Niklas Bolin   **Nicholas Aylott**
Mid Sweden University   Södertörn University

RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTY LEADERSHIP IN SWEDEN: ONE OF A KIND OR ONE OF THE CROWD?

Authors
Niklas Bolin is Associate Professor of Political Science, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall. His research interests include elections, political parties and party systems with a special focus on new parties. Previously he has published in journals including J*ournal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *Party Politics*, *West European Politics* and *Scandinavian Political Studies*.

ORCID no. 0000–0002–2597–363X
e-mail: niklas.bolin@miun.se

Nicholas Aylott is Associate Professor of Political Science at Södertörn University, Stockholm. His main field is comparative politics, with a thematic focus on political parties. He has written and co-written books on the impact of European integration on party strategy and organization, including Political Parties in Multi-Level Polities: The Nordic Countries Compared (Palgrave, 2013), and has had his research published in various journals.

ORCID no. 0000–0001–9346–2324
e-mail: nicholas.aylott@sh.se

Abstract
Are right-wing populist parties fundamentally different from other types? This article explores one aspect of what we call the exceptionalist thesis. The thesis could be applied to a wide range of party characteristics, but here we focus on leadership. In this context, our case study is of the Sweden Democrats (SD). First, we examine how SD selects its leader. Second, we assess how leadership works in practice in SD, especially regarding party management. We also review how this leadership style has gone down with voters. We mix our own interpretation of these data with other scholars' assessments. Generally, we find little evidence, at least in this exploratory inquiry, to support the exceptionalist thesis.

Keywords: political parties, party leadership, right-wing populism, Sweden Democrats, Sweden

Introduction

The rise of the right-wing populists is one of the most important ongoing changes in party politics around Europe. In the last two decades, this party family has grown from mostly comprising small, pariah outfits to featuring some of the biggest parties in their respective national party systems. While societal change has surely facilitated this rise, many scholars have also pointed to "supply-side" factors. Variation in these parties' electoral success, for example, is said to be partly explained by ideological and organisational factors (Art 2011; Loxbo and Bolin 2016). Some argue that one other supply-side factor – leadership – is even more important in explaining why some right-wing populists are electorally successful.

Not all scholars agree that successful right-wing populist parties depend on a specific type of leadership. Some are led, or have been led, by fairly ordinary figures, rather than some supposedly strong or charismatic individual. One such case is that of the Sweden Democrats – in Swedish, Sverigedemokraterna, often abbreviated to SD. It is one of the country's younger parties, formed only in 1988. (by 2019, by contrast, four of the eight parties in the Swedish parliament were over a century old.) It won parliamentary seats for the first time even more recently, in 2010. Yet the effect of its breakthrough on Swedish politics was immense. A party system that was renowned for its stability, and in which SD was only the fourth new entrant since the 1930s, was thrown off its axis by this particular newcomer.

What caused SD's spectacular rise? The effect of party leadership is, of course, hard to isolate. Many observers would probably say that the effect had been considerable. It is possible, however, that the causal effect was actually the reverse – that is, an impression of successful leadership was amplified by the success of the party. Regardless of whether leadership is seen as cause or effect of party success, or (perhaps most realistically) as both, it is well worth studying this aspect of SD. Party organisational culture in Sweden has several distinct characteristics, especially in respect to the role of leadership. Identifying the degree to which SD shares those characteristics may allow us greater general insight into SD and the sort of party with which it is most commonly compared.

In particular, this article explores what we call the *exceptionalist thesis*, which holds that right-wing populist parties are fundamentally different to mainstream parties. While the thesis is relevant to ideology, strategy and organisation, we concentrate here on leadership. More specifically, we study the case of SD and question whether its leadership deviates in any substantial way from that in the other Swedish parties. We limit our empirical ambitions to two aspects of leadership. First, we explore how SD selects its leader. Here we are interested in both the official story, that is, how the selection formally takes place; and the real story, the actual practice of the leader selection (cf. Katz and Mair 1992). Second, we assess how leadership works in practice in SD. Here, again, we focus on two aspects: leader characteristics and leader popularity among voters. We use a variety of data, both quantitative (election results, voters surveys) and qualitative (historical description). Although our contribution is largely descriptive, we combine our own interpretation of these data with other scholars' assessments. The article is thus largely exploratory in character.

The article develops as follows. First, we elaborate on the exceptionalist thesis, emphasising leadership especially. After describing SD's history and impact, we examine the institutional characteristics of its leadership, with SD compared to other Swedish parties. Next we look at the role of individual party leaders. Naturally, Jimmie Åkesson, by far the longest-serving SD leader, who took over in 2005 and was still in charge at the time of writing, takes a prominent place in this section. Finally, we draw tentative conclusions about both the significance of leadership on SD's fortunes and the extent to which the party, which deviates from Swedish norms in many ways, deviates in respect to leadership, too.

The exceptionalist thesis

Right-wing populist parties are commonly referred to as extraordinary or exceptional. Some even study the party category without reference to established mainstream concepts

and theories, as if it is "a pathology, and can thus only be explained outside of the 'normal'" (Mudde 2010:1171). In terms of policy, the parties are often said to have extreme stances on, for example, immigration and nationalism. They are also commonly referred to as anti-establishment or even anti-system. Organisationally, they are seen as centralised, with grass-roots members enjoying little influence (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). Because of these deviations from normalcy, right-wing populist parties are, it is sometimes claimed, also evaluated differently by voters and by other parties (van der Brug et al 2000).

The exceptionalism thesis is not undisputed. Ideologically, for example, Mudde (2010:1178) suggests that such parties' ideas are, in fact, "not alien to the mainstream ideologies of western democracy". Voters support them for reasons that are similar to those that apply to other parties (van der Brug et al 2000). As government parties, they are not necessarily bound to fail, despite being anti-establishment (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). Yet the idea that these parties' electoral progress is dependent on extraordinary leaders seems to have gained traction in recent years. It builds, in turn, on at least two partly separable ideas about how leadership in right-wing populist parties differs from leadership in mainstream parties (Mudde 2007).

Internal leadership essentially refers to party organisation. It is sometimes suggested that right-wing populist parties are leader-centric and take decisions in a top-down fashion. "[A]ll parties analyzed", declare the editors of a recent collection of case studies, "typically represent the most centralized political formations in their respective political systems" (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016:233). Another study finds that the far-right party family displays lower levels of intra-party democracy than does any other (Bolin et al 2017).

External leadership, meanwhile, refers to the electoral arena. Certainly, leaders do seem to greatly affect parties' electoral support, except maybe to a limited extent (Mughan 2015). In general, the importance of a party leader's own personal traits – cognitive, physical, communicative and managerial capacity, for example – are often emphasised (Bennister et al 2015). In relation to right-wing populist party leaders in particular, the elusive quality of charisma is often assumed to be crucial (cf. Lubbers et al. 2002). Yet it does not seem to be a necessary condition for electoral success (McDonnell 2016). In a survey of forty-five populist contemporary European populist leaders, only five were categorised as being charismatic (Pappas 2016).

In much of the literature, then, there is also an implicit assumption of right-wing populist party exceptionalism – an assumption that is, however, frequently questioned. Before we turn that analysis to the case of SD, we first describe the party and its role in Swedish politics.

SD and Swedish politics

Sweden was long considered the archetype of a Nordic model of stable, "consensual" democracy (Elder et al 1982). From the 1930s until 1988, its party system featured the same quintet of parties (Berglund and Lindström 1978). One of them, the Social Democrats, was in government almost continually between 1930 and 1976. After experiencing some turbulence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party system assumed an increasingly

bipolar character, with "bloc politics" solidifying to the extent that, by 2006–2010, Sweden had acquired the semblance of a two-party system (Aylott and Bolin 2007).

SD's rise

In the late 1980s a collection of small anti-immigration and neo-Nazi groups cohered into SD. The party was by no means an instant success. A big influx of refugees from former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s failed to excite much support for it. In the 1999 European Parliament election, SD's vote was negligible.

The party's subsequent growth coincided with Åkesson, at 25, becoming party leader. He pulled it towards mainstream politics in its ideology, rhetoric and symbols. Its vote began to pick up. It won nearly 3 percent in the 2006 parliamentary election. It built a presence in local politics, especially in southern Sweden (Loxbo and Bolin 2016). Was this an Åkesson effect? Perhaps; but political conditions were changing too. The financial crisis of 2008 had a sharply negative, albeit fairly short-lived, effect on the Swedish economy. As violence spread through the Middle East, applications for asylum by people reaching Swedish territory, which had averaged less than 10,000 annually in 1995–99, rose to over 25,000 annually in 2000–10 (Migrationsverket 2019). Economic and social changes are probably insufficient to explain the rise in support for SD, but they surely played a part.

Figure 1. Sweden Democrats' results in parliamentary elections (percentage of vote)
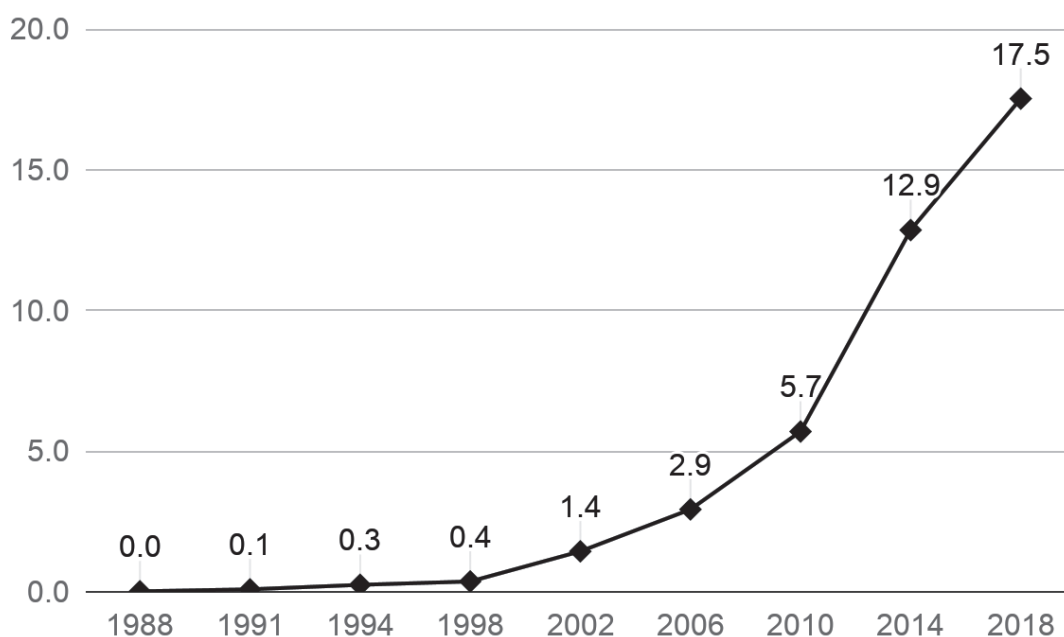
Source: Valmyndigheten (undated).

The big breakthrough for the party came in the 2010 parliamentary election, when it comfortably cleared the threshold for parliamentary representation. The reaction in the political mainstream and the media was that of profound shock. A strong anti-racist norm had developed in public discourse across the political spectrum. The other parties

now competed with each other in their keenness to isolate SD, both in parliament and, perhaps more significantly, in setting Sweden's policy agenda. A political *cordon sanitaire* was thus spontaneously constructed around the party.

The average annual number of asylum applications doubled again in 2011–14. As a centre-right prime minister acknowledged, in a famous speech in 2014, immigration had become an expensive policy choice for Sweden. Nevertheless, for whatever reason (cf. Backlund 2016; Barrling 2016), no mainstream party defected from the policy component of the *cordon sanitaire* so as to adopt a more restrictive stance. That left SD as the only party voicing any scepticism about immigration. For the fourth consecutive parliamentary election, its vote doubled; in 2014 it became Sweden's third-biggest party. Only in late 2015, a year in which 163,000 asylum-seekers poured into Sweden, did mainstream parties finally agree to tighten policy. By then, SD was established. In the 2018 election it won 17.5 per cent (see Figure 1). In two southern constituencies, it became the most popular party.

If the tone of Swedish politics changed in tandem with the rise of SD, the party system changed at least as much. The bloc structure of party competition was upset by the new party. A parliamentary majority looked increasingly out of reach for each of the existing blocs (see Table 1). And because the *cordon sanitaire* endured in the parliamentary arena, stable majorities that included SD were ruled out, too. Indeed, after the 2014 election, mainstream parties formed a formal cartel designed to maintain SD's isolation (Bjereld et al 2016).

TABLE 1. Swedish party system, 2010–18

"Party constellation"	RED-GREENS	ALLIANCE	–
Parties	Social Democrats**	Moderates*	SD
	Greens**	Centre*	
	Left	Liberals*	
		Christian Democrats*	

Note. The Alliance for Sweden, often just called the Alliance, was formed in 2004. The term "party constellation" was defined by the parties in the 2014 December agreement. Parties within each constellation are arranged in descending order of the size of their respective parliamentary groups.
* These parties formed a minority coalition government after the 2010 election.
** These parties formed a minority coalition government after the 2014 election. They eventually renewed their coalition after the 2018 election.

This "December agreement" did not last long. Yet the other parties' antipathy to SD proved to be resilient, powerful and divisive. After the 2018 election, when it took far longer than ever before to form a government, the Centre and Liberal parties ultimately preferred a renewed centre-left government to a centre-right government that was in any way beholden to SD. Their decision demolished those parties' 15-year-old formal alliance with the Christian Democrats and Moderates, both of whom had been prepared to govern with SD's passive support (Aylott and Bolin 2019). The party system was thus fundamentally changed. Far from a two-party system, competition now resembled "polarised pluralism" (Sartori [1976] 2005:116–22).

What sort of party?

SD has certainly been disruptive. How else should it be classified? Most scholars classify SD as a right-wing populist party (Jungar and Jupskås 2014). This party family tends to be defined by three components: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007).

The party certainly meets the first two of these criteria. Although its immigration policy became much less an outlier after the policy U-turns by other parties in late 2015, which was followed by the Moderates and, to a lesser extent, the Social Democrats belatedly shifting their positions in SD's direction, the party's rhetoric remained tougher. Indeed, outright racist views held by individual party members have been revealed in the media with some regularity. Moreover, law and order, SD's other main policy priority, is also linked to migration. This link is both implicit (some categories of crime are often associated with people with immigrant backgrounds) and explicit (in, for example, the demand that more foreign criminals be deported).

Still, the party's ideology has deradicalised. From 1995 SD explicitly distanced itself from Nazism (Widfeldt 2015:184). A ban on political uniforms was introduced in order to get rid of "Hollywood Nazis" at party meetings and demonstrations (Widfeldt 2008:273). Some of its more extreme proposals were removed from the party programme. In 2001 a splinter party, the National Democrats, was formed, following the expulsion of a couple of hardliners. SD thus lost some of its more extreme members, and was no longer the party closest to white supremacism (Ekman and Poohl 2010:126–7). Later still, SD moved towards an "open and non-racist" nationalism (Sverigedemokraterna 2011:13), in which an individual's ethnicity was considered less important than willingness to embrace Swedish culture. Exactly what that culture entailed was inevitably left vague, but it increasingly included relaxed attitudes, even in this self-proclaimed socially conservative party, about sex equality and sexuality.

Moreover, while immigration remained SD's most important issue by far, there were also attempts to broaden the party's appeal in other areas. Economically, the party had long been centrist or even left-of-centre (Jungar 2015). In combination with its authoritarian position on the cultural dimension, then, SD adhered to what has been called "the new winning formula of the radical right" (Kitchelt 2004; also de Lange 2007). By 2019, however, there were signs that SD was blurring some of its economic positions, partly to facilitate co-operation with established parties (cf. Rovny 2013). SD's Euroscepticism, meanwhile, which had previously involved advocacy of a renegotiation of Sweden's EU membership and possible departure, was toned down in the light of Britain's troubled path out of the Union (Åkesson 2019).

Finally, the extent to which, by 2019, SD was especially populist was debatable. SD certainly did not describe *itself* as such. Since a revision of the party programme in 2011, SD calls itself a "social conservative party with an essentially nationalist perspective" (Sverigedemokraterna 2011). Before and after the 2018 election, Åkesson talked hopefully of a new "conservative bloc" comprising SD, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats. It did talk of a self-interested political establishment; but not much more than other parties did (Bergene 2019).

Leadership structure

A first observation about Swedish party leadership is that all but one of the eight parties represented in parliament after the 2018 election had an individual who was clearly the party leader. The exception was the Greens, who had dual leadership, a man and a woman. A second observation is that, in each party, the leader was formally accountable only to the extra-parliamentary organisation. This was reflected in the formal titles given to the leaders. Although the term party leader (*partiledare*) was widely used in the media, on the parliament's website and by the parties themselves, the leader was referred to as the chair (*ordförande*) of the party in all but one of the parties' basic constitutions, their statutes. The Greens' leaders were called spokespeople (*språkrör*).

At the same time, a third observation is that all nine leaders, including the Greens' duo, held seats in the parliament. True, they were not formally leaders of their respective parliamentary groups; that job was given to someone else. Moreover, two of the party leaders subsequently gave way to alternative MPs when they took up roles (including that of the prime minister) in the government that was eventually formed, due to the constitutional separation of legislative and executive roles. Nor is it unheard of in Sweden for parties to be led, at least for a while, by non-MPs. Nevertheless, the norm is that parliamentary groups are under the firm command of the respective party leaderships. Voting discipline tends to be solid (Jensen 2000:217–20). During the long period of political uncertainty after the 2018 election, when inter-party relations became fraught, there was only one real breakdown in this discipline (and even that was only in the election of a second deputy speaker).

Formal selection procedure

Swedish parties, and indeed most organisations with a claim to any sort of internal democracy, have an unusual means of selecting their leaders. The process centres on the *valberedning*—literally, "election preparation", or what we call the selection committee. This committee is typically chosen by the selectorate—that is, the organ or group with the ultimate, formal right of choosing people to fill particular positions. In the selection of a leader in a Swedish political party, the selectorate is the congress, members of which are elected by the membership, usually through regional branches.

The selection committee's job is to consider candidates and then to propose them to the selectorate. The selectorate is not obliged to approve the proposed candidates, but it usually does (see Figure 2). Most party leader selections in Sweden, then, are "coronations" (Kenig et al 2015:61), in which the congress simply approves a single candidate.

What is the point of this system? Group representation is important in Swedish organisations. Indeed, this may have been the original motive for the development of the system in the Social Democratic Party and the broader labour movement, which was and remains a coalition of diverse economic and ideological interests. Over the years, other types of group representation—particularly of the sexes, sometimes also related to geography, age and ethnicity—have become increasingly prioritised in many organisations. The more groups that are involved in the process, the more a satisfactory balance must be negotiated and engineered, rather than being left to open electoral competition. The selection committee is often a forum for such negotiation and engineering.

Figure 2. Simplified model of delegation within a Swedish party
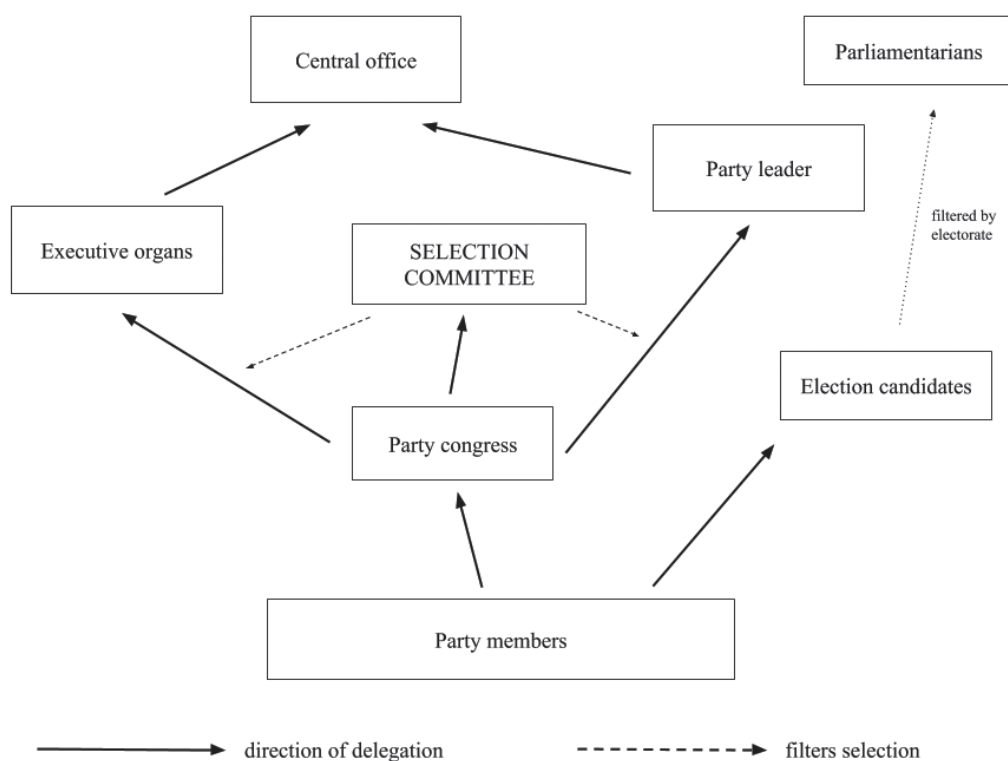
Group balance is, of course, far from the only consideration for a selection committee. It must also take account of the selectorate's current preferences about what the organisation should do and, not least, the merits of individual candidates. In parties, there are also the fundamental matters of electoral appeal and relations with other parties. These too must be worked into the selection committee's proposals.

A further feature of the system, especially in competitive organisations like parties, is that the selection committee can deliberate in private. It can try to discern the preferences of the selectorate without resorting to having these preferences revealed in the selectorate's vote for candidates who compete publicly with each other. Of course, such open competition is usually seen as the essence of representative democracy. The problem for an individual party, however, could be that it debilitates *all* the candidates in their joint competition *with those in other parties*. Better, arguably, for the selection committee to orchestrate a form of "managed" internal party democracy (see Aylott and Bolin 2017). If the selection committee misjudges the selectorate's preferences, the selectorate can always reject its proposals.

Variation in Swedish parties

The Swedish party that most closely approximates this model of internal leader selection is, not surprisingly, the Social Democrats. Its selection committee strives hardest to sup-

press open competition between leadership candidates and to achieve a balance between interests and groups. The committee's composition includes the main power centres within the party, especially its regional branches and its MPs. Its work is buttressed by a party culture that frowns upon expressions of personal leadership ambition. Aspiring leaders are expected to refrain from acknowledging publicly that they are aspiring leaders. Rather, they should wait for the party – in the shape of the selection committee – to invite them to take up the reins. In this way, the party's internal balance of power can be maintained. Occasional calls by Social Democrats for more open competition had, by 2019, yet to make any headway.

The main right-of-centre party, the liberal-conservative Moderates, has a comparable mode of selection, although personal leadership ambitions can be expressed more freely. Some observers attribute the common features of leader selection in the Social Democrats and the Moderates to the fact Sweden's two biggest parties usually provide the prime minister (Madestam 2014:306–7), although it is not entirely clear why this should make much difference.

The smaller Swedish parties follow the selection-committee model, but with more open competition between candidates. In 2010–11 the selection committees in the Left Party, the Centre Party and the Greens each endorsed a small number of leader candidates who then debated openly about preferred political directions. One candidate – or, in the Greens' case, a duo – were then designated as the selection committee's recommendation to the congress. In each party, the congress confirmed the selection committee's recommendation. That does not always happen, however. The Greens' congress rejected one of the selection committee's preferred candidates in 2002 (Madestam 2014:165–69).

In the two remaining parties, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, competition has also been fairly free, although the selection committee still eventually states its preferred candidate. In 2011 the incumbent Christian Democrat leader was subject to a (failed) leadership challenge at the party congress, without any endorsement from the selection committee – a rare event in Swedish politics. Indeed, all national party leaders tend to sit for fairly long periods (see Table 2). In 2019 the Liberals' selection process marked a departure from normal Swedish practice, and a convergence with broader international trends towards more inclusive procedures (Cross and Blais 2012; Cross and Pilet 2015; Kenig 2009a, 2009b; Leduc 2001; Pilet and Cross 2014; Sandri et al 2015; also Kosiara-Pedersen et al 2017:243), in that around three-quarters of the party's 21 regional branches held advisory ballots among their members on the three declared candidates (*Dagens Nyheter* 14 June 2019).

An obvious disadvantage of the system is that it depends on a broad acceptance within the organisation that the selection committee performs its function in an even-handed way. Potentially, a particular group or coalition could cement its control of the organisation through control of its leadership, via the selection committee. Even the suspicion of such manipulation could undermine the legitimacy of the system. The result could be either a chaotic, conflictual party or one in which a particular power centre dominates. Given the reputation of radical-right populist parties elsewhere in Europe, which is not usually associated with dispersed internal power and trust between fractions, we might expect SD to differ from the Swedish organisational norm. Does it?

Table 2. Swedish parties and the duration of leadership (years) from around 1970 to early 2019

	start of counting period	number of leaders (including incumbent)	longest-serving (including incumbent)	shortest-serving (completed term)	average duration (including incumbent)
Christian Dems	1973	3	31	11	15
Left	1975	4	18	8	11
Centre	1971	5	14	3	10
SD*	1992	3	14	3	9
Social Democrats	1969	6	17	1	8
Liberals	1969	7	12	3	7
Moderates	1970	7	13	2	7

Notes: acting leaders are excluded from the count; all numbers are rounded up.
The Greens are excluded because of their model of joint leadership and terms limits.
* In 1988–92 SD had spokespeople rather than a party leader.
Sources: party websites.

SD's selection procedure

The official story, at least, is that SD's leader selection bears a close resemblance to that of other parties. A selection committee is chosen by the congress after nominations by the chairs of the regional branches. The selection committee proposes a candidate to the selectorate, the congress (*landsdagar*). In addition to delegates selected by the regional branches, members of the party board also have voting rights at the congress. In this respect, SD is similar to the Swedish centre-right parties; in the left-of-centre parties, only elected delegates can vote (Bolin 2019). The congress then selects the leader (Sverigedemokraterna 2017).

In reality, there have been few genuine leadership contests in SD. It first formal leader was Anders Klarström, a former member of an outright neo-Nazi party, Nordiska Rikspartiet, who was selected by the 1989 congress. He was replaced by Mikael Jansson, formerly a member of the Centre Party, at the 1995 congress.

Although Jansson made the party somewhat more respectable, many thought progress was too slow. Moreover, he was widely regarded as being a rather uncharismatic and introverted leader; he was also accused of nepotism (Bolin 2012:230–1; Widfeldt 2015:185). Internal dissatisfaction with Jansson increasingly came to the fore after the 2002 election. A faction of younger SD politicians from the party's stronghold of southern Sweden managed to advance its position by acquiring more seats on the party board after each party congress. While Jansson was formally still leader, his standing was increasingly undermined. The advance of this faction was gradually reflected in the orientation of the selection committee. The new balance of power was openly revealed prior to the 2005 congress when the selection committee nominated Åkesson, who at that time headed SD's youth wing, as new party leader (Ekman and Poohl 2010: 132–3). Jansson fought on, but Åkesson managed rather easily to unseat him, with 91 votes to 50 (Jungar 2016: 200).

Up to 2019, Åkesson has not been seriously challenged as leader. He has been re-selected eight times at the biannual party congress (annual until 2009).

Leadership in practice

How has Åkesson's leadership style developed over the years? In many ways, it has been remarkably consistent. In the following discussion, we first review the implementation of party strategy, which is often the subject of conflict in parties like SD. Then we examine his personal style and speculate about its political significance.

Implementation of strategy

Åkesson won the party leadership in a fully legitimate manner, in accordance with the party's statutes. His grip on the position subsequently was also more or less compatible with the rules. Yet any long-serving party leader has to exercise considerable political skill and a good degree of ruthlessness, and Åkesson has been no exception. His success was not only in keeping hold of his position, but also in keeping SD aligned to his preferred political strategy. For example, although revelations about lower-ranking members' and even parliamentarians' racism could be shrugged off when the party was finding its feet as a parliamentary force, this became more difficult as SD's policy-seeking ambitions developed.

Åkesson declared in 2012 that his party had "zero tolerance" for racism or extremism. By 2019 well over 100 members had been expelled for that reason (see also Bolin 2015). They included several leading members of SD's youth wing, who were accused by the party leadership of consorting with an extreme right-wing organisation. When, in 2015, an ally of those expelled members was elected chair of the youth wing, the SD leadership simply closed down the wing and replaced it with a new youth organisation. (In 2017–18 the expellees formed another offshoot party, Alternative for Sweden. It attracted two defectors from SD's parliamentary group, and also SD's former leader, Jansson. The new party won 0.4 per cent in the 2018 parliamentary election.)

Of course, Åkesson could not maintain this level of control alone. Central to his leadership was a clique of close allies, most of whom had met at university. By 2015 the positions of secretary-general and chair of the parliamentary group, arguably the two most important roles in the party after that of the leader, were in the hands of Åkesson's closest allies, Mattias Karlsson and Richard Jomshof, respectively. At the same time, other long-standing members of the clique were eased out of leading positions when their behaviour and statements had become awkward for SD. Admittedly, that took a long time in the case of Kent Ekeroth. Elected to parliament in 2010, he was soon involved in an early-hours, racially charged contretemps, although this infamous "iron-bar scandal" only came to light two years later. More violence in 2016 led to his being dropped from the party's lists for the 2018 election. Another example was Björn Söder, an old ally of Åkesson's, who was replaced, against his will, as SD's secretary-general in 2015, although he remained an MP.

Personal leadership style

Åkesson is often cited as one example of a populist party leader who is not charismatic (Jungar 2016:200; Bergmann 2017:181; Eatwell 2018:252). According to one study, Åkesson "does not meet even generous definitions of charisma" and is better "described as low-key" (Widfeldt 2015:213). So what individual qualities does he possess?

Compared with his predecessors as SD leader, there is no doubt that Åkesson has a far broader electoral appeal. Jansson was instrumental in SD's professionalisation, but Åkesson is generally reckoned to be much more eloquent (Bergmann 2017:181). While he is "rarely described as an inspirational speaker", and although he is not prominent in social media, he has been called "an effective media communicator" (Widfeldt 2015:213) and "media-savvy" (Demker 2012:243). His low-key expression is said to suggest competence and reliability; only rarely does he sound deliberately provocative or outrageous. He is also a good debater (Widfeldt 2008:271; Bolin 2012:231), even when subjected to tough questioning about SD's extreme past, or when accused of racism and failure to respect (to use the Swedish idiom) "people's equal worth". His opponents sometimes lose their cool in such exchanges; an eruption by Annie Lööf, the Centre Party leader, in a pre-election debate in 2018 is a famous example. The SD leader himself rarely does so. He often dodges tricky questions by claiming ignorance of the facts in some specific question or incident. (Indeed, Åkesson has occasionally been criticised within SD for being insufficiently informed on certain issues.)

We cannot know how SD would have fared without Åkesson at its helm. Still, the aftermath of the 2014 election suggests that he was not entirely indispensable. A week before polling day, it was revealed that he had a gambling problem. Soon after, it transpired that he was also suffering from exhaustion. In an open letter, less than a month after the election, Åkesson (2014) announced that he was temporarily stepping down as party leader, blaming his condition in part on "our opponents' tireless attempts to frustrate our successes, the media's often repulsive campaigning journalism, and extremists' boundless hatred". Karlsson, the parliamentary group leader, stepped in as acting leader. Opinions polls indicated a continued rise in SD's support, as Karlsson deftly handled one of the country's more turbulent parliamentary situations.[1] Less than six months after going on sick leave, however, Åkesson was back in charge.

Leadership popularity

The preceding review of Åkesson's leadership style is unavoidably impressionistic, so our survey is wrapped up with a more systematic comparison of the popularity of Swedish party leaders. Specifically, these data allow assessment of the common assumption that right-wing populist parties are more dependent on their leaders than are other parties. In other words, if the assumption holds, we should expect Åkessson to show higher popularity figures than his counterparts in other Swedish parties.

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1   It was Karlsson who announced, in a famous press conference, that SD would break with parliamentary convention and vote for the opposition's budget proposal, which forced the new government to abide by it. This episode led directly to the aforementioned December agreement.

In general, Åkesson is the least popular Swedish party leader. When respondents in an annual national survey have been asked to score each leader on a scale from -5 to +5, Åkesson's average score has been significantly lower than of all the others (the data in this section are collected from Andersson and Oscarsson 2018). While his numbers improved over the years, from -2.7 in 2011 to -1.5 in 2017, his relative unpopularity mirrored the fact that SD remained by far the most disliked party in Sweden (Ryan and Reiljan 2018). However, when we compare the scores given by the respective parties' sympathisers, a somewhat different picture emerges. Among SD supporters, Åkesson's average score has ranged from +2.5 (in 2012) to +3.4 (in 2015). Those scores are relatively high, though not as high as those enjoyed by, for example, the Centre Party's Lööf (+3.9 in 2017).

Table 3. Share of party supporters who score the leader higher than the party on a dislike-like scale

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	average
Centre	13	8	13	21	33	30	39	22
Left	12	24	21	28	18	25	20	21
Moderates	28	29	31	34	6	11	7	21
SD	12	13	14	15	21	19	18	16
Christian Dems	10	14	14	17	9	3	18	12
Social Democrats	7	19	14	11	7	10	14	12
Liberals	9	16	8	10	9	11	14	11
Greens	7	9	10	7	9	9	5	8

Note: Because of their model of joint leadership, the figures for the Greens are the average of their two spokespersons.
Source: Andersson and Oscarsson (2018).

A harder test is to compare how voters score a party leader in comparison to how they score his or her party. Only when a voter likes the leader better than the party can that leader potentially be regarded as what is sometimes referred to as a "vote magnet" (see, for example, Jensson and Aalberg 2006). In Table 3, we present data on the share of party sympathisers who score the leader more highly than they do his or her party on a dislike-like scale. Åkesson's relative popularity is fairly steady over the years. But it does not, in itself, suggest much support for the exceptionalist thesis.

Conclusions

There are, of course, important differences between the party families that can be identified in European democracies. Right-wing populist parties are sometimes referred to as something extraordinary or exceptional. As we have seen, however, the exceptionalist thesis has drawn plenty of criticism, too. In this study, we have explored a particular case, that of SD, and a particular aspect of the thesis, namely, the common assumption that these parties' electoral progress is dependent on extraordinary leaders. We have looked into two aspects of party leadership, selection and practice. All in all, we found little evidence in support of the exceptionalist thesis.

The formal process of leader selection in SD is very similar to that in the other Swedish parties – and, indeed, many other Swedish organisations. According to the party statutes,

a selection committee manages the process prior to a vote of congress delegates, reflecting a procedural norm that has deep Swedish roots. In fairness, we should acknowledge that because SD's long-serving leader, Åkesson, had – at the time of writing – been in charge for so long, since 2005, we have no recent observations of leader selection in SD that can be compared with previous ones in the same party or with other, more recent ones in other parties. Recent research suggests that SD is somewhat more centralised and less internally democratic than other Swedish parties (Jungar 2016; Bolin et al 2017; Bolin 2019), so it might well be that the selection of Åkesson's eventual successor will involve less openness than in other parties. But that remains a matter of speculation.

As for the practice of party leadership, we cannot assert that Åkesson's leadership was a necessary condition for SD's remarkable rise in Swedish politics. There is scant psephological evidence for that, and contemporary historical analysis adds little weight to the proposition. In any case, much has changed in Sweden in recent decades. Regardless of whether one subscribes to the idea that mainstream parties in advanced democracies have formed national cartels, in order to protect their own organisational survival (Katz and Mair 1995, 2018), it is clear that, in Sweden, a striking mismatch developed after around 2000 between electoral demand and party political supply in respect to a particular issue, that of immigration. This mismatch culminated in the near-collapse of Sweden's immigration controls in 2014–15. In such extraordinary circumstances, it is conceivable that a party of SD's type would have prospered whoever had been in charge of it (cf. Dahlström and Esaiasson 2011; Loxbo 2015; Uvell 2018).

Nevertheless, it is hard to dispute the conclusion that Åkesson has proved to be a very capable party leader. He formulated a clear, long-term political strategy and pursued it with steadiness and ruthlessness. It took SD beyond its extremist origins and established it as one of Sweden's big three political parties. By spring 2019 the *cordon sanitaire* that the other parties had constructed around it was breaking down. For sure, developments elsewhere in Europe, and especially in other Nordic countries, are not necessarily harbingers of things to come. The policy influence enjoyed by Danish People's Party, for example, or the Progress Party's becoming a party of government in Norway do not necessarily presage developments in Sweden. If SD's political influence does continue to grow, however, it can be reasonably stated that its leadership was a significant contributory factor.

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