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## A Nordic Anomaly: Examining the Establishment of an Anti-Immigrant Party in Sweden

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Honors Thesis

A NORDIC ANOMALY: EXAMINING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF  
AN ANTI-IMMIGRANT PARTY IN SWEDEN

by  
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

Political Science Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

### A NORDIC ANOMALY: EXAMINING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ANTI-IMMIGRANT PARTY IN SWEDEN

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Political Science Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis examines the establishment of an anti-immigrant party (AIP) in Sweden. Until recently, Sweden was known as the Nordic anomaly with no AIP in spite of high levels of immigration and high rates of right-wing violence. This has now changed, and the AIP, Sweden Democrats, are rising to popularity in high speed. I examine the causes given for the anomaly up until 2006 and show that a change in these has since created a favorable environment for an AIP to become successful. First, socio-economic cleavages have become less salient through decreasing party loyalty and increasing numbers of party switchers. Second, the immigration issue has become more politicized. I account for other complementary explanations for a Swedish AIP formation and conclude that Sweden is no longer an anomaly in the landscape of European AIPs.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Wade Jacoby, Dr. Kirk Hawkins, and Dr. John Holbein from BYU's Political Science department for their support, mentoring, and great insight. I would especially like to thank Dr. Jacoby for always pushing me to do better and for encouraging me in so many ways. I am additionally grateful to Dr. David Art (Tufts University), Dr. Jens Rydgren (Stockholm University), Dr. Jacob Ravndal (Oslo University), and Dr. Yascha Mounk (Harvard University) for sharing their work and their ideas with me. Finally, I am very grateful for the BYU's Honors Department and the phenomenal years of education they have provided for me.



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## I. Introduction

Anti-immigrant parties are taking voters with storm throughout Europe. It is a surprise to some and expected by others. In some countries, these anti-immigrant parties (AIPs) have been a part of the political reality for several decades. This is notably the case in several of the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland)<sup>1</sup> share many similar demographic, historical, and political characteristics. The world knows them for their progressive tax and health care systems, homogenous native populations, long winters, and socialist leanings. Except for the Finnish language, the four countries are often seen as almost identical parts of the same Nordic entity. Perhaps due to the climate of the harsh north, few immigrants have found their way to the North over time. But since the 1970s, immigration has increased throughout Europe and large numbers have made their way to Sweden. In Denmark, Norway, and Finland political AIPs entered the national political stage as a response to the rise of immigration, although these countries experienced lower numbers. But an influential AIP in Sweden did not see the light of day until the mid-2000s.

This paper seeks to extend previous arguments for the lack of a “successful” AIP in Sweden until 2006 (Green-Pedersen & Odman, 2008; Rydgren, 2010).<sup>2</sup> This is done by examining the causes of the anomaly up until 2006 and showing that a change in these causes has since created a favorable environment for an AIP to be established and successful. Until 2006, the anomaly was mostly explained as a result of strong socio-economic cleavages and the low priority of immigration as a national issue in Sweden.

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<sup>1</sup> Iceland and Denmark’s associated territories, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, are also considered a part of the Nordic countries, but will not be included in this present study.

<sup>2</sup> A “successful” AIP is an AIP that has received 5% of the votes in three consecutive national elections (Art, 2011).

Socio-economic cleavages were seen as high rates of class voting and low rates of party switchers. I claim that since 2006, the weakening of such socio-economic cleavages and an increase in the politicization of immigration in Sweden have created a favorable environment for an AIP to become successful.

The Sweden Democrats are set to have the most successful election of their time in September 2018. This will no longer make Sweden an anomaly among the majority of European countries. A conventional narrative of Sweden as being uniquely friendly towards immigrants have long dominated the perception of the country. This has been informed by high levels of immigration (compared to its Nordic neighbors) and no AIP (again, compared to its neighbors). But this narrative is complicated when considering that Sweden has higher rates of right-wing extremist violence per capita than any of its three neighbors combined. I will here attempt to address this puzzle by drawing on previous work on this Swedish exceptionalism and extend them to show how a long-standing tradition of no AIPs has recently changed. However, the structural and cultural explanations for this change as presented are not the only factors in the complex story of an AIP formation. Matters internal to the AIP, the economic story of populism, and different levels of racism can all contribute to the story and will be laid out later in the paper.

## **II. Successful AIPs**

The phenomenon of AIPs is spreading and so is the associated terminology that tries to capture its full meaning. The most common titles for these parties are “nationalist,” “far-right,” “right-wing,” “xenophobic,” “populist,” and “anti-immigrant”

parties. Perhaps none of the terms fully captures the diversity among the various AIPs, but since a common theme is the highlighted stance against immigration, I use the term “anti-immigrant party.” I do so with clear reference to Denmark’s most recent and prominent AIP, Dansk Folkeparti (“Danish People’s Party” or DPP), Norway’s Fremskrittspartiet (“Progress Party” or FrP), Finland’s Perussuomalaiset (“The Finns Party” or FP), and Sweden’s Sverige Demokraterna (“Sweden Democrats” or SD). My dependent variable is AIP success. Art considers an AIP “successful” when it receives over 5% of the votes in three consecutive national elections (Art, 2011, 4). I choose this measurement as I am looking for established and long-term influential AIPs in Sweden, with brief comparisons to the rest of the Nordic countries, not just the existence of short-lived and newly established AIPs from time to time. I assume that long-lived AIPs have a better opportunity to shape policies and debates as they solidify their presence in Parliament.

### **III. The Nordic Context**

The current study is not a comparative study, but I still believe that we can better approach the puzzle of the Swedish anomaly by putting it in context of its Nordic neighbors. I here include a brief synopsis of the emergence of the successful AIPs in Denmark, Norway, and Finland for contextual purposes. There will be a slight emphasis on Denmark in examples throughout the study.

## Denmark

Denmark is home to one of Western Europe's oldest and most influential AIPs. Fremskridtspartiet ("Progress Party" or PP) took Denmark by storm in a landslide election in 1973. As the first Danish AIP, PP received 15.9% of the national vote. The influence of an AIP has remained in the Danish Parliament since, although the impact of PP would dwindle in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Betz, 1994). In 1995 two prominent figures of PP broke out to form what is still known today as the DPP. The formation of DPP secured a continuing presence of an AIP in the Danish Parliament. DPP received 7.4% of the national votes in its first election in 1998 and provided necessary parliamentary support for the minority conservative-liberal coalition from 2001-2011. This position gave DPP the ability to steer policies (particularly on the issue of immigration) without taking any official seats in the government.

Although a Social Democratic government was in place from 2011-2015, DPP remained the third-biggest political party in the Parliament with much bargaining power. The 2015 national election took DPP to its so-far highest peak with 21.1% of the votes. They still chose to remain outside of government, in spite of being the second largest political party in Parliament. This decision, again, positioned them as the necessary parliamentary support for a minority conservative-liberal government coalition. With this brief overview in mind, and by extending the influence of PP through the break-off party DPP (I justify this with the argument that the majority of the party platform and party



membership and leadership continued through DPP), we can determine that Denmark has had the presence of a successful AIP since 1977.<sup>3</sup>

## **Norway**

Although Norway's FrP has had strong electoral power for many years, it has had significantly less policy influence than DPP. FrP received 5% at its first election in 1973, where after votes died down for some years, only to return with 13% of the vote in 1989. It has been in parliament every election except for one since 1973 but would only have been considered successful by Art by 1997. It peaked with 22.9% of the votes in 2009 but has gone down to 15.3% at the most recent election in 2017. Unlike DPP, FrP accepted an invitation to join the center-right government and has been in power since 2013 with seven out of nineteen ministerial posts. Until then, considerable efforts had been made by the centrist parties to exclude the FrP from any significant influence on policymaking.

## **Finland**

Finland's current AIP, FP, has been around since 1995. It rose out of the ashes of its predecessor, Suomen Maaseudun Puolue ("Finnish Rural Party"). The Rural Party collapsed after having marked Finnish politics by its agrarian and populist agenda since 1959 (they received over 5% of the votes in four out of ten national elections). Similar to SD, FP experienced a rise in the mid-2000s and have been in Parliament since. As they

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noticing that PP received less than 5% of the votes in the 1984 and the 1987 elections (3.6 and 4.8%). They nevertheless remained in Parliament but would not have been considered successful by Art during those two election cycles.

have only received over 5% of the votes in the past two elections (2011 and 2015), they have yet to be considered successful by Art's standard.

Nevertheless, FP joined the governing coalition in 2015, after becoming the second largest party in Finland. The alliance only lasted two years as the party split in 2017 and FP left the government. A defector group, Blue Reform, continuously supports the coalition, but the now opposition party, FP, is still weakened by the split.

#### **IV. Sweden: The Nordic Anomaly**

Sweden has seen a large influx of immigrants since the 1970s. According to Sweden's official website, beginning in the early 1970s, it is estimated that some 45,000 people with Chilean background now call Sweden home after fleeing Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship from 1973-1990 (sweden.se, 2016). In the 1980s and 1990s, many Middle Eastern and North African immigrants as well as 100,000 Bosnians after the Balkan conflicts arrived in Sweden. South American immigrants continued to come. After joining the Schengen zone in 2001, immigration continuously increased with about 29,000 immigrants from outside the Schengen zone arriving during the 2000s. The refugee crisis in 2014-2015 would completely change the dynamics of Swedish immigration. Although many immigrants from the 1970s-2000s had come from non-Western countries, still a large part of Sweden's immigrants was from predominantly Catholic and Western-minded countries. In 2014 alone, Sweden received more than 100,000 immigrants, the majority of these being Syrian, Eritrean and stateless refugees. In 2015 this number rose to 160,000, down to 140,000 in 2016, and 125,000 in 2017.

Sweden now takes in more immigrants per capita than any other country in Europe (Hinde & Silberstein, 2017).

The large amounts of immigrants did not result in a long-standing successful AIP. After several unsuccessful attempts to establish influential AIPs in Sweden,<sup>4</sup> SD emerged in 1988. SD remained a smaller party not represented in the national Parliament but instead represented in local communes and the European Parliament until 2006. That year they rose above 1.5% of the national vote for the first time, achieving 2.9%. Had they run in Denmark, that result would have taken them above the electoral threshold of 2%, whereas the result was still well below the 4% Swedish electoral threshold needed to gain representation in Parliament. The two following national elections were very fruitful for SD, which received 5.7% of the votes in the 2010 general election and 12.9% in the 2014 election (see Table 1, below).

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<sup>4</sup> Bevara Sverige Svenskt (“Keep Sweden Swedish”) was an anti-immigrant movement formed in 1972 which later merged with the populist party Framstegspartiet (“Progress Party”). The merged party became known as Sverigepartiet (“Sweden Party”) but regroup as the Sweden Democrats just two years later in 1988.

**Table 1: Swedish Election Results 1976-2014 (percent)**

Swedish Election Results 1976 – 2014 (percent)												
Party	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
V	4,8	5,6	5,6	5,4	5,9	4,5	6,2	12,0	8,4	5,9	5,6	5,7
S	42,7	43,2	45,6	44,7	43,2	37,7	45,2	36,4	39,9	35,0	30,7	31,0
MP	-	-	1,6	1,5	5,5	3,4	5,0	4,5	4,6	5,2	7,3	6,9
C	24,1	18,1	15,5	10,1	11,3	8,5	7,7	5,1	6,2	7,9	6,6	6,1
FP	11,1	10,6	5,9	14,2	12,2	9,1	7,2	4,7	13,4	7,5	7,0	5,4
KD	1,4	1,4	1,9	2,3	2,9	7,2	4,1	11,8	9,1	6,6	5,6	4,6
M	15,6	20,3	23,6	21,3	18,3	21,9	22,4	22,9	15,3	26,2	30,1	23,3
NYD	-	-	-	-	-	6,7	1,2	-	-	-	-	-
SD	-	-	-	-	0,02	0,1	0,3	0,4	1,4	2,9	5,7	12,9
FI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,7	0,4	3,1
Minor Parties	0,3	0,8	0,3	0,5	0,7	0,9	0,7	2,2	1,7	2,1	1,0	1,0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Turnout	91,8	90,7	91,4	89,9	86,0	86,7	86,8	81,4	80,1	82,0	84,6	85,8

*Comment: Parliamentary elections only; official results. The initials for the parties are the customary ones in Sweden: V=Left Party, S=Social Democratic, C=Center, FP=Liberal, M=Conservative, KD=Christian Democrat, MP=Green, NYD=New Democrats, SD=Sweden Democrats and FI=Feminist Initiative.*

**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies (SNES), *Swedish Voting Behavior*, 2017.

The 2018 national elections are likely to be the first year of a successful AIP in Sweden, as a third consecutive performance above 5% seems inevitable. In fact, a June 2018 opinion poll shows that SD is estimated to receive 28.5% of the votes if there was an election tomorrow (yougov.se, 2018). That is up from an estimated 19.6% in March 2018 (yougov.se, 2018; IPSOS, 2018; SIFO, 2018; Frick; 2018). Such a result would make SD the biggest party in Sweden with a large margin over the second biggest party, the Social Democrats, who received 22% in the same opinion poll. Although using opinion polls as legitimate markers is difficult, any such result will make SD not only a successful AIP by Art’s standards, but also in a position for power that no other AIP has been in Nordic countries. It will be harder for any coalition to form around and might for the first time force the other parties to include an only recent “extreme” AIP in the nation’s government.

## V. Claims

Two claims have stood the test of explaining the Swedish anomaly up until 2006. These claims take an external perspective. They account for the structural and cultural conditions surrounding the establishment of AIPs that can either prevent or enable their success. Firstly, structural conditions of deep socio-economic cleavages have “protected” Sweden from the rise of an AIP (Green-Pedersen & Odmalm, 2008; Rydgren, 2010). Secondly, cultural conditions seen in the lack of the politicization of immigration issues in Sweden has lowered the chances of a successful AIP (Green-Pedersen & Odmalm, 2008; Rydgren, 2010). Although different, these claims are complementary and act as two sides of the same coin in the process of party formations. The cultural aspects of the phenomenon explain the areas that a merely structural approach does not cover. Although the structural factors are to some degree easier measured than cultural factors are, I believe the cultural element has a vital part to play.

Since SD has risen to an almost “successful” level over the past decade, it is imperative that we examine if the same variables can explain this new phenomenon. As such, these two independent variables will not only explain the lack of a Swedish AIP but also that a change in these variables has led to a successful Swedish AIP. I expect to see this through the weakening of socio-economic cleavages and the increase in the politicization of immigration issues in Sweden.

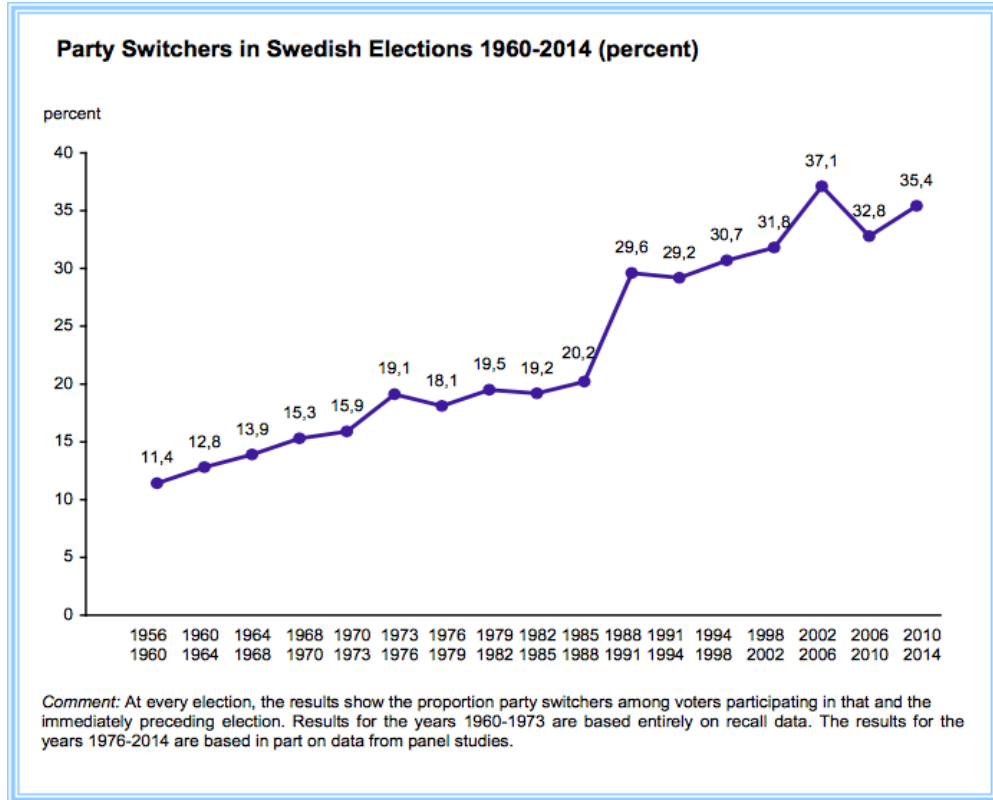
### **Socio-Economic Cleavages**

Deep socio-economic cleavages have “protected” Sweden from the rise of an AIP. Socio-economic cleavages are divisions of voters by social class or identification.

Cleavages manifest themselves in party loyalty based on socio-economic (or “class”) voting (i.e., workers voting for Social Democrats and the middle and upper-class voting for the Conservatives). These cleavages have long been weakening in Denmark (Rydgren, 2010), and have recently been on the decline in Sweden as well. As party loyalty decreases, voter volatility increases. Party loyalty can be measured by changes in party switchers and levels of class-voting, something that can lead to floating voters for AIPs to more easily recruit.

**Party Switchers.** Party switching has dramatically increased in Sweden since the early 1990s. Party switching indicates that a voter changes their party of choice from one election to another. As party switching increase, AIPs are more likely to gain votes from floating voters. Figure 1 shows data on party switchers in Swedish elections from 1960-2014 depicts the percentage of Swedish voters that changed the party they voted on from the party they voted on in the previous general election. Note especially the changes from the 1991 election and again during the 2002 election.

**Figure 1: Party Switchers in Swedish Elections 1960-2014 (percent)**



**Source:** SNES, *Swedish Voting Behavior*, 2017.

As we can see, party switchers have generally been on the rise since 1960. Worth noting is the high jump in party switchers from the 1988 election to the 1991 election when New Democracy entered the political stage. Although their success was short-lived and their decline in the 1994 election would explain a significant decrease in party switchers that election, the trend remains high. This signaled that the mode of party loyalty had changed in Sweden and that the following elections were expected to be marked by higher levels of party switching.

The increased voter volatility paved the way for SD in 2006. Previous to this, the general trend had been upward-moving, but we see the highest jump in the percentage of party switchers since the elections of New Democracy in 1991 from 2002-2006. The

2006 elections, the same year that SD secured 2.9% of the votes, saw a high jump from 31.8% to 37.1% of voters changing parties from the previous election in 2002. The percentage continues to decline in the following election,<sup>5</sup> but goes up again in 2014 when SD secures 12.9% of the votes, up from 5.7% in 2010. It is very likely that the increase from 2010-2014 of 32.8-35.4% of party switchers is mainly explained by the rise of SD and the subsequent decline of Moderaterne (“Moderates,” a Swedish Conservative Party or M) (see Table 1).

The same election volatility is seen in the decline of voters who vote for the same party three consecutive elections. Figure 2 shows the percentage of Swedish voters voting for the same (orange) or different (grey) party three elections in a row.

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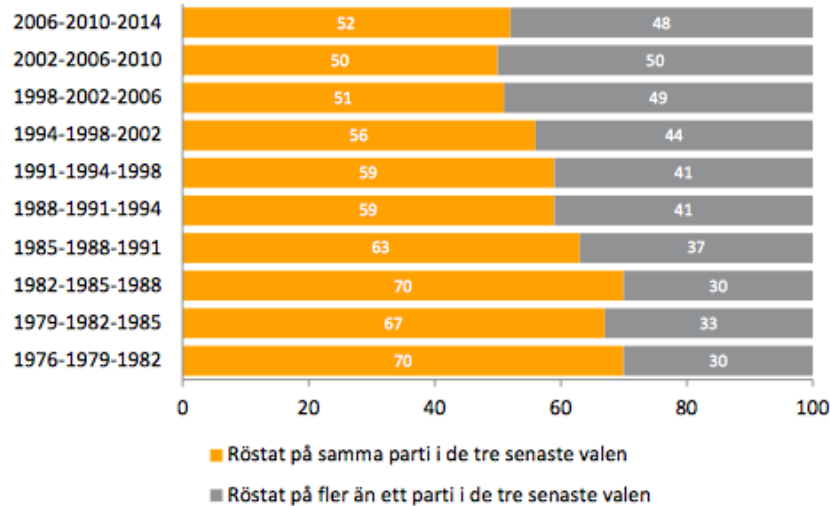
<sup>5</sup> Explanations for the otherwise high jump could be seen in the Moderates who had experienced a significant dip in their vote share in the 2002 election, a number that went up again and stayed high from the 2006 elections and onwards. Additionally, the results in 2006 also included 2.1% of the votes to “other parties” and 0.7% of the general vote which went to the newly established *Feminist Initiative* party, FI (see Table 1).



**Figure 2: Individual Level Three Election Volatility in Swedish General Elections.**

**The Proportion of Voters Voting for the Same/Different Parties at Three Consecutive Elections 1974-2014 (percent)**

**Trevalsrlighet i svenska riksdagsval. Andel som rstar p samma/olika partier i tre p varandra foljande riksdagsval 1976-2014 (procent).**  
*Figure 4. Individual level three election volatility in swedish general elections. Proportion of voters voting for the same/different parties at three consecutive elections 1976-2014 (Per cent).*



**Kommentar:** Uppgifter om partival i tre efter varandra foljande riksdagsval bygger p analyser av valundersökningarnas tvåvalspaneler och vilar p panelernas valminne från tidpunkt 1, uppgivet partival vid tidpunkt 2 och uppgivet partival vid tidpunkt 3. Antalet svarande för de tre senaste mellanvalspanelerna är 650, 795 respektive 928 personer. För de tidigare panelanalyserna varierar antalet svarande med mellan 1 000-1 500 personer.

**Source:** Statistics Sweden, *Democracy Statistics Report no 21: Floating voters*, 2016.

Following the trend as depicted in Figure 1, the volatility of voters is also increasing here.

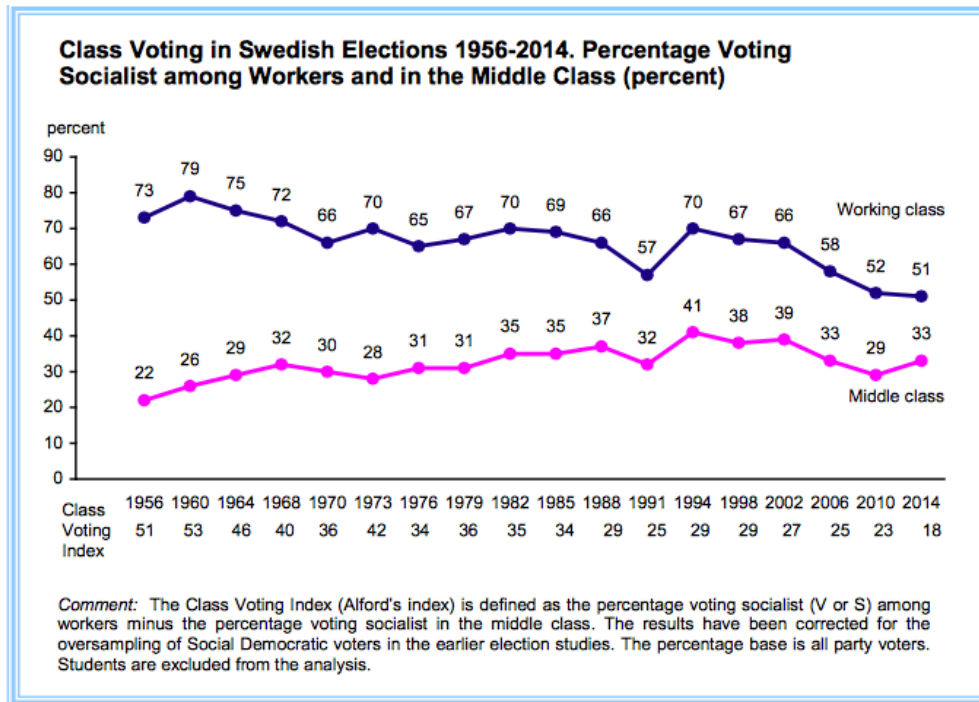
Figure 2 shows an overall decreasing percentage of voters voting for the same party three elections in a row from 1976-2014. Assuming that as voter volatility goes up, the likelihood of an AIP’s ability to recruit new voters increases, the voting patterns for Sweden indicate that such recruiting grounds are now better than ever.

**Class voting.** Another aspect of socio-economic cleavages is class voting. As political parties are losing traction all over the Western democratic world, so are

traditional “class parties” (Mair, 2013). As class parties lose their grip on their traditional voters, party loyalty declines, and more maneuver room for an AIP to compete for the votes opens up. This is also the case in Sweden. Figure 3 depicts the percentage of workers and middle-class citizens that voted socialist from 1956-2014. Traditionally, workers have been more likely to vote socialist. As the size of the middle-class has increased, the number of traditional workers has declined. Some of these former workers, now middle-class, continue to vote socialist. However, the overall decline of the socialist votes among these groups have been larger than the increase in middle-class votes for the same.

**Figure 3: Class Voting in Swedish Elections 1956-2014.**

**Percentage Voting Socialist among Workers and in the Middle Class (percent)**

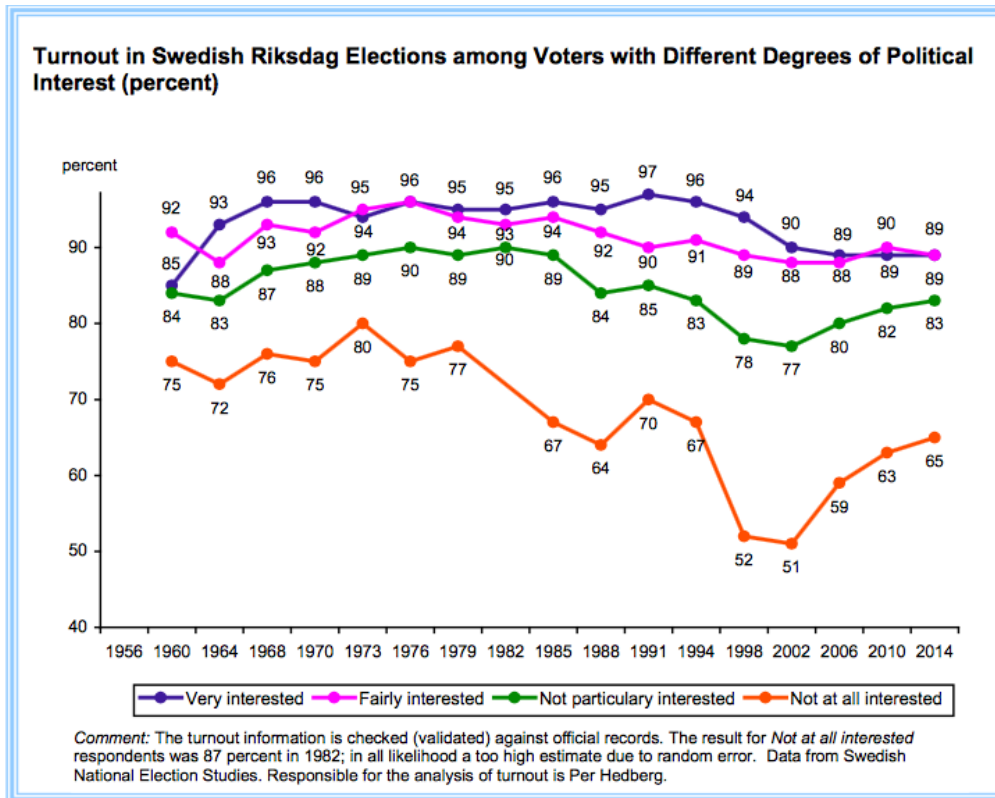


**Source:** SNES, *Swedish Voting Behavior*, 2017.

Class voting among workers has been on the decline since 1960. After a deep dip in 1991 with the appearance of ND, the numbers went up again in 1994 and have been on a steady decline since similar to that of previous decades. Although not dramatic, the decline has been reaching lower numbers than ever before in 2010 and 2014, indicating higher volatility among voters than before. We also see a decline among middle-class voters from 1994-2010, although this increases from 2010-2014. Although the decline in class voters among workers and socialist parties does not directly explain the rise of SD, it shows a more volatile political climate in which fewer are loyal to their old parties. Nevertheless, as most of SD's voters have come from the Moderates, a decline among middle-class voters have arguably opened up for the establishment of SD since 2002.

SD mobilizes otherwise nonparticipating Swedish voters. Besides voter migration from Moderates to SD since 2002, it is likely that many of SD votes come from voters with low political interest. Figure 4 shows turnout in Swedish general elections among voters with different degrees of political interest.

**Figure 4: Turnout in Swedish Riksdag Elections among Voters with Different Degrees of Political Interest (percent)**



**Source:** SNES, *Swedish Voting Behavior*, 2017.

Not surprisingly, the voters who are “not at all interested” in politics vote the least. However, their participation has gone up drastically since 2002 compared to their 1994 and 1998 turnout. Similarly, the voters who are “not particularly interested” have also had higher turnouts since 2002. Although this does not account for the decline in participation among these two disinterested groups in the 1990s, it is interesting to note that the last two times their participation has increased since 1985 for the “not

particularly interested” group and 1979 for the “not at all interested” group have been the years with an AIP on the ballot.<sup>6</sup>

Voter volatility has gone up in Sweden. Volatility has created voters more receptive to AIP recruiting as they switch parties more, are less likely to vote for the same party three elections in a row, and as class voting decrease. Additionally, there has been an increase in voter turnout among politically disinterested voters, indicating that additional dealignment/realignment mechanisms are shifting in Sweden.

### **Politicization of Immigration**

The politicization of immigration issues impacts the likelihood for the success of an AIP. The politicization of immigration issues (along with agenda setting and framing) increase public attention and awareness on the subject. This can act as an advantage for those political parties with platforms primarily on the issues of immigration. It is partly due to a culture of political correctness and a hesitancy to acknowledge issues surrounding immigration and racism that is found notably in Swedish, and not to the same degree in Danish culture (Pred, 2000). The use of the terminology ‘political correctness’ is here meant to indicate the culturally embedded taboos and inability or lack of political will to discuss specific difficult topics in public.

Political correctness hinders the establishment of AIPs because it keeps immigration from being discussed in public. Thus the “voicing” of concerns is not legitimized or facilitated. New research shows a beginning trend between the absence of such a political “voice” channel (such as an AIP) and higher levels of right-wing violence

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<sup>6</sup> Future versions of this paper will here include dealignment theory and data on SD’s success among these groups.

(Ravndal, 2017). Although it is possible that Sweden could be an example of such a pattern, more research is needed to solidify this theory. Nevertheless, the politicization of immigration issues is now on the rise in Sweden. Table 2 shows the top election issues among voters in Swedish elections from 1970-2014.

**Table 2: Election Issues in Sweden 1979-2014.**

**Percentage of Party Voters Who on an Open-Ended Question**

**Mentioned the Various Issue Areas as Important for Their Party Choice (percent)**

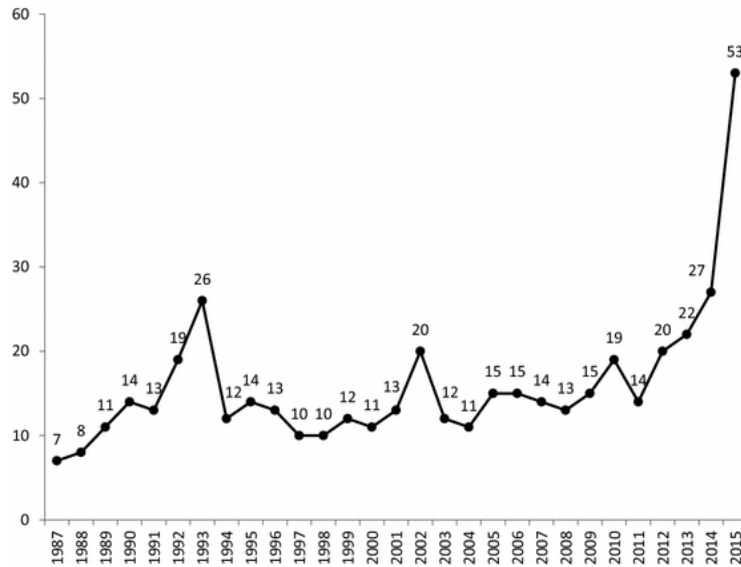
Issue Area	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Health Care/Welfare	4	12	19	15	22	21	28	36	32	37	43
Education	6	3	3	2	4	6	20	29	24	26	41
Full Employment	18	29	25	5	23	41	34	7	35	31	30
Immigration/Refugees	0	0	1	2	8	5	3	10	5	9	23
Environment	6	7	22	46	25	20	12	8	11	13	20
Pensions/Care of Elderly	5	8	8	9	20	9	17	20	21	19	17
Economy	9	14	14	8	20	30	14	10	11	17	15
Taxes	17	8	20	19	18	9	17	14	15	15	11
Gender Equality	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	4	1	5
Family/Child Care	8	8	17	16	18	13	15	14	15	6	4
Energy/Nuclear Power	26	2	1	3	3	2	3	1	5	2	2
Public vs Private Sector	5	2	7	3	4	4	3	4	2	2	2
Agriculture	1	1	2	1	3	1	1	2	3	1	2
Housing	5	2	2	4	5	1	0	2	1	1	1
Religion/Moral	2	1	1	1	3	1	2	2	1	0	1
EU/EMU	0	0	0	1	10	14	6	5	0	0	1
Wage Earners' Funds	4	33	11	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Percentage of voters who mentioned at least one issue	63	76	78	72	82	79	77	73	80	86	90

**Source:** SNES, *Swedish Voting Behavior*, 2017.

When respondents were asked an open-ended question about the issues important to their party choice, the salience of the immigration issue rose from 9-23% from 2010-2014. A similar increase is backed up by a study that goes one year beyond the study presented in Table 2 (see Figure 5). In Figure 5 we again see the importance of the immigration issues

for voters but see a towering increase in 2015, the year following SD's 12.9% of the votes and the global attention to the refugee crisis.

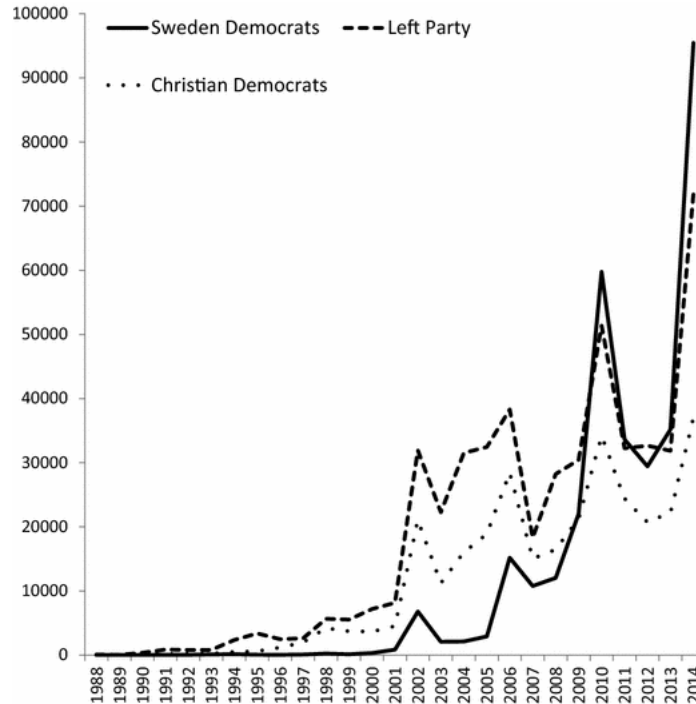
**Figure 5: The Importance of the Immigration Issue, 1987-2015 (percent)**



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

It is difficult to tell whether the politicization is a result of SD's prominence or whether the politicization has resulted in more opportunities for SD (Rydgren, 2010). It is likely that both are the case. But it is undoubted that SD is changing their image and becoming more mainstream (Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2016). Figure 6 shows the number of times SD were mentioned in the Swedish media, compared to two other smaller political parties.

**Figure 6: Mentioning of SD in Swedish Printed Press and Web, 1988-2014**



**Source:** Rydgren and van der Meiden (2016).

The increase in the importance immigration issues played for Swedish voters as well as SD's media attention indicates a heightened interest in immigration that is likely due to an increase in the politicization of immigration.

## **VI. Other Explanations**

The Swedish anomaly is a complicated story. Although my primary focus in this paper is on two specific structural and cultural phenomena that explain the changes in Sweden, there are many other factors commonly used in such explanations. Following are brief synopses of popular notions of what might have attributed to the Swedish anomaly.



**A Difference in Levels of Racism.** Danes are xenophobes and Swedes are xenophiles. This is perhaps the most common notion expressed about the Swedish anomaly, when compared to its smaller neighbor to the south, Denmark. In a recent study performed by Pew Research Center, 25% of Danes scored higher than five on a 10-point scale of nationalism, anti-immigrant, and anti-minority sentiment (Pew Research Center, 2018, 75). Only 8% of Swedes scored higher than five. To infer that Danes, therefore, are more racist introduces three problems. First, although Danes often rank higher in self-perceived racism studies, expressed racism does not necessarily generate racist behavior. Secondly, this does not explain the success of SD among Swedes, a party that has an expressed anti-immigrant policy platform very similar to DPP's. This could be explained by the lag in the politicization of immigration issues in Sweden and perhaps a reluctance on behalf of Swedes to brand themselves as anti-immigrant. Thirdly, Sweden has had higher levels of right-wing extremist violence per capita than any other European country from 1990 to 2015 (Ravndal, 2017). Additionally, it has experienced more right-wing violence than have Denmark, Norway, and Finland combined in the same period (ibid.). These three points challenge the idea (often portrayed by Swedish elites (Pred, 2000)) that Swedes like strangers/immigrants more and therefore have not had an AIP.

**A Difference in Electoral Thresholds.** Another common explanation refers to the difference in electoral thresholds. Sweden requires a political party to receive 4% of the general vote in a national election to obtain seats in parliament, whereas Denmark only requires 2%. Although the Danish threshold is unusually low (only the Netherlands with their 0.67% is lower worldwide), both are lower than Art's 5% threshold, and there is,

therefore, no definitive difference when considering an AIP successful. However, there is a significant difference when considering a party's ability to gain an advantage by being represented in Parliament earlier on. However, when searching through all political parties on the general ballot in Sweden from 1910-1998, I find no AIP that received between 2-4% of the vote (Statistics Sweden, 1998). That leads me to conclude that the argument of "had an attempting AIP only run in Denmark, the AIP would have gotten electoral seats" is wrong. The only time any other AIP besides SD obtained seats in Parliament was New Democracy in 1991, but they did so with such a high margin that a lower electoral threshold would not have mattered. The only exception to this claim is the 2006 election in which SD received 2.9% of the general vote. This would have given them seats in Parliament in Denmark but did not otherwise deter them as they have received well over 4% of the vote in both elections since then.

**A Difference in Political Strategies among Centrist Parties.** A 2011 study shows "a dismissive issue strategy [as adopted by the established Centrist parties] has been effective in reducing support for anti-immigrant parties" (Dahlström, Carl and Peter Esaiasson, 2011, 1). This theory explains the Swedish anomaly by showing significant effort on behalf of the Centrist parties to dismiss any attempts of a Swedish AIP to be established and to receive political backing by any other parliament party. However, this does not explain the sudden rise of SD since 2010 (the study was submitted before the 2010 general election), particularly when bearing in mind the continued dismissive strategy as portrayed by the Centrist parties in Sweden since the entrance of SD. Norway's centrist parties likewise attempted to keep FrP at bay but succumbed to its

sheer number of vote-shares and invited them to join the governing coalition in 2013. The same happened in Finland in 2015. Only Denmark is an outlier here as DPP does not wish to join the government, in spite of being the second biggest party in the country. It is possible that the election results in Sweden in September 2018 will change the political strategies of the centrist parties, as they have in the other Nordic countries once the AIPs became significant in size.

**The Economy of Populism.** It is commonly argued that the stagnation of the economy since 2008 is contributing to the rise of populism across Europe. But that does not explain the Swedish anomaly until 2006. The Swedish case might in fact, at first sight, suggest that the decline in class voting indicates that the economy matters less now. But the economic stagnation might overall explain part of the sudden rise of SD since 2006. To test this argument, we would have to control for economic changes over time within Sweden. Although that is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the influencing factor that the economy has likely played in SD's rise since 2006.

**Matters Internal to the AIP.** The establishment and breakthrough of AIPs are primarily due to their organizational strength, leaders, and local candidate base (Mudde, 2007; Art, 2011; Loxbo & Bolin 2016). Art emphasizes internal factors, such as party organization and the quality of party activists, as key elements in making an AIP successful. To differentiate successful from unsuccessful AIPs (and political parties in general), we have to look at the internal life of the party. I agree that internal matters are an aspect of party formations and declines that cannot be overlooked. It is likely that internal matters help

explain the disappearance of New Democracy after their good election results in 1991. It can also help us understand SD's ability to rise to the moment in a time of political volatility in Sweden. But I claim that it does not explain the entirety of the Swedish anomaly and more recent success of SD.

**Proportional Representation is Conducive to the Emergence of AIPs.** Lastly, it is often argued that electoral systems of proportional representation are favorable to the rise of any extreme parties, including AIPs. Although I do not dispute this argument, this argument does not explain the variation in the success of AIPs as all four Nordic countries have proportional representation as their electoral system.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Previous research has attempted to explain the lack of a Swedish AIP until 2006. This was done by showing that salient socio-economic cleavages had protected Sweden against the emergence of an AIP and that immigration as an issue had been of lower importance among Swedish voters. Both resulted in structural and cultural conditions that were not conducive to the establishment of an AIP. I have here built on mentioned research by attempting to explain how these same patterns have changed and created a space for SD to become successful.

Waning traditional voting patterns allow fringe-parties to monopolize on floating voters. SD is doing so successfully during a time when voter volatility in Sweden is increasing. Party alliances based on traditional socio-economic patterns have been decreasing, as seen through the decrease in class voting. That is also backed up by the

rising numbers of party switchers. When fewer voters stay with the same party as in previous elections, it indicates that voters not previously available are now susceptible to a party change. SD has been able to capitalize on this unfreezing of the traditional voting system, and although the changes did not start when SD arrived, they have been able to capitalize on a changing political landscape and have succeeded in disrupting the system further.

The issue of immigration is now front and center of the Swedish public debate. That was not always the case, and a heightened politicization of immigration is likely benefitting SD. Although it is hard to prove whether the politicization is a cause or a consequence of the rise of SD, it is a part of a changing culture that is making anti-immigrant stances more legitimate. We see that in the increasing and growing media presence of SD. The culture change around the politicization of immigration thus contributes to the mechanism of moving voters towards SD.

The structural and cultural aspects are not the only determinants of the political change. I have in this paper given a brief overview of the many possible explanations for the change in Sweden. Some are more liable than others, but I hope to have painted the picture of the complex nature of this phenomenon, in spite of giving my primary focus to just two aspects in this paper.

It is clear that Sweden was a Nordic anomaly for many years. But as the political landscape changes, it is becoming more similar to its neighbors. However, we still need to address the difference in the speed and the size of growth that SD, and multiple other recent AIPs or right-wing populist movements in the West, have experienced compared to DPP and others that have slowly and steadily increased over time. How they differ has

implications for how we understand AIP formations as well as how we tackle their disruptive nature. Appropriate solutions are unlikely to be found until much more of the life of these AIPs is understood.

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