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Sweden has been a member of the European Union for almost 25 years but the 2019-election was the first where none of the established parties argued for an exit. Previously the Left Party and the radical right-wing party Sweden Democrats have promoted a Swexit. The shift in strategy is understandable: popular opinion has successively become increasingly positive towards the EU and arguing for a withdrawal is currently not a winning position. The turbulence surrounding Brexit has probably encouraged this policy shift. Hence, we could expect an election campaign focusing on broader issues than the dichotomous YES or NO-debate. The results, however, clearly show that issues concerning the distribution of power between the member state and the EU are still central to the debate.

In terms of policy areas, the campaign involved four themes. First, most opinion polls in Sweden indicated that the electorate prioritized environmental concerns and global warming in the EP-election. This was reflected in the political parties’ EU-campaigns. They all emphasized the importance of a strong union with regard to the environment including suggestions such as introducing a European carbon tax as a strategy to limit carbon dioxide emissions. This tax already exists in Sweden and has broad support. However, the question of “exporting” this to the EU triggers the supranational or intergovernmental divide; i.e. should the EU be trusted to impose taxes or is this a national concern? The critics argued that this would open Pandora’s Box as delegating this power to the EU would mean a fundamental step towards a more federal union. These parties instead promote nuclear energy, currently an entirely national concern, as the best strategy to fight carbon emissions.

The second theme, both in terms of public opinion and the political parties’ priorities, was migration. Here the differences between the parties are a matter of principle rather than policy. Again the question involves the EU’s decision capabilities. The fundamental conflict on migration, defending a more open policy versus closed borders, arose in the Swedish debate. However, much of the discussion concerned who should be able to make binding decisions in this matter - the EU or the member states. The Swedish experience from 2015 and the migration crisis figured in the debate and most parties hoped that an agreement concerning binding quotas could be reached. The social pillar was the third theme offering an opportunity for the parties on the left to propagate for a stronger Europe in terms of welfare policies. The social pillar is an agreement between the member states but the EU is not able to make binding decisions in this area. The debate here is less about the content of the social pillar and more about changing the EU’s role. All parties defend the Swedish system: disagreement concerns whether the national system is threatened if the EU becomes more involved in this area. Here the complex intertwined dimensions of left and right, respective more or less union, become apparent.

Fourth, as in the latest Swedish general election (September 2018), the fight against crime also became an issue in the EP-campaign. Stronger border control, stronger cooperation between policy authorities and a European FBI figured in the debate. This issue and the migration issue were connected in many respects and a more repressive tendency characterized the debate. The crime problem could have been linked to social inequalities and the need for more socially progressive policies in Europe, but this was never really the case. Again, this illustrates the dilemma of what the EU’s role should be.

This brief review of the Swedish 2019 EP-election debate illustrates the two-sided nature of EU-politics; the policy as such (often triggering the traditional left-right divide) and the question of whether the EU should be delegated legislative power in the specific area. From a voter’s point of view, this constitutes a dilemma. A party might oppose a certain policy either because it does not agree on the specific political measure or because it is reluctant to delegate power to Brussels. It is often hard for the voter to assess which arguments are most relevant in the debate. This problem became obvious late in the campaign when it was revealed that an earlier MEP belonging to the Christian Democrats had casted votes in the EP that indicated a negative stance towards women’s rights to abortion. The party had a hectic time explaining that the MEP was opposing this issue being dealt with on the European level and had nothing to do with party’s position on abortion. All the four themes outlined above involved both dimensions and this blurs the parties’ message. The problem is accentuated by the parties’ lack of consistency in their view of the EU’s role. In one issue the EU is constituted as a threat, whereas in another it becomes a solution.

The intertwining of two or more fundamental dimensions in EU-politics, while the party system is largely organized along a left - right dimension, constitutes a difficult democratic dilemma. The fact that the parties fail to politicize EU-relevant issues between elections makes things even worse. Now we have a new group of MEPs – let us hope that this also means an intensified debate on important issues that will enable the electorate to make wise decisions in the 2024 elections.

More or less EU – still the fundamental conflict in Sweden

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