Talking About a Revolution: Or Why (Most of) the West Did Not Extend the Franchise

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Introduction

Did the threat of revolution force elites in the West to extend the franchise? A number of economists and political scientists believe that it did (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Aidt and Jensen 2011; Conley and Temimi 2001; Przeworski 2008). For economists, the credible threat of violence provides a compelling solution to the puzzle of why the rich would ever peacefully agree to increases in taxation and redistribution that follow from suffrage extension (Meltzer and Richard 1981). For political scientists, works such as Boix’s (2003) framing of democratization as a high-stakes game between social classes echoes Dahl’s (1971) classic formulation of democratization as the result of the costs of suppression exceeding the costs of toleration. One could of course trace the basic idea back further: Marx, Machiavelli, and Aristotle all recognized that leaders were unwilling to make democratic concessions without the serious threat of revolt. The prima facie plausibility of the “threat of revolution” hypothesis also renders it an appealing explanation for other types of political outcomes, such as the creation of social insurance (Kim 2007).

Support for the “threat of revolution” hypothesis has thus far come primarily in quantitative form. Przeworski (2008) uses Banks’ data on riots and strikes and his own dataset on suffrage extensions, though the fact that Banks’ data begins after WWI means that he is forced to exclude most cases of franchise extension in Europe from his analysis. Kim also uses strikes as a proxy for revolution, but his use of data from Flora, Kraus, and Pfenning (1987) allows him to begin in 1880 and thus include cases from Western Europe. Aidt and Jensen (2011), by contrast, argue that riots are a poor indicator for revolutionary threat and instead use actual (as opposed to
threatened) revolutions elsewhere, claiming that “revolutionary events abroad represent exogenous shocks to the information set of the elites in other countries and may, through that channel, be a trigger of suffrage reform (5).”

In terms of qualitative evidence, existing studies rely on a combination of secondary sources and quotes from elites to demonstrate that a revolutionary threat caused franchise reform. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), for example, claim that the “consensus among historians is that the motive for the 1832 reform [in Great Britain] was to avoid social disturbances (3).” Both they and other authors make use of Goran Therborn’s “The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy” for evidence of revolutionary threat in sixteen states in the West. Przeworski draws on wider array of secondary sources than most of the authors, but prefers to rely on the words of the actors themselves. “The strongest evidence in favour of the argument that suffrage was extended to the poor under the threat of revolution,” he writes, comes “not from the events themselves but from voices of the historical protagonists.” “These voices were often so explicit,” he claims, “that one does not need to impute the motivations (310).”

It is far from clear, however, why one should take such statements at face value. There are a host of reasons why elites would knowingly exaggerate the threat of unrest, the most important being that it added an additional argument to a policy that they supported for other goals. Invoking the threat of mass social unrest is also a classic rhetorical strategy that both proponents and opponents of democratization have used across time and space (Hirshman 1991). Thus while elites may talk a lot about revolution during periods of institutional change, there are good reasons for making a serious effort to place their claims in historical context.
When one does so, it becomes clear that the threat of revolution was at best a minor factor in the story of franchise extension in the West. While several studies have attempted to displace the “threat of revolution” hypothesis by arguing that elites extended the franchise to provide more public goods (Lizzeri and Persico 2004) or to favor specific economic sectors (Llavador and Oxoby 2005), there have been no attempts to refute the hypothesis directly. Given that Acemoglu and Robinson’s 2000 article titled “Why Did the West Extend the Franchise? Democracy, Inequality, and Growth in Historical Perspective” has been cited over one thousand times, the failure to examine the historical accuracy of their core claim is striking. In the sixteen Western countries that I analyze (which are the same sixteen as Therborns’ 1978 article (minus Japan), I find that the fear of revolution offers an unambiguous account of franchise extension in only two cases: Denmark in 1849 and Sweden in 1918. In several other cases—Great Britain in 1832, Belgium in 1893, and Australia (Victoria Province) in 1857—one can plausibly argue that the threat of revolution mattered if one relies solely on a particular strand of historiography. But these cases are ambiguous enough that one can also claim that the threat of revolution was either irrelevant or a secondary factor in them. In the rest of major cases of franchise expansion, the threat of revolution played little to no role.

In the first part of the paper, I focus on those countries that would appear to be the best fit for the “threat of revolution” hypothesis: Great Britain (focusing on the 1832 reform), Belgium, Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia. With the exception of Australia, these are the cases that proponents of the threat of revolution hypothesis use as illustrative examples. I argue that the “historical consensus” that Acemoglu and Robinson claim in regards to the First Reform in Britain does not exist, and that when one takes a deeper look at the historiography of the event a basic division exists among supporters and detractors of the “threat of revolution” argument.
Perhaps more importantly, by looking more closely at the timing of events I argue that at best the “threat of revolution” explanation could explain why a small subsection of the elite changed their opinion on the suffrage question. In the Belgian case, I concur that mass protest did play a large role in the suffrage extension of 1893, but that at least three other periods of mass strikes did not lead to similar expansions. This was primarily because elites correctly perceived the Belgian Socialist party as among the least revolutionary parties in Western Europe, and thus did not consider the threat of revolution to be credible. Turning to Sweden, I do not dispute that fear of revolution explains the franchise extension of 1918, but I claim that 1906 has been falsely coded as a similar case when it is better understood as one of elite competition. I find no evidence that franchise extension in New Zealand, which Przeworski and Therborn mention in passing, had anything to do with the fear of revolution. Australia, as noted above, is a mixed-case at best.

The rest of the paper looks at the other cases. Three of them (France, Germany, and Switzerland) are countries in which an actual revolution or a civil war occurred and suffrage was extended as a result of this event, not because of a fear of it. A further three (Austria, Finland, and Norway) have been linked to the “threat of revolution” hypothesis, but on closer examination it was not class-based unrest that led to franchise reform but rather nationalist agitation in the context of declining empires. The final four cases (Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States) are ones that no scholar to my knowledge has used as illustrative examples for the “threat of revolution” hypothesis, nor is there any historical evidence to support that view.

Before turning to the cases, five caveats are in order. First, I limit my analysis to cases of franchise extension for white males and thus do not consider cases of suffrage for females or for ethnic minorities. Since the threat of revolution hypothesis is explicitly rooted in class analysis, it
would be unfair to introduce other variations of franchise extension to challenge it. Second, and as proponents of the threat of revolution hypothesis have emphasized, franchise extension does not mean democratization: franchise extensions can be extremely limited in scope, can include safeguards for the upper-classes such as plural voting, and can have little effect on whether parliament actually has any political power. Third, I do not consider every single case of franchise extension in the sixteen countries but instead focus on the major ones. If anything, this decision stacks the decks in favor of the threat of revolution hypothesis since none of the minor reforms have, to my knowledge, been cast as responses to threats of social unrest. Fourth, I have made every effort to consult as many secondary historical sources in English as I was able to find for each case (including the ones that threat of revolution proponents cite in their own work), but I make no claim that my search was exhaustive. My strategy was simply to go beyond schematic histories and selective quotations as sources of evidence to show that the threat of revolution hypothesis does not receive much historical support. I leave it for the reader to judge if the evidence is sufficient to reach that conclusion. Fifth, I do not develop a new explanation for the pattern of franchise extensions in the West, and this article is thus more an exercise in theory demolition than in theory construction. Yet given the massive influence the “threat of revolution” hypothesis has had upon the literature on democratization, it is crucial, as recent works have argued, to “take history seriously” to strengthen future work in this important area (Ahmed 2010; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Kreuzer 2010).

1 While I did not consult non-English sources directly, I should note that none of the material I analyzed made reference to any non-English work that provided strong support for the threat of revolution hypothesis.

2 It should be emphasized that this article challenges only one element of Acemoglu and Robinson’s broader argument in their influential 2006 book, and I make no claim to evaluate the other components of their rich theory here.
Reconsidering Cases of Revolutionary Threat

I begin by reconsidering those cases that are used as paradigmatic examples for the threat of revolution hypothesis. Since the First Reform Act of 1832 in Great Britain has received by far the most attention, I concentrate on it.

Great Britain

“The Principal of my Reform is to prevent the necessity of revolution. I am reforming to preserve, not to overthrow.’

-Lord Grey (in a parliamentary debate on the First Reform Act)

Przeworski (2008) claims that the historical evidence marshaled to support theories of suffrage extension shares “an obsessive focus on the English reform of 1832.” While he is correct in noting that many works—including his own—quote Grey and refer to the First Reform Act, none have really engaged the historiography of the period. Acemoglu and Robinson (2000; 2006), for example, rely heavily on two sources that are basic histories of British politics that cover a century (Lee 1994) and a century and a half (Lange 1999). To these sources they add the work of a Whig historian (Darvall 1934) and Asa Brigg’s 1959 The Age of Improvement to claim that “the consensus among historians is that the motive for the 1832 reform was to avoid social disturbances 2006: 3).”

But does this conclusion hold when one examines works that analyze the 1832 reform more closely than these general histories? There are, to be sure, several studies that argue that the “threat of revolution” was the decisive factor in the First Reform Act (Royle 2000; Thomis and Holt 1977). Yet there are enough significant departures from this line of argument to undercut
any claims of a historical consensus (Brock 1973; Fraser 1970; Hamburger 1963; LoPatin 1999). Moreover, when one looks at the sequencing of events and the behavior of particular actors, it is far from clear that the threat of revolution was as important as Acemoglu and Robinson and others claim.

Historians do agree that it was universally expected that the Whig government of 1830 would introduce some sort of Reform bill. Leading Whig politicians—including of course Lord Grey—had favored electoral reform for decades, and there were several reasons why the moment seemed opportune in 1831, First, the death of King George IV and the succession of William IV eliminated a staunch opponent of any reform and replaced him with a monarch with Whig sympathies. Second, disunity among the Tories gave Whig reformers an opening. This disunity was in part a product of a third factor: The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 that allowed Catholics to enter parliament. A number of ultra-tories became supporters of expanding the franchise because they considered the “anti-popery” of the public to constitute a check on Catholic influence. But the Catholic Relief Act had an even greater influence on electoral reform by destroying “the mystique of an unalterable, Protestant constitution (Brock 57).” A fourth factor was the rising cost of buying elections in many of the rotten boroughs. Some landed elites found that they were no longer able to outspend their middle-class challengers under the prevailing system and considered electoral reform to be in their interests.

During the first reading of the Reform Bill in the House of Commons, Grey made his oft-quoted statement about reforming to prevent revolution. It should be noted that this was a well-worn justification for franchise expansion among Whigs, and that fear of revolution was a part of Victorian political culture (Houghton 1970: 54-58). As Hamburger argues, however, it was far from clear that Grey was referring to an imminent revolution: “the Whigs…were mainly
concerned about the possibility of a revolution in the future—not in 1831 but in, say, 1851—or as it turned out, in 1842 and 1848. They thought the present unrest was under control for the time being, and that it would subside with the passing of the Reform Bill (37).” The opposition Tories, for their part, also invoked the specter of revolution, but for them it was the passing of the Reform Bill that would constitute the overthrow of the social order. While there was much talk of revolution in the parliamentary debate, there were few signs that the public was preparing for one. Two prominent reformers (O’Connell and Russell) lamented that “the country was in a state of perfect tranquility” in the Spring of 1830 (Brock 77). The French Revolution in May of that year also failed to create a sense of fear that would buttress either the Whig argument for reform or the Tory argument against it. As Brock argues, the Tory’s had tried to use the “good fright” argument too many times: “It was by now very well known to the progressives. They had suffered much from its application over the years. Tory governments had cried wolf too often. Their opponents could easily represent these cries as false alarms, designed to whip the doubtful into line (127).”

The second reading of the Reform Bill passed the Commons by a vote of 302 to 301, but an attempt to thwart it at the committee stage led the King to dissolve parliament and to call new elections. This amounted to a public referendum on the Reform Bill and constituted the first “single issue” campaign in English politics. It is worth pausing to consider whether the King would have consented to such a campaign, or that either the Whigs or Tories would have maneuvered themselves into one, had they been genuinely concerned about revolution. Given that elections were well-known to be violent affairs (Jennings 1960), one could have not have imagined a better revolutionary spark. Yet there is little evidence that anyone thought along these lines, suggesting that many parliamentarians did not believe the “rhetoric of menace”
(Hamburger 1963) they themselves employed in the House of Commons. In fact, Grey counseled the King that the political unions, analyzed in more detail below, that were championing reform did not constitute a revolutionary threat: “The excitement which now exists is directed to what, I think, is a safe and legitimate object. In the event of a dissolution, it would act in support of the King and Government (quoted in Briggs 2000: 215).”

The elections demonstrated the overwhelming popularity of the reform and gave the Whigs a strong mandate. According to Brock, at this point “every MP with constituents knew that a vote against the Bill meant expense at the next election whenever it came, and perhaps a risk of being unseated (171).” The barely modified Reform Bill passed the Commons with a vote of 345 to 236 and was sent to the House of Lords, which proceeded to reject it on October 8, 1831 by a vote of 199 to 158. The fear of social unrest was apparently not great enough at this point to convince a majority of peers of the upper house to support expansion of the franchise. Brock summarizes the contrasting incentives of elected MPs of the lower house with the unelected peers:

The election might have shown that it was unwise for MPs to defy the government. A peer was more happily placed for a display of independence. Alarm at Reform mobs had little effect except among those noblemen whose country seats lay near great towns. Many opposition and doubtful peers regarded the possibility of disorder if the Bill were rejected as a bogey raised by the government. Moreover the fear of being thought afraid was even more powerful among the peers than in the Commons. Their principles forbade them to yield to threat, especially to threats in which they did not believe. The government's
attempts to show that the king would allow a large creation were unconvincing; and no other threat counted (232-33).

The rejection of the Bill by the House of Lords set off a series of disturbances, and it is from this point forward that the proponents of the revolutionary threat theory marshal the majority of their evidence. According to this view, a series of riots in Derby, Nottingham, and, most significantly, in Bristol allowed the reformers to argue that the country was in fact on the verge of revolution. The supposed participation of the Political Unions in these disturbances, coupled with signs that the largest of these unions—the Birmingham Political Union (BPU)—was adopting a military structure and arming itself meant that the revolutionary threat was no emanating from “ill-organised working-class groups” but from a “well-organised middle-class group (Thomis and Holt 1977: 89).”

The Political Unions clearly arose to pressure the government toward electoral reform and in this sense heralded the arrival of mass politics in Great Britain. Yet neither of the two major studies that examine them in detail finds them to be revolutionary (Flick 1979; LoPatin 1999). In contrast, leaders of the groups made every effort to distance themselves from revolutionary rhetoric and excluded potential troublemakers from membership. They repeatedly professed their loyalty to the King. Critically, those responsible for monitoring internal security did not regard the Unions as dangerous. As LoPatin documents, reports from the Home Office reveal that it was not overly concerned about either the Nottingham or Derby riots. The more tumultuous riots in Bristol also did not provoke undue alarm: “The government looked at the events in Bristol and saw that the Political Unions were responsible and level-headed, not revolutionary (100).” If anything, it was the enemies of reform (the Tories) that tried to use the disturbances to their advantage and warn that the reform push had ignited a revolutionary
situation. Hamburger (1963) also analyzes Home Office reports and similarly concludes that “the government’s confidence that it could control the disorder and it calm evaluation of its significance contrasts sharply with the frightened and alarmist statements made by some Tory politicians (237).” The combination of Home Office reports and assurances from Lord Grey alleviated the William IV’s about Bristol (LoPatin 101). The government took the precautionary step of issuing the Proclamation against Political Unions on November 21, 1831, but neither the government nor local officials did anything to implement them. By this point, the BPU had completely backed away from whatever paramilitary aspirations it had and public agitation appeared to have died down considerably by December 1831.

It was at this point, in January 1832, that William IV made a critical decision: he would not object to the creation of peers in the House of Lords to assure the passage of the Reform Bill. The King’s hesitancy in the past had signaled to peers that the threat was not credible, but on this occasion his support for the measure to overcome the crisis spread quickly (Brock 269). When the Bill was brought again to the House of Lords on April 13, 1832, thirty nine peers either reversed their vote or abstained, allowing the Bill to pass by a vote of 184 to 175. But as the closeness of the vote suggests, the fear of revolution was not considerable enough to convince close to half of the peers of the necessity of reform. Moreover, a move by diehard opponents of the Bill to effectively block it through postponement succeeded in the House of Lords by a vote of 151 to 116 on May 7, 1832.

The May Crisis of 1832 marked the second, and more serious, crest of revolutionary threat following the riots of the previous October. When Grey’s government resigned, William IV called on Lord Wellington of the Tories to form a government to carry through the Reform Bill. But they failed, and for several tense days the constitutional crisis was accompanied by
massive public protests, banking runs, and apparent preparations for armed resistance by Attwood’s BPU and Francis Place’s group in London. According to Thomis and Holt, “the plan was for revolution, however respectable its organisers, however determined they were that a revolutionary seizure of power should not precipitate social revolution in Great Britain (92-3).”

But there is alternative reading of the May Crisis as something far short of this. As Brock writes, “there was a touch of comic opera about Attwood’s army…Its chances against regular troops would have been poor. It was not intended for fighting regulars, still less for defeating them. Its function was to put Wellington in the position where he must give the order to fire on the reformers or concede defeat (309).” According to Fraser, popular agitation once again had little influence on the opponents of reform in the upper house: “what persuaded the Lords was not the public commotion of eighteen months’ duration but the threat of the creation of peers. Only when they were given the ‘alternative of the Reform Bill with an addition to the Peerage, or the reform Bill without it’ did the Bill pass.” This is precisely what occurred on May 20 when the King’s Secretary Sir Herbert Taylor sent a note to the diehard opponents of reform clearly signaling the new peers would not be created if opposition was dropped (Briggs 223). When the Bill was read again on June 4, it passed by a vote of 106 for and only 22 against.

“In May 1832,” writes Fraser, “a popular myth was born which was to dominate extra-Parliamentary politics for a generation (46).” Place himself did much to encourage the view that the threat of revolution forced the Lords to back down: “much of the available information about the crisis comes from the archive to which Francis Place devoted his declining years. In it his own power and prescience receive the fullest recognition (Brock: 296).” It is probably impossible to quantify exactly how many minds the May Days—as opposed to the expansion of peerage--changed the minds the Lords and how much it pushed the Whigs to carry on with the
Bill when it looked defeated. Hamburger, who can be read as a partial advocate of the threat of revolution hypothesis, offers the following assessment of the Whigs: “it would be difficult to assume that the alleged threat of revolution had no role in shaping the determination of at least marginal supporters who had no strong convictions prompting them to support the Bill (276).”

My purpose in examining the historiography of the 1832 reform Bill has not been to resolve a historical controversy, but merely to show the absence of a consensus on the degree to which a revolutionary situation pertained in Britain and, more importantly, on the degree to which elites perceived a threat and allowed it to influence their calculations. There were many factors without which the reform bill would not have passed: an electoral mandate for reform, the threat of creating peers and diluting the institution of the House of Lords, and a general recognition that some sort of reform was needed both to deal with the widely acknowledged problem of electoral corruption and to give some voice to a rising middle class. Even if one believes that the threat of revolution was critical—and in my own view it was not—it would clearly not have led to the expansion of the franchise without these other factors. Indeed, the failure of the Chartist movement in the 1840s to win universal suffrage suggests that threats alone—and by many accounts the actual threat of revolution in Britain was greater in 1842 and 1848 than in 1832-- were not sufficient to achieve its goals.

The Second Reform Act

Acemoglu and Robinson claim that the threat of violence was also a critical factor in the passing of the Second Reform Act of 1867. Yet in contrast to the 1832 reform, there is really no serious historical debate about the case. As Ansell and Samuels (forthcoming) argue, Acemoglu and Robinson rely on the work of two historians with political motives to substantiate their claim
that “many other historians” agree with their interpretation: both Trevelyan (1937), a Whig historian, and Harrison (1965), a trade unionist and former member of the Communist party, had an interest in exaggerating the public’s influence on political outcomes. The Hyde Park riots that they consider a “catalyst” to the 1867 reform have been dismissed as inconsequential by other historians (Briggs 2000; Cowling 1967; Feuchtwanger 1985; Himmelfarb 1966; Smith 1966). Acemoglu and Robinson again quote Lee in their 2000 article to make their case: “as with the first Reform Act, the threat of violence has been seen as a significant factor in forcing the pace (of the 1867 Reform Act); history was repeating itself (142).” But Lee not only uses Trevelyan and Harrison as well to present this view, but backs away from it later and draws on two other historians—Cowling (1967) and Feuchtwanger (1985)—to undercut it. For what it’s worth, Lee’s own interpretation of the 1867 as “above all, a tactical coup” by Disraeli to catch his opponents off guard is in line with most other interpretations (Lee 141).

Belgium

The Belgian case would appear to be a good fit for the revolutionary threat hypothesis. Marx had referred to the country—particularly the heavily industrialized region of Wallonia, as the “hell of the proletariat,” and militant workers had begun striking with the explicit aim of winning universal suffrage in 1887. These were followed by massive demonstrations in 1890 before the Belgian Socialist party decided to call its first general strike in 1893 to force parliament to grant universal manhood suffrage. The party’s leader Emile Vandervelde proclaimed in front of a crowd outside of parliament that if the chamber “decrees political equality, it will be the army of labour that joyfully re-enters their factories. If they refuse us, we will become the army of the Revolution (Polasky 1992: 453).” Although parliament stopped short of universal suffrage and instituted plural voting to dilute the influence of newly
enfranchised workers, there can be no doubt that the general strike of 1893 forced elites to
reform. Socialists across Europe, such as Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, and Rosa Luxembourg
praised the victory that became an immediate sensation (Polasky 1992: 454).

But 1893 was only one of three general strikes for suffrage expansion, and the only one
that clearly ended in success. The general strike of 1902 (like the miners’ strikes of 1886-87) was
called off after the Belgian state made clear that it would use violence against it (Witte 2009:
102). In fact, it did not take much: the killing of six demonstrators in Louvain by the Civil Guard
led Vandervelde to retreat: “I recognize that it is no longer possible to win democracy by
force…It would be foolhardly to allow our admirable proletariat to be massacred (Polasky 1995:
36).” From this point forward, Vandervelde looked toward an alliance with the liberals as the
most effective means of winning universal suffrage (Polasky 1995: 41). Luxembourg lambasted
the Belgian Socialists for their passivity after 1902, and Karl Kautsky was not even willing to
accuse them of revisionism: “they have nothing to revise, for they have no theory” (Bartolini
2000:86).” For Michels (1911), the behavior of the Belgian socialists conformed to his “iron law
of oligarchy.” When militant workers pushed for another general strike in 1912 for universal
suffrage, Vandervelde tried to prevent it and negotiated with politicians and business leaders to
find a peaceful resolution (Polasky 1995: 48-9). When the strike proceeded anyways,
Vandervelde framed the resolution to set up a parliamentary committee to analyze the question
of universal suffrage as a concession and counseled the demonstrators to be happy with their
“half-victory.” Luxembourg described the 1912 strike as “an even greater defeat than that of
1902 (Polasky 1995: 51).” When universal suffrage finally came to Belgium after WWI, it did so
without demonstrations or the threat of unrest.
The Belgian case is important in two respects. First, it suggests that most attempts to win franchise extension through protests do not work. The 1893 case was exceptional, and once elites had seen that limited uses of force could squash strikes they were less concerned about the threat of revolution. By selecting on the dependent variable—looking for indicators of revolutionary threats after locating franchise extensions--- existing research ignores failed cases and thus massively overstates the degree to which threats work. Second, the nature of the organization that would supposedly be leading any revolution matters in elite threat perception, but this variable has been conspicuously absent from formal models like those in Acemoglu and Robinson. As one of the least revolutionary socialist parties in Europe (at least after 1893), the credibility of the Belgian Socialists in instigating a revolution was not on the same level as, say, the anarcho-syndicalists in Italy or France. Like the Millite radicals that, by their own admission, “said a lot of things that nobody really believed” in the 1832 crisis in Great Britain (Hamburger 1963), Vandervelde talked a lot about a revolution but it is doubtful that many people in power took his rhetoric seriously.

**Sweden**

Acemoglu and Robinson (2000) claim that the Sweden provides two confirming examples of the threat of revolution hypothesis. Relying largely on Tilton (1974), they claim that “the reform of 1909 had been preceded by strikes and demonstrations, and even though Sweden was not a participant in the First World War, the revolution in Russia and the situation in Germany forced the concession of democratic rights (1185).” The 1909 reform granted universal suffrage in the lower house, while the 1918 reform extended it to the upper house.
It is difficult to argue that strikes and demonstrations had much to do with the 1909 reform. As Tilton himself notes, public agitation for universal suffrage had begun in earnest in the 1880s. Luebbert (1988: 70) writes that “franchise reform was the motor force of Swedish liberalism for almost two decades.” According to Lewin, it had come to dominate the parliamentary party system by the mid 1890s (Lewin 1988: 64). When Hjalmar Branting steered the Swedish Socialist party decidedly away from Orthodox Marxism and turned it into one of the most revisionist parties in Western Europe, the Socialists joined the Liberals as ardent supporters of universal suffrage (Berman 2006). According to Sejersted (2011: 139), the Socialists discussed launching a general strike for universal suffrage in 1902 and 1907 but rejected it both times. The strike of 1909 that Acemoglu and Robinson mention “did not have to do with the right to vote” but was sparked by a lockout by the Employers Association (Sejersted 2011: 139).

Moreover, the drive to universal suffrage had begun in earnest in May of 1906 under the conservative prime minister Arvid Lindman who saw that an increasing number of workers were passing the existing property qualification to vote. Lewin summarizes Lindman’s arguments to his fellow conservatives:

What was necessary, Lindman argued, was to find some aspect of the suffrage issues that would split the growing Left. It could not be assumed that demands for universal manhood suffrage would continue to be defeated in Parliament. There were now too many people who supported such a reform. Sweden would soon be the only country in Europe that did not allow all adult men to vote. No, the introduction of universal manhood
suffrage was certainly unavoidable. But could this process take place in a way less harmful to the Conservatives than by embracing the suffrage ideas of the Left? If such a solution could be found, it was better to act now, while the Conservatives were in government and could direct the political game. If this opportunity were squandered, the Left would soon get the chance to implement its suffrage program (Lewin 1988: 70).

Lindman’s solution—one that had been suggested by conservatives as early as the 1890s—was to change the electoral system from majority elections to proportional representation while simultaneously introducing universal manhood suffrage. The complex machinations are recounted in detail in Lewin (69-86), but suffice to say that the maneuver worked. Collier, although she incorrectly describes the aborted strike of 1902 as a push toward universal suffrage, and Luebbert both reach the same conclusion as Lewin (Collier 1997: 84; Luebbert 1988: 70-72, 126-32). There is thus no historical consensus that the threat of revolution had anything to do with the reform of 1909.

By contrast, the Reform of 1918 is perhaps the clearest case of the perceptions of a revolutionary threat leading to franchise expansion. A combination of food scarcity, the creation of labor councils and soldier councils along the Soviet model, the civil war in Finland, and threats by the Social Democratic leader Branting convinced the King and the conservatives that there was no alternative to full democratization. Sejersted agrees with the consensus view, even while pointing out that “it is doubtful there was a real revolutionary threat in 1917” and that “it has also been debated whether there was a real revolutionary threat in December 1918 as a
response to the revolutionary situation in Germany and in relation to the voting rights reform (142-143).” But this is not enough evidence to overturn Acemoglu and Robinson’s coding of the Reform of 1918 as a reaction to a revolutionary threat.

**Denmark**

The advent of universal suffrage in Denmark in 1848 also fits the “threat of revolution” theory. Stimulated by the Revolutions in France and Germany, liberal leaders organized mass meetings that culminated in a march to the square of Christiansborg Palace to demand the removal of ministers. They were shocked to find that the king had already acceded to their demands, and the 1849 Constitution created a parliament elected by universal suffrage that ruled together with the monarch. It is worth noting, however, that the 1866 Constitution included a restriction of the suffrage and that universal suffrage was not achieved again until 1915. The threat of revolution was not a factor in this final step in Danish democratization.

**New Zealand**

New Zealand is included in this section since it is cited by Prezeworski (2008) as a case where “massive strikes or demonstrations preceded the extension of suffrage (310).” Prezeworski cites Therborn (1978), who writes that “a sort of male democracy was instituted in 1889 by a rather conservative government in the wake of left-Liberal and Labour agitation,” to justify his coding. Yet Therborn, and by extension Preworski, are incorrect. Universal manhood suffrage was achieved in a series of electoral reforms between 1879 and 1881 and public agitation played little role in the outcome (Atkinson 2003: 60-71). The year 1889 marked the abolition of plural voting, but there is no evidence that this occurred as a result of massive strikes or demonstrations. The only major strike around this time period was the maritime strike of 1890,
but this was an industrial dispute that had spread from Australia and had nothing to do with domestic politics (Roth 1973: 14-15). Moreover, “in both countries the strikes failed miserably (Sinclair 1959: 169).” Given the timing of suffrage extensions, and given the fact that New Zealand has never faced the threat of revolution, civil war, or even destabilizing disturbances since the Maori wars, the case provides no support for the revolutionary threat theory.

**Australia**

Australia, on the other hand, would appear a better fit for the theory despite the fact that is has not been used as an illustrative example. On December 3, 1854, a group of miners from the Ballarat goldfields in the colony of Victoria refused to pay licensing fees without representation and girded themselves for an armed conflict with the colonial forces. A fifteen minute attack on the Eureka Stockade left around 30 miners dead and crushed the uprising, but massive protests followed and pushed the government to accede to the miners’ demands which, under the influence of Chartism, included the vote. Fearing that the enfranchised miners—who could vote in any electoral district they chose—would overwhelm local residents, the government of Victoria instituted universal suffrage in 1857. The other colonies followed suit over the next decade. Given this sequence of events, it is not surprising that politicians, particularly those on the left, and historians have claimed that “Australian democracy was born at Eureka” and that it has become a seminal episode in Australia’s historical memory (Pickering 2003: 69).

Yet there have been many serious critiques of this interpretation, and the significance of Eureka has been debated from the very moment the miners were crushed (Beggs Sunter 2012).
Hirst, for example, argued that a gold-rush inflation meant that property qualifications for the franchise had become almost worthless, which meant that granting full manhood suffrage was “scarcely a radical measure (Hirst 2002: 55).” Hirst (2008) and Ward (1976) also make the case that democratic concessions had much less to do with domestic agitation than it did with governing liberals in Britain. Serle (1963) also doubts that the Eureka rebellion was decisive, and doubts that the miners were concerned about democracy in the first place. In a short piece written on the 150 anniversary of Eureka titled “The Unromantic Truth About Eureka,” historian Robert Murray notes that much of the impetus toward democratization had come before Eureka, a view that accords with earlier interpretations (Normington-Rawling 1963).

There is thus no historical consensus about the significance of the Eureka uprising, much less whether the threat of domestic unrest was decisive in the move to universal suffrage. As the author of one recent work laments, “the dominant approaches to this history date back a number of decades; they either proudly insist on the centrality of the diggers or claim cynically that it was the most accidental and inglorious affair (Scalmer 2011: 355).” Even if one accepts the view that Eureka led directly to universal suffrage, it is not clear that the government considered agitation among miners to constitute a credible revolutionary threat, particularly given the ease with which they put down the rebellion. According to British historian Paul Johnson, “It is a reflection of Australia’s happy and largely uneventful history that this picturesque but trivial episode, which would have gone unrecorded in the history of less fortunate lands, has to be raised to the status of a major event (Miller: Eureka Tradition).”

Revolutions, Civil Wars, and Franchise Extensions
Revolutions led to franchise extensions in France, Germany (twice), and Switzerland. In each of these three cases elites either failed to defuse a revolutionary situation through democratic concessions, or the new regime made the changes that the previous one would not. Although A&R use Germany in 1918-19 as an illustrative example for their theory, a closer look suggests otherwise.

France

As Jonathan Sperber notes, “the outbreak of revolution in 1848 and its rapid spread throughout the continent was anything but a surprise (Sperber 2004: 116).” Several years of economic crisis beginning in 1845 and the push for universal manhood suffrage through nationwide banquet campaigns from July 1847 had created an explosive situation by February 1848. Alexis de Tocqueville famously warned the government to expand the franchise to avoid a potential revolution, but he was ignored. When the government outlawed public banquets, the crowds in Paris erected barricades and the revolution had begun. Universal suffrage thus came as the result of a revolution, not the threat of one.

Switzerland

The Swiss case, while complicated by extreme variations in the timing of franchise extensions at the cantonal level, is straightforward in the sense that universal suffrage was established at the national level in 1848 following the Swiss Civil War (Sonderbund War). The victorious Protestant cantons imposed their preferred constitution by force on the conservative, Catholic ones that had rejected political efforts at centralization and democratization during the previous two decades.
Germany

Universal suffrage first came to Germany in 1849 following the Revolution of 1848. It was reversed during the period of reaction that followed, but reintroduced by Bismarck in 1871 to weaken the liberals. Franchise remained universal throughout the Second Reich (1871-1918), although the lack of parliamentary autonomy obviously meant that Germany was an authoritarian state throughout this period.

Since Acemoglu and Robinson (2000) include Weimar Germany as an illustrative example for their theory—albeit the claim is not about the expansion of the franchise but democratization more generally—it is worth considering it here. They write that “the final emergence of Germany democracy, the Weimar Republic, in 1919 was in response to the very severe threat of social disorder and revolution triggered by the collapse of the German armies on the Western Front in August 1918 (1184-85).” They cite Mommsen (1981), in addition to Gerschenkron (1943), to support this claim. Yet Mommsen, like Craig (1978) and other historians of the period, is clear that the direct push for democratization came from General Ludendorff following the successful allied offensive at the end of September, 1918. Ludendorff’s calculation was twofold: first, his “sudden swing toward parliamentarization” was designed to “saddle the civilian government with responsibility for the loss of the war (Mommsen 1981: 11).” Second, he reckoned that a “government that would be capable of impressing the Allies by its representative character and its liberal philosophy” would have the best chance of securing the best possible terms at war’s end (Craig 1978: 397). Mommsen himself writes that the Kaiser’s acceptance of parliamentarization “would have been virtually inconceivable without Wilson’s conditions on German domestic politics (14).”
Nationalist Agitation and Franchise Extensions

Since the threat of revolution hypothesis is based on class analysis, it cannot account for suffrage extensions that occur primarily as a result of nationalist agitation. This was the case in the following three countries.

Austria

The Austrian electoral reform of 1907 that created universal manhood suffrage throughout the Hapsburg empire is cited by Prezeworski, as well as by Therborn, as an example of a case in which massive strikes preceded franchise extension. The evidence supporting this claim comes from Jenks’ (1974) study of the reform. Yet while Jenks does argue that Socialist agitation was an important factor in convincing the Emperor in particular on the need for electoral reform, the backdrop for the reform was complex politics of the national question in the empire. Indeed, he frames his study as a “description of one of the last efforts made to reconcile nationalism and democracy with Hapsburg tradition in the period preceding the final collapse of the empire (5).”

Support for franchise extension came from most national groups in the empire, with the notable exception of the Poles, whose elite were well entrenched in the Hapsburg political system and had no desire to diminish their influence. Czech pressure in the 1890s forced German leaders to concede that electoral reform was a possibility (6). The Austrian Socialists joined in the nationalist demands, but the large demonstrations they organized for universal suffrage in 1893 and 1894 had little effect on the government (22-3). As Jenks notes, “the factor which
compelled Austrian politicians to pay attention to the issue [of universal suffrage] was not to be found in Austrian affairs (27).”

Rather, it was the constitutional crisis in Hungary that was decisive. The development of the crisis is too complex to present here, but the key ingredient was the rising power of an ultra-nationalist Hungarian party of the Hungarian elite that threatened to overturn the compromise (Ausgleich) of 1867 that had established the dual monarchy. When the Hungarian Lower House refused to back the minority government of Baron Geza Fejervary, the Minister of the Interior Kristoffy proposed to introduce universal manhood suffrage to break the power of the Hungarian magnates. While this threat succeeded in taming the Hungarian opposition, it sparked a renewed push for universal suffrage within Austria. According to Jenks:

Rumors and surmises of a possible Hungarian reform filled the columns of Austrian newspapers during the summer of 1905, and the possibilities of a similar reform in Austria were explored and exploited rather completely. Party leaders sensed a new issue which might blot out the sorry record of parliamentary turmoil and obstruction; they seemed ready to take full advantage of the opportunity of “serving the people” when parliament reassembled in September, 1905 (30).

This is similar to AJP. Taylor’s interpretation in his classic study of the Hapsburg Monarchy:

The Hungarian crisis had unexpected repercussions in Austria. The dynasty could not advocate universal suffrage for one parliament and oppose it in the other…In
Hungary universal suffrage was opposed by the united “Magyar nation;” in Austria, there was no unity in the Reichsrat, even among the parties who would be ruined by universal suffrage. The only organized opposition came from the Poles, who demanded—and secured—excessive representation at the expense of the Little Russians…In Hungary, universal suffrage had never been more than a tactical threat; in Austria, it seemed a way of escape from the nationalist conflicts of the middle-class politicians (Taylor 1948: 212).

What all this meant is that, according to Jenks, there was an air of inevitability about the move to universal manhood suffrage that had much more to do with nationalist politics than it did with the threat of revolution by the working class. The nationalist parties in the empire supported universal suffrage (the Poles excepted), but so too did two other non-socialist forces within Austria: the liberals, who may not have really welcomed universal suffrage but were committed to it in theory, and the Christian Socials, who accurately perceived that they would be big winners when conservative Catholics gained the right to vote.

What role then did Socialism and the Socialists play? The revolutionary disturbances in Russia “undoubtedly gave the Germans in Austria much to think about,” but Jenks notes that the possibility of a pan-Slavic uprising in the empire “was seldom mentioned in the great debates on reform (31).” As noted, Przeworski is correct that Jencks does see the massive strikes organized by Austrian Socialists as the decisive factor that convinced the Emperor to decide for universal suffrage (41-45; 208-9). But he also recognizes that the Socialists long-term crusade for universal suffrage had been unsuccessful before the Hungarian crisis, and that their threats had
been dismissed in the past. Moreover, it is revealing that the “reform to avoid revolution” argument of Grey does not appear at all in Jenk’s detailed examination of the parliamentary debates that eventually led to the 1907 reform. A safe conclusion is that Socialist agitation was important in the context of long-running nationalist problems and the spark of the Hungarian crisis, but would have been unlikely to produce reform on its own.

**Finland**

Finland is listed as yet another country in which massive strikes preceded suffrage extension (Przeworski 2008). Yet the granting of universal suffrage in 1906 cannot be separated from the actual—and not the threat—of revolution in Russia, of which Finland as a part until 1917. Facing more serious problems elsewhere in the Empire, the Tsar conceded to Finnish demands for constitutional reform. The fact that these demands were pushed by the Socialists did not worry the Tsar unduly as “the Russians were much more alarmed by small bourgeois groups thought to be advocating separatism than by the Social Democrats (Apaluro 1988: 127).” Like the Belgian Socialists, the Finnish Social Democrats were one of the most reformist socialist parties in Western Europe and had adopted a “class-conscious revolutionary passivity” that made them unlikely to cause much serious trouble (Kirby 1971: 129).

The political strikes of 1905 were also the culmination of national resistance rather than class-based agitation (Törnudd 1968: 28). The most important political cleavage in Finnish politics leading up to the reform was not based on class, but on the national question that pitted the Constitutionalists (a coalition of the Young Finnish Party, an upper-class nationalist movement, and the Swedish Liberals) against the Compliers (those groups that benefited from
Russian rule). The fact that universal suffrage was championed by Finnish nationalists, Swedish liberals, and socialists meant that it had close to universal consensus within the nationalist movement and helps explain why Finland adopted the most liberal constitution for its time in 1906. The fact that the Tsar stopped short of granting Finland independence and would proceed to trample on the new Constitution until 1917 also helps explain such apparent magnanimity. The threat of class-based revolution had little direct role in the Finnish case.

**Norway**

Norway mirrors Finland in that franchise extensions were inextricably linked with the independence movement (in this case from Sweden). The main protagonists in this struggle were liberal nationalists that founded the Left party (Venstre) in 1884 after the supremacy of parliament was established. Although Collier’s claim that this reform—which expanded the franchise—was a “result of a fierce struggle that almost erupted in civil war” would appear to fit the Acemoglu and Robinson narrative (Collier 1999: 67), the volunteer rifle clubs that would have compromised the armed resistance movement were peacefully disarmed when the Norwegian army authorities “went no further than to remove the bolts from stored rifles, put cartridge stocks out of harm’s way, and load some of the cannons of the Oslo fortress (Derby 1973: 58).” The major battles for reform were fought not outside of parliament but within it between the early 1870s and 1884.

Therborn claims that the Left party “came out in opposition to universal suffrage” after 1884 and that it was only the labor movement’s agitation that persuaded the liberals to overcome the resistance from rural interests (Therborn 1978: 15). Yet it is difficult to see how he arrived at this conclusion. Norway industrialized late, and the tiny Labor Party would not even gain
parliamentary representation until 1905. The year before the extension of universal suffrage in 1898, it had won less than one percent in elections. Moreover, Collier, drawing on Luebbert and Derby, is correct in noting that the Liberals championed universal suffrage after a party split in 1884 in order to align themselves squarely with the nationalist movement for independence, which was achieved in 1905 (Collier 1997: 68; Luebbert 1988: 121; Derby 1973: 155). As in Finland, the overall picture that emerges in Norway is a fusion of the drives for independence and democracy with broad consensus for universal suffrage.

**The Rest of the West**

The following four cases have not, to my knowledge, been identified by any proponents of the threat of revolution theory as illustrative examples for their argument. Yet it is instructive to include them here as they illuminate dynamics of franchise reform that have been mentioned in previous cases.

**Italy**

Italy instituted nearly universal manhood suffrage in 1912 after Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, the dominant politician of the era, expressed his support for it in a parliamentary debate in 1911. This was an abrupt turn, for only two years previously Giolitti had insisted in Parliament that the expansion of the franchise, which would effectively extend the vote to the illiterate, would have to wait until Italy achieved close to universal literacy (Piretti 2001: 552). While
Giolitti’s motives are still debated by historians, it is clear that the threat of revolution played no role in his calculations.

Italy did face serious domestic unrest beginning in 1898 when food riots in Milan spread to other major cities. The government responded by firing on demonstrators and imposing a state of siege in Milan, Florence and Naples. For the ensuing two years, there was a real possibility of a slip into authoritarianism as the King and conservative forces pushed for a revision of the constitution and for further repression against political agitators, principally socialists. It is worth noting that during this period there was no talk of expanding the franchise to stem the threat of social unrest: in fact, the political elite responded by moving to permanently restrict civil liberties. In the end, there was enough support for constitutional liberalism to prevent Italy from adopting Bismarkian solutions to the political awakening of the working class.

Giolitti played a key role here. In 1897, he had already rejected the argument that socialism represented an existential threat.

In Italy, the Socialists, who profess with sincere conviction collectivist theories, are an insignificant minority and, as long as they abstain from violent acts, they are also harmless…It is therefore not the collectivist theories that constitute a danger for us; rather, it is the troop of malcontents, unemployed, displaced who take the name of “Socialist” because it serves them as a flag, a rallying point, a means of effective organization (De Grand 2001: 67).

Rather than repressing the Socialists, Giolitti reached out to them and sought to incorporate them into the culture of Trasformismo that structured parliamentary politics. He offered Socialists posts in his governments and refused to support employers when workers struck. When the
revolutionary syndicalist under Arturo Labriola briefly took power of the Italian Socialist party and called a general strike in 1904, Giolitti responded by calling elections and the Socialists were punished handily at the polls (Adler 1995: 37). He adopted a similar tactic in 1909, 1913 and 1921.

When Giolitti signaled his support for universal manhood suffrage, there was neither significant demand for it among the population—a point that opponents of the measure raised in parliamentary debates (Piretti 1995)—nor major signs of labor militancy. The number of strikes had in fact been falling for several years (Larcinese 2012: 13). Giolitti likely took this as a propitious moment to introduce a measure that he considered inevitable: “the big reforms must be proposed when the time is ripe, when the Country is calm (quoted in Larcinese 2012).” The rise of reformists within the PSI also allowed him to claim that his policy of engagement had had the desired effect of marginalizing its revolutionary wing. In April of 1911, Giolitti could reinforce his case for universal suffrage with what would become an infamous quip: “the Socialist party has greatly modified its program, and Karl Marx has been relegated to the attic (quoted in Luebbert 1988: 150).” Obviously, he turned out to be wrong as the orthodox Marxist wing of the party would reemerge during WWI and play a crucial role in the massive strikes of 1919-1920 that led to the fascist counterreaction. But there is no evidence that Giolitti believed that Socialism represented a revolutionary force in 1911, and Italy adopted universal suffrage without any threat from below.

Netherlands

Suffrage was one of the three divisive issues, the other two being control of education and collective bargaining, that pitted Dutch political parties against one another and also led to
splits within them between 1878 and 1917. Two franchise expansions in 1887 and 1896 had still left half of all adult males without the vote as of 1900, and both Liberals—aside from those that had split over the issue—and the Labor Party made the attainment of universal suffrage central to their program. In 1912, the Liberal government appointed two commissions to recommend solutions to the education and suffrage questions. What emerged was a package deal whereby the liberals and labor received universal suffrage and the conservatives were granted state support for religious education. The “pacification” of 1917 set in motion the politics of accommodation that characterized Dutch politics since (Lijphart 1975: 105-112). Although Collier (1999) notes that labor agitation in 1911 and 1912 played a role in achieving universal suffrage, it would be a stretch to consider the events a revolutionary threat. The fact that a large percentage of the working class had been organized into clerical parties and trade unions deprived Dutch socialism of whatever revolutionary potential it might have had (Luebbert 1988: 144).

**Canada**

The history of the franchise in Canada was marked by numerous small extensions and retrenchments over the course of the 19th century, and there was significant variation among the colonies prior to confederation in 1867. The Electoral Franchise Act of 1885 actually created a more restrictive franchise than that which existed earlier, which is not surprising given that it was the work of the Conservative Party, whose leader John A. MacDonald had “a profound aversion to universal suffrage, which he considered one of the greatest evils that could befall a country (HVC, p. 49).” However, the franchise was expanded suddenly in 1917 when the government needed to force through a conscription bill and was afraid that it would be defeated without giving serving military personnel, including female military nurses, the vote. Following the war, the Dominion Elections Act of 1920 established a near universal franchise for men and women.
WWI was thus the critical impetus for franchise extension in Canada, as it was for several other European countries.

**United States**

Universal white male suffrage in the United States was achieved over the course of the first half of the 19th century. Although the states ended economic qualifications for suffrage at different intervals over this period, two general trends are discernable. The first is that none of the states that entered the union after the original thirteen colonies had a property qualification for the franchise. There are many possible explanations for why the frontier states adopted universal manhood suffrage from the beginning: to attract settlers, to raise militias, to attract voters in highly charged partisan environments (Keysaar 2000: 34-42). Yet one factor was notably absent in these states: ”No threat of civil disorder from below was needed to convince elites that they could benefit by broadening access to the right to suffrage (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005: 916).”

The second trend was the gradual elimination of property qualifications in the original thirteen colonies. The move to universal suffrage was preceded by intense debates in state conventions, but neither violence nor the threat of it played any role in the outcome (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005: 905). The exception was Rhode Island where a militant working-class suffrage movement was backed by the Democratic party under the leadership of Thomas Dorr. During the tragicomic Dorr War, two different groups claimed to be the legitimate government of the state and there were several minor violent confrontations between the Dorrites and the authorities. The Dorrites were soundly defeated and the episode demonstrated that “the middle

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3 Three states had tax qualifications (Ohio, Mississippi, Louisiana), but only in Louisiana were these a significant constraint (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005: 898).
and upper classes were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent any significant expansion of the right to vote (Keysaar 2000: 75).” Rather than extending the franchise to avoid social conflict, the Rhode Island elite were more than ready to face down the challenge.

**Conclusion**

By and large, the West did not extend the franchise because of a revolutionary threat. There are, to be sure, several cases in which it did: Denmark in 1849, Sweden in 1917, and Belgium in 1893. There are also several cases in which the historiography is contested enough that one can make a plausible—albeit hardly a clear-- case for the revolutionary threat hypothesis: Great Britain in 1832, Australia (Victoria) in 1857, and perhaps even Austria in 1907 if one believes Socialist pressure was decisive. Yet in most countries, major franchise extensions were the result of actual revolutions, nationalist (as opposed to class) based threats, or factors that cannot be described in terms of threat at all. If anything, this survey of the qualitative evidence has probably overstated the success-rate of the revolutionary threat strategy as it has not included the universe of cases where various forms of protest or threats of violence were linked to demands for franchise extension. How many other countries fit the Belgian pattern in which massive strikes failed to achieve their desired goals three times and succeeded once? Without a data set on strikes that assesses both their magnitude and their objectives, there is no way of knowing precisely how infrequently elites extended the franchise under a threat they considered to be credible.

The historical evidence shows that state authorities mostly did what one would expect when assessing the potential severity of domestic disturbances: they looked closely at the evidence, assessed the credibility of the sources of information, and heavily discounted the
rhetoric of politically-interested parties. They took the revolutionary rhetoric of both sides with a heavy grain of salt. This was the case both when the potential revolutionaries were middle-class liberals, as in Great Britain, or socialist leaders. Despite their revolutionary ideology, most working class parties had in practice abandoned direct, extra-parliamentary confrontations with the state before most franchise extensions. In 1895, Engels himself had advised that Socialist parties no longer adopt revolutionary tactics because technological chance and growing state capacity made it too easy for capitalist forces to crush any uprising. Although there was significant variation on the continent, Giolitti’s quip that the Italian socialists had relegated Marx to the attic could have easily been extended to most other Socialist parties before WWI. The radicalization of leftist parties in Germany, Norway, and in Giolitti’s Italy after the War and the Russian Revolution came after universal suffrage had been achieved.

So why did the West extend the franchise? There were obviously a multitude of factors, and the variation in the paths to democratization should make us skeptical of the claim that any one of them was present, or even decisive, in the majority of the cases (Collier 1999). Yet it does appear that a sense of “inevitability” about franchise extension that suggests that whether through conviction or through resignation most elites had accepted it even while attempting to delay it for as long as possible. In no case—not even in the bastions of reaction like Austria—could one find elites who categorically rejected the arguments in favor of universal suffrage.

The most conservative gentlemen in the Upper House admitted the impact of the present while bemoaning the loss of the past. The realization of democratic rights for all was an aspect of contemporary European civilization that the most
hardened devotees of caste and privilege could not ignore. Renewed political agitation or the possibility of Russian or Hungarian reform would have meant little without the general feeling in Austria that universal manhood suffrage would be salutary and “progressive” and that it was in any case inevitable (Jencks 1974: 31).

If this view is at least somewhat correct and generalizable, then it would make sense to reexamine the traditional view of democratization as the triumph of ideas rather than of socioeconomic forces and political unrest. To use Acemoglu and Robinson once again as foils, once cannot simply dismiss ideational explanations simply because enlightenment ideas did not lead to uniform steps to democratization across Western Europe (2000: 1187). The stories of how some elites came to embrace the cause of universal suffrage, others began to recognize the legitimacy of the argument even if their interests were aligned against it, and still others lamented the shift in social values while admitting to themselves that the change was real and its progression was inevitable have been lost in the socio-structural and rational choice accounts that have dominated literature on European democratization for the last half century. Without falling into the well-known traps of Western triumphalism or Whiggish history, there must be some more room for the role of ideas in the story of democracy’s first wave.
Table 1. Major Cases of Franchise Extension in the West

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Illustrative Example for TOR* hypothesis?</th>
<th>Any Historical Support for TOR hypothesis?</th>
<th>Historical Consensus that TOR was important?</th>
<th>Major Cause of Franchise Extension?</th>
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*Used by either Acemoglu and Robinson (2000; 2006), Therborn (1978), or Przeworski (2008) as an illustrative example of the Threat of Revolution (TOR) hypothesis.
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