Public opinion and alcohol policy in Sweden, 1990–2012

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ABSTRACT
AIMS – We analyse the association between public opinions and political decisions on alcohol policy in Sweden during the last decades. METHODS – Reviews of existing Swedish surveys on public opinion and recent data on the opinion of decision-makers. RESULTS – Restrictive alcohol policy measures have much support in Sweden and this support has increased in the last decade. The opinions of the public and their elected representatives correspond fairly well but the relation between these opinions and policy decisions are not always straightforward. CONCLUSIONS – There is little support for the idea that public opinion has been a major influence on alcohol policy formation in the period of 1990–2012.
KEYWORDS – Alcohol policy opinion, Sweden, 1990–2012

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Introduction
The last decades have seen several important changes in Swedish alcohol policy, mostly in a more liberal direction. Although the EU membership has played a crucial role in this development by limiting the conditions for implementing national alcohol policy measures, several policy changes have also been initiated by the Swedish government. At the same time, often quite dramatic changes in public opinion on alcohol policy measures have taken place, raising the question of the association between public opinion and alcohol policy decisions.

The period 1990–2012 in Swedish alcohol policy development contains valuable but untapped materials on determinants of policy developments, including opinions of the public and politicians, introduction of new interest groups, national decision-making mechanisms and influence from other policy areas. This is an important field of study not only for alcohol policy research but also as case studies for political science and studies in present-day democracy.

A high degree of agreement in opinions of voters and politicians is often seen as important. It is also interesting how changes come about. Are changes “run from below”, i.e. do politicians’ opinions emanate from and follow the opinion of the public, or are they “run from the top”, i.e. formed by the political parties which the opinion of the voters follows? Given the dynamic nature of representative democracy, both processes exist for different issues and are legitimate as democratic processes (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996). The focus of the debate is whether politi-
Alcohol policy changes in Sweden 1990–2012

The time period in focus is characterised by important changes regarding the conditions for implementing alcohol policy measures in Sweden, with the EU membership playing a crucial role. The entry of Sweden into the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994 and the European Union (EU) in 1995 brought about several changes to Swedish alcohol policy and was the starting point for a period of liberalisation in Swedish alcohol policy (Holder et al., 1998; Holder, 2000). In terms of the relation between the opinion of the political decision-makers or the public and changes in policy one can discern between at least two cases. On the one hand, policy changes were made in connection with legal processes where Swedish national law was considered to be in conflict with the EU treaty and on the other hand, changes were made on the initiative of the government without being necessitated by legal demands emanating from the EU treaty.

Changes to Swedish alcohol policy directly motivated by EU legal issues include:

- 1 January 1995: Abolishment of the monopolies on wholesale, import, distribution of alcoholic beverages and the monopoly on spirits manufacturing
- 1 January 1995: Beer stronger than 4.5% alcohol by weight (5.6% by volume) was allowed to be sold in Sweden
- 15 May 2003: Advertisements for alcoholic beverages with no more than 15% alcohol by volume allowed in newspapers and magazines following a judgement by the Swedish Market Court
- 1 January 2004: Free import of alcoholic beverages for personal use by travellers

The overall aim of this article is to analyse the association between public opinions and political decisions on alcohol policy in Sweden during the last decades. More specifically, we will describe the development in alcohol policy and use existing Swedish surveys on public opinion to describe public opinion in 1990–2012 as well as present some recent data on the opinion of decision-makers. On the basis of these data we will then discuss to what extent policy decisions are related to public opinion and how these in turn are related to the opinion of policy-makers.
without alcohol taxes paid in Sweden

• 1 July 2008: Abolishment of the Swedish prohibition on private importation of alcoholic beverages following the judgement in the so-called Rosengren case of the European Court of Justice

Changes initiated primarily by the Swedish government include:

• 1 January 1997: Lowering of beer tax by 39%, from SEK 2.38 to 1.45 per litre and each per cent of alcohol by volume
• 1 January 2000: Abolishing of licences for importation and wholesale of alcoholic beverages
• 1 July 2001: Opening hours of retail alcohol monopoly stores lengthened to include Saturdays
• 1 January 2011: New Alcohol Act comes into force
  ○ Increased possibilities for restaurants and catering firms to receive licences for serving of alcoholic beverages
  ○ Abolishing of licences for manufacturing of alcoholic beverages
  ○ Abolishing of licences for trade in alcohol not intended for consumption. Free trade in completely denatured alcohol and in non-beverage products containing alcohol.

It is, however, important to note that political power not only gives possibilities for decisions of changes of legislation and policy but also of non-decisions, i.e. to decide not to take action by framing an issue in a way that it does not come to be discussed as a political possibility or directly stops proposals for change (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). Examples that to a smaller or greater extent fall in this category in Sweden in 1990–2012 include not increasing alcohol tax and not clarifying alcohol legislation in connection with allowing individuals to import alcoholic beverages for personal use.

Before Sweden became a member of the European Union, Swedish alcohol taxes were increased yearly to keep up with the inflation rate. This practice ended in the first years after entering the EU in 1995. The tax for beer was lowered in 1997 and the annual increases in wine and spirit taxes ended in 1998. In 2004 a government commission (Alkoholinförselutredningen) proposed a decrease of the tax on spirits by 40% to counteract private alcohol import from abroad (SOU, 2004:86). The proposal led to an intense debate but was not realised.

Table 1.
Alcohol tax rates in Sweden 1995–2012

| Date of change | Beer* | Wine (8,5–15 abv)** | Spirits*** |
|---------------|-------|---------------------|-----------|
| 19950101-     | 2.33  | 26.2                | 474       |
| 19960101-     | 2.38  | 26.81               | 485.04    |
| 19970101-     | 1.45  | 26.8                | 494       |
| 19980101-     | 1.47  | 27.2                | 501.41    |
| 20011201-     | 1.47  | 22.08               | 501.41    |
| 20080101-     | 1.66  | 21.58               | 501.41    |

* Tax rate in SEK per litre and percentage of abv
** Tax rate in SEK per litre of product
*** Tax rate in SEK per litre of 100% alcohol

The absence of tax increases in the latter years has led to a decrease of alcohol prices in real terms. Taken together with the increase in disposable income, the affordability of alcoholic beverages has increased considerably since 1995. This increase is the main factor behind the increase in domestic alcohol sales since this year (Norström & Ramstedt, 2009).

The European Court of Justice declared 2007 in the judgement of the Rosengren
case that the Swedish ban of private imports by individuals for personal use was a breach of the EU treaty. The ban had been created for spirits at the beginning of the twentieth century to protect the effectiveness of the then local retail spirits monopolies in reducing consumption and avoiding competition, which was one of the main reasons for creating the monopolies in the first place (SFS, 1915:183; Proposition, 1915:187). After the Rosen- gren judgement in 2007 that stated that a ban on importation was not allowed by EU rules, a Swedish state inquiry (SOU 2009:22) proposed a ban on commercial mediation (“kommersiell förmedling”) to clarify the legislation and achieve a similar effect as the original ban on private importation. The proposal was not included in the Swedish government’s proposal to the parliament for a new alcohol act (Proposition, 2009/10:125).

Besides the policy decisions it can be noted that Systembolaget, the state-owned retail monopoly on the selling of alcohol, has developed a more open service profile. It has modernised its shops, promoted wine courses and, in 2013, started a trial with home delivery of alcohol.

Public opinion on alcohol policy in Sweden in 1990–2012

The most researched issue in Swedish public opinion on alcohol policy is whether the alcohol retail monopoly of Systembolaget should be retained or abolished (for an overview of available data and their sources, view appendix). This may seem surprising as there are many other alcohol policy issues that have been under political consideration since 1990, such as the number of on-trade licences, alcohol taxes or marketing regulations. But the alcohol monopoly is something of a household issue in Sweden with strong symbolic value. Moreover, given its importance as an alcohol policy intervention, it is interesting to study opinions on the monopoly and their possible determinants.

One of the questions on the monopoly used in surveys is whether wine should be sold in grocery stores instead of only by the alcohol monopoly. The question has been used in different surveys from the 1980s until today (Figure 1). During the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s around 40 percent of respondents were positive to the idea of sales of wine in grocery stores. In 1993 the figure had almost doubled to 75% and was on a similar level also ten years later. Such a dramatic change in opinion is unusual. There were no corresponding changes in consumption or harm in this period. Most likely this change in the public opinion was an effect of the debate on the effects on Swedish alcohol policy of the EEA agreement and the possible Swedish membership of the European Union. The Swedish Brewers’ Association also published estimates at the time on unregistered consumption of alcohol in Sweden, which were used as argument for that Swedish alcohol policy had lost its effect and had become outdated. This received considerable interest in the media. That the industry estimates were later shown to be exaggerated, received less attention (Leifman, 1998).

Since 2005, the proportion of respondents positive to the sale of wine in grocery stores has decreased. The figures are back to the 1980s levels.

Another question that has been used to gauge the opinion vis-à-vis the retail mo-
nopoly is whether all alcoholic beverages, i.e. strong beer, wine and spirits should be sold in grocery stores. The proportion of respondents positive to this statement is generally smaller than when asked for wine only. The decreasing trend for wine since 2004, above, is validated by the similar trend for all categories of alcoholic beverages in surveys of the SOM Institute (University of Gothenburg) and of Systembolaget (Figures 2 and 3).

In the SOM Institute surveys, the proportion of respondents positive to the proposal of sales of all alcoholic beverages in grocery stores has decreased from around 45 per cent in 2001/2002 to around 30 per cent in 2011/2012. Analysis of sub-groups of respondents shows that the factors that have the greatest effect on the view of alcohol in grocery stores are whether the respondents consider themselves to be to the right or left in political issues, the concern for increased future alcohol consumption and personal alcohol drinking habits. Respondents on the political right are more likely to be positive to sales of alcohol in grocery stores. A greater concern for future consumption increases the probability for not seeing sales of alcohol in grocery stores as a good proposal, while more frequent consumption of alcoholic beverages is correlated to greater likelihood for being positive to grocery store sales. Other determining factors include education, where higher education is associated with more restrictive views. Even if these patterns are the same both in the early and the later years of the period, all groups decreased their support for selling alcohol in grocery stores (Holmberg & Weibull, 2013).
Over the last two decades frequency of consumption has increased and concern for increased alcohol consumption has decreased. It seems paradoxical that the opinion on the retail alcohol monopoly has grown less liberal during the same time. Interestingly, the relation between concern for alcohol as a societal problem and support for the retail monopoly has weakened between 2004 and 2012 (Holmberg & Weibull, 2013).

In the surveys by Systembolaget, respondents are asked to choose between two alternatives by responding to the question “Do you think that Systembolaget and the monopoly on the sale of strong beer, wine and spirits should be retained, or would you like strong beer, wine and spirits to be sold in other stores?”. The percentage of respondents that prefer retaining the monopoly has increased from around 50 percent at the beginning of 2000 to 71 percent in 2012. During the same period the proportion of respondents that would prefer alcoholic beverages in other stores has decreased from around 40 percent to 23 (Figure 3).

The effect of political party preference of the SOM Institute surveys is validated in the Systembolaget surveys. The trend of increased support for retaining the retail monopoly is found among the supporters of all political parties (Figure 4). Even among supporters of the Conservative/moderate party, who are the least positive to the monopoly, only one third says that alcoholic beverages should be sold in other stores and more than 60 percent wanted to retain the monopoly in 2012 (Figure 5).

One of the reasons behind the increased support for Systembolaget’s monopoly is probably the monopoly’s increased customer service during the last decade or so, with e.g. extended opening hours and self-service stores (Holmberg & Weibull, 2013). Systembolaget’s Customer Satisfaction In-

**Figure 2. Proportion (%) of the public supportive of proposal to sell strong beer, wine and spirits in grocery stores, 1993–2012**

![Graph showing proportion of public supportive of proposal to sell strong beer, wine and spirits in grocery stores from 1993 to 2012.](image)

**Remark:** Results for 1993–2000 come from Leifman & Gustafsson, 2004, while the 2001–2012 results stem from Holmberg & Weibull, 2013.
Figure 3. Public opinion on the Systembolaget retail monopoly in 2001–2012, surveys by Systembolaget (% of respondents)

Remark: Data supplied by Systembolaget. Number of respondents per year: 18000.

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Figure 5. Public opinion on the Systembolaget retail monopoly in 2012 according to party preference, surveys by Systembolaget (%)

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Behind the opinions on the state monopoly there are other factors related to alcohol attitudes. One important aspect is the view on the severity of alcohol as a social problem. According to available studies such views have changed considerably in Sweden since the 1980s. According to the European Value Study, 66% of Swedes saw alcohol as a very serious problem in 1981. In 2012, less than 20 percent of the respondents were very concerned of a future increase in consumption, according to SOM Institute survey. While the questions are differently formulated, the differences are sufficiently large to likely reflect a real change in perception. The changes at the beginning of the 1990s seem to coincide with the weakened support for the retail alcohol monopoly, but the small number of surveys during this period makes the interpretation uncertain. During this period of a marked shift in attitudes there were no major changes in alcohol consumption or alcohol-related harm (Leifman, 1998).

Looking at group differences in the an-
Looking at group differences in the answers we find an almost opposite pattern than with the opinion on the retail sales of alcohol in grocery stores. People concerned about alcohol as a social problem are generally very much against measures of liberalising alcohol distribution.

More support in the last decade for a restrictive policy in the form of an alcohol retail monopoly is paralleled by less support for a decrease in alcohol taxes since 2005 (Holmberg & Weibull, 2013). Fifty-seven percent supported a decrease in 2005 while in 2012 the corresponding figure was 23%. Men, people with a right-wing political orientation and those drinking alcohol regularly are more in favour of a tax decrease, but support has declined also in these groups in the last years. During the same time the perception of alcohol as a social problem has decreased, which seems to be contrary to what could be expected. The restrictive attitudes are stronger among women, the elderly and those with a left-wing political orientation (Holmberg & Weibull, 2013).

**Opinions among decision-makers**

Whereas data on the public opinion in the alcohol policy area is fairly rich, the sources are few when it comes to attitudes among politicians. However, we have found some interesting sources, which enables comparisons with the public opinion.

Ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2010 the Swedish public service television (SVT) created a website, Valpeij.se, where parliamentary candidates could present their views on political issues by answering questions in twelve different
Table 2. Attitudes to abolishing the state monopoly on retail sales of alcohol among members of Swedish Parliament, 2010 (Absolute numbers)

|                | All MPs | V | S   | MP | C   | KD | FP | M   | SD |
|----------------|---------|---|-----|----|-----|----|----|-----|----|
| Bad proposal   | 213     | 17| 89  | 22 | 15  | 18 | 18 | 22  | 12 |
| Good proposal  | 72      | 0 | 0   | 0  | 4   | 0  | 4  | 60  | 4  |
| Total number responding | 285 | 17 | 89 | 22 | 19 | 18 | 22 | 82 | 16 |

Remark: Data from Swedish Television’s Valpejl.se 2010. For information on the parties, view remarks in figure 4. SD is a right-wing party focused on immigrant issues.

areas as guidance to voters. The website came to feature replies by nearly 3000 candidates, of whom 299 took up office after the election. One of the questions on the website was whether to abolish the alcohol monopoly was a good or a bad proposal. Of the 349 members of the Swedish parliament, 293 of those in office at the beginning of 2013 had their answer to this question registered on the website. Eight of those had given the reply “no opinion”. Of the 293 replies, 213 (73%) stated that they regarded the proposal as very or fairly bad. 72 persons (25%), mostly members of the Conservative party considered it to be a very or fairly good proposal. In four of the eight parties in parliament, no MP considered this to be a good proposal. The Conservative party (formally, the “Moderates”) is the only party in Parliament where a majority of MPs state that abolishing the alcohol monopoly would be positive measure.

Among the parties in the present right-wing government alliance (Conservatives /M/, Liberals /FP/, Christian Democrats /KD/ and Centre party /C/) a majority of 73 MPs supported the monopoly whereas 68 were in favour of abolishing it.

The overall parliamentary opinion on the alcohol monopoly corresponds well to the opinion of the general public. There is less agreement between the parties’ supporters and their respective MPs. The difference is greatest for the Conservatives, which most likely is an indication that alcohol policy is not a salient issue for conservative voters.

During the electoral period 2006–2010, political scientists at Gothenburg University conducted a survey in 2008 on the views on democracy of members of the Swedish municipal councils. Out of a total of almost 14 000 persons, nearly 10 000 replied. The councillors were asked to consider, for example, whether it was a good or bad proposal to “pursue a more restrictive municipal alcohol policy”. The proportion who found this to be a good proposal was 32 percentage points greater than the proportion who did not. There was a majority in support for more restrictive alcohol policy in all parties, except for the Conservatives, where a small majority found this a bad proposal.

Even if they are very different, the two available national studies show a consistent pattern. Party politicians to the left are generally in favour of a more restrictive alcohol policy than are politicians to the right. Two observations emerge on closer inspection: among the right-wing or non-socialist politicians it is especially the conservative or moderate politicians who are against restrictions, while the opinion is more mainstream among other contem-
Table 3. Opinion on restrictions in municipal alcohol policy: percentage in favour of increased restrictions, 2008

|                  | Total | V   | S   | MP  | C   | KD  | FP  | M   | SD   | Other |
|------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-------|
| Opinion balance  | +32   | +61 | +42 | +55 | +29 | -74 | +27 | -8  | +33  | +29   |

Remarks: The respondents are politically elected councillors on the local or regional level. The total number of respondents is 8,810. The majority are local councillors. Opinion balance shows the difference between those in favour and those against the proposal. This can vary between +100 (all in favour) to -100 (all against). From Gilljam et al., 2010.

Discussion

Using existing Swedish surveys on public opinion and recent data of the opinion of decision-makers, this paper has sought to analyse the association between public opinions and political decisions on Swedish alcohol policy during the last decades. It appears that restrictive alcohol policy measures enjoy plenty of support in Sweden and this support has increased in the last decade. The opinions of the public and their elected representatives correspond fairly well but the relation between these opinions and policy decisions are not always straightforward. In conclusion, there is little support for the idea that public opinion has been a major influence on alcohol policy formation in the period of 1990–2012.

Public support for restrictive policy measures, seen as support for the retail monopoly, has increased over the period and is quite high in 2012. The public opinion agrees with the opinion of the Swedish members of parliament, as seen from Valpejl.se in 2010. Comparing the MPs of the parties and their sympathisers, the politicians’ opinion is if anything more pronounced, with the exception of the Conservative party where the opinions differ between MPs and sympathisers.

As we do not have access to time series data on the opinion of politicians it is not
possible to draw any firm conclusions from the material on how the opinions have changed. It is clear, however, that the public alcohol policy opinion has not had a marked influence on the political decisions during the period. At the beginning of the 1990s when the public opinion changed in favour of sales of alcohol in grocery stores, the political decisions did not follow. The development toward more restrictive public opinion since the beginning of 2000 has been accompanied not by more restrictive policies but by liberalisations. If we assume that the alcohol political decisions in this period reflect the opinion of politicians, it is not the public opinion which leads and is followed by the opinion of the politicians. But if the opinion of politicians is not in concordance with the political decisions, the reasoning above of course does not hold.

It seems to be more common with changes in opinions to be “run from the top” than “run from the bottom” in Sweden. Of the 18 issues where the opinions of Swedish MPs and voters have been compared in 1969–1994, 50% followed the top-down process, while slightly less, 33%, followed the bottom-up process (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1999). As there are no time series of data of MPs or other politicians’ opinion on alcohol policy issues from the time of this study, the hypothesis of a top-down process cannot be confirmed. But the political decisions around the year 2000 of extended opening hours for the retail monopoly and more outlets can be seen as political decisions to increasing public support for the monopoly. In this sense, they come closer to the top-down model.

**Alcohol policy decisions and models of representative democracy**

How do the developments in Swedish opinions and political decisions in 1990–2012 fit with the three overarching models of how opinion is translated into political decisions in a representative democracy? In short, none can be confirmed in the field of alcohol policy in the time of this study.

The *Responsible Party Model* assumes that the parties’ positions are known to the voters before election. As a crude way of estimating this and the importance to alcohol policy issues given by the parties, the election manifestos from 1976 and onwards have been reviewed (Table 4). During the last decades alcohol has generally been mentioned in two party manifestos in each election, but the parties that have brought up alcohol each time vary in a rather haphazard manner. We have to go back to 1979 to find alcohol mentioned by a majority of the parliamentary parties, and only the Moderates (Conservatives) do not mention the issue. In the 2006 and 2010 elections, the right-wing parties which went on to form the government, published a common pre-election manifesto. In both years alcohol was mentioned as a public health problem as was the need to reduce alcohol consumption. In 2010 the alcohol retail monopoly was mentioned as a central tool, alongside with price policy (Alliansens valmanifest, 2006; 2010). What kind of alcohol policy the political parties would carry out if they came into power and which party thus aligns with the voters’ alcohol political opinion is not readily understandable from the election manifestos, at least not since the 1970s. In view of the liberalisation of policies during the last two electoral terms, these
policies seem to be especially difficult to predict from the election manifestos.

It is reasonable to assume that in the responsibility model the issue in consideration needs to be seen as important by the voters to influence their evaluation of the performance of the governmental parties. Given the drop in the proportion of Swedes who considered alcohol a serious problem in the mid-1990s and that in the SOM Institute survey of 2012 increased alcohol consumption was the issue that caused the least worries among 16 possible social problems (Weibull et al., 2013), it seems unlikely that the alcohol political decisions in 1995–2012 have had a noticeable impact on election outcomes and thereby that the voters opinions have been reflected through this possible mechanism.

In the participatory democracy model, the opinion of the public as well as that of the political decision-makers can be seen as being formed during the process. The data in this study can neither substantiate nor negate the model for alcohol policy in this period. As the Swedish state inquiry system prepares for political decisions, the model does, however, have relevance for the alcohol policy field in the period since 1990. The state inquiries into the Alcohol Act before Swedish membership in the EU (SOU, 1994:24), the inquiry into unregistered consumption and EU rules of import of alcohol by travellers (SOU, 2004:86; SOU, 2005:25) and the inquiry into farm sales (ref, SOU, 2010:98), i.e. whether retail sales from Swedish producers of alcoholic beverages in the countryside should be allowed, have all been widely discussed. In several cases the discussions seem to have influenced what decisions have been taken, e.g. that the tax on spirits was not lowered even if the 2004 inquiry had proposed a 40-percent cut.

**Political decisions and the opinions of decision-makers**

Another question is to what extent the decision-makers’ opinion is related to politi-

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**Table 4. Alcohol as a policy issue in Swedish election manifestos, 1976–2010**

|       | 1976 | 1979 | 1982 | 1985 | 1988 | 1991 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| V     | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | R    | 0    | 0    | r    | -    | 0    |      |
| S     | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | r    | 0    | r    | 0    | 0    | 0    |      |
| MP    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 0    | 0    | r    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| C     | r    | r    | R    | r    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| KD    | -    | -    | 0    | R    | r    | r    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |      |
| FP    | r    | r    | 0    | r    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | -    | -    |
| M     | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | r    | r    |      |
| Alliansen** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |

**Remarks:** 0=alcohol not mentioned; r=alcohol mentioned as a problem or in connection with proposed restrictive alcohol policies; l=liberalisations/fewer restrictions; - = election manifesto not available

* The Moderates had no election manifesto of their own in the 2006 and 2010 election, but published a joint manifesto of the right-wing alliance. **The right-wing/non-socialist alliance: M – Moderaterna (Conservatives), FP – Folkpartiet (Liberals), C – Centern, KD – Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats)

Manifestos retrieved from Swedish National Data Service at University of Gothenburg (http://snd.gu.se/sv/vivill)
cal decisions. One would expect political decisions to be closely connected to the opinions of the political decision-makers, regardless whether these opinions are driven by or drive public opinion. In looking at this relationship it is obviously important to take distribution of power into consideration. The studies in 2006 and 2008 of the opinion on municipal alcohol policy by members of municipal councils suggest that the association may be weak (Karlsson, 2012; Gilljam, Karlsson & Sundell, 2010). While there was a majority for more restrictive municipal alcohol policy in all parties except the Moderates, the parliamentary decisions during the same electoral term seemed to go in the opposite direction, including liberalised licensing of restaurants, which is a municipal responsibility.

Two national alcohol policy issues during the last two electoral terms are related to the retail alcohol monopoly, farm sales and private importation of alcoholic beverages. Two state inquiries have come to the conclusion that farm sales of alcoholic beverages would not be in accordance with a retail monopoly on other alcohol products according to EU treaty rules (SOU, 2009:22, pp. 107–108; SOU, 2010:98, pp. 88–90). According to media reports, the government announced in 2012 that it will not introduce farm sales now but would keep working on the issue within the Cabinet Office (Sveriges Radio, September 16, 2012, http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=5272027). In the case of private importation of alcoholic beverages – following the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling in the Rosengren case – the Swedish government have by the power of non-decision not clarified the Swedish legislation, unlike the governments of Norway and Finland. Both these issues entail a risk of weakening the alcohol retail monopoly. This seems to go contrary to the majority of members of Swedish parliament who support the monopoly.

A specific problem in analysing the alcohol policy level is the complicated play inside both Parliament and the coalition government. The present government is a minority government with 173 of the 349 seats in the Parliament. The Moderates are the largest party in the coalition with 107 seats in comparison to the total of 66 seats held by the other three coalition parties. The Swedish Moderate Prime Minister has argued in media interviews that as the Moderates are the largest party in the coalition they should also have the greatest influence (see e.g. http://www.sydsvenskan.se/sverige/sverige-kan-bli-svart-att-styra/). On the other hand, as we have seen, some of the coalition partners are much less liberal on alcohol issues. What comes out – or does not – as political decisions is thus very hard to evaluate, especially when the alcohol issue is not on the current agenda. The conclusion seems to be that the influence of opinions on alcohol political decisions must be gleaned and examined from the mechanism of decision-making within the government and the parliament.

Alcohol policy decisions brought about directly by the EU treaty

One final reason for why it is complicated to understand decisions in alcohol policy issues is their relation to the EU. In terms of the public and politicians’ opinion, changes to Swedish alcohol legislation caused by EU Treaty rules, most clearly by
the decisions of the ECJ, are different in nature from the decisions directly made by the national parliament. The ECJ judgments are not seldom a form of “judicial policy making” in matters of principle of European integration. Given that a reversal of such judgments of the ECJ would require amendments to the EU Treaty, which requires unanimity among the EU member states, and that the basis which make these judgments possible has not been articulated in the original political decisions but are interpretations of the EU Treaty by the ECJ itself, such changes seem in practice nearly impossible (Cramér, 1998; Scharpf, 2010). These changes in Swedish national legislation are therefore not, as by definition, influenced by public opinion in a bottom-up process of representative democracy. It is conceivable, however, that the changes influence public opinion in a top-down process.

Summary and directions for future research
In summing up, restrictive alcohol policy measures are strongly supported in Sweden, and this support has increased in the last decade. The opinions of the public and their elected representatives correspond fairly well. But the relation between these opinions and policy decisions are not always straightforward and there is little support for that public opinion has been a major influence on alcohol policy formation in the period of 1990–2012. There are some indications for influence in the opposite direction, that political decisions drive public opinion, but only to a limited extent. This seems to be very different from the political processes in the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries when the popular interest in alcohol and its societal effects was crucial for the emergence of the restrictive Swedish and Nordic alcohol policies. The changed situation in the 1980s and 1990s seems to stem from several intertwined factors. Important factors could include the EU membership, the changed view on the role of the state in general welfare politics and the increased presence of alcohol commercial interests.

We would argue that to elucidate the role of opinion in alcohol policy formation in the period 1990–2012 in Sweden it would be informative to study the decision-making processes in the government and parliament at this time and to study not only the decisions made but also the non-decisions in a similar framework as Bachrach and Baratz have done (1970). One of the questions to include in such a study could be what role public alcohol policy opinion has had, and under what conditions public opinion has or does not have an impact on alcohol policy decisions. Another question to look into could be the role of interest groups, e.g. the rise of alcohol industry actions on alcohol policy issues (see e.g. Olsson, 2000; Leifman, 1998; Casswell, 2013) and the decline of the temperance movement (Ramstedt & Kühlhorn, 1998). Yet another interesting question are the mechanisms of decision-making in government alliances, how differing interests among the ruling parties are played out and co-ordinated and what consequences this has for representative democracy.
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None.

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APPENDIX
Sources of data on public opinion on alcohol policy
There exists no single time series within the same institution that examines public opinion on alcohol policy in Sweden covering the whole period 1990–2012. However, there are scattered studies, which periodically have been compiled by researchers, addressing two main themes; how to sell alcohol and the level of alcohol taxes. The main data sources are describe below.

SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg
The SOM Institute, a survey organisation at the University of Gothenburg, have in their annual surveys of Swedish habits, behaviour, opinions and values included questions on alcohol habits since 1992, alcohol as a problem and opinion on alcohol policy since 2001.

SoRAD, Stockholm University
The Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD) has included some questions on alcohol policy opinions in their monthly Monitoring survey during 2002–2012. The main aim of the Monitoring survey is to measure unrecorded alcohol and drinking habits. The data is used to estimate and monitor the overall level of drinking in Sweden.

Systembolaget
The Swedish alcohol retail monopoly Systembolaget has since 2001 through the public opinion research company SIFO carried out monthly surveys on the public support for the retail monopoly. The results are used as a key performance indicator for the societal perspective in a balanced scorecard model in order to monitor company management (Systembolagers årsredovisning 2001, Systembolaget 2012 Responsibility Report). Furthermore, Systembolaget initiated similar surveys in the early 1990s through the company TEMO.
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