

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

NORMALISING THE PARIAH

The Sweden Democrats Path from
Isolation to Government

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Within a decade, the Sweden Democrats have fundamentally transformed the Swedish political landscape when it comes to party competition, government formation as well as political debate and decision-making. The isolationist strategy towards the Sweden Democrats, came to an end in 2022.



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It remains to be seen in what ways Sweden, that has been internationally recognised as a modern, tolerant and progressive state with regards to migration, multiculturalism, internationalism, gender equality, LGBTQ-rights, the environment and climate, will change with this conservative turn.

Sweden has, compared to other European countries, been a latecomer when it comes to the representation of a radical right-wing party in parliament, and was, until recently, described as a European exception with no radical right party in parliament (Demker 2012). With the parliamentary breakthrough and the rapid electoral growth of the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) since 2010, the mainstreaming of its narrative and policies among some of the other parliamentary parties and the acceptance of the SD as a legitimate party with governmental credibility has been established.

The isolationist strategy towards the Sweden Democrats that had been pursued by the other parliamentary parties since 2010 has definitively come to an end in 2022. The Sweden Democrats now function as a support party for the centre-right government consisting of the conservative Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*, M), the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) and the Liberal Party (*Liberalerna*, L). Even though the SD is the largest party in the right-wing bloc it has accepted a role as a support party to the government, thus refraining from demanding ministerial positions. This is not a new phenomenon in Swedish parliamentary history as the great majority of governments have been minority governments with backing by support parties.

But this time the constellation is different and political power has shifted to the right-wing block. The previously isolated Sweden Democrats for the first time will have direct access to governmental decision-making. Even though the parties now in government clearly stated during the election campaign that they were positive about forming a cabinet with the support of the SD, as a matter of fact it was also a precondition for their governmental power. They were, however, not prepared to include the SD as full members in the government coalition.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE WITHOUT MINISTERS

The cooperation between the government and the SD is regulated by a specific agreement, the *Tidö-avtalet*, which covers seven areas of cooperation, to some extent how the cooperation shall be carried out as well as the government's budget (Tidöavtalet 2022). The areas of cooperation, as they are defined in the agreement, are crime, migration and integration, climate and energy, health care and education. The SD has, in exchange for not receiving ministerial portfolios, left their mark on governmental proposals, especially in the areas of crime, migration and integration. The number of quota refugees will be reduced from 5,500 to 900 per year. Deportation will be made easier while obtaining citizenship will become more difficult. Social benefits are to be reduced for non-citizens and asylum centres are to be set up outside of Sweden. These are among some of the proposals that are to be investigated and, if they are realised, Sweden would become – together with Denmark – one of the countries with the strictest legislation in the area of migration within the EU. Longer penalties, anonymous witnesses and

police visitation zones, where the police could undertake visitation without concrete criminal suspicion, are some of the policy proposals focusing on crime. The SD will have their own civil servants in the central coordination unit of the cabinet, (*regeringskansliet*), in order to prepare and oversee the preparation of legislative proposals. The SD has also for the first time obtained four chairmanships of parliamentary committees¹, where the parliament addresses and negotiates the government's proposals, and the position of the Vice Speaker of the parliament.

IDEOLOGY AND PARTY ORGANISATION OF THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

In 2010, the SD made its parliamentary breakthrough with 5.7 per cent of the vote. It has increased its share of the vote in every election since its parliamentary debut. In the 2014 elections the SD received 12.9 per cent of the vote, rising to 17.5 per cent in 2018. In the 2022 elections one out of five voters supported the SD, which won 20.5 per cent. While the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*, S) remain the largest party with 30.3 per cent of the vote, the SD replaced the Moderates (19.1 per cent) as the second largest party. The party has developed a nation-wide party organisation and the membership has increased from 5,000 in 2010 to 33,000 in 2022. While almost all other Swedish political parties have lost party members, the SD continues to grow. With the help of increased public party support, the SD has built up a member-based party organisation resembling that of mainstream parties with a democratic chain of command, regional and local branches, a women's organisation (*SD Kvinnor*) and a youth section (*Ungsvenskarna*). The SD is more centralised than the other Swedish parties when it comes to providing the leadership with greater control of the party organisation (Jungar 2016). The leadership has tried to curb ongoing factionalisation by excluding more than 100 members since 2010 and cutting ties with the former more radical youth organisation (*Sverigedemokratisk Ungdom*). The party runs its own YouTube channel, *Riks*, and has established the think-tank *Oikos*.

IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND CURRENT DIRECTION

The SD is a populist radical right-wing party combining nativism and authoritarianism with populism (Jungar & Jupskås 2014, Strömbäck & al 2016). It was founded in 1988 and originated from neo-Nazi subcultures, as well as neo-populist nationalist and anti-immigration mobilisation in the late 1980s. Nationalism was from the start the core of the SD ideology, reflected in resistance to immigration and European integration, while defending "Swedish traditions and values" threatened by migrant cultures. From the start the party made authoritarian appeals for stricter policies on crime

¹ The Committee on Labour Market, the Committee on Justice, the Committee on Industry and Trade and the Committee on Foreign Affairs.

(re-introduction of the death penalty), traditional family values, restricted abortion rights and opposition to LGBTQ-rights, but the party has now adapted its policy to the existing legislation and has, from a Swedish perspective, mainstream views. It is against the death penalty, pro-abortion, and favours adoption rights for same-sex couples (Jungar & Jupskås 2014). In 2011, social conservatism was added as a second ideological principle of the SD in addition to nationalism. On the socioeconomic left-right spectrum, the SD is situated in the centre: supportive of the welfare state, and particularly the positions of hard-working people, small businesspeople, pensioners, the elderly and families (Jungar & Jupskås 2014). Welfare chauvinism by which welfare should be prioritised for the native population is part of the SD narrative, in which immigration is considered a threat to welfare access for “native” Swedes and the financing of the welfare state. In its party programme, the SD wants Sweden to exit the EU, however, since the European election campaign 2019, the general rhetoric is more positive towards the EU and it is thus unclear when, how and even if they will pursue this position. Despite supporting a national defense, the SD has supported Sweden’s application to join NATO.

The SD embarked on the path to becoming an accepted and legitimate parliamentary party under the leadership of Jimmie Åkesson, who was elected party leader in 2005 directly from the position as the leader of the SD youth organisation. This has been reflected among other things in the policy repositionings described above, which were preconditions for becoming a party with governmental credibility. Their notion of nationalism has been slightly modified as has their position on who can become a Swede, meaning being Swedish is no longer a matter of ethnic, cultural or historical legacy, rather it is a matter of learning Swedish and living according to “Swedish values”. However, the party’s immigration and integration policies have not become less strict, something which is quite clear from the SD’s impact of the present government.

WHO ARE THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS’ VOTERS?

Migration, integration and policies on crime are the main reasons why Swedes vote for the SD. The SD electorate is male-dominated: Even though the share of female voters has increased, 25 per cent of Swedish men and 16 per cent of women voted for the radical right party in the 2022 elections (SVT Vallokalasunder sökning 2022). SD voters live in smaller towns and rural areas, and display greater distrust for political parties, public institutions and the mainstream media than the average voter (Sannerstedt 2016). The SD has taken votes from both the Moderate Party and the Social Democrats and thereby contributed to the shrinking of these two parties over the last two decades. In the 2022 election, the Christian Democratic party actually lost most voters to the SD. The SD has increasingly mobilised workers as well as small businesspeople, and now competes with the Social Democrats over the position as the largest party among workers and trade union members (Oscarsson & Demker 2015).

MAINSTREAM PARTY RESPONSES TO THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

Sweden is a parliamentary democracy with proportional elections, and a four per cent threshold for receiving parliamentary seats. Since the late 1980s, the number of parliamentary parties has increased from five to the eight. A majority of the Swedish postwar governments have been minority cabinets, partly as a consequence of the practice of negative parliamentarism (Bergman 1993). While positive parliamentarism entails that a cabinet needs to mobilise a majority to support the government at the vote of the investiture, negative parliamentarism means that the cabinet only has to be tolerated, i.e. that a parliamentary majority is not opposed to the cabinet. Given the frequency of minority cabinets, the Swedish parliament has been important for the cabinet to find parliamentary backing for their proposals. Support parties have been necessary for the passing of government policies, and the parliamentary committees have been important arenas for negotiating policies that will pass in parliament.

While negative parliamentarism makes it easier to form governments, the cabinet needs to mobilise a parliamentary majority when passing the budget. The SD has, as will be recounted below, made use of their parliamentary blackmail power in this respect and forced governments to govern with the budget of the opposition.

The electoral breakthrough and growth of the SD has contributed to a more complicated parliamentary situation, not least regarding the formation of governments (Backlund 2022). With the SD’s entry into the Swedish parliament (*Riksdagen*) in 2010, the parliamentary parties formulated an informal “cordon sanitaire” stating that they would neither negotiate nor cooperate with the Sweden Democrats due to their historical origins in the extreme right and their radical migration and integration policies. The centre-right bloc, at the time made up of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Centre Party (known as The Alliance) still controlled more seats than the left-green bloc. The Alliance government, in power since 2006, could therefore remain in office after the 2010 elections.

As a matter of fact, the strategy of isolating the SD was reflected in the fact that the other parties increased their policy distance on the question of immigration. The government formulated more liberal policies when it came to asylum and labour migration with the support of the Green Party, echoing the confrontational strategy vis-a-vis the SD voiced by the Moderate Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt at that time: The SD should not be allowed to influence migration policies; neither directly nor indirectly. By the election of 2014, the distance between the SD and the mainstream right had increased (Backlund 2020). Indeed, the leaders of the Alliance parties committed themselves to resigning if they won fewer seats than the left bloc in the 2014 elections, in order to prevent the Sweden Democrats from exercising any political influence. Under such conditions an Alliance cabinet would have needed active support from the SD in the investiture vote, as well as in any subsequent roll call where the left voted no.

The Sweden Democrats, then possessing the pivotal blackmail position between the centre-right and the centre-left of which none controlled a majority of their own, had consequently an incentive to put pressure on the government. They declared that they would not support a cabinet that made no concessions on immigration. In order to keep the centre-right Alliance bloc intact – even in opposition – and to keep their promise to isolate the SD, the parties abstained from the investiture vote in 2014, allowing the Social Democrats and the Greens to form a minority government with external support from the Left Party.

From their pivotal position, the SD kept challenging the mainstream parties (Backlund 2020). In December 2014, the SD effectively blocked the red-green government's budget from passing, by disregarding the informally established voting practice in this area. This 'irresponsible' behaviour made the SD an even more unlikely coalition partner, but probably pleased their voters. In order to avoid a snap election, the government and the Alliance parties entered negotiations about how the earlier practice, which had been disrupted by the Sweden Democrats, could be upheld. The threat of a new election was averted when the parties announced the 'December agreement' (*Decemberöverenskommelsen*), according to which the prime-ministerial candidate supported by a coalition of parties larger than any other conceivable coalition would be tolerated, enabling it to form a government. The agreement would allow the larger of the two blocs to govern as a minority, regardless of how many seats the Sweden Democrats had. The SD thus remained without influence over the process of government formation, but stated that it now was 'the only opposition party'. However, the December agreement came to an end within less than a year, when dissenting fractions within the Christian Democrats forced that party to defect.

At the time of the 2018 election, the parliamentary parties all remained committed to not cooperating with the Sweden Democrats. The centre-right parties had diverged from each other on immigration policy and on how to deal with the SD. The Alliance failed to win more seats than the left-green bloc in the election, and the Centre Party and the Liberals were unwilling to form a minority government that granted the SD any blackmail potential. Furthermore, the two liberal parties actively opposed an attempt by the Moderates and the Christian Democrats to form such a cabinet. Instead, the Centre Party and the Liberals negotiated a support-party agreement (the 'January agreement') with the red-green government, helping it to remain in office.

THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S INFLUENCE ON SWEDISH POLITICS AND OTHER PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES

After the refugee situation in 2015, and particularly after the 2018 elections, the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, as well as the Social Democrats, formulated more restrictive policies on migration, asylum, integration and law and order. They have to different degrees

adopted the SD narrative that immigration and "failed" integration are the causes of what many people saw during the election of 2022 as some of the most pressing problems facing Sweden, gang-related crime and segregation. Before the year 2019 was over, the Moderates and Christian Democrats opened the door to negotiations with the SD, and SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson was speaking of a 'new conservative bloc' that would make a good basis for a government coalition. The Liberal Party changed its stance on SD after heated internal debates and joined the Moderate and Christian Democratic parties in promoting a centre-right government in 2021. The new 'conservative' bloc has made joint public statements on, for instance, crime and energy policies and on occasion campaigned together. The Centre Party has sternly opposed any cooperation with the Sweden Democrats.

Consequently, the policy positions of the SD are no longer fundamentally different from the majority of the other parties, but have become normalised. To a large degree this applies to the Social Democrats as well: The party has since 2015 formulated more restrictive policies with regard to asylum and family reunification. Firstly, in the form of temporary legislation during the high inflow of immigrants and their relatives in 2016 but in 2021 the temporary law was made permanent. The Social Democratic Party has throughout history been strict on migration policy, and there are no signs that the party would turn the clock back and advocate more liberal migration and integration policies (Hinnfors et al 2012). The same applies to questions related to combating organized crime where the Social Democrats are close to the policies proposed by the present centre-right government. In addition, leading Social Democrats have stated that their integration policies have failed, and some have introduced ethnic arguments instead of the classic socioeconomic ones, for example focusing on employment and education to deal with the segregation in Swedish society. The former Minister of Interior, Anders Ygeman, for example proposed during the electoral campaign that a maximum 50 per cent non-Nordic inhabitants should be allowed to live in exposed residential areas, and the ex-Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson did not want to see any "Chinatowns, Somalitowns or Little Italys in Sweden". Over a short time, the Social Democrats started using narratives resembling those of the Danish Social Democratic Party, which has been outbidding the Danish radical right-wing party.

Within a decade, the SD has fundamentally transformed the Swedish political landscape when it comes to party competition, government formation as well as political debate and decision-making. The mainstream parties have gradually accepted as well as adopted the radical right-wing party's discourse, particularly on migration, integration and law and order. It remains to be seen in what ways Sweden, that has been internationally recognised as a modern, open, tolerant and progressive state with regards to migration, multiculturalism, internationalism, gender equality, LGBTQ-rights, the environment and climate, will change with this conservative turn.

In conclusion, can the Swedish case provide lessons on how to contain the influence of a radical right-wing party? The rationale behind the isolationist strategy was to prevent the SD from having any influence over policy-making, particularly on migration and integration, while simultaneously maintaining a social stigma and a threshold for the voters to cast their votes for the nationalist party. As a means to prevent people from voting for the SD, this strategy failed, while the SD – until now – has had no direct influence over the material policy-making, but as explained above, the blackmail position has impacted on the budget process as government formation. The impact of the SD has been indirect as the other political parties to different degrees have adopted the rhetoric and policies on migration, asylum, integration and law and order resembling those of the SD as a part of their strategy to win back voters from the SD. However, until now, this strategy has failed since the SD during the last decade has grown into the second largest political party in Sweden. The fact that the party has been in opposition and has not taken political responsibility has obviously helped the SD to increase its share of the vote in three consecutive elections. The question is whether this success story will come to an end now that the SD, as a support party, can be held accountable for the government's policies?

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