

Chapter 7: Sweden

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Introduction

The first Swedish European parliamentary (EP) election was held in 1995, one year after the tight referendum where 52.3% of Swedes had voted in favour of European Union membership. The Swedish entry was a part of the fourth enlargement, where Finland and Austria also became EU members. These countries were prior members of the European Free Trade Area, with a limited interest in joining the EU, and Swedish membership used to be a 'non-issue' in the domestic political context, mainly because it was considered impossible to combine with maintaining neutrality in foreign and security policy. Two important factors — the fall of the iron curtain and a more globalised economy — led to political parties who traditionally opposed a membership starting to re-evaluate their positions. In particular, the Social Democratic Party (SAP) changed from being against membership to becoming open to joining the EU during the beginning of the 1990s, even if the internationalisation of the economy was seen as a threat to national politics ability to control the economy and employment policy. This change of position was not without problems as most political parties were internally divided in their view of the EU. This divergence could be found both among voters and representatives at different political levels. However, EU-membership was not possible without the SAP supporting the idea. The party has traditionally dominated Swedish politics, both in terms of voter share and being in government (Gilljam and Holmberg, 1998; Tallberg and Von Sydow, 2018).

In the aftermath of the referendum

The first Swedish EP election (1995) was overshadowed by the 1994 referendum in which only two parties unanimously favoured the membership (The Moderate party and the Liberal party) while two were strongly opposed to joining (The Left Party and the Green Party). The election outcome verified this as both the Left Party and especially the Green Party received stronger support compared with the national election held the previous year. In this respect, Sweden stood out compared with other EU countries in having the strongest opinions against the EU from parties leaning ideologically to the left (Gilljam and Holmberg, 1998).

Compared with other countries, where domestic issues often overshadow the EU perspec-

tive, the 1995 campaign focused on the EU and the future development of the union (foreign policy and an EU defence, European Monetary Union, EU federalism etc.). In other ways, the first Swedish European election shared experiences from other countries, with limited media interest, low intensity campaigns, and low voter turnout – 42% percent compared with 86% in the 1994 national election. In terms of election results, traits from EU elections in other countries were also apparent: larger established parties lost support and smaller parties gained voters. Thus, even if EU issues dominated the first Swedish European election it was nevertheless a second-order election (Gilljam and Holmberg, 1998).

The second EP election in 1999 became a rematch of the first, where voter turnout was even lower (39%). What changed was public opinion, where the strong stance against the EU was declining, even if most voters were still opposed to membership (Holmberg et al, 2001). This trend continued over time and Swedish opinion has changed from being one of the most sceptical towards the EU, to one of the most EU positive. Today, around 60% of the Swedes have a positive view of the EU (Berg et al., 2019).

In the shadow of the Euro

An important question of previous campaigns had been the European Monetary Union (EMU). It was an obligation due to the Amsterdam treaty, but Swedish politicians first chose to stay outside the EMU system (1999) and then submitted the decision over whether to join the single Euro currency to a citizen vote (Tallberg and Von Sydow, 2018). In 2003, Sweden held the EMU referendum and where the 1994 membership referendum was a close race, the EMU referendum turned out to be a landslide in favour of keeping the Swedish Krona with 56% voted against joining the Euro (Oscarsson et al., 2006). Consequently, the 2004 EU election was held in the aftermath of a referendum but, contrary to the outcome of the 1994 vote on membership, the debate over the Euro did not cast a shadow over the 2004 election campaign. Instead, it had rather the opposite effect. Voters lost interest in the EMU and EU and the turnout reached an all-time low with 38%. This was interpreted as a 'low signal' consequence of parties spending less resources on the campaign and there being relatively little media attention (Oscarsson et al., 2006). Looking at the campaign posters

from 2004, a significant trait of the Swedish campaigns was the universality of campaign messages criticising the EU, even from traditionally pro-EU parties. Even if the Swedes have become more positive towards the EU, there is still a somewhat sceptical view of it, which these campaign messages reflect (Blomgren, 2019).

What goes up must come down

A notable feature of the 2004 EU election was the success of a new political party. The June List Party was formed by two previously well-known economists and received a lot of media attention. The party favoured Swedish EU membership but promoted a critical stance towards the country's further integration into the EU. When the votes were counted Junilistan emerged as the big winner with 14.5% of the vote with three of the 20 Swedish seats in parliament (Oscarsson et al., 2006). This would be the first of several EU elections in which new parties would successfully campaign and win representation in the European parliament. Although Junilistan lost their three seats in 2009, one of these was taken by yet another new electoral force, the Pirate Party, that received 7.1% of the vote.

The Pirate Party had originally started as a protest movement against declining standards of integrity in public life and the threats posed by increasing control and surveillance from states and private companies' use of new information technology (Demker, 2010). The success story of the Pirates was, like Junilistan's, short lived and the party lost their seat in the 2014 election. There was, however, another successful newcomer in this campaign in the guise of feminist party Feminist Initiative (Fi). Again, a successful campaign (5.5%) of the votes was followed by one term in parliament as they lost their seats in the 2019 election (Berg, 2014). There is one exception from this logic—the Sweden Democrats—which we will come back to later. The Sweden Democrats was founded in the right-wing extremist movement with Nazi roots, and as nationalists from the beginning strongly opposing membership in the EU and received their first seats in Swedish parliament in 2010 and in the EP parliament in 2014.

A new campaign channel and a changing political landscape

Like other EU members, issues that are salient in other countries do not necessarily impact on Swedish politics. A prime example of this came with the 2009 campaign when the economic crisis dominated many election campaigns throughout Europe. The issue was almost non-existent in the Swedish campaign, mostly due to the limited effect of the crisis on the national economy. In several ways the 2009



Image 7.01: The Green Party poster during the 1999 EU election shows an illustration of Sweden as a dog on the EU's leash. 'Now it is enough! Away with corruption, bureaucracy, and destruction of nature. YOU choose'. 1999 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.02: Liberal Party Poster of Marit Paulsen, a well-known pro EU Swedish politician. She became very popular with her persona as a 'grumpy old woman'. The text on the t-shirts says, 'The right old woman for the job'. 2014 European Parliamentary elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

campaign differed from previously held campaigns. For the first time since Sweden joined the EU, voter turnout increased (46%) and the Swedes view on EU had developed to be strongly pro-EU. Secondly, EU policy issues seemed to be less important to voters when they cast their votes. Instead, domestic issue positions became more important. Thirdly, a significant change in the political landscape took place as the Green Party abandoned their goal of Sweden leaving the EU. The new position was in line with similar European parties where the EU was increasingly seen as an opportunity for progress rather than a threat, especially as an arena where the environmental cause could be advanced (Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2010).

Another important new aspect of the 2009 campaign was the introduction of political advertising on television. Traditionally, Swedish politicians have had limited access to the medium as a campaign channel on their own terms. Previously, journalists would control interviews, debates, and other kinds of visibility on television. Even though the internet started influencing campaign strategy, Swedish parties mainly relied on a traditional combination of channels like newspaper ads, election posters, public speeches, leaflets, and interpersonal communication to gain attention. Sweden had, until 2009, a history of prohibiting electoral TV spots but, due to changing regulation, political ads could now be aired on the private channel TV4. This facility was mainly used by the centre and centre-right parties. The left leaning parties, however, maintained a negative view of television advertising and were disinclined to use it, fearing it would decrease the quality of public debate and increase campaign costs. Instead, they produced films published on their websites (Johansson, 2017).

The Super election year of 2014

The consequences of the economic crisis were still prevalent as the 2014 EU election took place and cast a shadow over the campaign in many member countries, where Eurosceptic parties gained support. Even if the economic downfall was less visible in Sweden, Euroscepticism was on the rise elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, Sweden Democrats got seats in parliament after the 2014 election (9.7% of the votes) (Berg, 2014). This right-wing populist party had been increasing its support among the Swedish public for a long time before it entered the national parliament in 2010. Sweden Democrats adopted a clear anti-EU position from the start, with the party leader Jimmy Åkesson even claiming this issue was the main reason why he originally joined the party in the 1990s (Åkesson, 2013).

The 2014 election took place just a couple

of months before the national, regional, and local elections in Sweden. Consequently, campaigning resources were limited, and it was anticipated the EU elections were a rehearsal for the upcoming general elections. Even if there were signs that some posters used slogans that would be recycled for the later campaigns, the European election mainly focused on EU perspectives. The pro-EU parties promoted collaboration, with the Social Democrats and Greens both prioritizing environmental and social rights. Nevertheless, some parties generally positive towards the EU still qualified their support for membership. For example, the Centre party produced a TV spot where EU bureaucrats were depicted walking around a Swedish landscape counting and measuring accompanied by a voice over from the party leader Annie Lööf claiming that EU regulations were too detailed, and that the energy and resources involved in implementing them should instead be allocated to help resolve environmental problems.

No longer a second order election?

The 2019 European election was a game changer in the history of Sweden election campaigns. The support for the EU was higher than ever before, with around 60% of the population endorsing membership and only around 15% opposing it (Berg et al., 2019). A so-called 'Swexit' was no longer even being proposed by the most critical parties given both the Sweden Democrats and the Left party having abandoned their previous goal of campaigning for the country to leave the EU. Interestingly Swedish voters seemed to have by now rejected the old wisdom of the EP elections being less important. Voter turnout reached a new record with 55% casting their vote. Still, slogans with themes about limiting or expanding the EU dominated the election campaign as many times before (Blomgren, 2019).

Several themes were visible, where some parties promoted stronger environmental measures (such as a carbon tax), which other parties criticised for its potential to hand over too much power to the EU. A similar divide was found upon migration issues, where some parties argued that the EU should be able to make binding decisions while others argued this should be a member state decision. National sovereignty was also debated in relation to the social pillar. Even if all parties defended the social welfare system, there were disagreements whether the national system would be threatened if the EU became more involved in this area. Crime was also a prominent issue during the campaign related to stronger border controls, but cooperation between police authorities and discussions of a future European FBI was also debated (Berg, 2019; Blomgren, 2019).

The two key themes that have dominated the



Image 7.03: Moderate Party poster. The party has traditionally been one of the most EU-friendly Swedish parties, but in this poster and others from the same election (2004) the party promoted the limitations of European power. The text on the posters says 'The forest and the agriculture are in Sweden, not in Brussels' where the EP candidate Peter Wachtmeister stands on a tractor (in suit and tie). 2004 European Parliamentary elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.05: Green Party poster. The Green party has often used contrasting slogans with a humorous twist in their political communication. One of the posters in the 2009 campaign featured the appeal 'Raise the emission demand levels in Brussels, lower the sea level in the oceans' illustrated by a picture of the well-known Brussels statue Maneken pils. 2009 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.04: The Pirate Party poster posed the question 'Which big brother will be removed?' illustrated by a picture of a serious agent/security person next to a teen boy carrying a younger boy on his shoulders. 2014 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.06: Sweden Democrats Poster. During European elections the Sweden Democrats' main theme has been about leaving the EU or, at least, minimising the influence of Brussels. Critiques of increased federation, bureaucracy and forced regulation have been a recurrent feature of the party's campaign appeals. In 2014 the message was condensed into one slogan 'Brussels out of Sweden – Vote for Sweden in the EU election on May 25th'. 2014 European Parliamentary election. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.07: Christian Democrats posters. The well-known public service television journalist Lars Adaktusson left journalism to become a politician for the Christian Democratic party. His journalistic background was acknowledged during the campaign with the message 'Send an investigative journalist to Brussels'. The implicit message of the poster was that even if the party supported membership, the EU needed to be controlled. 2014 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.



Image 7.08: Christian Democrats poster. The party used a Trump inspired slogan ‘Make the EU lagom again’ in the 2019 campaign. The word ‘Lagom’ (moderate) is often said to be unique to the Swedish language, but it has equivalents in other languages, meaning something that is ‘not too much and not too little’. 2019 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.



Image 7.09: Left Party poster. Top candidate Malin Björk and party leader Jonas Sjöström stand together with voters. The campaign slogans were comprised of contrasting concepts that the party supported and opposed. On this one ‘Oil lobbyists’ is crossed over while ‘Climate activist’ is not. The general slogan on all posters was ‘A united Europe for everyone, not the rich only. Vote for the Left Party on May 26th’. 2019 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Swedish EU debate are firstly different policy positions along a left-right ideological scale, secondly the power of the EU where the debate is about if the EU should be delegated legislative power in specific issues. However, the latter also includes the broader question of EU integration and where the EU is heading. This tension between policy position and the delegation of power caused the biggest political scandal in the history of Swedish EU election campaigns. The Christian Democrats had cast their vote in the EP on what could be seen as being against women's rights to abortion. The party—and the MEP Lars Adaktusson—had a hard time trying to explain that the vote was opposing the issue being dealt on at the EU level, not on the party's position on women's rights. This scandal was revealed by a journalist on the broadsheet newspaper Dagens Nyheter and later used by other parties to question the party's position on abortion. The scandal became a dominant story; the image of the Christian Democrats became very unflattering both on social media campaigns and the media (Johansson, 2020).

tary in Sweden). The 2019 election campaign was also more engaged among voters, parties, and news media (Johansson, 2020). Thus, maybe the labelling of EP elections in Sweden as second order elections no longer true. However, even if the EU membership has been normalised in the Swedish political context, one question that has been stable from the beginning and is still there is: more or less EU? The Swedish position toward the EU is sometimes described as pragmatic and policy oriented (Tallberg and Von Sydow, 2017). When it comes to the future institutional issues of the EU, Sweden seems to be quite defensive, holding a sceptical view which is often visible in the campaign. Even pro EU parties express a somewhat defensive position to the EU and from a Swedish perspective, the EU should be 'lagom'.

The 'lagom' way

When looking back at the six EU elections held in Sweden, they can be at once characterised by stability and change. From a country where the membership was contested and the Euro was rejected, the Swedish view of the EU has become more positive and after a declining trend, the voter turnout changed to rise to levels above the EU average (even if voting is volun-

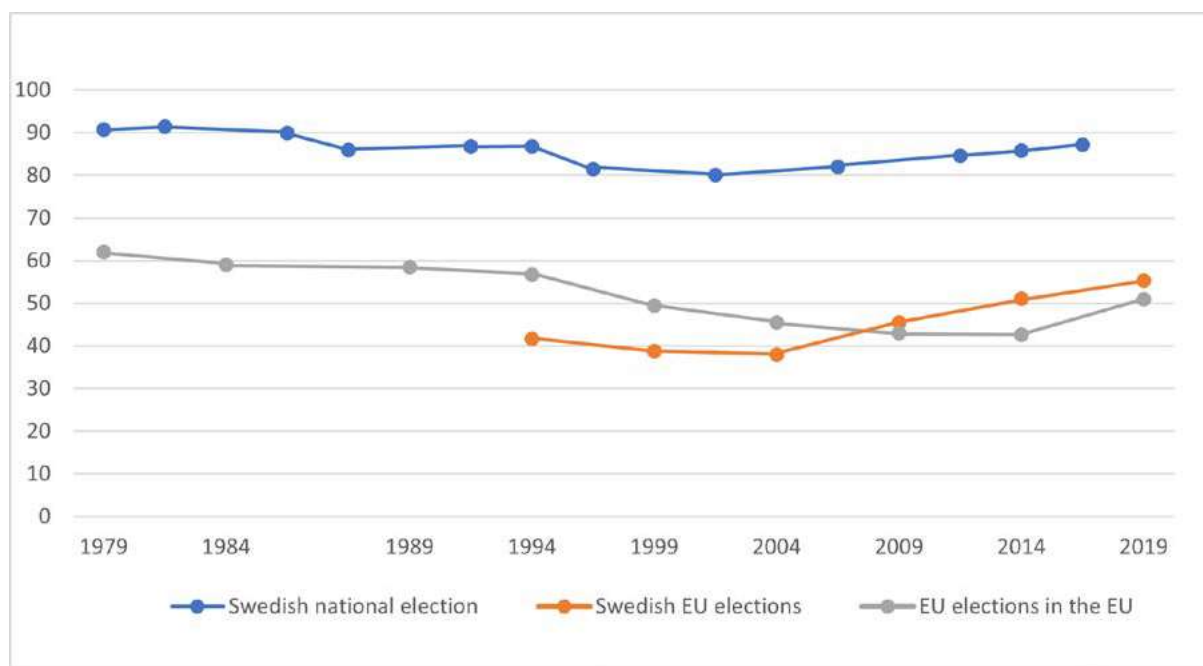


Figure 7.01: Voter turnout in the Swedish EU elections, Swedish national elections and EU elections in the EU (percent). Source: Author's own calculations based on data from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/sv/valdeltagande/>

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