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On Sunday the 9th September 2018 the Swedish voted on the political party that they believe should represent them in Parliament. Sweden has been a perfect example of the Scandinavian model of politics for decades, with a focus on social welfare and progression. But for the first time in history, the 2018 election results left Sweden with an uncertain path forward as the populist Sweden Democrats party gained significant ground in expense of the traditionally powerful Social Democrats. This paper focuses on the question of why Swedish politics have diverted from its established path, and what the way forward may look like.

The Swedish Political System: Its Political Parties and their Campaign Points

[The Swedish system of government](#) is classified as a parliamentary democracy. The Swedish parliament, or Riksdag, includes the political parties that have managed to surpass a 4% threshold in the general elections. Parliament thus represents the people. The task of the parliament is to make decisions, where after the government implements them. In order to establish the government, the Riksdag appoints a prime minister (PM) and the PM chooses his ministers who will lead the ministries. Besides enforcing the Riksdag decisions, the government also proposes new laws and amendments whose implementation will be decided on by the parliament.

[The Social Democratic Party](#) (SAP) is historically the oldest and biggest political party in Sweden. It was founded in 1889 as a labour party and in 1917 it experienced a schism, where after the leaving members formed the Left party. For many years the

Social Democrats were able to maintain dominance in Sweden as a centre-left party, sometimes taking more than 50% of the votes, sometimes going into a coalition with leftist parties. Consequentially, the Social Democrats [have had a big impact](#) on Swedish politics and society. The party is especially well known for its establishment of the Swedish welfare system, also called 'Social Democracy'. By implementing this system, the Social Democrats transformed the Swedish health, education and pension systems. Additionally, they also boosted its economy, thus providing people with jobs and income. A downside to this impressive welfare system is that during times of economic hardships it is more difficult for the government to curtail (social) expenses and mitigate negative economic developments. The party's main [campaign points](#) were better universal health care, improved pensions, higher employment, more jobs, improved education and a strong rule of law.

The Moderate Party (M) for a long time played only a small role in the background of Swedish politics. In the first decades after its initiation, the party argued for a more efficient market economy, lower taxes and less government involvement in the economy. However, when more difficult economic times kicked off around the 80s, the Moderates grew and eventually became the [second largest party in the country](#). The party's main [campaign points](#) were reduced taxes, less government spending, deregulation and privatization of public services.

[The Sweden Democrats Party](#) (SD) was founded in 1988 with its roots in the Neo-Nazi movement. It holds nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-EU views. Initially, real presence and representation in

Swedish politics were unattainable due to the questionable backgrounds of many prominent members of the Sweden Democrats regarding Nazism, the party's extremism, and ties with more flagrantly extremist groups. However, the combination of the charismatic Jimmie Åkesson as its leader and the new social climate with the SD's explicit views on immigration has benefited the party. They have significantly increased the party's popularity. The party's campaign was mostly based on anti-immigrant, anti-EU, and nationalist policies.

[The Centre Party](#) (C) was founded in 1913 as the Farmers' League. It focused on farmers' rights and freedoms in a largely industrialized society. Since then the party has built on this view and evolved and expanded its platform into environmental issues and decentralization of government authority. The broadening of the party's topics of concern also came with a name change to the Centre Party. The party is pro-immigration and pay equality. It currently focuses on the support of small businesses and entrepreneurs. The party's 2018 [election focus](#) was rural development and power.

The Left Party (V) was founded in 1917 as a breakaway group of the Social Democrats in order to take a more left-oriented route. Since then the party has [refocused](#) on feminism and creating an egalitarian society particularly highlighting women's rights, equality, young people's rights, and anti-racism. [Traditionally the party has argued](#) for public ownership rather than privatization, and against publicly funded companies making a profit. It is anti-EU membership.

[The Christian Democrats Party](#) (KD) was formed in 1964 in [an effort to](#) bring

Christian values to the surface in politics. The party's main campaign points were better health care for everyone, better care for the elderly (e.g. pensions), and better security for Swedish citizens (e.g. more police on the streets).

[The Liberals](#) (L) were founded in 1934 as the People's Party on the basis of equal rights for all, specifically voting rights for both the male and female population. The party's main issues are better schools and education, a better integration policy, lower taxes, provision of personal assistance to disabled people, and deeper EU cooperation and Swedish NATO membership. They also support freedom of choice regarding, for example, schools and health care.

The last party in the Riksdag is [the Green Party](#) (MP) whose main concerns are climate and the environment. It has argued for an increased environmental budget, taxes on air travel, cleaner transport, and the closing of nuclear reactors.

The Electoral Campaign

The 2018 electoral campaign was characterized by anti-immigration sentiments built on the current economic and cultural tension in Sweden. The populist Sweden Democrats party focused on reeling in the working class, which some argue is a part of Swedish society that has been neglected by the previous establishment. The welfare state as Sweden knows it could not be used as a main campaign point anymore by the Social Democrats, and the SD party was aptly able to play into this by underlining rising inequality and increasing law and order concerns while connecting it with [the anti-immigration sentiment](#).

The Election Results

After some initial shuffling, the final results appeared as follows:

Party	Seats Gained/Lost	Total Seats	Riksdag %
Social Democrats	-13	100	28.26
New Moderates	-14	70	19.84
Swedish Democrats	+13	62	17.53
Centre Party	+9	31	8.61
Left Party	+7	28	8.0
Christian Democrats	+6	22	6.32
Liberals	+1	20	5.49
Green Party	-9	16	4.41

According to these final results, the Riksdag alliance division looks as such:

1. Left bloc: 40.76% → 144 seats
2. Centre-right alliance: 39.9% → 143 seats
3. Sweden Democrats: 17.53% → 62 seats

It is clear that the Left bloc and the Centre-right alliance are approximately tied. Both the Social Democrats and the Moderates lost a significant amount of seats in favor

of the Sweden Democrats. Neither one of the established blocs were able to constitute a majority that can form a majority government. In this situation, the Sweden Democrats are the decisive factor that will majorly impact the coalition-forming process.

The following visual shows us [the final results](#) of the general election. It gives a good overview of the division within the Riksdag and the respective parties that are discussed:

King: Carl XVI. Gustav · State Minister: Stefan Löfven (S) · Governing parties: S, MP

● Legislative elections: Riksdag, 4-year term, 349 seats, 4% threshold, party-list PR:

Party		2018		2014	
		%	Seats	%	Seats
 Socialdemokratiska Arbetarepartiet (S) [ⓘ] Social Democratic Workers' Party	Social democracy	28,3%	100	31,0%	113
 Moderata Samlingspartiet (M) [ⓘ] Moderate Coalition Party	Liberal conservatism	19,8%	70	23,3%	84
 Sverigedemokraterna (SD) [ⓘ] Sweden Democrats	Right-wing populism National conservatism	17,5%	62	12,9%	49
 Centerpartiet (C) [ⓘ] Centre Party	Liberalism Agrarianism	8,6%	31	6,1%	22
 Vänsterpartiet (V) [ⓘ] Left Party	Socialism Feminism Euro-scepticism	8,0%	28	5,7%	21
 Kristdemokraterna (KD) [ⓘ] Christian Democrats	Christian democracy Conservatism	6,3%	22	4,6%	16
 Liberalerna (L) [ⓘ] Liberals	Liberalism Social liberalism	5,5%	20	5,4%	19
 Miljöpartiet De Gröna (MP) [ⓘ] Environment Party The Greens	Green politics	4,4%	16	6,9%	25
Others		1,6%	-	4,0%	-
Total		-	349	-	349
Turnout			87,1%		85,8%

© 2018 Wolfram Nordstieck. Source: Valmyndigheten (<http://www.val.se>).
Archive: [Elections \(1948-2014\)](#).

The Social Democrats' Declining Popularity

The Social Democrats party is the oldest and biggest party in Sweden. Since the last century, it has consistently received anywhere between 35 and 50 percent of the votes in Swedish parliamentary elections. For this reason, the Social Democrats established a clear dominance in the party system. However, especially since the 2000s, the party has experienced increasing political opposition and decreasing support from the population. This can be connected with many internal and external societal issues.

The Social Democrats, along with many other center-left political parties, built up their foundation and support from blue-collar jobs where they defended workers' rights. However, Sweden has been seeing a decline in blue-collar jobs in favor of higher tech or service-oriented ones. As a result, the Social Democrats' usual voting base is being depleted. Moreover, many Swedish citizens found themselves leading difficult lives following the global economic crash of 2008, with little

assistance from their government. At the time, the Social Democratic party had the majority in the Riksdag and thus took the brunt of the blame. The people stopped trusting them enough to vote them into office.

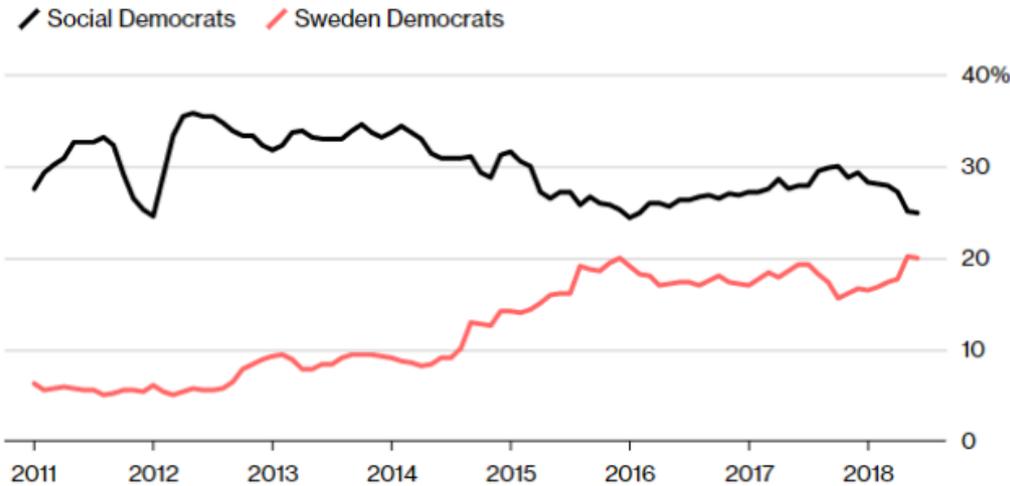
A second issue is that the Social Democrats' welfare system is not enough to pull in the voters anymore. The concept of universal health care is no longer seen as a partisan issue, even though the idea originated with the Social Democrats and it has been a strong campaign point ever since. In the public eye, universal healthcare has shifted from being viewed as a luxury to a given. Due to this, more parties have been able to expand from the same platform and specialize in other areas. However, the Social Democrats have not specialized in many other topics. Thus, they [have been losing voters](#) to other parties that are bringing more to the table.

However, the biggest issue curtailing the party's popularity is [immigration](#). The influx of non-assimilating refugees from Middle Eastern and North African regions became a point of contention among

Swedish citizens and gave way to nationalist sentiments. This is moving the traditional support of the working class, trade unions, and union members towards more right-wing, anti-immigration parties such as the Sweden Democrats. The Social Democrats' toughening stance on immigration, the promise of bigger pensions, and reminders of the importance of Sweden's welfare state have not been able to return mass support to the once so powerful party. The Sweden Democrats were able to capitalize on this. They

rebranded themselves from their Nazi-affiliated, white supremacist origins to be more appealing to the masses. The party has been steadily rising to prominence, and now has gained a notable presence in the Riksdag at the expense of the Social Democrats.

All of the aforementioned factors have contributed to the decreasing popularity of the Social Democratic party and the parliamentary vote of no confidence after the elections regarding [Löfven's role as PM](#).



Source: Kantar Sifo data on combined Novus, Kantar Sifo, Ipsos polls

Possible Coalitions

The general parliamentary elections in Sweden on September 9th have left the Swedish political field with an uncertain future. However, there are a few already defined steps to be made in order to form a new Swedish government. The first step is to elect the Speaker of parliament. On September 24th, the Riksdag elected [Andreas Norlén](#) (M) as Speaker, he won in a vote against Åsa Lindestam from the Social Democratic Party. Norlén is required to propose a new Prime Minister so that he or she can appoint the other government ministers. Norlén has to work on a proposal to be approved by the Riksdag while in the meantime [Löfven will lead a caretaker government](#). In order to

find a suitable PM candidate, the Speaker meets with all the party leaders of the Riksdag. When Norlén has his proposal ready, he will present it in the Chamber of the Riksdag. This proposal will also introduce the parties that will be included in the government. The Riksdag will then vote on the Speaker's proposal. If they oppose, the speaker has three more chances to present a new proposal. This has not been necessary in previous coalition forming.

The actual formation of a governing coalition will be very complicated on this occasion. None of the traditional blocs has been able to win a majority in the Riksdag which seats 349 MPs. For a majority government, 175 seats are needed. The left

bloc, which governed from 2014 to 2018, won 144 seats while the Centre-right alliance followed closely with 143 seats. Lastly, the Sweden Democrats earned 62 seats. This means that because neither the Left bloc nor the Centre-right alliance managed to receive a majority of the votes, [other options will have to be explored](#). More specifically, a coalition with the Sweden Democrats will have to be considered for either one of the blocs to be able to form a majority government. However, almost all parties have stated that they [will not be negotiating](#) with the Sweden Democrats. The Christian Democrats Party is the only party that has stated that, if need be, would be willing to do so.

Firstly, if the Alliance were to come together with the Sweden Democrats, they would be able to form a majority government together. However, a complicating factor is the internal political division in the Alliance regarding liberals and conservatives. Thus while the conservative wing (specifically the Christian Democrats) of the Alliance might theoretically be able to come to some form of agreement with the Sweden Democrats, the Liberals (Centre Party and Liberals) are [unwilling or unable to consider this option](#).

A second option would be the formation of a minority government of the Centre-right alliance. In this case, it would still need additional parliamentary support in order to pass their bills in the Riksdag. The Sweden Democrats have expressed willingness to hold talks regarding support for the Centre-right alliance on the condition that they would be able to have considerable influence on policy. The question of immigration will be the most important in this case. The Sweden Democrats specifically invited the Moderates and the Christian Democrats to negotiate terms, but both members of the

right-wing Alliance declined this invitation. The leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, stated afterward that the power to influence policy would be a prerequisite for his party's support. This could be done either by policy concessions or awarding the Sweden Democrats with major positions on parliamentary commissions that draft legislation. This has not been seen as [a serious option](#) by the Alliance parties.

The left bloc would theoretically be able to form a (weak) minority government if they were able to make a deal with the Centre Party and the Liberals to pass legislation that they can reach agreement on in the Riksdag. However, this third option is hindered by the Sweden Democrats who have stated that they would overturn such a government by, for example, opposing the budget bill of the new government.

A fourth alternative would be a grand coalition with the Social Democrats and the Moderates working together and forming a government. This has never happened in the history of Swedish politics. While they have been known to work together on big issues such as pensions and defense, integrating into one government is a different story and unlikely to happen. The Centre-left bloc and the Moderates have previously stated that they would be able to come to a mutual agreement with one side forming a minority government with the support of the other side in the Riksdag. However, there is disagreement on who should lead such a coalition. Löfven has stated that because the Social Democrats are the biggest, they should lead such a coalition, but the Moderates disagree. Besides the issue of leadership, it is unclear on how they would merge their contrasting ideologies.

A final option would be for parties to leave their particular bloc. The leader of the

Liberal Party Jan Bjorklund, for example, has already stated that he would leave the Alliance in order to cooperate with the Social Democrats or the Greens [before cooperating with the Sweden Democrats](#).

What becomes clear is that the complicating factor in this process is the fact that the Sweden Democrats have become a force that is practically impossible to disregard, in contrast with the past few decades. Sweden is not alone in this dilemma, it has become a trend in European politics for right-wing parties to gain a foothold after recent multi-party

elections and complicate the government formation process. Some prime examples are The Netherlands, Germany, and Italy, the latter of which was forced to implement an all-populist government in March 2018 after the Democratic Party decided not to cooperate with either one of the populist parties. Forming a new government in Europe is becoming increasingly difficult as forming a government coalition with a right-wing party is still considered unacceptable. When these kinds of parties keep rising in popularity and representation, the question is which options are left?

Infographics: Possible coalitions



Created by Emma Welsink

Coalition formation: a First Attempt

On October 2, Norlén (M) held talks with the representatives of all the parties in the Riksdag regarding the formation of a new government. After discussions with the party leaders, the Speaker gave Moderate Party leader Ulf Kristersson the task of exploring the possibilities of forming a new government. This choice was expected, due to the right-wing majority in the Riksdag and the departure of Stefan Löfven (SAP). Kristersson was supposed to present his final report on this issue by October 16 to the Speaker. By this time, he had to have gathered enough support to be able to become Prime Minister where after the speaker would determine whether he sees [the proposal fit for him](#) to present in the Riksdag Chamber.

Kristersson put forward two ideas. Firstly, he tried to get the Social Democrats to support an Alliance government, including all its members. But the Social Democrats refused to back the Alliance in the Riksdag and thus dismissed this option. Secondly, Kristersson proposed a government formed out of the Moderates and a number of parties from the Alliance. This would be a minority government that needs extra support in parliament to pass legislation. Naturally, such a construction would depend on the Sweden Democrats' support, which is why the Liberal party and the Centre party spoke out against this proposal. They firstly stated that they don't want to have to rely on the Sweden Democrats, and secondly that they wish to keep the Alliance together [rather than split it up into different directions](#). The Christian Democrats spoke out in favor of the second proposal, but their support alone is not enough to make it into a reality. On Sunday, October 14 Kristersson announced to the Speaker that, for now, [he would give up his attempts of getting support](#) for his Prime Ministership and the

formation of a government led by the Moderates.

Coalition formation: a Second and Third Attempt

After Kristersson's retreat, on Monday October 15 Speaker Norlén appointed Social Democrat leader Stefan [Löfven to try and win support for a new government](#). Löfven is currently leading an interim government, as he was voted out of his previous post of Prime Minister on September 25. He had two weeks to gain support and form a new government. Löfven was expected to approach the Centre and Liberal parties of the Alliance in order for them to support his government. However, as previously mentioned, the Centre and Liberal parties are aiming to keep the Alliance together. Besides that, they also still would like Kristersson to become Prime Minister. As the Social Democrats have stated that they would not consider cooperating with the Sweden Democrats it thus seemed that the [interim PM was in for a difficult task](#). After talks with the party leaders, Löfven announced that he was [unable to present a proposal](#) and accordingly withdrew his efforts to form a new government.

After Löfven's unsuccessful attempt, speaker of parliament Norlén decided to directly put Kristersson forward as Prime Minister in the Riksdag in an effort to appoint a non-interim successor and allow Kristersson to make a second attempt at forming a government. This move was in contrast to appointing a new candidate to lead negotiations before presenting it in parliament. On Wednesday November 14th the Riksdag met in an attempt at finally appointing a non-interim successor. However, with 195 rejecting votes, [Kristersson's bid for the position was voted down](#) by his own allies, namely the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, and the Liberals parties. The

party leaders expressed concerns that Kristersson's plan to create a center-right alliance would force them to rely on the votes and cooperation of the Sweden Democrats. It was the [first time in history](#) that the Riksdag rejected a PM candidate presented by the speaker of parliament, Norlén now has three attempts left before new elections will have to be called.

One day after this failed attempt, [Norlén appointed Centre Party leader](#) Annie Lööf as the third candidate for negotiating an agreement. A major complicating factor effectively blocking negotiations is the fact that the Moderates and the Christian Democrats do not want to cooperate with the Social Democrats while the Centre Party and Liberals do not want to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats. For this reason, it was no surprise that on November 22th [Lööf announced her withdrawal](#) from her efforts of forming a coalition. Thus currently the ball is back in the speaker's court. Norlén announced that he will hold a press conference on Friday 23th in which he will presumably present his vision on what the next step will be. There is no doubt about it that

Swedish politics continue to be in a deadlock, with no immediate solution visible.

The new government that will eventually lead Sweden will undoubtedly have to focus on the issue of immigration. Swedish society is deeply affected by this topic, and it has more or less taken over Swedish politics like it has in many European countries. Most likely, policy on the issue will be the subject of extensive discussions and eventually some amendments. In 2014 Sweden knew a generous refugee policy that made it possible for many refugees to arrive and apply for asylum (163.000 in 2015). But already in 2015, the government announced [restrictions on its refugee policy](#) to the EU minimum level. It has become clear that this has not eased the minds of the Swedish population, thus we can expect more extensive regulations. The Sweden Democrats, for example, argue that refugees should not be able to receive free healthcare. Since healthcare is a topic that is highly focused on by many of the Riksdag parties, this could be an issue that [will be discussed by the new government](#).

Conclusion

After decades of being the largest political party in the Riksdag and biggest ruling force in the Swedish government, the Social Democrats are experiencing an unprecedented decline in support. There are many reasons why they have been unable to please voters, such as the depletion of Swedes in workers union positions, and the party's shortcomings during the 2008 financial crisis. However, the most noteworthy contribution to the decline has been the 2014/2015 migrant crisis. The influx of migrants entering Sweden without completely assimilating made the Swedes uneasy. The Social Democrats' lack of a hard stance on immigration displeased a considerable share of the Swedish population which consequentially turned to upcoming

nationalist movements such as the Sweden Democrats.

The evident importance of migration in the minds of the Swedish population is a clear indication that this will be a focal point of any future Swedish government. The party that heads the future Riksdag will need a cohesive, comprehensive plan to address Sweden's migrant situation. Additionally, it will also be necessary for them to keep the nation's rising levels of nationalism in mind. Despite the Sweden Democrats' rising popularity among the public, every party within the Riksdag (apart from the Christian Democrats) is currently unwilling to ally themselves with them. Therefore, the Swedish Riksdag is bound to be divided regardless of whatever direction it eventually takes.

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