

EUROPE AND THE SWEDISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF SEPTEMBER 2002

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Key points:

- After the election of 15 September 2002, Sweden was set for yet another term of Social Democratic government, supported in parliament by the Left and Green parties. Göran Persson continued as prime minister. A rightward trend in Western Europe was thus bucked.
- Having all but given up months beforehand, the opposition alliance made a fight of the campaign, partly owing to the arrival of immigration onto the agenda. But

in the end, significant vote swings occurred only within the two major blocs, not between them.

- The electorate generally moved from the poles towards the centre. The Social Democrats performed well, but the major winners were the Liberals, who nearly tripled their vote. That was largely at the expense of their allies, the Moderates, who lost over a third of their support.
- Despite the likelihood of a referendum within a year on joining EMU, Europe was a non-issue in the campaign.

Introduction

The Swedish Social Democrats (SAP) have been in office for all but just over nine years since 1932, which makes them arguably the most successful electoral party in the world. Yet they had looked vulnerable after the previous election, in 1998. That had been a disaster for SAP: its score of 36.4 per cent was its worst since the 1920s. Although SAP clung to power, it was forced to strike a formal parliamentary deal with two parties, the Left and the Greens, whose support for Sweden's withdrawal from the EU was

TABLE 1: SWEDISH ELECTION RESULT, 2002 (%)

		Vote	Change from 1998
Socialist bloc	Left Party	8.3	-3.6
	Social Democrats	39.9	+3.5
	Greens	4.6	+0.1
Bourgeois bloc	Centre Party	6.2	+1.1
	Liberals	13.3	+8.7
	Christian Democrats	9.1	-2.6
	Moderates	15.1	-7.7
	Turnout	80.1	-1.3

Source: Election Authority (www.val.se), downloaded 19 September 2002.

sharply at odds with the pro-integration position of the Social Democratic leadership. Moreover, no incumbent party had increased its vote since 1968 and the prime minister, Göran Persson, was widely regarded, even within his party, as an electoral liability. The transformation of Persson's standing in Swedish politics over the following two years was astonishing. There were several reasons for this. The pact with the Left and the Greens worked more smoothly than most had expected. Swedes felt better off as their economy enjoyed steady, if unspectacular, growth (helped by the export-promoting effect of a weak krona), unemployment fell and the government reversed some of the spending cuts that Sweden's dire public finances had required in 1994–8. A cap on child-care charges (which had surprised leading Social Democrats when, on Persson's own initiative, it appeared in their 1998 manifesto) turned out to be popular, especially among middle-class voters. Persson worked hard to repair relations with the powerful Confederation of Trade Unions, which remains intimately linked to SAP. A successful Swedish presidency of the EU's Council of Ministers in 2001 did Persson's profile and authority no harm, and seemed both to assist and project his growing confidence. He also had a 'good 11 September': his immediate rallying behind the US after the terrorist attacks was by no means an automatic Social Democratic reaction, but it chimed with public opinion. By 2002 the prime minister was being dubbed 'President Persson'.¹ Thus, Sweden approached its autumn election with a distinct lack of excitement, so inevitable did a Social Democratic victory seem.

Meanwhile, despite the prime minister's overtures to the Centre Party, with which SAP had cooperated from

1995 to 1998, the so-called bourgeois (right-of-centre) parties sought rescue through closer collaboration. In July the quartet issued a joint manifesto (in addition to each party's own) for the first time. The party system thus seemed to assume a clear bipolar character, comprising a socialist bloc of SAP, the Left and, with associate membership, the Greens; and a bourgeois alliance. But the blocs were not evenly matched. By the summer, opinion polls invariably suggested that SAP, with the presumed support of the Left Party, would not even need the Greens to secure a comfortable majority in parliament. The four bourgeois parties combined were hovering around 40 per cent. The Liberals, like the Greens, were dangerously close to the 4 per cent threshold for parliamentary representation.

The campaign

Late summer saw another, even more rapid transformation of a party leader's fortunes. On 3 August the Liberal leadership unexpectedly launched a new policy on immigration and the integration of newcomers into society. This is a sensitive subject in Sweden. Since a populist right-wing party, New Democracy, briefly upset the party system in the early 1990s, discussion of immigration and integration had become, if not taboo, then highly depoliticized. But this consensus has come under increasing strain. Politically insignificant but sometimes violent far-right groups made occasional headlines. A series of 'murders for honour' – the victims of which were women from immigrant backgrounds, killed by their own relatives for offending patriarchal cultural traditions – caused deep distress. Meanwhile, the rise of right-wing

populism elsewhere in Western Europe had convinced many, not just on the left, that depoliticization needed to be defended even more vigorously. In August the biggest-selling broadsheet, *Dagens Nyheter*, caused a stir by refusing to publish an advertisement by the Sweden Democrats, the biggest party on the extreme-right fringe.

It was in this context that the Liberals proposed, among other points, the reintroduction of a language test for those applying for Swedish citizenship. This won immediate media attention and was quickly attacked for resembling the policies both of the Sweden Democrats and, in a wider comparison, of the populist, anti-immigration Danish People's Party. Some senior Liberals, who had not been consulted about the initiative, were also unhappy. But the Liberal leadership had a twofold riposte, almost certainly carefully prepared. The first prong traded on the party's impeccably anti-racist reputation. At the end of May, the Liberal leader, Lars Leijonborg, had debated on Danish television with the leader of the Danish People's Party, and theatrically ripped up one of its posters. When Leijonborg announced his new policy nine weeks later, this reinforcement of his anti-racist credentials, which had seemed well-meaning but futile at the time, suddenly looked shrewd. The second prong of the Liberals' defence concerned the rest of the party's policy package. How can we be anti-immigration, Liberals asked, when we want to boost the labour force by accepting more immigrants, and we want residence permits to be automatic for foreigners with legitimate jobs in Sweden?

It was, in many ways, a brilliant tactical manoeuvre – and it was certainly popular. The party had lost votes in four consecutive elections, and on 9 August a Gallup poll gave the Liberals exactly 4 per cent. On 14 August a former party leader penned a savage attack on the current incumbent. 'My conviction is', he wrote, 'that if the party had changed its leader last year [as it had come fairly close to doing], it would now have over 10 per cent in the polls.'² In fact, the Liberals reached that figure in a poll published just over a fortnight later, and they continued their extraordinary rise until the election.³ The Liberals' initiative also meant that immigration came to dominate media coverage of the campaign. The issues of schools, health care and social care, which had been repeated like a mantra by almost all the parties in the 1998 campaign, received less attention than usual. Yet these remained the issues that most voters said had motivated their party choice (see below). Indeed, it would be wrong to attribute the Liberals' rise solely to their position on immigration, although it may, as the party secretary put it, have 'burst the bubble around the party'.⁴ They consciously tried to be 'clearer' and to toughen what a

member of their executive called their (roughly translated) 'reputation for niceness'.⁵ They styled themselves as a party prepared to make demands – of immigrants, of teachers, of pupils, of the state.

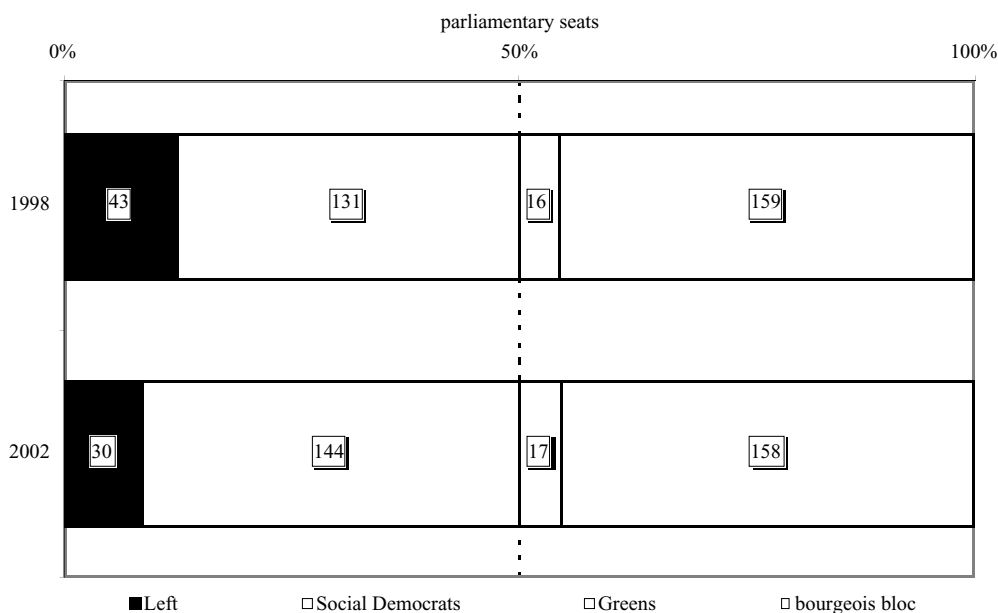
Suddenly, the bourgeois bloc and supportive newspapers became hopeful that defeat was not certain after all. The alliance's collective ratings crept up, and some polls in September even put it level with the socialist bloc, minus the Greens. The Social Democrats' response seemed lethargic. In 2001 party strategists were publicly declaring that one of its major targets in the election campaign would be Stockholm's city government, a bourgeois coalition that had outsourced the provision of various public services – including, most controversially, hospital care – to private companies. But that Social Democratic line of attack never materialized, which left SAP reminding voters of the government's respectable economic record and, above all, of its leader, easily Sweden's most popular politician.

Otherwise, the parties' platforms were predictable. The Left aimed its campaign for 'reforms' instead of tax cuts squarely at women employed in the public sector. The bourgeois bloc promised a more business-friendly climate, although the Moderates' pledge of big tax cuts (SKr130 billion) during the next parliament made their allies uncomfortable. All parties wanted to channel extra public money to families with children, although they disagreed on how. No party proposed a concrete solution to one of Sweden's more alarming problems: the explosion in numbers of people claiming benefit because they were too ill to work, from 75,000 in 1997 to 120,000 in 2002, at a cost of 15 per cent of the state budget.⁶

Finally, intra-bloc relations became an issue. On the right, the Moderates had hitherto jealously guarded their entitlement, as the alliance's biggest party, to the prime ministership in any joint government. But in the week before the election, the emboldened Liberals and then the Christian Democrats argued that they had a more persuasive claim to the position. This late reminder of the Swedish right's most enduring weakness, its disunity, did its component parties no favours.

Meanwhile, the Social Democrats' problem was that both the Left and the Greens were keen to upgrade those three parties' arrangement to a full coalition, with ministerial positions shared out. During the previous four years, this had sometimes seemed possible. But as the war on terrorism unfolded, relations between the Left Party – the former Communist Party, which retains much of its anti-Americanism – and SAP deteriorated. In July 2002 Persson ruled out sharing power with the Left, and was only slightly less categorical about the Greens, arguing

FIGURE 1: DIVISION OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS



Note: In the bourgeois bloc, the Centre Party won 22 seats (against 18 in 1998), the Liberals 48 (17), the Christian Democrats 33 (42) and the Moderates 55 (82).

Source: Election Authority.

that their positions on foreign and European policies made both parties unreliable.⁷ The Left reacted meekly; it could not credibly threaten to abandon SAP in favour of a bourgeois government. The Greens, on the other hand, said that they could deal with any party but the Christian Democrats and the Moderates – and that assertion, together with the fact that they held the median position in parliament, made them just about credible as kingmakers. Even into the campaign's final week, the Greens' spokespeople were insisting that their MPs would vote against any government from which the party was excluded.

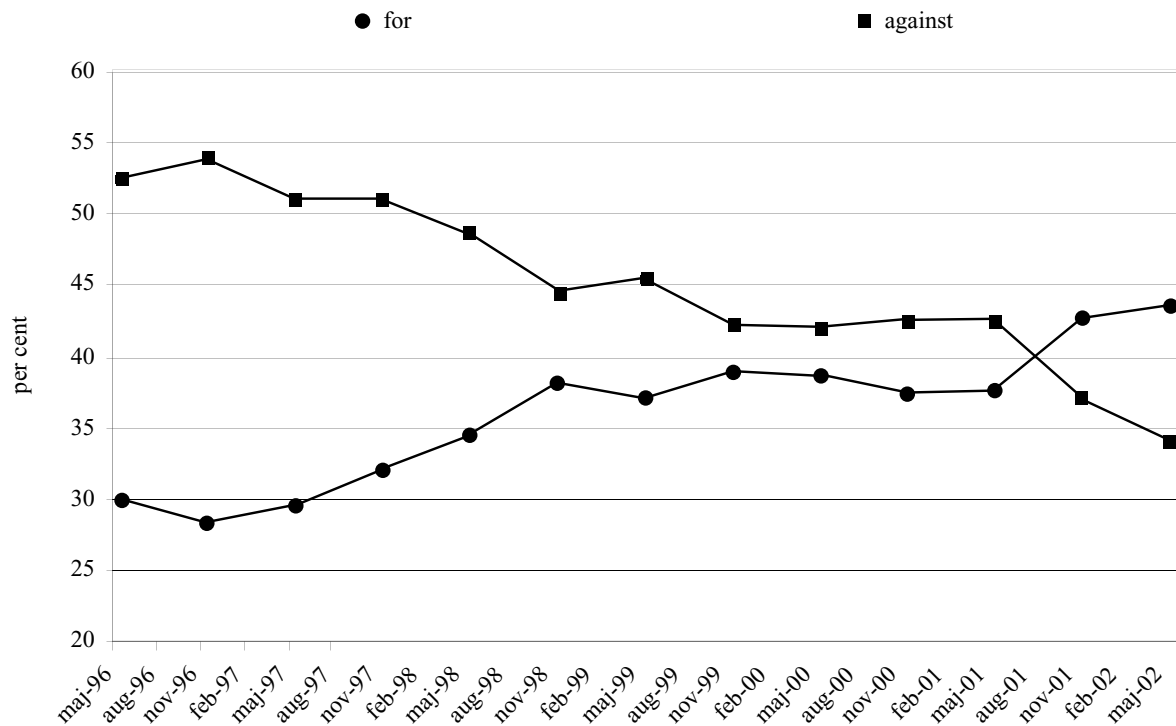
The result and aftermath

Despite the unexpectedly exciting campaign, the election result left each bloc's parliamentary strength almost as it had been (see Figure 1). There were significant shifts within the blocs, however. The Moderates' feeble performance in opinion polls during the previous parliamentary term ended in the collapse of their support at the end of the 2002 campaign. An obvious explanation for their disaster was a lacklustre leader. Yet the Moderates lost on a similar scale in the Stockholm municipal election, where the local party branch had a high-profile and popular leading figure. (Indeed, the bourgeois parties' loss of Stockholm's government was as bitter a blow as any on election night.)

The Social Democrats celebrated, as it was almost universally assumed that they would continue in office with the support of the Left and the Greens. However, the path to that outcome became trickier than anyone expected.

The bourgeois parties had received criticism from some quarters after the 1998 election for not even trying to tempt the Greens away from the socialist bloc and thus dislodging the Social Democratic government. In 2002 that scenario became slightly less fanciful, owing to the shift of bourgeois votes away from the right and towards the middle. The Liberals therefore initiated talks with the Greens on whether they might be interested in a minority coalition comprising those two parties, plus the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats; it was assumed that the Moderates would offer passive support. Not surprisingly, the Greens were only too keen to run parallel negotiations both with this truncated bourgeois alliance and with the parties of the socialist bloc. Sweden is not used to this sort of uncertainty about government formation and, as the public exchanges became increasingly bitter, Persson suspended talks with the Greens. A change of government suddenly looked conceivable.

Leijonborg's hopes of becoming prime minister were quickly extinguished, however, as the Centre – for reasons that were not entirely clear – withdrew from the talks with the Greens. In fact, a coalition of middle parties was always a remote possibility. If there are significant policy differences that divide the Greens



Source: Statistics Sweden, statistical database (www.scb.se), downloaded 18 September 2002.

from SAP, the distance from the bourgeois parties, even minus the Moderates, is even greater. Nevertheless, the Greens' flirtation with the right had reinforced their claim to be able to deal with all sides, an essential attribute for any genuine kingmaker – and they still had the option of going fully into opposition. However, as parliament reopened, the Moderates moved a vote of no confidence, and the Greens abstained, which, under Sweden's system of negative parliamentarism, implies support for an incumbent government. That support was on the basis of a deal with SAP, reached the previous night. It involved 120 specific issues of agreement, including such Green goals as traffic-congestion charges and a freeze on cod fishing; but their spokespeople emphasized that it also gave the Greens greater scope for opposing the government on other policy questions. The next day the Left also signed up to the deal. Each supporting party was allowed to place representatives in certain ministries, alongside the Social Democrats' appointees. The parties agreed to review their cooperation after two years.

Possession of the median legislator's position (i.e. having the pivotal MPs) remained the Greens' trump card. But they could also congratulate themselves on choosing two spokespeople, Peter Eriksson and Maria Wetterstrand, who proved as effective in the post-election negotiations as they had been in the campaign (even if, after a chaotic selection process the

previous spring, their promotion had been rather fortuitous). Yet the Greens did break two firm campaign promises, in (a) flirting with the Christian Democrats and, more seriously, (b) ultimately supporting a government in which they did not have ministerial posts. Whether that will incur a future cost for the party in the electoral and parliamentary arenas remains to be seen.

The non-impact of Europe and implications for Sweden's role in the EU

Sweden, which only joined the EU in 1995, has some big decisions to take about European integration, and the issue might thus have been expected to feature prominently in the campaign. One such decision concerns the intergovernmental conference in 2004 that will seek to rewrite the Union's basic legal framework. Before that, there will very probably be a referendum on whether to join economic and monetary union. Persson has informally scheduled this vote for either spring or autumn 2003.⁸ Moreover, Swedes are not uninterested in Europe. Indeed, they are consistently identified by the Eurobarometer surveys as the EU's most Eurosceptical citizens, and only recently have a greater number supported remaining in the EU than leaving it (see Figure 2).

TABLE 2: PARTY LEADERSHIPS' POSITIONS ON EMU, 2002

Pro-EU, Pro-EMU	Social Dems		Liberals	Christian Dems	Moderates
Pro-EU, Anti-EMU			Centre		
Anti-EMU, Anti-EU	Left	Greens			

Most, if not all, of the parties have fairly clear positions on the issue of European integration. Keenest are the Liberals, the only party explicitly for a federal Union. The Moderates are not far behind. SAP, at least at its top levels, has reconciled itself to the Union,⁹ in some cases enthusiastically, although the party remains against federalism, and prefers intergovernmental cooperation to the empowerment of supranational institutions. At the other end of the scale, the Left and the Greens remain formally in favour of Swedish withdrawal from the Union, primarily asserting, like the sceptics in other parties, that it poses a threat to Swedish democracy.

Despite these factors, Europe was almost entirely absent from the election campaign. One political scientist lamented that it was 'a democratic failing that we do not have an open debate on [these] big and important questions'.¹⁰ The reason was simple enough, however. The contours of Swedish opinion on the EU – very roughly, the political, socio-economic and geographical centre tends to be in favour, the periphery against – have been hard for the party

system to handle.

As Table 2 shows, each bloc is divided by Europe. Moreover, although by 2002 there was only minor division among each party's elites on integration in general and EMU in particular, the supporters of three parties – SAP, the Centre and the Christian Democrats – are significantly divided, with at least a third of their members disagreeing with the leadership's stance (see Table 3). The parties are therefore in no rush to politicize the EU during a parliamentary election campaign: to do so would only expose either their own internal divisions, or those between themselves and their allies, or both.

Even the Left and the Greens, which have attracted a lot of the other parties' more Eurosceptical supporters in Sweden's two elections to the European Parliament, tried only half-heartedly to push the EU onto the campaign agenda in 2002. With an eye to post-election negotiations, doubtless they wanted to avoid irritating the Social Democrats by going on about Europe. But a bigger reason for dropping the subject was that there were almost certainly few votes

TABLE 3: SWEDISH VOTERS AND A REFERENDUM ON EMU

	Would vote for		Would vote against	
	1998	2002	1998	2002
Left Party	11.7	15.5	72.2	68.5
Social Democrats	27.2	41.3	48.8	35.4
Greens	10.2	20.2	74.5	61.1
Centre Party	24.7	33.1	50.3	42.9
Liberals	64.1	62.6	14.8	19.9
Christian Democrats	40.8	44.6	38.4	36.4
Moderates	72.3	72.6	13.4	13.7
Total	38.8	43.7	41.7	36.8

Sources: SVT (Swedish Television), Valu 1998, published in *Dagens Nyheter*, 21 September 1998; SVT, Valu 2002 (www.svt.se), downloaded 23 September 2002.

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF VOTERS WHO GAVE SELECTED ISSUES 'VERY GREAT SIGNIFICANCE' IN DETERMINING THEIR VOTE IN 2002 (AND THOSE ISSUES' RANK ORDER OF IMPORTANCE FOR ALL VOTERS, FROM A TOTAL OF 15)

	Schools and education (1)	Refugees and immigrants (12)	EU/EMU (15)
Left Party	67.4	40.5	38.8
Social Democrats	68.3	26.9	24.2
Greens	56.7	31.3	29.3
Centre Party	63.7	23.9	19.6
Liberals	69.3	34.9	25.2
Christian Democrats	67.7	28.0	24.5
Moderates	64.9	30.8	34.8
Total	66.9	31.3	27.9

Sources: SVT, Valu 2002.

in it. As Table 4 shows, Swedish voters had many more urgent issues. And the reason for that may be that the parties' strategy of 'quarantining' the EU issue has worked rather well.

In essence, this has involved compartmentalizing the arenas of party life, and restricting discussion of Europe to certain reserved zones. In the state arena, boundaries have been set between policy areas: SAP made clear in 1998 that EU policy was off-limits to its new parliamentary allies, and the same applied to the deals struck after the 2002 election. In the electoral arena, the parties have turned major EU-related decisions over to referendums. In the internal arena, the parties have tended to relax their norms of decision-making and discipline, with Euro-dissenters allowed to campaign without penalty. The objective – for SAP above all – has been to dissuade both members and supporters with Eurosceptical dispositions from defecting to other parties. Supporters and members may thus have learned that, even if they disagree with their leadership on Europe, they can always 'discuss this later' – that is, during the coming referendum campaign, when the real decision will be taken.¹¹

What the election outcome means for Sweden's immediate future in the EU is unclear. The financial markets were apparently relieved at the result, the assumption being that a continuing Social Democratic government would stick to the schedule that Persson had sketched for a referendum on the euro, and also that, when it was held, a Yes vote would be likelier. The theory here is that Social Democratic voters, whose numbers make them decisive for any referendum, would be more easily convinced to give up the krona by a prime minister from their own party, particularly one with Persson's exalted status, than they would if a

bourgeois government were urging them to do so.

There is a counter-hypothesis. For compartmentalization to be effective, parties' members and supporters must be persuaded to disconnect their preferences in national elections from those that they hold in European elections and EU-related referendums. But if that does occur, even a popular government may have trouble in getting voters to follow its recommendation in the latter context. The Swedish economy has not obviously been harmed by non-membership of EMU. Moreover, the Danish 'No' to the euro in the referendum of September 2000 offers a warning of how public opinion can turn against a government. After the 2002 election, Swedish approval of accession to EMU looked likelier than not, but still far from certain.

Outlook for the party system

So, once again, Sweden stayed Social Democratic. The party was happy with its election performance; for one thing, the trade unions mobilized votes much more effectively than in 1998. SAP's score was especially impressive when set against the backdrop of conservative advances elsewhere in Europe, and not least the collapse of social democratic parties in Denmark and Norway in 2001. SAP took back many votes that it had lost to the Left Party in 1998. Indeed, the Left had much to contemplate after its setback. Internal tension between vote- and office-seeking – a familiar dilemma for parties with a more or less populist character – may well become more pronounced.

But the election will have most effect on the right of

the party system. Clearly, the chief beneficiaries of the Moderates' failure were the Liberals, and their sensational result may signal a shift in power within the bourgeois bloc. In the 1960s the Liberals, the Centre and the Moderates each averaged around 15 per cent. A Centre revival on that scale is unlikely, as it remains essentially a rural force (although its first electoral upswing since 1973 was a colossal relief within that party). But, after dominating the alliance for two decades, the Moderates may now find themselves in a roughly equal position with the Liberals and perhaps the Christian Democrats – who, despite their losses, did secure their second-best result ever.

This may conceivably facilitate still closer bourgeois cooperation. But whether even that will be enough to win power is another matter. Though its disappointment was concentrated in the Moderate camp, the alliance must collectively be wondering what it can do to make further gains. Apart from short-term factors like leadership, SAP has very considerable structural and systemic advantages. One is the party's enduring relationship with the unions, which, in the most organized labour market in the world, provides a direct channel to a large proportion of the electorate. Another is the absence of a populist, right-wing party that could lure voters in the left's natural working-class constituencies – a big factor in the Danish and Norwegian social democrats' difficulties. Like other West European countries, Sweden has problems with

integrating immigrants from very different cultures. But, although the racist Sweden Democrats made gains in the south at municipal level, they remain a long way from achieving a national breakthrough, and are probably too extreme to do so. Nor are the Liberals, for all their opportunist success in 2002, likely to fill that populist role. The party's call for more immigration, an essential component of its overall position, was opposed by the trade unions, and will probably not appeal to their blue-collar members. Of those who voted Liberal in 2002 after supporting other parties in 1998, over four times as many came from other bourgeois parties as from the left trio.¹²

Swedes remain doubtful about the EU, and a former Social Democratic prime minister speculated before the election that the Moderates, in desperation, might subsequently seek votes through adopting a British-style Euroscepticism.¹³ But that remains unlikely. The other bourgeois parties may yet be tempted to defect and deal with the Social Democrats, something Persson would almost certainly welcome. But the Liberals and the Centre have tried that before, and their voters have not been impressed. For that reason, the contours of bloc politics in Sweden remain firm – much to the advantage of the Greens, who, for now, can pivot between the blocs (or threaten to, at least). The bourgeois bloc may have to wait until, as in 1976 and 1991, some economic crisis unseats the currently immovable Social Democrats.

Endnotes

- ¹ B. Elmbrant, 'President Persson – hur fick vi honom?', *Studio Ett*, P1 (Stockholm: Radio Sweden, 22–26 April 2002).
- ² P. Ahlmark, 'Kan man rösta på folkpartiet?', *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 August 2002. I am responsible for translations from Swedish.
- ³ Poll data are from Temo, 'Väljarbarometrar i Sverige: TEMO:s samt övriga undersökningsföretags publicerade mätningar' (www.temo.se), downloaded 17 September 2002.
- ⁴ *Svenska Dagbladet*, 3 September 2002.
- ⁵ *Svenska Dagbladet*, 12 September 2002.
- ⁶ *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 August 2002.
- ⁷ *Göteborgs-Posten*, 19 July 2002.
- ⁸ *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 January 2002.
- ⁹ See N. Aylott, *Swedish Social Democracy and European Integration: The People's Home on the Market* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).
- ¹⁰ K. M. Johansson, "'Dubbla budskap skadar förtroendet'", *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 August 2002.
- ¹¹ N. Aylott, 'Let's Discuss This Later: Party Responses to Euro-dvision in Scandinavia', *Party Politics*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2002, pp. 441–61.
- ¹² SVT, Valu 2002.
- ¹³ I. Carlsson, "'M kan bli främlingsfientligt'", *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 September 2002.

Convened from the Sussex European Institute, the Opposing European Research Network is a group of academic researchers studying party politics within the European Union and candidate countries and seeking to understand in particular why Euroscepticism exists in some states and not in others. Like the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Network itself retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. The views presented are those of the authors.

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