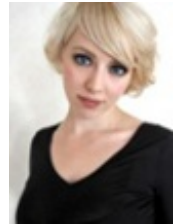


To gain the support of the young, and keep the support of the old, Sweden's social democrat leader Stefan Löfven must tread carefully between reassuring the electorate and engaging with controversial issues.

In Sweden, new social democrat leader Stefan Löfven has steadied the ship and reassured older voters. [Katrine Kielos](#) argues that he now needs to stem the flow of younger voters turning their backs on the party.



Swedish politics has gone through a remarkable change in the last couple of months. Stefan Löfven became leader of the social democratic party in March and since then the headlines about chaotic infighting and disaster have almost completely disappeared.

At the same time prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and his “progressive conservatism” project has stalled. His tax cuts and supply side reforms have given the middle classes more money to spend but have not proved successful in getting unemployment down. Reinfeldt is increasingly being perceived as a man without ideas or visions. “I don’t believe in visions – they cost money” he has stated. That doesn’t sound like the man who radically modernised his party and made history by becoming the first Swedish centre-right leader to win two elections in a row. Despite his failure to deliver on employment, Reinfeldt’s success in the last two years has rested on two things: his image as a man of the people and his commitment to strong public finances. Both of these have however become more difficult lately.

With Stefan Löfven, an orphan and former steel worker, as the new leader of the social democratic party Reinfeldt can no longer claim that he’s the one who best understands ordinary people. Equally, the new social democratic shadow finance minister, Magdalena Andersson, has – unlike both Reinfeldt and his finance minister Anders Borg – real experience of consolidating the Swedish public finances from her time as a government advisor during the financial crash of the mid-nineties.

Overall the social democrats have got their act together. Nobody wants to go through the disorder of the now resigned Håkan Juholt’s brief time as leader again. It was scary enough when it happened. Everyone is on their best and most loyal behavior. The experience of how fast even the most successful electoral machine can deteriorate has given Löfven an extraordinary mandate. However nobody yet knows how he’ll use it.

Politics is sometimes more about avoiding mistakes than about doing things right, and for now this seems to be Löfven’s strategy. Reassurance, reassurance, reassurance. After the policy u-turns under the leadership of the charismatic Juholt the calm Löfven assuring the public that the social democrats can be trusted again is indeed what many people have longed for.

Löfven is not taking any position that may upset anyone – indeed he’s not taking many positions at all. This might work for now however he won’t be able to ignore the deeper structural problems of the party. The next Swedish election will take place in 2014. The first time voters in 2014 will have been born in 1996. They weren’t even conceived the last time (1994) the social democrats went from opposition to winning an election against a centre-right government.

On New Year’s Day that year there were an estimated 623 websites. In total. On the whole internet. It was a completely different world. But Swedish social democracy like many other parties of the centre-left still draws most of its energy from this world of the mid-nineties. The conflicts of these years whether they were about privatisation, the EU, or what was in many countries known as “the third way” is still what the party navigates its internal life and debate around. Most voters have however moved on. Especially those who weren’t even born then.

The fact that Löfven is doing well in the polls is mainly due to voters over the age of 55. He's got a real problem with young people in urban areas – a trend that has been going on for years. Winning these groups back with a defensive strategy of reassurance won't be possible. In many ways the issues that attract young Swedish people to politics: foreign policy, feminism and climate change are by their nature controversial. Stopping the young from leaving for the green party and at the same time reassuring older voters that the social democrats are a viable alternative is a paradox that Löfven will have to navigate. Not ignore.

Politics is not only about playing it safe, but also about knowing when not to.

This article is a contribution to [State of the Left](#) - Policy Network's monthly insight bulletin that reports from across the world of social democratic politics.

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