7 Conservatives at the crossroads

Cooperating or resisting extremism and populism?

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Right-wing populist parties have gained support and been successful in national elections in the past few decades, including in the formerly stable Nordic party systems. This is challenging not only for the traditional democratic right, but for the Nordic Model as well. Established in the authoritarian 1930s and helped by the successful concept “the People’s Home”, the model now fights for its survival. In this chapter, I will compare how the conservative parties reacted to threats from right-wing extremism in the 1930s and in the first decades of the new millennium, analyzing how they balanced strategies of cooperation and resistance and how they tried to modify or isolate the new parties.

During the 1930s, the Nordic democracies were threatened by the rise of National Socialism and various other forms of right-wing extremism. Most vulnerable were the conservative parties and especially their youth leagues, where many members listened to the siren calls from Italy and Germany.

Without discussing the concept of populism in this chapter, “right-wing populist” will be used for today’s parties that also can be described as “national conservative” or “extreme right” That does not prevent elements of social radicalism – at least favoring the ethnic majority.

The tensions between liberal-conservative parties and right-wing populists are rarely studied in a historical perspective. My intention is to compare the past few decades with the 1930s when parts of the conservative parties became pro-Nazi. Undoubtedly, the older opponents differed from today’s parties that are trying to become legitimate parts of the system. However, the problem of the democratic right has been the same: distance themselves from the new parties or cooperate with them? By taking-off in the 1930s and ending in contemporary politics, this study at the same time illuminates conservative strategies and the difficulties for the Nordic Model.

Varying strategies have been used in the Nordic countries, and there are differences between the strategies of today and those of the 1930s. How crucial to the decision-making process were the overall differences between the 1930s and post-2000, for example the emergence and strengthening of the Nordic model in the intervening period, and what is the role of differences in national political cultures?

I will first discuss the conservative parties and the right-wing extremism in each country in the 1930s.¹ How strong were the new challengers? This is followed by a corresponding discussion about the past few decades. Then the two periods can be compared to explore similarities and differences. Are there elements of a Nordic conservative consensus in how to act against extreme parties to the right? If so, did or does any country tend to diverge from the pattern, either in the 1930s or today? The wider question of how vulnerable the Nordic model is to the progress of the extreme parties will also be discussed.

Conservatism and right-wing extremism in the 1930s

The established conservative parties

Denmark. The Conservative People's Party (Konservative Folkeparti, KF) was established in 1915, succeeding the more aristocratic and traditional Right Party (Høyre).² The new party mixed liberal and conservative positions, mostly supporting the liberal farmers' Left party (Venstre). With John Christmas Møller as chairman, a more independent course was introduced in 1929. Christmas Møller, supported by the Conservative Youth League (Konservative Ungdom, KU), gained new sympathizers by stressing social and national matters. The membership of the KU doubled from 1932 to 1936, from 15,000 to 30,000. The KF gathered 60,000 members, so the Youth League was an important part of the conservative family, especially in the election campaigns. In the elections in 1932–1938, the conservatives reached 17–19 percent of the vote.

Norway. The Right party (Høyre) was already established in 1884, much earlier than other Nordic conservative parties.³ The main opponent, the Left Party (Venstre), became the leading party, but when the Workers party (Arbeiderpartiet, Ap) made progress in 1906 after the change in voting rights, the Right party for a time succeeded in becoming the strongest party in the parliament (Stortinget). In the 1930s, the conservatives upheld second place, securing 21–29 percent in the elections. The joint election campaign with a former splinter group from the Left Party, the Liberal Left (Frisinnade Venstre), ended in 1931. Instead, that small group with its slightly misleading name began to cooperate with various extreme right-wing groups. However, very few of the conservatives were attracted by the extreme right.

Sweden. The Conservative party (Allmänna Valmansförbundet, AVF) was hesitatingly formed in 1904, still opposing a modern party system, full democracy and parliamentary rule (and, until 1913, female members).⁴ After the democratic breakthrough in 1917–1921, the party managed to keep an important position, gaining 18–24 percent in the elections to the parliament (Riksdag) during the years 1932–1940. The Swedish National Youth League (Sveriges nationella ungdomsförbund, SNU) significantly increased its membership, reaching approximately 40,000 in 1932. However, the political initiative had from that point on been taken over by the Social Democrats.

After the conservative Prime Minister Arvid Lindman's resignation in 1930, no conservative politician would participate in a government until 1976 (except in the 1939–1945 wartime coalition government).

Finland. The National Coalition Party (Kansallinen kokoomus/Nationella samlingspartiet) has its roots in two parties from Finland's period as part of the Russian empire: the moderate Old Finns and to a certain degree in the Young Finns, who had advocated more active resistance against russification.⁵ After independence in 1917 and the subsequent civil war, the Coalition Party worked energetically for a monarchical constitution. However, due to Germany's collapse, a republic with a strong presidency was established. The Coalition Party had sympathizers in many of the extreme right organizations, especially the Lapua Movement (Lapporörelsen) and the Academic Karelian Society (Akademisk-Karelska Sällskapet, AKS). An agreement with the new right-wing, fascist-oriented party IKL (Fosterländska folkrörelsen), was reached in 1933. However, the result of the election was a disappointment and the contacts with IKL became increasingly frosty. In 1939, the Coalition Party politically dissociated itself from IKL. It is also important to mention the conservative minority in the Swedish People's Party (Svenska folkpartiet, Sfp) that tried to establish a coalition with sympathizers to the Lapua Movement.

The challengers

In general, the various extreme right-wings groups were not serious challengers to mainstream conservatism in the Nordic countries, except in Finland. The Danish National Socialist Workers Party reached 1.8 percent in the 1938 election; in Sweden the results were even worse, 1–1.5 percent (depending how different groups are classified); and in Norway Vidkun Quisling's National Coalition (Nasjonal samling, NS), founded in 1933, did not manage more than 1.8 and 2.0 percent in 1933 and 1936, respectively.

The real problem in Denmark, Norway and Sweden turned out to be their youth organizations. National Socialism, fascism and other extremism was to a high degree a youth protest against traditional society and the political system, attracting teenagers, male and female, with collective and often violent actions. Disregarding differences in other aspects, in this sense there are similarities with the radical protests in the 1960s.

Denmark. "Young Denmark" had been a widespread concept already in the middle of the 19th century.⁶ It was neither a movement nor a program. Instead, it has been seen as an intellectual conception, interpreting how to be truly Danish. The core of "Young Denmark" was an anti-liberal, organic nationalism. To be Danish was incompatible with being liberal. Both young conservatives and the old school of classical conservatism were influenced by this way of thinking. However, the party chairman Christmas Møller was too nationalistic to accept the new German vision and too much of a democrat to brush aside the parliamentary system.

Anyway, the antagonism between anti-system and system-friendly conservatism increased. As a result of profound contacts with SNU, the program of Danish Youth League was a nearly complete translation of the Swedish program. In a couple of years, the tension among the three Nordic conservative organizations would lead to splits and a new conservative Nordic landscape.

Norway. Despite the fiasco for NS in the elections, right-wing extremists could cause problem – recruiting younger people and attacking the old conservative traditional politics. Besides NS there were other right-wing organizations that failed for different reasons. Fridtjof Nansen, the well-known explorer, scientist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, died in 1930. No one could replace him, although not a fascist, as potential leader of a broad authoritarian movement.⁷

Sweden. SNU had been formed in 1915, and soon became very important during the conservative election campaigns, although not formally belonging to the party organization. Young persons in academia, especially in Uppsala and Lund, were attracted by conservative ideas. From the beginning of the 1930s, SNU became more critical of the democratic political system. Some members had never really accepted the democratic breakthrough in 1917–1921. Also other extreme positions were integrated, like economic collectivism and the wearing of party uniforms. The SNU increasingly distanced itself from the main party. The right-wing in the SNU was stronger than in Norway. A clear majority in SNU supported the turn to the right and the positive view of the regimes in Italy and Germany. In 1934, the chairman of the Conservative Party Arvid Lindman broke contact with SNU. Afterward, this can be interpreted as a crucial moment for the development of democratic conservatism in Sweden.⁸

Finland. In contrast with the other countries, the young conservatives in Finland were less attracted by National Socialism and other extreme views than the older generation that had been formed by the civil war in 1918. However, as a whole, right-wing extremism was stronger in Finland than in the Nordic region generally. The Academic Karelian Society had sympathizers among Finnish-speaking students and intellectuals, and the Lapua Movement was established by landowners in Ostrobothnia, although dissolved after the violent actions in 1932 (in Mäntsälä). Instead, the dominant party became IKL, uniting various extreme groups and participating in the election of 1933, allied with the conservatives in the National Coalition Party. Right-wing tendencies could also be found in Sfp, in the faction that worked for an alliance with groups to the right in order to neutralize the communists.⁹

The decisive moments: agreement or confrontation?

The developments in Denmark, Norway and Sweden were quite similar. Opposition groups among the young conservatives were defeated by the established party machines. In that struggle, the contributions of esteemed conservative leaders like John Christmas Møller (Denmark), Carl-Joachim Hambro (Norway) and Arvid Lindman (Sweden) were decisive. They despised pro-fascist

and antidemocratic ideas and strongly defended a conservative tradition that integrated democracy and nationalism.¹⁰

In Denmark, the party opposition was defeated. The Conservative Youth League kept its loyalty to the main party, and in the end leading opponents had to leave the party. In Norway, some district organizations participated in electoral alliances with NS, for example in Bergen where the two parties worked together in 1933. However, the party executive strongly criticized all such collaboration and afterward succeeded in isolating the NS and other groups. In that way, the Conservative party also saved the contributions from the industry that for a couple of years had been divided between the party and right-wing groups.¹¹

SNU was too strong to be defeated. When Lindman cut ties with SNU in 1934, only a minority among the members stayed loyal to him. The majority continued as an independent party, soon changing its name to Sweden's National League (*Sveriges Nationella Förbund*, SNF). However, the youthful character of the organization should not be overestimated. Many members had stayed in the SNU, notwithstanding of age, in the late 1920s when SNU increasingly became an oppositional right-wing organization. Lindman had to build a new Youth League (*Ungsvenskarna*). In some places, Conservatives and SNU/SNF formed electoral alliances (Norrköping, Helsingborg, 1934–1938). However, SNF never succeeded in building a strong party. The three members of the parliament that belonged to the organization were not re-elected in 1936. Therefore, SNF became merely one of several pro-Nazi parties, competing for the small group of Swedish Nazi sympathizers.

In Finland, the election in 1933 was a disappointment for the conservatives. The alliance with IKL gathered fewer votes than the Conservatives alone had reached in 1930. The adaption of some of the more extreme positions was strongly criticized and the electoral alliance was not repeated. However, IKL held its position and participated in the government 1941–1944. IKL was characterized by anticommunism, corporatism, ultra-national foreign policy, pure Finnishness, an ideal of the strong leader (“the Führer principle”), and a traditional Christian faith. The best election result was 8.3 percent in 1936. During the Continuation War (1941–1944), pro-German views were widespread and not limited to IKL.¹²

As already mentioned, Denmark, Norway and Sweden share a common history in the 1930s, at least regarding the relations between the Conservative parties and various extremist challengers. Opponents in the Youth Leagues were tolerated to a certain degree. But when they went too far and tried to establish themselves as more independent factions, repressive measures were taken. KU in Denmark was overtaken by more loyal elements, and soon the opposition was defeated. Norway shares the same history, and Swedish SNU was excluded from the conservative family. In all three countries, the party leaders were decisive in the struggle against fascist and other extreme elements. Such groups outside the parties were seldom considered coalition partners, and local agreements were strongly counteracted by the central executives. However, some

exceptions could be found in Sweden, where some local arrangements were upheld for a couple of years, not causing much trouble.

In the middle of the 1930s, the conservative parties had triumphed. By linking democracy to old national traditions, fascism and National Socialism were characterized as un-national and incompatible with Nordic traditions.¹³ The antifascist contributions by the conservatives have seldom been taken into account when analyzing the failure of right-wing extremism in the Nordic countries. However, the efforts by John Christmas Møller, Carl-Joachim Hambro and Arvid Lindman motivate their places in a hypothetic Nordic pantheon of antifascism. Of course, they should share their glory with liberals as well as the Social democrats, succeeding to stabilize society with broad coalition agreements that weakened extreme elements in the farmer's organizations and generally turned depression and unemployment to stability and belief in the future.

Finland has a very different story. The civil war, the communist activities in the 1920s in order to start a revolution and the frontier to the Soviet Union polarized society. Strong authoritarian groups combatted the communist threat with legal as well as illegal methods. Liberal politicians, especially in the Swedish People's Party, and Social Democrats engaged themselves against the fascist threat, but that never became a consensus view in Finland. The Conservative party accepted some of the new, extreme ideas, but the formal alliance with IKL turned out to be a failure. The reactions from conservative statesmen like Juho Kusti Paasikivi (president 1946–1956) against the right-wing violence were important, but did not more than temporarily deter extremist strength.

Conservatism and right-wing populism in the past few decades

Needless to say, the political landscape in the Nordic countries has changed in a profound way since the 1930s. In particular, the welfare state and other elements of the Nordic model have been decisive for these changes. The former conservative parties are more liberal than before, not least on economic issues. At the same time, differences between conservatives and liberals to some extent have been blurred. Also the relative strength inside the nonsocialist bloc (if there is such a thing) has been changed. In Denmark, the Conservative Party nowadays is a small party, receiving only 6.6 percent of the votes in the 2019 election. Instead the Left Party, liberal/right-wing, has succeeded the Conservatives as the leading party on the established right. However, both parties will be discussed, and similarities as well as differences observed.

Nowadays, the challengers of the right in the Nordic countries are of a different kind, in comparison with those 60 or 70 years ago. They have been developing outside the traditional conservative parties, outside the traditional party system as such. Generally, they have appeared as protest or populist parties, critical to elements of the Nordic model such as taxes, bureaucracy, centralization and progressive values. An anti-immigrant policy was integrated after some

time and has grown to be the most important issue for these parties.¹⁴ However, characterizing the new parties as fascist is misleading. Populism, authoritarian, national conservative, or sometimes ultraliberal are more useful concepts. An exception is the early phase of the Swedish Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) with its roots in the Nazi milieu in the 1980s, ideas that nowadays have disappeared.¹⁵ On the other hand, the party has been relatively successful in connecting its policy to the concept of the People's Home.

In contrast to the crisis in the 1930s, losing party organizations to the challengers has not been the main problem for the conservatives. Instead, the debate has circled around the strategies of the parties. Which relationships were desired or feasible? Could the new parties be reliable as supporters of the government, or maybe even as a part of coalition governments?

The established conservative parties

Denmark. In the 1990s, various groups had been criticizing the liberal Danish immigrant policy. Some restrictions were instituted and when a center-right coalition of the Liberal and Conservative parties assumed power in the 2001 elections, a radical change of policy was introduced. The government was supported by the populist, anti-immigration, nationalist Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) that had been successful in the election. The new government policy was popular domestically, but criticized by international observers. In the cultural-ideological field, the left paradigm was seriously challenged by right-wing conservatives, especially by the priest Søren Krarup. His Christian thinking is built on nationalism. By stressing the struggle between Christianity and Marxism, Christianity and science, and not least, Christianity and Islam, he rejects the modern homage to the individual. For some years Krarup was a member of parliament (Folketinget) for the Danish People's Party. His aggressive attitude to Islam became very influential for the changing of Danish immigration policy after the year 2000.¹⁶

The Liberal-Conservative coalition, under Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (V), was re-elected in 2005 and 2007. When Rasmussen was appointed secretary-general of NATO in 2009, he was replaced by the foreign minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen. The restrictive immigration policy was not changed, not during the Social Democratic government 2011–2015, and not during the following governments dominated by Venstre. In the 2015 election, it reached 19.5 percent and the coalition partners, the Conservatives and the Liberal Alliance, each received 3.4 and 7.5 percent of the vote respectively. DF received 21.1 percent, but stayed outside the government. Although Venstre kept its share in the 2019 election, the Social Democrats took over, supported by RV and two left parties in Folketinget.

Norway. During the past few decades, the Conservative Party has usually been second in parliamentary strength after the social democrats in the Workers Party (Ap). However, the left has been weakened, and in 2013, Conservative leader Erna Solberg became the first prime minister from her party since

1990. She headed a minority coalition government with the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP). The small parties in the middle (the liberal Left Party and the Christian People's Party) chose not to join the new government, but agreed to support it in return for some softening of the restrictive immigration policy that for a long time had been the core issue for the Progress Party. After the 2017 election, the coalition managed to stay in power, although with a narrower margin. In 2018, the Left Party accepted a place in the government and in 2019 the Christian People's Party after a trying party debate followed suite.

Sweden. The liberal-conservative Moderate Party (former Right party) turned to the middle after a disappointing election in 2002. The new party chairman Fredrik Reinfeldt abandoned many of the party's former core issues: a strong defense, reforms of the laws inspired by social democratic values in the labor market and cuts in the welfare system. He also proclaimed a more open and generous immigration policy and at the same time clearly dissociated the party from the anti-immigration Swedish Democrats.¹⁷ No collaboration whatsoever with SD was possible during his reign. Reinfeldt was prime minister from 2006 to 2014, jointly with three smaller center-right parties. After the 2014 election, he resigned. The successor, Anna Kinberg Batra, did not succeed in formulating a trustworthy political line when the refugee crisis turned many traditional ideas upside down.¹⁸ To avoid uncontrolled immigration to Sweden, the Social Democratic-led government instituted a much more restricted policy, transforming the unique Swedish immigrant policy to one resembling a mainstream European one. In October 2017, Kinberg Batra was replaced by Ulf Kristersson. In the election of 2018, the Moderate Party was one of the losers, although with 19.8 percent of the votes it was still the strongest party in the non-socialist Alliance and second after the Social Democrats with 28.3 percent of the vote.

Kristersson had accepted being prime minister with the help of SD, although at the same time refusing further cooperation with the party. However, his candidacy was voted down and instead the Social democratic chairman Stefan Löfven reestablished the coalition with the Green party. This time with the support of the Liberal and the Center parties from the former non-socialist alliance. The new collaboration was possible due to the weakening of the Social democrats and the clear opposition of the two middle parties supporting a government in any way dependent on SD. The relations with SD are still controversial in the Moderate party, although the role as opposition party might bring the two parties closer to each other.

Finland. The conservatives in the National Coalition Party have kept its position as one of the leading Finnish parties. It has participated in most of the governments during the last 20 years, sometimes also filling the post of prime minister (Holkeri, Katainen, Stubb). One explanation is the Finnish tradition of majority governments, including parties of the right, center and left at the same time. In the 2015 election, the conservatives reached 18.2 percent, a decline from the 20.4 percent of votes they had in the previous election.

The decrease continued in 2019, 17.0 percent. For the first time since 2007, the Conservatives were left out from the coalition government.

The challengers

Denmark. In the sensational 1973 election, the Progress Party (Fremskridtspartiet) became one of five newcomers to the parliament. The controversial lawyer Mogens Glistrup had established it just one year before. Until his death in 2008, Glistrup would remain a spectacular figure in political debates, most of the time as leader of his anti-bureaucratic and soon also anti-immigration party. Muslims were a particular target for Glistrup's scoffing. However, in later years he could not lead his party due to his imprisonment for tax evasion. At that time, the party had lost its seats in the parliament.¹⁹ In 1995, Pia Kjaersgaard and other leading members broke with the party and established the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF). They wanted to form a party that would be more acceptable to other parties, and using that strategy, influence society, especially immigration policy. In the 2001 election, DF came in third with 12 percent of the votes. The governments led by the Left Party (V) were dependent on DF from 2001 to 2011. Agreements between the government and DF were made before the proposals were sent to parliament. Therefore, the nationalistic policy of DF regarding immigration as well as the EU became official Danish policy. The strong hostility toward a multicultural society has continued to be the core element in DF's ideology during the chairmanship of Kristian Thulesen Dahl, who succeeded Pia Kjaersgaard in 2012.²⁰ In the 2015 election, DF reached its all-time high with 21.1 percent of the vote, surpassed only by the Social Democrats (26.3 percent). In 15–20 years, DF had an important position in Danish politics, without participating in the government. This situation ended abruptly after the 2019 election when the Social Democrats took over. DF lost more than half of its voters, reaching only 8.7 percent.

Norway. In 1973, an equivalent to Glistrup's party was established, named a bit narcissistically the Anders Lange Party (Anders Langes parti). The platform was also reminiscent of Glistrup's creation: lower taxes, less bureaucracy and a populist critique of the authorities in general. It immediately won four mandates in parliament. However, Lange died in 1974 and after choosing a new party name, the Progress Party, and the appointment of Carl I. Hagen as chairman in 1978, the party became an important force in the Norwegian party system.²¹ Sometimes the economic policy was characterized by neo-liberalism, sometimes by promises of welfare reform, especially for the elderly. More continuity can be found in the immigration issues, where the party established a strong resistance against refugees, especially those from outside Europe. Hagen led the party for 30 years and left behind an established party with extensive experience in national politics and local government. However, it was his successor Siv Jensen that led the Progress Party in a coalition with the Conservatives after the 2013 election (16.3 percent), a coalition that stayed in power after

the 2017 election (FrP 15.1 percent), still dependent on the smaller parties in the middle. Jensen has been minister of finance in the coalition government since it was established in 2013.²²

Sweden. The first successful populist party in Sweden, New Democracy (Ny demokrati, ND), was established in 1991. Thanks to widespread media coverage, well-known party leaders and a growing dissatisfaction with Swedish immigration policy, ND received 5.7 percent of the vote in the 1991 election, enough to get 25 seats in the parliament. Disagreements inside the party and controversial statements made by some of the leading politicians broke down the party and it eventually fell out of parliament already in the 1994 election. No agreements between the center-right government and ND had been made, but secret negotiations between the Moderate party secretary and ND helped the government when ND fell apart.²³

The Swedish Democrats have formed a more stable party, although every now and then the party is hit by accusations of crime or political scandals concerning racist or other remarks by leading members. SD's roots are in neo-Nazi groups from 25 to 30 years ago. Although quite successful in forming a more modest and democratic image ("national conservative" or "social conservative"), its history still casts a shadow over the party. It managed to get 5.7 percent of the vote in the 2010 election, a share that was increased to 12.9 percent in 2014. In the 2018 election, the increase continued to 17.5 percent, which, however, was not as much as predicted.

In June 2002, all seven parties in the parliament (except SD) had published a joint proclamation against the SD. Neither the center-right government of Reinfeldt nor the Social Democratic/Green Party government of Löfvén made agreements or negotiated with SD when in power. Even informal political talks with SD representatives were out of the question.

However, due to the strengthening of the Swedish Democrats in 2014, claims for a different attitude to the challengers were raised in the Moderate Party. Particularly at the local level, various forms of cooperation have been established. In the build-up to the 2018 election, this current became more outspoken, at least outside the party-executive. The party chairman Ulf Kristersson explained that his first option was an Alliance government. However, he also declared that he would accept SD's passive support in order to form a government containing Moderates and Christian Democrats. After the election in 2018, a couple of local alliances were formed by the Moderate Party and SD, defying the official party line.

Finland. The first populist party in the Nordic countries, the Smallholder Party (Småbondepartiet), was established in 1959 as a splinter group of the Agrarian Party. (Cf. Emilia Palonen's article in the book). Its leader, Veikko Vennamo, had participated in the government of Urho Kekkonen, later the president of Finland, but became critical of the situation for the Karelian people who had come to Finland after the War of Continuation. In 1966, the name was changed to the Countryside Party (Landsbygdspartiet/Suomen Maa-seudun Puolue, SMP).

The 1970 election was successful, 10.5 percent of the vote. Thereafter, strong internal divisions, defections and other trouble weakened the party. In the 1980s, it made a strong comeback with Pekka Vennamo, son of the founder, as party leader. The party participated in various governments but again faced trouble when it went bankrupt in 1995. The party was formally dissolved in 2003. The Finns, formerly the True Finns (*Sannfinländarna/ Perussuomalaiset*), was founded in 1995 as a successor party, but did not reach the parliament before 2003. With his anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-immigration policy in 2011, Timo Soini led the party to a sensational result of 19 percent of the vote (in 2007, it was 4.05 percent). After the 2015 election, the party became a member of the government with Soini as foreign minister. When Soini resigned in 2017, the far-reaching opponent of immigration, Jussi Halla-aho, was elected chairman. Some of his opponents broke with the party and founded a separate, more moderate, group in the Riksdag. However, the hard line faction clearly won the competition. In the 2019 election it gained 17.0 percent – but was not invited to the government – while the moderate group only got 1.0 percent.

The decisive moments: agreement or confrontation?

The four main challengers discussed here demonstrate differences as well as similarities. Three of them have a long history, founded in the 1950s (Finland) or the 1970s (Denmark and Norway), if original party creations are included. Sweden is an exception, also in view of the first challenger in the 1990s, New Democracy. The backgrounds differ. When the populist, anti-bureaucratic character was obvious in the Danish and Norwegian parties, for a long time carrying synonymous names, the anti-urban trait was more important in Finland. SD in Sweden has a completely different background due to its roots in the neo-Nazi tradition.

The strategies of the Nordic conservative parties display clear differences. One side is represented by Finland, Denmark and Norway. The challengers have been handled much in the same way as other parties in the political system. The Countryside Party participated in the Finnish government in 1966. However, the party was not so controversial, compared to the two forms of the Progress Party from the 1980s. Immigration was a non-issue in Finland during the Cold War. However, while never a governmental party, DF's supporting position strongly influenced (some might say decided) the government's policy on immigration, which is the best example of political success for the challengers. Participation in the Norwegian (2013–) and Finnish (2015–2019) governments marks still more progress for right-wing populist members of the Nordic party family.

The coalitions and other forms of collaboration do not seem to have caused any sharp tensions in the conservative parties. Also the Danish Social Democrats have accepted most of the new policy. In a nearly desperate bid to win back its former voters, they have declared a general agreement with DF on many political issues. It seems that the conservatives have easily accepted the

restrictive immigration policies that have come from the right. If so, the price to pay for letting in the populists has been moderate.

The exception is, of course, Sweden. SD has been seen as not “house-trained”, a spiteful remark about DF made by Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Danish prime minister (1993–2001) and leader of the Social Democrats. Accepting the party in government is unthinkable in political debate in traditional parties, at least on the national level. Agreements with or formal dependency on SD for gaining a majority are also hard to accept. In the past few years, any hint of consideration for the party’s existence has been criticized from either the right or the left. The difficulties concerning SD have made it difficult for the Moderate party to establish a clear policy on the relationship. The election in 2018 did not give enough mandates to build a non-socialist government based solely on the four parties in the Alliance. The Moderate party did not succeed in persuading the middle parties to support Kristersson as prime minister if this required the votes from SD. The party had to stay in opposition after four months of complicated party negotiations.

From internal threats to external help?

By comparing the 1930s with the beginning of the 2000s, some differences have been brought forth. The new parties are much stronger than the old fascist groups. It was, of course, easier to isolate small parties in the 1930s than treating today’s parties representing 15 to 25 percent of the voters the same way.

The threat that stands before the conservative parties today is external, not like the internal threat in the 1930s when certain elements of the movements stepped out of the democratic field. The modern right-wing populist parties do not share a common conservative or liberal-conservative idea of society and politics, although tax reductions, anti-bureaucracy and anti-socialism often are common platform points. By adapting their policy, the conservatives could use the new situation as a strategic weapon, transforming the general threat to a threat against the left, thereby challenging aspects of the Nordic Model that they consider too socialist.

The party conflicts in the 1930s resulted in a polarization between conservatism and extremism. Today, some important ideas have been accepted by conservatives, and to some degree also by center and left parties. Most obvious is the new agenda regarding immigration policies. With the exception of Sweden, the new parties have been accepted in government (Norway, Finland), or as an auxiliary force for the government, with strong influence on governmental policy (Denmark). By getting votes from the working class, populist parties have diminished the left’s chances to lead the government. On condition that the conservative parties continue to collaborate with them, strong center-right or right governments could be the Nordic model in the future. However, the development is not determined. For the moment, in September 2019, three of the Nordic Prime Ministers are social democrats. The result of the Swedish 2018 election was a Social Democratic-Green government, supported by the

liberal parties. The four-party alliance that governed Sweden 2006–2014 has broken down. Instead, the government has promised to carry through important liberal demands. The Swedish Democrats won't hold the balance of power as long as the left – liberal collaboration remains.

Of course, there are other options: the populist parties may start falling apart when some of their ideas have been realized. Or, perhaps, they will sharpen their demands and try to change more fundamental elements of society. Based upon the situation in Denmark, one should not leave aside the possibility of a social democratic – populist alliance. Both parties are dependent on support from the lower classes and consequently share some social demands. Today the challenging parties work inside the system, determined to change as much as they can in the area of “multiculturalism”, a concept that besides “liberalism” can be seen as their main enemy.

The extreme right parties in the 1930s, influenced by fascism and National Socialism, turned their backs on the relatively young democracy. Today, the new parties have accepted the democratic system, although leading politicians and ordinary members, not only in Sweden, have shown negligence concerning human rights.

Maybe the democratic system is not at stake today, but populist parties have learnt to use democratic means to change society. That could be fateful, not only for the Nordic model – what still remains of it – but for all forms of rational, human and tolerant systems. Democracy is after all mainly a system for majority decisions, not a guarantee for tolerance and human reforms.

Notes

- 1 Uglevik Larsen 1990, 240–263, Girvin 1994, ch. 3.
- 2 Egander Skov 2013, Jensen 1983, Winther 1966.
- 3 Seip 1987, 45–104, Kaartvedt 1984.
- 4 Nilsson 2004, 130–175.
- 5 Waltå 1993, Schauman & Lilius 1992, Djupsund & Karvonen 1984, Bonsdorff 1947, 1984, 1994, Andreen 1980.
- 6 Egander Skov 2013, 51–55.
- 7 Norland 1973, 152–155, Danielsen 1984, 448–451.
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