6. Sweden. No Longer a European Exception

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Introduction

During the last decade, political populism has been on the rise in Sweden. For years, the discussion focused on why radical right populist parties were unsuccessful in Sweden compared to elsewhere in Europe (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013a, 2013b; Rydgren, 2002a, 2002b; Widfeldt, 2008), but all this changed when the Sweden Democrats gained parliamentary representation for the first time in 2010. In the 2014 elections, the Sweden Democrats doubled their vote share and became the third largest parliamentary party. The party now holds a key position in the Swedish parliament, since neither of the two political alliances—the center-right and the Red-Green—controls a majority. However, the Sweden Democrats party is not the first party with populist appeals in the Swedish parliament: Between 1991 and 1994, the anti-establishment New Democracy had a brief stint in parliament before it dissolved. One of the findings presented in this chapter is that right-wing political populism now appears to be firmly established in the Swedish political landscape; another is that some evidence suggests that the interplay between media coverage and opinion polls might help explain the recent success of the Sweden Democrats.

Research on Populism in Sweden

In Sweden, as in many other countries, populism is a contested concept. In public debates, the term tends to be associated with political opportunism, offering simple solutions to complex problems and antagonistic, black-and-white rhetoric. In academic circles, there has been some disagreement on whether populism is a scientifically useful concept (Bagenholm, 2010), echoing an international disagreement on whether anti-establishment and anticorruption parties are necessarily populist (Sikk, 2009). However, in research adhering to the concept, the definitional agreement is extensive. Populism is generally defined as a "thin ideology" (see Chapter 2 in this volume), although in a few cases, populism has been defined as a specific type of political communication and style. These conceptualizations are referred to in the literature on both New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats (Hellström, 2010; Jungar, 2015a, 2015b; Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Rydgren 2002a, 2002b; Taggart, 1996; Widfeldt, 2008). Definitions of populism referring to communication strategies and style—personalized and charismatic leadership as well as weak party organizations—prevail in research on New Democracy (Rydgren, 2005; Taggart, 1996) but not on the Sweden Democrats party, which lacks charismatic party leadership.

The weak presence of political populism in Sweden until recently has clearly had an impact on the type and scope of scholarly analysis of this phenomenon. The absence of a populist radical right party with parliamentary representation in Sweden (until 2010) used to be described as a European "deviation" (Demker, 2012), "negative case" (Rydgren, 2002a, 2002b), and "failure" (Art, 2011). New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats are the only parties with populist appeals that have been or are represented in the national parliament

(1991–1994 and 2010–present, New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats, respectively)—although, in the southern part of Sweden (Skane), some regional populist parties were successful in the 1970s and 1980s (Lindström, 2003).

The first populist political party that gained representation in parliament was the economically liberal and anti-immigration party New Democracy, which received almost seven percent of the vote in the 1991 parliamentary elections. Two charismatic leaders formed the party the same year, but due to internal conflicts and a weak organization, it dissolved in 1994 and is a typical case of the so-called flash party.

The Sweden Democrats formed in 1988 out of three connected and overlapping nationalist, racist, and anti-immigration political parties and organizations: The Sweden party, Keep Sweden Swedish (BSS), and the Progress party (Rydgren, 2005; Widfeldt, 2008). Several of its early representatives, including the first party leader, had been members of fascist and neo-Nazi parties (Hellström, 2010; Widfeldt, 2008). The Sweden Democrats party has been ridden by factional conflicts between radical groups, but since 2005 it has gradually moderated its ideological profile to attract more voters (Jungar, 2015b; Widfeldt, 2014).

The electoral fortunes of the Sweden Democrats were small until 2002. In 1994, the party received its first five seats in three municipal assemblies. In 2002, it obtained less than two percent of the vote and the number of its representatives in municipal assemblies increased fivefold. The elections in 2006 resulted in an almost three percent vote share for the party, which entitled it to public funding. Since then, the Sweden Democrats have had increased financial resources for organizational development and electoral campaigning.

The party's parliamentary breakthrough came in 2010 when it surpassed the four percent threshold: With almost six percent of the vote, the Sweden Democrats could claim 20 parliamentary seats. In 2014, the party first received close to 10% of the vote in the European parliamentary elections, before it received 13% of the vote in the national parliamentary elections. The era of Swedish "exceptionalism" had come to an end (Rydgren, 2002a, 2002b; Widfeldt, 2008).

The policy influence of the Sweden Democrats, however, has been limited because the other parties treat it as a "pariah party" (Jungar, 2012, 2015b). Both the former and the current governments stated that they would not negotiate with, or seek parliamentary support from, the Sweden Democrats, which amounts to a *cordon sanitaire*. The democratic credentials of the Sweden Democrats are questioned because of their nationalist ideology and historic origin in outright racist and neo-Nazi milieus.

Early research on political populism in Sweden focused on the suppliers of populism—New Democracy (Rydgren, 2005; Svasand & Wörlund, 2005; Taggart, 1996) and the Sweden Democrats (Lindström 2003; Widfeldt, 2008)—as well as the weak demand for populism (Rydgren, 2002a, 2002b, 2006). Using mainly case studies, researchers analyzed the parties' formation, ideology, and organization. Since then, research has multiplied and diversified with the electoral growth, parliamentary representation, and party institutionalization of the Sweden Democrats, and as more data sets containing information on policies, electoral support, party representatives, and voters have become available. Still, an overall assessment of the literature reveals as yet very little systematic, empirical research on *mediated* political populism, and few publications that deal with the media or populist political communication.

Whereas Swedish research is largely in agreement with respect to the conceptualization of populism, some differences prevail on how populism combines with other political ideas and, consequently, which of the existing party labels—right-wing populism, radical right, or extreme right—are most appropriate for characterizing Swedish parties with populist appeals. New Democracy has been labelled a populist right party (Rydgren, 2006), whereas Taggart (1996, 2000) calls it a case of *new populism*, which is "as much associated with style of politics as with the political agenda" (Taggart, 2000, p. 74). New Democracy's anti-establishment appeals in combination with its anti-institutional ethos form a common basis for populist definitions. The strong personalization of New Democracy has been used to define it as an entrepreneurial party (Svasand & Wörlund, 2005). The party's populism is also associated with the central role of a personalized and charismatic leadership, and with a weak party organization (Rydgren, 2005; Taggart, 1996; Westlind, 1996). The Sweden Democrats party has been characterized as an extreme (Carter, 2005; Widfeldt, 2008, 2014) and radical right populist party (Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Rydgren, 2006).

The word *right* has been used to describe the parties' position with respect to both the socio-economic and the liberal-authoritarian political cleavages. New Democracy was positioned to the right on both the socio-economic (anti-tax, anti-regulation, welfare state retrenchment) and the sociocultural (anti-immigration policies) dimensions (Rydgren 2002a, 2002b; Taggart, 1996). With respect to the Sweden Democrats, research agrees that the party occupies a rightist position on the authoritarian end of the value-based conflict dimension with its nationalism (anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, anti-Islam, welfare chauvinism), social conservatism (traditional family values, anti-feminism, opposed to same-sex marriages) and authoritarianism (law and order) (Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Widfeldt, 2010). It could also be considered a case of "complete populism", combining appeals to the people with anti-elitism and exclusion of outgroups such as immigrants (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Apart from Carter (2005), who classifies the Sweden Democrats as a neoliberal party, the party is usually considered as holding a centrist position on the socio-economic dimension (e.g., Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Rydgren, 2006; Widfeldt, 2014). Consequently, the Sweden Democrats have never exhibited what Kitschelt in the 1990s defined as the "winning formula"— that is, a combination of authoritarian appeals with liberal economic policies (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997). Instead, the Sweden Democrats used "welfare chauvinism" to appeal to groups who might feel that immigration is threatening the welfare state (Rydgren, 2006). Whereas New Democracy supported Swedish membership in the European Union as an instrument for economic liberalization, the Euroskepticism of the Sweden Democrats is embedded in the ideology of national self-determination (Jungar, 2015a). A final remark concerns the use of *radical* or *extreme* to describe the Sweden Democrats. These adjectives are general used to denote the party's position in the party-political space—in other words, the Sweden Democrats party holds an extreme or radical position vis-avis the mainstream parties on issues such as immigration and minority rights. But the extremeness is not related to the party wanting to replace democracy with another form of government as, for instance, fascist or neo-Nazi political parties do.

Swedish research on political populism has clearly been influenced by the late breakthrough of right-wing populism in Sweden. In early research, populism's lack of success was *the* predominant question (Rydgren, 2002a, 2002b, 2006). Studies of the successes and failures of both New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats have utilized international mainstream theories, and have provided a multitude of factors—namely, demand, external supply, and internal supply—for explaining electoral breakthrough and persistence (Mudde, 2007). In a

seminal article, Rydgren (2002b) analyses the failure of radical right-wing mobilization in Sweden by focusing on explanations involving demand (strong class loyalties) and external supply (the saliency of the socio-economic and the sociocultural political dimension, the immigration issue, and left-right convergence) (see also Kitschelt & McGann, 1997). The same explanations applied to the electoral failure of the Sweden Democrats (Rydgren, 2002b, 2005). In his comparative work on the success of radical right populist parties, Art (2011) focuses on internal supply explanations—namely, the type of party activist. He considers the Sweden Democrats a failure because, for a long time, the party—with its nationalist, even neo-Nazi background—had difficulties recruiting competent and more moderate activists to work for it and to represent it (pp. 86–98). The *cordon sanitaire* against the Sweden Democrats further impedes activists from joining since the social costs are high, and it may well increase the threshold for voting for the party (Art, (2011; Jungar, 2015b). The failure of New Democracy to persist has been ascribed to internal supply factors, such as a failing party leadership, weak party organization, and party-internal conflicts (Rydgren, 2002a, 2005; Widfeldt 2014).

According to Rydgren (2002a), the breakthrough of New Democracy in 1991 was due to the electorate's rightward shift on the socio-economic left-right dimension and to the immigration issue becoming more salient. The studies explaining the Sweden Democrats breakthrough have analyzed the above-mentioned external supply factors and indicate that the factors that had been identified as furthering the electoral success of radical right populist parties have changed. The Sweden Democrats local breakthrough meant more public funding and consequently more available resources for a national breakthrough. Class voting, which has been comparatively strong in Sweden, has weakened (Rydgren, (2010) the saliency of the sociocultural dimension has increased (Jungar & Jupskas, 2014), and mainstream party convergence has taken place on the socio-economic dimension (Jungar, 2015b; Oscarsson & Demker, 2015).

Importantly, however, demand factors such as increasing anti-immigration attitudes cannot explain the Sweden Democrats' electoral breakthrough. Neither can the Sweden Democrats' electoral growth be attributed to an increase in anti-immigration attitudes (Demker, 2012, p. 95; 2015) or to a higher degree of political disillusionment—two factors that have been suggested as facilitating the Sweden Democrats' growth (Rydgren, 2002b).

Internal supply factors have received more attention—including party policy change, party institutionalization, and international cooperation— as explanations of the Sweden Democrats' electoral growth. The party has widened its political appeal and moderated some policies. It has been claimed that it was and still is a single-issue party since the framing of other issues is predominantly nationalist; that is, the issues are more or less related to problems associated with immigration and multiculturalism. Be that as it may, the Sweden Democrats party also attempts to mobilize voters on other issues (Jungar, 2015b). Moreover, their voters' concerns include issues other than immigration, such as law and order, gender equality, and the economy (Erlingsson, Loxbo, & Öhrvall, 2013, p. 10). The presence of local organizations has had a substantial effect on the Sweden Democrats' results in the national elections and on gaining representation in local councils (Erlingsson et al., 2013). The effects of the Sweden Democrats have been studied with respect to its influence on local refugee reception (Bolin, Lidén, & Nyhlén, 2014), local government formation (Loxbo, 2008, 2010), and central government formation (Jungar, 2012). There are also some studies on how mainstream parties react to the presence of a "pariah" party in local councils (Kiiskinen & Saveljeff, 2010).

Populist Actors as Communicators

Turning to research on populist actors as communicators, very little systematic research investigates whether a specific and unique style of communication can be defined as populist, whether leaders of parties identified as populist differ in terms of their charisma and communication skills from leaders of other parties, whether political actors use different styles, strategies, and languages when approaching different media, whether unique communication strategies and tactics distinguish populist actors from mainstream parties, and whether there are any systematic differences between the style of language used by mainstream and populist parties.

What research there is focuses overwhelmingly on the Sweden Democrats, and the main focus of this research is not on their communication strategies, tactics, or style per se, but rather on the content therein. Norocel (2013), for example, investigates op-eds written by the party leader, Jimmie Akesson, in the party's own newspaper. From a feminist perspective, the analysis focuses on how Akesson discursively constructs the metaphor of Sweden as the "people's home"—an important national metaphor with roots in the 1910s and 1920s, and historically used by the Social Democrats (see also Hellström, 2010; Widfeldt, 2008). Studies investigate the ideological positioning of the Sweden Democrats, both in general and with respect to immigration (Boréus, 2013; Hellström & Jungar, 2012; Hellström, Nilsson, & Stoltz, 2012; Hervik, 2014). Boréus (2010), for example, investigates anti-immigration and anti-immigrant stances expressed by the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party, and whether other parties adopted a dismissive, accommodative, or adversarial strategy when confronted with their rhetoric, in election campaigns in 1994 and 2006–2007. Another example is Hellström and Nilsson (2010), who investigate the ideological positioning of the Sweden Democrats in the public debate in 2006–2007. This analysis reveals several recurring rhetorical figures of speech: "Sweden belongs to the Swedes," "We are the true Social Democrats," "We are the democratic victims," and "We are the true democrats." The latter two are opposed to "them"—the political and mainstream media elites—and are a clear expressions of anti-elitist populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). However, the analysis does not reveal how frequently these rhetorical figures are used. The same holds true for a study that investigates nationalist claims by the Sweden Democrats, finding that such claims are common but without quantifying how common (Hellström, Nilsson, & Stoltz, 2012).

The main exception to the virtually nonexistent research on populist actors as communicators is a study by Hellström (2013) investigating appeals to the people in the Swedish political debate. More specifically, it investigates how New Democracy in the 1990s and the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats in the 2000s used the rhetorical figure "the reality people" to appeal to the people and to position themselves as part of the people versus the elites. For Hellström (2013) this approach can be perceived as a form of "banal populism" that is based on a moral division between the people and the elite, appealing to the people in the everyday political competition of the vote (p. 12). The study discusses communication style, albeit not systematically, noting that although the leaders of New Democracy could be perceived as charismatic and use a populist communication style, the same could not be said of the Christian Democrats or the Sweden Democrats. The conclusion is that while all parties make use of the rhetorical figure "the reality people," they do it in different ways. New Democracy referred to "the reality people" to sustain its anti-establishment position, the Christian Democrats did it to justify a broader ideological transformation, and the Sweden Democrats did it to "move from the extreme to the mainstream in Swedish politics"

(Hellström, 2013, p. 21). The analysis, however, does not reveal how frequently this rhetorical figure—or, indeed, any other appeal to the people—is used or was used in the past.

To conclude, the research on populist actors as communicators is overall limited, and what research there is mainly focuses on content and ideological positioning rather than communication strategies or styles, and it is mainly qualitative and discursive. Hence, there is no research on how frequently different populist appeals are occurring. Apart from this observation, it should be noted that there is a general consensus in Sweden that the Internet and social media have been and continue to be important for right-wing populists, including the Sweden Democrats. While we share this view, systematic empirical evidence is thus far lacking on how populists, in general, and the Sweden Democrats, in particular, use digital media to pursue their goals.

The Media and Populism
Compared to research on populist actors as communicators, there is more systematic research on media and populism in Sweden, although it focuses almost exclusively on the Sweden Democrats rather than on political populism in general. The most extensive study, by Bevelander and Hellström (2011), investigates the media coverage in six leading newspapers and opinion polls of the Sweden Democrats between the elections in 2006 and 2010. Seeking to answer whether the media coverage during this time period affected the poll numbers and election results, the study shows how the Sweden Democrats became more and more visible over time and that the party was more visible in the media over the entire time period than several parties in parliament (e.g., the Center Party and the Christian Democrats) or even in government. The study found that the amount of media coverage had a positive effect on the Sweden Democrats' poll numbers, in contrast to the poll numbers for other parties. The effect was strongest for the leading morning newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*. Although much of the coverage was negative, it nonetheless benefited the Sweden Democrats. The positive effect of increased visibility thus appears to have trumped the negative effect of the tone of the coverage.

What this and other research (Oja & Mral, 2013) suggests is that a shift in the debate about, and in the coverage of, the Sweden Democrats occurred around the time of the 2006 election. Gradually, the earlier cordon sanitaire gave way to more extensive coverage, and as the coverage of the Sweden Democrats increased, their poll numbers went up, suggesting that they had passed a threshold of electoral relevance.

This interpretation is corroborated by research on how major Swedish media cover election campaigns. During the 2006 election campaign, there were quite few news stories dealing with the Sweden Democrats. During the month before Election Day, the party was the main actor of less than one percent of news stories (Asp, 2006). In this election, they nevertheless won close to three percent of the vote. The situation was different during the 2010 election campaign. According to one study, the Sweden Democrats party was the third most visible party (Asp, 2011), while another study shows that it was the fifth most visible party. The latter study also found, however, that in terms of the share of news stories where different parties were the *dominant* party, the Sweden Democrats came in third (Strömbäck, 2013). Comparing the election news coverage in 2006 and 2010, the Sweden Democrats became much more visible in the media, and in 2010, more visible than most of the parties with seats in parliament. One reason why the Sweden Democrats received so much coverage was the prospect of the party winning parliamentary representation. In addition, a dominant question

was what the government would do if neither the left nor the right bloc won a majority (Asp, 2011; Strömbäck, 2013). Furthermore, in this situation, how would the government deal with the Sweden Democrats?

What these results suggest is that much of the coverage of the Sweden Democrats was driven by the framing of politics as a strategic game and by media logic, which includes storytelling techniques such as personalization, negativism, and simplification, less space for serious issues, and more space for the drama of politics. Following Mazzoleni (2008, 2014), one aspect of mediatization (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014) is its encouragement of media populism, which might facilitate and be conducive to political populism (see also Plasser & Ulram, 2003). Along the same lines, a theoretical analysis by Andersson (2010) discusses the relationship between populism and journalism at three levels: populism as an invective, as news criteria, and as news ideology. One of his conclusions is that media logic might be conducive to political populism. In essence, to the extent that populists can frame messages so that they fit storytelling techniques following media logic (simplification, personalization, polarization, etc.), it might be difficult for media to resist covering them, even though the coverage might be negative. According to the author, whether this coverage is "positive or negative is without importance in this context, since all coverage is likely to benefit populism" (Andersson, 2010, p. 284).

Apart from these conclusions, there is no *systematic* knowledge in the Swedish case on how populist actors and their communicative strategies resonate with journalistic media, on the typical content features of media discourse on populism, on how individual media outlets deal with populist discourse, on the reasons for differences between types of media and media outlets, on how populist actors and communications resonate in non-journalistic media, or on whether there is a decoupling of online versus offline and journalistic versus citizen discourse due to the presence of populist actors and communications.

It is important to note the word *systematic*. As noted above, there is a general consensus and many indications that the Sweden Democrats and other right-wing groups have been successful in building and maintaining a digital infrastructure, with several blogs or "alternative" online newspapers, and that they are very active in using social media and commenting on news websites and other online forums. An examination of the most prominent right-wing extremist webpages shows a high level of activity and that digital media is key for these groups to connect and mobilize (Swedish Media Council, 2013). How much of this activity should be considered "populism," even in its more radical right form, is a question that can only be settled after further discussion and systematic research. In essence, we have little doubt that digital media are important for Swedish populist actors, in general, and radical right populist groups, in particular, not least because digital media offer a platform for groups that have a hard time reaching out through mainstream media or that distrust them. Whatever the case, more systematic research is required.

Citizens and Populism
Turning to research on citizens and populism in Sweden, some of the demand-side explanations for successful populist mobilization have been addressed above. In this section, we will cover research concerning the voters: who they are, why they vote for the Sweden Democrats, and whether the Sweden Democrats' supporters are similar to other European populist radical right voters.

The Sweden Democrats' voters and supporters are more often male than female, have a lower education than the national average, live in small cities or urban areas, and tend to be employed in the private sector (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2011; Sannerstedt, 2008, 2010). As is the case regarding most European radical right parties, voting for the Sweden Democrats has been particularly prevalent among working-class voters. In 2009, roughly two-thirds of the Sweden Democrats' votes came from people in the working class, especially from those with "lower technical" and "lower sales and service" jobs (Oleskog Tryggvason & Oscarsson, 2014; Oskarson & Demker, 2012). In 2010, this overrepresentation diminished somewhat, but the working class remains the group most strongly supporting the Sweden Democrats. The supporters have higher scores on political distrust and on the authoritarian dimension, which are significant predictors of support for the Sweden Democrats (Oskarson & Demker, 2015). In the national election of 2014, the new Sweden Democrats' voters mainly came from the conservative Moderate Party, followed by the social democratic party (Berg & Oscarsson 2014; Oleskog Tryggvason, 2014).

It has been proposed that voters living *close* to immigrant-dense areas are more likely to support the Sweden Democrats, but in the Swedish case, the results are mixed. Instead, the socio-economic marginalization hypothesis appears to have the largest significant effect on support for the Sweden Democrats (Rydgren & Ruth, 2013).

The most important explanation for voting for the Sweden Democrats party is its anti-immigration policy, as is the case for other European populist radical right parties. The Sweden Democrats party is a niche party in the Swedish party system, offering a unique position on immigration and European integration. The issue-congruence between the Sweden Democrats (and other European PRR parties) and their voters is high, both regarding immigration and EU membership (Jungar, 2015a).

Rising levels of anti-immigration sentiments, however, cannot explain the breakthrough and electoral growth. Many surveys have in fact shown increasingly positive attitudes toward immigration, which is argued to be one of the reasons why populist messages, mainly from the Sweden Democrats, were not successful earlier and why citizens used to be considered as less susceptible to such messages (Hellström, 2010; Jungar, 2010; Rydgren, 2010; Widfeldt, 2010). Some earlier studies thus conclude that the Sweden Democrats would have more of an uphill battle to gain legitimacy compared to Denmark, where citizens' demands for more restrictive immigration policies had paved the way for the Danish People's Party (Jensen & Frolund Thomsen, 2013; Widfeldt, 2010).

At the same time, however, some studies argue that there is an electoral demand for more restrictive policies among Swedish citizens (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013a; Rydgren, 2002b) but that actions taken against the Sweden Democrats by the established parties (e.g., not cooperating with the party, not adding legitimacy to its description of reality, politicizing the immigrant issue) is the main reason that this dimension used to be unsuccessful in Sweden (Loxbo, 2008). Earlier research also concludes that the Sweden Democrats party was unsuccessful because the socioeconomic leftright dimension was (and still is) especially strong in Swedish politics and that Swedish parties have not converged on that dimension as much as parties in other countries where this dimension had a less dominant role (Rydgren, 2002b).

Most research to date focuses on elections when the Sweden Democrats party was a minor party. There is still only little research covering the most recent election. Conclusions

regarding citizens and populism in Sweden might thus have to be revised while the most recent developments are taken into account. It should also be noted that none of the studies mentioned deals directly with how susceptible citizens are to populist communication, but rather, they discuss it indirectly by talking about populism, in general, and about voting for the Sweden Democrats, in particular.

Summary and Recent Developments
Our overall assessment after reviewing Swedish research on political populism is that very little research deals systematically with populist political actors as communicators or with the media and populism. There is also very little research on citizens and populism in general, beyond the case of supporting or voting for the Sweden Democrats. There are a number of publications, and scholarly interest in political populism is on the rise, but systematic, empirical research on populist political communication and the media is lacking in both breadth and depth.

One key reason is that only recently, the only party widely considered as populist, the Sweden Democrats, has started to gain electoral success and significance. Based on that success and the outcome of the 2014 election, we expect scholarly interest and systematic research on various aspects of political populism to increase significantly over the next few years. One area would be the role of the media in covering and legitimizing the Sweden Democrats, and the party's framing of immigration and its consequences. The recent success of the Sweden Democrats, as well as the societal debate on how to understand and interpret this success, will in all likelihood have a major impact on the scholarly agenda.

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