

# Social Democrats lead in polls, but populist Sweden Democrats could make a breakthrough in the 11 September general election

As every four years, Swedes are being called to the polls on the second Sunday of September, this year on the 11th, to renew the 349 members of the *Riksdag* (the single house of parliament), as well as all their local representatives: councillors of the local assemblies of the kingdom's 20 counties and councillors of the 290 municipalities. This electoral calendar, in which local and national elections coincide, traditionally leads to a high turnout and the predominance of national political issues in the election campaign.

Norwegians and Icelanders living in the Kingdom, people with the nationality of another state but registered as resident in Sweden for at least three consecutive years and citizens of the other 26 EU member states are entitled to vote in local elections. For the parliamentary elections, voters can fulfil their civic duty by post at any post office in the country during the 18 days preceding the election date, which this year started on 24 August. They can then, if they wish, cancel their postal vote by going to the polling booth on voting day. For the first time in the country's history, the number of Swedes born abroad who can vote in these parliamentary elections totals over one million: 1.2 million, or 200,000 more than in the previous election on 9 September 2018, out of a total of 7.5 million voters.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Novus Institute between 21 and 23 August, the Social Democratic Party (SAP) leads in voting intentions with 28.2% of the vote. The right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (SD) for the first time lies second in a poll with 22%. The Moderate Party (M), the main party of the governing right, is expected to win 17.5%; the Left Party (V) 8.5%; the Environment Party-Greens (MP) 8%; the

Centre Party (C) 6.9%; the Liberals (L) 6.1% and the Christian Democrats (KD) 5.1%.

An Ipsos poll published in July shows that 37% of Swedes want Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson (SAP) to remain in office; 22% would prefer the leader of the Moderate Party, Ulf Kristersson to replace her and 12% support the right-wing populist leader, Jimmie Akesson (DS).

The Social Democrats therefore remain the favourites in the legislative elections. To see the Moderate Party overtaken by the Sweden Democrats would be an extraordinary event for the Scandinavian kingdom. And for Europe. The Swedish political scene, which is already increasingly fragmented with each election, might find itself in a new configuration.

## A GROWING POPULIST THREAT

The legislative elections of 9 September 2018 confirmed the fragmentation of the Swedish political landscape. Long dominated by the Social Democratic Party, which traditionally battled with a right-wing opposition led by the Moderate Party, the country had managed to overcome the crisis of its (particularly generous) welfare state and until the 2010s was spared from the populist wave that was sweeping through many other European countries.

But the situation has changed over the last decade. The Sweden Democrats, which garnered 2.93% of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections and 5.7% in 2010, became the country's third largest party with 17.53% of the vote in 2018. While in the past the economy and the welfare state were the bones of contention in the legislative elections, law and order and immigration have now become predominant. The Sweden Democrats have

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succeeded in imposing their electoral agenda as well as their vision of reality, with their leader, Jimmie Akesson, hammering home the idea that immigration, especially of Muslims, is a threat to national identity and security and must therefore be contained.

For a long time, the Social Democrats took a firm stance regarding the reception of migrants, notably because they saw them as a threat to wages, while right-wing parties argued for open borders. In the 2010s, the Social Democrats advocated a more generous asylum policy. As a result, 240,000 asylum seekers arrived in Sweden between 2014 and 2015. Currently, about 20% of Sweden's 10.5 million inhabitants are foreign-born, with Syrians being the largest group.

Reception difficulties (housing problems) and a growing sense of insecurity have led to a hardening of the social democratic government's policy, which finally reintroduced border controls and carried out expulsions. In fact, the kingdom has one of the toughest immigration policies in Europe and current Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, has made the fight against illegal foreign labour her priority.

Faced with the rise of the Sweden Democrats in the polls, the main political parties have shown their determination to tighten immigration policy, with the Social Democratic Party bidding against the Moderate Party's proposals, and *vice versa*, all convinced that Swedes are calling for greater firmness. As a result, the policies of these parties have become opaque and confusing to Swedes, and the Sweden Democrats have continued to make progress in the polls, as voters still prefer the original to the copy.

Jimmie Akesson (DS) plays the left and right against each other: "*Fredrik Reinfeldt (M), Prime Minister from 2006 to 2014, brought them here, Magdalena Andersson gave them benefits and the Sweden Democrats will lock them up and kick them out of the country*", he says about the immigrants in the country. He has undertaken a full-scale policy to de-demonise his party by replacing the flame on its logo with an anemone, he has introduced a code of conduct that prohibits racist statements, and he has integrated into the party's ideology the defence of *folkhem*, the Swedish welfare state, and social achievements, respect for women's and minority rights.

He accuses the Social Democratic Party of letting the welfare state fall into ruin and claims that he can save the situation by making large-scale investments, financing them by reducing social benefits and by a different migration policy. He wants to reserve the benefits of the welfare state for Swedish citizens and those who contribute to the welfare state.

The question of Swedish identity is undoubtedly a major theme in the election campaign for the general election on 11 September 2022.

Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson opened the SAP campaign with the slogan: "*A Sweden that is as much like Sweden as possible*". "*I love Sweden and I am proud to be Swedish*," she said in a speech at the Almedalen Political Festival in July. She cited "*trust, solidarity and hard work*" as the Swedish values she holds most dear, mentioning also a sense of duty, equality and the rule of law. "*We are a country where men take maternity leave and care for children and women work and can become Prime Minister.*"

The head of government used the words "Swedish" or "Sweden" 71 times in her half hour speech. "*More than different opinions on how many prisons we need, what is at stake in this parliamentary election is Sweden's values, the kind of country we want,*" she said.

The Almedalen Political Festival is held every year in early summer in the medieval town of Visby on the island of Gotland. A highlight of Swedish political life, it brings together politicians, journalists, trade unionists, decision-makers and the Swedish elite to exchange views with each other and the public. About 40,000 people attend each year. Previously an eight-day event, this year it has been reduced to just five.

After Magdalena Andersson's speech, Jimmie Akesson responded by presenting a list of 100 points from his programme, with a strong focus on fighting immigration and strengthening measures against organised crime. The Sweden Democrats accuse the government of being too lax and regularly highlight the violence caused by foreigners. In their view, society must be monocultural, as progress and the values of freedom and equality can only thrive in a community of homogeneous morals with clear boundaries. They advocate what they call '*open*

Swedishness' (*öppen svenskhet*), which they present as an alternative to social democratic universalism.

### A DOMINANT BUT WEAKENED SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The Social Democratic Party is trying to revert to its roots, i.e. to preserve the welfare state, while standing firm in terms of immigration and security. It has three priorities: to regain democratic control over schools, the health system and old people's homes; to make Sweden the world champion of ecological transition; and to combat the segregation and gang warfare that the country has failed to stop.

Privatisation is central to public debate. The withdrawal of the state from key sectors has led to inequality and a sense of social and economic insecurity that the social democrats have failed to see and address. Finally, *"segregation is so strong that we have two parallel societies in Sweden. We live in the same country but in two different realities,"* stressed Magdalena Andersson, who admitted that Sweden has failed to integrate the immigrants it had taken in. *"We are the workers' party, but we have taken ordinary people and workers for granted. We thought they would never go anywhere else and we tried to win the middle class votes, especially in the big cities, which has led us to disconnect from our base,"* analyses Tobias Baudin, current secretary of SAP.

A report by the Swedish Council for Crime Prevention showed that only Croatia has had more gun deaths per capita in the last four years than Sweden out of 22 European countries. The violence has long been confined to the suburbs of the three largest cities - Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg - but is now spreading to smaller towns. Since the beginning of 2022, 44 people have been shot dead in Sweden (46 in 2021). According to the Institute for Society, Opinion and Media at the University of Gothenburg, this crime is the main concern of Swedes for the first time (41%). *"Violence and crime are surely the government's weak point,"* says Nicholas Aylott, associate professor of political science at Södertörn University.

Magdalena Andersson warns against the formation of a *"very right-wing"* government in the event of a victory for the various right-wing parties: *"a government that*

*would stop ecological transition and profit from the school system"* in *"a Sweden where social groups would be pitted against each other, where social divisions and polarisation would increase, where the number of yachts would increase but the number of school counsellors would decrease, and where everyone's trust in each other and in society would be undermined"*.

The question of preventing the privatisation of schools (*Stoppa vinstjakten*, i.e. *"Stop the pursuit of profits in schools"*) is a topical issue. In 1991, the country decentralised and partially privatised its education system with the aim of improving its quality and efficiency. However, the results have not been forthcoming: according to international comparisons, the educational performance of young Swedes is getting worse and school segregation is increasing. Schools run by private companies, which were created after the 1991 reform, are financed by the public authorities (municipalities give a school voucher to the family that wants to enrol its child in a private school). The 1991 reform has been misused, allowing some people to make a profit from children's education; it has also allowed the development of religious schools that is far from the reform's objectives.

According to a survey carried out by the SM Institute for the University of Gothenburg, on the country's west coast, two thirds of Swedes (67%) support a ban on these public schools. Limiting them is one of the Social Democrats' primary goals.

The social democratic legislature that is now ending has followed a tortuous course. Firstly, it took no less than 131 days after the election on 9 September 2018 to form a government. On 19 January 2019, Stefan Löfven (SAP) was reappointed as Prime Minister with the support of the Centre Party (C) and the Left Party, two groups that refused to allow the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats to join forces with the Sweden Democrats. The government then included the Social Democrats and the environmentalists from the Environment Party-Greens. In June 2021, the Left Party withdrew its support to the government in response to plans to abolish rent control on new housing. On 21 June, Stefan Löfven fell victim to a no confidence motion, a first in the country. He resigned on 28 June but was reinstated as head of government on 7 July. His new team obtained the confidence of 116 elected

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members, with 173 voting against and 60 abstaining. It should be noted that the Swedish system does not require an absolute majority in favour of confidence but only the failure of the vote against to reach an absolute majority (which stands at 175 MPs).

Weakened however, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven announced that he would not stand for election as leader of the SAP in November 2021 and that he planned to step down as head of government after his successor had been elected, which he did on 10 November. Magdalena Andersson was elected on 24 November with 117 votes in favour, 74 against and 57 abstentions, thanks to the signing of an agreement with the Left Party on increasing the lowest pensions. The Centre Party, opposed to this measure, withdrew its support to the government. Magdalena Andersson's minority government was unable to pass its draft budget. The *Riksdag* then voted for the budget drafted by the right-wing opposition with the Sweden Democrats. The Prime Minister was forced to resign after the Green Party quit the government because they were opposed to governing with a budget prepared by the right-wing forces. The Prime Minister was reinstated on 29 November and formed a government comprising only social democrats.

Finally, a few weeks ago, a motion of censure, initiated by the Sweden Democrats, was tabled against Morgan Johansson, Minister of Home Affairs and Justice, accused of being lax in dealing with organised crime, a scourge that has grown in recent years in a Sweden unaccustomed to such violence. The SDs tried to bring down the government a few weeks before the elections in a bid to create a political crisis. However, they just missed the chance by one vote, that of the independent MP (and former Left Party member) Amineh Kakabaveh.

### WHERE DOES THE GOVERNING RIGHT STAND?

The leader of the Moderate Party, Ulf Kristersson, supported the motion of no confidence, accusing Morgan Johansson of being ineffective against organised crime. The Moderate Party is campaigning under the slogan "*Let's get Sweden's house in order now*" and says it is "*tough on crime and the causes of crime*", which, according to the party, are "*welfare dependency, educational failure and the attraction of easy money*". The party says it will

double or even quadruple prison sentences for criminals. Ulf Kristersson knows that his only chance of governing is through an alliance with the Sweden Democrats. The leader of the government right has ruled out the populists' participation in a government led by him, but the former may well support such a cabinet in parliament. The cordon sanitaire was broken in Sweden on 20 January 2020 when the Moderate leader declared himself ready to cooperate with the populists, who he says have changed in recent years. Ulf Kristersson likes to recall that right-wing populist parties have participated in governments in Norway (Progress Party, FrP) and Finland (True Finns, PS) and that Danish governments have run the country with the support of the People's Party (DF).

The Moderate Party has also taken a stand on the cost of living, which it sees as the other crucial issue in the campaign. It describes the election as a *boksväl*, an election based on the public's wallet. He promises that he will not raise taxes and denounces the 46 tax increases made by the Social Democrats during the last parliament. Ulf Kristersson says that Sweden, after eight years of Social Democrat government, has the lowest rate of growth in the EU and the eighth highest unemployment rate: "*700,000 people who have arrived in the country cannot afford to live decently and they cost the welfare state 132 billion kroner a year.*" He repeats that his party has, with the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats, a viable coalition ready to govern, unlike the Social Democratic Party whose allies, notably the Centre Party and the Left Party, are insecure.

### THE SWEDISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

Sweden has a unicameral parliament, the *Riksdag*, with 349 members elected every four years by proportional representation. The country is divided into 29 constituencies (one per county, with those of Stockholm, Skåne and Västra Götaland being subdivided), which elect 310 members (11 on average, from 2 to 43 elected per constituency). The votes are distributed according to the modified Sainte-Laguë method with a first divisor of 1.4.

The remaining 39 seats, called compensatory seats, are distributed among the different parties to ensure the most accurate representation of the vote at national level.

The candidates elected to these compensatory seats are those whose party has the highest remainder in the constituencies. To take part in the distribution of these compensatory seats, a party must have won 4% of the votes cast nationally or 12% in a given constituency.

People can vote for a party or cast a preferential vote for one of the candidates on the lists proposed to them by the parties and thus influence the allocation of seats. At the count, the number of seats won by each party is established and then the candidates on each list with the highest number of votes for their own names are declared elected.

8 political parties are represented in the current *Riksdag*:  
– The Social Democratic Party (SAP), founded in 1889 and led since November 2021 by outgoing Prime Minister

Magdalena Andersson, has dominated Swedish politics for over 70 years. It has 100 elected members;

- the Moderate Party (M), a liberal party founded in 1904 and led by Ulf Kristersson, has 70 seats;
- the Sweden Democrats (SD), a right-wing populist party founded in 1988 and led by Jimmie Akesson, has 62 seats;
- the Centre Party (C), a former agrarian party founded in 1913 and led since 2011 by Annie Lööf, has 31 seats;
- the Left Party (V), a radical left-wing party led since 2012 by Nooshi Dadgostar, has 28 seats;
- the Christian Democrats (KD), founded in 1964 and led by Ebba Busch Thor, has 22 seats;
- the Liberals (L), founded in 1934 and led by Johan Pehrson, has 20 seats;
- the Environment Party - The Greens (MP), founded in 1981 and represented by its spokespersons Per Bolund and Märta Stenevi, has 16 seats.

#### Reminder of the results of the 9 September 2018 parliamentary elections in Sweden

Turnout: 87.18%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
<b>Social Democratic Party (SAP)</b>	1 830 386	28.26	100
<b>Moderate Party (M)</b>	1 284 698	19.84	70
<b>Sweden Democrats (SD)</b>	1 135 627	17.53	62
<b>Centre Party (C)</b>	557 500	8.61	31
<b>Left Party (V)</b>	518 454	8	28
<b>Christian Democrats (KD)</b>	409 478	6.32	22
<b>The Liberals (L)</b>	355 546	5.49	20
<b>The Environment Party-The Greens (MP)</b>	285 899	4.41	16
<b>Others</b>	99 137	1.53	0

Source : [Elections in Sweden site](#)

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