

## Scenes from a Marriage: Social Democrats and trade unions in Scandinavia

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# SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

## Social Democrats and trade unions in Scandinavia

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## **Scenes from a marriage: Social Democrats and trade unions in Scandinavia**

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we explore recent developments in institutional relationships between social democratic parties and trade unions in Scandinavia. We find that previously observed variation is still evident. The relationship in Denmark has become notably weaker in recent years, as much extant theory predicts. But the Swedish equivalent has remained stronger, while the Norwegian one appears to have revived. However, exactly how intense the latter relationship now is has considerable implications for our analysis. To offset a deterministic tendency within structural, system-level explanations, we have previously argued that we need to bring agency back in, through a simple model of political exchange – that is, what each wing of the labour movement can offer the other, and what it receives in return. This model still performs fairly well in explaining the divergence between the Danish and Swedish cases. However, to some extent, the relative strength of ties between the Norwegian Labour Party and the country's blue-collar unions give us cause to reflect more critically about the assumptions that underpin our inquiry.

### **Introduction**

In the first half of the 20th century, party organisations in modern democracies were often firmly embedded in particular social segments by, among other things, close relations with particular interest groups. Based on a common history and ideology (Duverger 1972/1954), these organisational 'marriages of convenience' (Warner 2000) offered obvious advantages to each side. Yet variation across and within cases raises numerous questions about the conditions in which such associations are favoured or hindered (Thomas 2001; Allern forthcoming, ch. 3). Particularly intriguing examples can be found in Northern Europe. In recent decades, the region's historically powerful social democratic parties have gradually drawn away from the organisations that were once their most important allies, the trade unions. Both these wings of the national labour movements have, it seems, seen their interests diverge and their organisational and ideological ties loosen.

Structural reasons for this development are not hard to identify. Society has fundamentally changed since the labour movements were founded in the late 19th century. The social democrats' core constituency, the urban working class, has diminished in size, a process that has fragmented class identity (Howell 2001: 16-18; Kitschelt 1994: 8-39; Poguntke 2006: 397). The growth of the public sector has left social democrats in the often awkward position of being simultaneously the representatives of organised labour and, when in government, its employer (Hernes 1991, 247-55; Åmark 1992, 91). Such changes have in turn posed a challenge to traditionally shared ideology. In response, social democratic parties in particular (Koelble 1992) have sought to expand their appeal throughout the electorate. As early as the 1960s, the 'catch-all party' was being discussed as a successor to the old class-based mass party. As a consequence, collateral and other closely tied organisations turned into interest groups with weaker party links (Kirchheimer 1966: 192-3).

As far as the Nordic region is concerned, one comprehensive survey of the organisational relationships between parties and interest groups (Sundberg 2001a, 2003) concurred broadly with these conclusions. For instance, in the Danish case, Bille and Christiansen (2001: 71-3) found that, although their link had not completely dissolved, the Social Democratic Party and trade unions had become more autonomous of each other. This was attributed to changes at societal level, with collective political participation weakened by differentiation and specialisation. It thus came to be in the interests of both partners to act independently and flexibly in order to attract voters and/or members (see also Bille 1998, 112-13). Indeed, as Sundberg (2003: 80) pointed out, unions were often as keen as the parties, or keener, to see the relationships loosened.

However, Streeck and Hassel (2003, 343) argue that party-union relations in Western Europe have, in a long-term perspective, been remarkably stable. In an earlier article (Allern et al. 2007), we showed that the structural thesis of party-union divorce needs a more nuanced analysis. Focusing on three 'comparable cases' (Lijphart 1971, 689) of institutional ties partly designed to promote political exchange,<sup>1</sup> we argued that, while these relations have indeed declined, they have done so at different paces and to different degrees in Scandinavia. The ties between the Danish Social Democratic Party (SD) and the blue-collar union confederation in Denmark, known as LO (as it is in the other two countries, too), had deteriorated to the extent that the two wings were quite separate from each other. In Sweden, however, relations between the Social Democratic Party (SAP) and LO remained considerably more robust. In Norway, the links between the Labour Party (DnA) and LO fell somewhere between the other two cases.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, in contrast to the contributors to the Sundberg (2001a, 2003) project, we concentrate on ties that can be established or abolished by leadership decisions.

We argued that, in explaining the variation that we observed, a useful starting point could be located within the school of rational-choice institutionalism, in which institutions are conceived as reflecting and maintaining equilibrium in the goal-seeking strategies pursued by relevant political actors (Bates et al. 1998, 8; Hall & Taylor 1996, 942-6). Institutional connections between social democratic parties and trade unions could be envisaged as the product of an exchange relationship (Poguntke 2006; cf. Warner 2000). Unions, on one hand, seek to maximise their memberships and to promote the material interests of those members, while parties may encourage party sympathisers to affiliate to these groups and provide interest groups with access to political decision-making. With these assumptions, unions view institutional connections to a party as a potential means of (1) attracting members and (2) gaining access to social democratic governments. Parties, on the other hand, are assumed to be primarily office seeking. This requires successful vote seeking at election time, which in turn is facilitated by two resources that unions might (or might not) be able to deliver, namely, (1) financial support and (2) the votes of their members.<sup>2</sup>

When this exchange of resources occurs efficiently, we expected party-union connections to remain strong, not least because their institutionalisation allows the actors to overcome problems of imperfect information and non-simultaneous exchange (Quinn 2002, 210). When, however, one side in the exchange can no longer produce the goods that the other side seeks, or if those goods become less valuable to the recipient, the institutional links will become weaker, as the costs of being closely linked – money, labour, time and, above all, reduced freedom of action – are likely to exceed the benefits for each actor. The size of these benefits might be influenced by external, structural constraints (like, for instance, changes in the economy and the electorate). But, unlike structural theory, we emphasise costs and benefits specific to parties and unions, and we analyse the options that parties and unions face as autonomous, goal-seeking actors.<sup>3</sup>

We concluded that the hypotheses of our exchange model performed pretty well, but that it did not explain the whole range of variation and change in our cases. The development until 2005 seemed also to be rooted in the formative phase of the relationship. Strong historical connections, though present in all three countries, were – as shall be elaborated below – rooted more deeply and at an earlier stage in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark, and were thus perhaps more binding at a later one. In other words, rational-choice but also (additional) elements of historical institutionalist approaches appeared useful in explaining the variation in contemporary party–relations in Scandinavia.

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<sup>2</sup> Thus we do not directly examine variation in parties' primary goals or resources in terms of public policies.

<sup>3</sup> For a more elaborated cost-benefit model of party-interest group relationships, see Allern (forthcoming, ch. 5).

Interestingly, we also learned that the institutionalised ties between social democratic parties and trade unions entered a critical phase in Scandinavia towards the late 1990s, after a period of moderate decline. Thus, the choices made in the early 2000s appeared to be far from definitive. In this paper, therefore, we look at recent developments in each of the three countries. Nearly one decade into the 21st century, do the institutional ties still persist in the Norwegian and Swedish case, or have they – belatedly – followed the Danish course? The other main question we explore in this paper is: what can account for the intriguing variation across Scandinavian labour movements as of 2009? Does the simple exchange model still take us a fair way towards explaining the differences? And what might explain possible deviations from the course that it predicts?

Again we assume that the three Scandinavian countries share enough characteristics to offer the reasonable expectation that background variables – history, culture, location, political systems, party systems – can be held constant. A comparative study of party–union relationships in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, with a measure of within-case investigation in each, may help us to identify relevant key explanatory variables – even if we need to be cautious about the significance of our findings. As in our previous work, the descriptive empirical analysis is based on relevant party documents and interviews with key informants. For the explanatory analysis informed by the exchange model, data for the following relevant variables have been collected: union memberships; their access to power, in terms of the number of years the labour parties have been in government; the financial resources that parties derive from unions; and the unions' capacity to mobilise their members to vote for the social democrats, according to national election studies.

The rest of this paper unfolds as follows. First, we summarise the historical background and development of the party-union ties in the three countries, and we look at recent developments. Then we review the data relevant to our potential explanatory factors in the exchange model. Finally, we discuss our results. We conclude that the previously observed variation is still evident, but exactly how intense the relationship now is between the Norwegian Labour Party and LO has considerable implications for our analysis. Overall, the simple exchange model still appears to be useful, but recent developments, particularly in Norway, reveal and highlight more shortcomings than the variation up to 2005 did. In conclusion, therefore, we discuss whether more elements emphasised by the school of historical institutionalism – like institutional feedback mechanisms – need to be incorporated in future work on this topic.

## **The Scandinavian cases compared**

Scandinavian labour movements used to have some of the closest relations between political parties and unions found anywhere (Duverger 1954/1972; Ebbinghaus 1995; Streeck & Hassel 2003, 343). ‘Institutional ties’ included overlapping organisational structures that guaranteed mutual representation on national executive organs.

In Denmark, where party and unions initially constituted a single organisation, this arrangement was upheld for almost 100 years (Bille & Christiansen 2001). It ended much earlier in Norway and Sweden, where, instead, liaison committees were established, as was the norm of having leading figures in LO and its member unions elected to the party’s executive committee. Even more importantly, collective party membership at local level applied in Norway and Sweden. Whenever a local union branch affiliated to the local branch of the party, it also automatically brought all of its members into the party (Wörlund & Hansson 2001, 144; Allern & Heidar 2001, 108). Denmark never had similar collective membership, although local party branches were often represented in joint committees with union branches (*fællesorganisationer*), and vice-versa (Dybdahl 1969, 243).

By the late 1990s formal institutional party-union links had notably weakened (Sundberg 2001b). Most significantly, collective party membership was abolished in Sweden and Norway by, respectively, 1991 and 1997 – a major change in the relationship between parties and unions. Yet some significant ties remained in the new millennium (Allern et al. 2007), and as we shall see, such ties still exist at the end of the 2000s in Scandinavia. Indeed, we have seen a few developments in party-union ties since 2005.

#### *Recent developments of party-union ties*

In Sweden, a ‘Trade-Union Committee’ still involves representatives of the party organisation, its MPs, LO, its member unions and other organisations within the labour movement. It meets once a month. Three functionaries within the organisational division of the party’s central office work on party-union co-operation. During the election campaigns of 2002 and 2006, a ‘trade-union election centre’ was established in the Social Democrats’ central office to co-ordinate the party’s and the unions’ campaign efforts (*Aftonbladet*, 14 Feb. 2006). LO’s chair is also still certain to be elected by the party congress to SAP’s executive committee. At local level, union sections often still affiliate to party branches, and the more of their members they can persuade to join the party, the more weight these unions branches receive. This presence has a considerable impact on basic party operations such as candidate selection (Aylott 2003; cf. Widfeldt 2001, 71-2).



As it became clear in 2007 that Mona Sahlin was likely to become Social Democratic leader, some within LO expressed disquiet. For them, Sahlin lacked a real bond to the union movement.<sup>4</sup> However, no serious union opposition to her candidacy actually emerged.

In Norway, a ‘Co-operation Committee’ collects the leaders of DnA, its parliamentary group, LO and individual unions to discuss political and organisational issues at least once a month. Occasionally, it also establishes temporary joint policy committees (Allern forthcoming, ch. 7, 15). DnA’s tradition of electing LO’s chair onto the party’s executive committee was discontinued from 2002, but it was re-established in 2005. Furthermore, the party leader and the party secretary still attend (without the formal right to speak) the meetings of LO’s general council (*Representantskap*) (Allern forthcoming, ch. 7). The practice of LO’s chair heading the party congress’s election committee was suspended in 2007 (Jota 2008 [interview]), but this may be due to exceptional circumstances (see below). At local level, the party has founded still more branches in workplaces, and the national party leadership has encouraged the formation of local joint committees between party and union branches.<sup>5</sup>

In Denmark, by contrast, de facto overlapping leadership has almost completely disappeared at national level (Bille & Christiansen 2001, 18). A top-level joint committee had become moribund by 2007 (Palshøj 2008 [interview]), although, interestingly, a revamped version did begin meeting again in 2008 (Madsen 2009 [interview]). At local level, mutual representation on executive committees is still found in some major towns. In 2002, however, LO distanced itself further by removing any reference to the party in its constitution (Due & Madsen 2002, 1).

In 2005 SD elected a new leader in a membership ballot, a contest that divided LO unions. One candidate, Frank Jensen, argued that the broken ties had led to ‘ideological confusion’, whereas the other, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the preferred choice of LO’s chair, stressed that the organisations should remain autonomous (*Ugebrevet A4*, 2005, no. 11). Thorning-Schmidt won the ballot. During the 2007 Danish election campaign, LO chose a new leader, with the more ‘traditionalist’ candidate, Harald Børsting, narrowly defeating LO’s deputy leader. Neither candidate

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<sup>4</sup> This reputation had been cemented in 1990, when, as employment minister, Sahlin had been partly responsible for a package of policy measures that had caused the most serious rift between party and unions in the labour movement’s history. The episode had contributed to her failure to become party leader in 1996, although minor scandal was the ostensible reason for her withdrawal from contention then.

<sup>5</sup> That all this is still the case was confirmed by an interview with the ‘party-union advisor’ in 2008 (Jota 2008 [interview]).

advocated re-establishing formal or economic ties; nor did the leaders of the major unions (*Ugebladet A4*, 2007, no. 28).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we see that in Denmark, institutional relations remain distant, while in Sweden and Norway, ties since 2005 have been maintained, not abolished. Hence, the question is what has made the Danish labour movement follow the anticipated path towards greater autonomy, while its Swedish and Norwegian counterparts have chosen differently. In light of the scholarly literature emphasising the significance of structural changes in society and economy for political developments, this survival of old ties and persistent variation come as a surprise.

### **Examining variation in party-union ties**

We hypothesised that the links still offered worthwhile payoffs for the Swedish and the Norwegian party and associated trade unions, whereas in Denmark the equivalent payoffs were lower for both trade unions and parties in their pursuit of basic goals. We now examine union interests (increased membership and access to power) and party interests (financial and electoral support) in turn, paying special attention to developments since 2005.

#### *Union members: social democratic voters?*

Social democratic parties might ‘deliver’ new union members by urging their sympathisers to join unions. In Norway, DnA’s statutes still recommend LO membership, but the number of DnA members has decreased over time (Heidar & Saglie 2002, 35). The most effective way to maintain or increase membership density, however, is probably to offer benefits to members, either collective (improved wages and working conditions) or selective. If union members identify themselves decreasingly as members of the historical labour movement, they may come to dislike the exclusive co-operation of their union with a particular party, or even the use of union funds for political purposes (Poguntke 1998, 158). More specifically, when economic developments compel social democratic governments to implement painful policies, like cost-saving pension reforms, association with social democrats may become less attractive for unions trying to recruit new members. In this sense, social democratic parties’ ability to deliver goods to unions have been weakened in all three countries, and the costs of party ties – in terms of political constraints – might

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<sup>6</sup> After his election, Børsting initiated the above-mentioned regular meetings between the leaderships of SD, LO and the major unions, especially during major political negotiations. The stated purpose was primarily to share information about major initiatives and not to let the government play the partners off against each other (as some say happened in 2007) (Madsen 2009 [interview]).

even have significantly increased. However, we should also consider three union-related external conditions that might impinge on the cost-benefit calculations of unions: relative union density; the relative homogeneity of LO; and the degree of direct competition with other confederations for members.

In Scandinavia, the unionised proportion of the workforce (union density) has, for various reasons, traditionally been high (Allern et al. 2007, 618). The question is whether these incentives for change varies between and within our cases today.

In Norway, LO unions' coverage of all employees had sunk from about half in the 1960s to about 30 percent in the late 1990s (Stokke 2000, 17). When the party abolished collective membership, LO initiated the change, pointing to the problems it had caused for LO's recruitment of white-collar employees. Many collectively affiliated union branches left the party in the 1970s and 1980s (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). By 2005, although LO's membership figures had never been higher, its market share had diminished to about 28 percent (Neergaard & Stokke 2006).

In Denmark, the growth of white-collar confederations contributed to LO's share of all employees falling from around 55 percent in the 1980s to 47 percent in 2003, especially in the expanding public sector (Bild et al. 2007, 46-7, 371).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one of the two main reasons why LO decided to end its funding of the Social Democrats was that it constituted the main obstacle to alliance or merger with the two other Danish union confederations, which both emphasise non-partisanship (Due & Madsen 2002, 5-7). By 2007 LO's market share had fallen to about 41 percent.<sup>8</sup>

In Sweden, LO's loss of market share had been relatively modest, falling from 57 percent of the workforce in 1980 to 53 percent in 1998 (Kjellberg 1998, 99). Moreover, compared with its sister confederations in Denmark and Norway, the position of LO in the Swedish labour market – with its more easily centralised labour relations and relatively limited competition between its blue-collar unions and other, white-collar unions – appeared to have weakened its incentive to seek a politically freer position in order to attract members. However, by late 2007 LO's share of the workforce had fallen, fairly spectacularly, to 32 percent (Statistics Sweden 2008a). In 2005 the total memberships of the two Swedish white-collar confederations for the first time surpassed that of LO (news report, Radio Sweden website, 27 Feb. 2006).

Inter-union competition has, then, hardened across the board in Scandinavia. The growth of the service sector has lead to more specialised organisations for the highly educated and a

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<sup>7</sup> Denmark's LO does include a major white-collar union, HK, organising about 9 percent of employees by 2007.

<sup>8</sup> This figure is derived as the proportion of fee-paying union members (LO 2007) among all employees (Statistics Denmark 2007, table 113), in accordance with the procedure used by Bild et al. (2007, 371).

strengthening of white-collar confederations' market share. The old unions have often been left with their power bases in declining economic sectors (Due & Madsen 2002, 5-7; Kjellberg 1998, 99; Neergaard & Stokke 2006, 65). The unions' need for innovative recruitment strategies has thus increased, not least in Norway and Sweden.

The 'service model' of trade union, with emphasis on selective incentives, is not predominant. But there are indications of scepticism about partisanship among LO unions in Norway. Some Norwegian unions prefer not to have formal ties to the Labour Party and some emphasise party-political neutrality in their statutes (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). A few unions have publicly argued that LO should weaken its links with DnA or establish equal ties to the Socialist Left Party. Indeed, LO's chair decided to withdraw temporarily from the DnA executive committee in 2001 after internal pressure from members and unions (Allern forthcoming, ch. 7). During the leadership of Gerd-Liv Valla in 2001-7, it became clear that not all unions appreciated the more pronounced political role she gave LO in Norwegian politics (Tranøy 2007). So the utility of a close relationship with DnA for membership recruitment is, for sure, much discussed in today's LO. In Denmark, a membership survey conducted in 2002 concluded that only 10 percent thought that LO should support any specific political party, with 70 percent against (Bild et al. 2007, 243).

However, no such pressure is apparent in Sweden. Indeed, LO's furious reaction to reforms made to unemployment insurance by the new centre-right government in 2006-7 seemed to push the confederation even closer to the Social Democrats.<sup>9</sup> One of Sahlin's first moves on becoming party leader was to pledge, in an article written jointly with LO's leader, to reverse the cuts in unemployment benefit (Sahlin & Lundby-Wedin 2007). Hence, while institutional party ties may have become less useful for membership recruitment in general, the contrast between the reactions to falling market share of, on one hand, Swedish LO unions and, on the other, those in Denmark and (to a lesser extent) Norway are striking.

#### *Union's access to power: social democrats in office?*

As argued above, unions' investment in relations with a party will be encouraged if that party can in turn influence public policy. Such influence becomes less likely if the party is frequently out of government. Although corporatist arrangements have grown weaker, and minority governments are

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<sup>9</sup> These reforms included a cut in the rate of benefit received after 200 days of unemployment from 80 percent to 70 percent; a reduced maximum rate of benefit; the abolition of tax-deductible status for premiums paid to unemployment-insurance funds; and a differentiation of state subsidies to these funds, which raised premiums to funds representing workers in high-unemployment sectors (*Dagens Nyheter*, 16 Oct. 2006). The consequent fall in union density was striking. In late 2006 the figure stood at over 75 percent; by the end of 2007 it had fallen below 70 percent (Statistics Sweden 2008b).

frequent in Scandinavia, incumbent social democratic parties should be more attractive to unions than those in long-term opposition. When social democrats lose their hold on power, trade unions may reasonably hesitate to put all their political eggs into that one party's basket. How, then, can the Scandinavian social democratic parties' governing propensity be evaluated, especially since 2005?

Of the three parties, the Danish one has had the weakest grip on government. The breakthrough of the Progress Party in the 1970s helped to shift the balance of power, as its reinforcement of the right made it harder for the Social Democrats to control the vital median position in parliament (cf. Laver & Schofield 1990, 111). SD was in opposition for over a decade in 1982-93 (Bille 1997a, 386). In 2001 it lost power again,<sup>10</sup> and a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives, supported by the anti-immigration Danish People's Party, took office. The Social Democrats' decline continued in the 2005 election and again in 2007, when their vote fell from 29.1 percent to just 25.5 percent. The right-wing governing constellation remained intact.

This meant that, by 2009, right-of-centre governments had been in power in Denmark for 19 of the previous 27 years. It has thus become increasingly clear that, to exert stable influence over public policies, unions needed to engage with these governments (Christiansen et al. 2004) – which is what they have done. In June 2007 all three major trade-union confederations agreed with the government on a major 'quality reform' of the public sector at a cost of DKr6.4 billion.<sup>11</sup> Leading Social Democrats criticised LO both for participating in the agreement and, later, for not getting enough out of it. But LO's chair stated that the agreement contained improvements for employees that even exceeded his initial demands (*Berlingske Tidende*, 4 Jul. 2007; *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*, 18 Jun. 2007, 18 Oct. 2007). He declared explicitly that although LO still preferred a Social Democratic government, LO was ready to pay the political price of helping the existing government by bargaining with it (*Ugen på spidsen*, Danish radio P1, 29 Jun. 2007).

In Norway, DnA spent just a few unhappy months in office between 1997 and 2005, and periodically engaged in some rather bitter infighting. Labour's electoral decline has been even more marked, and in 2001 it obtained less than a quarter of the vote, its worst score for eight decades. The party, which had never shared power with any party in government, responded to the crisis by actually initiating a centre-left coalition alternative. After the 2005 election, having partly recovered

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<sup>10</sup> In the 2001 election, SD became the first and so far only Scandinavian social democratic party since the 1920s to relinquish the status of biggest national party.

<sup>11</sup> The initial reform involved more than 15 initiatives, particularly regarding training and working conditions. Further costly initiatives were agreed as far as 2015. The texts of these 'tripartite' agreements can be found at a special government website (Government of Denmark 2007).

by receiving almost 33 percent of the vote, DnA formed a three-party government with the Socialist Left and the Centre Party.

At first sight, this development seems to signal the end of a ‘government era’ in Norway, despite the fact that Labour returned to office: the ‘eagle’ of Norwegian party politics had been reduced to an ‘ordinary’ party, reducing LO’s incentive for maintaining links with DnA. Yet the proposed ‘red-green alliance’ received strong support from LO when it was finally approved by the party’s various bodies in 2004-5 (Allern & Saglie 2008; Allern & Aylott 2009). Senior Labour members in LO’s leadership may have feared that a coalition would legitimise the Socialist Left among union members (cf. Tranøy 2007, 34) and perhaps empower the environmental movement in industrial issues. But it seemed that LO’s leadership concluded that a majority coalition would instead maintain DnA’s attractiveness, as partner, in terms of policy realisation. Indeed, in recent years, Norwegian newspapers ‘have been brimming with articles indicating that DnA’s political decisions are heavily influenced by the trade union movement’ (Allern forthcoming, ch. 15).<sup>12</sup> And there is little doubt that some kind of power sharing was needed to secure DnA’s access to office in 2005.

In Sweden, the electoral decline of SAP – always the strongest electorally of the Scandinavian social democratic parties – has also been marked. The party’s grip on national power is thus weaker than it was. From 1998 SAP held office with the support of the Left Party and the Greens, and the ‘contract’ between the three parties – which in some ways resembled, but fell short of, an executive coalition (Bale & Bergman 2006) – was renewed in 2002. In response, four centre-right parties built what they called the ‘Alliance for Sweden’ (Allern & Aylott 2009). Despite a booming economy, the Social Democrats suffered a historic defeat in 2006, and the Alliance formed Sweden’s first majority government since 1981 (Aylott & Bolin 2007). When the centre-right parties are able to co-operate so strongly, their collective chance of holding office probably increases. As a consequence, it could be argued, Sweden’s LO should have doubts about whether closeness to the Social Democrats is the most secure way to power.

Such an assertion would be premature, however. SAP is, after all, still by far Sweden’s largest party. Although the party leadership’s formation, in autumn 2008, of a pre-electoral alliance with the Greens and the Left was widely seen as mishandled (and did not bring any immediate reward in the opinion polls), the depth of the economic downturn in 2009 ought to offer the Social Democrats a good chance to return to office in 2010.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Labour’s attempt to modify the sickness-benefit system in 2000 may have been blocked by LO (Takvam 2002, 29, 155), and DnA’s programme for 2005-2009 is commonly described in public debate as a rapprochement to the trade unions’ policy views in welfare and economic issues.

The Scandinavian contrast is thus apparent. The Danish Social Democrats have experienced lengthier and more frequent bouts of opposition, which have given Danish unions stronger reasons to back several horses rather than relying on one party's political impact to pursue its own policy interests. The LO confederations in Norway and especially Sweden, however, have good reason still to regard their ties to the social democratic parties as means of influencing the direction of public policy.

*Unions' contribution to party finance*

Sweden is unusual in having little legal regulation of party finance (SOU 2004:22, 13-14; Van Biezen 2004, 714). In 1990 Denmark passed a law that compels the parties receiving public subsidies to report annually their sources of income, albeit only at national level (Bille 1997b, 156-8). In Norway, regulations are also limited. Hence, Scandinavian interest groups have long been able to finance parties in secret and without restrictions (Allern forthcoming, ch. 6).

Generous public subsidies to parties (NOU 2004:25, 58) mean that social democrats no longer required the unions' resources to survive and contest elections. Yet the parties still have an interest in receiving these resources. Contemporary election campaigns are costly affairs. In 2005 we concluded that union funding could partly explain why the Swedish and Norwegian labour parties still co-operated closely with unions (see Table 1). Is this argument still persuasive?

Table 1. Parties' funding (percentage of total income)

	SD		DnA		SAP	
	corporate donations	public subventions	corporate donations	public subventions	corporate donations	public subventions
1970					41*	47*
1971	67*	7*				
1972	35	19				
1975	60*	13*		63		
1980	26	23			20	54
1981	56*	15*				50
1982	60	13				43*
1984	68*	11*				
1985	61	19		58*		
1987	56*	21*				
1990	42*	40*	19		13	39
1991	20	59	25			45*
1992	25	56	14			49
1993	33	51	22*			
1994	48*	39*	8			
1995	29	54	14	67		
1996	21	68	4			28
1997	28	62	17*	63*		
1998	35*	56*	10	81	8*	
1999	20	70	11	68		
2000	21	70	7	74		
2001	35*	57*	15*	68*		34
2002	7	63	9	70		36*
2003	8	75	14	67		
2004	6	73	9	67		
2005	11*	66*	17*	55*	16	38
2006	0	80	7	73		

Corporate donations include annual transfers from LO and its unions, plus their contributions to social democrats' election funds. In the Danish case, public subventions include payments to the parliamentary party and to the central office. Unfilled boxes indicate missing data.

\* Signifies an general election year, during which corporate donations to campaign funds can be expected to raise total contributions higher than in non-election years.

Sources: Denmark – Bille (1997b), Bille & Christiansen (2000), Danish parliament (various years); Norway – Allern (2007), Allern & Heidar (2001); Sweden – SOU 2004:22, Wörlund & Hansson (2001).



In Denmark, financial transfers from LO to SD, which amounted to DKr4m-8m annually, had ended by 2002 (Due & Madsen 2002, 1), and the party only received grants from individual unions. Such donations accounted for no more than 11 percent of the party's total income in 2005 (an election year), and the Social Democrats did not receive anything at all from the trade union movement in 2006. Within LO, donations to SD have been debated occasionally (*Ugebrevet A4*, 2005, no. 6). A number of union leaders have argued that it was a mistake to stop the support and wanted to re-consider the decision; others have regretted that it was no longer possible without scaring potential members away; a third group, including leaders of the major unions, have defended the move without reservations (*Ugebrevet A4*, 2007, no. 29). A few unions still support SD economically during election campaigns. But the trend is clear. In 2007 the largest Danish union, 3F, decided that it would no longer support the party economically. Debates and statements in connection to the LO congress of 2007 also clearly indicated that economic support from LO to the party belonged to the past (*Ugebrevet A4*, 2007, no. 37; *Berlingske Tidende*, 1 Nov. 2007). Before the 2007 election it became clear that the Social Democrats' campaign budget was much smaller than those of the Liberals and the Conservatives (*Information*, 19 Nov. 2007).<sup>13</sup>

In Norway, by contrast, donations from LO have been maintained. In 2004 DnA received NKr5.25m from LO and its unions. A year before the 2005 election, LO embarked on a 'Long Campaign', aimed at removing the centre-right government. Several individual unions donated money to Labour, and the LO leadership pledged NKr2.75m. In sum, DnA received NKr13.4m from the trade union movement in 2005, about 17 percent of the central organisation's total income. In 2001 LO's congress had decided to support the Socialist Left Party's campaign as well, though that party only received NKr1.63m from the trade unions in 2005. Formally, LO's separate campaign was politically neutral. But nobody doubted that that 'LO actually supported the red-green alternative, and in particular Labour' (Allern & Saglie 2008, 92-3). In 2006 the party again received NKr5.25m from LO, and a few more million kroner were reportedly donated before the local elections of 2007 (*Nettavisen*, 26 Jun. 2007). The scale of this financial support has drawn criticism from other parties, but it does nonetheless make LO an attractive partner for DnA.

In Sweden, despite the relatively opaque character of party finance, LO's economic support for the Social Democrats appears even more extensive than in Norway. By 2008 the party acknowledged that it received annually about SKr6m from LO and around SKr9m from individual

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<sup>13</sup> LO did run an advertising campaign against the government in 2007, but it did not directly recommend voting for SD (*Politiken*, 9 Nov. 2007).

unions (SAP, undated), a significant increase since the early 1990s (SOU 2004:22, 51-52).<sup>14</sup> Inquiries by the parliamentary research service suggest a total contribution from LO and its unions of SKr33.7m in 2002 and SKr22.7m in 2005 (RUT 2006, 1).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, LO also continued to campaign actively on the Social Democrats' behalf. As well as the confederation's own election budget of SKr20m (*Aftonbladet*, 14 Feb. 2006), a Liberal MP reckoned that the human resources donated to the Social Democratic campaign in 2006 by employees and elected officials within LO and its member unions (whose duties employers are legally obliged to allow paid time for) amounted to the equivalent of SKr730m (Hamilton 2006, 10-12). Union support for SAP is controversial in Sweden, as in Norway. The Liberals, in particular, have attacked the extent of LO's support for the Social Democrats, the reluctance of both unions and Social Democrats to itemise this support publicly, and the alleged policy influence that this financial support brings to LO (Hamilton 2002, 2006; Johnson 1998).

Clearly, then, there are strong economic reasons for both SAP and DnA to maintain their institutional connections to the unions, despite other parties' criticism, whereas the financial incentive has all but disappeared for the Danish Social Democrats. Still, it is worth recalling that, in Denmark, the Social Democrats terminated the unions' representation in the party before LO ended its financial support. There is more to variation in party-union relations than just economic dependence.

#### *Union members' electoral support for social democrats*

Perhaps the most valuable resource that the Scandinavian social democrats have derived from their connections with the trade unions to date is the votes of the unions' members in elections (cf. Kunkel & Pontusson 1998, 27), as a vital means of promoting the goal of attaining office. We saw earlier that union density remains relatively high in the region (though falling in Norway and Sweden), and thus union members remain an attractive target for a vote-seeking party. The crucial questions, then, are: can the unions actually persuade their members to vote for the social democrats? and does the decline in LO's membership density affect the parties' assessment of the relationship with the unions?

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<sup>14</sup> LO recommends that its unions donate SKr6 for each of their members (SOU 2004:22, 52).

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Carl B. Hamilton, a Liberal MP who commissioned the inquiry, for allowing access to its findings.

Table 2. Workers and LO union members' votes

	SD	DnA	SAP
1970-74	52	56	71
1975-79	52	64	67
1980-84	49	57	70
1985-89	44	60	66
1990-94	51	61	60
1995-99	44	54	55
2000-02	35	33	58
2003-07	31	48	52

Figures indicate the proportion of the constituency that voted for a party or parties. In Norway and Sweden, the constituency is members of LO unions. In Denmark, it is skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers.

Sources: Averages calculated from figures in: Denmark – Andersen & Goul Andersen (2003), Danish Data Archives (1986, 1989, 1996), Worre (1983); Norway – Aardal (2003); Sweden – Holmberg (2000), Holmberg & Oscarsson (2004), Statistics Sweden (2008).

As Table 2 shows, Swedish LO unions' are still relatively successful in persuading their members to vote for SAP. As late as 1994 as many as 66 percent did so; 58 percent still did in 2002. Even in the party's electoral disasters of 1998 and 2006, each of which constituted its worst result since the early 1920s, more than half of LO union members voted for the Social Democrats. This mobilising capacity is a valuable resource for the party,<sup>16</sup> and it surely contributes to successive party leaders' displays of commitment to the party-union relationship – especially since the 1998 election reverse, which many Social Democrats blamed partly on the unions' lukewarm campaigning (cf. Aylott 2003, 385-6).

Once again, Denmark is a very different case. True, it was always much the weakest of the three parties electorally. Still, the fall in workers' support for the Social Democrats in the elections of 2005 and 2007, to 33 percent and 29 percent respectively (from around 50 percent until the early

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<sup>16</sup> This might not always be the case. In spring 2009 a scandal broke in Sweden about a huge corporate-pension plan that the chief executive of a pensions firm, AMF, had secured. LO's chair, a member of the firm's board, was shown to have approved the plan without asking too many questions. SAP's poll figures sunk like a stone after the story broke. Still, in contrast to what happened in Norway two years before, LO's chair weathered the initial political storm, and her confederation's ties to the Social Democrats were not threatened.

1990s), was striking.<sup>17</sup> This was only slightly above support in the electorate at large. In addition, about 50 percent of workers voted for parties that supported the centre-right government. Not surprisingly, this decline in Denmark has been used to justify LO's loosening its ties to the Social Democrats (*Berlingske Tidende*, 3 Jul. 2005).

In Norway, meanwhile, the decline in LO union members' electoral support for Labour was even steeper. In 1969 75 percent voted for DnA; in 1993 the share was still 61 percent; but in 2001 it collapsed to 33 percent. Few would have been surprised if Labour's electoral shock in 2001 had prompted the party to weaken further its links with the unions. A significant proportion of LO's members preferred other parties. Election studies showed that Labour's major problem was the electorate's increasing level of education, because more highly educated voters were often organised outside LO (Berglund 2003, 125). One obvious inference was that institutional connections to the traditionally blue-collar confederation had repelled other voter groups. Thorbjørn Jagland, a former party leader, suggested that the 2001 election result pointed towards coalitions between Labour and other parties. He also predicted that the Co-operation Committee would wither (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16).

Regarding Jagland's second prediction, however, the party came to a different conclusion. Traditionalists within DnA, supported by parts of LO's leadership, argued strongly that the party's more pragmatic and technocratic profile had alienated the party's customary voters, without paying off in attracting new ones. As a result, internal pressure to make the party's policy profile more left-wing, and maintain the historic alliance with the trade unions, increased. Gradually, a similar analysis gained ground in the party leadership, seemingly inspired by the Swedish experience in 1998-2002 (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). Labour chose 'to revitalize its relationship with the trade unions, apparently concluding that re-consolidation of its links with LO was a tool with which the party could more efficiently recover' (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). Interestingly, in 2005 the share of LO members voting for Labour increased to about 48 percent, after LO's chair had all but directly urged LO members to vote for one of the alliance's parties (Allern & Saglie 2008, 93).

Soon after the 2005 election, however, the relationship was again put on trial. The DnA-LO Co-operation Committee was accepted by the other parties in the new government coalition. But the chair of LO, Gerd-Liv Valla, chose not to keep disagreements with the party leadership behind the committee's closed doors (or to confine them to her informal 'Sunday talks' with the prime

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<sup>17</sup> Danish electoral studies have only occasionally asked about union membership. Therefore we use class as an indicator. Those election years in which the two measures can be compared show that they are highly correlated.

minister). Instead, she confronted the red-green government on several contested issues in public.<sup>18</sup> The party-union relationship appeared increasingly strained at elite level (Tranøy 2007; Valla 2007). Then, in March 2007, Valla was compelled to resign as LO chair after a long-term conflict with an employee in LO's headquarters.

These remarkable events certainly tested the cost-benefit considerations of DnA's leadership. Could the controversies lead to a loss of electoral support? Officially, the party leader and party secretary were neutral during the saga, but this position was made difficult by Labour's institutional ties to LO. One very visible consequence was the dropping – perhaps temporarily, perhaps not – of the practice, mentioned above, of LO's chair heading the party congress's election committee. This arrangement had long been criticised by those within DnA who were less keen on the party's ties to LO, and its abolition was officially justified on the grounds of principle. However, this change would probably not have occurred just then without the 'Valla affair' (cf. Jota 2008 [interview]).

So developments in Norway after 2005 suggest that ties between DnA and LO are more resistant to structural change than many in the late 1990s had thought, with the party leadership apparently seeing closeness to the LO unions as a valuable tool in the party's search for more stable electoral support. It is certainly not obvious that strong links with unions are at odds with access to public office.

## Conclusions

Today the Swedish and Norwegian social democrats still have closer ties with their traditional trade-union partners than their equivalents in Denmark have, and the Swedish party and unions have kept somewhat stronger institutional links than their counterparts in Norway have. The choices made in the late 1990s and early 2000s have been upheld. Hence, despite social and economic developments that might have heralded weaker party-union ties in all three countries, significant differences still exist between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish party-union relationships. General social structures surely impose constraints and shape party and union preferences; but they certainly do not determine outcomes.

What, then, can explain the existing variation within Scandinavia? In our earlier article, we concluded (2007, 628) that our basic hypothesis – 'if the resources on offer ... are delivered less

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<sup>18</sup> The issue of sick-leave regulations caused severe tensions within the labour movement. A proposal to reduce this benefit seemed poorly prepared by the government and was interpreted as an 'ultimatum' by both Norwegian employees' and employers' organisation. For once, they joined forces to make the government back down.

reliably or become relatively less valuable to the receiver, then ... one or both [partners] should lose interest in those ties' – had been 'partly confirmed'. That remains a reasonable verdict on the explanatory power of our exchange model in this, our updated analysis of the same cases. To some extent, the varying degrees of persistence and decline in institutional ties vary systematically according to the particular benefits (potentially) provided to each side.

Denmark's LO offers relatively little to the country's Social Democrats these days; the costs of being closely linked seem to have exceeded the benefits. LO has increasingly failed to deliver its members' votes at election time; indeed, class and union membership have become poor predictors of Danes' voting behaviour. Moreover, LO itself decided to end its financial contributions to the party. Conversely, the Social Democrats' hold on government office, and thus their scope to offer privileged access to the shaping of public policy, has become increasingly weak. True, the framework of labour-market regulation remains favourable to trade union goals. Yet, after three consecutive election defeats for SD, this framework is clearly no longer upheld solely because of the Social Democrats' hold on government. This realisation can only have further encouraged the unions to spread their political bets, as in the quality reform.

In Sweden, on the other hand, LO's unions still help to persuade over half their members to vote for the Social Democrats, even when (to adapt a Swedish phrase) the electoral wind blows to the right, as in 2006. Their donations to the party's activity, in the form of money and human capital, remain very significant and valuable to SAP. Meanwhile, despite that election defeat in 2006, the Social Democrats can still offer the unions the realistic promise of access to power; and, after the reforms to unemployment-benefit insurance introduced by the incoming centre-right government after 2006, it would be understandable if Swedish unions felt that only a Social Democratic government would defend the regulatory framework that optimises the pursuit of their goals, including the maximisation of their memberships.

Developments in the Norwegian case, however, especially in recent years, suggest that the relationship between party and interest group is more complicated than might be inferred from our basic exchange model. By 2001 much in Norway pointed to a Danish-style decoupling. LO's falling share of the Norwegian workforce, and its unions' diminishing success in persuading those they still covered to vote for Labour, looked like strong reasons for the party to distance itself from those unions and to aim instead to attract other categories of employee, as a catch-all party would do (although, admittedly, the Danish Social Democrats' own struggles at that time were not a shining advertisement for that strategy). Meanwhile, even stronger incentives arguably existed for Norway's LO to follow the same path as its Danish equivalent was about to take, and seek a freer hand with

which to attract politically non-partisan members. Yet, as we saw, this was not what happened in Norway. DnA concentrated on recovering its lost unionised supporters; and LO opted to renew its institutional commitment.

There were good short-term arguments for these decisions. After a veritable ‘electoral shock’, the prospect of reviving core support through re-consolidating ties to LO must have appealed to the party leadership (Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). And, indeed, the 2005 election result suggests that the strategy did help to restore a *certain* level of support for the party. However, in the longer term, the observable payoffs delivered by the DnA-LO relationship have, according to our model, diminished. The unions are not a particularly reliable source of votes in today’s Norway. Nor can DnA shape public policy as it once could; certainly, the utility of close relations with Labour is much discussed within LO. So our exchange model fails to account for all the observed variation in the decline of institutional party-union ties.

Why? It could be that independence from unions is simply less helpful for vote seeking, and thus office seeking, than we assumed. In Norway, links to LO might still mobilise more voters than they repel. Nor is it obvious that mutual independence will lead to a significant membership increase for LO’s unions. Second, to the extent that electoral competition is based on issue-ownership rather than spatial competition (Blomqvist & Green-Pedersen 2004; Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen 2007), close relationships with trade unions might be a way to reinforce the party’s ownership of issues related to public welfare and redistribution. The need for a more distinct political profile was, for sure, a part of Labour’s strategic analysis before the 2005 election (cf. Allern forthcoming, ch. 16). Specific policy preferences and choices might well also have played a part – and they too should be systematically explored in future research.

The preference order that we allocated to the parties emphasised the attainment of government office, not maximising votes or implementing policy. We did this to avoid the problem of circular or tautologous reasoning, which can appear if actors’ preferences are allocated in the light of observed behaviour, and the behaviour is then purportedly ‘explained’ by referring to those preferences.<sup>19</sup> Yet we do not pretend that this reductionist approach involves anything other than a shift away from the real world, which naturally limits the explanatory power of the model.<sup>20</sup> Put briefly, a somewhat more complex cost-benefit model – including preference orders – is probably needed (cf. Allern, forthcoming).

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>20</sup> See Anthonen, Lindvall and Schmidt-Hansen (forthcoming) for a recent analysis of the relationship between social democrats, unions and corporatism, in Denmark and Sweden, emphasising the policy dimension.

The differences between the Danish and Norwegian cases, in particular, might also prompt a deeper reconsideration of the assumptions that underpinned our model. It was conceived partly as a correction to the determinist tendency within structuralist, system-level explanations of decline in party-union relations, which we reviewed briefly in the introduction. We identified more specific external explanatory factors and aimed to bring agency back in, in the form of institutions designed and sustained by goal-seeking actors with something to gain from exchange that was regulated by agreed rules and procedures.

However, it seems that both *timing* and *sequences* may *per se* influence actors' analyses and choices. As we saw, other options were open to the leaders of the Norwegian labour movement in the period of crisis after the 2001 election. Yet, apparently informed by close contacts with their Swedish counterparts and their own movement's history, they chose to revive party-union ties.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Denmark's LO made a different choice in 2002, which was also a period of flux after the Social Democrats' defeat the previous year. Thereafter, despite SD's patent need to shore up electoral support in its traditional constituencies, the political costs of changing course had become too great for it to be a realistic option for either wing of the Danish movement.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, we may have to look further back into labour movement history to achieve greater insight into other types of internal constraints. For example, it could be that the 'movement consciousness' that Minkin (1991, 653-4) argues underpins Labour's relationship with trade unions in Britain is also at work in Scandinavia. Maybe some in a party see a connection to trade unions as a confirmation of the party's original *raison d'être* (cf. Allern, forthcoming). In 2007, we concluded that the weaker the ties were from the beginning, the more easily they seem to have unravelled in response to environmental changes. In light of recent developments in the Norwegian case, future analyses should perhaps allow greater scope for the capacity of institutions to provide heuristic lenses through which actors interpret situations and react accordingly, as the school of historical institutionalism argues (Thelen & Steinmo 1992, 9). Such institutional qualities may be especially important when the institutional incentives are finely balanced. As in 2005 (Allern et al. 2007), it seems likely that the experience of collective membership, and the enduring organisational ties that

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<sup>21</sup> One institutional connection is SAMAK, the Joint Committee of the Nordic Social Democratic Labour Movement. Interviews with participants underline the value that many of them place on this forum for communication between Nordic social democrats and trade unionists. Meetings are held five or six times per year to discuss political and strategic matters; and at least once every year the leaders of the parties and LO participate as well (Jota 2008 [interview]; Palshøj 2008 [interview]).

<sup>22</sup> In 2008 some Social Democratic MPs argued that, in order to break the right's hold on power, a renewal of ties to LO was necessary. LO's response was lukewarm, at least as far as financial support was concerned (*Berlingske Tidende*, 2 Mar. 2008).



are its legacy, ‘fed back’ (cf. Thelen 1999, 392-9) into the decisions made by Swedish and, more recently, Norwegian social democrats and trade unions at moments of crisis.

Like a marriage, then, the relationships between social democratic parties and trade unions in Northern Europe, and arguably also those between parties and interest groups more broadly, will eventually come under strain if actors become dissatisfied with the payoffs hitherto derived from their commitment to the agreed rules and procedures. Yet parties and unions, like spouses, retain scope to make choices, especially at certain important moments; and these choices will be shaped by particular experience and judgement. A closer understanding of precisely how such mechanisms operate, and the conditions under which they can endure or are overwhelmed, could be an intriguing next step in this area of research.

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