



The Swedish Elections, 2018

*Dr. Ankita Dutta**

Sweden went to polls on 9 September 2018 to elect a new parliament (Riksdag) and a government which would succeed the Social Democrat-Green coalition of Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, which has run the country since 2014. The centre-left bloc (Social Democrats, the Liberals and Greens) and the centre-right bloc (the Moderate Party, Liberal Party, Centre Party and the Christian Democrats) face stiff challenge from the right-wing Populist Party Sweden Democrats, which emerged as holding the balance of power. The paper identifies major parties contesting the 2018 elections and the main issues that were raised during the campaign. The paper also looks at the result of the elections.

Political Parties and Issues

The political system of Sweden is dominated by two alliances – Centre-Left which includes Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), Green Party (Miljöpartiet) and Left Party (Vänsterpartiet) and the Centre-Right coalition called ‘The Alliance’ which includes- The Moderates (Moderaterna), Liberal Party (Liberalerna), Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), Centre Party (Centerpartiet). Apart from these two coalitions, the third part is represented by Sweden Democrats which represents the far-right populist spectrum of the Swedish political system.¹

The issues considered most important by Swedish citizens in the 2018 electoral debate are welfare system, immigration and law and order. Issues that have received little attention are EU cooperation, economic policy and gender equality. The first was of immigration and integration, although the present government has radically tightened asylum laws, the Sweden Democrats have kept the issue at the centre-stage, highlighting that Sweden’s generous welfare state was at risk because of the migrants and asylum-seekers. The second key issue and often related to immigration is the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. The year 2018 saw a rise

in violent crimes in Sweden, and several incidents, including the arson of over 100 cars on 14 August. It has caused many Swedes to consider “law and order” as the key issue in the election.²

The third is the far-right party’s call to hold a referendum over whether Sweden should leave the EU. The leader of the populist Sweden Democrats Jimmie Åkesson has demanded that the government grant the people of Sweden a referendum on whether or not to remain in the European Union (EU) following the national election by saying the EU had become “a major force of corruption where nobody has control over anything”.³ However, support for the referendum idea remains low within political circles as well as the general population.⁴ There is also a divide among the parties over NATO membership, with the centre-left opposing it and the centre-right and Sweden Democrats in favour of membership.

Another key issue was of welfare system. Swedes pay one of the highest taxes in Europe — with a top rate of income tax of 60.1 percent — in return for a generous welfare state. Healthcare and schools are the two biggest voter concerns alongside immigration. All the parties have promised to introduce the cuts in waiting time to receive healthcare benefits, a key concern, by reintroducing the “kömiljarden” – a state-funded programme that financially rewards county councils that can keep their waiting lines down. For schools, almost all parties are in the favor of nationalizing the schooling system to increase the productivity and also want to hire more teachers and teaching aides.

Elections Result

The Sweden Democrats, an anti-immigrant, eurosceptic, populist party, increased its vote share to 17.5 percent (62 seats), up from 13 percent in 2014. The governing Social Democrats, led by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, maintained their record of finishing first in every election since 1917, but saw their score fall to 28.3 percent, while the main centre-right opposition Moderate Party slipped to 19.8 percent. After Sweden’s election authority completed its final count (including ballots from Swedes living abroad), the centre-left bloc collectively got 40.7 percent (144 seats) of the vote and the centre-right received 40.2 percent of the total vote (143 seats).

Sno.	Parties and Coalitions	Percentage Vote	Number of Seats
	<i>Centre-Left Coalition</i>		
1.	Left Party	8	28
2.	Social Democrats	28.3	101
3.	Green Party	4.4	15
	<i>Total Count</i>	<i>40.7</i>	<i>144</i>

	Centre-Right Coalition (The Alliance)		
4.	Centre Party	8.6	31
5.	Liberal Party	5.5	19
6.	Moderate Party	19.8	70
7.	Christian Democrats	6.3	23
	Total Count	40.2	143
8.	Sweden Democrats	17.5	62
	Total		349

Source: Sweden.se, <https://sweden.se/society/political-parties-in-sweden/>

With neither mainstream bloc on course for a majority in the 349-seat Riksdag, whatever government emerges would need the backing either of the opposition, or an informal accommodation with the Sweden Democrats, to pass legislation. But the centre-left and centre-right have not been in formal coalition since the 1950s, and all other parties have pledged to continue shunning the populists.⁵

With far-right, anti-immigration, and populist parties making advances across Europe, and now in government in Italy, Austria, Norway and Finland, the government-formation, in a country long seen as a model of political stability, is being closely watched. Sweden is looking towards a chaotic period of coalition building as the result signal a possible political gridlock. So far, Prime Minister Lofven, defying the calls to resign, has invited the Alliance opposition to talks, saying that he would “work calmly as prime minister with respect to the voters and Sweden’s electoral system” until the new parliament opens on 25 September 2018.

** Dr. Ankita Dutta, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Strategy debates of Swedish parties, *General election in Sweden 2018 - a new political landscape*, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, <https://www.fes.de/strategy-debates-global/strategy-debates-sweden/>, Accessed on 1 September 2018

² Youths in Swedish towns burn and vandalize scores of cars, *Reuters*, 14 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-violence/youths-in-swedish-towns-burn-and-vandalize-scores-of-cars-idUSKBN1KZoOJ>, Accessed on 1 September 2018

³ Jimmie Åkesson noted that the amount Sweden would have to pay to the bloc would increase due to the loss of the 100 billion Swedish Krona (£8.49bn/\$11.2bn) an amount Britain was previously paying into the EU.

⁴ Swedish Populist Leader Calls Referendum on EU Membership, *Breitbart*, 19 June 2018, <https://www.breitbart.com/london/2018/06/19/swedish-populist-leader-calls-referendum-eu-membership/>, Accessed on 4 September 2018

⁵ Sweden faces political gridlock following vote; PM invites opposition to talks, *Strait Times*, 10 September 2018

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/sweden-pm-says-will-not-step-down-after-vote-invites-opposition-to-talks>, , Accessed on 10 September 2018