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How the Swedish centre-right deals with populism

Sweden's centre-right parties have shifted from a dismissve to an accomodative strategy towards the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats. Can it work?

The 2018 Swedish election was a watershed. The incumbent left-wing government, led by the Social Democrats (SAP) in alliance with the Green party (MP) and supported by the left-socialists (V), won one more seat than the alliance of the traditional parties of the right — conservative Moderates (M), Liberals (L), Centre party (C) and Christian Democrats (KD) — but fell far short of a majority. The largest parties of the left and right, the SAP and M, had terrible elections, with the former receiving less than 30 per cent of the vote, its lowest vote share since 1911, and the latter less than 20 per cent.

Voters shifted from both parties to the populist-right Sweden Democrats (SD), which received 17.5 per cent of the vote. This was its largest share ever — large enough to ensure that a right-wing majority government could not be formed without its support.

After four months of negotiations, a landmark agreement which split the traditional left- and right-wing blocs in Swedish politics — the so-called January agreement (*Januariavtalet*)—was finally reached. This enabled the SAP's Stefan Löfven to return as prime minister, having struck bargains with other left parties as well as the Liberal and Centre parties.

The new SAP-Green government had, however, only 116 seats in parliament, out of the 175 needed for a majority. It was burdened from the outset by the substantial concessions it had to make to the Liberal and Centre parties to get them to break with their traditional alliance partners and commit to not voting against the new government.

Vociferous debate

The weakness of the government which emerged from the 2018 elections

is compounded by the sustained strength of the SD: polls show the party continues to enjoy the backing of nearly one in five voters. This has generated a vociferous debate about how to deal with the SD and create stable majority governments capable of dealing with the country's problems. Since such issues are being debated across Europe, it is worth looking at the evolution of the Swedish debate more closely.

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Until the last election, all the mainstream Swedish parties adopted a 'dismissive' strategy towards the SD. Most obviously, this entailed an unwillingness to work with the party during election campaigns or when forming governments. But the mainstream parties' dismissal of the SD went beyond a refusal to co-operate with the party. Until relatively recently, mainstream parties ignored or downplayed many of the concerns on which, as with other right-wing populist parties, the SD thrived: immigration, assimilation, 'law and order' and so on.

Bo Rothstein and Sven Steinmo noted in *Social Europe*, for example, that while Sweden had experienced a greater influx of migrants and refugees than at any point in its modern history or proportionately than in any other European country and 'popular opinion polls indicated significant dissatisfaction with these policies', all established parties, even the M, had supported the 'open door':

Anyone who questioned this policy — from within the established parties, the media, or academia — was instantly tagged as reprobate or racist and pushed to one side. Swedish voters who wanted a somewhat more moderate refugee policy (perhaps something like that followed in Norway or Denmark) had no party to turn to — except the Sweden Democrats.

However morally satisfying and normatively desirable the dismissive strategy might be, the continued popularity of the SD made clear that it did not work. Why?

Salient and distinctive

Scholars generally find that convergence between mainstream parties is associated with the rise of radical parties, because it waters down the profile of the former and gives voters looking for alternatives nowhere to turn. This dynamic is particularly pronounced when mainstream parties

converge on positions far from that of a significant number of voters. This, of course, is precisely what happened in Sweden and elsewhere.

The rise of the SD was not driven primarily by a shift in citizens' preferences, with voters becoming, for example, more racist or xenophobic — indeed in Sweden, as in many other European countries, just the opposite was the case. Rather, the SD were given the opportunity to capture the support of many voters because mainstream parties did not offer voters with moderate to conservative positions on immigration a place to turn.

As with other radical or niche parties, right-wing populists thrive, in short, when they can emphasise issues that are *salient* to voters (as immigration became to voters in Sweden and other European countries over the past years) and offer positions on them that are attractive and *distinctive* (approximating the preferences of many voters and differing from what other parties offer).

Undercutting support for these parties over the long-term requires, accordingly, diminishing the salience of immigration.

By 2018 the failure of the dismissive strategy in Sweden was evident. After the election the conservative and Christian-democrat parties began openly shifting towards what might be called an 'accommodative' strategy, indicating they would consider co-operating with the SD to make possible the formation of a right-wing government in 2022. Perhaps more surprising, the Liberal party — which has a more 'centrist' profile than the M and KD and took, as noted above, the unprecedented step of breaking with its traditional allies after the 2018 election precisely to shut the SD out of power — recently voted to shift course too. Can an accommodative strategy succeed?

Underlying conditions

Such a strategy can only work if it addresses the underlying conditions which enable right-wing populists such as the SD to prosper. The first is distinctiveness. Wooing voters away from the SD requires offering voters with concerns about immigration and related issues a moderate to conservative alternative to the racist and xenophobic rhetoric and policies peddled by the party. This is what the M and KD have been doing, particularly since the 2018 election.

This shift is necessary, but probably not sufficient. Partly this is because

in Sweden, as in many other European countries, populist parties have been around long enough to 'own' the immigration issue: they are seen by voters as having the most consistent and reliable positions on it. Citizens voting on the basis of concerns about immigration may, accordingly, prefer the 'real' thing over parties of the right which have only recently shifted course.

The second condition therefore which needs to be addressed to deal with right-wing populism is salience. Since anxieties about immigration drive support for the SD and other right-wing populist parties, as long as immigration remains central to political debate and competition such parties will flourish.

Undercutting support for these parties over the long-term requires, accordingly, diminishing the salience of immigration. Over the past years in-migration in Sweden and other European countries has dropped but concerns about labour-market inclusion, integration, crime and 'terrorism' remain. Dealing forthrightly and effectively with these concerns would diminish their importance or salience to voters, enabling them to turn their attention to issues on which the SD, as with other populist parties, lack distinctive positions.

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