

# Sweden: right-wing coalition wins election by the narrowest of margins

Saturday 17 September 2022, by [NILSSON Petter](#), [WARLENIUS Rikard](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2022).

**With almost all votes counted from Sunday's election, it looks like Sweden's right-wing parties are set to take power with a razor-thin majority, ending eight years of social democratic government. For the first time, this conservative coalition also includes the far-right Sweden Democrats, who have emerged as the country's second largest party, despite their roots in Sweden's neo-Nazi movement. The result is an evident decline for the progressive spectrum of Swedish politics as a whole and the Left party in particular.**

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As of Monday, the right-wing bloc of Moderates, Christian Democrats, Liberals and the far-right Sweden Democrats have won 49,7 % of the vote, against the 48,8 % won by the other possible coalition of Social Democrats, Left, Greens and Centre party. The final votes will be counted on Wednesday but the Moderates leader Ulf Kristersson says he is ready to start forming a government.

After the 2018 election, it took four months of negotiations before a government could be appointed. Such a delay is unlikely this time, with the emergence to two distinct political blocs. These blocs do not signify a return to right and left as the dominating contest in Swedish politics, however, and there are big political differences within both coalitions. Indeed, the blocs were founded largely on the question of whether the far-right Sweden Democrats should be allowed to have an influence on the government or not. Four parties said no, four other parties said yes.

The "No to SD" bloc is led by the Social Democrats, who spent the election campaign triangulating the "Yes to SD" bloc in questions regarding migration and law and order, while being unable to articulate credible left economic policies since the bloc also included the neoliberal Centre party. This also made the differences between the possible government coalitions minimal. If the result stands, the conservative right can form a government, but will do so in the shadow of the Sweden Democrats becoming the second biggest party.

The Left party has attempted to break out of the shadow of the Social Democrats by going for a more classic social democratic profile, but in the end lost 1,4 % from last election at the national level. The overarching strategy for the Left party's election campaign was to gain ground rustbelt rural areas and this was not accomplished. The Left party gained two to three percent in each of the three biggest cities Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö – but this was not enough to offset the general

decline.

## **The far right is the only winner**

Summing up the previous election in 2018, we argued that ["the grand narrative of the election is the decline of the two largest parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, and the concurrent rise of the Sweden Democrats"](#). Unfortunately, this still holds true – even more so this time around. Some early votes, as well as votes from abroad, remain to be counted, but everything points to the rightwing conservative coalition winning by the slightest of margins. The Social Democrats gained 2,2 % from the last election while the Moderates lost – but these shifts say much less about the current situation than the rise of the Sweden Democrats to the position of second biggest party in Sweden at 20,6 %.

The Sweden Democrats were formed in 1988 out of the "Keep Sweden Swedish" movement and was composed of explicitly racist and neo-Nazi groups uniting under a common banner. The Sweden Democrats have spent the years since 1988 cleaning up their act, but it still remains an almost single-issue, anti-immigration party, whose members continuously slip-up, forget the new communication plan put in place by the leadership, and write racist slurs under pseudonyms on the internet.

The past 8 years have seen a plethora of negotiations to form different minority constellations, particular one-off agreements to pass reforms, and the ever-looming threat of new elections or votes of no confidence. The Social Democrats have been the only party in government during the last year, after the Green party left government when the last budget vote saw the passing of the budget proposal from the conservative-right coalition composed by the Moderates, Liberals, and Christian Democrats. The Green party refused to govern on a budget proposal negotiated with the xenophobic Sweden Democrats and which entailed slashing climate reforms, so they promptly left government, while the Social Democrats stayed and governed on an opposition budget.

The Social Democrats response to declining voter share has been to try to entice one or two of the rightwing parties into coalitions, thereby undermining the ability of the Moderates to form a majority. The Centre party disdain for the Sweden Democrats made them the likeliest candidate, but they are neoliberal on economic issues and have exacted a hefty price for their support. The only possible left coalition also needs support of the Left party and the Greens. Centre party leader Annie Lööf has explicitly stated that she will never support a government with Left party ministers – or indeed even left policies. Meanwhile, Left party leader Nooshi Dadgostar has stated that their support is conditioned on being part of the government.

On the other side, the conservative-right bloc of the Moderates, Liberals, and Christian Democrats have now normalised cooperation with the Sweden Democrats, even though the other coalition partners maintain that the latter are still too immature to have ministers in government. With the Sweden Democrats as the biggest party in the bloc, however, it will only be a matter of time before they claim ministers. The Sweden Democrats will probably demand reforms first, rather than ministerial roles, while they train their cadre with presence in councils and committees.

## **Two unstable coalitions**

This election campaign has been a continuous exposition of unsuccessful populism, with the Social Democrats trying to win over right-leaning voters by promising to restrict migration, be tough on crime, increase military spending, accommodate business interests and not put forward any major tax reforms. The conservative right's campaign was not much different, so the election largely centered on the credibility of the party leaders and their personal ability to form a government and

“lead Sweden”. With both coalitions being relatively loose, there was plenty of room for maneuvering and populist proposals by the individual parties – it didn’t matter if they were internally contradictory, as any necessary accommodations could take place after the election. This dynamic has evidently been most successful for the Sweden Democrats.

After the previous election, a cordon sanitaire against the Sweden Democrats was formalised in the “January Agreement”, where the Social Democrats could rule with the support of the Greens, Liberals and Centre party and with the toleration of the Left party. This agreement came with 73 concrete reforms – with a strong right leaning profile – but was only partly carried out. In 2021 the Left party called for a vote of no confidence in the government to stop a policy set to replace negotiated rents with market rents in the housing sector.

This meant the collapse of the January Agreement and, in quick succession, the cordon sanitaire was broken and the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and – most recently – the Liberals started openly cooperating with the Sweden Democrats. Now these parties are aiming to form a government whose shared solutions to the biggest policy challenges outside of crime and migration still remain unclear.

## **Major issues**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine initiated a rapid change in the 200 year old military non-alignment policy and, within a few weeks of the war’s opening shots, Sweden had applied for membership in NATO. Turkey’s autocratic leader Erdogan sensed an opportunity and listed his demands to allow Sweden’s entry, including the extradition of 33 mainly Kurdish residents of Sweden, as well as an end to any support for the YPG troops in Syria.

Social Democrat foreign minister Ann Linde had just a few months earlier declared the YPG to be heroes for their struggle against ISIS, yet the same foreign minister was soon negotiating terms with Turkey. Old friends are now left to fend for themselves, Kurds are to be extradited to torture, and only the Left party is still able to criticise Turkey’s abuse of human rights – but the Social Democrats succeeded in removing the issue of joining NATO from the election campaign in just a few swift moves.

The question of crime has been one of the major issues of the election. For the first time ever in Sweden, voters have rated crime “most important issue” in polls. The facts tell quite different stories, depending on which ones you choose to focus on. On the one hand, lethal violence in Sweden has been constant for several decades and is now actually slightly lower than in the 80s and 90s.

However, the last few years have also seen a large increase in gun violence and deaths between warring gangs in the major cities. Even though these are mainly internal disputes of a few hundred people, the resulting shootouts have taken place in public spaces and has spread a general mood of fear and impending chaos, fed by tabloids and right-wing pundits and more often than not seen as a consequence of “unrestrained” immigration.

The Social Democrats have legislated higher sentences, increased funding and allowed more repressive powers for the police. They have also started to explicitly discuss crime rates as a result of excessive immigration. The conservative right has followed suit and are of course willing to go even further: the Moderates proposing “stop and search” areas where no suspicion is needed for police intervention, the Christian democrat leader asking why police didn’t severely injure more civilians after riots, and the Sweden Democrats suggesting the eviction of the whole family of anyone convicted.

## **The Left party election campaign**

The Left party adopted a classical social democratic agenda of big investments to counter the economic downturn. These investments are specifically directed towards countryside and “rustbelt” areas as way to counter the decline of large parts of rural Sweden. The underlying idea is to bridge their current electoral support of young progressives in cities with winning over working-class voters in industrial towns who used to be predominantly social democratic but now lean towards the Sweden Democrats. This attempt has caused conflict with some sectors of the party as well as with the environmental movement, both of whom have seen the pandering to major industries and economic growth as a step away from the previous focus on climate reform.

The Left party leadership has responded that green reform should not come at the price of “common folk” and that large investment in “green growth” is the path forward. The Left party image is to be revamped from what – according to this analysis – has been too much focus on moral and individual responsibilities and a new communication strategy was drawn up. No longer should one feel bad for flying to Mallorca for holidays, eating meat and driving big cars. Whether or not this was intended to also communicate that climate would no longer have the same priority, it seems that this was how it was received, with critique ensuing both internally and from within the climate justice movement.

The challenge to join city and countryside, young progressives and traditional blue-collar workers is still an unsolved question for many European left parties and the Left Party’s move to find a larger voter base has not yet come to fruition, with an election result almost 1,5 % worse than last time. Part of this loss can be explained by the framing of the election debate – it has been hard for the Left to navigate an election run around crime, migration and NATO. Some of those lost votes were tactical support for the Green party in the final weeks before the election, as the party was in risk of falling under the 4 % parliamentary threshold, which would have ensured victory for the conservative right.

But the movement from Left to Green likely has both pull and push factors: tactical support for the Greens *and* discontent with how the Left has de-emphasised environmental issues. If the strategy was to strengthen support in blue-collar small towns while taking the calculated risk of losing some urban progressive voters, it only half-succeeded: the Left lost urban voters to the Green party, but also small town-voters to the Social Democrats.

## **Now is the time of monsters**

For many Swedish people the current election was a referendum on the concept of allowing the Sweden Democrats to be part of the government. The position on this was the main thing holding together the two coalitions. The Centre party is in economic terms further to the right than some of the parties in the conservative right bloc, but their refusal to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats forced them into the Social Democrat’s coalition.

Parties in the rightwing coalition, however, have also had divisive internal conflicts about cooperating with such an explicitly xenophobic party as the Sweden Democrats. The leader of the moderates Ulf Kristersson - likely to be the new prime minister – famously promised holocaust survivor Heidi Fried that he would never cooperate with the Sweden Democrats. The conservative right bloc has rapidly gone from promising never to negotiate with the Sweden Democrats, to saying that ministers from the Sweden Democrats is unthinkable “for now”.

These populist maneuverings and bricoleur coalitions are also an expression of the lack of any historical bloc in the Gramscian sense, i.e. a stable political project tied to a class formation and cohering institutions. The 2008 financial crisis halted the wave of neoliberal reforms in Sweden, but

was not replaced with any political project with a basis in class, or indeed any other social formations.

The privatisation of the welfare sector was rampant but the resulting housing shortage, school system failure and faltering healthcare sector makes it impossible to keep pushing on with the promise of more markets to solve current market problems. Even the right chooses to focus more on crime and migration rather than economic issues since their age-old maxims of markets and freedom are not too popular at the moment.

The differences between the blocs on economic policy are also pretty slim, and the main difference in the coming years will be the policing of suburbs and borders. As a recent tweet aptly put it, the difference between the Centre party and the Liberal party (and their coalitions) is whether you will make things worse for poor migrants because they are poor or because they have migrated.

Both the Social Democrats and the Left party are vying for the same disgruntled working class voters that has largely gone to the Sweden Democrats. This is a more recent development in Sweden than many other European countries and there is a lot of debate as to how to reach voters who drifted from the Social Democrats to the Sweden Democrats. The Social Democrats are attempting to triangulate them by analysing more and more social issues as results of excessive migration. The Left party believes that these voters will be won back by a classic social democratic strategy of industrial renewal and welfare expansion - while toning down radical parts of the party program as well as some aspects of identity politics.

## **Who remembers Sweden?**

The equitable Sweden of the late 70s is by now long gone, even though it maintains a phantom existence in the self-image of many Swedes. The economy has been doing well through the pandemic and the growth of capital assets have meant that parts of the middle-class have seen their fortunes grow rapidly by owning a house or stock market shares. This tendency increased when the pandemic meant that those able to work from home needed more room, and housing prices soared.

With the recent rise of inflation and a looming recession, the central bank is now slowly raising from interest rates from the zero that has been the norm for the previous years and the housing market is slowly adjusting. A more rapid fall would reveal many households unable to pay mortgages and the resulting decline in consumption would mean a cascading crisis for the Swedish economy. The secular decline of the tax rate is also beginning to show, with the health care system unable to face the pandemic or even staff hospitals during summer. [According to a report by the Ministry of Finance](#) the extra money needed to finance current levels of welfare in 2026 is between 50-80 billion Swedish crowns.

Sweden's energy market has faced a twofold problem. Integration into the European market meant that Sweden exports electricity until the prices even out, which - especially for southern Sweden - has meant a stark increase in energy prices. A rapid increase in energy demands has also meant periodic shortages of capacity during peak hours. Two nuclear plants were closed in 2015 as a result of a declining market and few would have guessed then that building new nuclear power plants would ever become politically viable.

This energy crisis was strongly exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and - according to the political right - the nuclear phase-out policies of the green left, and all the political parties have scrambled to subsidise fuel and electricity. Even though climate change has been part of the campaign, the idea that climate politics might disrupt consumption patterns is evidently off the table at the moment. All parties are competing to subsidise current consumption rates, while to differing degrees (mostly the

Left and the Greens) talking about large climate reforms somewhere down the line. With the conservative right in power, climate reform will most certainly be halted.

## **The next four years**

With the current gridlock in political majorities, Sweden can look forward to four years of reactionary politics where the democratic institutions are genuinely at risk. When in power locally, the Sweden Democrats have tried to interfere with the independence of civil servants and have broken the “arm’s length” agreement between politics and civil society with, for example, ordering the removal of rainbow flags.

With the Social Democrats collapsing into the center, there is a large empty area on the left of the Swedish political landscape, but the Left party has failed to capitalise. The attempts of the Left’s current leadership to bridge the city and countryside, young progressives and blue-collar workers, has not yet born fruit. The Left saw slight increases in cities, with 11-15 % in each of the three biggest cities, but did worse in smaller rural areas than in towns. This is a familiar problem but is more critical in an election campaign where the explicit goal was to change the voter dynamic of urban growth and rural decline.

The Left’s potential for growth in the cities is probably not large enough to deliver a national breakthrough, but the current strategy of updating the party profile did not deliver either nationally or on its own terms. It takes time to change the image of a party and the current remodeling did take into account that there could be lost elections before such a bridging could be accomplished. However, the movement towards a more centrist populist agenda will see criticism in the coming years if it does not deliver votes.

There have been increased contacts between the Left party and labor union leaders traditionally tied to the Social Democrats although it remains to be seen if this can be translated into rank-and-file support. Besides the rift between city and countryside, there are some starkly gendered voting patterns emerging, with female voters much more likely to vote left and green, but with young males in particular voting for the far right.

Cracks are apparent in the welfare system as well, and people are increasingly skeptical about the privatisations of the past two decades. The welfare gap means that there is great potential for countercyclical politics in the coming economic downturn. The old welfare alliance between blue-collar workers and middle-class progressives remains a possibility, and there is a clear majority in favour of investments targeted towards green transformation in neglected regions, alongside increased taxes to strengthen the public sector. The entailing shift from private to public consumption would also mean a solution to the dilemma of “individual vs collective responsibility” on climate issues.

The Left needs to present clear and concise break with neoliberal austerity ideology in economic policies, and to neutralise the conflict on crime and migration that is now dividing the blue-collar workers and middle-class progressives who make up a potential base of left support. Either as a political project to overcome this divide, or the successful shifting of the “most important issues” back to conflicts on which it can be built, such a class alliance will only be constructed by an overarching political agenda that is able to instill enthusiasm. How it is to be done remains as much the conundrum of the Swedish left as it is of the wider European left as well.

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