

Swedish General Elections: breakthrough expected by rightwing populists

Corinne Deloy

Analysis

7.3 million Swedes, i.e. 98,000 people more than in the previous election on 14th September 2014 are being called to ballot on 9th September to appoint the 349 members of the Riksdag, the only house of parliament, and all of their regional and local councillors. The Swedes renew all of their political representatives once every four years on the second Sunday in September. Swedes living abroad are allowed to take part in the vote and they can do so early during the 18 days preceding the election.

According to the most recent polls the general election is due to be unique in its genre. Indeed, three parties lead in terms of voting intentions: the Social Democratic Party (SAP), the Moderate Party (M) and the Democrats of Sweden (SD). This situation will probably make it difficult to form the next government.

We might note that a few months after the general election in 14th September 2014 the government led by Stefan Löfven (SAP) was in the minority after the vote on the budget (153 votes against 182), since the Democrats of Sweden and the right-wing opposition voted against the project. The outgoing Prime Minister then announced the organisation of a snap election on 29th December 2014, the first date possible according to the kingdom's Constitution. This election was the first of its kind in Sweden since 1958. On 26th December however both the left and right signed an agreement, whereby the 6 parties from two political trends committed to two points: that the leader of the party that came out ahead in the general election would be appointed Prime Minister after the vote and that the budget that he presented would be approved by parliament. The agreement that was valid initially until 2022 only lasted 6 months and was dissolved on 9th October the following year. "Politics in Sweden over the last two legislatures have been very much focused on relations that each might entertain with the Democrats of Sweden," summarises Niklas Bolin, a political scientist from the university of Central Sweden.

"The government has been on automatic pilot for some time. The opposition has also been pretty much absent, succeeding in signing an agreement to allow the

government to push its budget through and as a result denying the Democrats of Sweden any influence over parliament," says Nicholas Aylott, a professor of political science at the University Södertörn.

The Populist Threat

Sweden will not escape the breakthrough made by populist parties, a trend now affecting all European countries, notably the Nordic States. Indeed, the populists participate in government in Finland (Blue Reform, after scission from the True Finns), and in Norway (the Progress Party F). In Denmark the People's Party (O) became the country's leading right-wing movement in the last general elections on 18th June 2015.

According to the most recent poll by Novus the Social Democrats are due to come out ahead in the general election with 24.2% of the vote, followed closely by the Democrats of Sweden, who are due to win 21.6% and the Party of Moderates, who are due to come just third with 18.1%. "18% or 20% for the Democrats of Sweden, if this result becomes a reality, will represent a score well over the average for the far right in Europe," stresses Andreas Johansson Heinö of the think-tank Timbro.

The Centre Party (C) is due to win 9.6% of the vote, just like the Left Party (VP); the Liberals (L), 5.9% and the Environment Party-Greens (MP) 5.2%. Finally, the Christian Democratic Party (KD) is forecast to exit the Swedish Parliament winning only 3% of the vote, i.e. below the threshold of 4% of the vote cast at national level, vital to be represented in the Riksdag.

"The election agenda is different this year. The economy, healthcare and pensions are no longer decisive issues, these themes have been replaced by answers to give to the migration crisis," indicates Karin Eriksson, a journalist for the daily Dagens Nyheter. "In Sweden, the economy and public services have constantly been the main issues at stake in the general elections over the last two or three years, but law, order and immigration have become dominant. This is a major development," confirmed Nicholas Aylott. "For the first time immigration has become a daily issue in the Swedish electoral campaign," repeats Henrik Oscarsson, a political scientist from the university of Göteborg.

Indeed, the electoral campaign has been largely dominated by the themes of immigration and integration, a first in the Scandinavian kingdom. Crime and violence are both issues that concern half of the Swedes (50%) according to one poll by Ipsos. These themes are followed by immigration, which worries a third of those interviewed in the same poll (33%).

The Democrats of Sweden have succeeded in imposing their electoral agenda as well as their vision of reality. Hence their leader, Jimmie Akesson insists on the idea that immigration absolutely has to be contained and maintained at a level to prevent it threatening Swedish national identity and the country's security. In his opinion, Islam is the greatest threat that Sweden has faced since the Second World War. "You are destroying our people, we are building a new one," he repeats targeting the country's political leaders, whom he accuses of ruining and destroying Sweden.

Sweden has taken in more than 350,000 exiles since 2014 (in relation to 9.9 million inhabitants). In 2015, 163,000 people asked for asylum, i.e. 1 for every 25 Swedes – a record in Europe.

In a bid to reduce the number of refugees, Stefan Löfven's government, which includes the SAP and the Environment Party-The Greens (MP), re-introduced border controls with Denmark on 12th November 2015. In June 2016 he adopted measures in view of toughening the country's asylum policy. Presented as

being temporary, these measures were extended in May 2018. On 4th May Stefan Löfven reduced the quotas of refugees that Stockholm will accept (around 14,000 per year). Sweden hosted 27,000 refugees in 2017 and Helene Fritzon (SAP), Minister for Immigration and Asylum Policy declared that Stockholm would not grant asylum to more than 14,000 to 15,000 people this year. The outgoing Prime Minister also generalised the attribution of a three-year residence permit (previously it was granted for an indefinite period) and decided to allow family reunion and to attribute social aid only to those who achieved refugee status. After these decisions the Greens threatened to quit the government.

However, the government's refugee reception policy is still not very clear. Indeed, one month after having taken the most recent measures, it decided to grant child asylum seekers who entered the country in 2015 the right to enter a new asylum request on condition that they continued to undertake their studies in Sweden. This new measure that entered into force on 1st July last might concern 9000 young people.

Stefan Löfven maintained that Sweden had been "naïve" in the face of the refugees. The Social Democrats want to toughen labour laws governing foreigners. "Labour immigration must focus on professions that cannot be undertaken by the Swedes. Professions for which there is no lack of workforce must first be given to the unemployed living in Sweden," we read in the manifesto of the party in office. "The Social Democrats paint a dark picture of Sweden as if they are convinced that it is this that the Swedes want to hear and that they are frightened of saying the opposite of this," stresses Ulf Bjereld, a political scientist.

"The Social Democrats have tried to defuse the issue of immigration, but they have just added to the confusion. Voters no longer understand their political approach and in the end all of the parties are losing ground in the polls, except for the right-wing populists," stresses Anders Lindberg, editor in chief of the daily, Aftonbladet.

The Democrats of Sweden point to the violence caused

by foreigners and accuse the government of being too lenient. Recently, on 18th June, an incident that led to the death of three and the injury of three others in the heart of the country's second biggest town, Malmö, shocked the Swedes, who are not used to this kind of occurrence.

Each of the political parties highlights that they want to toughen up on immigration. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to exclude the Democrats of Sweden from the political landscape. On 19th January 2017 Anna Kinberg Batra, the leader of the Party of Moderates at the time indicated that her party was prepared to put forward a draft budget with the populist opposition, thereby breaking a Swedish taboo that prevented all negotiation with the far right. Anna Kinberg Batra was replaced on 1st October 2017 by Ulf Kristersson as the head of the Moderates. The latter maintains the ambiguity regarding the links his party has with the Democrats of Sweden: although he rejects all negotiation with the latter, he does say however that he is prepared to govern with the greatest majority possible and he has invited the Democrats of Sweden to take part in national debate over the future of the country's immigration policy.

The right-wing leader also takes a firmer stance on the issue than his predecessors who were still very much in favour of the reception of migrants. Polls show that the Moderates have won some voters back from the Democrats of Sweden over the last few months. "It is possible that the change of leader was effective, but it is also possible that the change in policy regarding refugees also produced these results," indicated Anders Sannerstedt, a political scientist from the University of Lund.

The Democrats of Sweden like to define themselves as the only opposition party in Sweden. Jimmie Akesson has transformed the party, previously inspired by neo-Nazis, into a respectable movement that expels its most extreme members. "Jimmie Akesson himself embodies the transformation of an individual wearing a bomber jacket and steel-tipped boots, into someone dressed in a suit. He has succeeded in shaping the fundamental issues of his party in the most skilful

manner and he has also succeeded in avoiding themes that damage the party," analyses Jonas Hinnsfors, a political scientist from the University of Göteborg.

Jimmie Akesson supports the organisation of a referendum on Sweden's membership of the European Union. "The European Union is a vast network of corruption in which no one controls anything. We pay a great deal of money and we receive little, but the main reason for our wish to leave is ideological: we must not belong to an ideological union," declared the leader of the Democrats of Sweden. According to the most recent polls, only 17% of Swedes support their country's exit of the EU, most are against doing this (57%).

Review of the Social Democrat's legislature

In office for the last four years the Social Democratic Party is the oldest and the most significant political party in Sweden. It has governed the kingdom for 80 of the last 101 years of democracy. For a long time, it dominated the political landscape, winning 45% of the vote on average. Now the polls credit it with around 25% of the vote and the party has lost one support in four votes since 2014. Many Swedes believe that the party no longer defends the lower classes and believe the presence of foreigners to be a threat to their jobs. They often accuse the latter of accepting low wages, as long as they can benefit from social aid and that they even want just to take advantage of the generous Swedish social system.

According to the most recent poll by Ipsos, three quarters of the Swedes (73%) believe that their country is "going in the wrong direction". This is 17 points more than the European average.

And yet the Social Democratic Party can boast the reasonable results of its four years in government. Sweden is the most prosperous and most egalitarian of European societies and its public finances are the best managed amongst the 28 Member States of the European Union. All of the country's economic indicators are showing green. GDP growth has been over 3% for the last few years, its public accounts

are in surplus, debt is decreasing constantly and represents 38% of the GDP, i.e. its lowest rate since 1977. The number of people in work is the highest since 2000, with unemployment totalling 6.1% (June 2018) – this figure continues to fall. Although the rate of employment of those born abroad is still lower than that of those born in Sweden, the gap has closed over the last few years.

The Social Democrats are campaigning on the reduction of the difference in taxation between pensioners and those in work, the increase in pensions and the improvement to housing on the part of the most vulnerable. They are planning to organise a referendum on the Welfare State. The outgoing Prime Minister Stefan Löfven says he defends the Trygghet, a term that means both security and comfort. "People need to feel that they are safe in the globalised economy. They need to have a job and also to feel protected. This is why we are fighting crime," he declared.

Hence the Social Democrats' real adversaries are not so much the Moderates, who are also on the decline, but rather the Democrats of Sweden. "The Social Democrats have never been as low in the polls but why indeed choose the copy when you can have the original?" declared Andreas Hellström of the University of Malmö in June.

Opposition on the right draws a critical picture of the state of the country. In the opinion of the leader of the Party of Moderates, Ulf Kristersson, the Swedish model has its drawbacks. He presents his party as the one that wants to reduce taxes and highlights the individual, a programme denounced by the outgoing Prime Minister who believes that tax reductions will lead to greater unemployment and deficits. "The Swedish economy may be flourishing, unemployment decreasing, consumption rising and trust on the markets might be at its highest possible level, but the present government is not interested in serious issues which are security and the integration of migrants," declared Elisabeth Svantesson (M), the spokesperson for economic issues. The right is critical of the extension of waiting times to access healthcare, the high level of unemployment amongst immigrants, the lack of police

officers and the difficulties experienced by foreigners regarding integration.

As for the "small" parties they are in a weak position as the election date approaches. The Christian Democratic Party (KD) has tried to widen its electoral base by pushing its religious roots into the background, but the exercise has not really been very successful. "The Liberals (L), formerly the People's Party (FpL) has lost many members at each election since 2002. The situation for the Christian Democratic Party (KD) is even worse because the number of votes it wins has been decreasing since 1998. If these trends continue the two parties will find themselves in a precarious position," stresses Niklas Bolin.

Finally, the Environment Party-the Greens (MP), which entered parliament for the first time in 2014, has lost half of its members since then and is not guaranteed to reach the threshold of 4% of the votes cast at national level – which is vital to be represented in parliament. The Swedish Political System

Sweden's parliament has only one house. The Riksdag has 349 members all elected for four years according to a proportional vote. In the general elections the country is divided into 29 electoral constituencies (one per country, with those of Stockholm, Scania and Västra Götaland being divided), which elects 310 MPs, (11 on average, from 2 to 45 per constituency). The votes are distributed according to the modified Saint Lagüe method with a first divisor of 1.4.

The 39 other compensatory seats are distributed to ensure the best possible representation of the national vote. Candidates elected to these compensatory seats are those whose party enjoys the highest remainder in the constituencies. To take part in the distribution of the compensatory seats a party has to have won 4% of the votes cast nationally or 12% within a given constituency.

People can vote for a party or make a preferential vote in support of one of the candidates featuring on the lists offered to them by the parties and as a result influence the attribution of these seats. During the

vote counting the number of seats won by each party is defined before declaring elected the candidates on each list having won the greatest number of votes in their own name.

8 political parties are represented in the present Riksdag:

- the Social Democratic Party (SAP), founded in 1889 and led since 2012 by outgoing Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, has dominated Swedish political life for the last 70 years. It has 113 MPs ;
- the Democrats of Sweden (SD), a populist right-wing party founded in 1988 and led by Jimmie Akesson, with 49 seats;

- the Environment Party-the Greens (MP), created in 1981 and represented since May 2011 by the Education Minister Gustav Fridolin and the Minister for Cooperation and International Development, Isabella Lövin, with 25 seats;
- the Centre Party (C), a former agrarian party created in 1913 and led since 2011 by Annie Lööf with 22 seats;
- the Left Party (Vp), led since 2012 by Jonas Sjöstedt, has 21 seats;
- the People's Party-Liberals (FpL), now the Liberals (L), founded in 1934 led by Jan Björklund, has 9 seats;
- the Christian Democratic Party (KD), a conservative party founded in 1964 and led by Ebba Busch Thor has 16 seats.

Reminder of the results of the previous general election 14th September 2014 in Sweden

Turnout: 85.81%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
Social Democratic Party (SAP)	1 932 711	31,01	113
Party of Moderates (M)	1 453 517	23,33	84
Democrats of Sweden (SD)	801 178	12,86	49
Environment Party-the Greens (MP)	429 275	6,89	25
Centre Party (C)	380 937	6,11	22
Left Party (Vp)	356 331	5,72	21
People's Party-the Liberals (FpL)	337 773	5,42	19
Christian Democratic Party (KD)	284 806	4,57	16
Others	251 871	4,04	0

Source : <https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-landsting-och-kommun/2014/valresultat.html>

Results

Right and left neck and neck and gains by the populists (SD) not as significant as forecast

A unique thing: the day after the Swedish general election the true winner is not yet known. The Social Democratic Party (SAP), led by outgoing Prime Minister Stefan Löfven achieved the weakest result in its history, but managed to retain its place as the country's leading party, which it has occupied since 1917, with 28.4% of the vote and 101 seats (-12 seats in comparison with the previous elections on 14th September 2014). It was followed by the Moderate Party (M), led by Ulf Kristersson which won 19.8% of the vote and 70 seats (-14).

The Democrats of Sweden (SD), a right-wing populist party, led by Jimmie Akesson, achieved a lower score than forecast by the polls. They came third with 17.6% of the vote and 63 seats (+14).

As for the "small" parties the results were also different from those provided by the polls. Hence, the Centre Party (C), led since 2011 by Annie Lööf, won 8.6% of the vote and 30 seats (+8), the Left Party (Vp), led by Jonas Sjöstedt, won 7.9% of the vote and 28 seats (+7), the Christian Democratic Party (KD), led by Ebba Busch Thor, 6.4% and 23 seats (+7), the Liberals (L) led by Jan Björkland, 5.5% of the vote and 19 seats (=).

Finally, although we might have thought that the heatwave of the summer in Sweden would have led the population to turn to the ecologists, this

was far from what happened. The Environment Party-the Greens, led by Gustav Fridolin and Isabella Lövin only just managed to take 4% of the vote and therefore satisfy threshold required to be represented in parliament with 4.3% of the vote and 15 seats (-10).

With 40.6% of the vote and 144 seats, the three parties on the left (SAP, Vp and MP) are just ahead of the 4 parties on the right (M, C, KD, L) which won 40.3% of the vote and 143 seats.

According to an exit poll 41% of the electorate changed their vote between the general election of 2014 and that of 2018.

And so, we shall have to wait for the count of the voting slips of the Swedes living abroad (around 250 000 people, 4% of the electorate) which will take place on 12th September before we know whether the left will maintain its lead. We might note that those living abroad usually vote more for the parties on the right.

Turnout was slightly higher than that registered during the previous general elections on 14th September 2014, totalling 84.4%, i.e. 1.1% more.

Results of the general elections on 9th September 2018 in Sweden

Turnout: 84.4%

Political parties	No. of votes won	% of votes won	No. of seats won
Social Democratic Party (SAP)	1 775 042	28.40	101
Moderates Party (M)	1 236 226	19.80	70
Democrats of Sweden (SD)	1 100 483	17.60	63
Centre Party (C)	537 189	8.60	30
Left Party (Vp)	495 480	7.90	28
Christian Democratic Party (KD)	397 713	6.40	23
People's Party-Liberals (FpL)	342 481	5.50	19
Environment Party-the Greens (MP)	271 183	4.30	15
Others	91 393	1.40	0

Source : <https://data.val.se/val/val2018/valnatt/R/riike/index.html>

"We would have liked to have achieved a higher score, but we are still the country's leading party," said outgoing Prime Minister Stefan Löfven on the announcement of the results. The Social Democratic leader presented the vote as a "referendum on the House of the People, (Folkhemmet, the Welfare State)", calling on the Swedes to vote for a "stable government that can lead Sweden in uncertain times," also presenting the SAP as a bulwark against the right-wing populists. "Only a government led by the Social Democrats will be able to guarantee that the Democrats of Sweden, a racist party, will not have the slightest influence over the executive," he declared.

Jimmie Akesson (SD) wanted the election to be a vote against the outgoing government's migration policy. "We shall have great influence over what will happen in Sweden in the weeks, months and years to come," maintained the populist leader. Although the Democrats of Sweden are rising, they did not achieve the breakthrough they had hoped for by their leader who was betting on a result totalling "between 20% and 30% of the vote," but it did not reach the symbolic level of 20%. "They have made a

very good score, they have strengthened their status as the country's third biggest party and they are continuing to form a conservative, nationalist block between the two ordinary blocks, but the leadership of the party and its supporters were expecting a better result," stressed Daniel Poohl, editor-in-chief of the magazine Expo.

Jimmie Akesson issued a warning, ahead of the election to the other political leaders that they could no longer exclude his party and consider it "as a passing sickness that is temporarily affecting parliament," and that, whatever the result. He also said he was prepared to work with the left as with the right, on condition that he could decide on the country's migratory policy.

According to an exit poll, slightly more than half of the Democrats of Sweden's electorate (54%) voted for this party in the election of 2014, 19% voted for the SAP and 18% for the Moderates Party. We can see that the populist party succeeded in winning over its supporters and attracting voters from both the right and the left.

"We are facing a European trend in which parties that have been in government for decades are losing their grip and in which the political landscape is more fragmented," indicated David Ahlin, Opinion Poll Director for IPSOS.

Since the two political blocks are almost on an equal footing the formation of the next Swedish government will be difficult. There are two main options.

The first is that the left retains its majority after the count of the vote of the Swedes living abroad and thereby succeed in form a majority government – or the strongest of minority governments – which will have to contend with a strong opposition. Jonas Sjöstedt indicated ahead of the vote that the Left Party was prepared to take part in a future left-wing government.

We should remember that in Sweden support of a majority of MPs is not necessary to form a government. There just has to be a majority of MPs that do not oppose

it. "To know who will govern, we have to ask the following question: which configuration of parties will minimise the risk of a negative vote," explains Li Bennich-Björkman, a political expert at the University of Uppsala.

The second is that the forces on the right will choose to break the taboo of negotiating with the Democrats of Sweden and try to form a government coalition with them, with the risk of breaking up the right.

According to the polls the majority of Swedes are against any collaboration with the Democrats of Sweden: only 22% of the electorate who do not vote for this party say they support the idea.

Just before the election Jimmie Akesson wanted to push the leader of the Moderates Party into a corner: "*Ulf Kristersson has 24 hours to answer the question: Would you rather cooperate with me or with Stefan Löfven?*" Answer on 12th September after the final results.

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