

The Election to the Swedish Riksdag 1988

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The Swedish parliamentary election of 1988 spelt victory for the Labour Party in the sense that it was able to remain in power despite an electoral loss of 1.5 percent, from 44.7 percent in 1985 to 43.2 percent in 1988. The reasons behind this relative success are manifold. The Non-Socialist parties suffered a major electoral defeat and the Environmentalist Party managed to gain a substantial parliamentary representation, but not the pivotal position it had hoped for. As a result the two Socialist parties obtained a parliamentary majority in their own right.

The Campaign

The election campaign of the Conservative Party was considerably more moderate in comparison to the last campaign when the party went under the slogan of system change, but the demands were this year more or less the same, that is, demands for privatization of the public sector and the selling of state enterprises. Another slogan suggested a change in the taxation system, i.e. reduction of the marginal tax. The party got the other two bourgeois parties – the Liberal Party and the Centre Party – to join in on these demands. But in the case of further common appearances, a joint government programme was not agreed upon. In the final stages of the election campaign and greatly owing to the success of the Environmentalist Party in the opinion polls, the parties finally managed to agree upon a joint environment programme. Put differently, the bourgeois parties ran an election campaign without any significant co-operation and without overtones as had occurred during the last election when there had been calls for system change. The election campaign suggested that the bourgeois parties relied on the recent scandals and 'affairs' to topple the Labour government: the Bofors affair; the escape of the convicted Soviet spy, Stig Bergling, which caused the resignation of a minister of Justice; the Ebbe Carlsson affair, which resulted in the resignation of the succeeding minister of Justice as she was accused of having practised ministerial ruling by issuing

a letter to a private person to carry out investigations concerning the murder of Palme; etc.

As for the Labour Party, they were until the summer in an extremely strong position to start their election campaign, i.e. the issues that normally dominate the campaigns, the economy and unemployment, deserved everything but negative remarks. Unemployment hardly existed and the economic situation looked good with a continually decreasing deficit of the budget (whether this was due to an efficient minister of Finance or whether caused by decreasing prices in oil or the decreasing value of the dollar is quite another matter – the political fruit of this is in all cases picked by the government currently in office). Even the labor market negotiations in the winter of 1987/88, that once looked quite menacing with an attempt by union activists from a number of trade unions to start a struggle involving the whole country, with a minimum demand for a pay-rise of 1000 kr a month, the so called 'Dala uprising', was disarmed by satisfying the demands of the trade unions and by leaving the government out of it all. In other words, the political table was more or less wiped clean of typical topics of the election campaign. The 'affairs', however, became a problem for the Labour Party as the opposition parties were able to pick political points all through the summer, which culminated when the opposition parties could press forward interrogations of persons involved or persons said to be involved, that is, not only civil servants in high positions but also the minister of Justice and the minister of State in the constitutional committee. It was somehow surprising in this situation to find that the Labour Party's election campaign became so low-keyed, since the proper strategy would be to attack under conditions of cross-fire. This did not happen; the party simply ran a campaign without any greater gestures – the only concrete promise was a sixth week of holiday. Concerning other topics in the election campaign, like environment, taxes and defence, the party gave no concrete answers.

The small parties like the Communist Party, the Environmentalist Party and the Christian Democratic Party all did well in this year's election, in spite of the fact that their respective election campaigns, perhaps with the exception of the Environmentalist Party's, were relatively modest. The Communist Party's campaign was a one-man campaign where the party leader – Lars Werner – played the leading role. Reasons for this may presumably be found in the internal struggle for power that the party had (is having?) and which came into light at the party's congress in May 1987, when a minority tried to overthrow the present party leader. The attempt, however, failed but created internal conflicts that prevented the party up until the election from fully concentrating on their election campaign. As in previous campaigns the main demands of the party were the withdrawal

of the VAT tax and improvements of the environment, especially the working environment.

The Environmentalist Party was, on account of deficient resources, mainly in the form of money, obliged to run a campaign on streets and squares, to distribute pamphlets, etc. The party, however, had, unlike during previous election campaigns, relatively good assets in radio and television to spread their message. In addition to that the party gained extraordinary attention in all mass-media channels through various natural disasters, such as the death of the algae in the West Sea and the deaths of the seals in about the same areas that followed. Opinion polls showed throughout the campaign that the party would manage the 4 percent barrier, which led to the fact that the established parties did not, unlike during previous campaigns, keep silent about the Environmentalist Party but, on the contrary, stated that the party was to play a leading role in the election campaign. The party's main demands were to stop nuclear power, to impose higher environmental demands on industries dangerous to the environment as well as threats to shut them down, and a 'no' to the EEC.

Knowing how difficult it would be to rally 4 percent of the voters to a cause that had never won the approval of more than 2.3 percent of the Swedish electorate, the Christian Democratic Party concentrated its election campaign on only one constituency – Jönköping – in an effort to mobilize the 12 percent of the constituency vote needed to elect at least one Member of Parliament. The party basically had two campaign themes: morality and ethics. They recurred constantly in the party's campaign rhetoric and it was repeatedly emphasized that moral and ethical values must take precedence over other considerations.

The Results

The turbulence amongst the electorate at this year's election mostly affected the established parties. The great losers were the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party with decreases of 3 percent and 2 percent. The only bourgeois party to make progress was the Centre Party, but the progress was a relatively modest one – from 9.9 percent to 11.3 percent. The Labour Party also belongs to the losers with a decrease of 1.5 percent – from 44.7 percent to 43.2 percent (see Table 1). The winners in this year's election were the small parties, that is, the Communist Party, the Environmentalist Party, the Christian Democratic Party and – if one wishes to express it that way – the non-voters. The Communist Party had been pronounced dead by all opinion polling institutes which gave the party less than 4 percent of the votes, but the election proved to be the best ever since 1944! The polling institutes had all predicted that the Environmentalist Party was to

Table 1. The Swedish Parliamentary Elections 1970–88 by Party. Percent of Valid Votes.

Parties	1970	1973	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988
Conservatives	11.5	14.3	15.6	20.3	23.6	21.3	18.3
Centre Party	19.9	25.1	24.1	18.1	15.5	(9.9)	11.3
Christian Democrats	1.8	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.9	(2.5)	2.9
People's Party	16.2	9.4	11.1	10.6	5.9	14.2	12.2
Social Democrats	45.3	43.6	42.7	43.2	45.6	44.7	43.2
Communist Party	4.8	5.3	4.8	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.8
Environmentalists	—	—	—	—	1.7	1.5	5.5
Others	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.7
Voting turnout	88.3	90.8	91.8	90.7	91.4	89.9	86.0
Blank votes	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.9	1.2

gain parliamentary representation. The big question was by how much and whether it would be enough to thrust the party into a pivotal position on the parliamentary arena.

The decline of the Conservative Party in this year's election was the most profound since 1964 and their second consecutive electoral defeat. The chain of successful elections from 1970–82 is now definitely broken. The Conservative Party doubled its electoral support of the period between 1970 and 1982 from 11.5 to 23.6 percent – only to lose more than 5 percent over the last two elections. The Liberal Party's ups and downs in the electoral arena seems to continue. The party was not able to repeat its all-time high of 1985 and suffered a setback of 2 percent (from 14.2 percent to 12.2 percent). In terms of seats the Conservatives lost 10 and the Liberals 7 (Table 2). The Centre Party's slight success – from 9.9 percent to 11.3 percent – meant that the party lost one seat. This modest pay-off was a by-product of the fact that the party lost the extra seat that was obtained through the electoral cartel with the Christian Democratic Party at the election in 1985.

The decline of the Labour Party from 44.7 percent in the election of 1985 to 43.2 percent in this year's election puts the party at the same level of electoral support as in the 1970s, when Sweden had a bourgeois government. The Socialist majority in the present Riksdag is primarily a function of the modest but decisive electoral success of the Communist Party. The Labour Party lost 3 seats, while the Communist Party gained 2 seats; and as a result the Socialist parties have a parliamentary majority in their own right; 177 seats against 152 for the bourgeois parties.

The Environmentalist Party increased from 1.5 percent of the votes in 1985 to 5.5 percent of the votes in 1988 or by a total of 256 percent (sic!). As a result the party obtained 20 seats in the Riksdag. The Christian Democratic Party scored the best result since the party made its first

appearance on the Swedish electoral arena in 1964 with 2.9 percent of the votes cast which is all the more noteworthy considering that the Christian Democrats concentrated their electoral efforts on the constituency of Jönköping where they failed to reach the 12 percent. Judging by the preliminary results, the Environmentalist Party and the Christian Democratic Party had an even greater success in the local and regional elections. The so-called 'other' parties, which is a heterogeneous group of minor parties of various ideological shades, also increased their share of the electorate from 0.5 percent in 1985 to 0.7 percent in 1988. The turnout (86.0 percent), however, dropped to the level of the 1950s, which goes towards reinforcing the picture of this year's election as an 'election of protest'.

Conclusions

The election of 1988 was the second consecutive electoral defeat suffered by the Conservative Party and some election analysts would like to see it as an indication that the neo-Liberal wave has been brought to a halt or at least that it has lost the initiative in the social debate. Such conclusions, however, are premature. The neo-Liberal issues still dominate the political agenda, where the debate on tax cuts successfully competed with the issue of environmental protection during the electoral campaign of 1988. All major parties, including the Labour Party, pledged themselves to substantial tax cuts.

In previous elections, bourgeois party-switching has only marginally affected the overall share of the bourgeois camp. One party's loss was counterbalanced by another bourgeois party's gains. This pattern, however, was broken in this year's election when the Conservative and the Liberal parties lost a total of 5 percent while the Centre Party failed to make up for this loss. The electoral gains by the Centre Party in the election of 1988 add up to no more than 1.4 percent when controlling for break-up of the electoral cartel with the Christian Democrats. So where did the bourgeois voters disappear to? We do not know for sure, but presumably a fair number of them defected to the Environmentalist Party while others opted for the Non-Voting Party (see Table 1).

This year's election should be characterized as a 'protest election' of significance. The rate of participation (86 percent) in the election was at its lowest since the 1958. At the same time the amount of blank votes increased by some 50 percent and the small parties, the Communist Party, the Environmentalist Party and the Christian Democratic Party all had their most successful election results ever. It remains to be seen to what extent, if at all, the election results were affected by the many recent scandals and 'affairs' in Swedish politics and it is also a moot question to

Table 2. The Distribution of Seats in the Swedish Riksdag 1970–88 by Party.

Parties	1970	1973	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988
Conservatives	41	51	55	73	86	76	66
Centre Party	71	90	86	64	56	(43)	42
Christian Democrats	0	0	0	0	0	(1)	0
People's Party	58	34	39	38	21	51	44
Social Democrats	163	156	152	154	166	159	156
Communist Party	17	19	17	20	20	19	21
Environmentalists	—	—	—	—	0	0	20

what extent the voting behaviour may be seen as an expression of the voters' contempt for politicians. All we can say at this stage is that the scandals and 'affairs' presumably did not loom large in the minds of those who reconfirmed their confidence in the ruling Labour Party which was at the very centre of a lot of adverse mass-media attention throughout the election campaign.

The election of 1988 spelt dramatic change in the sense that a new party – the Environmentalist Party – gained parliamentary representation. Similar changes had not occurred since the Agrarian/Centre Party made its appearance in the Swedish parliamentary arena seventy years ago. What does this mean for the very stable five-party system that took shape in the early 1930s? Probably not much, since the other parties are likely to adapt to the environmental issues championed by the Environmentalist Party which has opted for a strategy of non-confrontation and avoidance on almost all other issues on the political agenda which remains dominated by the left/right cleavage. The implication, of course, is that the influence of the Environmentalist Party is likely to be marginal.