

Ballot irregularities fuel uncertainty over Sweden's election result

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Although the final result from Sweden's 6,063 electoral districts was declared on Thursday, the outcome of the September 19 vote remains in dispute. The rightwing Alliance, composed of the Liberal, Moderate, Christian Democrat and Centre parties, fell just two seats short of an overall majority in the Riksdag (Parliament), gaining 173 seats in the 349-seat legislature. The opposition Red-Green coalition, made up of the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party, obtained 156 seats, while the far-right Sweden Democrats entered parliament with 20 seats.

The margins in several districts were so small that the Liberals are said to be preparing an appeal. Overall, the Alliance is estimated to have been 297 votes shy of an overall majority. In Värmland, the Liberals missed out on a seat by just seven votes, while in Göteborg fewer than 200 votes denied the Alliance an additional seat.

The possibility of several dozen votes altering the election result and handing an overall majority to the Alliance has led to a focus on reported ballot irregularities across the country. In Värmland, 50 votes were disqualified for reasons that were in many cases incorrect, according to a leading election official.

The Liberals are also considering an appeal in Göteborg, where it emerged that several hundred ballots may have been counted in the wrong district. Party Secretary Erik Ullenhag commented, "It's reasonable that there be an appeal in Göteborg in the first place, of some of the voting districts. It's important that it be investigated to see that everything is done right".

Results on the island of Gotland could be completely nullified, after it was discovered that ballots had been left unsupervised during the count, and that members of the public had been able to enter the room where they were stored. In Halmstad in western Sweden, 200

ballots went uncounted.

Nina Pripp, speaking for the election review board (Valprövningsnåden), stated that the need for new elections in a number of districts was growing increasingly likely. She told *Expressen* that such a possibility "cannot be ruled out".

The appeals process could take several months, with indications that it would take until November before complaints over results would be heard by the review board and new elections called in the regions affected. The Riksdag is due to reconvene on October 5, so Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt still faces the prospect of reaching an agreement with parties outside his Alliance to ensure a parliamentary majority.

This task is assuming increased urgency. Whilst all of the parties conducted their election campaigns on the basis that Sweden had avoided the worst of the global economic crisis and was returning to solid growth, prolonged political instability in the current international climate would prove dangerous. As Bruno Waterfield wrote in the *Telegraph*, "Sweden has now become the third previously stable Western European country since June to be without a governing majority after elections marked by the rise of far-right, anti-immigrant or separatist parties". He described the electoral result as an "unprecedented breakdown of the Swedish consensus model of politics".

The Greens are the main target of Reinfeldt's negotiations; they emerged with 25 seats in the Riksdag. Notwithstanding media reports portraying the hostility of the party to cooperation with the Alliance, clear signs have been given by party co-leader Peter Eriksson that they would be open to talks. Framing it as a means to block the influence of the far-right, he has called for collaboration between all of the established parties, including the Social Democrats.

Plans may also be afoot to alter the structure of Riksdag committees, ostensibly to minimise the influence of the Sweden Democrats. Several daily papers on Tuesday carried the story that the Moderates and Social Democrats were in support of cutting the number of seats on Riksdag committees from 17 to 15, reducing the number of seats open to the Sweden Democrats. But such anti-democratic measures represent a dangerous precedent, the essence of which is the claim that the political establishment can decide what is to be considered permissible in “mainstream” debate.

Last Monday, a crowd of 10,000 gathered for a demonstration in Stockholm to express their opposition to racism and the Sweden Democrats taking seats in the Riksdag. The demonstration was spontaneously organised following the previous night’s results, with a crowd of over 1,000 also gathering in Göteborg. One demonstrator in Stockholm commented to AFP, “It is very important to show that the big majority of the Swedish population is against the rightwing extremists like the Sweden Democrats”.

Leading daily *Aftonbladet*, which is a traditional ally of the Social Democrats, has launched a campaign entitled “We like difference”, a reference to the Sweden Democrats’ policy to deport immigrants from the country. The campaign has obtained the support of over 250,000 people online. Claiming that in the 1980s a stand was taken by the majority against racism, the campaign declares that this is what is required now. Noting that the Sweden Democrats seek to remove people of different nationalities and cultures from Swedish society, it concludes, “We don’t like hostility towards immigrants. We like difference. We will only say that”.

The call for unity amongst all of the political parties is designed to avoid raising questions about their role in the rise of the far-right. The Alliance has continuously resorted to the targeting of immigrants throughout its time in office, saying that they fail to integrate into the labour market and are a drain on state resources by remaining on welfare benefits. The Red-Green coalition, in its election campaign, called for a regulated immigration system in Sweden.

The initial hostile response from the Alliance to the question of working with the Sweden Democrats is of little significance. In neighbouring countries, the initial

rejection of cooperating with far-right, anti-immigrant parties has been transformed into a situation where they now play a key role in government. In Denmark, the Danish People’s Party has backed the Conservative-Liberal coalition government since 2001, exercising substantial control over Danish immigration regulations that are now some of the strictest in Europe.



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