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ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

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A party system in flux: the Swedish parliamentary election of September 2018

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ABSTRACT

In the Swedish parliamentary election of 7 September 2018, the biggest parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, both lost votes compared to their scores in the previous election, but not as many as they had feared. Commensurately, the radical-right challenger party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), which had seemed certain to profit from Sweden's dramatic experience of the European migration crisis, did well, but not as well as it had hoped. The result left the array of parliamentary forces fragmented and finely balanced. Only after months of negotiations could a government be formed. Eventually, the incumbent coalition received a renewed parliamentary mandate. At the same time, the party system was transformed.

KEYWORDS Sweden; election; parties; party system; government formation

Background: a changing party system

By 2010 Swedish party politics had become fairly simple. Each of the seven parties in parliament had peeled off into one of two formalised blocs: the centre-right Alliance and a 'red-green' association of left-of-centre parties (Aylott and Bolin 2007). However, the trend towards bipolarity in the party system was then broken. An eighth party – the SD – entered parliament, taking votes from both left and right. This wrecked the chances of either main bloc winning a parliamentary majority of its own. Yet all the other parties regarded SD as untouchable, which ruled out stable majorities that included it.

In that respect, the 2014 election changed nothing (see Table 1). It did, though, lead to a new government. The Alliance was replaced in office by the Social Democrats and, making their governmental debut, the Greens.

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Table 1. The Swedish party system after the 2014 election.

*'Party constellation'**	Red–Greens	Alliance	—
Percentage of parliamentary seats	45	41	14
Parties	Social Democrats** Greens** Left	Moderates Centre Liberals Christian Democrats	SD

*The term 'party constellation' was defined by the parties in the 2014 December agreement. Parties within each constellation are arranged in descending order of the size of their respective parliamentary groups.
**These parties formed a minority coalition government after the 2014 election.

Even with the presumed support of the Left Party, however, the new coalition was well short of a parliamentary majority. There followed weeks of sparring between the new government and the Alliance, ostensibly over the budget but more essentially over how they were all to handle the disruptive presence of SD. Stefan Löfven, the prime minister, dramatically called a new election. Equally dramatically, he then called it off. His Social Democrats, the Greens and the Alliance parties instead reached the 2014 'December agreement' (Bjereld *et al.* 2016).

The agreement involved an extraordinary innovation. Each of the two blocs (or 'party constellations') agreed to allow the bigger one to form a government and get its budget through parliament. (The left bloc was reckoned to include the Left Party, even though it did not sign the agreement.) The aim was clear: to construct a cartel that would exclude SD from all influence. It was almost as if the parliamentary arena was to be truncated, with seven parties acting as if the eighth was not there. The deal was a strategic victory for the Alliance; it was exactly what its leaders had wanted (Kinberg Batra *et al.* 2014). However, within two of its parties, the Christian Democrats and the 'liberal conservative' Moderates, there were grave doubts. Formally, indeed, the December agreement, which was supposed to last eight years, collapsed after just 10 months, as internal dissent forced those parties' leaders to withdraw their support.

Yet, in practice, the agreement refused to die.

In early 2017 the Moderates sought to pull the Alliance towards a quite different strategy, in which the *cordon sanitaire* around SD would be relaxed and SD's help in toppling the government accepted. This was enormously controversial. For many in the other Alliance parties, any accommodation with SD – a party that was founded in 1988 by neo-Nazi groups, even if it had since become far less extreme – was unthinkable. That intensely antipathetic attitude towards SD protected the minority red-green government; it was as if the December agreement still applied. Even during a major scandal in summer 2017 about a leak of classified information, in which two ministers resigned and Löfven was strongly

criticised, the Alliance could not agree to land a knockout blow, because it would have involved some level of joint action with SD. Soon after that fiasco, the Moderate leader was forced out. Her successor reconfirmed the *cordon sanitaire*.

The left-of-centre bloc, meanwhile, had its own problems. The Greens were always likely to find their first spell in government difficult (Aylott and Bolin 2015a). But no one could have anticipated their suffering during the events of autumn 2015, when the stream of asylum-seekers reaching Sweden – a quarter of a million in 2014–2015, in a country with a population of less than 10 million – became most intense. Having previously resisted any tightening of immigration and asylum policy, the government buckled. It agreed with the Alliance a series of emergency measures, including the imposition of border controls and a much more restrictive approach to granting residence permits. This meant a spectacular violation of a pledge in the Greens' 2014 manifesto, and on an issue – migration – that had become as important to them as environmental protection. The Greens' parliamentary group was bitterly divided over the measures. Amid further internal controversies, during which some commentators even wondered whether the Greens had been infiltrated by Islamists, the party's poll ratings fell to around the 4% threshold for parliamentary representation.

The Social Democrats sustained less direct political damage in 2015 than the Greens did, despite their leading the government during its immigration U-turn. They surely benefited from steady growth in the Swedish economy, perhaps stimulated by a migration-related fiscal boost. Nevertheless, their support eroded gently throughout the parliamentary term.

As the immediate migration crisis abated, it became clear that it had accelerated ongoing change in the Swedish party space. Journalists discovered a concept from political science, the GAL–TAN dimension of political conflict (Hooghe *et al.* 2002).[1] For decades, it was received wisdom that Swedish elections were fought over economic distribution. In 2014–2018 such issues became augmented, and even supplanted, by others: immigration, the social integration of newcomers and, not least, law and order. The media began to associate rises in levels of violence and crime with migration. Tension rose further after an Islamist terror attack in Stockholm in April 2017, in which five people died.

The Alliance became split along this newly prominent dimension. After years of allowing SD to monopolise scepticism about immigration, the Moderates tightened their position. The Centre Party, however, emphatically did not. To the consternation of other Alliance parties, the Centre ensured that a partial amnesty for thousands of asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, conditional on their enrolling to study at upper secondary school, won parliamentary approval in spring 2018.

Party strategies and the campaign

The Social Democrats were open about their election strategy (Socialdemokraterna 2018). Like the Moderates, the Social Democrats adopted tougher lines on migration and crime. The temporary border controls and restrictions introduced in 2015 should stay, they said. More police should be recruited and harsher punishments meted out by the courts. Religious 'free schools', funded by local government, should be closed. The party even signalled its hope that a long-term migration policy could be agreed with the Moderates. After years of Social Democratic stasis, this exertion of political will – and in a direction that would have been inconceivable before the 2015 crisis – was a surprise. There was internal opposition to the new line, but not that much.

With its right flank secured, the second phase of the Social Democrats' strategy was to bring the debate back onto its own territory, with promises of improved social benefits and opposition to the Alliance's preference for tax cuts. The centrepiece of the Social Democrats' manifesto, released less than a fortnight before the election, was a 'family week' – an extra week of annual paid holiday for parents. The plan did not, however, immediately appear to do much for the Social Democrats' poll figures.

The Greens put the environment back at the forefront of their campaign. As the election approached, polls began to predict a more comfortable outcome for them. Some speculated that climate-change awareness was enhanced by forest fires during the unusually hot Swedish summer. On the other hand, the Alliance's smallest party, the Christian Democrats, enjoyed an even more notable upswing in the polls. Commentators talked of the greater media visibility that small parties in general attain during an election campaign.

The campaign had an inchoate feel, perhaps because it revolved around numerous live debates between party leaders. The European Union cropped up as an issue. In the light of impending British departure, SD wanted Swedish membership renegotiated and put to a referendum. In stark contrast, the Liberals revived the idea of Sweden eventually adopting the euro – a dead issue since it had been rejected in a referendum in 2003. Much more prominent in the campaign, however, was healthcare. Swedish hospitals faced staff shortages and lengthening queues for treatment. That was obviously a weak point for the government parties. Still, in general, the Alliance's joint efforts looked rather half-hearted. There was no Alliance manifesto of the type agreed in 2006, 2010 and 2014.

Immigration policy per se did not dominate debate as many had expected. Yet the issue never went away. The campaign proper, which started in August, began with a big outbreak of car-burnings, a phenomenon associated with immigrant-dominated suburbs. The final week saw

new reports of Islamist-tinged misconduct by local Social Democratic and Green politicians. The campaign concluded with a big row in the final televised debate between the party leaders. The SD leader, Jimmie Åkesson, attributed the relatively low rates of employment among immigrants to the fact that 'they are not Swedes', and that they thus 'do not fit in [*passar in*]'. Swedish public service television, which hosted the debate, decided that Åkesson's remarks were so 'grossly generalising' that they violated the terms of its mandate (Landahl 2018). The channel publicly disassociated itself from them. SD boycotted the broadcaster's remaining election coverage.

Tightly intertwined with the new political agenda was the 'government question' – that is, how a government was to be formed, and thus how SD was to be handled. If any issue was paramount in the campaign, it was this. Each of the parties made pledges, with various levels of clarity and coherence, about future co-operation. It was understood that, according to the negative rules of Swedish parliamentarism, co-operation could take various forms. These pledges are worth describing in some detail (see also Bergman *et al.* 2018).

Ulysses, sirens, etc.

Åkesson, for one, declared his goal of a coalition of SD, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats, even as he acknowledged its current improbability. He promised that SD would vote against any new government that refused it influence.

More important, however, were the positions taken by the Alliance parties. All four ruled out negotiation with SD. They all also pledged to vote against the incumbent red-green government – which, with SD doing likewise, would surely bring it down. All four promised to try to replace it with an Alliance coalition.

But whereas the Moderates and the Christian Democrats vowed to pursue government office under all circumstances, the Centre and the Liberals stipulated a big caveat. They would indeed try to form an Alliance government, they said, if the Alliance ended up bigger than the red-green trio – a position that followed the logic of the undead December agreement. If, however, the Alliance was smaller than the red- greens, the Centre and the Liberals insisted that a putative Alliance government would first require the consent of parties to their left – which inevitably meant the Social Democrats. This, said the Centre and the Liberals, was because they would never approve a government that was reliant on SD for its survival, as that would bestow influence on SD.

This Centre and Liberal reasoning was either illogical or daring, depending on the observer's perspective. The Alliance apparently still embraced the bigger-bloc-governs principle. So why, if the Alliance ended up *smaller* than the red-greens, should the Social Democrats still accede to an Alliance government? 'Forget it', answered Löfven, in a pre-election debate (Swedish Radio, 29 August 2018). True, his party had often appealed explicitly to the Centre and the Liberals for co-operation. But it was clearly implied that such co-operation would have to be on Social Democratic terms. Before the election, Löfven (2018) once more urged an end to bloc politics. His stated alternative involved his Social Democrats, as (very probably) the biggest party in parliament, *leading* a cross-bloc coalition. The Alliance parties rejected that.

Commentators mooted possible paths out of this thicket of self-imposed behavioural constraints. One was an unprecedented grand coalition between the two biggest parties, the Moderates and Social Democrats (*Expressen* 2018). Another was a single-party minority government (Ruin 2017, 2018). By tolerating a Moderate or Social Democrat prime minister (and his budget), rather than actually joining his government, other parties might avoid violating too egregiously one or other of their pre-election pledges.

Results

At bloc level, the election results were roughly as the polls had forecast. The red-greens retained their advantage, though that advantage became extremely slight. The incumbent coalition, plus the Left Party, beat the Alliance by fewer than 30,000 votes (out of total of 6.5m cast) and, crucially, by a single parliamentary seat, 144 to 143. SD, meanwhile, cemented, but did not improve upon, its status as third-biggest party (Table 2).

At party level, reactions to the result were varied. The Social Democrats received their lowest-ever proportion of the vote. Their 28.3% dipped just under their score in the 1911 election. Yet the polls had been pointing to a worse outcome. Their better-than-expected result, combined with the advantage for the left bloc, induced a mild sense of Social Democratic triumph. Certainly, their decline was nothing like the collapses experienced by social democratic parties in neighbouring countries, like France and the Netherlands.

There was much less cheer among their coalition partners, the Greens. Their apparent recovery prior to the election turned out to have been fragile – or a mirage. The party finished only just clear of the 4% threshold. Over the following days, former leaders weighed into a debate about what had gone wrong and, in particular, whether the Greens' testing years in government had been worth it.

Table 2. The Swedish parliamentary election of September 2018.

	2018 Seats	Votes (000s)	Votes (%)	2014 Seats	Votes (000s)	Votes (%)
Social Democrats	100	1830	28.3	113	1933	31.0
Moderates	70	1285	19.8	84	1454	23.3
Sweden Democrats	62	1136	17.5	49	801	12.9
Centre Party	31	558	8.6	22	381	6.1
Left Party	28	518	8.0	21	356	5.7
Christian Democrats	22	409	6.3	16	285	4.6
Liberals	20	356	5.5	19	338	5.4
Greens	16	286	4.4	25	429	6.9
Feminist Initiative	0	30	0.5	0	171	3.1
others	0	695	1.0	0	603	1.0
turnout		6477	87.2		6232	85.8

Source: Election Authority (2018).

For the Moderates, there was no triumph. Their campaign had been a failure. Their share of the vote was their second-lowest in 30 years. An exit poll suggested that they retained only half of their voters from 2014, with around a tenth lost to the Centre and slightly more to SD.[2] Nearly a third of the Christian Democrats' vote in 2018, which confirmed that party's impressive revival, comprised defectors from the Moderates. Yet, like the Social Democrats, the Moderates took solace from their exceeding the polls' worst predictions.

For SD, there were mixed feelings. Its vote increased by nearly five percentage points. Yet that was near the lower end of the broad range of prognoses that opinion polls, with their different sampling methods, had offered. The exit poll suggested that while 'refugees/immigration', the top priority for SD voters, was a considerably bigger issue than in previous election campaigns, it was ranked only ninth, lower than many had expected, among those said by respondents to have had 'very great significance' for their party choice in 2018. (Healthcare and education were comfortably the most prioritised issues.) That might reflect a degree of success for the Social Democrats' campaign strategy.

Nevertheless, SD's result was better than mere consolidation. In three southern constituencies (among 29 in Sweden as a whole), the party won over a quarter of the vote. In two of those constituencies, it was the biggest party. In some municipalities there, its support was getting on for two-fifths of the vote. In an election in which, according to the exit poll, two in five voters, the highest ever level, switched from their preference in the previous election, SD retained nine in ten of its voters from 2014, a far higher proportion than any other party achieved. In 2018 SD became the second-biggest party among men, among blue-collar workers, and among members of blue-collar trade unions; it won about a quarter of the vote in each category. Intriguingly, nearly a tenth of respondents who had grown up outside Europe, or whose parents had, voted for SD.

There was speculation, too, that the party's growth could also have contributed to another striking feature of the result: that turnout rose for the fourth consecutive election, to over 87%. SD might have mobilised voters who would otherwise have abstained.

Government formation

With no clear winners, each side claimed the right to form the next government. The spotlight fell especially on the Centre Party. It had a pivotal position in the new parliament. Yet it was highly constrained by its own previous pledges.

The Alliance, by conventional measures, had ended up smaller than the red-greens. So its tactic, which had surfaced in the media some months earlier (Eriksson 2017), was to redefine the conventional measures. According to the Alliance leaders (Kristersson *et al.* 2018), the important units were not the 'traditional blocs', but rather the 'government alternatives'. And whereas the Alliance was both those things, the government alternative of the left was claimed now to *exclude* the Left Party, because the Social Democrats obviously preferred a coalition with others. Thus, the Alliance was actually bigger than the left-of-centre government alternative. And so the Alliance – with, once again, a nod to the December agreement – sought the Social Democrats' support in building a government.

Predictably, the Alliance's logic cut no ice with the red-greens. Still, the Alliance persisted, as a complex series of inter-party manoeuvres played out.

The preliminary games involved the election of the new speaker of parliament – an important decision, as the speaker designates the *formateur* of a Swedish government. Since the 1980s, practice had been that the biggest party in the bigger bloc provided the speaker. Presumably seeking to legitimise its interpretation of the election outcome, the Alliance declared that it would nominate its own candidate for speaker. A Moderate, he was duly elected – but only thanks to SD's support. The red-greens accused the Alliance of breaking the *cordon sanitaire*. As if to offset their discomfort, the Centre and the Liberals then insisted that the Alliance abstain rather than support SD's incumbent candidate for second deputy speaker. He thus lost out to a candidate from the Left Party. Twenty Alliance parliamentarians broke their parties' line in the secret ballot. There were reports of ructions in the Moderate group.

When the parliament reconvened, the Alliance parties and SD duly voted to terminate the Löfven government. (It continued in office in a caretaker capacity.) Immediately, however, Alliance unity on the government question began to crack. The Moderates and the Christian Democrats re-emphasised their readiness to form a government that was

tolerated by SD. The Centre and the Liberals re-emphasised that no Alliance government would be possible without the consent of the Social Democrats. And the Social Democrats re-emphasised that they would consent to no such thing.

The new speaker gave Ulf Kristersson, the Moderate leader, first go at forming a government. It took him a week to acknowledge that, inevitably, there would be no Social Democratic help. The Centre's leader, Annie Lööf, again invoked Decembrist logic, although of a slightly different strain. The Alliance should talk to the Greens, she said, not because they could jointly amount to anything like a parliamentary majority, but rather because, with the Greens, 'the Alliance would then be the biggest constellation' (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 10 October). Nothing came of the idea. Kristersson admitted defeat. The speaker passed the *formateur*'s baton to Löfven. In late October, he too handed it back.

In mid-November, the speaker forced a parliamentary vote of investiture on Kristersson as prime minister. SD voted in favour. But the Centre and the Liberals joined the parties to their left in voting against, thus blocking him. Alliance politicians exchanged bitter words. The speaker designated Lööf as *formateur*. She talked of brokering deals between the two biggest parties. But she threw in the towel just a week later.

In late November, the Centre and the Liberals acknowledged that they might accept a Social Democratic government. However, the two parties' initial policy demands involved so much liberalisation and tax-cutting that they almost seemed intended to invite rejection by the Social Democrats. In mid-December, days after a budget proposed by the Moderates and the Christian Democrats had been approved by the parliament, the Centre and the Liberals did indeed vote against Löfven in a second vote of investiture. Kristersson reportedly tried again to assure the other Alliance parties that SD would have no influence over a Moderate-led government. There were public calls by some Liberals for their party to accept his offer; the Liberal leader came under increasing pressure. Less visible, but reported subsequently, was disagreement in the Centre, too, about its choice.

It was not enough. The speaker's patience was clearly wearing thin. Crucially, the Centre and (especially) the Liberals had every reason to avoid a new election, which the constitution would have required had a vote of investiture failed for a fourth time to produce a prime minister. In mid-January the two parties' leaders announced that they would support Löfven in the third vote of investiture. The reason, they said, was the Social Democrats' acceptance of unexpectedly far-reaching reform of, for example, the labour and housing markets. Elsewhere in a 73-point deal, immigrants' right to move family members to Sweden was to be extended. Immigration policy more broadly was to be parked in a parliamentary

inquiry. Perhaps surprisingly, the Greens opted to remain in government, rather than take the politically less onerous role of support party.

The liberal content of the programme, plus a clause that explicitly excluded the Left Party from influence, raised hackles in the Left, whose support was needed to complete a parliamentary majority. Löfven's investiture was delayed still further, so that the Left's leader could be placated. On 18 January, after 131 days, more than five times the duration of any previous government formation, Löfven was finally confirmed as prime minister. The Centre, the Liberals, and the Left all abstained, which counted as acceptance. Party discipline in the vote was nearly complete.

Conclusions

The 2018 election induced profound change in the Swedish party system. The fragmented format became more evident. Never before had the two biggest parties accrued less than half the vote (Bolin 2018). Above all, the bloc-based, bipolar competition that had (with periodic exceptions) characterised it since the 1970s, and which reached a peak of formalisation in 2010, disappeared as the Alliance collapsed.

Rational calculation had undermined the Alliance. Once its shared goal of attaining a parliamentary majority had drifted out of reach, the willingness of each Alliance party to subordinate its own interest to their joint interest had become commensurately weaker (see Allern and Aylott 2009). Still, the new political agenda in Sweden was at least as important a cause of party system change.

Lööf (2017) had previously called her Centre Party the 'antithesis' or 'polar opposite' (*motpol*) of the Social Democrats. She had garnered headlines – and probably votes too – during the 2018 campaign by boldly pledging to evict Löfven's government (albeit without repeating her vow, stated in 2013, to eat her shoe rather than act as a 'stabilising wheel' to a Social Democratic prime minister). So it was painful for her to approve Löfven II. Yet Lööf had, in the same article, also described her party as the polar opposite of SD. And, ultimately, that component of the Centre's self-image took priority. The founding motivation for the December agreement, ostracism of SD, was so essential to the Centre that it could not be compromised, even if that meant the destruction of the Alliance.

The new government meant that the Centre and the Liberals had maintained the *cordon sanitaire*. The Social Democrats had managed to split the Alliance, a long-term strategic goal. Yet these victories were likely to come at a price. There was unhappiness in the labour movement at the Social Democrats' policy concessions. The steadiness and effectiveness of a government based on such a diverse parliamentary majority, with little

to unite it beyond antipathy to SD, was open to doubt. Meanwhile, the upheaval in the party system illustrated vividly the depth of feeling that remained in Sweden about SD and the issues of immigration and ethnic integration. They pose a hefty challenge for any Swedish government.

As for the party system itself, polarised pluralism, with a stretched ideological space and narrowly based governments facing bilateral oppositions, seemed likely in the short term (see Aylott and Bolin 2015b).[3] The Left Party was well placed to attract votes from disillusioned Social Democrats. On the right, SD talked gleefully of a new 'conservative bloc'. That pattern had emerged at municipal level in parts of Sweden. But the prospect was bound to prompt soul-searching in the Moderates. Other scenarios were possible, too. Much was likely to depend on the development of SD itself – and on the other parties' attitudes to it.

Notes

1. One end of this dimension, GAL, stands for green, alternative, libertarian. The other end, TAN, stands for traditional, authoritarian, nationalist.
2. References to the exit poll from here are to SVT (2018).
3. Van Holsteyn (2018) and Aardal and Bergh (2018) provide examples of other more recent reports in the Elections in Context series.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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