

The 2014 Swedish election will result in a change of government, but not in a substantive change of policy

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The Social Democrats have traditionally dominated politics in Sweden. However, since 2006 a major shift occurred in the Swedish party system which culminated in a centre-right alliance led by the Moderate Party coming to power. [Niklas Bolin](#) writes that while the centre-right alliance won an unprecedented second term in the 2010 parliamentary elections, their chances of repeating this success in the 2014 elections in September look remote, with two of the alliance's members currently sitting below the four per cent electoral threshold in the polls. He notes however that even if a change of government occurs it is unlikely to lead to substantive policy change due to a strong policy consensus between the country's mainstream parties.



In the upcoming Swedish election in September 2014, the incumbent centre-right government, led by the Moderate Party, will face challenges from both the centre-left and the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats. On the face of it, there is little to suggest that the government will succeed in winning yet another term. Very few Swedish governments have succeeded in staying in power more than two consecutive electoral periods and the centre-right has, to this point, never accomplished that. Moreover, on top of the fact that the parties in government have done poorly in recent opinion polls, it seems unlikely that Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt will hold on to power.

However, several factors may make the outcome less certain than what these facts might suggest. While the governing parties are lagging behind in the opinion polls, their main opponent, the Social Democrats, is also struggling. At the same time, although the opposition parties taken together will most likely end up with a majority of seats in the *Riksdag* (the Swedish Parliament), it is by no means certain that they will succeed in forming a majority government.

Background

Historically, Sweden has been a Social Democratic stronghold. In the post-war period up until 2006, the party was only in opposition for nine years in total. In order to address past problems of internal strife, the centre-right parties managed to strike a [pre-electoral coalition deal](#) before the 2006 parliamentary election. The deal was not only instrumental in providing them with credibility as an alternative to a single-party Social Democratic government – it also marked a major turning point in Swedish politics.

Whereas before government formation had predominantly been a post-election activity, the formation of the centre-right *Alliance for Sweden* set the tone for the next election in 2010. With the Social Democrats no longer being able to count on winning between 40 and 50 per cent of the votes, as they had repeatedly done in the past, they found it difficult to resist the call for a more openly declared strategy for winning a parliamentary majority. Faced with this imperative, the party first teamed up with the Green Party, leaving the Left Party, its long-time parliamentary support party, aside.

However, after vocal protests from within the labour movement, the party leadership had to back down on its plan.



While the re-inclusion of the Left Party silenced some of the opponents from the left-wing of the Social Democrats, the authority of its leadership was seriously [undermined](#). These events also were the start of a shift in the opinion polls. Despite being in a comfortable lead in the polls with more than 20 per cent in 2008, the centre-left ended up with its second consecutive electoral loss in 2010. Although the Moderate Party won over 30 per cent of the votes and thereby almost equalled the result of the Social Democrats, the parliamentary entrance of the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats prevented the Alliance from winning a majority. As a result, Sweden has been ruled by a centre-right minority coalition since 2010.

The current situation

While an important lesson from the 2010 election is that opinion polls between elections are inexact forecasts of upcoming elections, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the parties of the Alliance, a little more than six months ahead of the election, once again find themselves in an unfavourable situation. As shown in Table 1, by comparison with the 2010 electoral results, all four Alliance parties have lower levels of support today. While the Moderates are down to less than 25 per cent, perhaps more importantly, both the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats find themselves below the required parliamentary threshold of four per cent.

While chances for a parliamentary majority are poor for the Alliance parties, they will become non-existent if one of them fails to reach the parliamentary threshold. In a number of previous elections, both the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats have been helped by tactical voting from Moderate Party voters. However, with the two parties in desperate need of these votes, the Alliance may suffer from the fact that campaigning will be as much about winning votes from each other as from the opposition.

Table 1: Voting intention for 2014 Swedish Riksdag election and vote share in the 2010 election

<i>Party</i>	<i>Voting intention for 2014 election (%)</i>	<i>Vote share in 2010 election (%)</i>
Social Democrats	34.0	30.7
Moderate Party	24.6	30.1
Green Party	9.7	7.3
Sweden Democrats	9.0	5.7
Left Party	8.3	5.6
Liberal Party	5.6	7.1
Christian Democrats	3.7	5.6
Centre Party	3.6	6.6
Others	1.6	1.4

Note: Voting preference numbers downloaded on 28 February 2014 from the [Poll of Polls](#), a weighted average of five of the most important regularly updated Swedish national opinion polls, calculated and made available by Henrik Oscarsson. Current government parties are in bold.

On the other hand, the situation is anything but unproblematic on the other side of the political spectrum. Although the Social Democrats have a somewhat stronger support today than in the last election, it should not be forgotten that its 30.7 per cent result at the 2010 election was its worst since 1920. It is telling that the party, which once thought of itself as the natural party of government, has now officially proclaimed that its objective is to reach above [35 per cent](#) of the votes, a level it had previously surpassed in 26 consecutive elections from 1921 to 2006.

Although not committing to a pre-electoral coalition, the Social Democrats have now reconciled with themselves that

they need to team up with other parties in order to reach a parliamentary majority. However, while the Social Democrats and the Greens have publicly declared their willingness to go into a coalition, this probably will not be enough to form a majority, especially since the Sweden Democrats will surely improve on their 2010 result.

While the Left Party is the obvious choice, diverging views on whether to allow private enterprises within the nation's welfare services to turn a profit might be an insurmountable obstacle. Instead, some pundits are predicting that one or two of the small parties of the Alliance will end up in a cross-bloc coalition after the election. However, although both the Liberals and the Centre Party, to different extents, have a history of cooperation with the Social Democrats, a decision to leave the Alliance would not be an easy one, as it would break ten years of close cooperation between the centre-right parties. Furthermore, since many of these parties' voters identify themselves more with the [centre-right bloc](#) than with the parties themselves, such a shift would run counter to the expectations of many of their voters.

Important issues

Elections are of course not only decided by game-theoretical reasoning, but also by the voters' evaluation of the parties' policy proposals. As in the last election, issues of employment, public health, education and the economy will be important in the 2014 election. With the exception of public health, the parties of the Alliance have controlled these issues for the past couple of years. Recent [opinion polls](#) suggest, however, that this is no longer the case.

Whereas the Social Democrats now are considered to have better policies in both employment and education, the hallmark issue of the economy is also beginning to slip out of the grasp of the Moderate Party. Fredrik Reinfeldt and Anders Borg, once named the [best finance minister of Europe](#), both of the Moderate Party, have built their reputation on strong state finances and Sweden, compared to much of the rest of Europe, has seen rather steady levels of growth during the economic crisis. If this issue too is overtaken by the opposition, their prospects for re-election will be anything but bright.

Still, although voter confidence in a number of important issues no longer puts the Alliance at the forefront, this drop might be as much a desire for a change of face. All in all, the policy proposals from the Social Democrats do not deviate much from those of the government. In this sense, a government turnover would be more about who will govern the country rather than how Swedish politics will change in the years to come. Only the Sweden Democrats, and to a lesser extent the Left Party, radically deviate from the political mainstream. While the Left Party might end up in government, this will probably be at the expense of some of its own core issues. The Sweden Democrats, on the other hand, regardless of whether they end up holding the balance of power, will probably find themselves, once again, without much influence.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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