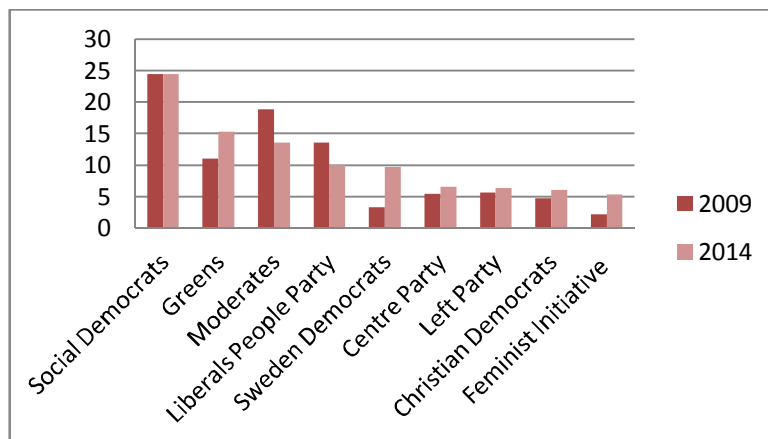


Political crossroads ahead in Sweden: The signs are red-green

Vilde Renman

The European Parliament (EP) elections in Sweden this year have contributed to a polarisation of national parties on the left and right. The political balance was upset on May 25th when the far-right Sweden Democrats almost tripled their vote-share compared to the last European election (see Figure 1, below) thereby gaining their first two EP seats and nearly matching the Liberal People's Party. The Greens also saw marked gains and will now be the second-largest Swedish party in the EP after the Social Democrats (see Table 1). Votes for current government incumbents, the Moderates, plummeted beyond expectation. Despite the fact that ruling parties tend to fare worse in EP elections than in national ones, opinion polls are now suggesting that the Moderates will not recover in time for the national elections in September, whereas both the Greens and the Sweden Democrats are likely to repeat the success of the EP elections. Since the Sweden Democrats are unlikely to form part of the coalition government, Sweden's political landscape is set to undergo a shift to the left.

Figure 1. EP election results 2009 and 2014



Source: European Parliament (<http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-se-2009.html>).

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This commentary is the second in a series by EPIN researchers aimed at examining the political landscape in the EU after the 2014 elections to the European Parliament.

Table 1. Swedish parties in the EP

Party	Seats	Group
Social Democrats	5	S&D
Greens	4	Greens/EFA
Moderates	3	EPP
Liberals People Party	2	ALDE
Sweden Democrats	2	EFD
Centre Party	1	ALDE
Left Party	1	GUE/NGL
Christian Democrats	1	EPP
Feminist Initiative	1	S&D

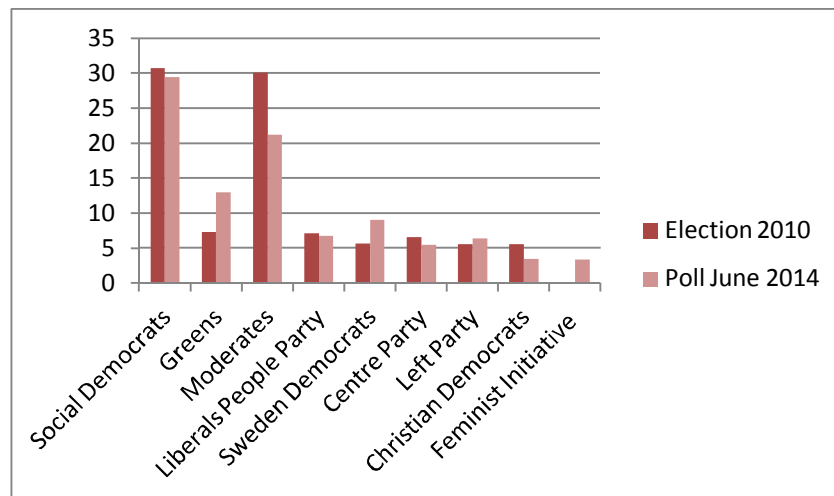
Source: European Parliament (<http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-se-2014.html>).

Most mainstream parties appear to have struggled, to different degrees, in this year's EP elections. In Sweden, neither of the two mainstream parties expected to fare too well, yet it is the Moderates that were considered the 'losers', with nearly a 5% drop in support and the loss of one EP seat compared to the 2009 election, resulting in their worst EP election result to date. Some conservative voters may simply not have turned up to vote, yet since the Swedish EP voter turnout was higher than in 2009, a more likely explanation for this result is that some voters switched their loyalties to the Sweden Democrats.

Although EP and national elections are not directly comparable, this result has created problems for the Moderates. The party has faced difficulties and declining voter support for a while now, and would have benefited greatly from a good EP election result to increase both voters' confidence in the party's chances of success in the national election this autumn and boost morale within the party itself. Instead, after their two consecutive terms in government, the Moderates face criticism for having run out of ideas that appeal to the electorate and voters seem to have tired of them. Crucially, the party is also failing to tackle issues that are relevant for voters. Sweden has become the EU member state to have welcomed the highest number of refugees per year; accepting one-third of all refugees to the EU in 2013.¹ Immigration has therefore become an issue for a growing number of voters. The Sweden Democrats have essentially monopolised the anti-immigration stance. This has led to the Sweden Democrats being able to not only maintain their vote-base but also recruit new voters.

¹ "[Sverige tar emot flest kvotflyktingar i EU](#)" [Sweden accepts the highest quota of refugees in the EU], *SVT Nyheter*, 29 April 2014.

Figure 2. National elections 2010 and June 2014 opinion poll



Source: Svenska Dagbladet & Sifo (http://www.tns-sifo.se/media/512543/vb_jun_2014_svd.pdf).

It is clear from the figure above that the Sweden Democrats are likely to enhance their vote share in the upcoming national election. In the last national election they took 5.7% of the vote and opinion polls now predict a support rate of around 9%. Comparing these figures with the EP elections reveals a similar picture: the party secured 3.27% in 2009 and 9.7% this year. This gain for the Sweden Democrats can best be explained by how the party is successfully mobilising their voters as well as how they are emphasising a political question that the electorate considers to be highly relevant, both on the European and national level.

What is noticeable with the campaign being developed by the Sweden Democrats is the stronger focus on targeting inner-city Stockholm residents. Their traditional voter base used to be smaller towns, especially in the south of the country, whereas voters in the capital have tended not to share the anti-immigrant and racist ideology of the party. However, as beggars are becoming a bigger issue in Stockholm, the Sweden Democrats have developed the new campaign slogan of being “against organised begging in the Stockholm metro”. This is arguably a major explanation as to why the party, for the first time, did so well in Stockholm in the EP election, and has the potential to make further gains in the national election in September because the party is now gearing up for a political campaign with the largest sum of the budget concentrated in the Stockholm region.²

Nevertheless, the Sweden Democrats are unlikely to secure enough votes to have a real impact in the Swedish government, even though they ended up in the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group in the EP (despite Nigel Farage’s initial refusal to accept such an “extreme” party whose openly racist comments could reflect negatively upon the image of the EFD). This suggests that they are slowly becoming institutionalised as a party, both on the European and national level. Crucially however, it is highly improbable that any other Swedish party would want to enter into a coalition with them.

The success of the Sweden Democrats will be further limited by the fact that there is a large segment of voters who actively stand up *against* xenophobia and anti-immigration policies. Following the EP elections, it became clear that many voters mobilised to vote against the type of politics promoted by the Sweden Democrats, which could partly explain the relatively high Swedish voter turnout.

The votes cast for the Social Democrats remained stable compared to the last EP election and the Greens improved their vote share by over 4%, securing four EP seats. Polls suggest that the Social

² “SD storsatsar i Stockholm” [SD invests heavily in Stockholm], *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 June 2014 (http://www.svd.se/nyheter/valet2014/sverigedemokraterna-storsatsar-i-stockholm_3669414.svd).

Democrats will have similar popular support in the national election in September which, coupled with the big losses of their rival party the Moderates, will be enough to secure victory.

Although the Greens are expected to fare slightly worse in the national election than in the EP elections, their predicted vote result of 13% would be enough for them to enter a governing coalition with the Social Democrats. If the polls turn out to be accurate they will indeed be regarded as the big winners nationally, nearly doubling their vote share from the 2010 result of 7.3%. Like the Sweden Democrats, the success of the Greens is largely due to their focus on a single political issue and the party is also successfully strengthening its voter base, with a large segment of the voter demographic consisting of young and/or first-time voters. In a survey ahead of the EP elections Swedish voters cited the environment and climate change as the most important political issue³ for them, so it is unsurprising that the Greens did so well in the EP elections. Furthermore, the Greens could highlight their achievements in the EP to date, which gave voters confidence that the party will be able to deliver on their election campaign promises. The environment is an important political topic in Sweden, as the country plays a prominent role in international climate change diplomacy. The outcome of the Swedish general election will most likely be an affirmation of the country's desire to maintain a high-profile role in global environmental policy-making.

In the Swedish EP elections, voters for left-leaning parties outnumbered voters for the right and extreme right, with the left-coalition parties taking 51.3% of the total votes. This sends a clear signal about what is to be expected from the national election in September and is noteworthy because it suggests a clear shift to the left in Swedish politics, as recent polls also suggest. Although the Social Democrats are polling as the winning party, a clear red-green majority is the likely outcome in the national election in September, with the Greens achieving their aim of becoming the governing coalition partners of the Social Democrats. The degree of ease that would surround the establishment of such a coalition is, however, uncertain. Social Democrat leader Stefan Löfven has previously mentioned his preference for working across the political spectrum as opposed to joining forces with the Left Party and Feminist Initiative, so the winner of the national election might in the end not be very clear-cut. The Greens are considered as a natural coalition partner, not the Left Party, but a government consisting of only the Social Democrats and the Greens would be too small to be feasible. The ultimate success of the Greens depends on the Social Democrat/Left block coalition being able to form a functioning alliance.

The EP elections revealed an increase in the popularity of parties on both the left and right margins of the political spectrum in Sweden, at the expense of the mainstream parties. As polls suggest, this trend is unlikely to be reversed in the upcoming national election, where these small parties are also expected to fare well. The outcome is likely to be a more profound left-right divide in Swedish politics, which could also affect the country's European policy regarding 'social Europe', with welfare policies being placed higher on the agenda than is the case with the current predominance of liberal conservatism. The absence of well-known actors such as current Finance Minister Anders Borg and Foreign Minister Carl Bildt could have a temporary but negative impact on the credibility Sweden has gained on the European stage, especially when it comes to the handling of the financial crisis, and it remains to be seen who their Social Democrat or Green replacements will be.

³ [“Ökat valdeltagande i historiskt EU-val”](#) [Increased voter-turnout in historic EU elections], *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 May 2014.