

Impartial Administration and Peaceful Agrarian Reform: The Foundations for Democracy in Scandinavia

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Why was the route to democracy in Scandinavia extraordinarily stable? This paper answers this question by studying Scandinavia's eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century peaceful agrarian reforms, which contributed to auspicious state–society relations that made democracy progress relatively smoothly. Based on comparisons with contemporary France and Prussia and process-tracing evidence, the paper shows that Scandinavia achieved relatively extensive and peaceful agrarian reforms because of relatively high levels of meritocratic recruitment to the central administration and state control over local administration, which ensured impartial policymaking and implementation. These findings challenge prevailing theories of democratization, demonstrating that the Scandinavian countries represent an alternative, amicable path to democracy led by civil servants who attempt to transform their country socioeconomically. Thus, strong state-cum-weak society countries likely have better odds of achieving stable democracy than weak state-cum-weak society countries. However, building bureaucratic state administrations alongside autonomous political societies is probably a safer road to democracy.


The Scandinavian countries often take center stage when scholars and pundits discuss models of sustainable, democratic governance (e.g., Fukuyama 2012; Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). This praising of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden is backed by solid evidence. Research connects the fact that the Scandinavian countries regularly score highest in democracy indices today (Alizada et al. 2021, 32) to a history of more consensus-oriented (Arter 2006) and less corrupt politics (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013). While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certainly saw political violence and conflicts around democracy (Berglund 2018; Mikkelsen 2018; Sandvik 2018), for instance, resulting in a particularly belated transition in Sweden 1917 (Møller 2011), and an outright democratic setback by constitutional amendment in Denmark 1866 (Knudsen 2006), the process of installing contested elections for government offices in Scandinavia was relatively peaceful and frictionless in a European context (Andersen 2021; Ziblatt 2017, 15). However, as asserted by Fukuyama (2012, 14) and others, it remains unresolved why the Scandinavian countries took such a stable path to democracy.

To explain this pattern, historians focus on a variety of deep-seated or proximate factors, typically seen as idiosyncratic to each Scandinavian country. This includes, for instance, Sweden's early abolition of feudalism (e.g., Tilton 1974) or its strong labor movement (e.g., Bengtsson 2019a); Norway's egalitarian political landscape and lack of a noble class (e.g., Eckstein 1966); and the "spiritual awakening" and civil society

development in nineteenth-century Denmark (e.g., Gundelach 1988). The vast majority of the literature on Europe's democratization only mentions the Scandinavian countries in passing (e.g., Ansell and Samuels 2014; Berman 2019; Boix 2015; Moore 1966) and the few accounts that compare other European with Scandinavian trajectories typically study the way industrial workers fought for universal enfranchisement (e.g., Iversen and Soskice 2019; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992) or interwar democratic stability (e.g., Luebbert 1991; Møller, Skaaning, and Cornell 2020).

This paper addresses two puzzles that emerge from this lack of systematic, comparative analysis: First, why did Denmark, Norway, and Sweden end up on a stable path to democracy when they industrialized comparatively late, which should have put them on track to (fascist) dictatorship? Second, why did the Scandinavian countries converge on this pathway despite widely different political–institutional points of departure in the early nineteenth century—Denmark being one of Europe's most absolutist monarchies, Norway having to struggle for nationhood, and Sweden with a powerful estates-based assembly?

My answer to these questions emphasizes the ability of backward agrarian economies in Europe to accomplish peaceful agrarian reforms in the decades around the French Revolution in 1789, which resulted in three divergent paths to democracy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hobsbawm 1962, 73): Where agrarian reforms stalled, landed elites sabotaged democratization (Ansell and Samuels 2014; see also Albertus 2017), and where reforms were enmeshed in violence, obstacles of democratization were removed but authoritarian reactions were frequent due to recurrent fear of violent revolution (Bernhard and Kopstein 2017). Where agrarian reforms were relatively extensive and

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more peacefully accomplished, democratization tended to progress relatively smoothly.

Existing research indicates that Scandinavia represents the latter path. While the peasantry was not a uniformly pro-democratic actor across Scandinavia (Bengtsson 2019b), the agrarian reforms helped build and integrate political societies of peasants into mainstream politics, which, in turn, assured state authorities and conservatives that they could grant associational rights to broader segments of the population, including industrial workers, without risking violent revolution (Nielsen 2009, 18–9, 61–79, 222).

This paper takes a step back by explaining why Scandinavia's peaceful agrarian reforms came about in the first place. In turn, it provides evidence as to why state–society relations were more auspicious to peaceful and enduring political reforms than in most of Europe before the onset of the first wave of democratization. In other words, the paper sets out to identify the foundations of democracy in Scandinavia by studying the causes of its peaceful agrarian reforms.

By bringing together an underappreciated body of work by generations of Scandinavian historians and using comparative historical analysis, I demonstrate three findings. First, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden¹ experienced relatively extensive agrarian reforms in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from forced redistributions of land and civil rights to liberalization of property transactions. Although significant acts of violence occurred, the reforms took place in remarkable consent. Second, while standard theories of agrarian productivity, rural inequalities, and the strength of absolutism fall short, contingent war outcomes and responses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries most fundamentally explain this record of peaceful agrarian reform as they triggered the building of relatively high levels of state control over local administration and meritocratic recruitment to the central administration. Third, meritocracy strengthened the inclusion of diverging interests, civil servants, and experts in policymaking around the agrarian reforms, while state control strengthened the dominance of civil servants and experts and respect for courts of appeal in their implementation. This impartial administration, in turn, weakened landlords' opposition to reform and decreased the potential to mobilize peasants for violent uprising.

Comparisons with contemporary France and Prussia vindicate the importance of state control, meritocracy, and impartiality. They constitute two of the most studied negative cases, where peaceful agrarian reform could plausibly have occurred but eventually did not (Jones 1990, 332), which later created bitter mistrust between state and society and a pronounced pattern of democratic setbacks (Ziblatt 2017, 15). The case of France shows how central-level and local patrimonial administrations delayed any serious reforms, which

contributed to motivating the peasantry for rebellion. Prussia demonstrates how substantive agrarian reform policies, pushed forward by a central-level meritocracy, were sabotaged in the 1810s by landlords using their long-held local administrative and jurisdictional powers.

These findings change our understanding of the causes and processes of democratization more generally. Scandinavia's stable democratization was founded in relatively peaceful and carefully planned agrarian reforms led by civil servants rather than through some proto-democratic legacy, a violent breakthrough, or at the hands of the bourgeoisie and/or working class. This was a state-led path to democracy characterized by auspicious state–society relations that separates Scandinavia from the rest of Europe and substantiates how a “Scandinavian model” may contribute to democratic transition and stability in today's developing countries.

HISTORICAL SETTING AND CASE COMPARISONS

My analysis spans from the major European wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the early nineteenth century, focusing specifically on the decades around the French Revolution in 1789. For several reasons, this setting is particularly suitable for illuminating the causes of Scandinavia's stable democratization.

The period is famous for the unraveling of feudal societies and estates-based political systems, including in Denmark–Norway and Sweden (Barton 1986). Through the eighteenth century, ideas of Enlightenment swept across Europe, focusing among other things on improving the efficiency of agricultural production and emancipating the peasantry (Scott 1990). At the same time, there was a great deal of variation in agrarian reforms and the way they came down (Tuma 1965, 180–8).

Moreover, the French Revolution was the temporary culmination but also the all-important accelerator of Enlightenment ideas that developed into pressures for mass democratization (Hobsbawm 1962, 73). In this way, the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth century represent a paradigmatic case universe for research on the conditions of democracy (Ziblatt 2017). Further, because the Scandinavian countries, like most others in Europe, only introduced contested elections for government power many decades later (Skaaning 2021), the risk of making endogenous claims by which democracy precedes and causes peaceful agrarian reform is drastically reduced.

Finally, across Europe, but particularly in Scandinavia, the European wars triggered a monumental break with the past, involving a move to so-called “early-modern” states that claimed authority over a given territory based on centralized organs of coercion and tax extraction (Glete 2002; Knudsen and Rothstein 1994, 205). We can thus use the sixteenth-

¹ The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 6) discusses the treatment of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden as separate cases.

and seventeenth-century warring period to handle the challenge of “infinite regress” by identifying whether any explanatory factors operating after this period were caused by cross-case antecedents or, alternatively, contingencies and case-specific background conditions (see Slater and Simmons 2010).

In this historical setting, I employ two types of comparisons. First, I compare the Scandinavian countries, which serves to reject potential explanatory factors that are dissimilar across these cases and thus cannot account for their similar outcome of peaceful agrarian reform. Nevertheless, this design fails at comparing outcomes across different explanatory conditions. Therefore, I control for similar conditions by comparing the Scandinavian countries with two cases, France and Prussia, lacking peaceful agrarian reforms. Supplementing this variable-based analysis, I conduct process-tracing analyses of the effect of those conditions that differ between Scandinavia on the one hand and France and Prussia on the other.

On two criteria, France and Prussia are the most suitable, negative cases to compare with. First, as I demonstrate, peaceful agrarian reform could plausibly have occurred, but reforms stalled in Prussia and were only accomplished through violent revolution in France (Jones 1990, 332). Second, France and Prussia represent variations of unstable democratization in the “long nineteenth century” (Ziblatt 2017, 15) that directly ties into a lack of peaceful agrarian reform. In France, the brutal and destructive reforms by violent revolution in 1789 triggered a pattern of democratic revolutions and authoritarian counterreactions until 1870 as state officials and conservatives, who feared a reprisal of the revolution, used any means to quell civil society (e.g., Huard 2015, 153; Tilly 1989). In Prussia, the stalled agrarian reforms left peasants politically hamstrung, incapable of building their own political societies. This not only worked as an obstacle to democratization in 1848 and around the German unification (e.g., Gerschenkron 1989), but also drove a wedge between state and society, which detached civil society and oppositional parties from mainstream politics with detrimental consequences for democracy after 1918 (e.g., Tenfelde 2015, 108–11, 116–23).²

Contrast state–society relations in the French and Prussian democratization with their counterpart in Scandinavia: In Norway, the transition to parliamentarism and multiparty elections in 1884 came about after sustained peasant protests and legal proceedings against Prime Minister Selmer. These peaceful means of change rested on decades of state support for and cooperation with peasant associations on economic modernization and welfare development (Dyrvik and Feldbæk 1996, 131–3; Gran 1994, 133). In Denmark, pro-democratic peasant movements and their positive relations with the state played similar roles in securing democratic breakthroughs: the liberal constitution of

1849 and parliamentarism in 1901 (Gundelach 1988, 74).

In Sweden, peasants were much more ambiguous in their democratic support. Parts of the peasant estate contributed to introducing a two-chamber system with regular, national elections in 1866, but they also staunchly protected the very limited suffrage that characterized the system (Bengtsson 2019a, 136–43; 2019b, 10–1; Christensen 2006, 743–4). However, politics stayed relatively peaceful and the suffrage extensions of the 1910s were granted without massive violence. A major reason was the early organization of peasant associations and parties, later equivalents among workers, and their integration into state administrative structures (Micheletti 1995, 32–3, 38; Rothstein and Trägårdh 2007, 231–5).

No cross-country, quantitative indicators are available before 1789 for the key variables of interest.³ Instead, the analysis relies on underappreciated but extensive native-Scandinavian, secondary-source historiographies.⁴ I base comparisons with France and Prussia on the main conclusions of the extensive historiographies on the French Revolution and Stein–Hardenberg reforms, respectively, and the vast literature on Europe’s early-modern state-building.

DEFINING PEACEFUL AGRARIAN REFORMS

I focus on a diverse set of reforms in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe all of which, however, transformed the rules determining distribution of land and rights between landlords, that is, manorial landowners, and peasants, that is, family farmers, tenants, or laborers. Reforms varied over time and across countries along three dimensions.

First, reforms liberalized rules of property transaction, such as enclosures that enabled tenants and village residents, but sometimes also lords themselves, to buy former common lands. Second, reforms redistributed lands from lords to peasants by force. The least extensive reforms guaranteed peasants hereditary claims as tenants but maintained the lord as ultimate owner. The most extensive reforms made peasants into freeholders by providing them full ownership of a farm, including its production (Tuma 1965, 167–8). Third, reforms emancipated peasants from manorial dues, granting them various civil liberties such as freedom of movement and bodily integrity. Most peasants in medieval Europe were subject to substantive demands from lords, ranging from contractual taxes and labor services to outright serfdom (Bloch 1966). Some reforms abolished serfdom entirely. Less radical ones constrained serfdom to specific conditions of lordly behavior, whereas others

² The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 6–7) discusses alternative cases for comparison.

³ For rural inequality, see Ansell and Samuels (2014). For state control, meritocracy, and impartiality, see Dahlström and Lapuente (2017).

⁴ The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 2–5) presents an overview of document types and a source-critical analysis.

annulled or vastly decreased manorial dues (Jones 1990, 329–30; Tuma 1965, 167–8).

Regardless of the extent of agrarian reforms, they were often preceded or followed by some degree of violence. Peasants rioted and rebelled locally or engaged in society-wide revolution, angered by the absence or insufficiency of reform or, occasionally, in opposition to reform. Landlords sometimes used violence to suppress peasant insurrections and resist reform, and state officials responded with repressive means. Yet these conditions varied across Europe (Moore 1966, 4–5). By peaceful, I, therefore, mean the relative absence of violent acts by peasants, lords, and state officials during the negotiation or implementation phases of a given agrarian reform decision.

EXTENT AND PEACEFULNESS OF AGRARIAN REFORMS

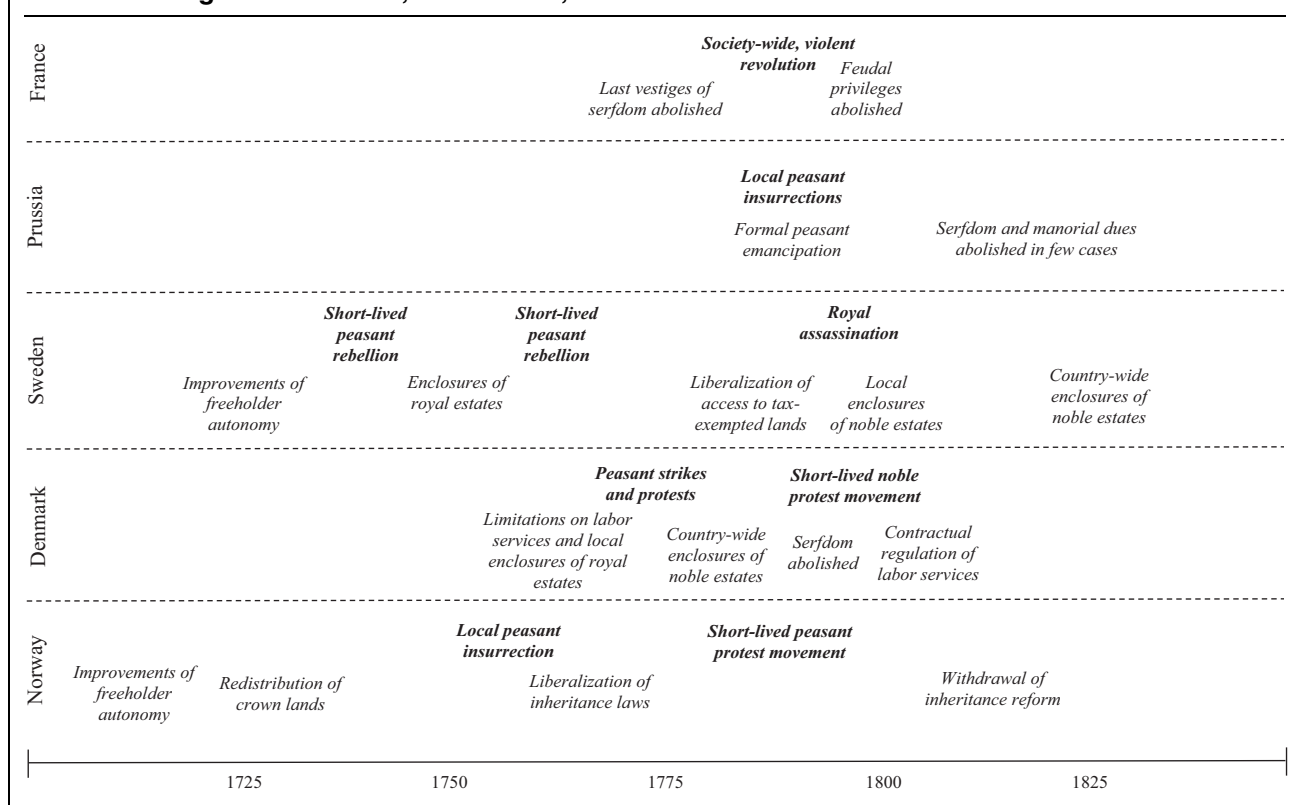
Figure 1 summarizes the extent and peacefulness (in bold) of agrarian reforms across the five cases. Two trends are clear. First, the Scandinavian countries, while differing in the types and degrees of reform, saw substantial peasant emancipation and/or dramatic land redistributions (one- to two-thirds of arable lands), even though smallholders were excluded from the reform benefits in Denmark and Sweden (Barton 1986, 210; Bengtsson and Svensson 2019). Second, violent rebellions and uprisings were very few and short-lived by European standards (see also Jones

1990, 332). In contrast, Prussian reforms stalled, whereas French reforms came with society-wide, violent revolution.

In Sweden, Gadd (2000, 199) estimates that from 1700 to 1878, the share of royal domains (*kronojord*) decreased from 36% to 8% of the total amount of arable land, ordinary tax lands (*skattejord*) rose from 32% to 60%, and tax-exempted lands (*frälsejord*) remained constant. This reflected redistributions of around one-third of the arable land from the crown to tenants, who then became freeholders (Carlsson 1949, 121; Gadd 2000, 198–9). In addition, agrarian reforms in 1719, making it legal for freeholders to hire tenants, and 1734, constraining the legal avenues for government inspections of peasant farms, bolstered the economic autonomy of the freeholders (Aronsson 1992, 45).

The most important changes came with the enclosures (Gadd 2000). The Great Partition Act (*Storskifte*) of 1757 reconfigured village lands under the crown to make for one connected field per farmer. With legal adjustments in 1762 and 1783, every village freeholder could apply for these new fields (Gadd 2000, 275–83). From 1789, all peasants were allowed to buy and own all, including noble, tax-exempted lands (Carlsson 1949, 140). Albeit very slowly, enclosures were realized over the next century with the *Enskifte* and *Lagaskifte*. The *Enskifte* first experimented with reconfiguring village lands on selected noble estates in the region of Skåne. An ordinance in 1827, the *Lagaskiftet*, broadened this experiment to the rest of the country

FIGURE 1. Agrarian Reforms, Backlashes, and Related Violence



(Aronsson 1992, 48–9; Gadd 2000, 284–92). While reforms involved only small steps toward peasant emancipation, they substantively liberalized property transactions, which primarily benefitted landlords and those farmers who were already freeholders (Bengtsson et al. 2019).

There were numerous conflicts between crown and nobility regarding the reforms. Most notably, King Gustav III was assassinated in 1792 by a small group of nobles motivated by the king's latest power grab, including his decision to equalize the property rights of peasants and nobles. In general, however, noble-crown conflicts were nonviolent and in fact waned quickly after the assassination (Ahlberger and Kvarnström 2004, 147–8; Berglund 2018, 291–2).

The relative absence of violent peasant rebellions and the fate of those that did occur are equally telling of the Swedish experience. After a violent confrontation with the military, 140 people died in the Dalecarlian Rebellion of 1743, which involved 5,000 revolutionary peasants (Ahlberger and Kvarnström 2004, 129–31). Apart from a small and failed rebellion in 1766 and the gathering of 1,500 rebel peasants in Klågerup in 1811, large-scale violence was uncommon (Berglund 2018, 284–9). Most notably, none of the three major enclosure reforms led to significant protests (Bäck 1984, 280).

In Denmark, the first significant spell of reforms began in the late 1760s, specifying most notably that labor services at the manor (*hoveri*) should “fit the tenant's capacity,” and that estate owners could sell lands to their tenants. Moreover, enclosures were attempted on some royal estates (Jensen 1936, 52, 75–6; Løgstrup 2015, 138–76).

From the 1780s, Danish reforms accelerated. The Small Land Commission (*den Lille Landbokommision*) in 1784 initiated the completion of enclosures (*Udskifningen*) and releases of labor services for tenants on crown lands in the counties of Frederiksborg and Kronborg. This paved the way for the broadening of enclosures to villages and lands of the estates in the Great Land Commission (*den Store Landbokommision*) in 1786 (Christensen 1975). The creation of a special credit bank in 1786 offered loans to buy-outs, ensuring that the less fortunate peasants could buy the enclosed lands (Kjærgaard 1994, 217–23). The tenant law of 1787 established that improvements on a tenant's farm should be reimbursed at the end of the tenancy contract or in the tenant estate (Løgstrup 2015, 198, 222). Most significantly, the abolishment of *Stavnsbåndet* in 1788 moved the administration of adscription away from the manors and made it legal for tenants to leave their estate of birth (phased in by 1800) (Kjærgaard 1994, 224–8). While selling of noble lands was voluntary, the overall impact on land distribution was impressive. By 1807, around three quarters of arable lands had been redistributed to former tenants (Tønnesson 1981, 201).

Finally, reforms of the labor services in 1791 and 1799 made it illegal for estate owners to physically punish tenants and established as a principle that services should be specified and regulated in contracts. In

return, tenants were obliged to conduct the required services and could be released from contract if breached (Jensen 1936, 190; Løgstrup 2015, 265–73). Although tenancy on royal baronies and counties was only formally abolished in 1919, the decisive steps away from manorial proprietorship were taken in the late eighteenth century (Østerud 1978, 126–7).

Before the 1760s, there were only sporadic violent conflicts between lords and peasants (Kjærgaard 1994, 217–23). From the 1760s, the number of peasant strikes and protests increased. However, physical encounters very rarely occurred (Bjørn 1981, 93–6). Mikkelsen (2018) supports this view, counting only 10 minor uprisings between 1700 and 1830 and identifying the revolt of Skipper Clement in 1534 as the last major peasant rebellion. Tensions were highest in the early 1790s, when dissatisfaction over labor services mounted among peasants in Jutland, and a number of freeholders and estate owners protested in the so-called *Jyske Proprietærfejde*. However, peasant dissatisfaction waned and never became systematically violent, and the elite conflict was resolved peacefully in 1792 (Jørgensen 2019, 416–7).

Norway was part of the Danish realm until 1814. While the Danish reforms did not apply in Norway, Danish governments enacted significant reforms of Norwegian rural institutions. A royal ordinance of 1687 codified many of the working norms in rural Norway, limiting the amount of labor services by law and stripping farm owners (noble and non-noble) of the right to police their own labor (Johnsen 1919, 268). In 1720, the king gave better opportunities for peasants to buy crown lands and thus accelerated the already high number of freeholders (Dyrvik 1995, 161). Further, in 1771, the Danish government decided to reform the traditional institution of *odelsretten*, by which the first-born son had the right of inheritance to the family farm (Koht 1926, 40). While decreasing economic security for family farmers, this also increased opportunities for tenants and others to become property owners (Johnsen 1919, 281–2).

Odelretten was reinstated in 1814, and enclosures first came in 1821. However, the net effect of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century reforms was to permanently expand the predominance of peasant freeholders (from 31% of arable land in 1661 to 60% in 1814) and decisively dismantle the remnants of traditional aristocratic rule (Koht 1926, 40; Tønnesson 1981, 192).

Norway saw very few violent conflicts. Tax riots were frequent from 1756 to 1763, but only grew violent on one occasion, when 2,000 peasants gathered in Bergen to confront allegedly corrupt distributions of trading rights (Sandvik 2018, 172). Another protest in 1786, the Lofthus movement, comprised peasants and was further inflamed by inspiration from revolutionary France, but generally remained nonviolent (Gustafsson 1994, 140–8; Sandvik 2018, 175).

No substantial agrarian reform movement took shape in prerevolutionary France. The abolishment of the landlord's right to make claims on the few remaining serfs in 1779 was the only reform initiative before

1789 (Jones 2012, 107–8). This lack of agrarian reform was one of the main drivers of the French Revolution. Peasant uprisings had been simmering during the 1780s and increased sharply from December 1788 to the spring of 1789, eventually culminating in the attack on the Bastille in July (Jones 1988, 67–8; Skocpol 1979, 125). Only in the context of civil war between 1789 and 1794 did agrarian reforms take hold, marked by declarations of the equal rights of men and abolishment of seigneurial tax exemptions (Skocpol 1979, 125–6).

In Prussia, local outbursts of rural violence increased from the 1790s, but outright rebellions only pertained to the southwestern parts of Germany (Saalfeld 1990, 353–7). The first serious attempts at agrarian reform came with the Stein–Hardenberg reforms, notably the October Edict in 1807 and the 1811 Edict of Regulation, which promised a substantial break with medieval institutions of serfdom and the introduction of commercialized agriculture (Clark 2006, 330), much like in Denmark. However, most aspects of servitude and rural inequalities remained substantially unchanged. Legal amendments in 1816 replaced the principle of compulsion with a voluntarist approach to the capitalization of farms, and smallholding peasants providing manorial dues and those on noble lands were now excluded from reforms. Further, the majority of noble estate owners retained their rights of corporal punishment and holding tenants as serfs (Berdahl 1988, 56–8, 201, 212; Eddie 2013, chap. 9).

ASSESSING EXISTING THEORIES

The literature emphasizes three overall factors that plausibly explain peasant and/or lord consent to reform and related violence in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. Competing accounts emphasize high (e.g., Moore 1966, 19–20) or low (e.g., Tuma 1965, 173) levels of agricultural productivity as conducive to peaceful agrarian reform, whereas rural inequalities (e.g., Ansell and Samuels 2014) and a weak absolutist or estates-based regimes (e.g., Scott 1990, 1) are usually seen as hindrances.

Neither of these theories accounts for the differences in peaceful agrarian reform between the five cases (see Table 1). Population data over the eighteenth century suggest that the Scandinavian countries had similarly growing rural populations (around 50% increases in population, with rural shares of 80%–90%) (see, e.g., Drake 1965, 99; Hansgaard 1981, 24) and backward agrarian economies, with village systems of common fields unable to feed the expanding rural populations (e.g., Oakley 1990, 363–4; Østerud 1978, 77–83). As they shared these conditions with France and Prussia (Jones 1990, 332), I consider low agricultural productivity a scope condition, explaining the impetus but neither the extent nor the peacefulness of reforms.

Rural inequality and the strength of absolutism explain neither the impetus nor the extent or peacefulness of reforms. Sweden, Norway, and France escaped feudalism and serfdom in medieval times and thus shared relatively more equal lord–peasant relations in

the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Bloch 1966; Jones 1990, 329–30; Østerud 1978). Contemporary Denmark and Prussia, by contrast, had widespread serfdom and only a few percent freeholders (Clark 2006, 62; Løgstrup 2015, 451; Tønnesson 1981, 192). By European standards, Danish–Norwegian absolutism, established in 1660 and preserved in its basic contours through the eighteenth century, was an extreme form of absolutism in which the nobility was stripped of political powers and a hereditary monarch stood above all, responsible only to God (Gustafsson 1994, 18; Jespersen 2007, 61). The system of absolutist government in Prussia developed along the same lines, although gradually becoming more complicated by the empowerment of bureaucratic elites from around 1740 (Clark 2006, 88; Rosenberg 1958, 35–9). By contrast, the Swedish political system from 1719 to 1772 comprised the king appointing a Council of the Realm, which was accountable to a diet (Gustafsson 1994, 48–51). Although absolutist monarchy prevailed before (1680–1719) and after (1772–1809) and the legacy of the diet was probably less pronounced than hitherto assumed (Almbjär Forthcoming), the contrast to Denmark–Norway is clear (Gustafsson 1994, 46). Likewise, *Ancien Régime* France, although formally absolutist, had strong regional parliaments that routinely refused to accept the king as political sovereign (Parker 1997).

Thus, the Scandinavian countries were neither completely different from each other nor completely similar to France and Prussia on the potential explanatory factors of peaceful agrarian reform. However, key puzzles stand out: Why did Scandinavian reform experiences divert from the French and Prussian, given their common point of departure of low agricultural productivity? Why did reforms converge in Scandinavia, despite the different political–institutional settings and initial levels of rural inequality? Indeed, French reform experiences should have resembled those of Sweden, whereas Prussia's should have resembled Denmark's.⁵

EXPLAINING PEACEFUL AGRARIAN REFORMS

I argue that a combination of meritocracy and state control over local administration created an impartial administration, which was the crucial factor separating peaceful agrarian reform from stalled reform or violent revolution. Meritocracy and state control originated in efforts to abolish patrimonialism in early-modern Europe. These efforts, first, marked a transition at the central levels of administration from councils and venal office-holding to bureaucratic colleges based on meritocracy, that is, a system employing civil servants on the basis of skills and experience rather than personal,

⁵ The Supplementary Material (2–8) includes expanded discussions of the existing theories and the logic of comparison. Moreover, on pages 9–21, it discusses state–church relations, petitions and court representation, and the so-called “Early-Modern-Roots” hypothesis as alternative explanations.

TABLE 1. Existing Theories and Peaceful Agrarian Reform

	Sweden	Denmark	Norway	France	Prussia
Agricultural productivity	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Rural inequalities	Low	High	Low	Low	High
Strength of absolutism	Medium–low	High	High	Medium–low	Medium–high
Peaceful agrarian reform	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

political, or socioeconomic connections. Second, they eradicated venal office-holding and medieval jurisdictions at the lower administrative levels of churches, towns, and manors, which served to install what I term state control over local administration, that is, a system connecting the lowest and highest levels of governance through a unified and effective hierarchy of administrative and jurisdictional powers. Because such bureaucratic reorganizations were more easily realized at the central levels than forced upon local magnates, the combination of state control and non-meritocracy was highly unlikely. Indeed, the empirical record shows that patrimonialism was only preserved in one of two ways: either the old institutions remained in place, which implied the continued absence of both state control and meritocracy, or a central-level meritocracy was built while remnants of local-level patrimonialism precluded state control (see Ertman 1997; Glete 2002).

Governance research suggests that meritocracy and state control ensure more impartial administration. On the input side, where policies are made, impartial administration implies that relevant societal groups and experts are being heard. On the output side, where policies are implemented, it means not taking into consideration anything that is not stipulated in the policy or the law (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, 169–70). Meritocracy is the principal driver of general impartiality (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017), but meritocratically recruited yet recalcitrant agents at lower levels of the administrative hierarchy constitute a separate problem for the impartial implementation of policies (Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001). In turn, meritocracy should be the primary driver of impartial policymaking around agrarian reforms, while state control over local administration should primarily determine impartial implementation.

Research on civil war and democratic stability further suggests that impartial administration dampens distributive conflicts by increasing confidence in the fair distribution of resources between groups with asymmetrical socioeconomic and political powers (Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Lapuente and Rothstein 2014). This should have two implications for the extent and peacefulness of agrarian reforms: First, in the context of a crisis-ridden agrarian sector, landlords and peasants reach consensus on substantial reform. Second, landlords believe that the administration will protect them against unlawful assaults and occupations by peasants. Conversely, peasants believe that the administration will protect them against power abuses by the landlords, such as through the buying or manipulation of civil servants.

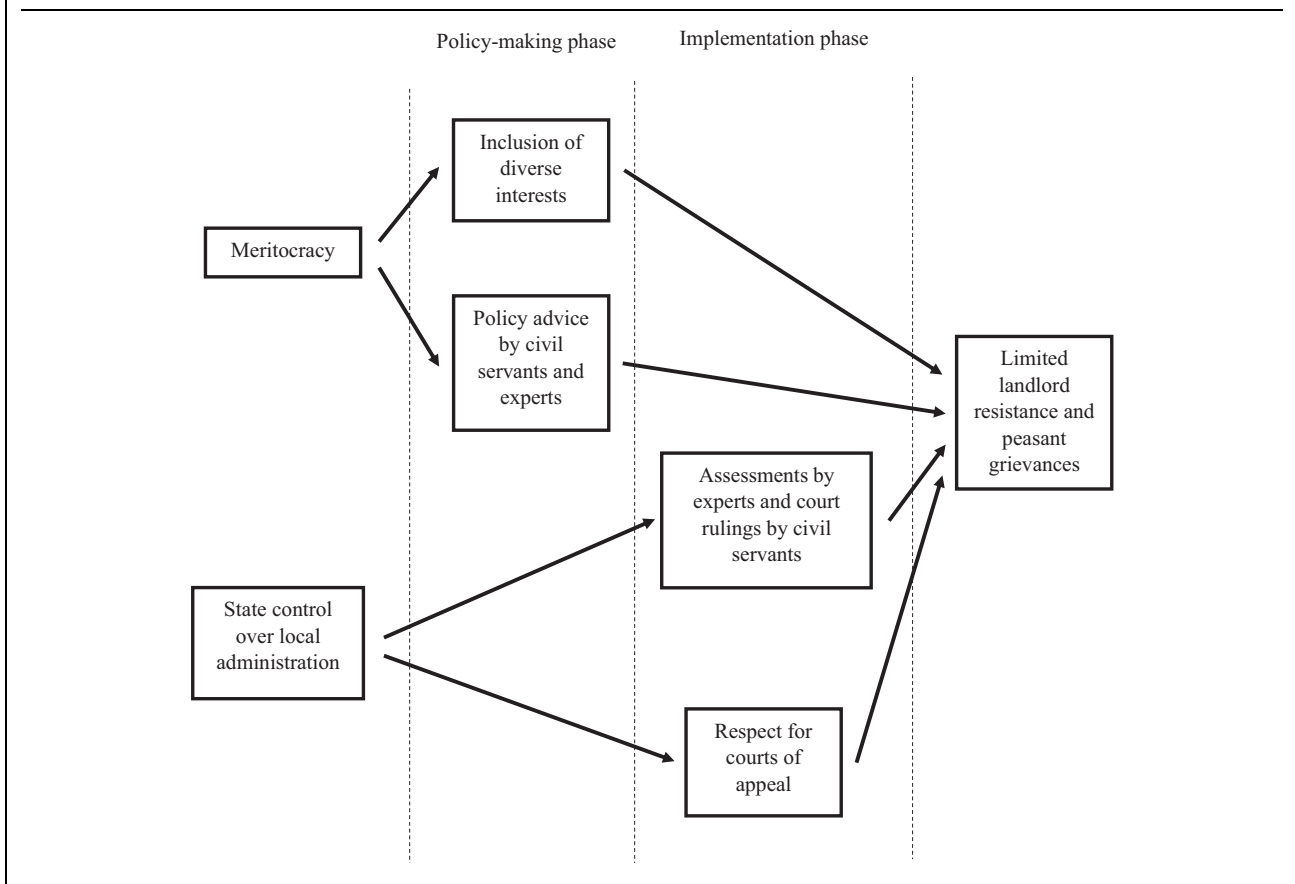
The next sections present two findings that support these notions (see Figure 2).⁶ First, despite initially diverging sociopolitical structures—most notably a weaker nobility in Norway, a weaker peasantry in Denmark, and a stronger church in Sweden—state control and meritocracy increased dramatically over a short period, triggered by contingent outcomes of and responses to pan-European and intra-Scandinavian wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Corruption levels in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Sweden and Denmark–Norway, however widespread, were relatively low in agrarian and legal administration and existed within some of Europe’s most complete systems of state control and meritocracy (Gustafsson 1994, 128; see also Ertman 1997, 306). By contrast, the warring period only triggered the building of meritocracy in Prussia, whereas the French state-building failed both in terms of state control and meritocracy.

Second, the principles of state control and meritocracy dominated the agrarian and legal administration in Scandinavia, contributing to greater impartiality and peaceful agrarian reform. The inclusion of diverging interests and the dominance of civil servants and experts in policy advice—connected with meritocracy—and the dominance of civil servants and experts in local assessment boards and courts and the respect for courts of appeal—connected with state control—together ensured against capture by “conservative” landlords or “revolutionary” peasants and thus helped limiting peasant grievances and landlord resistance to reform. Although peasants had relatively strong organs for making policy and filing complaints in Sweden, such organs were much weaker in Denmark–Norway, and mainly worked through an impartial administration across Scandinavia.⁷ The lack of a central-level meritocracy and, secondarily, recalcitrant local administrative elites hindered consistent agrarian reform attempts in France, thus contributing to radicalizing the peasantry for revolution, whereas the major stumbling blocks in Prussia were found in the implementation phase due to weak state control over local administration.⁸

⁶ The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 12–46) presents expanded process-tracing analyses, including discussions of observable implications and evidence that further support the findings.

⁷ The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 47–53) elaborates the varieties of the Scandinavian path.

⁸ The Dataverse Online Appendix (Andersen 2023, 8) elaborates on the logic of the variable-based analysis. Moreover, on pages 9–11, it elaborates the paths of France and Prussia.

FIGURE 2. Explanation of Peaceful Agrarian Reform in Scandinavia

The Development of State Control and Meritocracy

The early-modern state in Sweden developed from the reign of Gustav Vasa (1523–60) to Charles XI (1675–97), and is widely considered the first and most complete of its kind in Europe (Hallenberg, Holm, and Johansson 2008). Following the dissolution of the Kalmar Union in 1523, Gustav Vasa skillfully used the power vacuum to build administrative systems that could disseminate power from center to periphery (Ertman 1997, 313; Maarbjerg 2004, 400). The main invention was the installation of non-noble royal bailiffs (*kronofogdar*) personally appointed by the king to collect taxes and police locally (Lappalainen 2017, 115; Maarbjerg 2004, 399). At the same time, the end of papal law following the Protestant Reformation in 1527 enabled the state to monopolize judicial authority (Liliequist and Almbjär 2012, 10). Through negotiations with the strong clergy, the peasant communities, and a relatively weak nobility, the king achieved the loyalty of the nobility for his state-building efforts in exchange for representation in a four-estate diet (Hallenberg, Holm, and Johansson 2008, 251).

During the seventeenth century, Sweden played a central role in the Thirty Years' War, resulting in renewed state-building episodes. While Gustav Vasa laid the foundation for state control over local affairs, Gustav Adolf II

(1611–32) introduced the 1611 accession charter, which Ertman (1997, 613) termed “proto-bureaucracy.” It is unclear to what extent meritocracy became dominant at this point. Ertman (1997, 614) describes how the charter created a permanent civil service often occupied by non-noble, educated men with no proprietary claims on their offices. Such estimates are rare, but the literature agrees that Gustav Adolf cemented a system of specialized administrative bodies or collegial boards with much less room for purchasing offices (see, e.g., Nilsson 1990; Maarbjerg 2004, 394). Later in his reign, the king achieved control over all appointments and institutionalized educational credentials as a criterion for employment as a bailiff (Nilsson 1990, 200–1).

The 1634 Instrument of Government decisively dismantled the medieval administrative structures (Nilsson 1990). The county (*Län*) became the major unit of local administration, led by a county governor (*landshövding*) who controlled the bailiffs, local sheriffs (*länsmän*), and constables (*fjärdingsmän*). Although reserved for nobles, the office of county governor was permanent, paid by the state, constrained to a very narrow set of tasks and filing instructions, and subject to control by the Svea Court of Appeal (Royal Supreme Court) and occasional government inspections (Maarbjerg 2004, 400–1). All of these provisions hindered officeholders from becoming local magnates (Lappalainen 2017, 120–6).

Motivated by the country's faltering finances and defeats in wars against Prussia in 1674 and the subsequent temporary loss of Scania to Denmark in 1676, King Charles XI staged a royal coup in 1680 (Maarbjerg 2004, 407–8). In the following “Reduction” reforms, he allied with the peasant, clergy, and burgher estates against the nobility, thereby firmly establishing meritocracy and state control (Barton 1986, 16; Maarbjerg 2004, 391). The norm of royal appointments to collegial permanent offices and of county governors was cemented; more offices were staffed by educated lawmen of non-noble descent; judges effectively received lifetime tenure; and manorial proprietors no longer had any special administrative or jurisdictional authorities (Barton 1986, 35; Hallenberg, Holm, and Johansson 2008, 260–1).

The creation of the office of Ombudsman (*Justitiëkanslern*) in the 1719 Instrument of Government further consolidated state control with official abuses at all administrative levels. Generally, courts of appeal from top to bottom served to control and to inform the government of the workings of the administration (Frohnert 1993, 29–30; Liliequist and Almbjör 2012, 8; Linde 2000, 15).

Purchase of offices was a common practice during the Age of Liberty, related to the competition for government control between the Caps and Hats proto-parties (Teorell and Rothstein 2015). Nevertheless, due to their permanence and the explicit rules of merit-based public employment settled in 1719 (Carlsson 1949, 42), most offices were sheltered from the forces of political competition, and even those higher offices up for sale could only go to candidates with educational merits (Frohnert 1993, 61).

Danish kings also responded to wars with unusually extensive and successful state-building. While the breakup of the Kalmar Union and the Protestant Reformation of 1536 paved the way for the crown to sideline the church in tax extraction, the noble landlords achieved equal status with the king in council and so preserved the manorial estates as the main local political-administrative centers (Jespersen 2007, 54–5). However, the war with Sweden (1657–60) led to the building of genuine fiscal-military state structures (Jespersen 2007, 60–1). As Swedish troops overran Jutland and Funen, Denmark had to give up its possessions in southern Sweden as well as areas in Norway in the Treaty of Roskilde, followed by a 2-year siege of Copenhagen. The death of Charles X Gustav both saved the Danish state's independence and triggered what is unanimously considered a monumental break with the past in Danish political history (e.g., Jensen 2013; Kjærgaard 1994, 200). Because the nobility was widely blamed for the ineffective defense of the realm, Frederick III allied with the other estates and so managed to complete a coup d'état in 1660 (Tønnesson 1981, 191–2).

The result, the King's Law of 1665 and the later Law Book of 1683 (*Danske Lov*), completely abolished the political-administrative prerogatives of the old nobility and streamlined a hierarchical legal system, thereby establishing state control (Barton 1986, 27; Jespersen

2007, 68–9; Johansen 2006, 161). Directly inspired by Sweden, the system of specialized colleges for the central administration was introduced and counties (*amter*) replaced the medieval provinces (*landskaber*) and were placed as the superiors of bailiffs (*herredsfogeder*) (Gustafsson 1994, 53; Linde 2000). The invention of new baronies and counties in 1671 created a new class of diocesan county governors (*stiftsamtmænd*) and lower-level county governors (*amtmand*). These former servants and nobles oversaw tax collection, controlled local administration and manorial estates, and acted as courts of appeal for ordinary citizens, including village peasants and manorial tenants (Dombernowsky 1983; Hansgaard 1981, 23). As the one exception, the baronies and counties managed their own courts (*birketter*) (Johansen 2006, 164). However, owing their loyalty to the king, the barons and counts did not constitute a “state within the state” (Dombernowsky 1983).

The King's Law and its repercussions also marked a transition to meritocracy. The law stated the independence of the courts (Johansen 2006, 161) and, except for the *birkedommere*, the king controlled the employment of civil servants. Most of the county governors were estate owners and of noble descent, but appointed by the king (Jespersen 2007, 65). This trend accelerated from 1736 when it became mandatory for public employees in the central and local administrations to hold a law degree from the University of Copenhagen. In turn, the king generally adhered to a strict focus on expertise and competence. Although royal interference was not banned before reforms in the early nineteenth century, the Chancellery gradually eroded arbitrariness by taking over the task of appointing and overseeing county governors during the eighteenth century (Jensen 2013, 46).

As the weaker part of the Danish–Norwegian union since the fourteenth century, Norway largely followed the state-building path taken by Denmark (Nagel 1985, 119; Teige 2010). The first steps toward state control began with the Reformation but only took off after the death of Christian IV (Imsen 1997, 21). All of the changes from the King's Law of 1665 applied to Norway as well. In fact, as the aristocracy had traditionally been much weaker in Norway, the overhaul of the rudimentary administration went even more smoothly than in Denmark (Bagge 2014, 167). The medieval tradition of peasant participation in local administration of justice and peace, the *herredage* (Imsen 1997, 26), was abolished, instead represented by a regional court in Kristiania (*Overhofretten*) with rights of appeal to the Supreme Court in Denmark (Johnsen 1919, 258). Further, no separate Norwegian ministerial colleges were established. Rather, noble diocesan county governors were instated, most of them Danish or living in Denmark (Gustafsson 1994, 57). They were the top-level administrators in Norway, superior to locally recruited county governors who had the same functions as in Denmark (Dyrvik 1995, 179–81).

The development of meritocracy also followed the Danish path. The Norwegian county governors and bailiffs were appointed on the same conditions as in

Denmark and only a few offices were sold, primarily in the customs service (Nagel 1985, 121–2). Bailiffs and judges were increasingly recruited from the Norwegian bourgeoisie (Dyrvik 1995, 181). Likewise, the 1736 mandate regarding law degrees had the same positive effects on merit recruitment and bourgeois admission to the upper ranks of the bureaucracy as in Denmark, also bringing Norway close to the Weberian ideal (Gustafsson 1994, 127–8).

France, by contrast, stayed within the confines of patrimonialism. Pushed by wars against the Habsburgs in the 1630s, the Ministry of Cardinal Richelieu and later King Louis XIV (1643–1715) circumvented the medieval estates and centralized powers in the King's Court and his administration (Ertman 1997, 126; Fischer and Lundgreen 1975, 493). However, the provincial officials (*intendants*), who were the strongest instrument of state centralization, were, like all other offices from ministerial to the lowest officials, up for sale (Behrens 1985, 138). This institutionalization of venal office-holding was a deliberate strategy to raise finances, especially in response to wars with Great Britain in the eighteenth century (Ertman 1997, 137–42). Further, resistance to bureaucratization from the Catholic Church and the nobility in the regional *parlements* created a bewildering system of parallel administrative hierarchies and jurisdictions with no clearly defined relationships (Parker 1997, 175; Skocpol 1979, 52–3).

In Prussia, the Thirty Years' War changed the balance of power between the Hohenzollern royal family and the landed elite and forged a new state organization: the Hohenzollern princes got their standing army and control of a public finance and military administration, and later used this discretion to build a central-level bureaucracy based on meritocratic recruitment. In return, the Junkers were granted full autonomy in the administration of manorial estates and local justice (Rosenberg 1958). These were the essential features of the Prussian state until 1848 (Clark 2006, 61; Fischer and Lundgreen 1975, 510–7).

Impartiality in Policymaking and Implementation

Ideas for agrarian reform in Denmark were developed and negotiated in clearly mandated commissions and colleges (Løgstrup 2015, 506–14). The first major agrarian commission of 1757 (*Kommission til Landvæsenets Forbedring*) consisted of four civil servants, one noble, and three royal landlords or counts (*lensgrever*). It requested petitions from estate owners only and entailed no significant policy innovations (Jensen 1936, 36–8; Løgstrup 2015, 65–6). However, the permanent college on agrarian affairs (*Generallandvæsenkollegiet*), which was established in 1768 and led the first reforms on labor services and enclosures, had a broader composition including royal chamberlains, civil servants who were also landlords, and civil servants of bourgeois descent such as Professor Henrik Stampe (Løgstrup 2015, 66).

The college's leading force was Stampe. He made sure that the college's decisions were based on inputs from preordained, nationally organized consultations of the peasantry alongside the usual hearings of landlords and county governors (Jensen 1936, 62–3). These consultations resulted in a vast number of petitions—150 from peasant groups in the first year (Løgstrup 2015, 66)—that became vital elements in the reform design (Almbjär 2019, 1018; Hansgaard 1981, 75).

The Small and Great Land Commissions likewise were broadly composed of landlords as experts in rural affairs, civil servants, and both Enlightenment progressives and skeptics (Baack 1977, 7–8; Jensen 1936, 118–36). As typical of the later reform decisions, the Great Land Commission was initiated by the reformist Prime Minister and noble landlord Reventlow, carried through by jurist Colbjørnsen, and informed by peasant and county governor petitions (Barton 1986, 144; Jensen 1936, 140–1; Hansgaard 1981, 191). The politically charged discussions on abolishing *Stavnsbåndet* in the Great Land Commission reveal the expected disagreements between major landlord and common interests but also the dominance of a distinct bureaucratic ethos among the members, certifying a keen interest in reform but also in securing the legal rights of both peasant and lord (Baack 1977, 7–8; Hansgaard 1981, 108; Jensen 1936, 148–9; Løgstrup 2015, 506–14).

The laws and regulations on enclosures, leaseholds, and labor services were implemented by professional surveyors and inspectors. They were deliberately employed to be neutral in providing the land, housing, and income surveys of peasant estates needed to calculate tax requirements, details of tenancy contracts, and conditions for the buying of land (Barton 1986, 144; Christensen 1975, 31; Østerud 1978, 142). A telling example is the early enclosure reforms, whose provisions ensured that county governors and “knowledgeable men” with no landed property led the implementation (Hansgaard 1981, 129). Another notable example is the formal institutionalization of settlement commissions as part of the labor service reforms of the 1790s. These were formed to reach agreements in difficult cases outside the regular court system, taking input from each party and independent experts. Cases were moderated by diocesan county governors (Dombernowsky 1983, 186–8; Løgstrup 2015, 448–9), which, from 1799, reported to the ordinary county governors to ensure impartiality (Dombernowsky 1983, 193).

Petitions and courts of appeal in the last instance were frequently used to hear complaints over specific decisions made in relation to the agrarian reforms. While officeholders and landlords constituted the majority among the senders, peasants formed a significant part as well (Munck 2018, 383–4). The general assessment is that social status was no guarantee for a successful judgment of petitions (Munck 2018, 384). Despite frequent out-of-court settlements and administrative malpractices, the right of appeal and the rule of law more generally were well respected in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Denmark (Gustafsson 1994, 107–8; Johansen 2006, 165–71) and manorial court

decisions were frequently circumvented by higher courts (Munck 2018, 384).

Eventually, the Danish agrarian reforms progressed smoothly and peacefully because they struck a neat balance between peasant and landlord interests (Baack 1977, 24). One important reason for this balance was the central role of the commissions. When disagreements emerged, as during the Jutland landlords' protest in 1790, commissions eventually moderated some of the measures to include proposals of the disgruntled parties while preserving the main reform elements (Jensen 1936, 179–80). This handling was one way the Danish authorities avoided the situation of revolutionary France (Jørgensen 2019, 416–7).

The general level of legitimacy and respect for the implementation of the administration additionally weighed in. Although evidence on contemporary trust levels is thin, the public outrage against Enlightenment reformer Struensee during his *de facto* reign (1770–72) suggests that the existing system with entitlement to approaching state officials and respect for them as guarantors of law and justice were ingrained parts of the political culture among peasants and landlords (Bregnsbo 1997). Unlike what happened after the 1780s' petitioning processes in France, numerous court cases and the questionnaire of 1768 on improvements to rural conditions sent to tenant farmers and landlords document that peasants and lords almost always expressed their dissatisfaction with agrarian conditions and reforms peacefully as they expected some payoff and often got it (Bjørn 1981, 111–2; Bregnsbo 1997; Løgstrup 2011, 293–4). Likewise, the quick investigation by a royal commission and subsequent delivery of corn to angry peasants stopped their hunger riot in 1790 (Mikkelsen 2018, 17–8).

As Danish administrative principals dominated in Norway, the policymaking and implementation processes around reforms in Norway were basically the same as in Denmark. However, the large commissions in Denmark were not mandated to deal with the different agrarian relations in Norway. Instead, peasants voiced concerns via local courts, *things*, and petitions to the Danish king through the vicegerent, which played a key role in developing reform proposals (Barton 1986, 150; Østerud 1978, 202–14; Sandvik 2018, 167). In preparing the 1687 ordinance, vicegerent Gyldenløve was treated as expert on rural Norwegian affairs, writing to the king regarding his concerns for the well-being of the Norwegian peasants, while years of petitioning from dissatisfied peasants over the unlawful appropriation of property by bailiffs also worked to persuade the Danish authorities (Johnsen 1919, 266–71). Likewise, in preparing the reform of *odelsretten*, the Danish government collected reports from Norwegian officials and eventually went with the majority position (Johnsen 1919, 281).

The implementation norms in Denmark worked for the Norwegian peasants and estate owners as well. In general, the majority of petitions sent to the king in Denmark were processed according to standard rules and often with a positive outcome for the peasants

(Nagel 1985, 134; Sandvik 2018, 172). Relatively few peasants actually wrote petitions, but the county governors in many cases anticipated peasant complaints over a given policy and asked the Danish government to make amendments (Gustafsson 1994, 65). During the reform of *odelsretten*, for instance, arbitration commissions were established, including civil servants as chairs and peasants as members (Dyrvik 1995, 185). However, beyond what could be obtained through this participation, the general assessment is that the civil servants did not favor small peasants over large estate owners or other parties (Dyrvik 1995, 183).

This impartial policymaking and implementation played the same appeasing role in Norway as in Denmark. While the few protests and uprisings were directly provoked by allegedly corrupt practices of the royal servants in Norway, the most recent assessment of reform success in Denmark–Norway concludes that “[a] relatively simple structure of legal institutions, combined with a comprehensive system to process large quantities of petitions from all parts of society, ensured at least the appearances of concern for consensus decisions” (Munck 2018, 336). Tellingly, the increased opposition to Danish rule such as over the *odelsretten* reform from the 1770s pertained to narrow elites of state officials and burghers rather than peasants or landlords (Dørum 2021, 317). Likewise, the Lofthus movement's main tactic of sending supplications and the faltering of the movement after a government commission had investigated complaints and dismissed two judges indicate the appeasing role of impartial administration (see Sandvik 2018, 175–6).

As in Denmark and Norway, civil servants contributed to impartial decision-making and implementation around Sweden's agrarian reforms. The idea of Sweden's enclosure reforms was introduced in 1746 by Jacob Faggot, an engineer directing the royal land inspection office (Gadd 2000, 275). From 1749, the Land Board Survey, a group established by the state bureaucracy comprising professional civil servants and led by Faggot, began measurements of where and how enclosures would streamline agricultural production (Gadd 2000, 273; Helmfrid 1961, 115). Progressive estates in parliament did play a key role in supporting the work of the board by, for instance, winning over more conservative landlords and peasants (Bäck 1984, 280; Helmfrid 1961, 116). However, the first and subsequent enclosure reforms were initiated by civil servants and experts and negotiated in a highly bureaucratized process (Gadd 2000, 275, 283).

Proposals for adjustments in the *Enskifte* and *Lagaskifte* came from noble and peasant estate petitions and from land inspectors and other professional surveyors (Barton 1986, 255–6; Gadd 2000, 275). Peasants especially used the right of petitioning via the county governors, but also forwarded their more general opinions through the diet representatives (Bäck 1984, 281–2; Gustafsson 1994, 95). The reforms were most strongly encouraged by landlords and bureaucrats keen on increasing tax revenues, but no reform could come about without the consent of the peasantry (Østerud 1978, 146–8). Thus, parliamentary representation was

instrumental in the policymaking process, but impartial administrative channels played independent roles as well.

The implementation of the enclosures was carried out by land inspectors and other educated personnel employed by the state (Barton 1986, 255–6; Gadd 2000, 273). Information brought about by these civil servants fed into negotiations at the parish level where the priest, a state servant, contributed to making sure that decisions were settled amicably between tenants and proprietors (Aronsson 1992, 49–50; Helmfrid 1961, 121). Peasants influenced the practical design and execution of diet legislation, sat as judges and laymen in local courts, and made policy proposals at parish meetings (Österberg 2008, 77; Viitaniemi 2021, 239). However, given the gatekeeper functions of the county governors, court judges, and state-ordained priests, this peasant influence was just as much channeled by the state as forced upon it (Linde 2000, 26, 82).

Administrative misconduct was widespread but concerned mistakes, thoughtlessness, and recklessness more than deliberate abuse to favor third parties (Teorell and Rothstein 2015, 224–5). In fact, the specific organs implementing agrarian policies functioned effectively and channeled both peasant and landlord demands and complaints regarding county governors and bailiffs (Linde 2000, 92; Österberg 2008, 82). The high court and the Chancellor of Justice received substantial amounts of complaints from peasants (Liliequist and Almbjär 2012, 18; Teorell and Rothstein 2015, 224–5), and in turn ruled on the basis of a solid rule-of-law tradition going back to the Svea Court of Appeal (Jägerskiöld 1961, 1080).

As is generally agreed, the *Storskifte* and subsequent reforms proceeded peacefully, not because of policy agreement between peasants and lords, but because proposals, disputes, and protests were channeled through local participation organs and county governors (Bäck 1984, 280). Again, evidence on contemporary attitudes is thin. Nevertheless, at least from around the 1760s, parish meeting minutes indicate that the more active role of peasant organs and the respect they received from the state integrated peasants in mainstream politics (Viitaniemi 2021; see also Linde 2000, 26–30; Maarbberg 2004, 412–3; Österberg 2008, 74). Moreover, the peasants of the Dalecarlian Rebellion in 1743 at first negotiated peacefully with the government and probably only grew violent after mistaken firings of cannonballs (Berglund 2018, 289). Equally telling, the political unrest and royal assassination in 1792 did not lead to violent revolution as in France because of the concessions granted to peasants in 1789, which complicated an alliance between the peasant and noble estates (see Oakley 1990, 373). Popular riots in 1789, 1793, and 1799, inspired by events in France, only consisted of townspeople and were quickly resolved through negotiation with police authorities and imprisonment of riot participants as well as noble accomplices to the assassination (Berglund 2018, 290–3).

Conversely, the French system of venal office-holding supported seigneurial privilege and thus

hindered agrarian reform before 1789 (Behrens 1985, 138). For instance, the chief reform promoter, Finance Minister Necker (1777–81, 1788–1789, and 1789–1790), failed in building a coalition among central-level civil servants, regional parliaments, and intendants. As evidenced in the country-wide petitions and rebellions of the late 1780s, revolution was driven by decades of an ineffective and corrupt judiciary and system of noble tax exemptions, which had eroded state legitimacy and caused immense grievances among the peasantry (Jones 1988, 42–3; Skocpol 1979, 118). Eventually, Necker's dismissal partly triggered the Storm of the Bastille (Lefebvre 2015, 121).

As the Prussian central bureaucracy grew, it managed to push reform proposals much further than in France through commission works (Behrens 1985, 45). Enabled by Prussia's disastrous defeat at Jena in 1806, noble civil servants Stein and Hardenberg, alongside state councilors and professors, debated and promoted the 1807 October Edict and the 1811 and 1816 amendments (Clark 2006, 320). The partial retractions in 1811 and 1816 were necessary to appease noble powers in the national assembly and provinces (Berdahl 1988, 144–6; Eddie 2013, chaps. 8, 9). Although many landlords eventually welcomed the reforms (Clark 2006, 330), ordinances in the 1820s at the county level and rulings of local courts, where the landed nobility was still the dominant force, made sure that the nobility dominated the new provincial diets and preserved manorial rights (Berdahl 1988, 286–7). As Eddie (2013, 258) concludes, “[T]he state remained insufficiently ramified in the localities to force through a transfer of power [...] or wealth [...] away from its indispensable furthest protuberance, the noble manor.”

IMPLICATIONS

The findings above challenge some of the dominant theories of democratization in three ways. First, they identify an alternative Scandinavian route to democracy that goes against the widespread assertion that sustainable democratization requires a violent breakthrough (e.g., Moore 1966; for a review, see Bernhard and Kopstein 2017). The Scandinavian experience documents that peaceful, stable democratization is possible through auspicious state–society relations formed by an impartial state administration decades in advance.

Second, in contrast to leading models emphasizing the bourgeoisie and/or the working class (e.g., Ansell and Samuels 2014; Dahlum, Knutsen, and Wig 2019; Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992), the core reason behind Scandinavia's more stable route to democracy lies in the state. Contrasting classic cases of democratization by revolution like England (1688) and Germany (1918–19) as well as less violent ones such as Switzerland and the Netherlands, the principal organizer and arbiter of rights extensions in Scandinavia was not the bourgeoisie or industrial

workers. Rather, state officials, positioned as servants for the entire population and acting in accordance with bureaucratic norms of impartiality, orchestrated the content and implementation of agrarian reforms. Their behavior, in turn, ensured against capture by “conservative” landlords or “revolutionary” peasants and thus helped limiting peasant grievances and landlord resistance to reform.

While the exact connections between agrarian reforms and subsequent political developments in long nineteenth-century Europe are topics for future research, available evidence suggests that Scandinavian reform experiences contributed to auspicious state–farmer relations that later recurred with industrial workers and that this facilitated relatively stable mass democratization. This pathway stands in contrast to political developments in Prussia and France, where varieties of bitter mistrust between state and society and unstable democratization prevailed.

Third, the findings contrast more recent emphases on “early democracy” (Ahmed and Stasavage 2020) or medieval “executive-constraining institutions” (Møller 2015) as prerequisites for reaching the “narrow corridor” toward liberal democracy (see Acemoglu and Robinson 2019). Particularly in Sweden, peasant participation organs certainly played their part, but the historical route to auspicious state–society relations and democracy across Scandinavia began with a strong state rather than a strong society. Indeed, penetrative and impartial state administrations were forged by wars centuries ago in diverse sociopolitical settings. To be sure, democratization was not a deliberate state project in Scandinavia. However, Scandinavia’s vibrant civil society and political parties, which eventually pushed for and made the transition to democracy easier, were unintended consequences of bureaucratic ambitions to modernize the economy through peaceful agrarian reforms.

My findings beg the question whether we can generalize the Scandinavian trajectory. In a global statistical analysis, Gjerløw et al. (2021) recently found limited support for positive consequences of a “state-first” pathway, highlighting Denmark as a historical outlier. My results demonstrate that the Danish exception applies to the rest of Scandinavia, but the negative consequences of state weaknesses for stable democratization in France and Prussia suggest a more general proposition. Even if a strong state may initially hamper democratization, cases of strong state-cum-weak society like Singapore have better odds of achieving stable democracy if a political opening occurs than weak state-cum-weak society cases like Russia. Democracy is probably better able to take root when a strong and autonomous political society is combined with an impartial bureaucracy.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000205>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the APSR Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3GTZRZ>.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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