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REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 9
THE SWEDISH REFERENDUM ON EMU OF SEPTEMBER 14 2003

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Key points:

- Sweden's referendum on whether to join EMU produced an emphatic No vote. The murder, three days before the vote, of one the Yes side's leading representatives thus appeared not to have affected the result.
- The cleavages that were exposed in the Swedish referendum on EU membership nine years before were even more apparent this time. No-voters were concentrated on the political left, and in the country's periphery. Yet they were also to be found across the political, regional and social spectrums.
- Lessons from previous referendum campaigns, both in Sweden and elsewhere, had been learned by the opponents of EMU, but largely forgotten by its supporters.
- The political consequences of this major embarrassment for the Social Democratic government were, paradoxically, unlikely to be great. This, in turn, arguably helped to explain the size of its defeat in the referendum.

Introduction

The lively campaign that preceded the Swedish referendum on whether to join the EU's economic and monetary union (EMU) ended abruptly in its final week, when the country's foreign minister was murdered, apparently by a mentally disturbed man. Anna Lindh was one of Sweden's most popular politicians, and very probably its next prime minister. She was also the most persuasive advocate of the case for adopting the euro, and many felt that her death, which caused a wave of shock and grief in the country, might persuade uncertain voters to swing towards a Yes vote in sympathy.

But such a swing did not occur: Sweden voted against EMU by a margin of nearly 14 percentage points (see Table 1). The tragedy might even have favoured the noes. The pro-EMU side's final offensive was abandoned. The planned eve-of-referendum television debate, in which Lindh was due to urge a Yes, was cancelled, and replaced by a 'conversation' between the main party leaders about democratic values. Moreover, if viewers heeded the party leaders' call to vote as a mark of their support for democracy, the consequently higher turnout may have favoured the anti-euro side, as likely abstainers tended to belong to the same social constituencies as likely No-voters. Yet, ultimately, because the noes had enjoyed such a consistently large lead in the polls, no one considered the referendum's outcome to have been significantly influenced by Lindh's death.

Table 1. 'Do you think that Sweden should introduce the euro as its currency?' Sweden's referendum of 14 September 2003 (%)

	%	Votes
Yes	42.0	2,453,899
No	55.9	3,265,341
Blank	2.1	121,073
Ineligible	0.1	3,475
Turnout	82.6	5,843,788

Source: Election Authority (www.val.se), downloaded 22 September 2003.

What the vote thus represented was a big political blow to the Social Democratic prime minister, Göran Persson. He and most of his government had strongly urged a Yes vote. So too had most of the centre–right opposition. But neither of the two blocs that dominate the Swedish party system was united on EMU, and nor were the parties themselves. Indeed, the difficulties that the referendum posed for party politics was among the most intriguing angles on Sweden's decision to keep its national currency, the krona.

Background

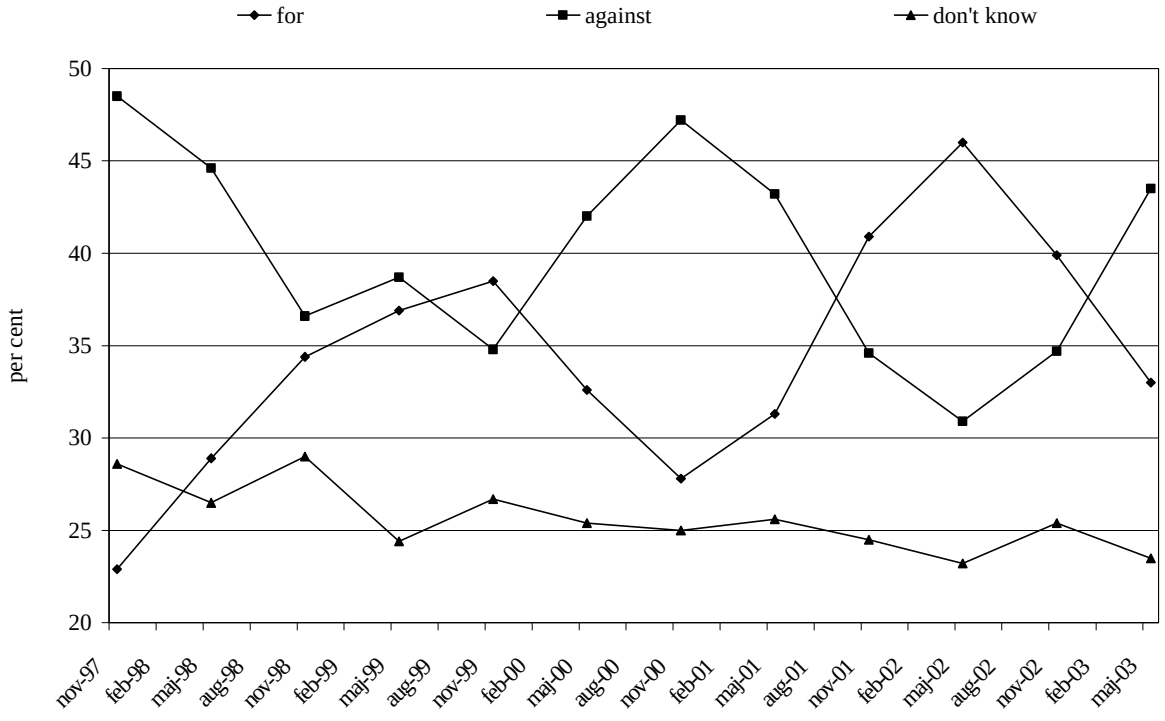
Towards the end of his failing campaign, Persson expressed his regret that EMU had become the subject of a referendum in the first place.[1] In some ways, the prime minister's frustration was understandable. Legally, Sweden did not need to hold a referendum. In fact, however, the vote was the consequence of strategic and tactical decisions made by Persson's own Social Democratic party. The main reason for both the Social Democrats' wariness of embracing EMU, and their commitment to a referendum in deciding it, was the fact that they themselves were split. To avoid taking a painful decision, which, because of these internal divisions, might have jeopardised its objectives in the arenas of 'normal' politics, the party decided to delegate that decision to someone else – namely, the electorate. Thus, when a Social Democratic congress in spring 2000 agreed to support Sweden's adopting the euro, subject to a referendum, it merely confirmed an already accepted political reality: that the question would be decided through direct democracy.

[1] See: *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 30 August 2003.

The two other conditions that the congress in 2000 stipulated were that Sweden should acquire: (a) greater discipline in its wage-formation, to guard against inflationary pressure, and (b) additional counter-cyclical policy tools, to compensate for the loss of a national monetary policy. In late 2002, the Social Democrats' national executive decided that these conditions had been fulfilled. In truth, this was far from obvious (see below); but, once more, political convenience decided.

The government had been comfortably re-elected a couple of months earlier. Just as important, public opinion had been swinging in a strongly pro-EMU direction in the two years since the Danes had voted No to EMU, as Figure 1 shows. Essentially, it looked as though a referendum could be won. Moreover, the Social Democratic elite had become increasingly convinced of the euro's merits, particularly Persson himself, who had been publicly sceptical until as late as 1998. He was probably encouraged to change his mind by the experience of presiding over Sweden's successful presidency of the EU's Council of Ministers in 2001, and by 2003 he could see 'not one good argument' against the euro.[2] Finally, Persson's confidence in his own ability to persuade the electorate can only have been enhanced by his remarkable accumulation of authority as Social Democratic leader and prime minister, to the extent that he had been given the sobriquet 'President Persson' by media commentators.[3] Whatever their motivation, all the parties agreed that it was time for the referendum, and set it for the following September.

Figure 1. Swedish public opinion on EMU



Source: Statistics Sweden, Statistiskdatabas (www.scb.se), downloaded 8 October 2003.

[2] See: *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 May 2003.
[3] See: Björn Elmbrant, '"President Persson" – hur fick vi honom?', *Studio Ett*, P1, Stockholm, Sveriges Radio, 22-26 April 2002.

As Figure 1 also shows, the parties acted just as public opinion was beginning to swing back against EMU. Precisely why the electorate's view changed is hard to say, but a flood of media reports about how badly the eurozone economies were doing, particularly Germany's, may well have contributed. Persson had planned to begin his campaign properly after the end of the long Swedish summer break, but the opinion polls persuaded him to start much sooner, in the spring (although they did not persuade him to shorten his own summer holiday). As we know, he and his fellow euro-supporters failed to turn the tide of opinion. We now look at two perspectives from which an explanation of this failure might be constructed. The first is psephological; the second relates to the campaign.

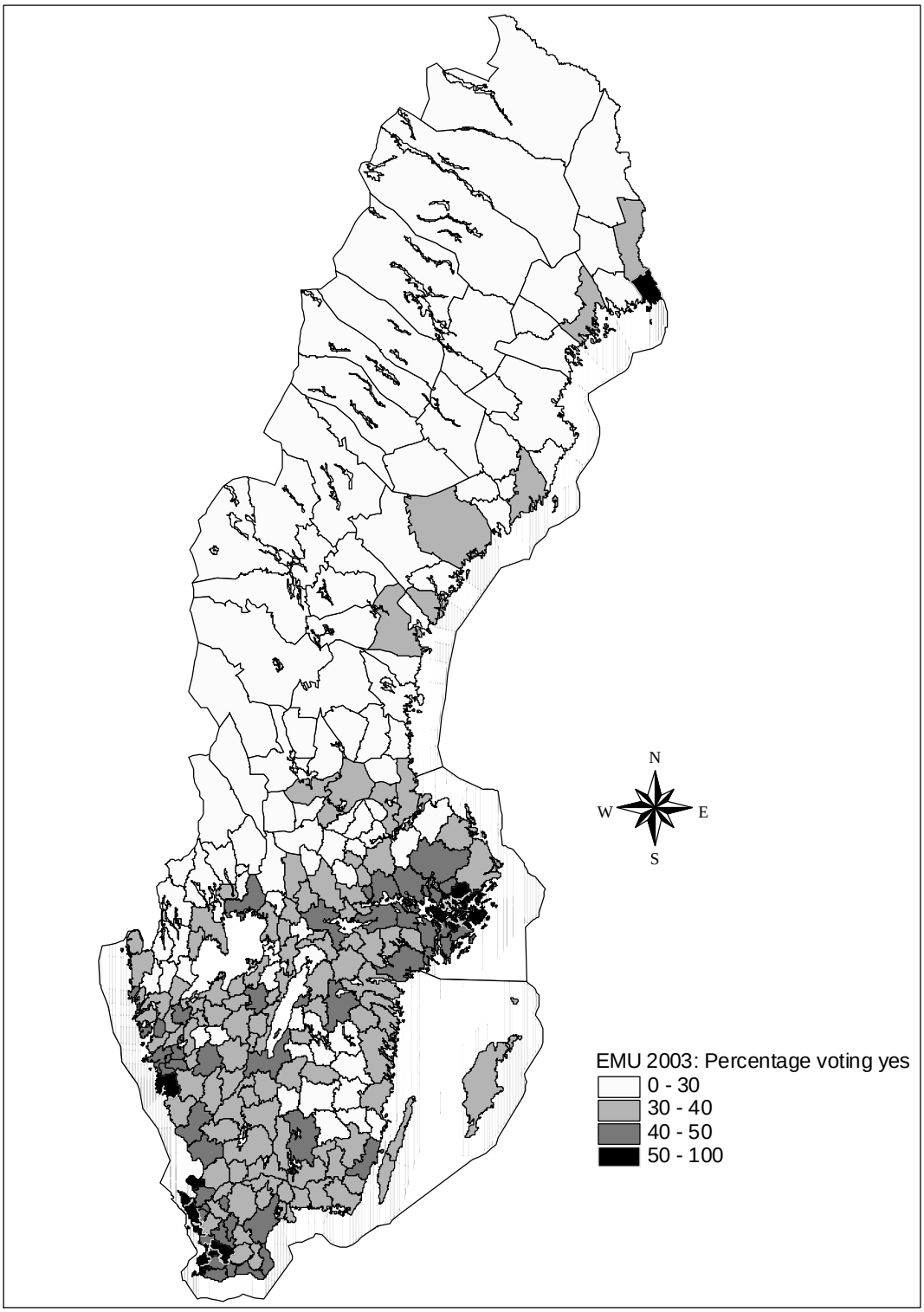
Voting behaviour

Sweden is a Eurosceptical country. By summer 2003, Eurobarometer indicated that fully 27 % of Swedes thought that EU membership was a 'bad thing', the highest percentage among the 15 member states.[4] But this scepticism is not evenly distributed throughout the country, as the 1994 referendum revealed.

The same geographical and social cleavages were visible again in the 2003 referendum – only much more sharply. As Figure 2 shows, the vote against EMU in the north Sweden was extraordinarily strong. Even in Umeå, a relatively prosperous university town that voted for joining the EU in 1994, two-thirds of voters were against the euro. In some other northern municipalities, where the economy is stagnant and depopulation is ongoing, between eight and nine out of ten people voted No. The social dimension was also visible. Once again, and as exit polls showed, women, the young, blue-collar workers and those employed in the public sector voted No in greater proportions than did men, the old, white-collar workers and those in the private sector.[5] These figures illustrate what a ready constituency there was for anti-EMU campaigners when they characterised monetary union as a project for the elites, not for ordinary people.

[4] See: European Commission, *Eurobarometer 59*, Brussels: European Commission, 2003.
[5] See: Valu 2003, published in *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 September 2003.

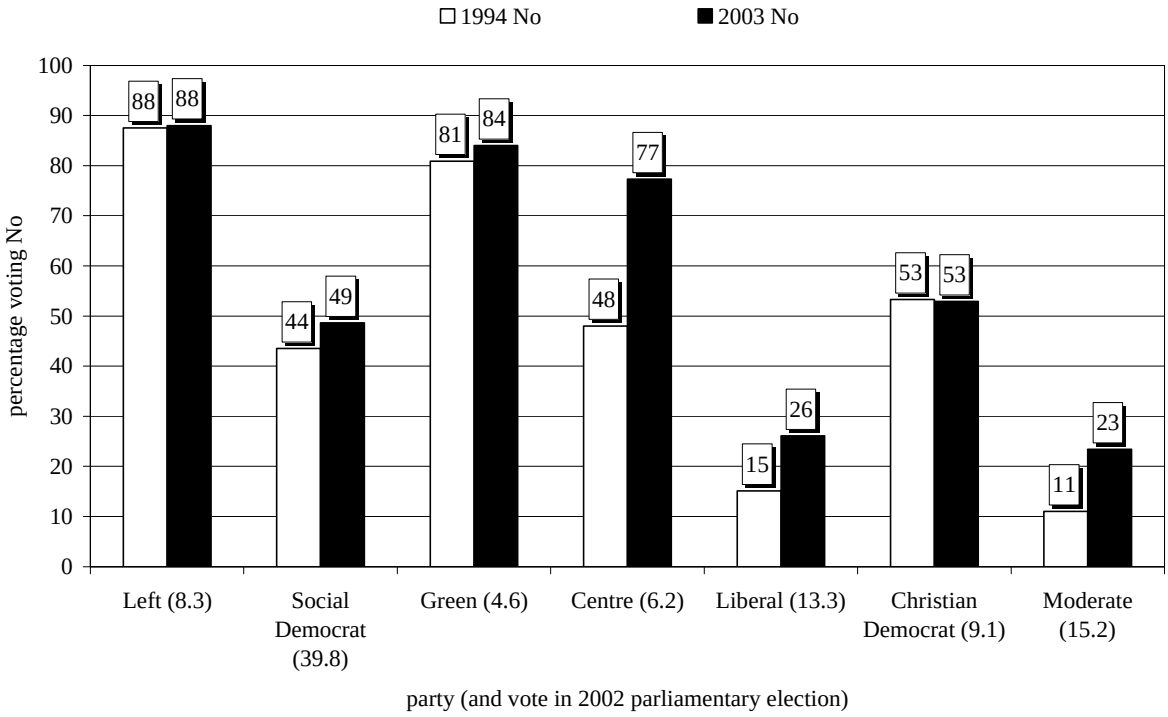
Figure 2. Distribution of votes in the EMU referendum



Source: Election Authority. Many thanks to Jessika Wide and Svante Ersson for their help with this map.

The ideological dimension was also present again, as Figure 3 shows. Supporters of the Left Party (the former Communists) were solidly behind the party leadership's call for a No. The Greens' sympathisers were also in tune with their party's anti-EMU stance. Around half of the Social Democrats' supporters, meanwhile, rejected their party leadership's calls to vote Yes. Left-wing Swedish Euroscepticism was clearly alive and well in 2003.

Figure 3. Party preference and No votes in the referendums on EU membership (1994) and EMU (2003)



Source: Valu 2003, published in *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 September 2003.

But the data presented above also show that these cleavages cannot be the only explanation of why Swedes voted against EMU by such a wide margin. Of the country's 21 counties, just one, Stockholm, had a Yes majority, and another, Scania, had a Yes plurality. Not all the remaining 19 can be called peripheral. Even in Gothenburg's region, West Götaland, 57.2 % voted No. As for sociological categories, all the groups whose members were likelier to vote Yes in 1994 saw smaller proportions doing the same in 2003, suggesting that many voters in all groups who had supported joining the Union nevertheless opposed a further step in European integration.

However, the most striking difference can be seen in the vote broken down by party sympathy. It was not the supporters of the left-leaning parties who were decisive to the outcome, and thus the difference between the Yes vote in 1994 and the No in 2003. They were similarly against or divided in both referendums. What changed was the proportion of non-socialist or 'bourgeois' voters who voted No: 32 % in 1994, 45 % in 2003. Of the four bourgeois parties' supporters, Christian Democrats were fairly evenly divided, as they had been nine years previously. Much the same could be said of the Centre's sympathisers in 1994, but in 2003 a big majority of them voted No. One reason was surely the stance of the party itself. The Centre's leadership had been for EU membership, and had become more

enthusiastic about it since accession; yet this did not change its consistent opposition to EMU. Indeed, the fact that a bourgeois party – albeit the smallest one, and with a dwindling rural base – opposed the euro was surely a vital encouragement to bourgeois-inclined electors to vote No. There was, in sum, no elite consensus, even on the generally pro-European centre–right, about the desirability of adopting the euro. This was crucial to the result.

While structural patterns take us some way towards understanding the Swedish result, it was the numbers who broke structural expectations and voted No that made it so emphatic. That, in turn, points to the importance of the campaign. Why did so many Swedes simply fail to buy the Yes side's arguments?

The campaign and issue-management

The Yes side had plenty of advantages at the outset (see Table 2 for a map of the campaign). They were apparently well organised, with party elites opting to run two parallel campaigns. One of these concentrated on the labour movement. It was co-ordinated by a specially established organisation in the ruling party, Social Democrats For Europe, under the leadership of a former cabinet minister (and a northerner), Anders Sundström. The other was run by an existing foundation, Sweden in Europe, which was financed by the employers' organisation, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, and which assisted the three pro-EMU bourgeois parties' efforts. The two Yes organisations set up a common platform, Yes to the Euro, which hired campaign workers (including those who offered to visit uncertain voters at home), issued posters and leaflets and ran a website.

The state provided subsidy for campaigners. Social Democrats For Europe and Sweden in Europe joined with a third group, the Federation of Swedish Farmers, to constitute an association that received and distributed the Yes side's share. The public subsidy that it took was vastly outweighed, however, by the resources provided by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. No figures were disclosed, but there was speculation about hundreds of millions of kronor being pumped into the Yes campaign. This financed various groups that aimed at niche electoral markets, defined either by age or political orientation. Probably the pro-EMU side's greatest advantage, however, was that it had the backing of most of Sweden's leading politicians: Persson, Lindh and the leaders of the Liberal, Christian Democratic and Moderate parties. All the national newspapers urged a Yes.

Table 2. Major national organisations campaigning on EMU (and the state subsidy that they received)

	FOR			AGAINST		
official	**'Association for the Yes side's receipt of campaign finance'**			**'Association for the distribution of resources on the No side…'**		
umbrella				**No to EMU** (21)	**Co-operation Against EMU** (21)	other (6)
	labour movement	*bourgeois*	*other*	?	?	
parties		Liberals Christian Democrats Liberal Youth Moderates		Green Youth Greens Left Youth Left	Centre	
new	**Social Democrats for Europe** (20)	'Eurocentre.nu' 'Eurofakta'* 'Vision Europa'	Yes to the Euro* Green Euro* '4euro.nu'* 'Jorå.nu' – Students...* Left for EMU		Yes to Europe, No to the Euro Citizens Against EMU	Immigrants Against EMU**
existing	Trade-Union Voices for Europe	**Sweden in Europe*** (20)		Centre No to EU Trade-Union EU-critics No to the EU Sweden Out of the EU 'Verdandi'	Kale (Christian Democrats) Social Democrats Against EMU	Freedom Front** Kvinnofronten** SAFE**
economic	Industrial Union Metal-Workers' Union Paper-Workers' Union	Confederation of Swedish Enterprise	**Federation of Swedish Farmers** (2) SACO			Commercial Employees' Union Transport Workers'Union Smallholders**
newspapers	*Aftonbladet*	*Dagens Nyheter* *Expressen* *Svenska Dagbladet*				

Notes to Table 2

Organisations' names have been translated into English by the author, except those in inverted commas, which are hard or unncessary to translate. Bold text indicates that the organisation was part of an official association charged with distributing public subsidy for the campaign. Figures in brackets indicate the amount of public subsidy, in millions of krona, that a group received from its official association.
* At least part-financed openly by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise.
** These groups received smaller amounts of public subsidy directly from the official anti-EMU association. This list is not exhaustive. Sixty anti-EMU groups or networks, many of them locally-based, received money.
Sources: Green Party (2003), "Fördelning av EMU-pengar", downloaded Aug. 2003 (mp.se); *Från Riksdag & departement* 3, 5 Mar. 2003 (www.rod.nu), 25 Aug. (hard copy); Swedish Parliament (undated), "Kampanjerna", downloaded August 2003 (www.riksdagen.se).

The No side, by contrast, was much poorer and much more fragmented. Partly, this was because it lacked a munificent equivalent to Sweden in Europe, around which its campaign could revolve. But it was also part of a deliberate strategy. After the referendum, the chair of Social Democrats Against EMU, Sören Wibe, claimed that vital to its ultimate success had been his persuading his group – an existing Eurosceptical party faction that changed its name when the vote was announced – to defect from a nascent anti-EMU umbrella organisation.[6] That umbrella was initiated by No to the EU, a group left over from the 1994 campaign, and Wibe feared that its rather radical left-wing image would put off moderate Social Democratic and bourgeois voters. Instead, Social Democrats Against EMU teamed up with three bourgeois groups – the Centre Party, a Eurosceptical Christian Democratic faction and Citizens Against EMU, led by a former Moderate MP – to establish a separate umbrella, aiming at the middle of the political spectrum. They were joined by a cross-party organisation, 'Yes to Europe, No to the Euro', led by a private-sector economist. The two anti-EMU umbrellas formed an association that distributed public subsidy, some of which went directly to other, non-aligned groups (though extreme-right parties were carefully excluded from the allocation).

What arguments did each side push? This turned out to be a tactical dilemma for the Yes camp. Perhaps wary of concentrating overly on economic issues, which the Yes side had been accused of in Denmark in 2000, it initially stressed the general benefits of European integration, not least peace. Then it swung the other way, and began to make highly specific pledges about the benefits that EMU would bring. Persson agreed with a report that the euro would create 108,000 jobs in the public sector;[7] the minister for consumer affairs claimed that it would promote retail competition and thus save the average Swedish family 30,000 kronor a year.[8] These pledges were regarded as unrealistic and speculative even by sympathetic newspapers. Later, the influence that Sweden would lose in the EU if it stayed out of EMU was emphasised. But this argument was undermined by the publication of doctoral research that showed no such effect in the Union's institutions since the euro had been launched;[9] and, anyway, such a prospect was unlikely to trouble most voters.

Meanwhile, the No side, with its big lead in the polls, could afford to pursue a low-risk, defensive strategy. Only on a couple of occasions did its leading figures violate Wibe's

[6] See: *Dagens Nyheter*, 25 September 2003.
[7] See: *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 June 2003.
[8] See: *Aftonbladet*, 24 July 2003.
[9] See: Rutger Lindahl and Daniel Naurin, "'Starkt EU-inflytande även utan euron'", *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 August 2003.

injunction to concentrate on '"just the facts" [*sic*], be restrained, don't exaggerate'.[10] The antis lacked a visible leader, the sort of 'No queen' or 'king' seen in other Scandinavian EU-referendums, although it certainly had its stars. One of the Greens' leaders, Maria Wetterstrand, a rising figure in Swedish politics, was a model of effective, sober argument. Nils Lundgren, the economist in charge of Yes to Europe, No to the Euro, was a lucid defender of Sweden's existing monetary-policy framework, with its independent central bank and floating exchange-rate. Indeed, the No side reminded voters consistently that the European economies outside the eurozone were doing better than those inside. It also pressed the democracy argument, with particular criticism aimed at the allegedly secretive and unaccountable European Central Bank. Both these issues hit home: 'democracy' and 'the Swedish economy' were the two named most frequently as 'very important' by voters in an exit poll.[11]

Towards the end of the campaign, the Yes side's desperation led to some last-minute gambits. Two weeks before the vote, Persson announced that a Yes would be a 'soft' one, meaning that, if the terms of Sweden's joining EMU turned out to be unsatisfactory, the expected date on which the euro would be adopted, in 2006, could be put back.[12] In effect, having delegated decision-making authority on EMU to the electorate, the prime minister was belatedly attempting to reclaim it for the government. Finally, Persson and the Liberal leader tried, in a joint article, to overcome one of the anti-EMU side's most effective, practical arguments – that a No could always be reversed in a few years, if the consequences were negative. The pair insisted that no new referendum could be held until 2010, with another three years needed thereafter to prepare for the introduction of the new currency.[13]

As the result illustrated, these ploys failed. But, arguably, the real damage to the Yes campaign had been done earlier. Having made up nearly two-fifths of the turnout in the 2002 parliamentary election, Social Democratic voters were obviously of major importance in the referendum campaign. The problem for its leadership was that the party was split, not just horizontally, with pro-EMU elites against Eurosceptical grass-roots, but within its top levels, too. This was also the case in 1994, but the internal division then was managed – in the end – satisfactorily. Social Democratic issue-management failed in 2003.

The divide in the labour movement

One of the secrets of the Social Democrats' remarkable political success has been the party's organisational ties to the blue-collar trade unions and, in turn, the unions' ability to mobilise the vote among Sweden's workforce, which is highly organised and has high female participation. Crucially, these unions' confederation, LO, was divided on EMU: three of its 16 members were keen supporters, two were strong opponents and the rest were either neutral or took no position. This put LO in a tricky position. Its chair, Wanja Lundby-Wedin, was naturally keen to avoid a split. So, in 2000, after a stormy debate, LO's congress agreed a compromise: support for EMU, but on two conditions of its own. The first, stable wage-formation, resembled one of the Social Democrats' conditions. The second was also similar, but more specific. LO wanted 'buffer funds', which would be used to offset the business cycle

[10] See: *Dagens Nyheter*, 25 September 2003. One occasion was in July, when the Centre leader stumbled into comparing the EU with the Third Reich. Another was in August, when an MEP from the Left suggested that Sweden should withdraw from the stability and growth pact.
[11] See the exit poll Valu 2003, published in *Dagens Nyheter* 15 September 2003.
[12] See: *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 August 2003.
[13] See: Göran Persson and Lars Leijonborg, '"Ett nej gäller till år 2013"', *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 August 2003.

and thus ward off unemployment. The third condition involved the management of these funds. LO wanted them controlled by a type of corporatist 'structural council', on which it would be represented.

These conditions were extremely awkward for the Social Democratic government. Any mention of 'funds' unavoidably revived memories of the 1970s, and one of the party's most radical policy initiatives, the wage-earner funds. These had been originally designed to take gradual control of the commanding heights of the economy, and they had mobilised bourgeois opposition like no other issue. The government's fear in 2003 was that talk of buffer funds would scare bourgeois voters into the No camp. From November 2002, in a joint working group, the Social Democrats and LO sought a mutually satisfactory way out. But, in early April 2003, these talks failed. LO's assembly declared the confederation neutral in the referendum. This was bad news for the Social Democratic leadership and the Yes side as a whole.

Even worse for the Yes side than this fiasco, however, was the fact that that the Social Democrats themselves were split over EMU. This was inevitably a problem for its leadership; but Scandinavian social democratic parties have now faced this situation in EU-related referendums quite often, and there are ways in which the situation can be handled.

In 1994 the Social Democratic leadership's strategy was clearly one of tolerance towards the party's Eurosceptics. It was emphasised repeatedly that, while Social Democrats were certainly urged to vote Yes by their leaders, No-sayers were equally welcome and legitimate within the party fold.[14] Ultimately, from the leadership's perspective, the plan worked: a party split was avoided and just enough Yes votes were mobilised to carry the referendum. By contrast, the mistake of the leadership before the EMU referendum was that the leadership appeared not have a strategy – or, rather, that it jumped between different ones.

Until spring 2003, the Social Democrats seemed again to be pursuing a strategy of tolerance. This signal was most clearly sent after their election victory in autumn 2002, when Persson appointed to the cabinet no fewer than five cabinet ministers who had indicated their inclination to vote No. The prime minister seems to have reached an informal agreement with them, according to which they would not engage actively in the referendum campaign. But what constitutes active engagement is a subjective judgment, and Leif Pagrotsky, the trade minister, was particularly willing to see it in minimal terms. His provocative EMU-sceptical posturing appeared to persuade Persson to change tack. Just before the traditional May day rallies, the prime minister insisted publicly that members of the government could not work against what he saw as the party's and the government's position on EMU.[15]

This shift of strategy was disastrous for the Yes campaign, and particularly for its Social Democratic component. An objective of the tolerance strategy in 1994 had been to prevent opposition to the party leadership's EU preference from being seen as a general challenge to the leadership's authority. In 2003, however, once Persson had ignited what the media called the 'gagging debate' by trying to enforce collective responsibility, every Eurosceptical comment by a minister – and there were a fair few in various May day speeches, for a start – was perceived as personal defiance of the party leader. The media's attention was drawn away from the Yes side's agenda and towards the ruling party's internal conflicts. The No-saying

[14] See Nicholas Aylott, 'Between Europe and Unity: The Case of the Swedish Social Democrats', *West European Politics*, 20 (1997).
[15] *Aktuellt i Politiken*, 29 April 2003; *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 April 2003.

ministers, meanwhile, enjoyed the media spotlight, while hardly having to work for it, and thus presented themselves not only as legitimators of Social Democratic doubts about EMU, but even as persecuted ones.

Conclusions

Monetary union is now off the political agenda in Sweden, at least for the medium term. After the chastening experience of overwhelming defeat, probably only one development will persuade its political elites to put it back there: a significant change in prevailing economic conditions. There was an element of grass-roots protest in the referendum,[16] particularly in the disgruntled north. But, essentially, the euro's supporters simply struggled to convince the electorate to support a radical change in their country's monetary policy framework, when the alternative arrangement was not obviously working more effectively than the existing one. Wherever they stood along the political spectrum, Swedes could take cues from like-minded politicians and economists that legitimised and reinforced their hesitancy about EMU. Without a considerable improvement in the eurozone's relative economic performance, it will surely be hard to convince Swedish voters – and, for that matter, those in Denmark and Britain, too – that they have much to gain by taking the plunge into EMU.[17]

Despite the government's embarrassment at the result, the domestic political consequences were unlikely to be great. This accords with the strategy of 'compartmentalising' the arenas of party activity, and quarantining EU-related issues in special sections, that Scandinavian social democratic parties appeared to have cultivated over the course of numerous referendums.[18] Persson made clear that he would not resign as prime minister in the event of a No. He also stated repeatedly that his party's formal parliamentary co-operation with two of the anti-euro parties, the Left and the Greens, would continue as before. In this way, EMU was successfully isolated from the rest of everyday politics.

However, this insurance against the issue becoming a general threat to the government's existence surely also contributed to Social Democratic supporters feeling even less constrained in their inclination to vote No, for they knew that there would be no negative political consequences of doing so. As one sympathetic commentator put it, voters felt that they could 'afford to rebel.'[19] If and when EMU does reappear on the Swedish political agenda, if and when the decision is subject to another referendum, and even if economic circumstances are more favourable, politicians may still have to take greater risks with their own political fortunes if the result of September 2003 is to be reversed.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on

[16] Cf. Tommy Möller, '"Nejsegern en protest mot makthavarna"' *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 September 2003.
[17] Cf. Mads H. Qvortrup, 'How to Lose a Referendum: The Danish Plebiscite on the Euro', *Political Quarterly*, 72:2, 192-3.
[18] See: Nicholas Aylott, 'Let's Discuss This Later: Party Responses to Euro-Division in Scandinavia', *Party Politics*, 8:4 (2002), 441-61.
[19] See: Helle Klein, 'Lär av nederlaget – stärk europapolitiken ', *Aftonbladet*, 15 Sepember 2003.

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