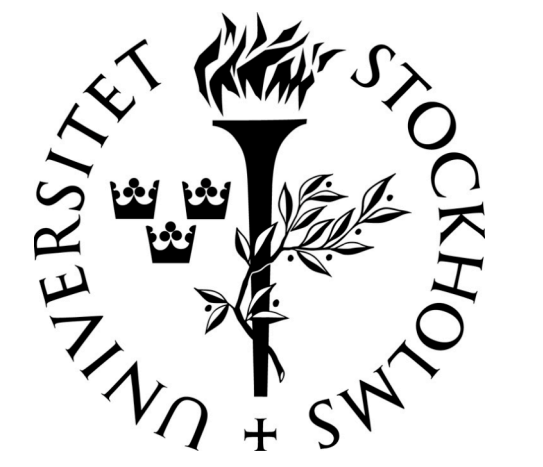




Perspective taking and expression of attitudes in a political controversy

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Introduction

- Previous studies have shown that people are successful at taking perspectives of various groups, and can simulate opinions not only of in-groups, but also out-groups (Dimdins, Montgomery, & Austers, 2005; Kemdal & Montgomery, 2001).
- This is because public discourse provides members of society with arguments representing the positions of various groups, and this information creates a shared reality between those groups (Dimdins & Montgomery, 2004; Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996).
- Research has demonstrated that perspective taking facilitates behavior consistent with the stereotypes about the group whose perspective is being taken (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008).
- This may happen because of an increased self-other overlap, when perspective taking becomes a priming manipulation, activating a schema representing the particular group.
- We wanted to test if this mechanism can be used to change attitudes in a controversial issue. If perspective taking (unconsciously) activates a cognitive schema containing representations of a particular group, one should expect that this schema should systematically influence the expression of attitudes in a direction consistent with the prototypical attitudes of that group.
- A significant factor predicting political attitudes is political affiliation and political ideology (Jost, 2006).
- Previous studies have shown that political ideology systematically influences people's judgments on various issues, biasing the information processing in ways consistent with individuals' political views (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).
- One should expect that individuals' political orientation would act as a stabilizing factor maintaining attitude stability independently of the experimental manipulation.
- As the background for the study, we chose a topical political issue in Swedish society--the debate about regulation of wages for posted workers (see "Background of the study" section).
- In our study, we used the perspectives of three stakeholder groups in the debate: Swedish workers (with predominantly wage regulation position), foreign workers, and Swedish customers (both with predominantly free competition position).
- We predicted that taking the perspective of the former group will result in increased negative attitudes to free competition, and taking the perspectives of the two latter groups will result in increased positive attitudes.
- We also predicted that there would be an independent effect of participants' political orientation on their attitudes, with rightist-affiliated participants being more supportive of free competition, and leftist participants more supportive of wage regulation (Mayda & Rodrik, 2005).

Method

- One hundred and thirty five (26% male, 74% female) psychology students at Stockholm University participated in the study (median age 24 years).
- After reading a short introduction about the topic, in a between-subjects design, participants were asked to formulate the advantages and disadvantages of free competition from a Swedish worker's, a foreign worker's, or a Swedish customer's perspective (a control group thought about pros and cons of their future work).
- After that, the participants completed a multi-item measure of attitudes towards free competition (6 items) and wage regulation (6 items).
- At the end of the questionnaire, among other demographic indicators, the participants indicated, which political party they supported.

Results

- Only participants who had indicated their political affiliation were included in the analysis.
- We counted the number of advantages and disadvantages generated by each participant (see Figure 1) and conducted a 3 (Perspective: Swedish worker vs. foreign worker vs. Swedish customer) by 2 (Political affiliation: rightist vs. leftist) ANOVA separately on the number of advantages and disadvantages of free competition.
- The analysis yielded a significant main effect of Perspective for the number of disadvantages, $F(2, 72) = 5.70, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$, and no significant effects for advantages, though the main effect of Political Affiliation was marginally significant, $F(2, 72) = 2.96, p = .09, \eta^2 = .04$.
- A similar ANOVA with the easiness scores for generating advantages and disadvantages (measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from -3 to 3; means in Figure 2) yielded a significant main effect of Perspective, $F(2, 74) = 3.23, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$, for easiness of generating advantages, but no significant effects for generating disadvantages.
- We calculated mean scores for attitude ratings in favor of free competition and wage regulation (measured on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from -5 to 5; means in Figure 3) and conducted a 4 (Perspective: control vs. Swedish worker vs. foreign worker vs. Swedish customer) by 2 (Political affiliation: rightist vs. leftist) ANOVA separately for these means.
- For the free competition mean, there was a significant main effect of Political Ideology, $F(3, 98) = 8.69, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$. None of the effects involving Perspective were significant. For the wage regulation mean, the results were similar. There was a main effect of Political Ideology, $F(3, 98) = 10.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$, but no significant effects involving Perspective.

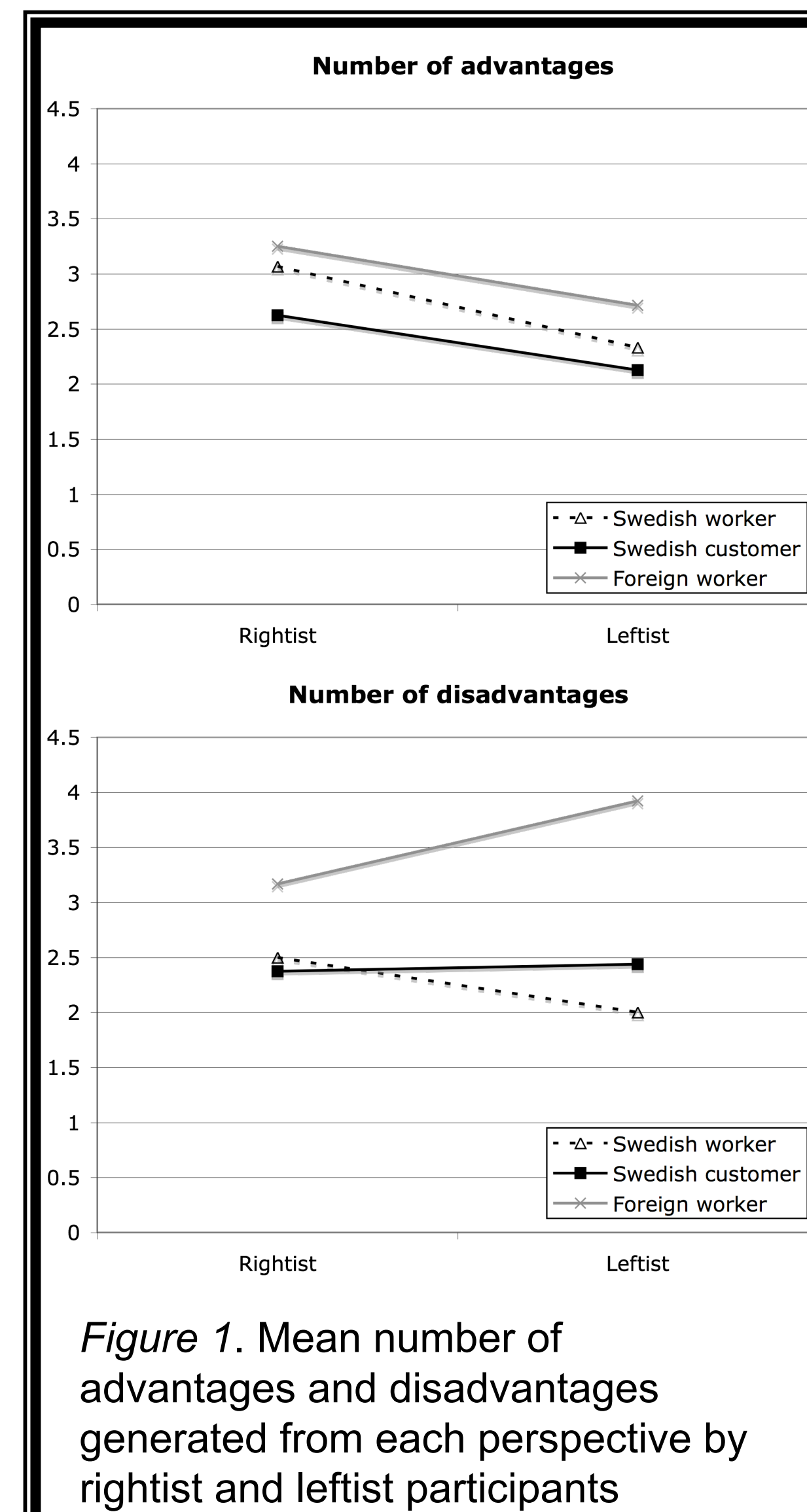


Figure 1. Mean number of advantages and disadvantages generated from each perspective by rightist and leftist participants

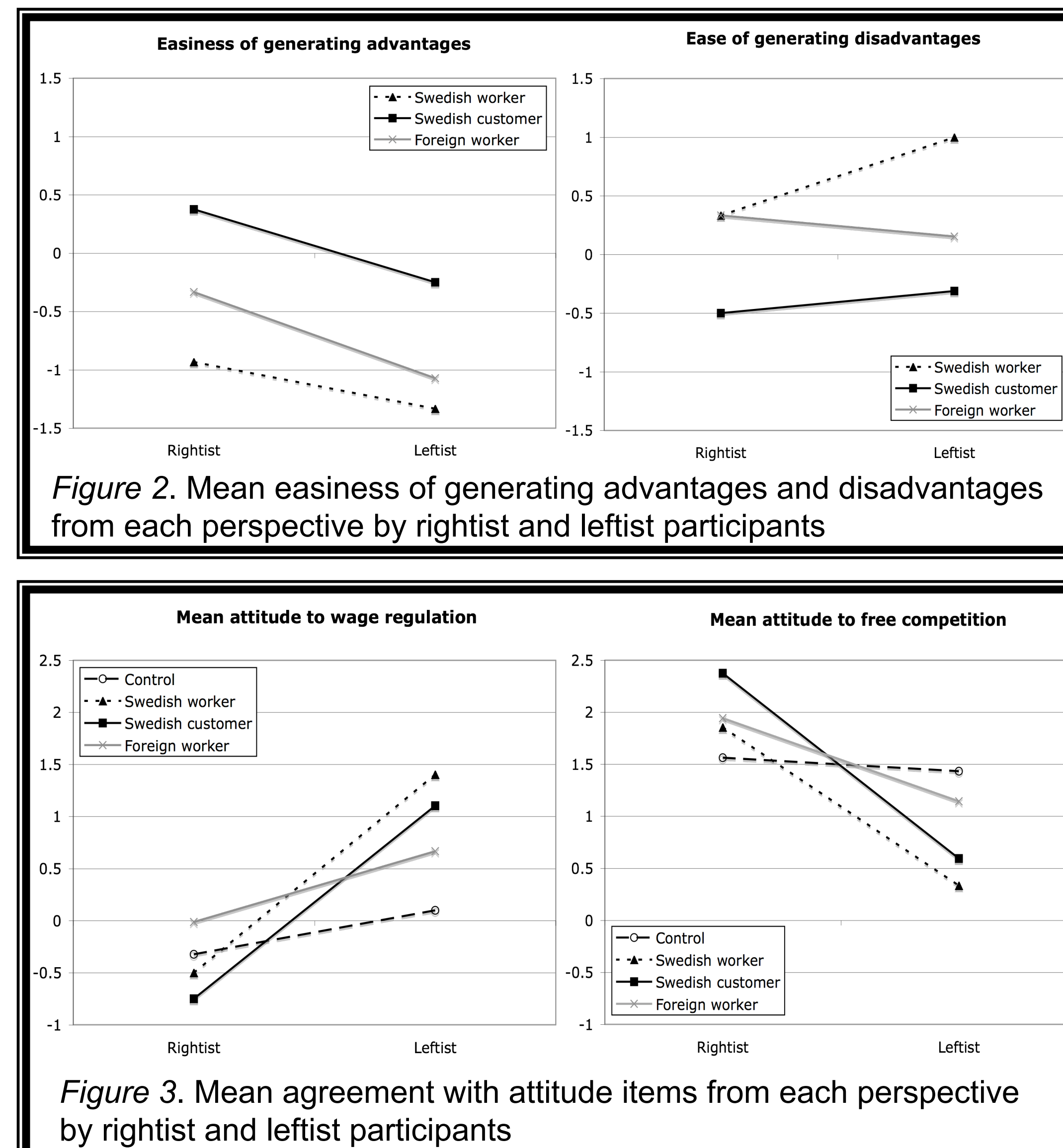


Figure 2. Mean easiness of generating advantages and disadvantages from each perspective by rightist and leftist participants

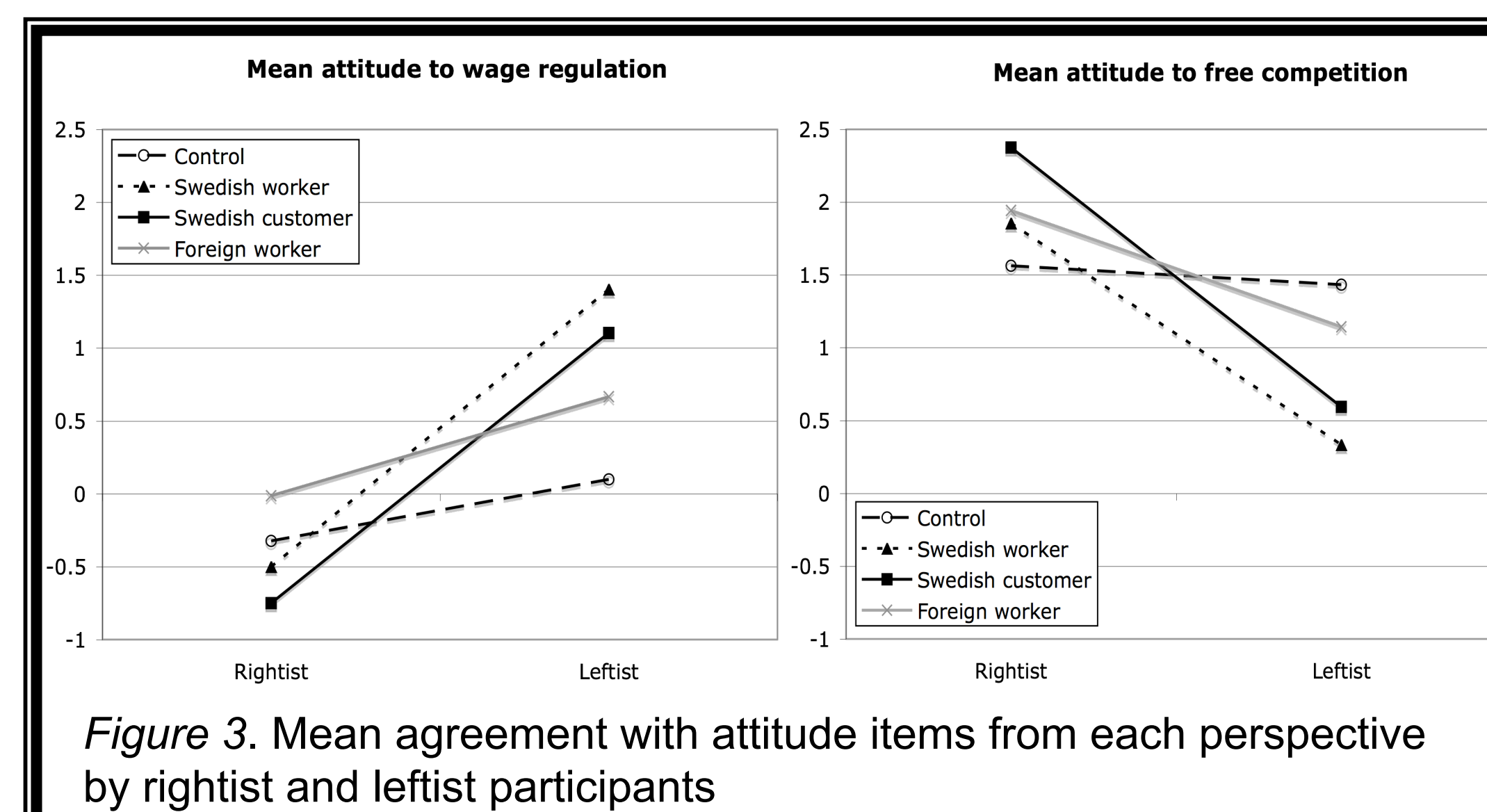


Figure 3. Mean agreement with attitude items from each perspective by rightist and leftist participants

Background of the study

In recent years, there has been a lot of debate in Swedish media, and among politicians and economists, about how trade in services should be regulated in Sweden. On the one side of the debate, the position is that foreign companies who post their workers in Sweden should be allowed to pay them in accordance with the legislation and collective agreements in their home countries. We denote this stance as support for **free competition**. On the other side of the debate are those who insist that the wages for posted workers should be regulated by the Swedish legislation and collective agreements. We denote this stance as support for **wage regulation**.

Discussion

- The results did not confirm our initial predictions about the effects of perspective taking.
- The most likely explanation for this result is that, in the shared reality regarding the opinions of the stakeholder groups, none of the groups are associated with distinctively positive or negative attitudes towards free competition in wages.
- This explanation is best illustrated with the finding that the largest number of disadvantages for free competition was generated from the foreign worker perspective, which from an economic point of view should be considered a stakeholder group with a high vested interest in free competition.
- But perhaps the public discourse is largely focused on the disadvantages of this group's position.
- Also, for other perspectives, it is evident that the advantages and disadvantages cancel each other out, resulting in no shifts in subsequent attitude ratings.
- The effects of political ideology were distinct and unaffected by the perspective taking manipulation, in line with previous research on the robustness of such effects (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003).
- Both leftist and rightist participants could generate about the same number of advantages and disadvantages of free competition for all stakeholder groups with about same easiness, confirming the earlier results of successful imitation of group opinions through perspective taking.
- At the same time, participants' own opinions remained largely unaffected by the perspective taking manipulation.
- In the context of previous research, our results suggest that perspective taking may be effective in changing peoples' attitudes when there are clearly defined, socially shared stereotypes about the direction of attitudes of a particular group, but may be ineffective when such stereotypes are ambivalent.

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