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Working Paper 2015:1

Mobilizing and educating via social media: How Swedish
trade unions use YouTube

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Abstract

Trade unions have faced a significant problem of member decline for several decades even in the countries with the traditionally high union membership. The use of social media has been proposed as important revitalization strategy which allows reaching to new audiences. The purpose of this study is to examine how different Swedish trade unions have accomplished this task by investigating and assessing their use of YouTube. We expect that the represented social class: working, white-collar or upper-middle-class, influences how unions use social media. Results based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of numerous YouTube videos demonstrate that working class unions use YouTube for mobilization, while white-collar unions focus more on existing members and upper middle class unions aim to educate their own profession. All unions also use YouTube for improving the transparency of the organizations by posting a significant number of videos about annual congresses, as well as promote the traditional labor movement issues such as salaries, equality and welfare.

Keywords: trade unions, YouTube, educating, mobilization, transparency, Sweden

1. Introduction

The use of social media has become an important part of various organizations' communication strategies. It has been shown to be valuable for corporations, non-profit advocacy organizations (Lovejoy et al. 2012), local governments (Agostino 2013), as well as for more loose networks such as social movements (Earl and Kimport 2011). While for many advocacy groups the use of social media for its purposes is not new, some groups such as trade unions have been more known to opt for off-line practices such as strikes and collective bargaining. However, due to the recent decline of trade union membership (Waddington 2014), scholars of labor movement research have proposed that unions should opt for new revitalization strategies and the usage of information and communication technology (ICT), especially social media could be a suitable means for such strategies (Bailey et al. 2010; Bryson et al. 2010). This would allow them to reach to new audiences of younger people, as well increase the organizations' internal democracy. While the research of public relations have shown the broad use of ICT and particularly social media among several types of organizations, as well as discussed its potential benefits (Duhé 2015), little is known about the

use of social media by trade unions (but see Panagiotopoulos 2012). The goal of this paper is to examine trade unions' communication via a particular social media, namely YouTube.

Studies on trade unions in general and trade unions' use of social media in particular, treat the trade union movement as one homogenous movement and do not acknowledge that different unions represents different social classes and, thus, have diverse audiences. Engaging these different societal groups might require different strategies. In order to test this hypothesis we examine the Swedish trade unions, which are particularly suitable for examining differences across social class (Kjellberg 2011). The existing three trade unions' umbrella organizations clearly represent different social classes – working class (LO), white collar workers (TCO), and upper middle class (SACO). Moreover, if unions should use ICTs somewhere, then it should be in Sweden where 92.5% of the population uses internet (Worldbank 2015) and trade union membership has significantly declined since 2006 (OECD 2013). Swedish trade unions actually are good users of ICT, as all 54 unions have own website, 52 have Facebook accounts and 43 have Twitter accounts, and 43 unions also have own YouTube-channels. Hence, these trade unions are organizations which actively use social media and we are interested in the content of this usage.

The article provides an analysis of more than 2 500 videos uploaded to YouTube by unions during the period of 2007 to July 2015. We have opted to examine YouTube videos for three major reasons. First, movies are an old form of communication that has often been used by the labor movement and therefore these require relatively little “new” knowledge for production and distribution (Jönsson and Snickars 2007). Second, YouTube movies are a more stable form of communication than Facebook or Twitter updates which depend much on specific events. Hence, YouTube videos display a long term communication strategy. Third, YouTube is a form of social media where it is possible to measure how widespread the posts are. It counts the number of views, not just the “likes” and shares or re-tweets as done by Facebook or Twitter. Hence, we can easily say something about outcome of communicating via videos.

There is little known about the use of YouTube videos as a public relation strategy (but see Waters and Jones 2011), but relying on prior research on social media, communication and labor movements we expect to find a specific pattern. Namely, we propose that there are some significant differences between the videos posted by different umbrella organizations because the audience or the represented class matters when unions decide upon their strategy of communication. If this is not the case, then all unions should use YouTube videos similarly

for mobilizing or educating members and the public, or improving the transparency of the organization.

The results of the study are important for public relations scholars and practitioners as these help us to better understand the use of varying social media strategies of traditional advocacy organizations with rather clearly defined audiences. The analysis is also useful for scholars of industrial relations, as there is a clear lack of studies about trade unions' use of social media, especially about the content of such communication (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett 2014) or specifically about the use of YouTube (but see Milner 2012).

2. Literature review and analytical framework

Trade union movement in Western Europe is in crisis as membership rates have fallen steadily the past twenty years. Unions are in need of revitalization and scholars propose that the best way to achieve it is to attract groups that have traditionally been difficult to recruit to trade unions, such as immigrants, women, and youth. One way to attract these groups is to use innovative strategies of communication via the channels of social media (Bryson et al. 2010; Ransom 2014). Social media is particularly suitable for attracting younger citizens. The knowledge about the use of YouTube by unions or by other organizations for recruiting members, mobilization, or constructing collective identities is still scarce. Scholars have focused more often on Facebook and Twitter (see review in Panagiotopoulos and Barnett 2014) and only rarely examined the use of YouTube for public relations (e.g., Auger 2013, Waters and Jones 2011). One of few prior studies has shown that youngsters become aware of trade unions' campaigns thanks to their YouTube videos (Geelan 2015) but research has not further analyzed the strategies employed by unions, the content of YouTube films or the implications these films have for identity formation.

Similarly to other media channels, especially those that allow combining the visual and textual messages, organizations could use YouTube videos for rising awareness about some societal issue or about the organization itself, advertising, fundraising, or educating the audience about some particular topic important for the organization. Organizations build their identity through strategic communication and YouTube is a useful medium for it (Waters and Jones 2011).

Consequently, by investigating the use of YouTube by the Swedish trade union movement we can learn a lot about their revitalization strategies. It is, however, important to state that the

trade union movement is not as homogenous as is often assumed by scholars of industrial relations, but represent different societal groups with different interests and socio-economic characteristics (Iversen 1999; Swenson 2004). Put differently, different unions represent different societal classes. Hence, unions do not have similar audiences and attracting their attention requires different public relations strategies.

One way to categorize these different audiences is to use the class concept. Using the class concept in order to understand differences between unions is a particularly fruitful perspective to employ in the Swedish case where trade unions are strictly divided into three umbrella organizations representing working class, white-collar workers, and upper middle class (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010; Kjellberg 2011). All trade unions are affiliated to specific umbrella organisations which represent the respective class: LO for working class, TCO for white-collar workers and SACO for upper middle class. We expect that the representation of these different classes influences unions' use of social media and particularly YouTube for three major reasons.

First, there has been much larger decline of membership of the working class and the white-collar unions than the upper middle class unions (Kjellberg 2011). Therefore these unions should be more inclined to use new innovative strategies for attracting potential members, for example by mobilizing and recruiting new members via YouTube videos. Upper middle class unions, on the other hand, can focus less on recruitment and instead use this media for constructing collective identity or educating its members. Working class unions also have a long tradition of arranging workers' educations (Jansson 2012), hence they might combine recruitment, mobilization and education via YouTube.

Second, members of these unions have educational levels and different computer experiences and skills. White-collar workers, as well as upper middle class professions, use computers at work more frequently than working class occupations; they have the skills and opportunity to use social media. This might mean that unions representing these groups would use YouTube more often than the working class unions.

Third, different social classes have different collective identities: working class unions are known to have strong class identity, whereas white-collar workers always had trouble mobilizing a collective identity and upper middle class unions are characterized by occupational identities (Björnsson 2007; Jansson 2012; Mills 1951). Moreover, the working class audience tends to be more receptive to political (leftist) messages than the upper middle

class. Hence, it is likely that working class unions produce and upload more videos with political messages, for example relate to national election campaigns or protest against some specific policy.

In sum, the main research question of this article asks how different trade unions use YouTube in their communication. More specifically, we expect to find some variation between the unions' use of YouTube and have the following hypotheses:

H1: white-collar unions use YouTube more frequently than working class unions

H2: working class unions use YouTube more frequently for mobilization

H3: upper middle class unions use YouTube mostly for purposes of information distribution

H4: working class unions have more political messages than other unions

3. Method and data

Scholars usually examine the use of social media by unions with the help of surveys, but this does not allow them to tell about the spread and content of specific social media channels. The analysis of unions' videos in YouTube is done in two ways. First, we use meta-data of all videos which were uploaded to the channels owned by the Swedish trade unions until July 2015. We examine 43 of such channels with in total 2557 videos. We have left aside 3 videos posted by the syndicalist' union SAC, as well as the channels owned by three youth-networks loosely related to working-class unions of electricians, construction workers, and transportation workers. As some of the unions have several channels we have collapsed these channels to one. In total we examine the videos produced by 36 different trade unions belonging to three different umbrella organizations. The umbrella organizations LO, TCO and SACO also have own separate YouTube channels. The distribution of unions and respective films by umbrella organization are described in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of videos and trade unions by umbrella organization

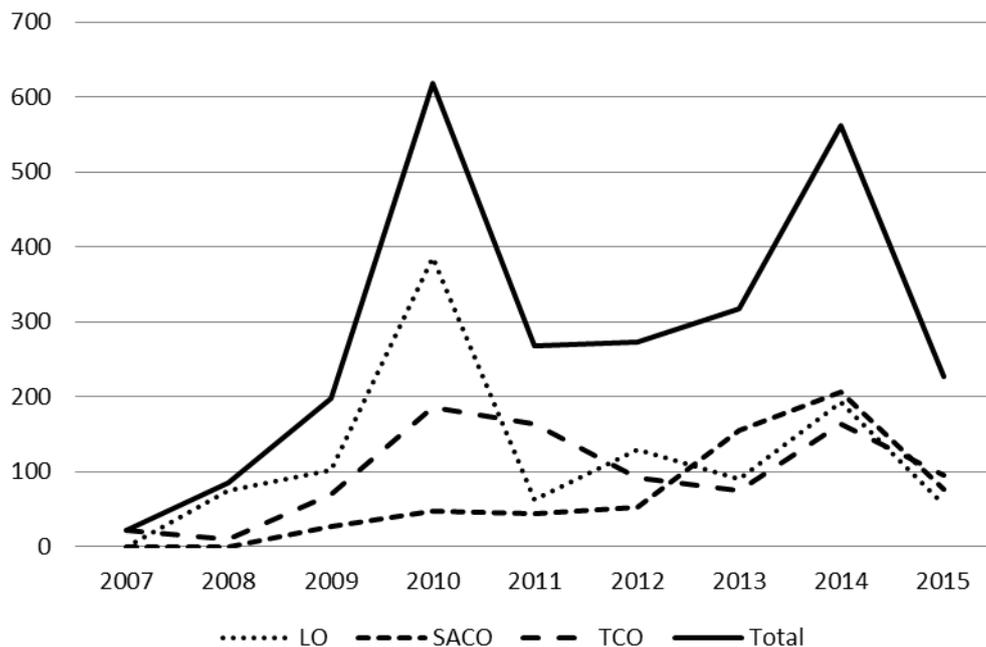
Umbrella organization	Represented class	No of affiliated unions	No of members	No of YouTube channels	No of videos studied	Videos per unions
LO	Working	14	1 272 427	13	1090	77.86
TCO	White-collar	14	1 018 613	13	873	62.35
SACO	Upper middle	22	487 928	17	604	27.45
<i>Total</i>		50		43	2567	51.34

Source: authors own database and Medlingsinstitutet for number of members (31 December 2013).

It is interesting that the relative number of videos per affiliated unions is highest for working class unions, but the number of videos per member is actually highest for the upper-middle class umbrella organization SACO (0.00124, for other two it is about 0.00085).

The collected metadata provides info about the time when the video was uploaded, duration of the video, number of views and likes, as well as the title and the short description of the video (if provided by the producer). These last two variables are used in a simple text-analysis for categorizing videos on basis of the words used in the title. Hence, it is likely that the video talks about a congress if the term is mentioned either in the title or in the description of the video. The same apply for some important event such as a seminar or protest or when the union has uploaded an interview with activists or the leader. We also checked how many of the video descriptions and titles included union-relevant terms such as “collective agreement”, “members”, “protest” or “salary”. This is obviously a very rough categorization of the videos, but does describe some general patterns. We also used the word “elections” as an indicator of videos with political messages, but because the Swedish word “elections” (“val”) can also mean “choice”, in this particular case we only coded videos that were uploaded during the election years (2010, 2014) or the year before (2009, 2013), because election campaigns usually start the year before the elections. Figure 1 also demonstrates that during the election years the number of videos uploaded by the unions increased significantly, especially in 2010 when LO opted for many short-videos which promoted the change of the government.

Figure 1. Number of uploaded videos by umbrella organization since 2007



Second, to complement this rough categorization we made a detailed qualitative analysis of randomly selected 63 videos – two from each umbrella channel, and the remaining 56 videos are divided as follows: 20 from LO, 16 from TCO and 29 from SACO. The goal was to select at least one movie from every affiliated union and therefore there are also more movies from SACO than from LO or TCO. We only included movies which lasted more than 15 seconds and less than 15 minutes, excluding thereby all seminars and the majority of congress-reports. The method allows for better comparison of the videos. Both authors watched all videos, used the same coding scheme and the inter-coder reliability was about 90%. Although the following analysis focuses only on the type and issue of the video the entire scheme is available upon request from authors.

The **type of the video** is a subjective measure and we have categorized the videos on basis of their goals. The videos can have following purposes: *information distribution*, *mobilization* of members or for membership, making *political claims* via electoral campaign or protest event, and *educating* the members or the society at large by explaining some particular aspect of labor legislation. **The issue of the video** refers to specific topics mentioned in the video – whether it talked about salaries, collective agreement, national elections, or welfare issues such as unemployment benefits, gender equality or retirement.

The type of the videos is analyzed only with the help of our randomly selected 63 videos, while for the issue we used the sample as well as the entire population of 2,567 videos.

4 Results

4.1. Describing the population

The first step of our analysis is to examine the simple quantitative measures such as length, views and likes of all 2,567 videos (Table 2). These measures could be seen as indirect indicators of unions' goals for making the videos, as longer videos are more suitable for educational purposes and shorter ones form mobilization and changing public opinion.

Table 2. Main descriptive data of unions' videos

Umbrella organization	Duration in min. Mean (std.dev)	Views Mean (std.dev)	Likes Mean (std.dev)	Examined videos # (%)
LO	3.64 (7.9)	3218.9 (28497)	3.58 (39.9)	1090 (42.5)
TCO	9.48 (17.7)	3483.8 (42557)	6.96 (117.4)	873 (34.0)
SACO	23.18 (31.4)	538.5 (2832)	1.22 (7.5)	604 (23.5)
<i>Total</i>	<i>10.23 (20.6)</i>	<i>2678.7 (31039)</i>	<i>4.18 (73.3)</i>	<i>2567 (100%)</i>

Note: All the measures across umbrella organizations differ from each other at the 0.05 level of significance

The videos last in average about ten minutes but the length actually varies from 4 seconds to 2.5 hours. There is also a clear difference across umbrella organizations as the videos produced by the working class unions (LO) are the shortest and the ones of the upper middle class unions (SACO) are the longest. The length, however, does not seem to guarantee the popularity, as SACO' videos have been watched the least times and received the smallest amount of likes. These numbers are obviously affected by outliers. For instance, TCO has produced two extremely popular videos for international audience: "Like a Swede (a way of living)" and "Business Like a Swede" which have been watched 856 816 and 767 691 times respectively and shift the mean number of views of TCO videos upwards. Without those two professionally produced videos the working-class unions (LO) have actually much higher average number of "views" and "likes" than TCO or SACO.

The number of views and likes might depend on the number of members the unions have, but this does not explain why SACO's videos are *sixty* times less popular than the ones of LO. It is likely that the type and content of videos matter for popularity and the videos produced by the working class and white collar unions are popular even among the general public.

4.2. Type of the videos

Looking at the type (Table 3), our qualitative analysis of randomly selected 63 videos demonstrates some interesting patterns. At a first glance these figures cast doubt over the idea

that YouTube is used to revitalize the trade union movement: a large proportion of videos just distribute information about the particular professions, union activities or government’s labor and welfare policies. Very few videos, except the ones uploaded by the working class unions, focused specially on mobilization of members or for membership. Since LO and TCO have been more effected by decreasing membership rates, they might have opted for different revitalization strategies. LO mobilizes via specific movies and TCO tries to market its name via information distribution and production of professional videos like the aforementioned “Like a Swede”.

Table 3: Type of videos produced by the unions

Umbrella organization	Information distribution	Mobilization	Educational materials	Other (political etc.)	Total
LO	10 (45)	7 (32)	4 (18)	1 (5)	22 (100)
TCO	10 (55)	4 (22)	2 (11)	2 (11)	18 (100)
SACO	12 (52)	3 (13)	0 (0)	8 (35)	32 (100)
<i>Total</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>64</i>

Among the randomly selected videos there were only a few with a clear political claim and these were produced by the teachers’ union and by the doctors’ union, both are affiliated to SACO. Hence the expectation that working class unions have more political videos does not find support here, but the result might be related to the fact that we have excluded short (less than 15 seconds long). On the other hand, our expectations that middle-class unions use videos for distributing information more than others has some support if we compare TCO (55%) and LO (45%).

4.3. The issues

The sampled videos discussed mostly the employment conditions and salaries, followed by collective agreement, union specific information and profession specific information. There were no clear differences between the unions, except that the videos made by upper middle class unions (SACO) did not mention collective agreement and had a more diverse set of topics (health, educations or the LGBT rights).

The rough analysis of titles and descriptions of all 2567 videos (Table 5) displays some different patterns, suggesting that the chosen random sample was not representative of all videos. Instead of the percentages of the videos addressing specific issues, we display the mean value of all dichotomous variables referring to specific keywords. The differences between the unions are clearly evident – SACO has opted for seminars about diverse issues

(psychology, higher education, or health-issues), congress reports and elections, TCO for congress reports and salaries and LO videos carry mainly some political message. Upper middle-class unions (SACO) focus on educating their members, often these videos' focus on issues specific for the profession, and these unions probably use YouTube more as an archive than as a channel of communication.¹ The other interesting issue is the focus on unions' congresses. One could suggest that unions have found a way for increasing the transparency of their organizations as even those members who were not present in congress can see who were elected to important posts and what were the main issues discussed. Although the white-collar unions (TCO) are more frequent producers of such videos there is no significant difference between the umbrella organizations here.

Table 5. Issues mentioned in unions' videos (means and standard deviations)

Issues	LO	TCO	SACO
Mean (std.dev)	Working class	White collar	Upper middle class
Seminars about diverse issues	0.01 (0.09)	0.08 (0.27)	0.11 (0.31)
Congress reports	0.08 (0.26)	0.17 (0.37)	0.11 (0.32)
National elections	0.25 (0.44)	0.09 (0.29)	0.11 (0.31)
Agreement	0.13 (0.34)	0.07 (0.26)	0.03 (0.17)
Salary	0.07 (0.26)	0.10 (0.30)	0.06 (0.25)
Welfare, equality	0.01 (0.11)	0.01 (0.09)	0.03 (0.17)
Protests	0.04 (0.20)	0.03 (0.17)	0.01 (0.08)
Political message (protests + elections)	0.30 (0.46)	0.10 (0.30)	0.11 (0.32)
<i>Total videos</i>	<i>1090</i>	<i>873</i>	<i>604</i>

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive as the title and description of the video can use more than one keyword, **bold** categories are significantly different from each other at 0.01 level of significance

The other general issues mentioned by the title and description of the videos could be divided into two categories – political claims and employment related claims. The issue of national elections is particularly interesting, as LO and TCO affiliated unions participated in the election campaigns of 2010 while SACO became more active only in 2014 (see Figure 1). The LO affiliates that have an institutionalized cooperation with the Social Democratic Party (Jansson Forthcoming 2016), changed their strategy in 2014 by focusing on fewer but longer videos than in 2010 (mean duration of LO's election videos was 0.38 minutes in 2010 and 14.24 minutes in 2014). TCO and SACO, on the other hand, are known to be “politically neutral” even though many union leaders have been recruited from the Social Democrats.

¹ This is supported by literature (Prelinger 2009) and our interviews with the unions.

Their videos do not encourage members to vote for a particular party but rather intend to create a public debate about issues such as social insurance system. Working class unions (LO) are also active in using protests for delivering their political messages, as they have many videos mentioning the terms like “protest”, “demonstration” or “manifestation”. Consequently, our expectation that working class unions are more political than other unions finds some support.

Employment related claims - collective agreement, salary, welfare and equality are expected issues for any trade union. Therefore it is not surprising that only in the case of collective agreements there is a significant difference across the umbrella organization. Working class unions (LO) talk more often about collective agreement than upper middle-class unions (SACO), which focuses rather on academic debates and profession specific issues.

5. Discussion, limitations and conclusion

The paper has presented how the Swedish trade union movement makes use of YouTube videos in their public relations strategies for almost ten years. We expected to find some interesting patterns and found support to some of the proposed hypotheses. White-collar unions were expected to use YouTube more frequently than working class unions, but the situation is actually opposite if we relate the number of videos to the number of unions. We find another pattern when we look at the number of union members, then the relative number of uploaded videos is the largest for upper middle class unions’ organization SACO. The last, however, does not guarantee the popularity, as their movies have been watched the least and have also received the least amount of likes.

We also expected that working class unions would use YouTube more frequently for mobilization purposes because of the need to get more members. This was indeed the case if we compare to the other unions, but in general the majority of the videos were still used for distributing information – something also found by prior studies for other types of organizations (Waters and Jones 2011). Upper middle class unions are, as expected, using YouTube mostly for purposes of information distribution and education, especially for professional purposes via numerous uploaded seminars. White-collar unions (TCO) also focused a lot on distributing information, but less via seminars. Instead they produce films in which union representatives talk about employment related issues such as salaries. They also

produced several very popular professional videos which suggest that the organization might have some aims to use Youtube for marketing purposes.

Finally, we suggested that working class unions have more political messages than other unions and this was clearly supported by the data. LO affiliated unions were active in the elections-campaigns and use Youtube for protesting against governmental policies.

It should be noted that the quantitative focus of our analysis has its caveats, as one is unable to provide a more detailed description of the issues and frames used in the videos. For instance, some of the unions might have talked about the collective agreement in a positive and others in a negative connotation. The presented way of counting the work “agreement” does not allow differentiating these interesting patterns. Moreover, attracting new audiences does not only work via the direct message of the video, but also through the visual appearance in the films (Doerr et al. 2013). For example, by including more minorities or young people as actors, as well as moving the video from a traditional office to the street or the workplace of some less represented profession, the unions could recruit new members from these groups. Without watching and evaluating all videos one can not say much about these patterns and how these differ across umbrella organizations.

However, we have demonstrated that trade unions do use YouTube as a mean of communication and this has increased since 2007. It is clear that YouTube is used for mobilizing for special events (national elections, protests), increasing the transparency of the organizations by making the congress recording available to everyone, and educating the society and own members about the qualities of specific profession or the benefits of the particular trade union. We expected to find some differences across the trade unions umbrella organizations, because their audiences are clearly defined by class. Presented results show that this is the case only in some occasions – the selection of what type of movies to upload, length and views, but in terms of content there are fewer differences. Unions talk about similar topics such as salary, welfare or equality, although working class unions are more focused on classic labor issues such as collective agreement. Of course there might be a difference in how these issues are framed but in order to determine that an even more in-depth qualitative analysis must be conducted.

These patterns might be Sweden specific, especially as the unions elsewhere are not so clearly divided into different classes they represent, but the implications of the findings ought to apply to less class-segregated unions as well: different classes constitute different audiences,

and thus, it ought to be even more difficult for unions that organize different classes to use YouTube effectively. Similarly, trade unions elsewhere are known to be less frequent users of social media (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett 2014). Still, the example of a few very popular TCO videos (“Like a Swede”) show that with the professional presentation and a moderate claim the strategy of using YouTube in the communication might pay off and increase the media presence of the organization as well as their message.

The findings confirm our assumption that trade unions are heterogeneous and social media strategies are dependent on which class a trade union represents. The audiences are clearly different and the trade unions have accordingly adjusted their videos to their members. Our findings also indicate that unions to some extent are using YouTube for revitalization, but they are not using the full potential that YouTube offers: far too many videos with the aim to distribute information suggest that some of the unions, mostly the upper middle class unions, use YouTube as an archive.

Acknowledgements

The paper is part of the project “The Labour Movement Gone Digital: Preservation of organizational activities in the On-line Era” funded by the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (*Riksbankens Jubileumsfond*). We would like to thank Anders Kjellberg for comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

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