if* the Social Democratic party also supported NATO membership. Data from the same poll showed that only 26% of Social Democratic voters at the time supported it, as this was before the formal decision to apply for NATO membership had been made by the cabinet.

6.4 Aftermath

Having analysed the evolution and alignment of the principal and agent in the context of Sweden's application to NATO, one may reasonably conclude that the cabinet acted in its principal's interest, thereby the decision to join NATO was legitimate from a principal-agent perspective. The results of the Swedish general election held on 11 September 2022 serve as additional evidence that further corroborates the legitimacy of the decision made by the cabinet. Although the premiership of Magdalena Andersson ended as a consequence of the election, her party saw its share of the vote increase in comparison to the last election (Valmyndigheten, 2022). As mentioned in the evidence section, the two parties who saw their respective vote share increase the most from the previous election were the ones who had changed their positions from being against to being in favour of Swedish NATO membership. It cannot be plausibly argued that this evidence is sufficient to say that the electorate rewarded the parties that changed their positions on NATO membership, especially since other issues were on the mind of voters. However, it does show that the electorate did not punish these two parties for having shifted their positions on NATO membership. Furthermore, a large majority of the electorate (86.6%) voted for parliamentary parties which were in favour of NATO membership at the time of the election (ibid.) (Sveriges Television, 2022f). While this is not sufficient to claim that all who voted for these parties were in favour of NATO membership, it does strengthen the validity of the analysed opinion polling data. Data from exit polls further strengthens the argument that the decision was made in accordance with the principal's preferences. Almost two-thirds of the overall electorate (66%) and of the Social Democratic voters (66%) were in favour of NATO membership, as mentioned in the evidence section (Sveriges Television, 2022g). This exit poll data serves as strong evidence since it was conducted *after* the respondents had cast their ballot. Therefore, the Social Democratic voters taking part in the exit poll actually voted for the party, in comparison to the previously presented opinion polling conducted before the election, which only shows the preferences of the voters *intending* to vote for a party. This data strengthens the data from the previously presented opinion polling and confirms that a majority of Social Democratic voters supported Sweden's application for NATO membership at the time of and after the decision was made by the cabinet.

7. Conclusion

In a span of six months the Swedish government of Magdalena Andersson went from firmly opposing Swedish membership in NATO in November 2021 to applying for membership in May 2022, thereby reversing Sweden's long-standing policy of military non-alignment. However, no referendum was ever held to ensure popular support for this major policy change and the decision was made just a few months before a general election in which the electorate could have given a mandate for the policy change. This thesis has, therefore, posed questions regarding the preferences of the electorate and the Andersson cabinet on a potential Swedish NATO membership and their respective evolutions over time. More importantly, this thesis has posed the question whether there was a congruence of preferences between these two actors and what implication the answer to this question might have on the democratic legitimacy of the cabinet's decision to apply for membership in NATO. To answer these research questions, the thesis has applied the theoretical framework of the principal-agent theory, in which the Swedish electorate is treated as the principal and the Swedish government as the agent. The thesis has documented the relevant events from the six-month period, starting from Magdalena Andersson's cabinet taking office to it deciding to join NATO. These events include the evolution of the electorate's preference from against to support of NATO membership, as captured by data from public opinion polls. Furthermore, this thesis ascertains a similar evolution of the cabinet's position on NATO membership over six months, as captured by data from public statements by key cabinet members. The analysis revealed that the cabinet decided to apply for membership in NATO while having to navigate the issue of preferences of other potential principals, such as the grassroots organisations of the Social Democratic party and the parties supporting the government in parliament, which did not support Sweden's accession to NATO. Despite this, the government did apply for membership NATO membership, which suggests that the cabinet regarded the electorate as its main principal in this instance. One reason for this could be the lack of mechanisms within the Social Democratic party rules for the grassroots to influence the parliamentary party and thereby the cabinet. Evidence also suggests that the parties supporting the cabinet in parliament did not use their ex-post mechanisms or even a threat thereof to influence the

cabinet and further their own interests. According to the principal-agent theory, the congruence of preferences between the electorate and the cabinet would imply that the decision was legitimate. The analysis of a large amount of evidence across three time periods regarding NATO membership by the electorate and key members of the cabinet has shown that the preferences of both principal and agent were aligned when the decision to join was made in May 2022. Therefore, this thesis evaluates the decision to join NATO as democratically legitimate from a principal-agent perspective, as it was taken in accordance with the preferences of the electorate. This thesis contributes to the literature on democratic legitimacy, in examining a case in which the cabinet quickly had to adjust to not only a changing external environment but to a change in the electorate's preferences as well.

7.1 Future research

Turkey and Hungary have both demanded concessions from Sweden in order for them to ratify Sweden's membership in NATO (Reuters, 2024). Due to the recency of this topic and the scope of this bachelor thesis, possible effects of this on the democratic legitimacy of Sweden's application for NATO membership have not been examined by this thesis and should be the subject of further research. Additionally, this thesis has regarded Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership as a case study of democratic legitimacy from a principal-agent perspective. However, future research may analyse this case from different perspectives in order to gain a deeper understanding of both the concept of democratic legitimacy and the case of Sweden's application for membership in NATO.

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