

# How the rise of the Swedish radical right changed the most stable party system in Europe



*The Swedish party system has long been regarded as one of the most stable in Western Europe. However, as [Nicholas Aylott](#) and [Niklas Bolin](#) write, the growth in support for the radical right Sweden Democrats ahead of the Swedish general election on 9 September represents a major challenge to the country's two traditional political blocs. While the SD may not end up in government any time soon, it will be increasingly difficult in the long-term for the mainstream parties to maintain their 'cordon sanitaire' around the party.*

On 9 September Swedish voters head to the polls. So far, no single political issue has dominated the campaign. Rather, voters might be wondering most about what happens after election day. Government formation used to be a fairly straightforward and simple process, but most pundits expect post-election negotiations this time to be extremely difficult. So what has happened? The simple answer is that everything changed with the surge of the radical right.

For a long time, the Swedish party system was arguably one of the most stable in Western Europe. The Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, harboured the exact same five parties for more than 60 years, from the democratic breakthrough in the 1920s until the late 1980s. While the five-party model became outdated in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dynamics of party competition remained much the same. Politics was dominated by two political blocs. New parties did not change this.

The Greens, who arrived in 1988, although stubbornly insisting that they were neither left nor right, increasingly came to be regarded as an important part of the centre-left bloc led by the Social Democrats. The Christian Democrats, who entered the Riksdag in 1991, became affiliated with the centre-right bloc. In the early 21st century, bloc politics were cemented even further when the centre-right bloc became a pre-electoral coalition, the 'Alliance for Sweden', led by the liberal-conservative Moderates. The centre-left quickly followed suit and formed the 'Red-Greens'. The formalisation of bloc politics went so far that we once speculated about whether Swedish politics had in effect [turned into a two-party system](#). Soon, however, the significance of the traditional blocs was to be severely challenged.

The reason for this is the unparalleled electoral surge of the radical right party the Sweden Democrats (SD). Formed in the late 1980s by outright extremist groups, the electoral development of the party has been remarkable. The SD has increased its vote share in each election since; indeed, that share has more or less doubled every time. It first entered the Riksdag in 2010 and became the third-biggest party in 2014, when it won about 13 per cent of the vote.

There are several reasons for the sudden rise of the SD. One is the [convergence of mainstream parties' stances on immigration policy](#), which opened a space for an immigration-sceptical party. Another is the way that the SD leadership skilfully rebranded the party and [developed its organisation](#). In the upcoming election, the SD will continue its growth. Anything but a major increase in support will be a big disappointment for it. Most opinion polls give the SD somewhere between [18 and 22 per cent](#) of the vote.

The rise of the SD has had a profound impact on Swedish politics, and the party's weakening of the traditional blocs has been arguably its most important effect. The Alliance parties, at least, still argue that their co-operation endures and that their goal is to govern in coalition together. The big problem is that the maths simply don't add up. Neither of the blocs is anywhere near to winning its own majority. Just as problematic is the fact that the rise of the SD has taken place in parallel with the rise of alternative political issues. Most importantly, immigration, which used to be a second-order issue in Swedish politics, is now one of the voters' main priorities. What is more, this issue has cut right through the blocs. In other words, the rise of the SD has not only undermined the scope for the traditional blocs to win parliamentary majorities. It has also exposed important intra-bloc differences.

In order to create a majority after the election, only two options are available. The first is to go for some sort of cross-bloc co-operation. The other is for some party or parties to co-operate with the SD. Given that all parties have hitherto refused to deal in any way with the SD, it seems as if a cross-bloc agreement of some sort is on the cards. However, it is not at all obvious what a government that rests on such an agreement would look like. Given the improbability that the other flank party, the Left Party, will be invited to take part, few combinations with majority potential remain. One way out might be a very narrow minority government, not exactly supported by other mainstream parties, but at least tolerated by them. It is even possible that the main adversaries over the last four decades, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, could govern together.

And even if a majority of some kind can be achieved, the temptation to enlist the support of the SD will remain as long as the party stays as big as it is. In fact, while the leaders of the established parties still uphold a *cordon sanitaire* around the SD, local politicians have aired their willingness to deal with the party. In a [recent poll](#), less than a third of the Moderates' local councillors stated that they ruled out cooperation with the SD.

This does not mean the SD will end up in government any time soon. However, the *cordon sanitaire* is starting to fray. The SD leadership, with increasing confidence, has launched the idea of a new conservative bloc that includes, besides the SD, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats. It is unlikely that this dream will materialise in the near future. In the long run, though, it is hard to see how all the established parties can resist the potential perks associated with allying with the SD. As we also know, political realities change rapidly. What seemed completely impossible just a couple of years ago now seems more and more like a matter of time.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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