

Elections in Sweden: Opening the Door to the Far Right

Sunday's election in Sweden shows how the decline of robust social-democratic guarantees can feed the rise of the far right.

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Featured image: The crowd at a Sweden Democrats event in 2013. News Oresund / Flickr

The sociologist Walter Korpi once quipped that “the revolution will not come to Sweden through armed struggle but by consulting all concerned parties.” He meant to suggest that nothing in Sweden is done hastily or unilaterally, but only through due process and consensus. For a long time, this held true. Sweden has had long periods of stability, mostly ruled by the Social Democratic Party (SAP) mounting gradual reforms.

But Sunday's election suggests a different picture. Amid the decline of the center-left and the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats, no party or coalition can expect to win a majority. The vote will likely be followed by days of frantic maneuvering to construct a stable government that can limit far-right influence.

For the last four years, Sweden has been governed by a minority coalition between the Social Democrats and the Greens, which has depended on the Left Party's external support to help pass its budgets. But the long-term tendencies that produced this weak administration have deepened further.

This is particularly shown by the current electoral campaign's focus on immigration, a once-minor issue that is now top of the agenda after health care and education. Its prominence [has grown in recent years](#), as deeper transformations in Sweden's welfare state helped destabilize its political order.

Long one of the world's most equal countries, Sweden now has one of the fastest-growing class divides of any industrialized state. It has hardly been the greatest victim of the crisis; overall, growth is still good, and Sweden still has better welfare than most.

Yet recent transformations mean that sections of the working class, especially in rural areas, have a distinct sense of being left behind. They have increasingly turned towards far-right populism, directing their anger not towards class politics but against immigrants and “the establishment.”

Far-Right Breakthroughs

Sweden's current instability is driven by the long-term decline of the Social Democrats and

the [simultaneous rise](#) of the far-right Sweden Democrats. This is a relatively new landscape in a country where the SAP's hold on government, whether alone or in coalition, has only been broken on a few occasions over the last century.

But the SAP is no longer a safe bet to be Sweden's biggest party. After hitting record lows in recent elections, the once-dominant SAP seems set for an even weaker tally in Sunday's vote. If its 24 percent poll score translated into reality, this would be its lowest score since it first stood for election in 1911.

The main rival to the SAP and its allies is the center-right coalition, built around the Moderate Party. This latter party is likewise polling below its previous election result and currently stands at 19 percent. Its coalition also includes the Liberal People's Party (polling around 5 percent), the "family values" Christian Democrats (4 percent) and the Center Party (9 percent), which is running on a pro-business, pro-migration platform.

But the most decisive change is the rise of the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, at 21 percent in the polls threatening to become the second-biggest party. These reformed fascists have dispensed with their uniformed parades, their skinheads, and any (explicit) talk of inferior races. When the party's current leader [Jimmie Åkesson](#) joined in 1995 it was still part of a broader neo-Nazi movement, but under his leadership it has rebranded itself as a populist anti-immigration and anti-establishment movement.

In earlier contests, the Sweden Democrats only won the fringe 5 percent who had voted for previous populist experiments — mostly older people from the rural south who have a tradition of xenophobia and Nazi collaborationism. However, as the party toned down its aggressive rhetoric on race, it came to focus on a nostalgic vision of the past where welfare was stronger and the population was (supposedly) ethnically and culturally homogenous.

Albeit in different versions, all parties share some version of this story. The far right has made inroads because notable sections of the population, particularly blue-collar workers, have felt their conditions worsening. Telling is the case of the [Swedish Trade Union Confederation](#) (LO). It is still politically tied to the SAP, but less than 40 percent of its members today back that party. Meanwhile the Sweden Democrats vote among LO members has soared to 25 percent. The union is considering breaking its links with the SAP.

The party's weakened hold over its blue-collar base owes to the regression it has overseen in office. If in 1980 Sweden's leading CEOs had an average income 4.9 times that of an average industrial worker, in 2016 it was 54 times larger. Since the 1990s welfare services and public spending have become an ever-smaller percentage of GDP. Already-vulnerable sectors of the population have been hit hardest; the level of relative poverty among the unemployed tripled from 10 percent in 2004 to 30 percent in 2012.

This reverse redistribution of wealth is particularly notable in rural areas. Since 1980 half of Sweden's 290 municipalities have in fact seen their population decline as people were forced to move to the cities to seek employment. Welfare services have followed the same trajectory. While in 2000 forty thousand Swedes had more than ten kilometers to the nearest maternity ward, in 2017 it had near-doubled to seventy-five thousand. After marketization, some small towns are now sixty kilometers from the nearest pharmacy.

If the Sweden Democrats have made inroads among all layers of the population, their typical voter is the rural male, without secondary or tertiary education. But if the party

offers such voters the opportunity to make an identitarian protest, its success especially owes to the fact that it has recast its xenophobic agenda as a defense of the welfare state created by the SAP in decades past. The Sweden Democrats are today the main force exploiting the weakness of the long-dominant center-left.

Left-wing alternatives to the SAP are in a less promising position. The Green Party has been weakened after being part of a “red-green” government that has failed to close coal plants, shut down airports, or even halt construction of new superhighways. The morale of this pro-immigrant party was hit especially hard in 2015 when the government it supports introduced a cap on migration; some MPs have quit and the party is barely polling above the 4 percent threshold to enter parliament.

Rather better is the situation of the Left Party, which is not part of the red-green government but did vote in favor of its budget. It looks set for one of its best-ever results, polling at over 10 percent despite rarely having gone far above 5 percent over most of its hundred-year history. However, overall it seems that the far right will enjoy the greatest breakthroughs in Sunday’s vote.

Gridlock

Polls can be misleading — it is still possible that the current SAP-Green coalition can eke out a majority. It looks more likely that these parties will again form the biggest minority bloc at around 40 percent, but with the Sweden Democrats becoming kingmaker. The composition of the new government will then turn on whether or not the current alliance of center-right parties would be comfortable relying on the Sweden Democrats’ passive support, and what the far-right party would want to trade for this.

Indeed, this gridlock existed already after the last election in 2014. On that occasion, the parties agreed that the biggest single bloc in parliament — even if lacking 50 percent support — would be allowed to pass its budget. This agreement was possible because the Sweden Democrats were still considered beyond the pale, which meant that the center-right coalition would either have to take them on board or force a new election — both of which would probably have lost them votes. Yet the agreement came under heavy criticism from sections of the Right and appears unlikely to be repeated.

After the September 9 election everything points to a free-for-all in which any coalition is possible. The center-right Moderates and the smaller Christian Democrats have stated that they are prepared to rule with the Sweden Democrats’ passive support. The cordon sanitaire against the far-right party has already been broken in some municipalities, where center-right coalitions have passed their budgets with the Sweden Democrats’ help.

The other small center-right parties have proudly insisted that they will never negotiate with the Sweden Democrats — but have also claimed that they want a government of the center-right, which is currently impossible unless they can indeed count on the far-right party’s passive support.

This instability owes to the absence of a stable “historic bloc” — that is, a combination of social forces, institutions, and organizations able to lay the basis for a sustainable political hegemony, in the manner of the SAP’s own domination dating back to the early twentieth century. This was rooted in a longstanding farmer-labor alliance which in turn included the middle classes in a broad compromise around universal welfare.



Supporters of the Neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement during a demonstration in Stockholm, August 2018. (Source: The Bullet)

The consensus characterized Sweden across most of the last hundred years. Even challengers to SAP hegemony claimed to embody a “truer and better social democracy”; the center-right Moderates labeled themselves “the new workers’ party,” much as the Sweden Democrats today claim to continue the legacy of the classical SAP leaders. Still now, no party or coalition has been able to replace the stable hegemonic position that the SAP once enjoyed.

A False Dilemma

This crisis of social-democratic hegemony is closely connected to the role played in this election by the so-called “progressives’ dilemma,” which asks us to choose between accepting immigrants and providing universal welfare. While the Sweden Democrats tell us that any immigration is an impossible burden on the welfare state, the neoliberal center advocates open borders so long as wages and welfare are cut to a level that can accommodate this. These apparent opposites in fact both feed the perception that immigration and welfare inevitably make up a zero-sum game. All the other parties line up at some point on this spectrum.

One cannot deny that the large-scale arrival of refugees with relatively low skill and educational levels, with a major spike in 2014 and 2015 with 80,000 and 160,000 arrivals respectively, represents a challenge for the type of high-productivity labor market that characterizes Sweden. Indeed, it is this high productivity which has allowed Sweden to maintain decent levels of real wages and welfare even with an increase in unemployment in recent decades.

For a period, the influx of large numbers of migrants could indeed create a strain on labor-market institutions, from Swedish-language classes to municipal employment offices and vocational training for migrants. But investment in these sectors could shorten this transition period and potentially also address the demographic problem posed by Sweden’s ever-larger numbers of pensioners.

Sweden needs to restructure its economy to phase out its dependency on fossil fuels and it will also need public sector workers to care for an ageing population. These aims require major investment and could form the basis of an active program to maintain high levels of migration while offsetting its short-term costs. In strictly economic terms, migration entails short-term costs and long-term benefits; investment thus needs to be targeted towards minimizing the “costs” period.

The [Rehn-Meidner model](#) devised by the unions the 1950s, which provided the basis for an active labor-market policy, was constructed to do just this (although the people being retrained back then were native Swedes hit by restructuring). This model is based on high minimum wages, which pushes low-productivity firms into bankruptcy and thereby releases capital and labor to be transferred to high-productivity sectors.

This demands that vocational training prepares workers for their new positions and that welfare levels are kept high to offset the consequences of letting industries go under. Given that the overall numbers of refugees are at historic highs, the Left needs to formulate just this kind of offensive program in order to be able to accept refugees while also strengthening labor-movement solidarity and organization.

Regrettably, the SAP has not addressed the recent spike in migration in these terms. Only the Left Party has argued that mass investment in education and welfare reforms can help make high levels of immigration sustainable, while also avoiding any downward pressure on wages as a result of an influx of people with a weak labor-market position.

But the fact that the Left Party has already signed on to the national budgetary restraints — which set limits for both the public deficit and government spending each financial year — make it harder for it to credibly argue that it could release the funds to make the investments necessary to managing these effects.

As well as submitting to budgetary restraints the government has also been unwilling to accept that we are in the first stages of a future characterized by large-scale migration. Its only remaining possibility has thus been to argue that nothing can be done, except close the borders and grant temporary residence permits to those refugees who have already arrived.

Hence even after the prime minister declared the spike in refugee numbers “a national crisis,” his government made no attempts to counter this with the funds that would have been necessary for a progressive response to this “crisis.” There is little comfort to be found in the fact that most European countries did even less.

Model Student

The chairperson of the Center for Marxist Social Studies has aptly characterized the Left Party as a force that has far too long aimed to be a sort of model student — diligent, upstanding, and polite in public discourse — while giving up on its role as the rebellious student who resists authority. Today it is perceived as part of the establishment, in a time of widespread anti-establishment sentiments. Eager to prove its capability in government, the Left has boasted that its budget is “financially sound,” its MPs are “respectable,” and its policies are well in line with the liberal consensus.

The respectable center-right never criticizes the Sweden Democrats without also taking a swipe at the Left Party, painting them as equally bad extremes. The Left Party has reacted

defensively to this, for instance falling quiet on its criticisms of the European Union, an issue today associated with the far right. The same goes for the discussion on immigration; the party has rightly argued that the public debate has been too skewed towards anti-immigration sentiments but has been slow about highlighting the strategic issues associated with maintaining public support for high levels of migration.

In a period when growing class differences and welfare cutbacks have fed resentment against the political establishment, the Left has been less able or willing than the populist far right to capitalize on this discontent. Growing class divides have caused a fall in real wages among the lower strata of the workforce and hit the unemployed even harder. Strongest in rural areas, this phenomenon creates a strong material base for resentment against “the establishment,” i.e. politicians and the upper-middle classes, rich in cultural capital, who mainly live in the big cities and have most benefitted financially in recent decades.

This has allowed the Sweden Democrats to make a rapid advance among these layers, especially low-skilled male workers. Alt-right media is also growing: some of the most popular websites now outcompete the largest national newspapers. Many rural voters get some or most of their news coverage from anti-immigrant propaganda.

This is not at all an argument for the Left to adopt a narrative similar to the populist far right. Rather, it needs to actively combat the far right’s rise by providing its own vision and practical solutions to these same groups of voters. The recent successes for the Left Party partly owe to its ability to present itself as an unwavering force, which does more than just tail media debates. For all its weaknesses, its fastidiousness and stability have earned it respect and made it something of a second home for disgruntled SAP voters.

The Left Party’s possible record result on Sunday highlights its potential if it can speak to the disappointment, rage, and distrust that have led so many SAP supporters and union members to turn to the Sweden Democrats. That party’s anti-immigration policies are supplemented by an anti-establishment veneer and a promise to return to a mythical version of the 1950s welfare state. Yet this masks the basic fact that the party espouses typical right-wing economic policies, from lower taxes to deregulated labor laws and the privatization of welfare services. The Left must present a more radical alternative.

The SAP itself seems lethargic. The Third Way centrism on which it embarked in the 1980s has — like in most countries — left it a pale shadow of its former self, in terms of membership, voters, or vision. But as a historically strong party in a relatively equal society, it remains a major force, even after decades of backsliding. And its situation is not all bad. Perhaps surprisingly in light of the election debate, most Swedes are still positive about immigration. According to a recent [European Commission study](#), overall Sweden has the most positive attitude toward immigration of any EU country, and there is a rock-solid support for a welfare state funded through high taxation.

The problem is that the SAP no longer has a political project able to answer the challenges of the time. Whatever its limits, Swedish social democracy’s modernist agenda of creating an equal society once represented an unparalleled success story. Yet this is no longer the case. Over the last few weeks the SAP has at least put forward some proposals serving the needs of working-class Swedes, including an extra week of vacation for families with young children and talk of increasing taxes on high income earners. Yet the party is falling far short of galvanizing its historic base behind an ambitious vision of progress.

Disorder Under Heaven

Looking at the disorder in Swedish politics, one might remember Chairman Mao's famous dictum "There is great disorder under heaven; the situation is excellent." Such optimism seems unjustified in the current context. Sunday's election is more unpredictable than Swedes are used to, but it does not bode well. The Left Party's growth is a positive sign, but not enough to counter the overall negative tendencies visible in the rise of the far right.

The most likely outcomes are a conservative government that buys passive support from xenophobes or a grand coalition of the SAP and one or more of the center-right parties, invoking the need to take responsibility for Sweden amid dire times. Neither will be able to meet the major challenges of the coming decades, namely the need to rebuild a strong welfare state whilst accommodating rising numbers of migrants and taking serious measures to counter climate change.

Neither of these goals can be pitched into the future, and they are tied to each other in the sense that climate refugees will in future represent the largest numbers of migrants. Equally, only a strong universal welfare state can maintain the political legitimacy that is needed if the workforce is to accept the retraining that a massive green restructuring program will at least initially entail.

There is no question that the Left should be in the front of internationalist solidarity accepting both refugees and migrants. But the Left also has to show that this will not act against the long-term interest of the already-settled working classes. This strategic plan needs to be fleshed out quickly, stopping the European left's slide toward a defeatist realism that defends the closing of the borders. The brutal treatment of migrants urgently needs highlighting. But it is also true that just repeating the slogan "no borders, no nations" is not enough to actually get rid of either borders or nations; the Left also needs to organize a political basis for this to be achieved.

The liberal parties' supposed defense of migration has hardly lived up to its reputation, as respectable centrist and center-right parties today consider governing with support from the far right. Sweden does not yet face the dramas of some European countries — for example, it is still unthinkable that the Sweden Democrats could join the government. But in playing to the seeming growth of anti-immigrant sentiments, almost all parties have echoed this far-right force's essential message that the welfare state is descending into chaos because of cultural conflicts.

The situation calls for a Left that can advance a grand vision to meet these challenges, and use them as levers for investment in infrastructure, education, and welfare. This Left has to be seen as — and actually be — an anti-establishment social movement that speaks to the fears and discontent of the people that have seen their social situation decline during the years of welfare rollbacks while the amount of dollar millionaires in Sweden has reached record highs. If the Left is unable to explain the material factors driving this process, a scapegoat will be found in migrants and especially people of color.

The answer to this is not simply to identify which voters are and are not personally racists and anathemize them on this basis. As individuals they may be many different things; the question is which of these sentiments find a politically organized outlet, and what can be done to break their influence. Swedes still care more about equality and the public sector than they worry about immigration, but if they sense that center-left and center-right are

aligned on the major issues, they will indeed vote on migration and for the party that seems to represent something different: the Sweden Democrats.

At the same time, we can also see the bases of a potential coalition between blue-collar workers and the increasingly proletarianized middle classes. The situation is far from hopeless; there are millions of Swedes looking for a political voice based on a strong welfare state and the defense of equality. They'll still be looking for that, even after Sunday's result. The hope for Sweden's future lies in galvanizing them into a progressive political project.

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