Sweden, Now a Country Like All the Others? The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism

No 25 (June 2016)

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The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Fifteen years ago, Jens Rydgren (2002) asked why no electorally successful radical right-wing party had yet emerged in Sweden. In this respect, Sweden was a negative case. Rydgren posited four main explanations: (1) social class mattered more in Sweden than elsewhere. Working class voters identified strongly with their social class and with the Social Democratic party, making them largely unavailable to radical right-wing mobilization; (2) socioeconomic issues still structured most politics in Sweden, and issues belonging to the sociocultural dimension – most importantly immigration – were of low salience for voters; (3) voters still perceived clear policy alternatives across the left-right divide; and (4) the leading radical right-wing alternative, the Sweden Democrats, was perceived as being too extreme. Since 2010, however, Sweden can no longer be considered a negative case, as the Sweden Democrats received 5.7 percent of the vote in the 2010 election and 12.9 percent in the 2014 election. In this paper we argue that in order to understand the rise and growth of the Sweden Democrats we should focus on changes in the factors enumerated above, that is: (1) the decline of class politics in Sweden; (2) the growing salience of sociocultural politics, and in particular the politicization of the immigration issue; (3) the increased convergence caused by a double move toward the center by the Social Democratic party and the Conservative party, leaving voters confused about policy alternatives; and (4) the process by which the Sweden Democrats have tried to distance the party from its neo-fascist past and erect a more respectable façade.

Introduction

Over the past three decades we have witnessed a resurgence of radical right-wing parties in Europe. These parties share an emphasis on ethnonationalism rooted in myths about the past, and their programs are directed toward making the nation more ethnically homogeneous and returning to "traditional" values. They also tend to be populists in that they accuse elites of favoring internationalism and cosmopolitanism over the nation, and of putting their own narrow self-interests and various special interests ahead of the interests of the people. Hence, the core message of radical right-wing parties is a mixture of ethnonationalism – or nativism – and antiestablishment populism (Rydgren 2007; 2017; Mudde 2007); their main rallying issue, at least in Western Europe, has been opposition to immigration.

However, the electoral success of radical right-wing parties has varied substantially from country to country and over time. Sweden was until a few years ago considered a deviant case, which unlike its Scandinavian neighbors Denmark and Norway lacked a radical right-wing party in parliament. With the partial exception of the 1991 election, when the newly formed New Democracy garnered 6.7 percent of the vote, no Swedish radical right-wing party had come close to winning a parliamentary seat until the 2010 election. In the 2002 election, the Sweden Democrats received only 1.4 percent of the votes, which more than doubled to 2.9 percent in the 2006 election. In the 2010 election, the Sweden Democrats received 5.7 percent of the vote and won seats in the national parliament, and in the 2014 election the party received 12.9 percent, which made it clear that Sweden is no longer exceptional in not having had an electorally successful radical right-wing party. In this paper we seek to explain this transition and the changes in Swedish politics that may explain the rapid growth of the Sweden Democrats.

Fifteen years ago, Jens Rydgren (2002) asked why Sweden was exceptional in that no electorally successful radical right-wing party had emerged. Rydgren posited four main explanations in the paper: (1) social class still mattered more in Sweden than elsewhere. Working class voters identified rather strongly with their social class and with the Social Democratic party, making them largely unavailable to radical right-wing mobilization; (2) partly as a result of this, socioeconomic issues still structured most politics in Sweden, and issues belonging to the sociocultural dimension – most importantly immigration – were of low salience to the voters; (3) there was a relatively low degree of convergence between the major mainstream parties, and voters still perceived clear policy alternatives across the left-right divide; and (4) the leading radical right-wing alternative, the Sweden Democrats, was perceived as being too extreme.

In this paper we will examine the four factors listed above in order to explain why Sweden is no longer an exceptional, or deviant, case. We will argue that in order to understand the rise and growth of the Sweden Democrats we should focus on (1) the decline of class politics in Sweden; (2) the growing salience of sociocultural politics, and in particular the politicization of the immigration issue; (3) the increased convergence caused by a double move toward the center by the Social Democratic party and the Conservative party, leaving voters confused about policy alternatives; and (4) the process by which the Sweden Democrats have tried to distance itself from its neo-fascist past and erect a more respectable façade.

Dealignment and realignment

Dealignment and realignment processes provide a favorable political opportunity for emerging radical right-wing parties. Several cleavage dimensions always exist simultaneously (Rokkan 1970), most of them ultimately based on social identity or interests. Although these

cleavage dimensions exist side by side, either manifest or latent, their salience increases or declines during certain periods (Hout et al. 1996; Kriesi et al. 2008; 2012). Contemporary Western European democracies are characterized by two major cleavage dimensions: the perceived economic rift that pits workers against capital and concerns the degree of state involvement in the economy, and the sociocultural conflict that revolves around issues such as immigration, law and order, abortion, among others. The relative strength of these two sources of tension influences radical right-wing parties' chances for successful electoral mobilization. As some of these issues lose in salience, frames connected to them become less effective for people's interpretation of the world. As Kriesi et al. (1995: 4) have stressed, old cleavages may provide "a shield against the framing attempts of rising collective actors." Schattschneider (1975) makes a similar point in arguing that a "shift from the alignment AB to the alignment CD means that the old cleavage must be played down if the new conflict is to be exploited…The new conflict can become dominant only if the old one is subordinated, or obscured, or forgotten, or loses its capacity to excite the contestants, or becomes irrelevant."

As will be further discussed below, one of the reasons why Sweden lacked an electorally strong radical right-wing party for as long as it did was the lingering strength of the socioeconomic cleavage dimension, manifested by the hegemonic position of the Social Democratic party, which worked as a shield against political actors trying to mobilize on (the authoritarian side) of the sociocultural dimension (Rydgren 2002; 2010). However, this situation has gradually changed over the past ten to fifteen years, opening up a space for radical right-wing mobilization.

Decline in class voting

Compared to its Nordic neighbor countries, the realignment process in Sweden was delayed. Socioeconomic politics still dominated the agenda and voters prioritized these over

sociocultural political issues (see Table 2 below). Moreover, although class voting declined slowly in Sweden, it remained fairly high throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, especially among the working classes. However, as we will see below, this has recently begun to change.

Class voting usually refers to when people belonging to the same social class vote, statistically, in the same way. This is assumed to be a consequence of their common interests, which are based on their shared socioeconomic position (e.g., Nieuwbeerta & De Graaf 1999). The relationship between social class and party choice has always been stronger in Sweden than in most other Western countries, since the Social Democratic hold on the working class has traditionally been strong (Oskarson & Demker 2013). As long as the traditional class-based cleavage dominated, there was little room for competing cleavage dimensions. Over the past decades class voting has decreased all over Western Europe, and in the North-Western countries this process has mainly been driven by weakened alignment between the social democratic parties and the working class (see, e.g., Clark & Lipset 2001; Oskarson 2005).

The decline of class voting has been explained by societal changes such as modernization and globalization, increased educational levels as well as changes in people's value structures (e.g., Betz 1994; Evans 1999). The overall left-right polarization in the party system also seems to affect class voting (Jansen et al. 2012), meaning that the ideological convergence between mainstream parties may decrease class voting as well (Evans & Tilley 2012a; 2012b). As will be further discussed below, when social democratic parties move toward the center in order to win middle-class voters, the effect may be weakened alignments with working class voters. In addition, the position of social democratic parties on sociocultural issues influences class voting: as social democratic parties increasingly tried to mobilize based on left-liberal sociocultural policies that were predominantly embraced by the new middle classes, they may have alienated some working class voters who on average share

more traditional and authoritarian sociocultural values (Kitschelt 1995; 2012). In any case, a decrease in left-right distinctions leaves room for other cleavage dimensions to be politicized.

There is ample evidence that class voting has decreased in Sweden, and that this downward trend has intensified over the past decade. Class voting, measured by the Alford index,[1] has decreased in Sweden since measurement started in the 1950s. However, it should be noted that the Swedish decline started from a comparatively high level and that class voting today is still among the strongest in the Western world (Oskarson 2016). There has been a steady decline since the 1950s, and in the latest election, in 2014, the Alford index decreased to its lowest value yet: 23, compared to 51 in 1956 (Oscarsson 2016). Another example of eroding class loyalties is the weakened relationship between trade union membership and party choice. The support for the Social Democrats from members of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*LO*) decreased from 80 percent in 1956 to 52 percent in 2010 (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013), and in the official Statistics Sweden poll in the fall of 2015 it was down to 42 percent (SCB 2015). At the same time, the support for the Sweden Democrats increased dramatically within this group: in 2015, 24 percent of the unionized working-class voters supported the party, making the Sweden Democrats the second most popular party among this voter category (SCB 2015).

At the same time, trade union membership has declined in Sweden since the beginning of 1990s. In 2015, 71 percent of all employees were members of a trade union, and the share among workers was 65 percent. Twenty years earlier, in 1995, 88 percent of all workers were union members, so the decline has been rather dramatic (Larsson 2015). This is important, since we know that the support for radical right-wing parties tends to be higher among non-unionized workers than among unionized working-class voters (Sannerstedt 2015). Also more generally, the decreasing ability of trade unions to integrate workers into the left-leaning

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[1] Alford's index is the difference between the share of socialist voters in the working class and the share of the socialist voters in the middle class.

electorate – since these organizations have lost some of their socializing role – favors radical right-wing parties (Immerfall 1998; Andersen & Bjørklund 1990:214; Oesch 2008).

Hence, we argue that one important factor for understanding the emergence and electoral growth of the Sweden Democrats is the decline of class politics in Sweden, which was caused by weakened alignments between the Social Democratic party and working-class voters (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013; Oskarson & Demker 2015). The decline of class voting is of highly significant since we know from previous studies that working-class voters are the ones most susceptible to to radical right parties (Oesch 2008; Rydgren 2012; Oskarson & Demker 2015; Sannerstedt 2015).[2]

Political mistrust and decline in party identification

As for the dealignment process, we see that confidence in political institutions in Sweden has declined more since the end of the 1960s than in most other European countries (Rydgren 2010). However, before the decline started, public confidence in the political establishment had been exceptionally high in Sweden, from both a national and global perspective (Holmberg & Weibull 1997). Swedish voters now have little respect for political institutions. In 2014, only 1 percent of voters had full confidence in political parties, and 20 percent had fairly high confidence. Little or no confidence in political parties, on the other hand, was expressed by 30 percent of voters in 2014 (Holmberg & Weibull 2015). Still, it is important to

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[2] It is, however, important to note that the Sweden Democrats have since 2006 been successful in attracting voters from all other parties, but especially its two main competitors, the Conservatives and the Social Democrats (as well as abstainers). For a detailed analysis of the movement of voters between the elections 2006, 2010, and 2014, see Oscarsson & Holmberg (2008), Oscarsson & Holmberg (2013), and Oscarsson (2016). After the election 2014, it was argued that the large share of voters that the Conservatives lost to the Sweden Democrats consisted of voters who had previously voted for the Social Democrats, indicating that the lost voters were floating voters and not core Conservative voters . However, analysis shows that moving from the Social Democrats to the Conservatives to the Sweden Democrats in the elections 2006, 2010 and 2014 was extremely unusual. This hypothesis has been refuted (Ekengren & Oscarsson 2015).

note that the decline in political trust has flattened over the last 15 years; in fact, it has reversed slightly.[3]

Despite these trends, we may also observe how voters in Sweden have become increasingly satisfied with how democracy in the country operates. Around the mid-1990s Swedes were no more satisfied than other Western Europeans. Whereas 61 percent claimed to be "very or fairly pleased with democracy in Sweden" in 1998, the corresponding share in 2014 was 77 percent (Bergström & Oscarsson 2015). This makes Swedish voters among the most contented in Europe, at least with regard to the democratic process (Oskarsson & Holmberg 2008).

This suggests that the niche for mobilizing discontent has contracted rather than expanded over the past decade. Nonetheless, there is and has been considerable scope for protest mobilization through the incitement of popular discontent with the mainstream political establishment. Political confidence among Sweden Democratic sympathizers is very low, which suggests that the party has benefited from this situation. Only 30 percent say they have very or fairly high confidence in politicians, making Sweden Democratic voters by far the most mistrustful voters in Sweden (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013). They also show much lower confidence in the political system than followers of any other party in the country (Sannerstedt 2015). Nearly two-thirds of Sweden Democrats express dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in Sweden, compared to just over one-fifth among the other parties' voters. In addition, most Sweden Democrats believe that the general trend in Sweden is going in the wrong direction: that things are getting worse rather than better. Only 11 percent of Sweden Democratic voters believe that developments are headed in the right direction, compared to 37 percent among other parties' voters (Demker 2015).

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[3] In 2002, 1 percent of those polled had full confidence in political parties, and 13 percent had fairly high confidence. Little or no confidence in political parties was expressed by no less than 41 percent of the voters (Holmberg & Weibull 2003).

This situation of dealignment also implies a decrease in political loyalties, and voters are thus available for voter mobilization by other parties. That this is the case is even more obvious when we consider the decline in party identification. The number of voters with strong party identification, that is, the individual voter's affective orientation to a political party, has declined in Western Europe in recent decades (Mair 2013); so too in Sweden, where figures of those who strongly identify with a political party dropped from 39 percent in 1968, to 17 percent in 2010 (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013).[4] By 2006 only 15 percent identified with a particular political party – which indicates that the proportion of available voters was higher just before the electoral breakthrough of the Sweden Democrats, and that with the emergence of the Sweden Democrats some of the previously un-attached voters found a party to identify with. Still, the percentage of attached voters is lower among Sweden Democratic voters than with other parties: in 2010, 23 percent of Sweden Democratic voters considered themselves adherents of the party. The average for the general population was 28 percent (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013).[5]

Growing salience of sociocultural politics, and the politicization of the immigration issue

As a result of the decline in class voting and party identification, a growing proportion of the electorate base their vote on neither social class nor party identity, but have become issue voters. As a result, issue competition has become even more important than before (Dahlström & Esiasson 2011).

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[4]If we combine those who strongly identify with a political party with those who somewhat identify, the share has declined from 65 percent in 1968 to 31 percent in 2006 and 28 percent in 2010 (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013).

[5] This is the combined proportion of those who strongly identify and somewhat identify with their party. The share among the other parties in 2010 was: Conservatives 28%, Christian Democrats 27%, Liberals 25%, the Center party 28%, the Green party 28%, the Social Democrats 41% and the Left party 29% (Oskarsson & Holmberg 2013).

The immigration issue and related issues (e.g., citizenship, multiculturalism) have been the most important political issues for radical right-wing parties in Western Europe. Radical right-wing parties mobilize voters by taking a harsh stance on immigration (van der Brug et al. 2005; Ivarsflaten 2008; Rydgren 2008). The opposition to immigration and refugees among the voters of the Sweden Democrats is solid. In 2015, 93 percent of the sympathizers of the Sweden Democrats agreed with the statement that it would be a good idea to reduce the number of refugees to Sweden. This should be compared to 42 percent of those sympathizing with the Conservative party, 29 percent of the Social Democratic sympathizers, and 13 percent of those sympathizing with the Green party (Demker & van der Meiden 2016). It should be noted, however, that Swedes in general have not become more negative toward refugees or immigrants to Sweden; on the contrary, general attitudes in Sweden have changed in the opposite direction. As we can see from Figure 1, the proportion of people who think it is a good idea to reduce the number of refugees to Sweden has decreased from 65 percent in 1992 to 40 percent in 2015.

[Figure 1 about here]

Similarly, the proportion of the population that agree that Sweden has too many refugees decreased from 52 percent in 1993 to 36 percent in 2009. Likewise, the proportion opposing an immigrant marrying into the family has declined from 25 percent in 1993 to 12 percent in 2009 (Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

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It should be noted that opposition to immigration has decreased at the same time as Sweden has received more refugees than ever (Demker 2015). The immigration issue has been of relatively low salience during the post-war period, compared to traditional socioeconomic issues. As shown in Table 2, it was of practically no importance at all to the voters during the 1980s; in the early 1990s (which saw the emergence of the right-wing populist party New Democracy), the salience of the immigration issue increased somewhat, but fell back again during the rest of the decade. And during the first decade of the millennium it fluctuated, but was still at a relatively low level. It was not until the national election of 2014 that immigration became among the most important political issues among voters in Sweden. Hence, the Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010 despite the fact that immigration was still of relatively low (albeit rising) salience among voters. Once represented in parliament, however, the Sweden Democrats contributed to the further politicization – and growing salience – of the immigration issue (cf. Rydgren 2003a).

[Table 2 about here]

 For the immigration issue to have an impact on voters' choices it has to be politicized (Campbell et al. 1960). For many years, the immigration issue was not politicized in Sweden. With few exceptions, it was a non-issue among mainstream parties until 2014 (Odmalm 2011; Widfeldt 2015). Immigration gained importance for voters when a political party mobilize around the issue, and that is also what we see in Table 2 and, even more pointedly in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 about here]

In the national election of 1991, when the share of voters who thought that immigration and refugees were important when choosing a party increased rather sharply to 8 percent (Table 2), the right-wing populist New Democracy party won parliamentary representation. Anti-immigration was a part of their agenda, and controversial, sometimes blatantly xenophobic, statements by party representatives contributed to attracting media attention to the issue. New Democracy imploded and was voted out of parliament in the 1994 election, and the immigration issue practically disappeared from the list of political issues that were salient to voters. Less than two months before the 2002 election, the Liberals (*Folkpartiet*; now renamed *Liberalerna*) presented an immigration and integration policy package. The most discussed proposal from the Liberals was the introduction of a language test as a requirement for Swedish citizenship. Even if the proposals were not designed to reduce immigration, they were interpreted as such by many voters. In the election of 2002, the Liberals almost tripled their vote, and evidence suggests that the immigration package was a part of their success (Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004; Widfeldt 2015). Dahlström and Esaiasson (2013) have shown that the immigration issue generally received little attention in election campaigns between 1970 and 2006, with 2002 being the important deviation from the general pattern. Although the Sweden Democrats doubled their vote share in every election since 1998, the mainstream parties did not politicize the immigration issue. Once the Sweden Democrats had won representation in parliament, however, they contributed to politicize immigration. The issue was also lifted high on the agenda in the run-up to the 2014 election, when Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt in a speech warned of the expected rising economic costs of immigration as a result of the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria, and asked Swedish voters to "open their hearts" to the refugees. Although this speech was in line with the liberal refugee policies endorsed by the government, it drew a lot of attention and initiated a debate on the economic

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costs of immigration. It thus presented the Sweden Democrats with ample opportunities to mobilize voters based on their pet issue.

As shown in Figure 3, the increases in the salience of the immigration issue in 1991 and 2014 also coincided with major peaks in asylum seeking, and in 2002 it coincided with a minor peak. Other minor peaks in refugee immigration, however, such as in 2006-2007, did not coincide with increased politicization of the immigration issue. Still, we would argue that the salience of the immigration issue is particularly likely to increase in situations in which changes in real-world processes (i.e., rapid increases in refugee immigration) is combined with political articulation (i.e., when a political party mobilizes around the issue).

[Figure 3 about here]

As Demker and Sandberg (2014) have shown, the proportion of voters holding anti-immigrant sentiments was higher among those who ranked refugee and immigration issues among the top three social problems.[6] This means that a substantial minority of Swedish voters wanted a tighter immigration and asylum policy *and* considered this issue more important than most other issues. The Sweden Democrats have mobilized support among these voters. At the same time, however, immigration was not such an important and salient *political* issue, in the sense that it affected people's voting behavior before the 2014 election, and it is therefore unlikely to be more than a partial explanation to the Sweden Democrats' electoral breakthrough in 2010. Still, the growing salience of the immigration issue was likely an important reason for the party's dramatic growth between 2010 and 2014.

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[6] Between 2014 and 2015 there was a dramatic increase in the proportion of voters ranking immigration as a top problem. This increase was highest among those who also shared anti-immigrant sentiments. However, people who wanted a generous asylum policy also more often ranked immigration as a top issue. Hence, ranking immigration as a top social problem is associated with both anti-immigrant sentiments as well as wanting a more generous asylum policy (see Demker & van der Meiden 2016).

Ideological (socioeconomic) convergence of mainstream parties

One contributing factor to the success of radical right-wing parties is the political

opportunities that arise from the convergence of mainstream parties in political space

(Kitschelt 1995). Convergence in political space may confuse voters about policy alternatives,

and some voters may perceive mainstream parties as "being all the same," which in turn fuels

discontent and distrust in political parties and politicians. Convergence may also open up

niches in political space in which flank parties may mobilize (Kriesi 1999). In addition,

convergence in the main political dimension, the socioeconomic dimension, may contribute to

a depoliticization of that dimension by making it less engaging for the voters and the media

(Schattschneider 1975; Mouffe 2005; Rydgren 2005). This creates opportunities for

challengers to mobilize on alternative cleavage dimensions, including the sociocultural

(Rydgren 2007; Bornschier 2010; Odmalm 2011; Oskarson & Demker 2013).

Developments over the past few decades have resulted in growing convergence along

the socioeconomic scale, in what Chantal Mouffe (2005: 63) termed a growing "consensus of

the center," but which in fact has also been a turn to the right of the whole scale (e.g., Mudge

2015). The room of maneuver for independent national economic policy has diminished as a

result of the expanded European Union with its Growth and Stability Pact and the European

Central Bank and the creation of independent national central banks, in which "decision-

making authority is passed over to ostensibly non-partisan bodies and in which binding rules

are adopted which deny discretion to the government of the day" (Mair 2013: 53; see also

Mudge 2015; Müller 2011: 5). As a result, political parties "might still compete with one

another for votes, sometimes even intensively, but they came to find themselves sharing the

same broad commitments in government and confining themselves to the same ever-

narrowing repertoire of policy-making" (Mair 2013: 53). A politics of austerity and fiscal

prudence has thus increasingly constituted a common ground for social democratic and

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center-right parties alike. This has been the case in Sweden as well. The deep economic crisis

in Sweden in the early 1990s was the start for a shift in national economic policy. New

standards in fiscal and monetary policy were imposed making economic policy more

restrictive, while also diminishing the government's influence over economic policy. The

Swedish Central Bank was made more independent and was tasked with stabilizing inflation

at two percent annually. Hence, fighting inflation has for the past two decades been prioritized

over other economic policy goals. In addition, a goal was set to balance the annual budget

with a surplus of two percent of GDP, and that this surplus should be used to pay off the

national debt. In addition, as Sweden prepared for EU membership in 1995, Sweden adopted

the Euro Convergence Criteria, a binding plan for how to cut budget deficits and keep budgets

balanced. EU membership also resulted in adoption of the Growth and Stability Pact. These

changes in economic policy toward a tightening of the state budget have been implemented by

both social democratic and center-right governments. Taken together, these measures have

limited the room of national governments to maneuver with regard to economic policy over

the past several decades and contributed to a situation in which social democratic and center-

right parties have converged on economic policy.

The strategic voting-seeking behavior of the parties has also contributed to growing

convergence. The distribution of voters along the socioeconomic dimension tends to

approximate a bell curve, with more voters located in the center than at the poles, meaning

that there are often incentives for parties to move toward the center (Downs 1957). The Social

democratic parties, in particular, which have seen their traditional working class

constituencies shrink in numbers, have had strong incentives to adjust their program in order

to attract middle-class marginal voters (Kitschelt 1994). This partly explains the move toward

the center of social democratic parties in countries such as Germany, the UK, and Sweden

since the 1990s. Simultaneously, the Conservative party in Sweden undertook a strategic

makeover in the wake of the 2006 election by presenting itself as "the new working party"

and by defending the Swedish welfare state. Although this shift turned out to be more

discursive than factual, it signaled a rather dramatic move toward the center.

When Swedish voters are asked, the overall left-right distance between the Social

Democrats and the Conservatives was perceived to be larger in the 1970s than in more recent

elections (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016). The tendency of convergence is clearly visible since

the 2006 election, and in the creation of the center-right electoral coalition, the Alliance

(*Alliansen*).[7]

Mainstream party responses to the Sweden Democrats

The success of radical right-wing parties partly depends on their relationship with the

established parties in the party system. Previous research indicates that we need to take the

issue-oriented strategies of mainstream parties into account in order to understand the ways in

which a radical right-wing party may mobilize voters on the immigration issue (Bale 2003;

Meguid 2005; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008; Dahlström & Esaiasson 2013; Odmalm

2011: Dahlström & Sundell 2012; Loxbo 2014). The basic notion is that mainstream parties

obstruct or facilitate the growth of radical right-wing parties, depending on how they handle

the immigration issue. Mainstream parties may face new competitors – such as a radical right-

wing party – by using a dismissive, adversarial, or accommodative strategy (Meguid 2005).

When using a dismissive strategy, mainstream parties choose not to take a position on the new

party's issue, that is, the immigration issue in the case of radical right-wing parties. By

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[7] When Swedish voters were asked to place political parties' position along a dimension ranging from 0 (left) to 100 (right), the Social Democrats were given 29 points and the Conservatives 89 in the election 1979. The Social Democrats were given 36, 33 and 37 points in the latest three elections in 2006, 2010 and 2014, whereas the Conservatives was given 84, 83 and 82. In the eyes of the voters, the Social Democrats moved 8 units to the right between 1979 and 2014, whereas the Conservative Party moved 7 units to the left. Hence, the overall polarization between the main competitors in Sweden has decreased in the eyes of the voters (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2013; Oscarsson 2016). However, this method cannot tell us how voters define the political concepts of *left* and *right*. Despite this, it should be remembered that it is ultimately the voters' perception of reality that guides their voting behavior.

avoiding the issue, mainstream parties may try both to move focus away from the immigration issue to other issues (such as economic politics), and to signal to the voters that the immigration issue is of relatively less importance. By using an adversarial strategy, mainstream parties declare opposition and distance themselves from the radical right-wing party's political program. By using an accommodative strategy, mainstream parties accommodate or coopt parts of the radical right-wing party's program. According to Meguid (2005), we should expect a decline in radical right-wing party support if mainstream parties coopt the position of the radical right-wing party, since this move is likely to draw voters away from the new challenger. According to Bale (2003), however, we should expect the opposite: a situation where mainstream parties accommodate the radical right by taking a tougher stance on immigration is likely to result in expanded political opportunities for the radical right-wing party, because it gives legitimacy to the issues it pursues. This helps the radical right-wing party to overcome a barrier of non-respectability and gain more votes (cf. Rydgren 2003b).[8] Bale (2003) also suggested that mainstream right-wing parties have less to lose than left-wing parties from the emergence of a successful radical right-wing party, since radical right-wing parties tend to support the mainstream right-wing parties in government formation. A successful radical right party may hence help to enlarge the right-wing bloc.

Given these strategies, how do we understand the previous relative absence and, more recently, the increasing electoral success of radical right-wing politics in Sweden? We argue that one crucial factor has been the strategic behavior of the mainstream right-wing parties, to which the creation of the right-wing coalition the Alliance (*Alliansen*) in 2004 was essential. In the 2006 election the Alliance won a majority of parliamentary seats and replaced the Social Democratic minority government. The Alliance did not place much emphasis on the immigration issue, despite a polarization on the issue among the four parties in the coalition.

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[8] There is some empirical evidence for the latter explanations (see, e.g., Dahlström & Sundell 2012).

This was partly because the Alliance preferred internal cohesion over maximizing the party programs of the individual parties in the coalition. Had the Conservative party, for example, drawn attention to the immigration issue in the election campaign, it would have threatened the cooperation among the Alliance parties and complicated the ability to present the Alliance as a coherent coalition. In addition, at the time, the four mainstream right-wing parties found it easier to agree on socioeconomic issues, whereas there was more disagreement on sociocultural ones, including immigration. Center and liberal parties, which usually take a more liberal stance on immigration than conservative parties, are strategically placed in the middle of the left-right dimension, which gives them the ability to make deals with the Social Democrats if they are not content with collaboration on the right. Hence, politicizing the immigration issue would make it more difficult for the mainstream right-wing parties to achieve government power (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008; Green-Pedersen & Odmalm 2008).

After the 2010 election, when the Sweden Democrats won parliamentary representation, the Alliance lost its majority but continued in government. Up until 2010, partly for coalition-strategic reasons, the mainstream right-wing parties used a dismissive strategy vis-à-vis the Sweden Democrats. This was successful for a long time and likely one of the reasons why the electoral breakthrough of Sweden Democrats took so long (Rydgren 2010; Dahlström & Esaiasson 2013). As a minority government after the election of 2010, the Alliance was forced to seek external support to get its policies through parliament. Partly in order to prevent the Sweden Democrats from getting influence over migration policy, the Alliance and the Green party (*Miljöpartiet*) struck a deal in 2011[9]. Since the Green party was

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[9] The agreement is called "The framework agreement between the Government and the Green party" (*Ramöverenskommelsen mellan regeringen och Miljöpartiet*) and can be found here: http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/16/22/26/03829a8c.pdf. The agreement included few concrete policy reforms, but did contain more generous treatment of refugees without identity documents, for example the right to health care and measures to facilitate family reunions. The Social Democrats and the Left party did not participate in the deal, but they did not oppose it either (Loxbo 2014; Widfeldt 2015).

one of the most socioculturally liberal parties, this agreement moved immigration policy in a more liberal direction. As a result the mainstream parties converged on the immigration issue. This may have benefited the Sweden Democrats for at least two reasons (cf. Loxbo 2014): First, liberalization of immigration policy contributed to the politicization of immigration and put the issue higher on the agenda. Second, the increased convergence on the issue gave the Sweden Democrats a monopoly over offering a more restrictive immigration policy program. Moreover, this policy change was coupled with a clear adversarial strategy toward the Sweden Democrats, and it is an open question whether or not this strategy benefited the Sweden Democrats. On the one hand, it provided the party with an opportunity to present itself as martyrs being unjustly ostracized, and it is reasonable to assume that the party found greater sympathy for this claim once it was represented in parliament – which may have increased the expectations among its potential supporters that other parties should pay attention to the Sweden Democrats. On the other hand, the Sweden Democrats may have suffered from a loss of legitimacy caused by the mainstream parties' adversarial strategy, even though the party was now arguably less sensitive to this than before, since the party was now represented in parliament, which in itself may have a legitimizing effect.[10]

Sweden Democrats – Being Seen as an Increasingly Legitimate Party?

The Sweden Democrats was founded in 1988 as a successor to The Sweden party (*Sverigepartiet*), which in turn was founded in 1986 as a result of the merging of the Progress party and the racist and far right group Keep Sweden Swedish (*Bevara Sverige Svenskt*) (Lodenius & Wikström 1997, 124; Rydgren 2006). Hence, unlike its sister parties in Denmark and Norway, the Sweden Democrats originated from an extreme right-wing milieu, as a result

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[10] Unfortunately we are not in a position to answer this question conclusively. First, we cannot disentangle the effects of the liberalization of immigration policy and the use of the adversarial strategy. Second, we cannot know if the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats would have grown even more *without* the adversarial strategy.

of which it was long viewed as illegitimate by a large segment of the voters, as well as by the mainstream parties. Hence, one of the main reasons why Sweden lacked an electorally successful radical right-wing party until the 2010 election was that the Sweden Democrats failed to present a façade that was respectable enough (Rydgren 2002; Widfeldt 2000).

In fact, the Sweden Democrats ambivalent relationship to neo-Nazis and other openly right-wing extremists has been a recurrent problem for the party. During the first half of the 1990s the boundaries were blurred, and around the mid-1990s the new party leadership banned political uniforms at Sweden Democrat demonstrations. Nonetheless, it was still not uncommon to find Sweden Democrat activists, who had previous or current connections to neo-Nazi environments, even in relatively prominent positions. Since then the party has increasingly tried to distance itself from the extraparliamentary extreme right in order to present a more respectable façade to the voters. This work was facilitated when one of the party's hard line factions left the party to form the National Democrats, and when the Sweden Democrats managed to recruit the Conservative party MP Sten Andersson to the party ahead of elections in 2002; something which signaled increased legitimacy. Work to present a more respectable façade intensified ever since Jimmy Åkesson became party leader in 2005, which may have contributed to the party's relative success in the 2006 election, in which the party managed to increase its voter share from 1.4 percent to almost 3 percent and gained more than 250 seats on different local councils. In 2010 the Sweden Democrats entered parliament with 5.7 percent of the votes, in 2011 the party officially changed its designation from nationalist to social conservative, and in 2012 it introduced what it called "zero tolerance for racism," which resulted in numerous expulsions of party members who had publicly expressed opinions deemed too racist. One may argue that these expulsions were primarily cosmetic and designed to signal to the voters that the party had a serious desire to rid itself of its too politically extreme past (obvious violations of this rule by more centrally placed

Sweden Democrats did not lead to expulsion), but it likely helped to destigmatize the party in the eyes of many voters.

Previous studies indicate that mass media are important for the emergence of new radical right-wing parties (Andersson 2010: Ellinas 2010). Media coverage is important because it contributes to the visibility of the party, which is crucial for new parties lacking economic resources. In addition, news media attention increases legitimacy and respectability as well as name recognition (Ellinas 2010).

[Figure 4 about here]

As shown in Figure 4, the media attention devoted to the Sweden Democrats has increased substantially over the past two decades. In the run-up to the 2010 election, for example, the Sweden Democrats received more media publicity than some established parties, such as the Christian Democrats and the Left party. This was immensely important for a small party lacking economic resources, even though much of the coverage was negative. Despite efforts by the Sweden Democrats to present a more respectable façade, the party still struggles with scandals and controversial statements from party representatives. The so called "iron pipe-scandal," which occurred in 2010, only received media attention in 2012 when a videotape was released showing two MPs and one highly placed party representative from the Sweden Democrats verbally attacking with racist and sexist epithets, a woman on the street and a Swedish comedian coming to her aid. One of the Sweden Democrats was shown shoving a woman into the side of a car, and they armed themselves with iron pipes. However, despite this and other controversies that received considerable media attention, support for the Sweden Democrats was not affected significantly. There is some evidence that radical right-wing parties are less sensitive to negative publicity, compared to mainstream parties (Ellinas 2010). One potential explanation is that the mass media are seen as a part of "the political

establishment," which is believed to be conspiring against the radical right (Andersson 2010). There is also a widespread distrust of the media among supporters of the Sweden Democrats. Among Sweden Democrat supporters, for example, 93 percent believe that Swedish media does not tell the truth about immigration (Demker 2015).[11] In addition, over the past decade alternative, on-line based news media have become increasingly important, and the Sweden Democrats have been successful in, directly or indirectly, launching such media propagating for its political program. The web-based news platform *Avpixlat*, for example, reaches between 200,000 and 300,000 unique visitors per week (Krzyzanowski et al. 2016).

Moreover, as argued above, one of the reasons why the electoral breakthrough of the Sweden Democrats took so long was the dismissive strategy that was employed by the mainstream parties. Not only did the mainstream parties attempt to erect a *cordon sanitaire* by refusing to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats, they also refrained from accommodating or coopting the party's program by playing it tough on immigration. In fact, they did their best to keep focus off of immigration (Dahlström & Esaiasson 2013; Odmalm 2011; Rydgren 2010). Once the Sweden Democrats were elected to parliament, however, and especially since the center-right coalition was voted out of government, this strategy has been difficult to maintain, and several parties – most notably the Conservatives and the Christian Democrats – have since the 2014 election tightened their immigration policies considerably. Partly this may be the result of changing political circumstances caused by the uptick in asylum seekers from Syria; but it is difficult not to interpret these changes as an attempt to accommodate the Sweden Democrats' program in order to win back lost votes. In addition, the Conservative party has since 2014 begun to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats at the local level, in singular municipalities. As of now, however, all mainstream parties still maintain the *cordon sanitaire* at the national level.

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[11] This should be compared to 60 percent among the general population.

Conclusion

This paper began with the observation that for a long time Sweden differed from other countries in Western Europe in that it lacked a radical right-wing party in parliament – a situation that changed in 2010. In the paper we have offered potential explanations for the relatively late emergence and electoral breakthrough of radical right-wing politics in Sweden. First, until recently enduring class loyalties in Sweden worked against radical right-wing mobilization in Sweden. Working-class voters identified strongly with their social class and the Social Democratic party, which tended to make them largely unavailable for radical right-wing mobilization. However, declining class politics over the past decades has transformed the political landscape. Second, the salience of the socioeconomic dimension in Sweden used to work as a shield against attempts to mobilize on issues belonging to other political dimensions (such as sociocultural ones). However, the sociocultural dimension and, most importantly, the immigration issue, have gained in salience over the last decade. This has benefited the Sweden Democrats. Third, the increased convergence on the socioeconomic dimension, with growing consensus among the mainstream parties, has contributed both to the depoliticization of socioeconomic politics, and to increased resonance for the Sweden Democrats' claim that there are no differences between mainstream parties ("they are all the same"). Fourth, the leading radical right-wing party, the Sweden Democrats, has been working hard to distance itself from its past and cultivate a more respectable façade, a strategy that seems to have been relatively successful in the eyes of many voters.

Our study thus points to the need to combine demand-side and supply-side factors (Rydgren 2007; Mudde 2007), while also taking the interplay between structural processes and the strategic behavior of political actors into account. It also highlights the importance of separating factors explaining the electoral breakthrough of radical right-wing parties from

factors explaining the further electoral growth of the same parties. For example, the Sweden Democrats managed to win representation to Swedish parliament in 2010 *despite* the fact that the immigration issue was still of low salience. Because the Sweden Democrats were represented in parliament after 2010, however, the dynamics of the political field (Bourdieu 2000) changed, which contributed to increased politicization of the immigration issue – which in turn partly explains why the Sweden Democrats were able to double their vote between the 2010 and 2014 elections.

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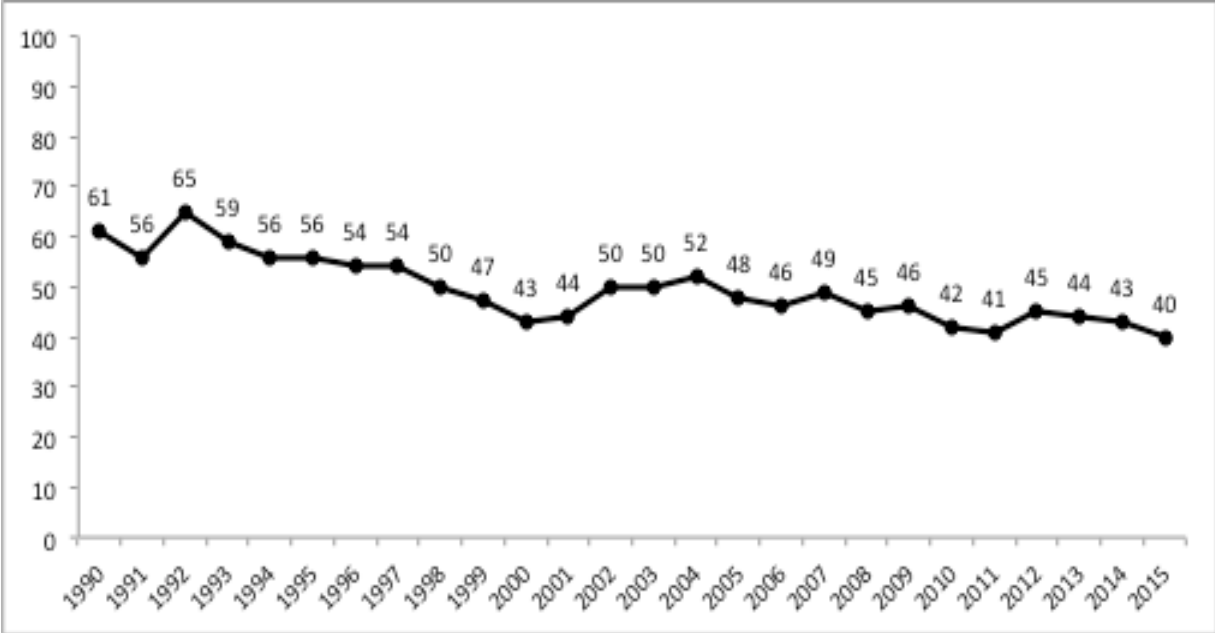5(A5): 65-83.

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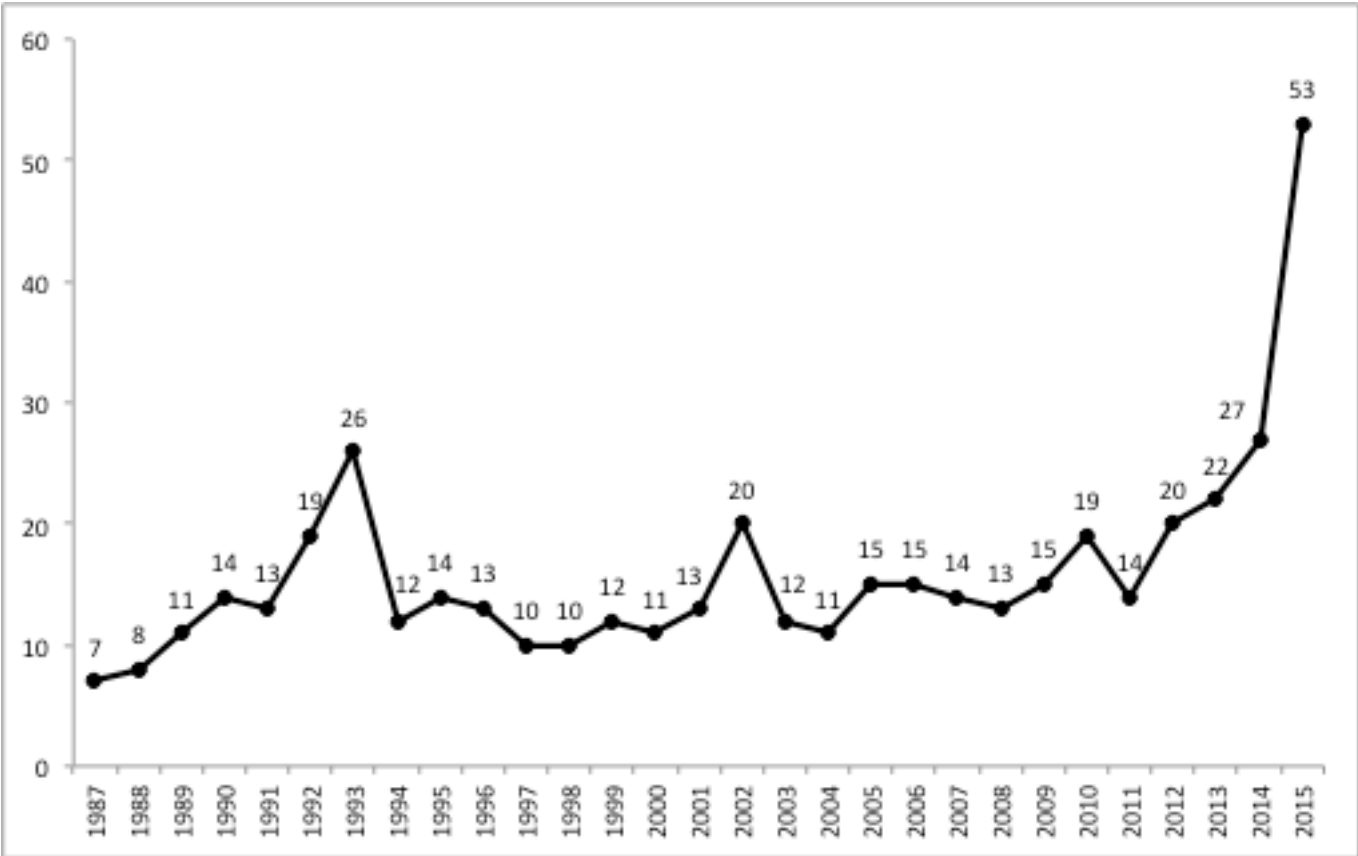Widfeldt, A. 2000. "Scandinavia: Mixed success for the populist right." *Parliamentary Affairs*, 53: 486-500.

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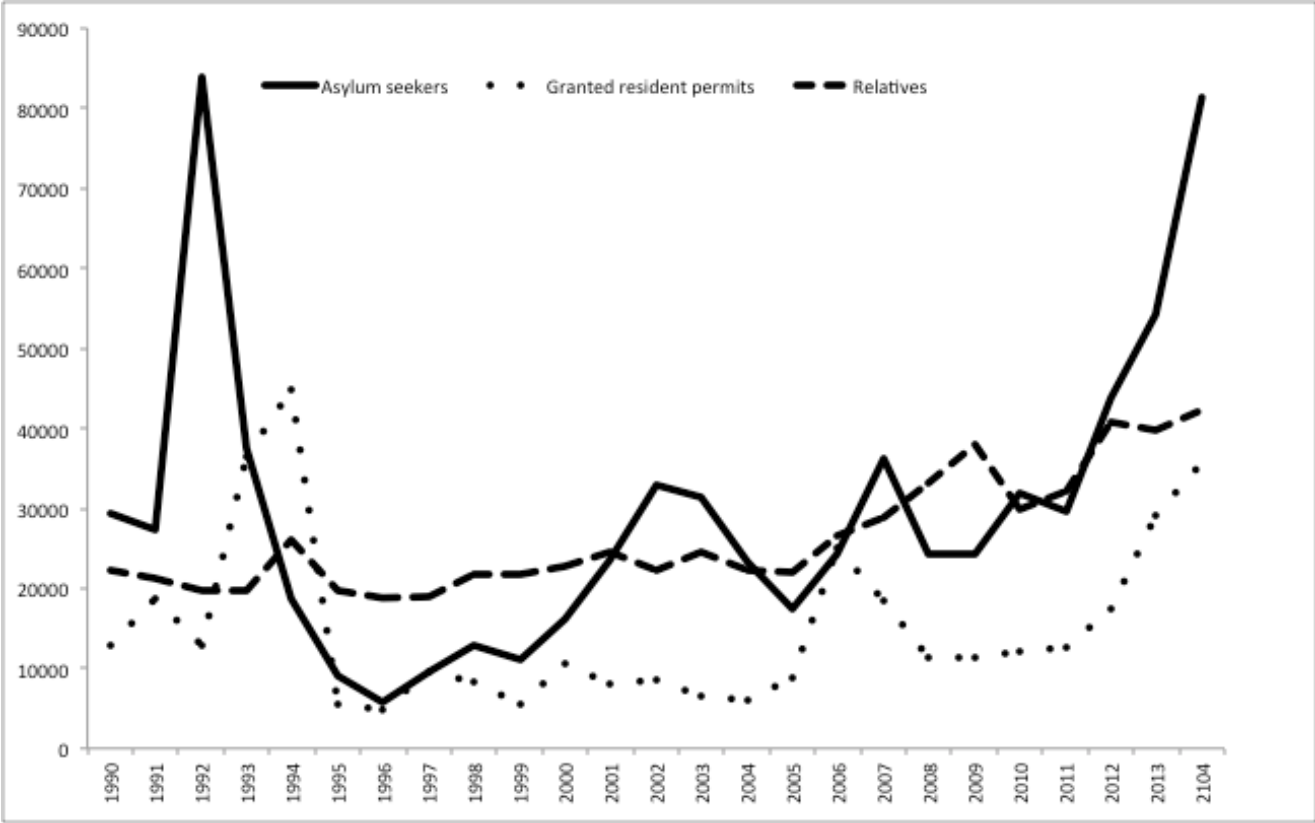**Figure 1** Attitudes toward refugees and immigrants, 1990-2015 (percent)

Source: Demker & Sandberg (2014), Demker (2015), Demker & van der Meiden (2016)

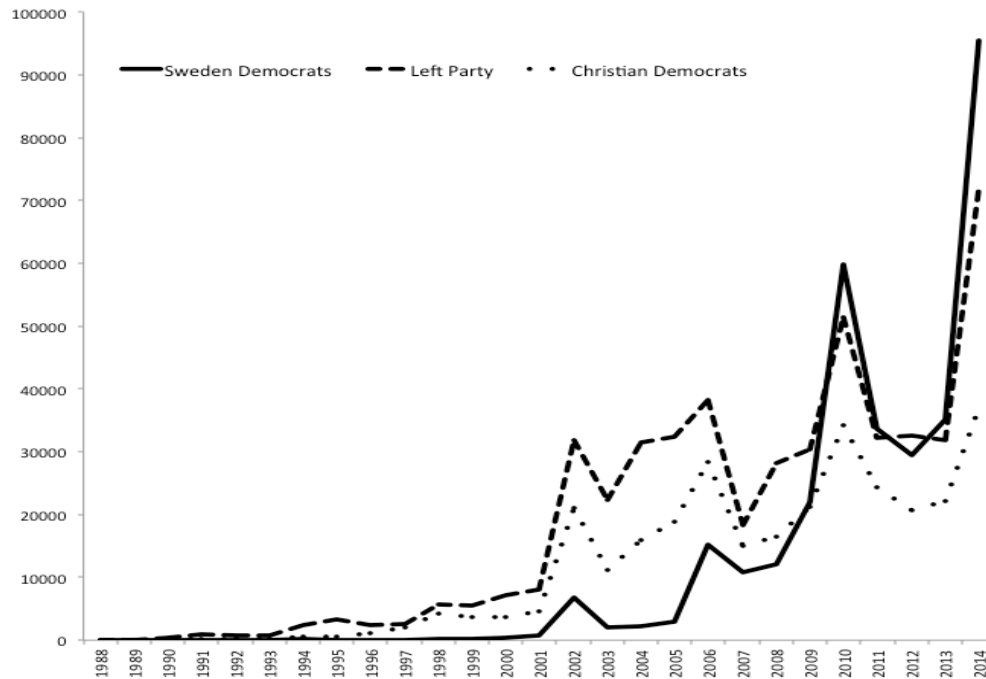**Figure 2** The importance of the immigration issue 1987-2015 (percent)

Source: Bergström & Oscarsson (2015), Demker & van der Meiden (2016)

Figure 3 Number of asylum seekers and granted resident permits for refugees and relatives 1990-2014

Source: Statistics from Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket) for number of asylum seekers, granted resident permits for asylum seekers and close relatives. In addition to this are also resident permits granted for students, adopted children, labour migrants and according to the EEA treaty, but these numbers are not presented in this figure.

Figure 4 Number of times the Sweden Democrats, the Left party and the Christian Democrats are mentioned in Swedish media 1988-2014.

Source: The Swedish media archive (*Mediearkivet*), the number of times keyword "Sverigedemokraterna", "Vänsterpartiet" and "Kristdemokraterna" is mentioned in Swedish printed press and web 1988-2014.

Table 1 Attitudes toward refugees and immigrants, 1993-2009

Percentage who agree that:	1993	1997	1999	2004	2007	2009
There are too many refugees living in Sweden	52	48	40	42	39	36
They would not like to see a relative marry an immigrant	25	18	17	15	14	12

Source: Demker (2010)

Table 2. Important issues for voters' choice of party in elections, 1979-2014 (percent)

Question: 'Think about the election this year. Are there one or several issues that are/were important for your choice of party in the parliamentary election?'

Issue	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Occupation/employment	18	29	25	5	23	41	34	7	35	31	30
Welfare, social policy, health care	4	12	19	15	22	21	28	36	32	37	20
Pensions	5	8	8	9	20	9	17	20	21	19	17
Taxes	17	8	20	19	18	9	17	14	15	15	11
Economy	9	14	14	8	20	30	14	10	11	17	15
EU	0	0	0	1	10	14	6	5	0	0	1
Immigration/refugees	*0*	*0*	*1*	*2*	*8*	*5*	*3*	*10*	*5*	*9*	*23*
Law and order	1	1	0	1	3	1	2	4	3	1	0

Source: Oscarsson & Holmberg (2013), Berg & Oscarsson (2015)

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