

Sweden: We are all the winners

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According to the spontaneous reactions from the parties' celebrations during the Swedish election night of May 26th, all parties were winners. The parties that lost support did not lose as much as they had feared, and among the parties that gained, celebration was loud and joyful. The only exception was the small Feminist Initiative that lost the single seat they won in 2014.

BACKGROUND

The 2019 European Parliament election took place less than a year after the national election in September 2018, which led to the most prolonged government negotiations in Swedish history. Not until January 2019 did the Social Democrats and the Green party receive support for a coalition government based on an agreement with the Centre Party and the Liberals. Even though these parties are not formally part of the government, the agreement was on a programme highly influenced by the Centre party and the Liberals. The formation of this government ended the previous two-bloc split between Social democrats, the Greens and the Left party on one side and the Centre party, the Liberals, The Moderates and the Christian Democrats on the other. The cause of this restructuring of the Swedish political landscape was the increased support for the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, combined with a reluctance from the other parties to rely on them for government formation. Even though the Christian Democrats and Moderate Party was somewhat more open to support from the Sweden Democrats, they failed to convince the former coalition partners to form a government with the support of the Sweden Democrats. The rejection of the Sweden Democrats by the other parties continued into the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) election, where resistance against nationalism, xenophobia and anti-EU sentiments were salient issues in the campaign.

SWEDES IN THE EU

For a long time, Sweden was quite a reluctant member of the European Union. The membership referendum in 1994 was won by the “join-side” by only a slight majority, and the referendum on joining the euro in 2003 was won by the “no-side”. In recent years, the Swedish hesitancy towards the EU has changed. Today around 80% of public opinion agrees that EU membership is a good thing, and the previously pre-

vailing “Swexit” demands are no longer heard. The two most EU-critical parties, the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats, have both declared that they will not campaign for a “Swexit”, albeit they both have it in their party programmes. A recent report on Swedish EU-attitudes confirms the EU-positive trend. In an analysis of perceptions of consequences of EU-membership for various policy areas, environmental policies, military security, employment and economy come out on top, whilst immigration is the policy area that has fared the worst (Berg et al., 2019). That EU issues are indeed important was demonstrated in an analysis of the 2014 EP election, where proximity on the EU-dimension was confirmed as a secondary decision rule for party choice (Oskarson et al., 2016). Increasing EU-support does not, however, mean that Swedes are un-critically positive towards further European integration, or to joining the euro. Quite on the contrary: the Swedish public support the current EU, but no more. It is the instrumental Euroscepticism that has decreased; the political Euroscepticism does in many ways still remain (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2005).

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign for the European election was described by most commentators as vague, not addressing current issues in the EU nor visions for the EU’s future. Even though the parties in many ways tried to put forward European issues, the media was more focused on the national political game. However, themes like law enforcement, border control, the social pillar and environmental policies such as European tax on carbon dioxide were salient on the agenda. But apart from actual issue concerns, the campaign was also characterised by several “revelations” in the media regarding such things as side-payments, allowances, abortion policies, and sexual harassment accusations, linked to MEPs from different parties.

THE ELECTION

Turnout continued the positive trend in Swedish EP elections since 2004 (37.8%) and in 2019 landed on 55.3% (preliminary). The increase is a reflection of the increased support for membership, as well as the more polarised political climate.

The Left Party as well as the Social Democrats got almost the same results as in the 2014 election. This means they keep their seats (1 and 5 respectively). The Left Party had been stronger in the polls just preceding the election, and the party leader Jonas Sjöstedt blamed their non-success on a media focus on the expense allowance of the left party MEP. The Social Democrats received their lowest support ever but expressed relief that they did not lose more.

The Green Party had their best ever result in European elections in 2014, with 15.2% of the votes. However, following the 2014 national election four months later they joined a coalition government with the Social Democrats, and it came with a high price. In response to the refugee crisis in 2015 the Greens, one of Sweden’s most pro-immigration parties, had to back the introduction of border controls and stricter immigration rules. In the national election in September 2018 they received

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Sweden

| PARTY | EP GROUP | VOTES (N) | VOTES (%) | SEATS | VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%) | SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 |
|--|----------|-----------|-----------|-------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Social Democrats | S&D | 974,589 | 23.5 | 5 | -0.7 | |
| Moderate Coalition Party | EPP | 698,770 | 16.8 | 4 | +3.2 | +1 |
| Sweden Democrats | ECR | 636,877 | 15.3 | 3 | +5.7 | +1 |
| Environment Party The Greens | G/EFA | 478,258 | 11.5 | 2 | -3.9 | -2 |
| Centre Party | ALDE | 447,641 | 10.8 | 2 | +4.3 | +1 |
| Christian Democrats | EPP | 357,856 | 8.6 | 2 | +2.7 | +1 |
| Left Party | GUE-NGL | 282,300 | 6.8 | 1 | +0.5 | |
| Liberals | ALDE | 171,419 | 4.1 | 1 | -5.8 | -1 |
| Feminist initiative | S&D | 332,143 | 0.8 | | -4.7 | -1 |
| Other parties | | 71,617 | 1.7 | | -0.4 | |
| Total | | 4,451,470 | 99.9 | 20 | | |
| Turnout (%) | | | 55.3 | | | |
| Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%) | | | 4% | | | |

Source: Valmyndigheten <https://www.val.se/> (Official Swedish authority for elections).

only 4.4% of the votes. In view of this turbulence, the result of 11.5% in the EP election was received as something of a comeback, even though the party lost 3.9 percentage points and two seats compared to their 2014 result. However, if/when Britain leaves the EU, the Environmental will get the additional seat for Sweden. Support for the Green Party was significantly higher among young voters, probably reflecting their engagement with climate issues.

The Centre Party, formerly agrarian but today a liberal/green party, had a very good election, gaining 4.3 percentage points and two seats compared to the previous EP election. Their campaign was a continuation of their campaign for the national election and focused on climate issues, keeping a clear distance from the radical right and national conservative forces, together with a liberal stance on economic issues.

The other Swedish party in the ALDE group, the very pro-EU Liberals, did not have the same good fortune. They more than halved their support compared to the last EP election and lost one of their two seats. It was well into the election night before it was confirmed that the party would be able to keep their only remaining seat. With the most pro-EU message, asking for further integration of the EU and introduction of the euro in Sweden, they were too EU-positive for the status-quo sentiments of the Swedish electorate. Replacing their experienced and well-known MEP with a quite unknown candidate just a few months before the election was probably not profitable for the party. Finally, the party is in the middle of replacing its party leader following the turbulence related to national government formation.

The Moderate Party (EPP) has a history of weak results in European elections, was also on the losing side of national government formation, and had weakened in the polls since the 2018 election. With an intense campaign, a clear message of stricter border controls, anti-criminality measures and continued use of nuclear power, the party gained 3.2 percentage points and an extra seat. The result was however still 3 percentage points below the result from the national election.

The Christian Democrats were for long seen as quite an insignificant party in Sweden, but this is now changing both in national and European elections. With a clear and intense campaign of a “just enough” EU, the party positioned itself as safeguarding the subsidiarity principle, not least against the social pillar. With 8.6% of the vote, they gained a second seat. The polls just before the election had suggested higher numbers, but the revelation that the party's former MEP had voted “anti-abortion” in the national parliament probably meant some lost votes among late deciders.

The Sweden Democrats were in a way the central hub for the European election, as well as for the national election last September. How the other parties related, or rather did not relate, to the Sweden Democrats at times during the campaigns seemed more central than actual policy positions. No longer aiming for a “Swexit” but rather to “change the EU from the inside”, the party has toned down some of its more radical positions. But it is still mostly profiled as anti-immigration together with safeguarding Swedish national interests against supra-national policies. With support of 15.3% of voters they did indeed gain 5.7 percentage points and one seat more than in the 2014 EP election. However, compared with the national election less than a

year ago, the party lost 2 percentage points. This is actually the first back-slide since the party gained seats in the Swedish Riksdag in 2010.

Finally, the small Feminist Initiative party that gained a seat in the 2014 EP election now lost it. The party never gained representation on the national level and, with its charismatic former party leader now in the background, the party was outside the race. This means that the 2019 EP election in Sweden was the first one since 2004 where no new party won a Swedish mandate.

CONCLUSION

The Swedish party system is in a state of turbulence. The prolonged government negotiations after the national election of September 2018 finally broke up the traditional two-bloc structure that had dominated Swedish politics for decades. This turbulence in many ways spilled over to the European election, shaping it into more of a two-level election than a pure second-order election.

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