

The Swedish Parliamentary Election of September 1994

Ingemar Wörlund, Mid-Sweden University, Östersund

Background

According to the opinion polls, eight parties were realistic contenders for the 349 seats in the Swedish Riksdag open for competition in last year's parliamentary election. According to the same opinion polls, four of these parties – the Centre, Liberal, Christian Democratic and New Democracy Parties – were dangerously close to the 4 percent threshold required for parliamentary representation in Sweden; and the election night was not without excitement. New Democracy was wiped out of parliament. With 4.1 percent of the valid votes cast, the Christian Democrats made it but by the skin of their teeth. The Social Democratic Party was returned to power after three years in opposition – and with a vengeance. The electoral *débâcle* of 1991 was transformed into an undisputable electoral success. With an electoral support of 6.2 percent, the Leftist Party (the reformed Communist Party) also did extremely well, only marginally below the 1948 all-time high of 6.3 percent. The Green Party was returned to parliamentary politics after three barren years of extra parliamentary opposition. The losers were the centrist parties of the Conservative-led four-leaf clover government of Prime Minister Carl Bildt – the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the Centre Party. But with a slightly expanding electoral base, the Conservatives came out of the election relatively unscathed.

The Outcome

The parties of the left were the unquestionable winners of the election. With an electoral support of 45.3 percent in 1994, the Social Democrats had improved considerably the historically poor results of 1991 when they

Table 1. Results of the Swedish Elections of 1991 and 1994 (Changes Within Parentheses).

Party	% 1991	% 1994	Change	1991	1994	Change
Social Democrats	37.7	45.3	(+ 7.6)	138	162	(+ 24)
Conservative Party	21.9	22.4	(+ 0.5)	80	80	(0)
Liberal Party	9.1	7.2	(- 1.9)	33	25	(- 8)
Centre Party	8.5	7.7	(- 0.8)	31	26	(- 5)
Christian Democratic Union	7.1	4.1	(- 3.0)	26	15	(- 11)
New Democracy	6.7	1.2	(- 5.5)	25	-	(- 25)
Leftist Party (Communists)	4.5	6.2	(+ 1.7)	16	22	(+ 6)
Green Party (Environmentalists)	3.4	5.0	(+ 1.6)	-	18	(+ 18)
Others	1.0	1.0	(0)	-	-	(0)
Total	100	100		349	349	
Voter turnout	86.7%	86.0%				
Female representatives	N			117	141	
	%			34	41	

had obtained a meagre 37.7 percent of the votes (see Table 1). This marked a return to party strength relations which had been perceived as normal in the heyday of Swedish Social Democracy. The Social Democratic Party once again found itself well above the “magic” 40 percent level, and the fears that the party would forever be reduced to a party of lesser magnitude and significance abated almost as soon as they had been voiced by leading party strategists. Similar comments apply to the soul-searching within the party in the wake of the electoral *débâcle* back in 1991. It went on for a while, but gradually faded out as the deepening recession and the unparalleled unemployment rate pushed the popularity rating of the Social Democratic Party closer and closer towards the 50 percent mark.

At the outset, the Leftist Party did not seem to have much of a future in Swedish politics. It remains a reformed communist party, adversely affected by the breakdown of “real socialism” in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; and the opinion polls predicted that it would lose its parliamentary representation more often than not. In that light, the party leaders opted for what turned out to be a winning strategy by calling upon a broad coalition of voters in the public sector to rally against the cutback policies and market reforms of the bourgeois government. But the favourable outcome – 6.2 percent in 1994 as against 4.5 percent in 1991 – may also be attributed to what is facetiously known as Comrade 4 percent in Sweden, that is to strategic voting among left-wing Social Democratic sympathizers keen on preserving an old and basically faithful ally, and perhaps also to the uncompromising stand of the Leftist Party *against* the European Union.

After three years outside the *Riksdag*, the Greens managed to stage a

comeback, albeit a slightly less convincing comeback than its initial success back in 1988. The strong and long-standing commitment of this party *against* the European Union made it into a serious contender for votes from across the entire political spectrum; and contrary to 1991 it now had the added advantage of having a professional and credible party organization. The early and timely pledge by the Greens in favour of a Social Democratic prime minister was probably also decisive in securing a parliamentary platform for the Swedish environmentalists. It defined the Green Party as a party of the left which marked a deviation from the previous official policy of describing the party as disconnected from the left-right cleavage in Swedish politics.

As already mentioned, the three centrist parties bore the brunt of the discontent and disillusionment with Carl Bildt's Conservative coalition government that had built up over the past few years. The small Christian Democratic Party was at a particular disadvantage. It entered the bourgeois coalition without previous experience of parliamentary and governmental politics but determined "not to rock the boat". The party successfully promoted some of its most deeply felt issues, including the introduction of child-care support for parents at home with small children (age 1–3 years) and an official declaration that made Christianity into the foundation of primary education in Sweden (grades 1–9) in Sweden. But the net result was a low profile which almost wiped out the party from the parliamentary arena and definitely spelled electoral defeat (from 7.1 percent in 1991 to 4.1 percent in 1994). The upcoming referendum on membership in the European Union left the party deeply divided. The unconditional commitment to the European Union by the party leaders failed to convince a slight majority of the party members, which is likely to have short-term as well as long-term repercussions. The European elections of September 1995 may prove somewhat problematic for the Christians Democrats; and – if at all represented in the European parliament – it is very much a moot point what the Swedish Christian Democrats will stand for.

On a downward trend ever since 1985, the Liberal Party obtained 7.2 percent in 1994, less than half of the electoral strength it had gained some ten years earlier. After three years of bourgeois rule, the unemployment level had reached record highs; and party leader, Bengt Westerberg, felt compelled to live up to his pre-election pledge of resigning in the event of yet another defeat at the polls. This paved the way for a political reorientation, but the basic dilemma – the difficult choice between the kind of market liberalism, also professed by the Conservative Party, and the kind of social liberalism, traditionally associated with the Liberal Party – remained unresolved.

The Centre Party is in a sense returning to its roots of an Agrarian Party. The success story of the 1970s, when the party rallied one-quarter of the

electorate under the banner of an anti-nuclear and green society, is long gone. With the exception of a slight pick-up in 1988, the Centre Party has been on a losing track ever since 1976 and polled a meagre 7.7 percent of the votes in 1994. The party faces at least two major problems. It does not have an ideology in the traditional sense of that term and it is strongly plagued by fractionalization. One of the two major fractions draws support from the farming community and its interest organizations such as the LRF (read: the Agrarian National Federation). The other major fraction has a distinct environmentalist streak to it and has an organizational base within the party youth organization. The projected road link between Sweden and Denmark across the Strait of Öresund and the upcoming referendum on the European Union – which surfaced on the political agenda shortly before the election – made the rift within the party readily apparent. Party leader Olof Johansson resigned from the office as Minister of Environmental Affairs three months prior to the election, when the government was due to take the final decision on the road link to Denmark, and deliberately opted for a low profile on the Europe Union in order to avoid an open conflict between the farmers, who were strongly in favour of the European Union, and the environmentalists, who were strongly against.

The Conservative Party was the dominant party of the four-party government coalition of 1991–94. With an electoral support twice that of its three coalition partners – the Centre Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats – the Conservative Party was in a position to take over the ministries of particular relevance to the Conservative Party platform – defence, foreign affairs, industry, justice and education – and to implement its policies with a fair measure of success but at the expense of the visibility of its coalition partners. The party was unflinching in its defence and implementation of in-market liberalism, i.e. in promoting what was referred to as a system change. State-owned companies were privatized; law and order were emphasized and the public sector, including the universities and colleges, was exposed to reforms designed to introduce market thinking. This was a strategy that paid off at the polls. In terms of electoral strength, it was a minor success (from 21.9 percent in 1991 to 22.4 percent in 1994), but a remarkable success for a leading government party in the midst of a deep economic recession. It also serves to highlight what may be described as the dilemma of the Swedish Conservative Party: whether or not to score points and gain votes at the expense of its potential coalition partners, whose survival and success are crucial to the party's prospects of regaining power within the foreseeable future.

With only 1.2 percent of the votes cast, New Democracy was wiped out of the *Riksdag*. The finale of its three-year term as a parliamentary party was marked by at least as much turbulence as its rise to fame three years earlier. In the beginning of February 1994 the party leader, Ian

Wachtmeister, had announced that he would not run for re-election at the upcoming party conference in April. The open conflicts about whom ought to succeed him as party leader and about the control of the rather substantial party funds threw the party into a state of anarchy that resulted in a veritable exodus of party members. New Democracy thus shared the fate of most populist parties and broke up into a number of competing versions.

The election campaign turned into a rather uneventful affair. The convincing lead of the Social Democrats in the opinion polls until a few weeks prior to election day made them into the primary target of the attacks by the parties of the ruling bourgeois coalition government, but there were no attempts by the government parties to present a common platform for the next few years. The campaign was dominated by three issues: the growing national debt, the budgetary deficit and the unemployment rate.

The Social Democrats emphasized the need for a successful struggle against unemployment which was depicted as a prerequisite for curbing the budgetary deficit and reducing the skyrocketing national indebtedness, but this was not enough. The voters were also advised that some social cutbacks might be necessary in order for the Social Democratic government to reach its economic objectives. Membership in the European Union played a similar role in the Social Democratic campaign rhetoric.

The bourgeois parties argued that the cutback policies had to be continued in order to trim down the size of the public sector, particularly the transfer systems. Tax hikes were ruled out; and small-scale private enterprise was hailed as the solution to the unemployment problem.

The Liberal Party adopted a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards bourgeois cooperation. On the one hand, it tried to present a united front with its bourgeois coalition partners; and, on the other hand, it held the door ajar for a coalition with the Social Democrats. New Democracy – which was fighting an uphill battle against the rapid disintegration of the party from within during the spring and summer of 1994 – sought to regain the initiative by campaigning on an anti-immigration platform.

The key question of 1994 – whether or not to join the European Union – had been effectively disarmed and temporarily removed from the agenda by the political parties, when they decided to hold the consultative referendum on this issue two months after the election. The Leftist and Green Parties – which were strongly *against* membership in the European Union – tried to raise this issue during the election campaign, but with limited success.

Conclusions

Social Democracy was returned to power after three years in opposition.

The electoral *débâcle* of 1991, when the Social Democratic Party polled a meagre 37.7 percent, was followed by one of the best election results (45.3 percent) ever in the entire post-war era. With 6.2 percent of the valid votes cast, the Leftist Party performed better than ever since 1948. The 5 percent polled by the Green Party – which returned to the *Riksdag* after three years of extra parliamentary opposition – was in a sense part and parcel of the left-wing victory. The Greens not only supported Ingvar Carlsson, the Social Democratic Party leader, for prime minister, but they were also in basic agreement with the traditional parties of the left on the overall thrust of distribution policy.

The left-wing tide had a strongly negative impact on all bourgeois parties with the exception of the Conservative Party. The defeat of the bourgeois government may be attributed to the deep recession and all which that entails in terms of rising unemployment, budgetary deficits and government indebtedness.

The Social Democratic government is a minority government, but a relatively strong minority government in the sense that it would take the concerted action of all the other six parties in the *Riksdag* to pull through a successful vote of no confidence. This kind of coalition does not seem to have a very high probability attached to it; and the Social Democrats are thus likely to remain in power through the duration of the current four-year term. Government by shifting majorities is not an entirely new phenomenon in Swedish politics.

The referendum on the European Union was held on 13 November 1994. With 52.3 percent in favour and 46.8 percent against, it produced a relatively clear-cut result. The pro-EU vote enjoyed the support of the entire political establishment, the mass media and industry. The victory of the pro-EU forces can perhaps be attributed to a great deal of concern about the economy, the level of indebtedness, the unemployment and the interest rates among the voters at large as well as to the skilful tactics of a Social Democratic prime minister, who chose *not* to involve his own party organization – which would have been a somewhat reluctant and unwilling instrument – in the campaign for membership in the European Union and who did *not* exclude well-known opponents of the European Union from his essentially pro-European cabinet.

This did not prevent the ruling party from literally splitting down the middle on Election Day. Some 50 percent of the Social Democratic voters came out in favour of the European Union and some 50 percent against. The EU referendum divided the party in more ways than one. Blue-collar workers were more inclined than white-collar workers to vote for the European Union. Northern Sweden was predominantly (70 percent) against membership, whereas the urban areas of southern Sweden were strongly in favour. The decision *not* to involve the party organization in the campaign

was probably wise in view of the tensions within the party. But it is still an open question what repercussions – if any – the open split will have on party members as well as voters. Similar comments apply to the Centre and Christian Democratic Parties which are also split down the middle on the European issue.