

The 2014 Elections in Sweden – A New Political Landscape?

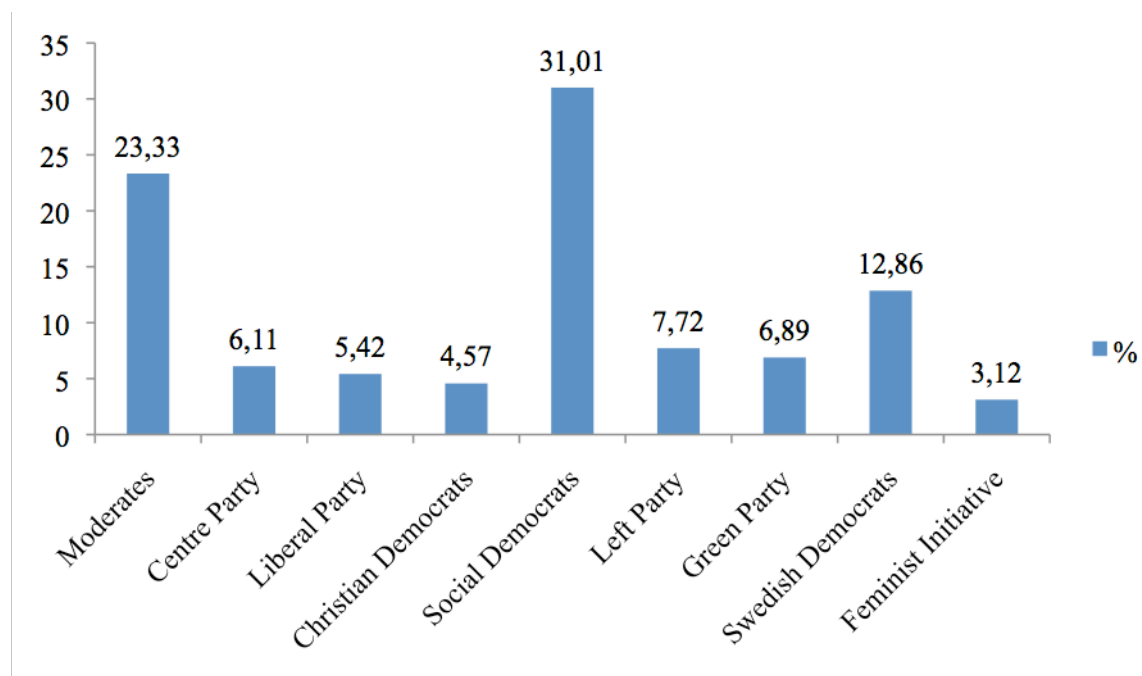
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Introduction

On Sunday 14 September 2014 the Swedish electorate went to the polls in at least three separate elections. There were elections to the national parliament, the Riksdag, county council assemblies, and municipal assemblies. The analysis below is not exhaustive, as too many issues have been raised by the elections to do justice to here. Instead, the briefing reports on some of the main public debates since the elections.

The result of the national election is a new minority coalition government between the Social Democrats (S) and the Green Party (GP), led by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (S).

National Election Result (2014)

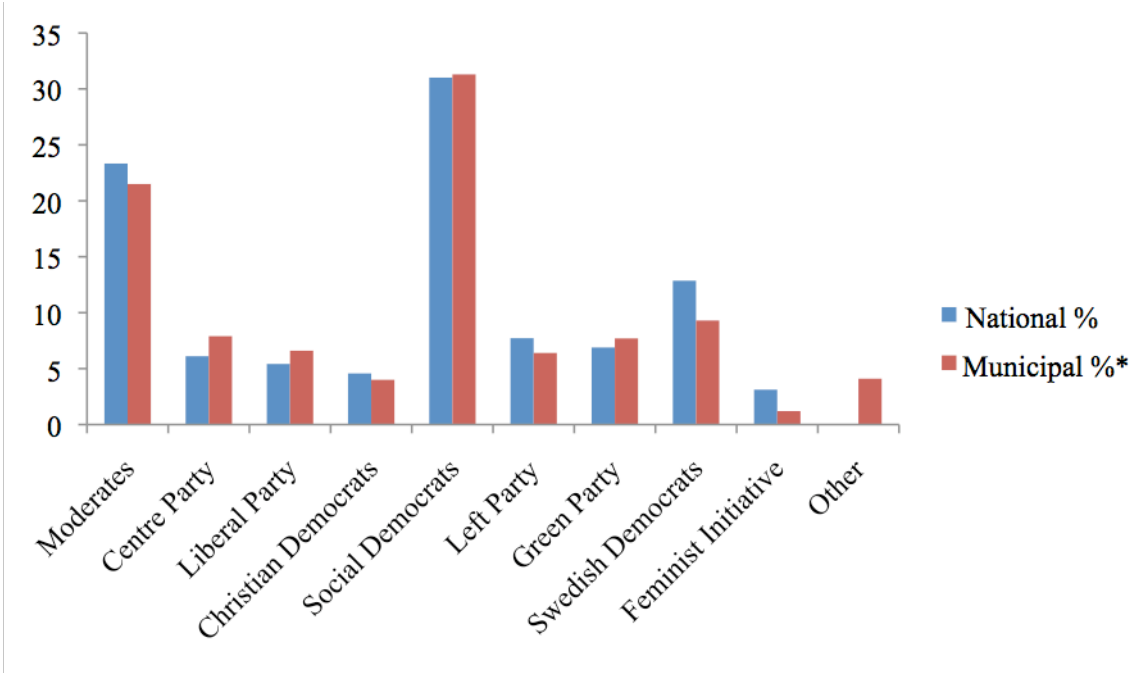


The biggest loser was the Moderate Party, losing 6.74 per cent of the vote compared to the elections in 2010. The biggest winner was the Swedish Democrats, increasing their share of the vote with 7.16 per cent and as a result becoming the third biggest political party in the national parliament.

There is discussion around a new political landscape in Sweden. This new political landscape is a divided Sweden, where cleavages go along axes other than the traditional right-left cleavage, such as a clear divide between centre-periphery, north-south, and ‘us 87% and them 13%’. The centre-periphery and north-south divide becomes clearer when one examines the municipal election results. However before turning to the municipal election result the ‘87 vs. 13’ division within the electorate needs to be addressed. This cleavage has its origin in the fact that the Swedish Democrats became the third largest political party in the Swedish

parliament. It is the Swedish Democrats’ policy regarding immigration and the party’s history which alienates not only the vast majority of the electorate but also the other seven political parties in the national parliament. The political parties have openly declared that they will not work with the Swedish Democrats.¹

Comparing the National Election Results with the Municipal Election Result



* The municipal election result is treated as one election and not 290 separate ballots.

What one can discern that there are slight variations for the political parties. Of particular interest are the election results of the Swedish Democrats, Feminist Initiative and ‘Other’. The Swedish Democrats received votes in every municipality (a difference, comparing the 2010 and 2014 elections), even if there is a north-south divide here: the lowest number of votes the party received was in Dorotea (13 votes, 0.7 per cent) in the north of Sweden, and the highest number of votes was 23.89 per cent of the electorate in Örkeljunga in the south of Sweden. Feminist Initiative seems to be concentrated more in the larger cities (Stockholm 4.64 per cent, Gothenburg 3.96 per cent, Umeå 3.9 per cent, and Lund 3.62 per cent) and in Simrishamn (8.89 per cent), which can perhaps be attributed to its being the hometown of Gudrun Schyman, one of the spokespeople for the party. The party was also successful in Gullspång, receiving 4.54 per cent of the votes. Feminist Initiative is now represented by 27

¹ As focus in this short paper should be on the election results this discussion will not be further explored here, however please see *We need to stop marginalising the Swedish Democrats and start shedding more light on the party’s policies.*

municipal politicians in 13 municipalities², in addition to their seat gained in the European Parliamentary elections earlier this year. The party is optimistic that this will provide a good platform for future elections.

It is more common today that there are local lists represented in municipal election.³ The election authority reports these local lists or local political parties as ‘other’, however they receive a large share of the vote in some municipalities. One such example is Åselepartiet (Åsele Party)⁴, which received 51.88 per cent of the votes by the electorate and will consequently ‘run’ the municipality for the forthcoming period. The second largest such local political party is Dorotea kommunlista (Dorotea municipal/local list)⁵, which received 39.02 per cent of the electorate’s votes. A difference between municipal elections and other levels of the Swedish political system, and indeed to the European Parliamentary election, is that the electorate actively take part and make a choice on whom to cast their vote for in the conviction that the person (or political party) chosen is the best candidate for the job. The candidates may then represent different political parties (since the 1970s there has been an increase in split ticket voting, by around 25 per cent)⁶.

The ‘traditional’ political parties are still receiving large shares of the electorate in some municipalities. The Social Democratic Party is the only political party, apart from Åselepartiet above, to receive over 50 per cent of the vote in 10 municipalities.⁷ The Left Party received 41.91 per cent of the vote in Degerfors, however in Fagersta their vote decreased 26.17 percentage points to 29.46, which resulted in the Left Party losing their majority in the municipality. The Moderates’ stronghold in this year’s election is Vellinge in the south of Sweden; here the party received 48.06 per cent of the vote. The Christian Democrats received 44.94 per cent in Markaryd. The Centre Party polled the most number of votes (percentage wise) in Mönsterås, receiving 40.72 per cent of the vote. The Liberal Party received 29.87 per cent in Skinnskatteberg, whereas the Green Party polled highest in Stockholm City with 14.32 per cent. This results in the outcome that in most municipalities there are different coalitions in charge of local politics. Some of these coalitions are along the traditional block politics (right to left), however there are also local political parties that are part of the coalitions, and there also several grand coalitions where politicians and political parties work across the traditional cleavage of left and right. This is also found in the county councils, however at the

² Feminist Initiative received votes in all municipalities in Sweden (290 in total) apart from Bjurholm, Hultsfred, Jokkmokk, Norsjö, Ragunda, Strömsund, Åsele, and Överkalix.

³ See for example Åberg & Ahlberger (2014)

⁴ For more information about the Åsele Party please see Åberg (2014) or the party’s website <http://aselepartiet.weebly.com/>.

⁵ For more about Dorotea kommunlista please visit their website <http://doroteakommunlista.se/>.

⁶ Berg & Ekengren Oscarsson (2013)

⁷ Munkfors 57.46%, Robertsfors 52.29%, Boxholm 51.96%, Norsjö 51.46%, Skellefteå 51.35%, Olofström 51.32%, Ragunda 51.12%, Grums 50.96%, Ånge 50.82%, and Hagfors 50.60%.

time of writing these negotiations are still on-going and as such must be the focus of a different paper. This would be of particular interest, as some of the county councils concerned will become regions on the 1 January 2015.

Some Reflections

In his first inaugural speech as Prime Minister Stefan Löfven stated:

... In this difficult parliamentary situation we [the Swedish government] find ourselves in need to find a way forward for Sweden.

Now we need to seek what unites us rather than what draws us apart.

Now we need to put what is best for Sweden before tactics and prestige. Now we need to unite in a will to take responsibility for our country. The government will take its full share of this responsibility. We intend to be a collaborative government working for the whole of Sweden.⁸

This brings us back to the discussion about a divided Sweden, along the cleavages of traditional bloc politics, centre-periphery, and north-south. In only a few municipalities is there a majority consisting of a single party, and the regional and national governments are all coalitions. These coalitions contain political parties which one cannot easily place along the left-right axis of politics. The Green Party is such a political party. There are also coalitions over the traditional left-right spectrum of politics. Future election results will tell if Sweden is moving further away from the left-right spectrum of politics. It is only the future that also can answer if Sweden will overcome the divide between centre-periphery (urban-rural) and north-south.

A strong sense that 'Stockholm' is not representing citizens' real views helps account for the rise of groups that go beyond the traditional groupings on both right and left, such as the Swedish Democrats and Feminist Initiative in the elections. The 'reality' in the bigger cities where there are job opportunities and where choices can be made (within education, health care, child care and elderly care to give just some examples) is not the same 'reality' as that in many small to medium sized municipalities, where there may be a dependency on one or two major employers and where the 'users' of public services are too few in number to be able to sustain a wide range of choices. The Swedish Democrats have perhaps been describing the reality the voters in many rural places and smaller municipalities can identify themselves with, whereas in the larger cities, where the Green Party and Feminist Initiative have done better, the 'realities' of peoples' lives are less affected by unmet material needs. As a result the voters can focus upon issues such as the environment and sustainable living and equality

⁸ ... Det som nu ankommer oss är att i ett svårt parlamentariskt läge finna en väg framåt för Sverige.

Nu behöver vi söka det som förenar snarare än det som drar isär.

Nu behöver vi sätta Sveriges bästa framför taktik och prestige.

Nu behöver vi enas i viljan till ansvar för vårt land. Regeringen kommer att ta sin fulla del av ansvaret. Vi tänker vara en samarbetsregering för hela Sverige (Regeringsförklaring 2014)

issues to a larger extent. In smaller municipalities the issues may be around where a school should be located, if the school is to be kept open, or access to welfare services more in general, and as such one can see the more traditional political cleavage along left-right and smaller support for political parties such as the Green Party and Feminist Initiative.

However, I would like this brief election analysis to end on a very positive note. This is that even though one can discern tendencies towards a more divided Sweden, politics is still considered important by citizens. In this year's national election the voter turnout increased, by 1.18 per cent to 85.81 per cent, that is an increase of 206,781 people casting their vote.

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