Why Sweden's Far Right Is on the Rise

The Sweden Democrats have been growing for years, and are likely to be among the largest parties in Parliament after Sunday's election.

Jimmie Akesson, the leader of the Sweden Democrats, campaigns in Motala, Sweden, on September 6.FREDRIK SANDBERG / TT NEWS AGENCY / REUTERS

The worst of Europe's migration crisis is over. Fewer migrants are coming to seek asylum, and many of those who have had their applications rejected have been deported. Yet immigration continues to spark rancorous debate, over everything from economic dislocation, to crime, to social integration, reshaping Europe's political landscape. On Sunday, it is Sweden's turn.

Polls show that about 1 in 5 Swedes will vote for the Sweden Democrats, the far-right, populist anti-immigrant party with roots in the neo-Nazi movement. The Social Democrats, the center-left party that has dominated Swedish politics for a century, will likely emerge as the single-largest party in parliament on Sunday, and the center-right Moderate Party is expected to finish either slightly ahead of or just behind the Sweden Democrats. (The Moderates are expected to cobble together a coalition government.) Sweden's two establishment parties have

refused to work with the Sweden Democrats, pointing to the party's past.

But public support for the Sweden Democrats, as well as the persistence of immigration as an issue, means the party is sure to emerge a significant player after Sunday. The Sweden Democrats have pledged to end Sweden's asylum policies, and make it harder for any newcomers to get jobs. This message has broad appeal across Europe, where the economies of many countries were battered by the recession of 2008 and crippled by the austerity measures imposed subsequently by the EU. But Sweden is different: It largely survived the recession with its economy intact, and its generous welfare state appears robust. Sweden also has a history of welcoming refugees from all over the world.

Now, this policy of openness faces severe strain, even as Sweden needs new workers who will pay the taxes required to sustain the generous welfare state for which Sweden is known. More Swedes are retiring than entering the workforce—a development with profound consequences for the future of the welfare state. And indeed, much of the current economic growth has been fueled by the foreign-born, whose taxes keep the system solvent. But here's the problem: The unemployment rate among the foreign-born is 20 percent, more than three times the national level.

What Sweden and Japan can teach the U.S. about its aging workforce

I asked Patrick Joyce, an economist with Ratio, a Swedish think tank, about this seeming discrepancy. "Sweden's economic upturn is benefiting from the migrants who came a while ago—those who came as children, or have been educated in Sweden," he said. "They are doing much better in the labor market than the newly arrived. In a way, they are helping the economy to grow."

The newly arrived refugees, by contrast, have a much harder time finding work, Joyce said. Only about half of them have a basic education, which takes them out of the running for jobs in Sweden's advanced service economy, which, at the minimum, require vocational training in addition to basic education. Only 5 percent of jobs on the Swedish labor market are suitable for the unskilled workers. "So 50 percent of the newly arrived are non-skilled, but only 5 percent of the available jobs demand low skills," Joyce said.

There are other obstacles, too, stemming from the challenge of assimilation. Joyce pointed out that it's highly unlikely refugees arriving in Sweden will know the

language. “Entry-level jobs in the Swedish labor market usually are in the service sector,” he said. “Even for a low-skilled work in a cafe … you need to have some basic knowledge of Swedish.” New arrivals also lack the networks and personal contacts needed to find employment. More than half of the jobs in the Swedish labor market are obtained through such connections, he said.“Migrants tend to get worse job offers through their own networks than Swedish citizens tend to do.” In other words, a large numbers of unskilled new migrants aren’t finding jobs even though there are, at least on paper, many vacancies.

Patrik Öhberg, a professor of political science at the University of Gotheburg in Sweden, told me that the issue is not that large numbers of immigrants come to the country, something that’s been happening for decades, but that many Swedes believe that “they come here but they don’t work.” “Over the last 10 years, we have 1 million people coming to Sweden,” he said. “So [the concern is] the housing market doesn’t work, the schools are not working.” Additionally, Sweden has become segregated, a problem that manifests itself through what many people perceive as higher crime rates—though the data on that are mixed. “When political parties start to talk about criminality, it taps into the discussion of immigration,” Öhberg said. That’s an issue on which the Sweden Democrats are seen to be credible.

Sweden’s inexplicable riots, explained

Vanessa Barker, a sociology professor at Stockholm University who studies democracy, migrants, and crime, told me in an email that though these are serious and longstanding concerns, the debate surrounding them often misses key points. “In public debate, crime in immigrant neighborhoods tends to be conflated with failed integration, parallel societies, criminal gangs, and in the foreign press as a sign of Swedish Dystopia,” she wrote. But “to residents in these areas, higher crime and disorder (graffiti, loitering) are the result of police ineffectiveness and socioeconomic disadvantage.”

It’s tempting to peg the rise of the Sweden Democrats to 2015, when Sweden accepted 163,000 asylum-seekers—more per-capita than any other country in the world (the number has steadily declined since then). But support for the party had actually been building for some time. In the 2014 election, it received 12.8 percent of the vote, a significant jump from the 3 percent it took in 2006.

As the Sweden Democrats ascended, Sweden debated the status of asylum-seekers, immigrants, and, pointedly, Islam. While today's migrants come from Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Syria, earlier ones came from Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, and Somalia. They, too, had trouble finding jobs and assimilating. "The earlier period coincided with global optimism about the future and all the promises of globalization—the end of the Cold War, the end of the nation-state, the rise of internationalized human rights, democratization around the world, the fruits of the IT revolution ahead, etc," Barker wrote. "Now, in 2018, we've seen the effects of the global economic recession, endless war, massive displacement of people around the world, large-scale failures of governance and government, declining trust, weak defense of human rights and human security, resurgent nationalism, and unchecked xenophobia and racism. All of these factors sit on a broken foundation for social inclusion. Migrants have become 'suitable enemies'—to use Nils Christie's well-known formulation—for the ills and anxieties of our age."
What is equally true, however, is that the Sweden Democrats' showing in recent opinion polls coincided with a heated debate across the European Union over immigration and asylum-seekers, largely from Muslim countries. This debate has vaulted right-wing, euroskeptic, anti-immigration parties in Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia, to power, and elevated them in Italy, Austria, Denmark, Finland, and the Czech Republic. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany party entered parliament for the first time last year. What they have in common, according to a Bloomberg analysis of their platforms, is a combination of "populist, nativist, and authoritarian strains."

In Sweden, the immigration debate grew particularly heated in the fall of the 2015. The country was unprepared for the influx of asylum-seekers. Despite the fact that a section of the public welcomed many of the newcomers, opposition to the asylum policy was so hostile (much of it came during the Islamic State attack in Paris that November) that the government reversed course in 2016.

Why Sweden tweaked its migrant policy

Barker told me there were both short and long-term factors that helped explain the government's reversal. In the short term, the government feared a breakdown of order and security, which are highly prized in Sweden, she wrote. But in the long term, "Sweden wants to preserve and uphold the bubble—its high quality of life, its social and economic well-being—its sense of national identity—for those on the inside—those deemed worthy, legitimate, productive members of society," Barker wrote. "The newly arrived are perceived to be interlopers—taking

resources from hard-working citizens."

The Sweden Democrats, long the only party warning of the supposed perils of immigration and open borders, was quick to seize on the latest debate over migrants. And because the two main center-left and center-right parties were largely pro-refugee, the Sweden Democrats have been perceived by many Swedes as the only credible voice on the issue.

Ann-Cathrine Jungar, an expert on radical-right parties in Europe at Södertörn University in Stockholm, attributed part of the Sweden Democrats' success to their reinvention under leader Jimmie Åkesson. They used to believe that "being Swedish is biological so you can't become Swedish by assimilating," she said. "They have over time … moderated themselves. Now it's more cultural nationalist." Åkesson has shifted the Sweden Democrats away from their neo-Nazi-linked past, making the party more professional, recruiting promising members, and formulating a zero-tolerance policy against racists and racist behavior. He has expelled more than 100 members since 2012—though revelations about the neo-Nazi ties of some of the party's candidates this weekshowed just how much work remains to be done.

The Sweden Democrats now present themselves as a law-and-order party that backs traditional family values. In the European Parliament, they have allied not with other far-right parties, but with mainstream conservative ones like the U.K.'s ruling Conservatives. They are strong supporters of the welfare state and have accused the Social Democrats of betraying its ideals. "They say that welfare is threatened by immigration. That it is costly. And immigrants require a lot more from the public welfare than ordinary Swedes," Jungar said.

The message has won it supporters. Öhberg told me that the Sweden Democrats initially enjoyed support mostly in the south of the country, but new poll numbers suggested the party now has the support of a broader section of society. The typical Sweden Democrats supporter, Öhberg said, is "usually a blue-collar male worker with a good job. He can make a living. He's not a bitter man. He's functional in society." For now, he said, the party's support is mainly among men, but its leadership is making a more concerted effort to reach out to women and others.

The refusal of the main parties to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats ensures

that they will own the issue of immigration. Whatever the results of Sunday's election, the Sweden Democrats will play an important role in Sweden's immediate future.

"Sweden tried to be the role model, but it wasn't able to do it," Öhberg told me. "They [the two main parties] need to rethink the Swedish model and the Swedish capacity to integrate all these refugees. They would like to be this shining example: have a lot of refugees coming to Sweden, [and] have a good economy, and don't have any right-wing, populist parties in Parliament. But that just fell apart."

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