

Swedish Elections and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right

Article by Ann-Cathrine Jungar

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The election on 11 September dealt a final blow to Swedish exceptionalism as the far right emerged as one of its biggest winners. With 20.6 per cent of the vote, the Sweden Democrats are the latest radical party in Europe to make huge gains on a platform of xenophobia and culture wars. Researcher Ann-Cathrine Jungar explains how Swedish politics has gradually shifted to the right and what happens next.

The parliamentary elections in September 2022 were a very close race between the centre-left and the centre-right. When all the votes were counted, there was only a difference of three seats between the two blocs competing for government. The centre-right – consisting of the conservative party Moderaterna, the Christian Democrats, the liberal party Liberalerna, and the radical-right Sweden Democrats – received 49.5 per cent of the votes. This result translated into a majority of 176 of the total 349 seats. Meanwhile, the centre-left bloc that includes the Social Democrats, the green Miljöpartiet, the left-wing Vänsterpartiet and the Centerpartiet collected 48.8 per cent of the votes and 173 seats.

The Sweden Democrats were the clear winners. The radical-right party increased its share of the vote as it has in every election since its parliamentary breakthrough in 2010. One of every five voters supported the Sweden Democrats, their total coming to 20.5 per cent of the votes. The Social Democrats are still the largest party with 30 per cent of the votes, but the Sweden Democrats replaced Moderaterna as the largest force on the right. The traditional party of the centre-right trailed in third place, receiving 19.8 per cent of the vote.

Despite the left-leaning bloc losing its majority, the Social Democrats and the Greens both managed to increase their shares of the vote. However, all the other parties other than the Sweden Democrats lost votes compared to the 2018 elections. The Green party had joined the Social Democrats after both the 2014 and 2018 elections. In 2018, this governmental experience resulted in a decrease of votes, particularly because of the introduction of more restrictive migration policies after the refugee situation in 2015 and the struggle to make progress on the green agenda in government. Both these setbacks were met by criticism among the party rank and file as well as the voters.

However, the Greens' decision to leave the red government prematurely in 2021 seems to have allowed them to regain votes. In this election campaign, the Greens focused on core green policies. The Greens voiced strong opposition against their former partner in government – the Social Democrats – for supporting digging new mines in northern Sweden including on land where the indigenous Sami people graze reindeer. Moreover, the Greens criticised the government's plans for the storage of nuclear waste and its painfully low environmental ambitions for sustainable forestry.

An election fought on migration

The top concerns of voters as measured by several opinion institutes during the electoral campaign were: healthcare, law and order, education, immigration, energy and the climate, and the economy. There was a distinctive divide between men and women. Healthcare, education and gender equality were the top three priorities among women, while law and order, immigration and energy (and nuclear power) were the most important issues for male voters.

Swedish electoral campaigns have historically revolved around socio-economic issues such as employment, education, and healthcare. But after the 2014 elections and the rise of the Sweden Democrats, immigration, integration, and crime have become more salient themes. Despite increasing inflation, high electricity prices and a hot summer in Sweden and Europe, “failed integration” dominated election debates. Meanwhile, Sweden’s application to join NATO and its increase in defence spending were hardly discussed. However, this is hardly surprising considering foreign policy, defence and the EU have never been important issues in Swedish elections.

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By 15 August, the number of deaths in gang-related shootings was larger than the total number of deaths in the previous years, a fact that was stressed in the run-up to the vote. With unemployment rates much higher among foreign-born people than their Swedish-born counterparts – 10 to 12 per cent compared to 3 to 4 per cent – immigration and integration were top of the political agenda.

All the Swedish parties support expanding the electrification of the energy system to reduce emissions. The Swedish government has set in place different policies and structures to stimulate the increased use of electricity and reduce dependence on fossil fuels. However, the parties differ on the means to be used. The parties of the centre-right support keeping the existing nuclear plants and the construction of new ones. Meanwhile, they are sceptical about the construction of wind turbines. It is likely that a centre-right government will pursue an energy policy along these lines. The centre-left parties prefer renewable energy, especially offshore wind.

Sweden Democrat’s political leverage

The first Swedish female Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, who led a social democratic minority government since November 2021, announced her resignation after the elections. The party leader of the Conservative party Ulf Kristersson has been assigned the mission of forming a new government. If he is successful, a minority government including the Moderaterna party, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals will come to power with the outside support of the Sweden Democrats. This is not a new phenomenon as the great majority of the Swedish governments have been minority governments. But this time the constellation is completely new. The political blocs have been recomposed and the

previously isolated Sweden Democrats will gain political leverage as a support party for the first time.

After the Sweden Democrats entered the Riksdag in 2010, the parliamentary parties formed an informal “cordon sanitaire” stating that they would neither negotiate nor cooperate with the radical-right party. The Sweden Democrats’ origins on the extreme right and its radical migration and integration policies made cooperation with them beyond the pale. However, since 2015 and particularly after the 2018 elections, the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and even the Social Democrats have adopted more restrictive migration, integration and “law and order” policies. To different degrees, they have accepted and adopted the Sweden Democrat narrative that immigration and “failed” integration are the causes of Sweden’s most pressing problems. Consequently, today the policy positions of the Sweden Democrats are no longer fundamentally different from those of other parties. They have been normalised. Moreover, their isolation has come to an end. The Conservatives, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals have all stated that they are prepared to form a government with support from the Sweden Democrats, though they are reluctant to entrust the radical right party with governmental portfolios.

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The governmental negotiations are going to be tough and not without complications. Holding the position as the largest party of the centre-right is not only symbolically important for the Sweden Democrats but also translates into bargaining power in the negotiations. Some representatives of the leadership of the Sweden Democrats have now and then aired that the party would like to be fully included in government, but at the same time made statements about being pragmatic and realistic. Their acceptance as a support party has not come about without internal convulsions in the other centre-right parties. So to include the Sweden Democrats now would be risky for them. This “one foot in and one foot out” strategy worked very well for the Danish People’s Party when they acted as a support party for the Danish centre-right government between 2001 and 2011. The party influenced policymaking without assuming full responsibility. As a parliamentary late-comer with an anti-establishment appeal, the position of support party is a chance for the Sweden Democrats to train the party organisation – representatives, members and voters – to assume political responsibility and accept compromises. It is a step on the way to joining the political establishment.

It is obviously important for the Sweden Democrats to show that their presence makes a difference on their core issues: more resources for the police and the judiciary, harsher sentences, and more restrictive migration policies. Swedish migration and asylum policies have already been tightened since 2015, they may now become the toughest in the EU. The Sweden Democrats are socio-economically more centrist than the other parties of the centre-right and have opposed mooted cuts to unemployment benefits. They have also called for the inclusion of dental care as part of the general healthcare insurance, which is

not the case now.

While the parties of the centre-right are likely to find agreement on law and order and integration, the negotiations will be harder on socioeconomic policies. Cultural policies such as the role and status of public broadcasting and academia may as well become another topic of disagreement. The Sweden Democrats have cultivated contempt for the left-wing liberal establishment pinpointing the biased public media, the “un-scientific” gender studies and critical theory in the academia, and the general role of cultural policies in upsetting the tastes and values of “ordinary people”. It would not be surprising if the parties in government, and particularly the Liberals, have a hard time agreeing with the Sweden Democrats on its attempts to use cultural policies to defend the national and traditional over the multicultural and explorative.

Dog whistle politics in Sweden

Sweden has moved into the European mainstream with these parliamentary elections. Comparatively, Sweden was a latecomer when it comes to the representation of a radical right party in parliament. With the rapid electoral growth of the Sweden Democrats since 2010, Sweden is no longer an exception. The radical-right narrative has been mainstreamed among the other parliamentary parties and the Sweden Democrats are accepted as a legitimate party with governmental credibility.

In the neighbouring Nordic countries and other EU member states, radical-right parties have grown over the last decades, often supporting or participating in centre-right governments. They have modified the party landscapes in Nordic countries as elsewhere, by introducing socio-cultural issues to political debates that were previously dominated by economic and welfare questions.

Sweden is internationally recognised as a modern, open, tolerant and progressive state in many respects: migration, multiculturalism, internationalism, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, environment and climate policy. Will that change with this conservative turn?

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Since 2015, Social Democrats have formulated more restrictive asylum and family reunification policies. These changes were first brought in as temporary legislation but were renewed as ordinary legislation in 2021. Today there are no signs that the Social Democrats would turn the clock back and advocate more liberal migration and integration policies. The same applies to questions related to organised crime. The Social Democrats largely share the policies proposed by the centre-right.

Leading Social Democrats admit the failure of their integration policies and have deployed ethnic arguments when discussing how to deal with segregation in Swedish society rather than approaches based on employment and education. The former Minister of Interior, Anders Ygeman, proposed that a maximum 50 per cent non-Nordic inhabitants should be

allowed to live in certain areas. Former Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson did not want to see any Somali- or China towns in Sweden.

Over a short time, the Swedish Social Democrats have adopted a similar rhetoric as those used by the Danish Social Democratic party to outbid the Danish radical right. However, it is unlikely that the Swedish Social Democrats, previously critical of their Danish sister party, will go quite as far. The move by the Danish Social Democrats has not paid off electorally as many urban and middle-class voters have turned to the Liberals. The direction taken by the Social Democrats in Sweden means that it will fall to the smaller parties in the centre-left opposition – particularly the Greens and the Centre party – to be the sternest critics of the centre-right government.



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