

ELECTIONWATCH SWEDEN



Sweden Pre-Election Watch: September 2010 Parliamentary Elections

In few democratic nations in Europe has one party so dominated the political scene like the Social Democratic Party of Sweden. The party has won every general election in the country since World War I, and has been able to form governments after all but four general elections since World War II, including one unbroken 40-year stint in government between 1936 and 1976. For almost all of the 20th century, the Social Democrats ruled not only electoral politics, but also set the left-of-center social and economic policy agenda that gave Sweden the reputation at home and abroad as perhaps Europe's most successful and prosperous welfare state. The Social Democrats gave the country a string of long-serving prime ministers, the most famous of which was Olof Palme, who served from 1969-1976 and again from 1982-1986, when he was assassinated.

A major factor enabling this Social Democratic dominance has been the inability of the many parties on the center-right to form effective and stable coalitions to stand against the left while in government and then in campaigns for re-election. This proved to be the case after the elections of 1976 and 1979 and then again following the term of center-right Prime Minister Carl Bildt from 1991-1994. The electorate in Sweden, however, has been changing rapidly over the past several decades. In 2006, the center-right Alliance for Sweden coalition led by the Moderate Party of Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and including the Centre Party, the People's Party-Liberals and the Christian Democratic Party, took power. Over the past four years, the popularity of the Alliance government sank, though it has been regaining support as the elections approach. The general elections scheduled for September 19, 2010, are widely viewed as a referendum on the performance of the Alliance and are being framed by all the major parties as a choice between a center-right and center-left course for the country.

What's at Stake?

Unlike the other parliamentary democracies of Europe, Sweden has regularly-scheduled dates for its general elections - they are held on the third Sunday in September every four years. On September 19, 2010, all 349 seats in the unicameral Riksdag are up for election, as are all town and county council seats around the country. Voters are allowed to submit postal ballots beginning on September 1, but can decide to void their postal ballot by appearing in person at their voting station on Election Day. The total electorate amounts to 7,000,000 voters, and turnout has averaged around 80 percent for the last 60 years, although has trended slightly lower since hitting a high of 91.76 percent in 1976.

The electoral system uses the Sainte Lagüe modified method of proportional representation, with 310 of the total seats spread across 29 geographic constituencies in what are called permanent seats. The remaining 39 so-called compensatory or adjustment seats are allocated

to parties with the objective of ensuring fair representation at the national level, with candidates elected from constituencies where their party has the highest surplus number of votes. To qualify, parties must surpass the four percent threshold on a national level or take more than 12 percent in a specific constituency. There is also a mechanism for preferential balloting for specific candidates on party lists.

The current Riksdag is comprised of seven parties, with four in the coalition government (the Moderate Party with 97 seats, the Centre Party with 29 seats, the People's Party-Liberals with 28 seats and the Christian Democratic Party with 24 seats) and three in opposition (the Social Democratic Party with 130 seats, the Left Party with 22 seats and the Environment Party-Greens with 19 seats). All these parties are competing in the current elections, along with the non-parliamentary, nationalist Sweden Democrats, as well as a number of other, smaller parties which are not expected to meet the four percent threshold.

The Polls

While the September 2006 elections that brought the center-right, four-party Alliance to power represented the worst defeat for the Social Democratic Party since universal suffrage in 1921, the popularity of the new government soon began to decline. The impact of the global economic crisis has not been as severe in Sweden as elsewhere, but the country did see both a decline in gross domestic product and an unemployment rate hovering around nine percent. Additionally, the Alliance government implemented a number of unpopular measures to make the Swedish economy more competitive, including reductions in unemployment funding, tightened access to unemployment benefits, restrictions on sick-leave benefits, and measures to weaken the country's historically strong trade unions. Throughout this period, Prime Minister Reinfeldt maintained a steady and consistent commitment to free-market reform that would place "work first," at one point noting that work at McDonald's is better than no work at all. But by early 2008, the aggregate poll results for the Alliance parties were almost 20 points behind the aggregate results of the three left-wing opposition parties, and it seemed that yet another center-right coalition government would have a tough time winning reelection.

The gap between the left and right blocks peaked in mid-2008, however, and has been narrowing since that time, as the economy began to show signs of recovery. Today, most polling organizations show the Alliance parties in the lead again, with a margin of roughly five percentage points over the Red/Green/Left coalition, with the nationalist Sweden Democrats winning about four percent of the vote. Part of the reason for this resurgence is undoubtedly the popularity of Prime Minister Reinfeldt himself and the continuing public skepticism regarding the main opposition leader, Social Democrat Chairwoman Mona Sahlin. An August poll by SIFO showed that 63 percent of Swedes preferred Reinfeldt over Sahlin, who is supported by only 18 percent of the population - a number that has stayed remarkably low since she took the party over in 2007. Even more notable for the long-term future of the Social Democrats, a July SIFO poll showed that a plurality of Swedes - 36 percent - said they tended to the right, 24 percent to the left and 33 percent located themselves at the political center.

The Campaign and Its Major Themes

As the leader of the Alliance and the Moderate Party, Prime Minister Reinfeldt has cast his

campaign as a call to continue the successful reform path upon which he has embarked. His campaign and speeches have focused on fiscal responsibility, with the Alliance setting a target of obtaining a budget surplus in a second term. The Alliance is committed to selling off some state holdings in major companies to reach this goal. Moreover, Reinfeldt has promised to continue to cut taxes, especially on the retired (who are taxed more than are those who are working), which should see a cut of \$2.65 billion over four years once the public debt is eliminated.

On the left, the Social Democrats and their allies are framing the elections as a choice between "a policy that will create more employment and equality between the sexes and a policy that increases inequality." They accuse the Reinfeldt government of failing to address the economic challenges facing the country and of allowing the unemployment rate - particularly among young people and immigrants - to rise to its highest level since the economic crisis of the 1990s. The Greens would open the country's borders, impose a moratorium on the building of supermarket complexes outside major towns and double the use of public transport over the next 10 years. The Left Party, having changed its name to the Welfare State Party, has positioned itself as the main critic of the "major failure" of the Alliance government. It is also calling for opening of Sweden's borders, as well as a six-hour work day, sharing of parental leave between both parents, the opening of state-sponsored day care facilities in the evening and at night, and the withdrawal of Swedish troops from Afghanistan.

The opposition parties are also calling for an overall increase in public spending funded by increased income taxes, along with tax increases on taxes on alcohol, tobacco and fuels. Social Democrat leader Mona Sahlin accuses Reinfeldt of weakening the Swedish social model and argues that allowing him to continue in office would do further damage. "The Moderate Party thinks that reducing taxes is the priority. Nothing else counts in their opinion: Not youth unemployment, not the exclusion of the sick, not the growing inequalities among Swedes. Is this really the Sweden we want? Is this the country in which we want to live? No, a thousand times no," she has said.

A relatively new competitor on the national level in the elections is the nationalist Sweden Democrats, which was founded in 1988 and took 2.9 percent of the vote in the 2006 elections, but has been holding around the four percent threshold in most polls in the current campaign. The Sweden Democrats say they want to limit access to abortion and stop what they call the "normalization" of homosexuality. They seek a 90 percent reduction in immigration to ensure that Sweden remains a "homogeneous society," as well as mandatory DNA, HIV and tuberculosis tests for all immigrants and issuance only of non-permanent resident permits. "Swedes are very tolerant, but I believe that a great part of the electorate thinks that immigration policy has been too lax and far too generous," says party Chairman Jimmie Akesson. On other issues such as the maintenance of the benefits of the welfare state for the Swedes, the Sweden Democrats align with the positions of the left-of-center parties.

Possible Outcomes

Although polls do show a solid lead for the center-right Alliance as whole, it remains unclear how each of the member parties will perform in the elections and, therefore, exactly how many seats in parliament the Alliance will win on September 19. While

Reinfeldt's Moderates may be on track to achieve their best result ever at more than 30 percent - and perhaps even edge out the Social Democrats to become the largest party - both the Center Party and the Christian Democrats have struggled to stay significantly above the four percent threshold in the polls, with many observers suggesting that the latter may be in danger of falling under the limit. On the left, the Social Democrats are weak and seemingly getting weaker. Even the leadership of the Greens has publicly suggested that if the left coalition is not able to form a government, it will be the fault of the Social Democrats, since the polls have shown the Greens edging up toward 10 percent from the 5.23 percent they took in the 2006, while the Social Democrats seem on track to fall under 30 percent - down from 34.99 percent in 2006.

With approximately 20 percent of the electorate still undecided, it appears that the Sweden Democrats may be called upon to play the role of kingmaker in the formation of a government, if neither the Alliance nor the left can achieve a clear majority. All the parties in both the blocks have ruled out cooperation with the Democrats in a future government, but it may be quite difficult for a victorious Moderate Party to find a combinations of parties that would reach a majority, if one or both of the smaller Alliance partners doesn't reach parliament. Some analysts suggest that Reinfeldt might be able to convince the Greens to side with the center-right, but Reinfeldt himself has said the differences between the Alliance and the Greens are simply too vast. The fact remains, however, that Sweden's center-right Alliance and, in particular, Prime Minister Reinfeldt, seem within reach of gaining a national majority for themselves based on a platform of free-market reforms that have significantly changed the way Swedes view themselves and their social model.

IRI in Europe

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