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10.09.2018, SWEDISH GENERAL ELECTIONS

Forging New Alliances under Duress

Ahead of Sweden's autumn general elections support for the populist, far-right Swedish Democrats is surging, and traditional patterns of party collaboration are in flux. Is Sweden in danger of becoming ungovernable?

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With the 9 September general elections just two days away, political activity in Sweden is intense - and it has been since the so-called Almedal Week in July. This annual event, staged in Visby on the picturesque island of Gotland, where the leaderships of all political parties convene with interest groups, lobbyists and the general public usually marks the end of the political calendar year. In election years, however, the Almedal Week signals the unofficial start of the election campaign, where alliances are formed or reaffirmed and lines of skirmish drawn.

The forthcoming Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2018 Sustainable Governance Indicators (<http://www.sgi-network.org/2017/>) report on Sweden states that "(...) it is easy to see that the combined factors of a political system under duress and

the challenge of ensuring a working majority in parliament have not strengthened the strategic capacity of government institutions."

Institutional arrangements and formal rules only work so far; in the final analysis political decision-making hinges on the capacity of the actors in the system to make it happen. The post-election discussions among the political parties on how to form a government with a true capacity to act will be critical in this respect.

The far-right Swedish Democrats are likely to gain some 20 percent of the votes

The outcome of the Swedish election in September is both extraordinarily uncertain and predictable. The uncertainty relates to whether any of the parties currently in parliament (the Riksdag) will end up below the four percent threshold for representation.

Several parties are balancing on that edge; the Christian Democrats poll about 2.5-3 percent and the Greens hover just about the threshold. Even the Liberals, currently at about 6 percent, have reason to feel some concern.

In other respects, the outcome is rather predictable. The four parties in the "Alliance"—the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the Center Party—are likely to receive some 40 percent of the votes. This will, give or take, balance the share of the votes given to the groups of parties on the left side of the party system; the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Greens.

Which of these two constellations of parties that ends up winning this aspect of the election is anybody's guess. It is also likely that the Swedish Democrats will attract some 20 percent of the voters. Thus, for the first time in history Sweden will display three parties controlling 20-25 percent of the votes each; the Conservatives, the Social Democrats and the Swedish Democrats.

How to avoid parliamentary gridlock?

This outcome would leave us with in principle the same parliamentary situation as Sweden has had for the past four years where none of the established groups of parties controls a majority of its own. Since inviting the Swedish Democrats (SD) to join forces is generally-speaking a faux pas owing to the SD's position on immigration and its historical roots in neo-Nazi groups, some other means of producing an arrangement that avoids parliament gridlock will be necessary.

The issue of how to, or not to, engage the Swedish Democrats has thus become a major theme in the election campaign. The forms of such engagement could

theoretically cover the full range from partnering in a coalition to tacitly expecting the SD to support major bills in parliament.

Two years ago, the Moderates announced that they were going to "have talks" with the Swedish Democrats, causing an outcry among much of the political establishment. Even the attempt to kill the issue by saying that talks do not imply negotiations was of little help. After that, the Moderates have emphasized that there will be no talks, let alone negotiations, with the SD. For the parties on the left, but also for the Center party, any form of interaction with the SD is off the table altogether.

Traditional patterns of party collaboration are in flux

The other Scandinavian countries have experienced similar parliamentary dilemmas but have displayed a more pragmatic stance. For instance, following the 2013 general elections, Norway is governed by a coalition between the Conservatives and the populist Progress Party. In Denmark, the Danish People's party, also a populist, right-wing party, has yet to be part of a coalition although there does not appear to be same level of stigma against them as there is against the Swedish Democrats.

One reason for these differences might be that while Denmark and Norway have a long tradition of populist parties mainly devoted to aggressive tax cuts, dating back to the 1970s, Sweden's experience with such parties is more limited.

More broadly, the patterns of party collaboration and competition are in flux. Swedish politics for the past century has been overwhelmingly shaped by the left-right dimension. Over the past several years, however, the GAL-TAN dimension ("green, alternative, libertarian" versus "traditional, authoritarian, nationalist") has become a salient feature of the political debate. This development has significant ramifications on traditional allegiances among the parties.

On the immigration issue, to take the most prominent example, the Social Democrats find themselves close to the Conservatives and even the Swedish Democrats with the Greens, the Left Party and the Center Party at the opposite end of the dimension. Given that immigration is a key issue in the upcoming election, and also given the uncertainty of the parliamentary situation after the election, the idea of forging new alliances to find a workable government has been floated.

Thus, the upcoming elections in Sweden are in many ways fraught with uncertainty. Most observers would probably agree that Sweden desperately

needs stable government with solid parliamentary support to be able to tackle pressing issues such as the quality of welfare-state services, education, immigration, law and order, and national security.

But few seem to think that the election is very likely to produce an outcome that secures those objectives. Situations like that call for good political leadership, pragmatism, and integrity. Anyone with any academic survival instinct would be wise not to make bold predictions about how this will play out.

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PROJECTS

Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI)