

Election Commentary

The Swedish Parliamentary Election of September 1991

Ingemar Wörlund, Östersund University

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As late as April 1990, opinion polls gave the Social Democratic party a rock bottom low of 28 percent of support. In light of this situation, an election result of 37.6 percent represented quite an achievement and it was widely broadcast as a success by party strategists. The Social Democrats had found themselves on the defensive throughout the entire election campaign, which focused on the size and growth of the public sector. By giving up its staunch defence of a constantly expanding public sector, but without specifying what course of action it had in mind, the Social Democratic Party laid itself open for attacks on two fronts. The party faithful worried that the party would give in to the call by the bourgeois parties for widespread privatization. The bourgeois parties, on the other hand, felt that the Social Democrats were doing too little, too late. But all things considered, the bourgeois parties bent over backwards to adopt a low profile widely believed to be instrumental in preserving their edge over the Social Democrats in the opinion polls. The established bourgeois parties in particular refrained from all-out attacks on the Social Democrats. To the extent that there were such attacks, they originated within New Democracy, the *enfant terrible* of the non-socialist camp, and itself an easy target for attacks from the right as well as the left.

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Table 1. Results of the Swedish Parliamentary Elections of 1988 and 1991 (Changes Within Parentheses).

Party	Votes			Seats		
	% 1988	% 1991	Change	1988	1991	Change
Social Democrats	43.2	37.6	(-5.6)	156	138	(-18)
Conservative Party	18.3	21.9	(+3.6)	66	80	(+14)
People's Party	12.2	9.1	(-3.1)	44	33	(-11)
Centre Party	11.3	8.5	(-2.8)	42	31	(-11)
Christian Democratic Union	2.9	7.1	(+4.2)	0	26	(+26)
New Democracy	0.0	6.7	(+6.7)	0	20	(+20)
Leftist Party (Communists)	5.8	4.5	(-1.3)	21	16	(-5)
Environmental Party	5.5	3.4	(-2.1)	20	0	(-20)
Others	0.7	1.2	(+0.5)	—	—	—
Total	100.0	100.0		349	349	
Voter turnout	86.0%	86.7%				
Female representatives	N			132	117	
	%			38	34	

Source: Official election statistics.

The Outcome

After the votes had been counted during the evening of 15 September it was readily apparent that the parties of the right had carried the day. But there was more to the election than that. It spelled defeat – or relative defeat – for the five parties which had dominated Swedish politics ever since the 1920s, the main benefactors being two new contenders for power, the Christian Democratic Union and New Democracy. By Swedish standards, the Social Democratic Party suffered a substantial loss by dropping from 43.2 percent in 1988 to 37.7 percent in 1991 (cf. Table 1), a result which was the worst since the election of 1928. The combined electoral performance of the two socialist parties – the Social Democratic Party and the Leftist Party – was even more disastrous. The two socialist parties had not done so poorly since the election of 1920 (cf. Table 2). But the traditional bourgeois parties – the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Centre Party – did no do as well as might have been expected given the rate of defection from the parties of the left. With an electoral support of 21.9 percent the Conservative Party was in fact alone in improving its position in comparison with 1988, when the party had polled 18.3 percent of the votes.

Table 2. Electoral Results by Party Block, 1920–91 Parliamentary Elections.

Election year	Socialist parties	Bourgeois parties	Other parties
1920	36.1	63.8	0.1
1921	44.0	55.5	0.5
1924	46.2	53.8	0.0
1928	43.4	56.5	0.1
1932	50.0	49.4	0.6
1936	53.6	44.9	1.5
1940	57.3	42.0	0.7
1944	56.8	42.3	0.8
1948	52.4	47.4	0.2
1952	50.3	49.4	0.2
1956	49.6	50.4	0.0
1958	49.6	50.4	0.0
1960	52.3	47.7	0.0
1964	52.5	45.7	1.8
1968	53.1	45.5	1.4
1970	50.1	47.6	2.3
1973	48.9	48.8	2.3
1976	47.5	50.8	1.7
1979	48.8	49.0	2.2
1982	51.2	45.0	3.8
1985	50.1	45.4	4.5
1988	49.0	41.8	9.2
1991	42.6	39.5	17.9

Source: Official election statistics.

With 9.1 percent of the votes, the Liberal Party received its harshest verdict from the Swedish voters since 1982, when the party had polled a meagre 5.9 percent of the votes. In view of the results, it is clear that the Liberals did not stand to gain anything by joining forces with the Conservatives in the campaign leading up to the election; one out of four Liberal voters defected from the Liberal Party between 1988 and 1991. At this point it remains to be seen what the policy implications of this defection will be – a return to social liberalism or a continued pledge to the kind of economic liberalism preached by the Conservative Party.

The Centre Party also failed to break the downward trend on which it had embarked in 1973, polling only 8.5 percent of the electorate in 1991. The Centre Party had lost its credibility as an environmentalist party in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the defence of rural and agrarian interest, in which the party had traditionally engaged, was not enough to mobilize the urban vote.

It would be a mistake to lose sight of the fact that the three established non-socialist parties did win the election. But considering that the bourgeois share of the vote in 1991 was on a par with that of the early 1910s, they

too suffered a defeat of sorts. The Swedish parliamentary election of 1991, in fact, is reminiscent of the Danish electoral debacle of 1973, when two new parties fought their way into the *Folketing* on a wave of popular support.

One of the winners in Sweden in 1991, New Democracy, a recently formed right-wing populist party, polled no less than 6.7 percent of the votes. This party was a product of an elite level coalition between *Bert Karlsson* (a well-known Swedish entrepreneur within the entertainment industry) and *Ian Wachtmeister* (a Swedish aristocrat and successful businessman), both widely known for their critical views on the Swedish political and economic establishment. In the autumn of 1990, the paths of these two gentlemen crossed by chance at Arlanda airport, just outside Stockholm. As might be expected, the conversation focused on politics and the possibility of forming a new political party arose. A preliminary party programme was published shortly afterwards. It met with a favourable response in the opinion polls in the winter of 1990/91. With a potential backing of some 10 percent of the votes, the party formally constituted itself in February 1991, about six months prior to the election.

The new party clearly owes its success to the appeal or charisma of the two party leaders, who in a sense constitute a genuine political odd-couple. While Karlsson stands for down-to-earth populism, Wachtmeister represents an impatient right-wing populism, which puts him close to the Conservative Party, but with the important proviso that he favours a much more rapid transition to a competitive market economy marked by low taxes and a small public sector. This turned out to be a winning team which made it easy for the party to recruit sympathizers from across the entire spectrum of Swedish politics. In the long run, however, New Democracy would seem to be open to the same kind of internal frictions and tensions which have been a characteristic feature of populist movements.

The other electoral winner was the Christian Democratic Union. After almost 30 years in political limbo (the party was founded in 1964), the pearly gates opened for the Christian Democratic Union in 1991, and the party sailed into the *Riksdag* on a wave of unprecedented popular support (7.1 percent), way above the ominous 4 percent threshold. For a party, which had hovered around the 2 percent level for decades (2.9 percent in 1988), this was a remarkable breakthrough. It testifies to the successful reorientation of party strategy which dates back to 1985 when the Christian Democrats overcame their long-standing reluctance to take a position on the dominant left/right cleavage in Swedish politics and formed an electoral alliance with the Centre Party.

The electoral alliance itself was an isolated event, but it helped increase the visibility of the party and it made it adamantly clear that the Christian Democratic Union was a party of the right. The commitment to bourgeois

values and bourgeois party cooperation was reconfirmed on numerous occasions in 1991, by which time yet another problem had been disposed of. By virtue of the surprise breakthrough of the Environmentalist Party in the 1988 election, the 4 percent clause had lost its potential as a deterrent to potential voters, and the notion that a vote for the Christian Democrats might be a wasted vote disappeared almost entirely from the debate prior to the election. The strong electoral performance of the Christian Democrats in 1991 may also be attributed to the emphasis on ethics and morals in the party propaganda which was well received by all those who were concerned about the political 'scandals' and 'affairs' that characterized the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Campaign

When the ruling Social Democratic Party submitted Sweden's application for membership in the European Community in the summer of 1991, it had undergone a profound transformation. As late as 1985, the party had cast itself as an exponent of an expanding public sector. In the years which followed, however, the emphasis shifted to reforming the public sector, which required more than marginal and cosmetic changes. The Social Democrats were, of course, no strangers to radical reforms, including the evaluation of social programmes and restructuring of the bureaucracy. Yet the EC and its implications for Sweden has to a remarkable degree superseded previously frequent references to the welfare state in Social Democratic rhetoric.

Against this background, the electoral defeat of the Social Democrats did not come as a big surprise. Opinion pollsters had predicted as much over the last two years prior to the election. Ever since the mid-1980s, the party had found itself in a kind of 'ideological vacuum', where policies and decision-making were not constrained by party programmes, party platforms or congress resolutions. Currency regulations were abolished, Sweden joined into European monetary cooperation and applied for full membership in the European Community. The list of deviations from the previous party line is not exhaustive, but long enough to suggest that there were members and sympathizers who did not feel at ease within the party any more. Hence, when running for re-election in September 1991, the Social Democratic government could not opt for a strategy of clear demarcation vis-à-vis the bourgeois parties. The emphasis was rather on strong, capable and component government by the Social Democratic Party.

The Leftist Party also fought an uphill battle in the wake of the dramatic events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1990/91. The reference to communism was removed from the party label by the party congress in

May 1990, and partly in response to this the party found itself under a constant barrage throughout the entire election campaign. Was it a communist party or was it not? The lack of a clear answer to this question certainly did not help the party's electoral fortunes.

The Conservative and Liberal Parties campaigned on a common platform – 'A New Start for Sweden' – which set out to explain what was to be done to bring Sweden out of the recession that was beginning to make its impact felt in early 1990. The emphasis of this platform was on deregulation, privatization and tax reductions, primarily for small-scale entrepreneurs. The Centre Party, which had not been invited to take part in the negotiations about the non-socialist platform, also expressed interest in participating in a three-, and possibly four-party bourgeois coalition government on the condition that vital, but loosely specified, Centre Party demands be met. During the campaign the Centre Party made most frequent reference to the vital importance of environmental protection.

As for the Christian Democratic Union, it did not want to jeopardize its favourable standing in the opinion polls by taking a strong stand against abortion or for religious instruction within the public school system. Rather it marketed itself as a solidly bourgeois party with a general commitment to Christian values and ethics, a strategy which was successfully pursued.

New Democracy, by comparison, campaigned on a platform consisting of the most diverse slogans. The party came out against the state-controlled liquor monopoly, it called for a stop to immigration into Sweden and for the immediate privatization of almost the entire public sector, and it repeatedly stressed that it must be more fun to live in Sweden. The public meetings and rallies, which were organized by the party, in fact drew large crowds. But it is a moot question what attracted the audience the most – the political gospel or the well-orchestrated shows.

Party Change

Electoral fluctuations were large and their direction did not always comply with conventional wisdom. The Social Democratic Party lost 10 percent of its previous voters to non-voting (cf. Table 3). In addition, well over 5 percent of the Social Democrats from 1988 opted for one of the new parties – roughly 3 percent for New Democracy and 2 percent for the Christian Democratic Union. The latter parties also recruited a large number of their sympathizers from among those who were non-voters in 1988. Of these previous non-voters, 5.2 percent came out in favour of the Christian Democrats and 12.1 percent voted for New Democracy respectively. The flow of votes from the Environmentalist Party to New Democracy (7.2%) might at first sight seem especially counterintuitive, but

Table 3. The Inter-Party Change of Voters, 1988-91 (Horizontal Percentages)*.

1988 Vote	1991 Vote										
	Soc. Dem.	Cons.	People's Party	Centre	Chr. Dem. Union	New Dem.	Left. Party	Environ. Party	Others	Non-Voters	Total
Soc. Democrats	81.0	0.9	0.5	0.8	2.4	2.8	0.9	0.2	0.6	9.9	100
Conservative	0.4	83.8	3.0	0.1	3.3	4.8	0.1	1.1	0.5	2.9	100
People's Party	0.6	24.9	57.4	0.1	4.6	6.5	0.2	2.2	0.4	3.1	100
Centre	4.3	0.9	0.2	63.9	8.3	8.6	0.0	0.4	0.7	6.8	100
Christian Dem. Union	1.0	1.1	0.5	0.7	90.4	1.5	0.1	0.3	0.2	4.3	100
Leftist Party	9.2	3.5	2.1	0.0	0.8	1.6	63.9	2.7	2.1	14.1	100
Environmental Party	1.4	19.6	11.9	0.4	5.9	7.8	1.0	38.5	1.1	12.4	100
Others	5.6	18.0	7.6	0.1	3.8	7.0	3.3	4.9	5.0	44.8	100
Non-voters	7.1	7.2	2.4	0.8	5.2	12.1	1.4	2.2	2.7	59.6	100
Total	31.9	18.3	7.7	7.2	6.0	5.6	3.8	2.8	1.0	15.6	100

* This transition matrix was generated with the aid of Sören Risbjerg Thomsen's method of ecological inference. The method is presented in Thomsen (1987). See also Thomsen et al. (1990). Empirical materials for the table are based on election results in 284 local municipalities (cf. VALU 91, Swedish Television's electoral study).

it makes good sense considering the increasingly pronounced left-wing orientation of the Environmentalist Party leadership. This factor paved the way for defections to the right, including the Conservative Party, which also gained heavily among former Liberal Party voters.

Conclusions

The durable Swedish five-party system is now definitely dead and gone. The 1991 parliamentary election was a *protest election* which favoured the parties of the right, and for the established political parties, with the exception of the Conservative Party, it was a genuine debacle. The category 'other parties', including the Christian Democratic Union, New Democracy and some minor parties, went up from 9.2 percent in 1988 to 17.9 percent in 1991. The Conservative Party was the only established political party to gain ground (3 percent between 1988 and 1991), and the two new arrivals in parliament – the Christian Democratic Union and New Democracy – were unmistakably bourgeois. The political protest also had another aspect to it. Some 13 percent of the voters did not turn out, while 1.2 percent handed in empty ballots and 1.2 percent voted for small local protest parties. With the votes for New Democracy and the Christian Democratic Union, the protest vote amounted to well over 25 percent. One voter out of four failed to support the established five-party system.

It is quite possible that the four-party bourgeois coalition government that was sworn in a few weeks after the election may prove as prone to internal tensions and conflicts as the bourgeois coalitions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s. The Liberal and Centre Parties lost heavily at the polls and may be tempted to break out of the coalition on some vote-winning issue. The future of the Centre Party, which has failed to carve out an ideological niche for itself in Swedish politics, is particularly uncertain given the increasing volatility of the Swedish electorate. The party's bid for the environmentalist vote did not meet with success, and its attempts at creating a platform for itself as the representative of the poor and underprivileged are not entirely credible. The Centre Party runs the risk of turning into a minor protest party with some well-defined rural strongholds.

The Liberal Party also finds itself in a somewhat awkward position. The united front between the Liberals and Conservatives in the electoral campaign benefited the Conservatives, but not the Liberals. By joining forces with the Conservatives, the Liberals may well have cast aside one of the party's few assets in Swedish politics over time – the coveted position in the middle of the political spectrum. Which party, if any, will be able to lay claim to the void created remains to be seen.

The present government does not have a parliamentary majority in its

own right. It is dependent on the benevolence of New Democracy in the sense that its proposals will fail should New Democracy decide to join forces with the Social Democratic and Leftist Parties. This kind of unorthodox voting coalition has already inflicted some damage on the four-party coalition government. In the final analysis, however, a strongly anti-socialist party like New Democracy is not likely to help the socialists overthrow a bourgeois government, so the most likely source of coalition collapse is to be found within the government itself.

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