Does the radical right have a future in Swedish politics? *Socio-demographic structure and voter support for the Sweden Democrats*

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, and exacerbated by the most recent global economic crisis, parties of the populist radical right have been able to garner considerable voter support across Europe (cf. Mudde 2007). Political sociologists have studied this trend and have taken a particular interest in Sweden, which has remained an exception to the Europe-wide trend of rising right-wing power until 2006 (Rydgren and Ruth 2011). In the 2006 general election, the nationalist, anti-immigration, and formerly fascist party *Sweden Democrats* (*Sverigedemokraterna*, or 'SD' for short) was able to garner 2.6 percent of the votes, allowing it to become represented in the Swedish parliament for the first time since its foundation in 1988. Since then, the SD have consistently expanded their voter base, claiming 5.7 and as much as 13 percent of the votes in the 2010 and 2014 national elections respectively. However, the party's support varies considerably across Sweden's municipalities, with SD voters especially overrepresented in Skåne, the country's southernmost county (Sannerstedt 2013).

Based on these observations, this paper asks two main questions: First, which factors enabled and continue to bolster the SD's meteoric rise to parliamentary power and how can we explain varying regional support patterns? And second, is the radical right likely to take a lasting hold on Swedish politics?

In order to address both research questions, we will first examine the correlation between demographic structure and support for right-wing parties at the local, municipality level (*n=184)*. Informed by our analytical insights, we will thereafter make inferences about the political situation in the next decade by using projection techniques. The aim of the projection is to present one possible picture of the future, by considering what the socio-demographic support basis for the radical right will be if fertility, mortality, and internal migration patterns remain stable in the near future. Certainly the basis of political support can change, as can demographic patterns, but it is nevertheless important to understand possible scenarios and this study makes a novel contribution in that respect.

Theory

In explaining the electoral success of the European radical right both across regions and countries as well as among different voter groups, political sociologists have emphasized two factors in particular: social marginality and ethnic competition.

The social marginalization hypothesis states that parties like the SD can gain from established parties' failure to adequately address the new realities of post-industrial stratification. According to Betz (1994), the process of post industrialization, which displaced many traditional industries with knowledge-intensive, highly automated modes of production, has created a group of so called "losers of modernization." Radical right-wing parties like the SD appeal to those unable to cope with the demands of post-industrial labor markets, running on platforms of social conservatism and promising a return to "the *status quo ante*" by bringing back traditional industries and jobs (Rydgren and Ruth 2011, 207).

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Another source of marginalization and right wing voting discussed in the literature is relative deprivation. On the one hand, individuals may feel deprived with respect to the future or life they thought they should have had (Runciman 1972). On the other hand, research on in– and out–group dynamics has also shown that people come to feel relative deprivation once their individual disadvantage is combined with the emergence of a comparatively advantaged out–group (cf. Walker and Pettigrew 1984). The sex ratio and age concentration of the municipality serve as good proxies for social marginalization. In Sweden as elsewhere, young people, and especially young women are likely to leave rural communities or communities with less job prospects in order to move to larger cities (Lundholm 2007). Swedish municipalities which have experienced out–migration thus have a higher sex ratio (more men than women), as well as a larger concentration of older people. Furthermore, if municipalities experience an extended low birth rate and a low percentage of youths, such a change can also be interpreted as a problematic signal, for a difficult economic situation or an out–migration. We thus hypothesize that an increase in voter support for the Sweden Democrats would be observed in areas with an overrepresentation of people aged 65+, and an under–representation of those below age 15, as well as a skewed sex ratio. Marginalization can also be seen in economic terms, where high levels of unemployment or relatively low salaries, or a lower average level of education can be signals of a stagnating area. These factors will also be included in the analysis (but not shown in this abstract).

A major part of the Sweden Democrats' agenda is anti–immigration as elsewhere in Europe. In Sweden, immigration is a much debated political subject. Though there are very many immigrants in Sweden (16% of the population has two non–Swedish born parents), there is also a substantial amount of refugee migration, bringing competition to the lower–skilled sectors. The anti–immigration focus of the SD would suggest that those who live very immigrant–dense areas are more likely to vote for the party. However, this should largely work as an interaction with regional economic risk factors, such as unemployment (high unemployment combined with high level of immigration leads to a heightened sense of competition for finite resources such as jobs and welfare benefits). We will consider the municipality share of first–generation immigrants as a predictor variable for SD support.

Research Design

Based on the hypotheses arising from these two central factors discussed in the from political sociology literature, we selected a number of key variables which can predict support for right-wing parties. The demographic variables of interest are age–structure and sex–ratios. The socio–demographic variables, which will be included in the full study, are education levels, percent Swedish born, unemployment rates, and the main economic sectors within a municipality. We examine the rise of the nationalist–populist right–wing Swedish Democrats party by considering the changes in these composition variables and the voting behaviour of Swedish municipalities between four elections spanning 2002–2014.

A further contribution of this study will be the use of projection methods to speculate about the future of the support base for the Sweden Democrats. The aim of this projection is not to make a prediction about the future success of the party, but rather to examine the changing socio–demographic trends of "left behind" areas in Sweden in relation to the observed voting behaviour of such areas. Although it is clearly possible that the support base of the party will change over time, the socio–demographically and economically marginalized areas are likely to continue playing a key role in supporting the party. The reliability of a projection based on socio–demographic factors also relies on the relative stability of the economic situation and attitudes towards immigration and welfare among the groups being studied.

Data and Method

This study uses compositional data on Swedish municipalities aggregated from Swedish register data. All people in each municipality are registered yearly, and we use the yearly registers from the years 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2012 as context variables. Data is currently available to the year 2012, so the context variables for the 2014 elections are the 2012 variables. This is a slight data shortcoming, as it might underestimate the amount of immigrants in a community, but it is unlikely that it biases the results with respect to any other context measure. The voting information is taken from the Swedish voting agency, which reports the results for each election the percentage of votes given to each party within each municipality.

The first step in the analysis is to relate the context variables to support for the Sweden Democrats. In order to make statements about the future of the party support, we study what socio-demographic changes are meaningfully related to changes in the party support. We fit a regression model on voter support for SD in each election, with a fixed-effect at the municipality level to control for municipality-specific characteristics. This fixed-effect adjustment is particularly important as we have not yet included the educational and employment variables in the analysis.

The second step in the analysis is to speculate about the changing base of the Sweden Democrats party over the next ten years by using projection techniques. We will combine the observed relevance of different demographic factors and the context. We will use the observed age-specific fertility and mortality levels within the municipalities and assume stability in the next ten years. We will also build migration into the projection by considering the age-specific likelihood of in- and out-migration for each municipalities. All of these simple age-specific rates can be easily calculated using the register data used for the context-variable analysis. A challenge is the projection of the percent foreign-born in the population—a variable crucial to understanding SD support. To make estimates of the future foreign-born population, we consider the rate of change in the foreign-born population over the study period (2002-2012), and compare it to the overall increase in foreign-born population in Sweden. We then use the immigration agency's (Migrationsverket) projections about the future level of immigration to Sweden and adjust them proportionally using the rates of growth from different municipalities. This accounts for the fact that certain municipalities disproportionately attract immigrants. Together, these pieces will allow for us to make an approximation of the age-, sex-, and national-origin- structure of the future populations within the municipalities.

Brief Results

In this results section, we will show some descriptive information on changes in voting patterns and demographic characteristics, and then present the regression results for the association between SD vote behaviour and socio-demographic context. The preliminary projection results are not presented here.

Table 1 below shows the main socio-demographic variables and how they have changed over time. The third column shows the proportional change between each set of two election years (2002-2006, 2006-2010, 2010-2012).As the table shows, there is substantial variation not only in support for SD, but also in the proportional change in support for SD. The Sweden Democrats have no support in some communities and nearly 30% in others. The party has lost some support in some municipalities, but in other municipalities their support was 15 times higher in later elections compared to a previous election year. This

change in support was particularly pronounced in the later election. The sex ratio shows that some municipalities have rather unbalanced compositions. The changes in the older population and especially in the foreign-born population are the most drastic.

Table 1: Voting and Context Descriptive Characteristics

Variable	Range across all years	Proportional variation between election years
Votes for Sweden Democrats	0 – 29.96 %	.95 – 15
Sex Ratio (men/women)	.929 – 1.145	.973 – 1.052
Older Population (% 65+)	12.4% – 31.5%	.932 – 1.213
Foreign-born Population	2% – 44%	.955 – 2.8

Table 2 below show the results of the regression of the context variables on the percentage of the votes in the municipality supporting SD. The socio-demographic structural variables seem to explain a significant share of the variance in the vote share given to the Sweden Democrats, which is promising for the projection. A higher concentration of men, older and younger people, and of foreign-born is related to higher support for SD. The surprising finding is that more young people in the municipality is so strongly related to higher support for SD, as the initial hypothesis was that lower fertility would be a signal of economic marginalization. However, the other results are as expected. Further analysis (not shown here) on the relationship between the proportionate changes in socio-demographic structural variables and the votes for SD, and of the relationship between the changes in the votes and the changes in the structural characteristics, show that in those instances the socio-demographic characteristics do not have a statistically significant relationship with the outcome. Thus, we conclude that for the purpose of this study and the projection, what matters is not the pace of the change in the sex ratios or other variables, but rather the actual level of these variables. We thus use the projected sex ratio (drawn from sex-specific out- and in-migration propensities, mortality and fertility schedules), age-structure, and percentage of foreign-born.

Table 2: Fixed effect regression results: percentage of votes for SD, by municipality. R-sq 0.82, adjusted R-sq, 0.61.

	Coefficient	P	SE
Sex Ratio	29.22	***	*14.65*
% over 65	70.81	***	*15.15*
% under 15	166.51	***	*17.87*
% Foreign-born	91.99	***	*7.8*

Conclusion

This paper will make an important demographic perspective to political sociology, by considering the socio-demographic structural perspective on right-wing politics in Europe. By using a novel approach and basic projection techniques, we will estimate how the socio-

demographic voter base for Sweden's far–right, nationalist party the Sweden Democrats will evolve over the next ten years.

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