

Immigration, media images and radical right-wing populist parties in the Nordic region

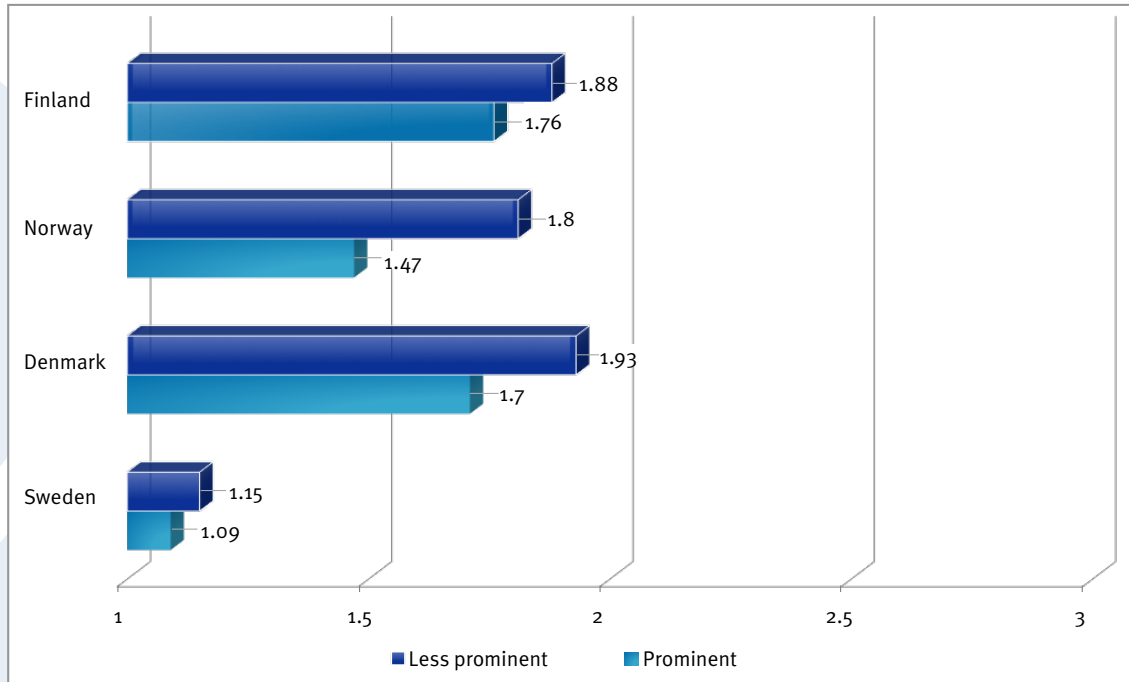
The political party landscape in Sweden has changed over a short period of time, and everyone is talking about migration issues. Both in Europe and the Nordic region, radical right-wing populist parties have enjoyed major successes in recent times, but how these parties have been treated varies greatly. This report looks at how editorials in Swedish newspapers describe the Sweden Democrats (SD) and compares this with how other radical right-wing populist parties are described in Denmark, Norway and Finland. The report also looks into how SD is treated on the Avpixlat website. The results show that ‘the media’ is not a uniform entity and that a party such as SD is treated very differently in different media spaces.

The report focuses on the period before the 2014 parliamentary election and comprises two substudies. The first study compares how the editorials of mainstream newspapers portray radical right-wing populist parties on the basis of a quantitative content analysis. The second substudy, which is based on a narrative text analysis, investigates an article series on the Avpixlat website, where SD sympathisers explain why they choose to vote for SD rather than any other party in the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag).

Substudy 1. Editorialists’ descriptions of radical right-wing populist parties

The main result of this study is that Swedish editorials (in Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet, Expressen and Svenska Dagbladet) wrote about the Sweden Democrats in a much more negative tone than was the case in similar newspapers in Denmark, Norway and Finland in relation to the Danish People’s Party, the Progress Party and the True Finns respectively. The results are shown in Figure 1 on the next page.

Figure 1. Tone (1–3) towards radical right-wing populist parties in editorials, 2009–2012.



Note: The tone of the articles is reported on a scale from 1 to 3. 1 refers to articles in which the tone is completely negative, 2 refers to balanced articles (where neither a positive nor a negative tone dominates) and 3 refers to texts that are completely positive. The light blue bars relate to texts in which the radical right-wing populist party is prominent in the text and the dark blue bars relate to texts in which it is less prominent. Source: authors' own calculations.

Irrespective of the subject matter, the results are clear: the tone towards SD in Sweden during this period was very negative in editorials in the

Swedish mainstream press. The treatment in the other countries was comparably 'positive' (although, there too, the tone was generally more

negative than positive). The difference between the countries was considerably greater than the difference between individual newspapers, which suggests that the climate of debate in these countries plays a more important role in the treatment of parties than the newspapers' ideological positions. There was therefore nothing that could be identified as a 'normalisation' of SD in the editorials of Sweden's largest mainstream newspapers during the period 2009–2012.

The results show that the editorials' tone towards SD reflects the political party landscape, in which the other parties in the Riksdag have so far refused to cooperate with SD. Sweden differs from Denmark, Norway and Finland in this respect.

Substudy 2. Avpixlat and reasons for voting for SD

The results from substudy 1 cannot explain why SD has come to be regarded as an increasingly attractive party by voters and the fact that the party received 13 per cent of the vote in the 2014 parliamentary election.

However, it is important to remember that the media is not one actor, but many. The public debate is expressed differently in different public

spaces. To study this more closely, the second substudy in the report analyses the article series called 'From the group of seven to SD' on the Avpixlat website, where SD sympathisers explain why they vote for SD.

The personal accounts in the article series are brought together in a nostalgic view of how everything was better in the past. These accounts express the idea that a vote for SD is the only logical alternative, regardless of socioeconomic background or previous choice of party. The focus is on the immigration issue, and immigration to Sweden is linked to – and presented as an explanation to – problems such as housing shortages, unemployment, poor school results, shortcomings in welfare, and criminality.

Judging by the article series on Avpixlat, SD sympathisers seem to come from both the right and the left of the traditional political spectrum. They describe themselves as realists and "ordinary people" with the ability to see reality as it is.

They describe themselves as the opposite of racist and hard-core SD supporters as well as of immigrants, idealists and representatives of the social elite. The table on the reverse (Table 1) shows the SD sympathisers' self-image.

Table 1. Pairs of opposites that form part of the writers' self-image, based on the article series 'From the group of seven to SD' on the Avpixlat website.

Us	Them
Swedes	Immigrants
Moderate SD supporters	Hard-core SD supporters
Realists	Idealists
Ordinary people	The elite
People who give	People who take
Good immigrants	Bad immigrants

Avpixlat offers an alternative arena for discussion in relation to the mainstream press. In this forum, voting for SD appears as logical and sensible, in contrast to the image conveyed in the major newspapers' editorials. This is why a website like Avpixlat has been, and to a certain extent still is, such an important tool in recruiting voters for SD.

Conclusions of the report

SD is still in the antechamber of Swedish politics. Both among other political parties and in editorials in mainstream media, resistance to SD has remained intact. Sweden differs from Denmark, Norway and Finland in this respect. Instead, SD sympathisers

have voiced their opinions on sites such as Avpixlat. The link between media representation and voter opinion is rarely straightforward, but the results of the report show that the Swedish editorial writers' consistently negative descriptions of SD do not correspond with the voters' growing support for the party. There is hence a discrepancy between voter sympathy and the opinions presented in the dominant mainstream media – at least in newspaper editorials.

In the wake of the refugee situation in 2015, Swedish migration policy has taken a more restrictive direction. One question to ask in the future is whether this will lead to SD becoming more accepted among editorial writers in the mainstream press and among other parties in the Riksdag. This report can, of course, not answer this question. What is clear, however, is that opinions are formed in a variety of arenas – not just in mainstream media but also on alternative internet forums, for example – and that this can have major implications for how the party system develops. This is a factor that is particularly important to take into account when we study parties that have an ambivalent attitude towards the establishment and that often argue against the elite that they consider the other Riksdag parties belong to. Changes to Sweden's migration policy give us every reason to continue studying what factors that make radical right-wing populist parties grow.



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