

# More than just an electoral upwind? Nordic left-wing parties after the EU elections

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**There was a moment after the European elections of 6-9 June 2024 when much of Europe was suddenly looking north, baffled. What had just happened? Some pollsters, journalists, and political parties themselves believed that there must have been a mistake, yet the numbers were correct. While across much of the rest of the European Union the traditional right was victorious and the far right came out stronger than ever, with left parties taking heavy blows, this scenario seemed to be reversed in the three Nordic EU member-states. The elections saw a record result for the Left Alliance in Finland with 17.3 percent (+11.2 compared to the last European elections and +9.1 from the last national elections), while the Greens maintained their vote share from the national elections a year ago (though losing at an EU level), and the Social Democrats kept their share at EU level (though losing somewhat compared to the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections).**

In Sweden, the Left Party Vänsterpartiet improved more than any other party in the country, winning 11.1 percent support and increasing their vote share by over 60% compared to the previous national and European elections (6.9 percent), while the Greens gained 2.3 percentage points on their 2022 national election result, winning nearly 9 points support, and outdoing the far-right Sweden Democrats as the third biggest party. The Social Democrats lost substantially (nearly 6 points) compared to the Riksdag elections however, while slightly increasing their share at the EU level to about 25 percent. In Denmark, the Centre-Left-Green parties (including Social Democrats, Socialist People's Party, Enhedslisten, the more moderate Radikale Venstre and the green Alternativet) retained 50 percent of the country's vote. These solid results for the Centre-Left were accompanied by losses for the (far) right. But are we really witnessing a substantial shift to the left that could translate into more progressive politics and governments in the foreseeable future?

## Record results for left parties

Sure enough, results for the left parties in Finland and Sweden were truly impressive. Li Andersson, the Left Alliance's (Vasemmistoliitto) outgoing party chair, this year's presidential candidate and former education minister, received a staggering 13 percent of the overall Finnish vote, or nearly a quarter of a million out of 1.8 million Finnish votes, by far more than any other Finnish EP candidate has ever received. She topped the polls in all bigger cities and received a fifth of the vote in the capital Helsinki as well as a quarter of the vote in her native Turku. Her vote made up 78 percent of the overall support for Vasemmistoliitto, which emerged as Finland's second biggest party, surpassing the Social Democrats for the second time this year, following the Presidential elections in January and February.

For the Swedish Vänsterpartiet, this election was their best result in twenty years, more than tripling the party's share in Gothenburg and more than doubling it in Malmö, making it the second biggest party in both cities, approaching 18 and 20 percent respectively. It surpassed the Social Democrats in several districts and regions. Former party leader and MEP Jonas Sjöstedt also

received the highest number of votes among all Swedish candidates. In Denmark, it was the Socialist People's Party, a party marginally left of the Social Democrats, internationally known as Green-Left, that went up by more than 9 percentage points from the national elections in 2022, gaining more than 4 points compared to the previous EU elections. The left Unity List or Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten), however, also gained, though at 7 percent less impressively with a plus of 'only' 1.5 percent on the last EU elections and almost 2 percentage points on the last national elections, becoming second biggest party in Copenhagen after the Socialist People's Party.

### **Bucking the trend — waning support for (far-)right parties?**

At least superficially, the growth of the left came at the expense of far-right parties. Yet while, in these elections, right-wing parties were unable to expand the structural majority they have enjoyed in the Nordic countries for some years, taking the national elections as a point of reference it is only in Sweden that we can observe a substantial shift. Here, the Sweden Democrats lost over 7 percentage points compared to the national elections and 2 points compared to the last EU elections. This might not sound like much, but is significant as it is the first election since 1988 that the party has lost support. In addition, the traditional right of conservative Moderates, Christian Democrats and liberals lost ground compared to the national elections of 2022, though some of them fared marginally better than in the EU elections of 2019. Taking the national level as the point of reference, we can observe a combined total of nearly 57 percent support for Social-Democrats, Greens, the Left and the Centre Party, with the traditional and far-right (together known as 'Tidö parties') just under 41 percent. This is almost a reversal of the 2022 results, where the Tidö parties had a 0.6 percentage point lead at 49.5 percent. At an EU level, however, the substantial gains for the left 'bloc' did not translate into a change in the distribution of seats between the domestic traditional blocs.

While the Finns Party faced substantial losses of 5.5 percentage points on 2019, and a whopping 9.9 percentage points compared to last year's national elections, the traditional right in Finland actually gained, with strong increases of nearly 8 points for the conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) and a slight increase for the Christian Democrats. Taken together, the NCP and the Finns, who currently form the government, did not actually lose more than 1.5 points, despite the centre-left parties' gains of around 6 points (disregarding the Centre and the party of the Swedish minority) and its additional two seats in the EP.

In Denmark, the picture is more complex, owing to the ongoing reconfiguration among the (far) right. Among the traditional right, Venstre (a conservative liberal party associated with ALDE/Renew at a European level), fell by almost 9 points compared to the EU elections 2019, but recovered slightly from a heavy blow it had received in the 2022 national elections. However, the Conservatives gained, as did the Liberal Alliance (a neoliberal party that is gradually shifting to the right). And while the Danish People's Party — once at over 26 percent in the EU elections a decade ago — lost compared to 2019, and received only 6.4 percent, this was actually an increase of nearly 4 points from the 2022 national elections. The recently founded far-right Danish Democrats, led by notorious former immigration minister Inger Støjberg, was standing in European elections for the first time, and received 7.4 percent. With nearly 14 percent between the Danish People's Party and Danish Democrats, and adding to this the 7 percent for the rightward-moving Liberal Alliance, the (far) right actually made some grounds in this election. Compared to the national elections, the combined traditional and far right (not counting the Moderates) also expanded their margin.

### **A vote on incumbent governments**

The losses for the right in parts of the region are due at least partially to current government policies. Take Finland as the most notable example. Since April 2023, the country has been governed

by a coalition of the traditional conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) with the far-right Finns Party. The past year has been characterised by government attempts to dismantle the Nordic model, with regards to both the welfare state and the collective bargaining system. The government cut 100 million Euros from the health sector and closed A&E sections; introduced numerous cuts on social welfare, mostly targeting the unemployed, low-income-earners, and part-time workers; continues to grind down conditions for workers, introducing restrictions on sick leave payment and eroding lay-off protection; and imposed restrictions on the right to strike. All of this amounts to [previously unseen attacks on welfare and workers' rights](#), which will cause damage for decades to come. The government has also retreated on climate and environmental legislation, including opposing the EU nature restoration law and backtracking completely on Finland's carbon emission goals.

Despite the gains enjoyed by the NCP, there are some indications that voters' discontent with this type of policies played a noticeable role in the elections, and that the far-right has taken the blow. Indeed, the first months of 2024 saw 'historic' strikes and protests against austerity and for workers' rights. The Finns Party was very much the face of the 'historic' assaults, with the party chair and Finance Minister Riika Purra literally flaunting scissors, grinning, when she announced more cuts, and the Health and Social Affairs Minister Kaisa Juuso from the same party implementing these policies despite having previously promised to maintain social and health care services. Support for the Finns Party fell from 24 percent to 7 percent in the district of Kovala, where they [closed an A&E section](#). To some extent, these government policies conflict with the historical roots of the party, which, at least before its [ascendency as an outright anti-migration party](#) over the past decade, was supportive of social policies benefiting the 'left-behind', mostly small farmers.

There is also a public perception of the Finns Party having pushed these policies onto the government agenda. The party has also experienced bad publicity following a number of neo-Nazi and racism scandals, displays of incompetence, and several ministers having to step down or face votes of confidence in parliament. A more mundane explanation for the losses of the Finns Party, of course, could be that its notoriously anti-EU voters simply did not take much interest in these elections; turnout for the EU elections in Finland was just over 40 percent (compared to substantially over 70 percent in the national elections), and we can traditionally observe a relatively higher support for left and green parties in EU elections.

## **Controversial alliances**

In Sweden, the minority coalition of three conservative parties has faced criticism for implementing the policies of its kingmakers, the far-right Sweden Democrats. In office since 2022, the government has a poor record on climate policies and is [unlikely to reach its emission goals in the coming years](#). It has also not been able to alleviate the cost-of-living crisis facing the country, plug the holes in the welfare system, or fix the economy — instead, it has turned [against migrants and racialized people](#). Yet many point to the Sweden Democrats rather than to the government parties, holding the far-right party responsible, which may, to an extent, be reflected in the vote. Details recently revealed by a journalist who had infiltrated the party about the [Sweden Democrats' 'troll farms'](#) also played a role in the relative loss in support for the party. Yet, as in Finland, the rather marginal losses for the conservative coalition partners suggest less discontent with these policies than the headlines might suggest. As in Finland, EU elections have little priority for supporters of the far-right in Sweden, again contributing to a low turnout for the Sweden Democrats.

In Denmark, the government has clearly taken the blow for a number of unpopular policies such as, prominently, the abolition of a public holiday without compensation. It appears that Danish voters do not appreciate the 'grand coalition of the centre' that the Social Democrats under Mette Frederiksen had chosen to form, irrespective of the (at least numerical) possibility to build a 'red bloc' coalition after the 2022 elections. It also seems that the Social Democrats have taken their

Islamophobic rhetoric too far during the campaign. Crucially, while an anti-government vote explains the three parties' record low, it also partially explains the gains for parties both on the hard right and left of the Social Democrats.

### **Was it a climate vote?**

Many international commentators attribute the gains for the centre-left to certain decisive political topics or campaigns. In Denmark, for example, the great results for the Socialist People's Party were read as a voter demand for greener politics. Some [opinion polls](#) back the idea that Danish voters considered climate policy as a priority (69 percent), or important (an additional 23 percent). Interestingly, in Denmark, it is the party even further to the left, Enhedslisten, that often presents itself — with some justification — as Denmark's 'greenest' party. During the EU election campaign, it has clearly [put green issues at the centre](#), while the Socialist People's Party traditionally has a fairly strong profile here. Indeed, within the old 'red bloc' we can observe a shift to the green-left. Between them, the three centre-left parties in Denmark received 40 percent of the overall vote in both the national elections of 2022 and in the EU elections 2019 and 2024. To what extent green politics were decisive for the shift within the bloc, however, remains open for debate. The Socialist People's Party, a close ally and supporter of numerous governments led by the Social Democrats, has historically functioned as a channel for frustrated social-democratic voters who are reluctant to vote for Enhedslisten, and this is likely what we are seeing here as well.

For Vasemmistoliitto, climate and environmental matters were also [central to their campaign](#), as they were to [Finnish voters](#). Yet also in Finland, it was not the Greens who made the important gains. In Sweden, climate was the most important topic for 58 percent of voters, according to [one poll](#) and consequently played a clearer role for both the gains for the 'red bloc' and the green-left shift within the bloc. Climate was also among the [top three priorities](#) for Vänsterpartiet during the campaign. With nearly a quarter of the vote between themselves and the Greens, as mentioned above, Vänsterpartiet no doubt benefitted from Sjöstedt's 'green' profile, as well as from the endorsements of both the Greens and the Left Party made by leading environmental NGOs.

### **Was it a Palestine vote?**

Other commentators have pointed to the importance of peace and security as potentially decisive factors in left gains during these elections, with the three left parties fully supporting Ukraine, having refined their positions on NATO, and having a clear stance on Palestine. In Sweden, this last topic featured particularly prominently. There are clear signs that Vänsterpartiet was able to substantially increase its support from among voters who themselves or whose family members had migrated to Sweden, especially from countries of the Middle East, and who — despite being traditionally more conservative — in this election made party stances on Palestine central to their decision at the ballot box. It also reflects the Left Party's substantial membership from this community and its track record of international solidarity work, including on Palestine. According to Finnish opinion polls, Ukraine and security were important to voters, and it helped that Vasemmistoliitto had positioned itself with a pragmatic stance on NATO membership and made solidarity with Ukraine central to their policies. Palestine solidarity is also a traditionally strong focus of the Finnish Left, as it is for the Danish Enhedslisten; its role as a decisive factor during the elections, however, is less clear in these two countries.

For left voters, the left parties' unique selling point is arguably how they connect green politics and international solidarity with social matters, focussing on the cost of living and other issues that people struggle with on a daily basis. During the campaign, they did so by strongly linking these matters to the European level, pointing both to problems with EU policies and regulations, while, despite their historically Eurosceptic positions (particularly Enhedslisten and Vänsterpartiet),

simultaneously presenting the European level as a space to engage in and work towards solutions. This seems to have gone down well with voters, especially where people had direct experience of what a coalition of traditional and far-right forces might mean at the European level.

## **Uncertain prospects**

The elephant in the room, however, is whether the gains for left-green parties can be turned into a more sustained shift to the left. Here, Vasemmistoliitto might be in for some disappointment. With a high volatility of voters along the centre-left-green continuum, the party benefitted both from the oft-quoted 'Li-effect' and the weakness of its closest competitors. In fact, many voters might not consider themselves as having voted for the Left Alliance, but for Li Andersson personally — she is an excellent communicator, enjoys high regard from across much of the political spectrum and received votes from supporters of all political parties. Her move to Brussels, and stepping down as party chair in the autumn, means this personal effect is likely to diminish in future elections. In fact, [recent opinion polls](#) see the Left Alliance once again receiving their usual level of support, around 9-10 percent, albeit with a potential to expand this gradually (going above 11 percent in July).

Both the Greens and the Social Democrats suffered from a lack of such a personality effect, having previously enjoyed it thanks to the Green's presidential candidate Pekka Haavisto and the Social Democrat's political superstar, former party chair and Prime Minister, Sanna Marin — neither of whom were seen much during the European campaign. Yet all three parties have a history of working together constructively, and politically they are comparatively close. If they can keep up the momentum throughout next year's municipal elections, this might turn the tide in the mid- to long-term. Much will also depend on how the Finns Party responds to the mounting pressure they are facing in light of government policies, questions about their competence, and ongoing scandals. However, the Finns Party has been able to hold on for much longer than was initially thought and the government as a whole has so far withstood most interpellations brought forward by the opposition in recent months.

## **From structural majority for the left to progressive political project?**

The Danish vote can be read as a warning to the Social Democrats not to venture too far with their 'government of the centre', as well as their policies targeting migrants and Muslims. The grand coalition's 'centrist' politics have not taken hold in Danish society and have strengthened forces both to the left and the right. The old blocs remain powerful, with the red bloc having maintained a solid 48-50 percent in opinion polls and at the ballot box between the general election of 2022 and now. Structurally, there is a 'red' majority, which was deliberately abandoned by the Social Democrats for their current 'centrist' project, yet in the most [recent opinion poll by Voxmeter](#), the Socialist People's Party has actually overtaken the social democrats, the first time the Social Democrats are not the most popular party in a decade.

While the traditional, (neo)liberal and far right are still in the process of reconfiguration, the left has an opportunity to translate its structural majority into a progressive political project. The Danish far right is still seeing internal shifts, with new parties emerging and others experiencing changes in support levels, but there is a consistent and substantial section of the Danish voters prepared to vote far right. Many of the far-right's policies have also become mainstream (the Social Democrats playing a particularly shameful role here), and even influencing how parties further to the left debate policies on migration, asylum and integration. In order to turn the structural majority for parties of the centre-left into a progressive government, these parties would have to do a lot of work.

## **A new balance of power**

Between 2006 and today, the political right has enjoyed a structural majority in Sweden. This year's EU election constituted a sea change in this respect. [Over the past year](#), the red bloc has gradually increased its vote share as well as its lead. However, within this bloc, more recently, the Social Democrats have lost ground in relation to both the Greens and the Left Party, while the Centre Party is also picking up after a longer decline. Although the Left party has historically polled comparatively strong in EU elections, it is at the national level that, according to opinion polls, it has gradually improved its position over the past two legislative periods to just under 10 percent.

The party is growing — having increased its membership from 11,000 to 27,000 within a decade or so — and its messages stick, thanks to an organising and communication strategy based on phone banking and targeted messages for different constituencies that appears to be working. In Sweden, we have in fact seen a shift in structural support from blue to red, which is reconfirmed in recent opinion polls. There also appears to be some rapprochement between the Left and the Social Democrats more recently, and the gradual strengthening of the Left within the bloc (as well as the Greens, putting aside for a moment their disproportionately good outcomes in European elections) could also point to a new balance of power, one that is potentially conducive to a progressive government.

## **The qualified success of the left**

The analysis shows that despite impressive results, and significant differences with large parts of the EU, these elections were not an unqualified victory for the left across the region. While some parties do benefit domestically from their results at a European level, some qualifications must be made regarding the potential to turn that into political change at home. Unsurprisingly, the left was most successful where it had candidates that were known and popular beyond their own party and its core support; where it had clear and comprehensive communication and organising; and where it could benefit from long-term strategic choices and clear political stances.

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