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Sweden's neck-and-neck election race

With support growing for the right-wing Sweden Democrats, the Social Democrats' strategy has shifted their focus away from their core voters

The race in the upcoming Swedish election is close with a lot at stake in these turbulent times. The spring was dominated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Swedish reconsideration of NATO-membership. Election campaigns didn't take off until the end of the summer. This Sunday, 11 September Swedish voters are choosing between two new and pretty loosely coupled political blocs that have both formed since the last election four years ago.

On one side you have the Social Democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson and her government that is backed by three parties: the Centre Party, the Green Party and the Left Party. On the other side you have the leader of the opposition, prime minister candidate Ulf Kristersson, from the liberal-conservative Moderate Party. He is backed by the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and the radical right-wing party Sweden Democrats.

The opinion polls in August have shown a tight race between the two blocs, one day Kristersson's conservative bloc leads, the next day Andersson's centre-left bloc leads. In the poll of polls, *Omnipoll,* from 1 September Andersson leads with only 0,6 per cent. At the same time a big problem is on the rise for Ulf Kristersson, the Sweden Democrats are starting to poll bigger than his own party the Moderates. This could undermine Kristersson in his position as the leader of the opposition and raises many questions regarding how the government negotiations would play out if the Sweden Democrats would dominate the bloc.

Legitimising the Sweden Democcrats

Here it is important to address a historical shift that has taken place since the last election. The unison and long political isolation of the Sweden Democrats has collapsed. In the election of 2018 all established parties still promised loudly not to cooperate with the far-right Sweden

Democrats, a party with roots in the racist Swedish neo-nazi movement. Back then Kristersson even promised Auschwitz-survivor Hédi Fried to never ever cooperate with them – a promise he often is reminded of by his political opponents.

Hundred years ago, the Liberals fought together with the Social Democrats for universal suffrage.

Now both the Moderates and the Christian Democrats are embracing cooperation and negotiations with the Sweden Democrats. Last to open their arms were the Liberals which is a remarkable shift considering the party's history. Hundred years ago, the Liberals fought together with the Social Democrats for universal suffrage. They have been champions of LGBT+ rights and gender equality policies in Sweden. The last decade they profiled themselves as defenders of liberal democracy and main opponents of the rising radical right.

Now all three of these established liberal and conservative parties are campaigning for a government coalition that is dependent on the Sweden Democrats. Their efforts to legitimise the Sweden Democrats as a political partner seems to have made the party just grow bigger and bigger in the polls. A quote from John F. Kennedy fits well to describe this dilemma and possible tragedy for Kristersson: 'Those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside'.

A strong Social Democratic candidate

The dynamics within Andersson's red-green bloc are not that smooth either and the four parties seem not to have coordinated their campaigns at all. Just some weeks before election day the Centre Party finally announced their support for Andersson as prime minister. The Centre Party stands out as one of the most market oriented and neoliberal parties in Sweden. It is their firm opposition to the Sweden Democrats that has pushed them reluctantly into the red-green bloc. The last four years the Centre Party has effectively blocked any bigger left-leaning progressive reforms and instead pushed through more tax-breaks, more privatisations, and a weakening of employment protection.

The Social Democrats are polling between 25-30 per cent of the votes and are still the biggest party. They have led the government in different constellations since 2014 and the last four years have been particularly shaky. In a stroke of genius, the party changed their leader less than a year before the elections. A third election campaign with former prime minister Stefan Löfven at the helm would not have worked. With

Magdalena Andersson the party got a fresh start and the country got its first ever female prime minister.

The Social Democratic election campaign is very person-centred and, in many ways, inspired by the SPD campaign of Olaf Scholz in Germany last year. Andersson has very high approval ratings with 52-56 per cent of the voters perceiving her as trustworthy. While, Kristersson scores between 33-42 per cent in trustworthiness. Her long experience as finance minister and her competence is stressed with the aim to frame the elections as a presidential election between Andersson and Kristersson.

Choosing the centre over the left

One problem for Andersson is that the election is dominated by issues where the opposition has a stronger hand. In August polling showed that the most important issues for the voters were: 1) health care, 2) law and order, 3) schools and education, 4) migration and integration and 5) energy policy. Only in the fiends of health care, and schools and education the Social Democrats are perceived as having the best policies. The public debate is dominated by law and order, segregation and migration issues where the Social Democrats have tried to triangulate the toughness of the conservative bloc. The electricity bills have skyrocketed in August and the opposition is successfully attacking and blaming the government.

Andersson doesn't want to talk about raising taxes or redistribution policies.

The Social Democrats are carrying out a rather centrist-oriented strategy embracing the Centre Party with open arms, even welcoming back the Liberals for negotiations, while dismissing the Left Party. Andersson doesn't want to talk about raising taxes or redistribution policies. The aim seems to be appealing to urban well-educated liberal voters who are sceptical of the Sweden Democrats and to get them over to her red-green bloc.

But the problem with carrying out this strategy all the way until election day is that it demobilises their own left-leaning core voters and the unionised blue-collar workers. Usually the Social Democrats go back to their classic left-rhetoric in the last weeks of election campaigns to mobilise turnout among their own voters. Now when the race is so close it could turn out to be a big mistake not to focus on mobilising the social democratic core voters and instead put almost all the attention on attracting the liberal marginal voters. Soon we will know.



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