

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# THE SWEDISH MODERATE PARTY AND RIGHT WING POPULISM

Sweden takes a conservative shift to the right

**Håkan A. Bengtsson**  
August 2021



The big question currently being asked in many democratic countries is: How to deal with right-wing populist parties?



There is the grave danger that, if there is a government led by Sweden's conservative Moderate Party after the 2022 parliamentary elections, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats could have a considerable influence on the affairs of state.



This is partly the result of a convergence on issues between Sweden's conservative parties and the right-wing populists – first and foremost attributed to the largest opposition party, the conservative Moderate Party. With their willingness to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats, the Moderate Party broke with a long-standing consensus among established democratic parties.

# THE SWEDISH MODERATE PARTY AND RIGHT WING POPULISM

Sweden takes a conservative shift to the right



When Sweden elects a new parliament in 2022, there is a possibility that a conservative government is formed under the leadership of the conservative Moderate Party with the support of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats. This constellation was considered unthinkable up until only recently.



The conservative opposition parties are partly responsible for this right-wing populist triumph. Along with the Christian Democratic Party, the Moderate Party has revoked the consensus among the established democratic parties in Sweden to refuse any kind of cooperation with the right-wing populists.



These prospects have been made possible by the Moderate Party's programmatic shift to the right from 2018 onwards. It is questionable whether this strategy of normalising right-wing populist ideas by adopting their positions will work. Historically, it has always been bourgeois, conservative parties who have helped right-wing populist parties to power.

For further information on this topic:  
[www.fes.de/stiftung/internationale-arbeit](http://www.fes.de/stiftung/internationale-arbeit)



When Sweden elects a new parliament in 2022, it is anything else than sure that a new government will stand under Social Democrat leadership. It is also possible that a centrist government will be formed under the conservative Moderate Party (Moderaterna) commonly referred to as the Moderates, tolerated by the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna). This is a situation that would have been unimaginable a few years ago. The party landscape has gone through enormous changes because the Sweden Democrats continue to grow in strength. This is due to the groundwork set by the conservative Moderate Party who has plucked the right-wing populist party out of political exile and made it acceptable for conservative parties to cooperate with them.

## THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS WERE NEO-NAZIS

The Sweden Democrats have fascistic and racist roots (Expo 2014). This differentiates them from similar groups in Nordic countries – other similar parties started out focused on criticising strong government and high taxes. In this sense, the Sweden Democrats also have a different and longer story than, for example, the AfD in Germany.

The Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988. The founders included people who were active in other right wing and racist parties, and some of these were even Nazis from World War II (Treijs 2017). Whoever takes a close look at this party's ideological and political programs from its foundation until now, will see that the party's image of society has not changed at all. The Sweden Democrats view cultural diversity and migration as an existential threat to Sweden.

In the meantime, the Sweden Democrats are the third largest party in parliament (July 2021). There are a number of indications that they stand before a breakthrough under invitation of the Moderate Party. For a long time, all the other parties refused to engage with the Sweden Democrats. In party leaders' debates, the Sweden Democrats and their xenophobia were unanimously condemned.

## THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN 2015 BROUGHT ABOUT THE TURNING POINT

The rapid and sensational success of the Sweden Democrats does not remain without consequences. In the last five to six years public discourse has changed: Immigration is no longer seen as being an opportunity, but as a problem. A lot of people have migrated to Sweden in the last 20 years. The high number of refugees accepted into Sweden in 2015 became a turning point: Much like the position held by Germany, Sweden now follows a much more restrictive refugee policy. Sweden's considerable problems with gang criminality, gang wars and an increase in fatal shootings that have attracted greater focus in the public eye.

Now, immigration and integration stand at the top of the political agenda along with law and order, and these topics

dominate media coverage and political debate. This comes at great cost to numerous other far more important questions. Sweden has made a complete ideological turnaround.

## THERE USED TO BE NO ROOM TO THE RIGHT OF THE MODERATE PARTY

The Moderate Party describes itself as a liberal conservative party and has been the biggest opposition party since the 1970s. Over the years, weight has shifted within the party between the conservative and liberal factions. When the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats got into parliament in 2010, it fundamentally changed the structure of Swedish politics. For a long time, no right wing populist party was represented in Swedish parliament, which made it unique within Europe. This is possibly because, as a long-term opposition party, the Moderate Party positioned itself further and further to the right of the political spectrum.

Until now, the approach to the Sweden Democrats from all other parties has generally been to isolate them in the political arena. They have been kept out of all the alliances, agreements and pacts that have been made since the Moderates went into opposition in 2014. But now they have become part of a structural right-wing majority in Swedish parliament. Since the 2018 parliamentary elections, more and more parties have shown themselves to be willing to form a government with the support of the Sweden Democrats or in cooperation with them. This was initially the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) (a party that emerged in the right-wing spectrum with strong free-religious ties) and, more recently, the Liberals (Liberalerna). It is neither yet clear what form this cooperation will take, nor what the outcome of future negotiations will be.

## FROM THE PARTY FOR RULING CLASSES TO THE PERPETUAL OPPOSITION PARTY

The Moderate Party emerged from pre-industrial Swedish power hierarchies. The General Voters' Alliance (Allmänna Valmansförbundet) was founded in 1904, and later changed its name to the Right Party (Högerpartiet) or »the Right« (Högern), and in 1969 to the Moderate Party (Moderata samlingspartiet) or »the Moderates«. The party was founded by the power-holding class and socially privileged groups of the time. It was the upper class in the broadest sense, including landowners and entrepreneurs, groups that held a privileged position in society at the time, such as officials, priests and other persons with higher education. The main goal of the party was to maintain its own position of power and the existing social order.

This meant that the Moderates always had a fundamental resistance to the democratisation that was forwarded by the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) and the Liberals. The »defence« of the nation and support for Sweden's monarchy was one of the foundations of the party's ideology and policy. It was a strong force on the right fringe of Swedish politics

in the first three decades of the 20th century and was often able to form the government. But then the right lost both its voters and its role as a state party.

## OUT OF GOVERNMENT FOR MORE THAN 60 YEARS

After the party lost the post of prime minister in 1930, it would take until 1991 before the Moderates re-emerged as a government-forming party. The party participated in the all-party government during World War II and in several conservative governments between 1976 and 1982. But for a long time, first the Liberals and then the Centre Party (Centern) were the leading conservative opposition parties, competing with the Social Democrats for the post of prime minister. Both of these parties were more in the social-liberal centre of Swedish politics at the time and often distanced themselves from the right.

For a long time, the Moderates had no political influence. As a result, the party cultivated its opposition role and guarded its position on the right fringe. Gösta Bohman, who was party chairman in the 1970s, moved the party even further to the right every time the Social Democrats moved closer to the Moderates on an issue. The Moderates sharply criticised the new social democratic »rule,« the power of the state and high taxes, in essence, the social democratic welfare state. With this stance, they had already occupied many of the issues that were the starting point for right-wing populist parties in other Nordic countries. Thus, no right-wing populist party established itself in Sweden because such a party already existed in part with the Moderates. The Moderate Party attracted those parts of the electorate that were sympathetic to right-wing populist ideas or could have voted for such parties.

## FROM THE NEO-LIBERAL MODERATES TO THE NEW MODERATE PARTY

In the 1970s, support for the Moderates grew. The party was now picking up on the neoliberal ideas that were beginning to dominate politics in the U.S. and Great Britain. In particular, the younger generation that pushed to the forefront of the party drew inspiration from Milton Friedman and Friedrich August von Hayek, from Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The party's voter base broadened. Now the Moderates were also elected by the middle class who no longer wanted to pay high taxes and opposed the expansion of the public sector. The 1979 parliamentary election then marked a turning point: The Moderates once again became the largest conservative party. But the new conservative government, a coalition of between the Moderate Party, the Centre Party and Liberals, continued to pursue a »middle-of-the-road« policy. Thorbjörn Fälldin, leader of the Centre Party, became prime minister. The fact that the Moderate Party did not win the post of prime minister may have been due to their anti-democratic past. But many also found their neoliberal ideas too extreme.

In the 1980s, political ideologies changed throughout the Western world. When the conservative camp came to power again in Sweden in 1991, the moderate Carl Bildt was elected prime minister. The Moderate Party now led a government whose agenda included economic liberalisation and the dismantling of the social democratic welfare state. The new conservative government pushed through resolutions that gave private actors access to the public sector and emphasised market-driven models.

## THE NEW MODERATE PARTY MODELS ITSELF ON THE GERMAN CDU

After the fall of the Moderate Party government in 1994, the party was again in opposition for twelve years. The Moderates partially changed their profile, and in the 2002 election ran with the demand for drastic tax cuts. A racism scandal broke out among election workers during the election campaign that did lasting damage to the party. As a result, the Moderates suffered significant losses in the 2002 election. This in turn paved the way for a new beginning.

Fredrik Reinfeldt was elected party chairman. In many respects, he emulated Germany's CDU as his role model and wanted to bring the party back to being a governing party. In economic policy, he moved toward the centre, and in an allusion to New Labour (aka Blair in Britain, among others, at the time), changed the party name to the »New Moderates« (Nya moderaterna). Even on immigration, the party now took a more liberal position and reached an agreement with the Green Party (Miljöpartiet) that cooperated with the Social Democrats' minority government. The Green Party worked to liberalise refugee policy, and with its help, very liberal rules were introduced for labour immigration from countries outside the EU. The old conservative party also adopted more liberal positions on cultural issues that were more in line with the spirit of the times.

At the same time, the influence of the Sweden Democrats grew as the Moderate Party moved more towards to the centre. In 2010, the Sweden Democrats won seats in parliament. Under Reinfeldt, the Moderates took the line of keeping the right-wing populists away from all political influence. Since then, government crises, budget disputes, and agreements have basically always been about how the other parties should relate to the Sweden Democrats and the issue of Sweden Democrats' involvement in policy making and government affairs.

## THE MODERATE PARTY SWINGS RIGHT

The slow shift away from Reinfeldt's position has divided the conservative camp and caused tension within it. In 2018, the Centre Party and the Liberals decided to accept Stefan Löfven as prime minister. However, the Moderate Party (and the Christian Democrats and now the Liberals) then declared they were ready to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats –

with the same party that had been branded as xenophobic, racist and fascist until that point.

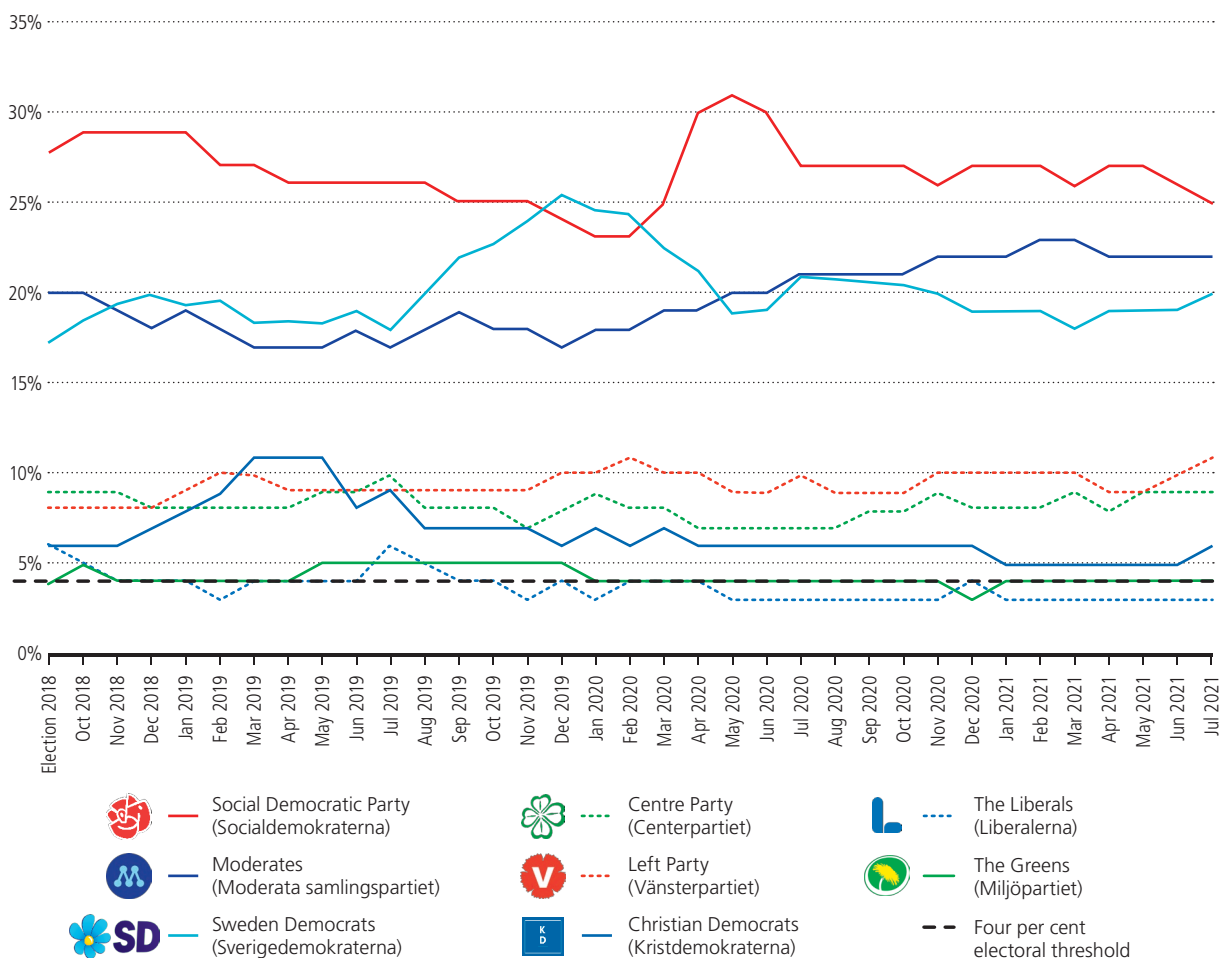
This change began even before the 2018 election under the Moderate Party leader Anna Kinberg Batra who replaced Fredrik Reinfeldt in 2014. She repeatedly indicated that they wanted to abandon their strict stance towards the Sweden Democrats, but when she openly declared herself ready for talks with the Sweden Democrats, this elicited a scandal that forced her to resign. That being said, this stance was not the only issue in her forced resignation. Her party was also dissatisfied with her leadership on other issues. This cleared the way for Ulf Kristersson as the new party leader. He had a neoliberal background and had even spoken out in favour of unrestricted immigration during his time as chairman of the Moderates' youth organisation (Moderata Ungdomsförbundet). He clearly disassociated himself from the right-wing populists from the beginning. When he met with Hédi Fried, a Holocaust survivor, she reported afterwards that Kristersson had affirmed that »he would never, ever agree to any association with the Sweden Democrats«. That is a promise he has now apparently broken (Lindberg 2021).

The political debate in Sweden has changed radically since Fredrik Reinfeldt left politics in 2014 with the Moderates leaving government. An unprecedented ideological shift has taken place. Under Ulf Kristersson, the Moderate Party has returned to the positions of the old Moderates, and they now engage in the kind of political agitation that partly mirrors the thrust and agenda of many Sweden Democrat viewpoints.

### THE RIGHT-WING CONSERVATIVE BLOC FITS INTO A GLOBAL PATTERN

The Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats are now seen as representing a new right-wing conservative bloc in Swedish politics. The Moderate Party does not want to accept this designation. The party insists that it also has a liberal streak and that it is not a formalised right-wing conservative bloc. Nevertheless, it is obvious that both the Moderates and the Christian Democrats have moved to the right. This comes at a time when there has been an upsurge of right-wing populist parties, governments, and politicians all over the world. This global pattern

Figure 1  
Poll results from the 2018 Swedish general election to 1 July 2021



Source: Sweden – National Parliament Voting Intention, Poll of Polls, Politico; <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/sweden/> (accessed 20.7.2021)

was brought to the world stage in 2016 by both Brexit in the UK and Trump's election in the USA.

The Sweden Democrats' recent election successes of gaining ground in all the elections has taken part in along with a popularity increase in public opinion polls (nowadays around 19 per cent) threaten the position of the Moderates as the largest middle-class opposition party. This is the reason for the Moderates' shift to the right. Meanwhile, the Moderates are calling for an increasingly restrictive refugee policy, and the rhetoric in their old parade discipline of crime and punishment has become increasingly strident.

## NO AUDIBLE CRITICISM OVER THE TURN TO THE RIGHT

Is there an internal debate among the Moderates (and the Christian Democrats) about their current willingness to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats? Is there any resistance? Among the Liberals, who were the last to join the conservative troika, this is indeed the case. In contrast, among the Moderates, if there is criticism, it has not yet been voiced. That is typical of Swedish party culture – the party is always united behind its chairperson and tows the party line.

In contrast, the conservative camp with its so-called alliance is split. After the 2018 election, the Centre and the Liberals did not want to depend on the Sweden Democrats to push through their policies. That would have been the case if Ulf Kristersson from the Moderate Party had formed a government. Instead, they chose to let the Social Democrats take power. On the one hand, this split the former conservative alliance, and on the other, it plunged the Liberals into a deep crisis that continues to this day. The Centre Party, which has stuck to its position, is now almost seen as a traitor to the conservative cause in the eyes of its former bloc colleagues, who have declared themselves willing to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats.

## THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS' GROWING INFLUENCE ON SWEDISH POLITICS

In contrast, opposition to the Sweden Democrats is still very strong among the electorate. The choice between a government that relies on the Sweden Democrats and one that does not will determine the future of the country. This alternative is likely to make its mark on the 2022 election. For the first time, the reality of Sweden Democrats, influence is on the horizon. It is still completely unclear how the next election will turn out.

Overlaps in the political agenda between the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats are obvious. A consensus on immigration and the crime associated with it could form the basis for cooperation. »Immigration has become a burden to Sweden«, Ulf Kristersson says now, referring to gang crime, honour culture and a lack of integration (SVT 2021).

Until recently, it was considered ethically unacceptable for the Sweden Democrats to express themselves in exactly this way.

Even if the Moderates do not want to stop immigration completely like the Sweden Democrats, the party is pushing for the further tightening of restrictions. Presumably, the Sweden Democrats will push this issue particularly hard. As yet, the Moderate Party or any of the other parties have not drawn any »red lines« to delineate how far they are willing to go on this issue.

## CULTURE WARS IN SWEDISH MEDIA AND UNIVERSITIES

Nevertheless, there are other areas where there is consensus between the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats, but less so with the Liberals. It's about the mission of the publicly funded media, which is to be slimmed down and its budget reduced. Changes are also being sought in cultural policy and state support for culture. Media policy is another such area. In addition, these parties are united by their distaste for the »dominance of the left« at universities. This means that a reduction in funding is quite likely to be part of future government programs. Likewise, support for public and adult education institutions linked to Swedish grass roots movements is likely to be cut back.

On a number of welfare policy issues (though not all of them), the Sweden Democrats are actually further to the left than the Moderate Party. How important these issues will prove to be in future negotiations is difficult to say. It could also be that the Sweden Democrats will focus on a stricter refugee policy and other measures directed against the cultural and liberal establishment, thereby possibly accepting in return a slimming down of the welfare state.

## THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS WANT A DIFFERENT SWEDEN

In the current situation, it is unlikely that the Sweden Democrats will be part of a conservative government after the next election. However, it is very likely that there will be some degree of formalised and organised cooperation. This is also a question of which path the Sweden Democrats themselves choose. The support of their voters will be in danger if the party is worn down by cooperation with the government. This is also likely to pose a threat, if other parties take over their issues, which has already happened to some extent. This is what the Moderates have done, but it does not yet seem to have diminished support for the Sweden Democrats.

And what else can be expected? Every revolution has a tendency to radicalise itself. The political debate in Sweden is experiencing a rapid radicalisation in the far-right direction.

The Sweden Democrats see Poland and Hungary as role models and would like Sweden to move further and further in the direction of Denmark on refugee policy. Sweden is in for a

protracted political battle. The ideological shift in debate and policy has already taken place. For the first time in 100 years, Sweden has a strong and radical conservative right that could be in a position to dictate government policy after the next election.

## THE ILLUSION OF »SWEDISH LAGOM«

Sweden is described as the country of »lagom«, meaning the principle of living a balanced, moderately paced, low-fuss life. The question is whether this is still true. Sweden has moved rapidly away from a social-democratic to a market-liberal welfare state, from a liberal to a restrictive migration policy, and from a general distancing from the Sweden Democrats to a situation in which three parties are now willing to cooperate. This is also reflected in the fact that Swedish politics has a much more brutal tone as different camps fight each other, creating a fractious, divisive, and combative general political atmosphere. The resistance and blockades in play, however, are more about power and less about political issues.

Swedish politics is currently reminiscent of the evolution of American politics in the last decade. The rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats, of course, reflects their own ideology. Moreover, we also see the »trumpification« of debate among individual members of the Moderates and the Christian Democrats, and sometimes among their leaders.

Debate in the conservative camp has shifted from liberalism to national conservatism at a dizzying rate. This is the fastest normalisation of a right-wing populist party ever seen in any country. As German historian and philosopher Jan-Werner Müller has pointed out, right-wing populists have always gained influence by means of conservative parties inviting them to power. This has been the case before and could recently be observed in several European countries. After the 2022 election, we may have to add one more country to the list: Sweden.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

**Expo (2014):** Sverigedemokraternas vitbok 1988–2014, Stockholm; [https://web.archive.org/web/20140912071628/http://expo.se/www/download/sds\\_vitbok\\_Expo\\_2\\_2014.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20140912071628/http://expo.se/www/download/sds_vitbok_Expo_2_2014.pdf) (accessed 21.7.2021).

**Anders Lindberg (2021):** Vad är halveringstiden på Kristerssons löften?, in: Aftonbladet, 29.6.2021; <https://www.aftonbladet.se/edare/a/kR4bMB/vad-ar-halveringstiden-pa-kristerssons-loften> (accessed 21.7.2021).

**Sverigedemokraterna (2019):** Sverigedemokraternas principprogram 2019; <https://ratatosk.sd.se/sd/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/16092141/Sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf> (accessed 21.7.2021).

**SVT (2021):** Almedalen: Partiledartal – Tal av Ulf Kristersson (M), 7.7.2021; <https://www.svtplay.se/video/31543714/almedalen-partiledartal/almedalen-tal-av-ulf-kristersson-m-7-juli-19-00?info=visa> (accessed 21.7.2021).

**Eric Treijs (2017):** Nazist arbetade för SS – var med och grundade SD, in: Svenska Dagblatt, 30.4.2017; <https://www.svd.se/nazist-arbetade-for-ss-var-med-och-grundade-sd> (accessed 21.7.2021).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Håkan A. Bengtsson** is the managing director of Arenagruppen, a publishing house and thinktank funded by Swedish trade unions. He is also the political editor of the political online magazine he co-founded called Dagens Arena published by Arenagruppe

## IMPRINT

Publisher:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.  
Godesberger Allee 149  
53175 Bonn  
Germany

E-Mail: [info@fes.de](mailto:info@fes.de)

Register No.: VR2392  
Register of Associations Bonn  
Local Court Bonn

Chairman: Martin Schulz  
Executive Member of the Board: Dr. Sabine Fandrych

Responsible for content and editing: Matthias Jobelius /  
Western Europe and North America Department

Contact: [simone.doebbelin@fes.de](mailto:simone.doebbelin@fes.de)

Layout: Petra Strauch

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

ISBN 978-3-96250-964-4

© 2021