Battle of the democrats

With elections next year, Sweden's Social Democrats have developed a new strategy for dealing with right-wing populists

For many years there was no extreme right-wing populist party in the Riksdag, the Swedish parliament, suggesting it was an exception to the Scandinavian rule. The Sweden Democrats (SD) were a small, obscure party that no one took seriously. Political analysts studying the neighbouring Scandinavian countries could safely shake their heads in dismay, commenting on how much worse things were over there.

Those days are long gone. Since the turn of the millennium the SD, who are rooted in Swedish neo-Nazism, have gained a foothold in an increasing number of municipal councils. And they have been in the Riksdag too since 2010, when they received 5.7 per cent of votes. The floodgates had opened. By the 2014 election their support was up to roughly 13 per cent of voters, and most polls for the 2018 election predict that to rise to almost 20 per cent. This would make them the country's second-largest party.

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A particularly depressing fact for the Swedish workers' movement is that the SD are enjoying strong support from member groups of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) – in other words, from the working class. According to recent opinion polls, the Social Democrats are supported by 44 per cent of LO members; the SD are on 20 per cent.

In the Riksdag itself, the other parties generally ignore the SD completely. Nobody has worked with them and their political proposals have not led to decisions. Yet the SD do have a big influence. Under the centre-right Alliance government of 2010 to 2014, which consisted of the Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats, as well under the current Red-Green minority government – made up of the Social Democrats and the Green Party – the SD have been 'the tail that wags the dog'. They have had a decisive impact on a

slew of important issues.

Just a few months after the 2014 election, they rejected the Red-Green coalition's first budget, almost causing a government crisis. They declared that they would continue to reject any future draft budgets that did not take into account their longstanding calls for reduced immigration and reduced spending on admitting asylum seekers and integration policy. The centre-right parties could see the danger here: even if they were to get into government, they would be unable to pass their budget under these circumstances. This resulted in a fragile arrangement whereby the opposition parties agreed not to submit a joint budget of their own. In so doing, they helped the Red-Green government to remain in power.

This arrangement, known as the December Agreement, lasted only a year in a formal sense. After this period, the small Christian Democrat party announced that it was planning on withdrawing from the pact. In practice, however, the centre-right Alliance never came forward with a budget of its own. This prevented the SD from having a decisive impact on the issue of the government itself, but they still had the casting vote in many individual matters.

From 2010 to 2014 they nearly always voted in favour of the centre-right government's proposals. Since 2014 they have tended to vote on the side of the Red-Green bloc – on about half of all topics, according to a study by the Svenska Dagbladet newspaper. Yet mere percentages are not a proper measuring system for analysing a party's ideological home. In a lot of matters it would be better to look at aspects of detail and form.

On important topics where there are certain ideological boundaries, the SD vote almost exclusively in the same way as the centre-right parties. This applies, for example, to issues concerning the working environment, employee rights to full-time work, proposals to restrict private companies from making profits in the welfare sector or regarding higher social requirements for public tenders. A study by the finance ministry revealed recently that the SD's economic policy would benefit first and foremost the wealthiest in society – by lowering taxes, for instance.

Likewise, the SD's annual budget submissions point to policies that create inequality. The party proposes, for example, making huge savings in the central government's support of municipalities, which would most affect schools, health and care services, sectors for which local government is responsible in Sweden. The SD want to fund all major economic changes with savings from the admission of asylum seekers and from integration policy. All the experts in this field agree that the SD are considerably overestimating the potential savings to be made in this area.

In parliament, the strategy in the Riksdag is the same as in all the country's municipalities: to isolate the SD as much as possible. No cooperation, no conversations before or after a decision. Until recently, this held true for the other parties too. The SD were given the cold shoulder, the thinking being that their policies were a far cry from the fundamental values of a democratic and open society.

This year, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats have decided to engage in conversation with the SD before political decisions. The Moderates announced this change in their relations with the SD at the beginning of 2017. Since then, their poll ratings have dropped rapidly and they are no longer Sweden's second-largest party. The shift of voters away from the Moderates is moving primarily towards the SD, for those Moderate voters who want a strict refugee policy, and to the Centre Party, drawing all those in favour of a liberal refugee policy and no cooperation with the SD. Notwithstanding such change, no party has gone so far as wanting to be in government alongside the SD.

The Social Democrats employed an argument-based strategy during the SD's first parliamentary term in the Riksdag. This consisted of denying that the SD would pursue substantial policy matters. Instead, they drew attention to the SD's fundamental values and their attitude towards human beings. The main allegations made against the SD were that they did not accord all people equal value and that their party's roots and history were undemocratic and racist.

They dealt with the SD's big topic, refugee policy, in a similar manner. Before the 2014 election, the Social Democrats decided to concentrate on their classic topics: school, the right to work, welfare and orderly public finances. Underlying this decision was the view that the party ought not to broach the topic of refugees. Should the latter come up in the public debates, they should respond in a way that would constantly bring the conversation back to their own priority topic areas.

The problem with this was that the agenda of the mass media and of the electorate centred, to a very large extent, precisely on the refugee issue. This meant that the Social Democrats came across as vague and often unable to participate properly in the debates. A significant part of the election campaign focused on the SD. And even though much of the news about them was negative – there was vast coverage, for instance, of the issue of how many of the SD candidates were convicted criminals – it still meant that for the duration of the election the public concentrated entirely on the SD and their possible successes or failures. An investigation by media researchers of the Mid Sweden University (Mittuniversitetet) in northern Sweden showed, for example, that topics

associated with the SD were among the most shared on social media by far in the 2014 election year.

After the election, in which the SD increased their share of the votes to almost 13 per cent, the number of refugees coming to Sweden also increased, making it impossible for the Social Democrats to continue with their line of argument. So, over this past year we have seen them pursue an altogether different way of dealing with the SD. The aim now is to show that the SD are a party on the right of the political spectrum, not just in terms of areas such as nationalism or its attitude to refugees, but also – or maybe even especially – in terms of economic policy. What is more, the Social Democrats have declared the SD to be their main opponent in the run-up to the 2018 election. The background to this is the fact that the SD has managed to attract many traditional working-class voters. And so, for the first time, they have recognised and acknowledged that the SD are a party that must be faced in pretty much the same way as other parties are.

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There are good reasons for this reassessment. The ideological criticism that they prioritised from 2010 to 2014 may well have been correct from a purely factual point of view: the SD do have a racist, undemocratic and anti-humanist basis. Yet how effective was this criticism with regard to the SD's voters? Will they abandon the party if the rhetoric and arguments revolve around portraying SD politicians and their voters as racists? Probably not. By pushing the voters into a corner like this, you risk further increasing their feeling of isolation, and the sense of belonging they feel towards the SD will grow in turn.

Instead, the Social Democrats' strategy now is to use a line of argument intended to drive a wedge between the SD and their voter base. This approach aims to show that the SD's policies will not actually benefit their supporters. In parallel to this argument-based approach, the Red-Green government has put forward various policy proposals, such as those intended to bolster low-earners and provide stimulus for municipalities with dwindling populations. In addition, they are pursuing a new regional political strategy. In November 2015, after Sweden had taken in some 160,000 refugees within a short space of time, the rules for admitting refugees were changed, with the consequence that noticeably fewer refugees arrived in Sweden. This helped push the topic out of the spotlight of public debate.

It is not yet clear whether the SD are facing a decline in the opinion polls. While for several months in the autumn of 2015 they were up to more than 20 per cent, today most surveys put them at 17 to 18 per cent. This still puts them significantly above their 2014 election result. But the various measures and the change in arguments adopted by their political opponents could at least hold the party back from further gains.

In the Riksdag, the new strategy has not resulted in any big changes in parliamentary matters. The Social Democrats have stayed true to their party line of neither discussing nor actively working with the SD. Of course, this does not hinder the SD in voting in exactly the same way as the Red-Green government parties in many areas. On several important issues, however, the SD have voted with the centre-right Alliance and have therefore rejected the government's proposals. On the other hand, several cross-bloc agreements have been reached to prevent the SD from being 'the tail that wags the dog' – in defence policy, for example.

It remains to be seen whether the new measures will be effective. We still have just under a year until Sweden's next election. It will be a barometer for social democracy in a country in which it has always been extraordinarily strong.



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