



**POPULISM IN
SWEDEN:
SOCIOECONOMIC
POLARISATION
IN THE MODEL
SOCIAL
DEMOCRATIC
STATE**

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The general election in 2010 changed the dynamics of Swedish politics when the populist party Sweden Democrats (SD) crossed the 4% threshold to get into parliament. This nationalist party with roots in Swedish fascism led by Jimmy Åkesson polled 5.7% and won 20 parliamentary seats, becoming Sweden's third biggest party. The country was in shock; the image of multicultural Sweden open for everyone was stained. Even though all parties on both sides of the political spectrum vowed not to collaborate with the SD, the SD continued its success in the 2014 general election, polling 12.9% and winning 49 seats in the parliament. This upward trend is still intact. In the latest general election polls carried out by the Swedish Institute for Opinion Surveys (SIFO), the SD climbed to 16.9%, which puts it in a comfortable position ahead of the next general election in September 2018.

What makes the SD so attractive? It promises to fight crime and provide "the real Swedish people" with opportunities to work, a good standard of living, better housing and an improved welfare system. The party targets voters that want simple solutions without complexity. SD voters are mainly male, poorly educated working class citizens, mostly heterosexual, with a traditional view of the family and female roles in society, and who don't believe in multiculturalism or globalisation. The SD promises to promote Swedish culture and identity and hold a referendum on EU membership, which it opposes. It also promises a drastic reduction of new immigration and demands complete assimilation of immigrants already living in Sweden. Many naturalised immigrants struggle to integrate as they do not speak Swedish and do not relate to the culture, which in turn affects their children – this is mainly the case for women with limited education.

According to an OECD report, Sweden is one of the most segregated countries in Europe when it comes to ethnic segregation. There is a large concentration of immigrants in the three biggest cities: Malmö,

Gothenburg and Stockholm. Some of this concentration is voluntary – people may choose to live in areas with lots of immigrants because they are new in the country and are looking for a network of people from the same background. Other immigrants with higher incomes might choose to live in areas with no immigrants as they are drawn to a certain lifestyle. However, when ethnic segregation is involuntary as a result of discrimination, this type of exclusion has negative consequences in society. Examples of this are landlords, employers and teachers not giving immigrants the same opportunities based on their ethnic background. The high volume of immigration in the last few years was concentrated in the south around Malmö, where the SD has a particularly high share of votes. This has led to strains on the welfare system, affecting housing, healthcare and schools, as well as increasing crime. SD voters see immigrants as a threat to their economic wellbeing, sense of security and identity. They feel Swedish identity is being diluted by influences from other cultures, changing Swedish values and way of life.

Globalisation, technical rationalisation and the relocation of manufacturing companies to foreign countries with cheaper labour have left the traditional Swedish working class frustrated and unemployed. This applies to its male members in particular. Highly qualified and educated people are increasingly in demand, moving around freely in the EU, leaving behind those without the required skills to succeed. Furthermore, entrepreneurs and people in low-paid jobs find themselves in competition with immigrants who may have higher qualifications and are willing to do the job more cheaply. Many feel let down by politicians on both sides of the political spectrum unable to provide them with the change in society and security they need. The resulting shift of lower and middle class voters to the SD has led to populist pressures on the established parties. In response, the incumbent Social Democratic government introduced border controls and stricter immigration policy.

What needs to change? In the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) Sweden has been classified as the country with the best integration policy, yet the majority of poorly educated immigrant families and young people get stuck in the welfare system, segregated in the outskirts of bigger cities or isolated in the middle of the countryside.

There is a big shortage of housing in Sweden, which makes moving around to find a job impossible. There is discrimination in the housing market and landlords tend to favour tenants with a Swedish name, which leaves immigrants in the hands of the black market and makes housing more expensive and insecure for them. Many immigrants also struggle to get a mortgage to buy a property, as most don't pass the credit check.

Many new immigrants who are highly qualified and have relevant experience from their home countries find it difficult to accept a job as a cleaner, waiter or bus

driver. On the other hand Swedish people have to compete against immigrants for low-pay jobs.

The government needs to address the socioeconomic problems and invest in human capital by providing the necessary resources to the increasingly changing multicultural population. Access to higher education should be made available to everyone; it is quite difficult to access education due to limited capacities at universities. Sweden has an ageing population and will need an educated and qualified workforce. Access to affordable housing is key to mobilising people in the country, which in turn will mobilise the workforce and reduce segregation.

The government recently proposed lower wages for immigrants between the ages of 25 and 45 without higher education. This will help many immigrants get off welfare and make them more attractive on the job market as well as giving them valuable experience and involving them in society, but will it make them more integrated? Will it not make them feel like second-class citizens? It is currently much harder for a jobseeker with a foreign name to get a job than a jobseeker with a native Swedish name. Will this not increase the discrimination in the job market?

In the end it is a question of allocation of resources: do we spend money on “us” or do we spend money on “them”. Political parties on both sides of the spectrum are planning to cut down on spending on immigrants in an attempt to attract voters they have lost to the SD ahead of the next general election in 2018. The SD is slowly creeping to power, normalising what they stand for. At the same time as Marine Le Pen wants to introduce reduced financial support for parents with a foreign background the Swedish government is proposing to reduce financial support for families with children born abroad. In January 2017 the Conservative party and the Moderates agreed to collaborate with the SD passively to bring down the sitting centre-left government, which was unthinkable a few years ago. By opening a door to the SD the Moderates are sending a message of acceptance and acknowledging the SD as a party. Will the 2018 general election focus on immigration or how to address the core issues in Swedish society?

