

## Failure despite Success The Swedish Elections 2006: Political Context, Campaign and Perspectives

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### Social Democrat Dominance

Social democracy has dominated Sweden's political scene since its political breakthrough in the 1930's. The Social Democrats probably hold the world record in democratic countries for long-term tenure in office. Since 1932 Sweden's Social Democrats were only supplanted by non-socialist governments and prime ministers between 1976 and 1982, and from 1991 to 1994. It is true that the Social Democrats did share power with the Centre Party in the broad coalition governments during the Second World War, as well as in the 1950's. But the Social Democrats have nominated the prime ministers for periods totalling 65 years since 1932, and the non-socialist parties for just nine years.

The reasons for this dominance are complex. Relative political stability and Sweden's peaceful history are obviously important factors. Sweden did not participate in either of the two world wars. Strong national support for the Social Democrats within a broad section of the population was instrumental in shaping the country's political culture. The Social Democrats were Sweden's first modern political party. The strength of the trade unions was another important reason, while Social Democrat collaboration with LO (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation) was a contributing factor. This long period in power made the Social Democrats Sweden's dominant political party.

### The Swedish Model

Of course another crucial point is what has become known as the Swedish Model, which is a product of Swedish history, political reforms and - especially - the lengthy social democratic periods

in office. Though not social democracy in essence, the Model is just as "Swedish" and just as much a part of Sweden's historical tradition. And these long periods of social democratic power, meant the Social Democrats were more influential in shaping the Model than any of the other political parties. The core of the Swedish Model is seen as its relationship with the labour market where, on their own initiative, the trade union movement and employers agreed on freedom of association, and that collective bargaining agreements should be enforced. The 1938 Saltsjöbaden agreement between LO and SAF(employers association) was seen as symbolic and provided practical confirmation of the spirit of collaboration and historic compromise that dominated Swedish social life for decades. But the jigsaw puzzle has some other, important pieces, including the Rehn-Meidner model of the 1950s, introduced by LO, the principle of considering loss of income when assessing social benefits, high taxation, the comprehensive public provision of health care, education and care of the needy, the high female employment rate, paid parental leave. These factors have resulted in a relatively equal distribution of income compared with many other countries. All of which have combined to form the contemporary Swedish Model. One should also remember the Swedish model is not a static phenomenon but is, rather, in a constant state of flux. It emerged in a period of Keynesian dominance in national economies, but today survives in a rather more neo-liberal context. Sweden's pension system was revised following comprehensive agreement between all the major parties in the 1990's. The system introduced in the 1950's has been "reformed". Furthermore, provision of welfare services has been liberalised with the public sector admit-

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ting private and cooperative consultants, even though financing is still via the public sector and taxation. The historic compromise between employer and employee organisations is now no more than a distant memory.

### **The 2002 Election: A Defeat for Neo-Liberalism**

Over the last few decades, the middle-classes in both Sweden and many other countries adopted a more neo-liberal standpoint. Sweden's high taxes, and the expansion of the welfare state, were criticised time and again. Radical Reaganite and Thatcherite criticism of the public sector were a major source of inspiration for the Swedish Moderates, who became increasingly liberal and less conservative. This neo-liberal wave in Swedish politics peaked at the beginning of the 1990's. The centre-right parties won the 1991 election and the then Moderate leader, Carl Bildt, gained power with a programme promising basic system change and significant tax reductions. The programme was called "A New Start for Sweden", but the centre-right government soon had to cope with an economic crisis and lost economic control. This failure paved the way for the Social Democrats to return to power in 1994. Given the economic situation, the Social Democrats were forced to adopt and implement a series of unpopular economic measures within the public sector and scale down social insurance benefits. The Social Democrats were penalised by the electorate in the 1998 election as a result but maintained their hold on government, as it was chiefly the Left Party which attracted voters who objected to the public sector cuts. However the 2002 election proved a great success for the Social Democrats and for Göran Persson personally. The economy was now more stable, with comparatively low unemployment rates. The Social Democrats attracted 40 percent of the voters and gained a third term in office. The election's main losers were the Moderates and their party leader, Bo Lundgren; the party lost one-third of its voters. The reasons for this included a TV programme which revealed that several Moderate election campaigners had racist tendencies. But the primary cause of the Moderates' failure was their insistence on putting forward proposals for far-reaching tax reductions, without indicating how the tax shortfall would be made up. Voters made no bones about rejecting this neo liberal agenda of the Swedish centre-right parties.

### **The 2006 Election: 'Alliance' against Red-Red-Green**

The 2002 election defeat caused a major upset within the Moderate Party. Many of the old guard left the party executive and finally, even party leader Bo Lundgren was forced to resign, to be replaced by Fredrik Reinfeldt. It was soon clear that he was not one in the string of Moderate party leaders following in their predecessors' footsteps. On the contrary, he based his approach on distancing himself from former neo-liberal policies and Moderate party demands for major tax reductions. Mr. Reinfeldt began a process of moving the party towards the centre, while simultaneously making the Moderates a party that appealed to the whole of the middle class, rather than a party way to the right of centre. The party began to refer to itself as "the new Moderates" and "the new Labour party", in what one can see as a parallel to the emergence of New Labour in Britain and *Die Neue Mitte* in Germany 1998. In other words it was a strategy designed to gain power by adopting the political mid-field, after several painful election defeats.

The next step was to form an alliance between all four non-socialist parties: the Centre, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Moderates. Previously the large Social Democrat party had managed to take advantage of the inner divisions within the opposition to point out the unreliability of the bourgeois parties and their general incompetence to govern. This time it was the centre-right alliance – at least up to polling day – that was more coordinated by comparison and more coordinated than it had ever been before. And they approached the election with a joint election manifesto, which raises the question of whether this represents a larger structural transformation in the bourgeois camp, which could lead to mergers between two or even several parties.

Sweden's Social Democrats enjoyed an advantage as having been easily the largest party. There was no comparable election programme policy or formalised collaboration on the left. Though it is probably important to remember that the Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Left Party collaborated very closely during the last two periods in power, despite the fact the Social Democrats had formed a minority government. This collaboration worked without any formal ties between the three parties, and despite internal tensions. The Social Democrats for their part did not want to share office with the Left Party or the Greens, while elements within both the Left Party and Green Party remain ambivalent about shouldering governmental responsibility.

Sweden's Greens have been labelled as rural, combining a measure of anti-urbanism and significant resistance to both globalisation and, particularly, the EU. In other words, there are greater political cultural differences compared with the Greens in Germany. Nonetheless, the party did have its greatest success this year in the elections in large towns, which could mean that in future the party will develop more along the lines of its German equivalent. At the beginning of the 1990's, the Left Party changed its name from VPK and deleted the word communist from both its party programme and its party name. The party had a major political breakthrough under the leadership of Gudrun Schyman in the late nineties. The party then appeared as more of a Left Socialist alternative to the Social Democrats, actually more socially democratic than the Social Democrats themselves, moving towards the centre, and attracting many Social Democrat voters. Since then, the party has experienced something of a communist rebound. For example the current party leader, Lars Ohly, maintained for a long time that he would continue to describe himself as a communist, though he has now stopped doing so. Also, and not for the first time, the party was affected by a number of defections, besides which party support has deteriorated considerably since reaching its high point in 1998.

Swedish political public life has been formed by culturally radical, social and liberal, and social democratic ideals. Lately the Conservatives have also become more liberal and less conservative than, for example, the CDU/CSU in Germany. And the way the Moderates have moved towards the centre has made them more like the CDU. But, at the same time, the picture becomes more complex if one considers the Alliance as a whole. The Liberal party has actually distanced itself from its early social liberalism, winning over voters with its tougher campaign against crime and immigration. The Centre Party has become a type of neo-liberal front party with an anti-union profile. While the Christian Democrats have tried to tone down their Christian roots by projecting a more universal image.

By 2006 the Social Democrats had governed Sweden for 12 years, always as a minority government, supported first by the Centre Party and then with support from, and in collaboration with, the Left Party and the Green Party. Göran Persson succeeded Ingvar Carlsson as party leader in 1996. He experienced two bad national elections, 1998 and 2006, and a very good result in the 2002 poll. The fact that the Social Democrats had three terms in office, governing for 12 years, should be viewed as an accomplishment. But many people felt there was very limited room for manoeuvre

where implementing social democratic policy was concerned. Göran Persson's historic achievement, as finance minister between 1994 and 1996, and later as prime minister, was in restoring order to Sweden's economy following the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s. There had been many economically difficult years, with tough political decisions, but the Swedish economy is now in better shape, with higher growth than for many years previously. Once again there was scope for presenting reform proposals and returning to a more traditional, social democratic policy. But the voters rejected this.

### **The Election Campaign's Major Issues**

The Swedish Model, with its high taxes and welfare targets, is often mentioned in other European countries as worthy of imitation, as is Sweden's capacity for carrying out structural economic reforms. Both economic growth and the employment rate are good. Sweden's high rate of female employment and high birth rate are often also cited as significant examples of Sweden's superior welfare system.

The Social Democrats entered this year's election campaign with a strong economy, which was enjoying a boom. Public finances were stable, growth was high. Unemployment was low, compared with other European countries, even if the government's 4 percent unemployment target had not been reached. The Social Democrats' election strategy was based on presenting a reform agenda after many years of tough economic policies. It was time for the Social Democrats to reap the harvest. Obviously all this was not enough to give them a lead in the recent election campaign.

One could say that, overall, the centre-right Alliance won the election by managing to appear more trustworthy where the creation of new jobs was concerned, a traditionally Social Democrat strongpoint. Another explanation would be that during the summer the non-socialist parties presented proposals to "get rid of" the property tax and managed to exploit them skilfully. This tax is generally unpopular and even if the question of the funding, and what would take its place, was never clarified, the Alliance managed to force the Social Democrats onto the defensive at an early stage. Another important factor was that the conservatives presented an integrated government alternative. In addition, the Social Democrats in general, and Göran Persson in particular, were considered lethargic, creating a general mood for a change of power, particularly in the media.

The centre-right parties' so-called job policies can be described as classic supply politics. The unem-

ployed will be given greater inducement to work. Taxes will be reduced for those who have jobs, while unemployment and early retirement benefits will be reduced, thus balancing the tax cuts for the employed. People will be encouraged to look for jobs, with the Alliance election campaign maintaining that any form of work is preferable to being unemployed.

The Social Democrats strongly opposed any reduction in unemployment benefits or other cuts in social security. They argued for solidarity rather than punishment for those affected by unemployment or illness. The main Social Democrat election slogan was "Everyone should be included". On the other hand, the Social Democrats suggested improving unemployment benefit by raising the ceiling for compensation, which would favour those with medium and high incomes. It was an argument that hit home in certain quarters. But at the same time the Alliance did win voters by focusing on job creation and stressing the promotion of work rather than "welfare dependence". They claimed that it was the Moderates who were adopting a "job policy" platform, normally a Social Democrat catchword. The Social Democrats stressed increased investment within the public sector. The Alliance promised more jobs.

And the Social Democrats failed to make clear that the long-term aim of reducing unemployment benefit and the subsistence payment (a type of reservation wage) would create a low-pay grade between the lowest contemporary wage rate and the now reduced unemployment benefit. In other words a low wages sector, which is actually what the economists are proposing. More people should have jobs, but be paid less than they are at present.

Sweden's basic politico-economic structure will not change under a conservative government. However, the public sector will be less rigid, partly because some of it will be opened up for private initiative. State-owned companies will be privatised. Family policies will not change in the short-term, but municipalities will be able to introduce private child-care allowances.

One should also point out that foreign policy issues were barely mentioned during the election campaign. These days Sweden has virtually no really high-profile international politicians, with the possible exceptions of Göran Persson and the Social Democrat foreign minister Jan Eliasson. Both are now leaving politics.

There were virtually no references to the EU in the campaign. One reason for this could have been that the parties did not want to support the policies of the EU-critical Junilistan party.

This could also be why questions of equality did not feature on the agenda either. There was a Feminist party in this year's election, the Feministiskt Initiativ which campaigned on getting into parliament.

## The Campaign

The general popular feeling was that it was probably time for a change. There was pretty widespread apathy towards the Social Democrats and Göran Persson. The centre-right parties quite simply appeared as a younger, more future-oriented alternative. There was general pressure for a change of government, especially in the media. This was particularly evident in the capital and, as a result, the Social Democrats fared very badly over the entire Stockholm region.

In Sweden as elsewhere, election campaigns now focus principally on the media. But over the past two years the Social Democratic government has received a great deal of negative media publicity. One could argue the Social Democrat government lost the battle to focus media attention on Sweden's perceived image, with the government failing to put across the fact that Sweden was doing well economically. Moreover, a number of "scandals" – big and small – reflected the image of a hackneyed and rather tired government.

Government reaction to the Christmas 2004 Tsunami developed into serious embarrassment for Göran Persson. The action taken was perceived as coming too late and was exposed to gruelling, even merciless, media criticism. The government was rocked, as confidence in it crumbled, and Social Democrats poll ratings sunk dramatically a couple of months into 2005, with the conservative opposition calling for several ministers to resign. Finally, the hard-pressed foreign minister, Laila Freivalds, was forced to step down, even though her formal resignation was over a different issue. And just weeks before the election, Göran Persson forced through the resignation of his close associate, Jan Danielsson, after a long period of speculation about how he had behaved during the first 24 hours after the Tsunami.

There were also some minor scandals fuelling the belief it was time for a change of government. It is worth mentioning that, two weeks before the election, it emerged that the Liberal Party had had access to the Social Democrats' internal computer network and internal Social Democrats working papers concerning the election. Apparently this scandal did not affect the relationship between the blocks, but the Liberal party went down heavily in this year's election and was the major loser in the centre-right Alliance.

Opinion polls play a major role in Swedish elections, by giving frequent summaries of the state of play to assessing the performance of party leaders in TV debates. Most of the surveys predicted a close election result with the Alliance slightly ahead. What was surprising about the opinion surveys, this time was that the figures proved generally accurate. It was also surprising that the expected Social Democratic mobilisation at the end of the election campaign never materialised, while there was no reduction in support for the bourgeois parties, as usually happens. The Moderates, in particular, have previously scored less well than indicated by their previously high ratings over the last weeks of the election campaign. This time round there were surprisingly few changes during the opinion polls conducted while the election campaign was under way.

Nor did the two major debates of the party leaders, held on the Thursday and Friday prior to the election provide any encouragement for the government in power. The debates showed that while the Alliance was coordinated, there was no comparable coordination on the other side. This was yet another factor affecting the election outcome, one that confirmed the image of an Alliance ready to take over government, and of a Social Democrat party leader on the defensive without any clear policy alternatives.

### **Why did the Social Democrats lose?**

The Social Democrats failed to exploit the economic situation and come up with a credible offensive policy. There was also dissatisfaction and alienation in many suburban areas, and continued high unemployment. Dissatisfaction was rife amongst the unemployed. Simultaneously, many people with jobs were critical of what they saw as over-indulgent attitudes, real or imagined cheating and welfare dependence. The Alliance managed to win in both these areas. Social Democrats and the parties on the left came across as defenders of the existing system. Sweden may be managing better than many other countries, but the Alliance quite simply managed to exploit this perceived dissatisfaction. In the 1960s when growth was high in Sweden, there were references to the “the dissatisfaction of rising expectations”, which became a focal point for the expansion within the public sector. Though there were parallels this time, the voters opted for a centre-right alternative with the promise of more jobs and fewer subsidies. The Moderates, for example, increased support amongst immigrants where the non-socialist block had previously been very weak. The Alliance’s so-called “job policy” was probably the factor that tipped the vote.

But of course many factors contributed. The Social Democrats had also lost a proportion of their loyal, older Social Democrat voters, who were unhappy with their low pensions, a result of the major pension reform in the nineties. Locally, there are successful pension parties. The fact that the other parties, which did not get into parliament, increased their votes was also significant in the overall election result.

In addition, the election developed into what was almost a referendum on Göran Persson. The Social Democrats’ election campaign began to resemble a “one man show”. Persson’s tough leadership style was increasingly portrayed as a very negative quality, frequently discussed in the media, and skilfully used by the centre-right parties.

One other decisive factor was that Stockholm voted for the Alliance. Now virtually all of the Stockholm region’s almost 50 municipalities have a bourgeois majority. The Moderates are easily the largest party in the capital and the Social Democrats lost a large number of voters in Stockholm. Stockholm has become a crisis area for the working-class movement and social democracy. However, despite the national trend, the Social Democrats did improve their position in some other areas, such as northern Sweden. Even in Gothenburg, the country’s second largest city, the Social Democrats did better than in the last election. The Social Democrats also held their ground in Malmö, Sweden’s third city.

A crucial point raised by the election result was the question of the formation, and composition, of the new government, since traditionally the Social Democrats have always had an advantage, as the centre-right parties have often been divided. There had been no dramatic improvement in the collaboration between the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Greens, leading to confusions as to whether these three parties would form a coalition after the election. This uncertainty helped the conservative Alliance and had a decisive impact on the election result and the ensuing change of government in Sweden. Here one can draw an interesting parallel with Norway. It had been doing well economically, but its conservative government presented no clear governmental alternative. When just such an alliance did emerge on the left a few years ago, there was a change of government. Norway now has a Social Democrat coalition with the Left Party and Centre Party.

In retrospect a central question is how a government that has been in power for so long can oppose the accumulated dissatisfaction that seems to grow towards all politicians in office regardless of their party affiliations. How can a government

counteract this political trend? Can a party in power renew itself politically? Or is it perhaps necessary to change the party leader at just the right moment? It is important to remember that Anna Lindh, generally expected to succeed Göran Persson, was murdered in 2003.

Finally one has to recognise that, this time round, the Social Democrat election and campaign machinery never got off the ground. Previously this system had always made a significant contribution to Social Democrat election successes. Negative media coverage may well have played a part, but it was the agenda of the centre-right Alliance which set the scene for the 2006 election campaign.

### What Happens Now?

Göran Persson announced his resignation late on polling day, when the government's defeat became clear. A new leader will be chosen at a specially convened party conference in March. The party has also appointed a study group which will analyse the election results. The situation in Stockholm is particularly serious as the conservatives now control almost all the municipalities and the county council, and the Moderates have become the largest party.

The coming months will probably also see considerable attention devoted to the question of Göran Persson's successor in discussions linked to broad political issues. Candidates under consideration include the EU commissioner, Margot Wallström, and the LO chair, Wanja Lundby-Wedin. Former Cabinet Ministers Pär Nuder, Ulrica Messing, Thomas Östros, Thomas Bodström, Carin Jämtin and Mona Sahlin are also seen as potential candidates. Many people believe it is time for the Social Democrats to choose a woman party leader for the first time in 118 years.

Politically, today's social democracy is characterised by tensions between a weak left wing, a pragmatic centre, and a more social liberal right wing. It is hard to know where specific conflict lines will be drawn. A group of leading Social Democrats felt dissatisfied under Göran Persson's leadership, believing they were not given the chance to show what they could do. It remains to be seen whether these conflicts create personal animosities, leading to a battle for the party leadership, which would be a new departure in the history of the modern Social Democrat party.

Politically, of course, there are interesting choices. The image of social democracy became somewhat backward-looking and traditional under Göran Persson, whose historic achievement was to revitalise Sweden's economy in the 1990's. Despite

the perceived image, Göran Persson was committed and forward-looking on environmental issues. For example, he recently appointed an oil commission to work with planning experts to reduce Sweden's dependence on oil. This did not become a central issue in the election campaign.

The demand for a more modern profile and a more up to date image will probably be balanced against the need to mobilise and attract the party's traditional supporters from within LO.

At the same time people will ask whether the defeat should be attributed to the Social Democratic party or to social democratic ideals. The Moderates won the election by coming closer to social democracy, now talking of a Swedish Model and praising the collective labour agreements. One could perhaps say, paradoxically, that social democracy had finally won the ideological battle against neo liberalism, with the final proof being that even the Moderates are more or less forced to adopt a cloak of social democrat rhetoric.

A question involving the other two opposition parties, the Left party and the Green Party, is whether they should work more closely together for the next election. It will become even more important to offer a viable government alternative the closer we get to the 2010 election. Various processes will soon run their natural course within the respective parties. But discussions about forming a government, both within and between the three opposition parties, will be on the agenda in a couple of years.

### The Future of the 'Alliance'

There is a difference of just 2.1 percentage points between Sweden's two political blocks, which limits the room for manoeuvre of the conservative Alliance, if it intends to win the next election as well. It's a perspective which will make it interesting to follow Fredrik Reinfeldt's post-election programme. Will he place himself at the centre and look for alliances and collaboration as a way to avoid serious conflicts in Swedish politics and social life? Or will the tougher, far-reaching, non-socialist demands for change be met? This will decide the future fate of the government. Naturally how the labour market develops will be another crucial factor, as will the Alliance pledge to create many new jobs. The approach towards the labour market partners, especially LO, will have a decisive influence. The trade union movement is usually very wary of increased costs to pay for unemployment benefits. And scrapped tax breaks on union contributions will make it harder for the trade union movement to maintain its membership. In combination with other changes, such as lowered unemployment benefit, etc., this will put more pressure on the unions, es-

pecially in upcoming wage negotiations, where the union organisations will demand compensation for these changes for the worse.

Swedish politics have converged towards the centre, but will this march to the centre continue? Will the Alliance become a government holding the middle ground or a government primarily for the centre-right? This will also decide the choice of strategies for the other block, how the three opposition parties will react and provide the framework for the 2010 election campaign, with Fredrik Reinfeldt and his challenger, the new Social Democratic party leader.

At the time of writing, we did not know how things would develop, nor did we know the composition of the new government. The common election policy presented by the four centre-right parties will be implemented following the government's formation in October. But there will be many new questions on the agenda in the coming four years, especially because economic developments will certainly produce an economic recession over the next few years, even though the economic heritage currently looks bright for the new government. Unemployment is expected to go down soon. The national economy is in good shape.

In the slightly longer term the government faces a number of possible threat scenarios, including how it will actually manage to handle the tensions within

the four-party Alliance. The Moderates are now larger than the other three parties of the block combined. There may be reduced willingness to compromise, particularly within the Liberal Party which lost much of its support and, in addition, has to deal with the repercussions of the election campaign's computer scandal.

There is also a question mark over how consistent the centre-right government's economic policies will actually be. The Moderates have done their best to draw up and present a tenable, stable, economic plan. But this will eventually be subjected to tough testing in internal negotiations. For example the Alliance agreed to a local child maintenance allowance, which does not really jibe with the Moderates now favourite policy of getting more people to take jobs. Furthermore the Alliance accepted the proposal to "get rid of" the property tax, in spite of the fact that the financial framework had not been completed. The Alliance says it is not willing to carry out non-financed tax reductions. The question is how can this financial shortfall be met; there has been talk of a local charge for property? Both proposals were forced through at the instigation of the Christian Democrats. There are tensions within the conservative block over the demand for sound public finances on the one hand, and demands for different tax reductions on the other. This type of conflict is likely to recur, especially if the economic situation deteriorates.

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## APPENDIX

### The Election System

In Sweden, parliamentary, county council and municipal elections are all held on the same day. Even though Sweden is ruled by parliament and the government, the municipal and regional democratic assemblies have a significant degree of autonomy. And there is some tension between the municipalities and the central administration.

Until 1970, Sweden had two national chambers; one was indirectly elected, on different election days, and the other elected directly. By abolishing the two-chamber system the people's sovereignty was strengthened to an extent and election results now more directly influence both parliament and the government. Previously, the different elections could swing from one direction to another in successive ballots, a situation which helped the Social Democrats maintain their long period in office. And, since 1970, Swedish politics has experienced more shifts of power.

Control over the municipalities and county councils are naturally also important when implementing current welfare policies, because they actually organise the administration and supply of these welfare services.

Generally speaking the county councils make little impact on their citizens. But local politicians often have a close relationship with local residents. And assertive, well profiled local leaders can also achieve good election results. The Social Democrats retained power in Gothenburg and Malmö, where they had forceful leaders. Leading individuals in municipalities can buck national election trends.

There is a four percent hurdle for the national parliament, which excludes many of the small parties. It is much easier to get into the municipal and county councils. Over time, there has also been an increase in vote-splitting at different levels. Many local parties operate at municipal level and many of the small parties have seats in several municipal assemblies around the country.

The political geography is complex. But there is a basic pattern, with social democracy strong in the north, and down through the traditional industrial regions and smaller built-up areas. The middle classes and Moderates are strongly represented in Stockholm and in south and west Sweden.

#### **Tradition of minority governments**

Sweden has a long tradition of minority governments, which have been much more frequent than majority governments. One reason for this is the relatively dominant position of social democracy within Swedish politics, and the fact the Left Party always supported Social Democrat governments. But minority governments were common even before the Social Democrats acquired power in 1932. One consequence has been that consultation and agreements between the non-government parties in parliament have been more important than in systems which have majority governments. This has previously led to collaboration between the parties - as well as between the blocks - on many issues. There has been consensus between the blocks over many central political issues, with defence policy providing a good example.

Now the Alliance is in power, Sweden again has a majority government. It remains to be seen whether or not this marks the start of a new trend. One possibility is that the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Green Party will profile themselves more clearly as a possible future majority government, thus offering a clear choice at the next election.

#### **The parliamentary election result**

The Left Party	5,85	-2,54
The Social Democrats	34,99	-4,86
The Green Party	5,24	+0,6
The Centre Party	7,88	+1,69
The Liberal Party	7,54	-5,86
The Christian Democrats	6,59	-2,56
The Moderate Party	26,23	+10,97
Other parties	5,67	+2,56
Blocks:		
s - v - mp	46,1	-6,8
Alliance	48,2	+4,24
Other	5,7	+2,56

The two blocks are virtually the same size. The conservative Alliance has won back some voters and restored Swedish politics to the position where there are two blocks with similar voter support, following three elections where it never came close to achieving government office. Now the margin between the two blocks is just 2.1 percent; after the 2002 election, the left block had a lead of 9 percent.

The left block has become less socialist and the Left Party has said goodbye to communism. The Social Democrats have rewritten their programme and reformulated their earlier belief, that power of production should be transferred to the people, to encapsulate a more generalised concept. Another factor is Green Party collaboration, both with the Social Democrats and the Left Party.

None of this helped the centre-right parties, which had been on the retreat in Sweden from the fall of the Wall to the present time. And now the Moderates have taken steps towards the political centre.

Another factor worth mentioning is the Social Democrats' declining support: in the 1930's the Social Democrats gained an average of 45 percent of the votes. For 30 years, the figures were between 45 and 50 percent. In the seventies and eighties, the proportion fell below 45 percent. Since 1991, the figures have usually been less than 40 percent. In this year's election the Social Democrats gained about 35 percent. But they are still the largest party and performed better than Social Democrats and socialist parties in many other European countries.

#### **New parties outside parliament**

It is probable that the increased election turnout was due to the near parity between the two blocks. Another explanation is that the parties not represented in parliament gathered more votes than before. They gained 5.7 percent, an increase of just over 2.5 percent!

***This is how the votes were split amongst the parties outside parliament:***

Feministiskt initiativ <i>(A feminist party led by former Left leader Gudrun Schyman)</i>	0.68
Junilistan (June list) <i>(A party critical of the EU)</i>	0.47
Piratpartiet (Pirate Party) <i>(A party wanting to legalise file sharing)</i>	0.63
Sjukvårdspartiet (Medical Care Party) <i>(A party opposing the closure of local hospitals)</i>	0.21
Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) <i>(An extreme right-wing and xenophobic party with roots in BBS, Keep Sweden Swedish)</i>	2.94

The most surprising fact is that a xenophobic party managed to poll almost 3 percent in a general election, and even more people voted for the Sweden Democrats in the local elections. They already had a strong position in southern Sweden. Now they have increased their local representation many times over and will acquire a larger share of the public funds for political parties. It's generally believed the Sweden Democrats stand a good chance of getting into parliament at the next election. Now discussions have begun as to how this can be prevented and how to combat hostility towards foreigners. Sweden is clearly susceptible to contemporary xenophobic infections! Sweden had not had a right-wing populist party since the breakthrough and rapid collapse of New Democracy in the early 1990's.