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SWEDISH MINORITY GOVERNMENTS: FROM ORIGINS TOWARD AN END?

INTRODUCTION

Main subject of this work is the Swedish practice of minority governments, from 1905 to 2007. In the first chapter I will show how the practice arose in the very first years of Swedish democracy; in the second I will discuss some elements brought by literature as possible causes of the rise of this model. I will then show in the second chapter the debate that brought, between the '50s and the '70s, to the constitutionalization of it in the new Constitution of 1975 and I will give some references to the changes in Swedish democracy between the '70s and the year 2000s. In the last chapter I will provide an hypothesis over a possible future development of the Swedish model, and I will sum up the main points of the paper in the conclusion.

1- THE ORIGINS OF MINORITY GOVERNMENTS IN SWEDEN

From his very first years of modern democracy, Sweden was characterised by minority government. As shown in table 1, between 1905 and 1945 only 6 government on a total of 29 (20,68%) satisfied the common-sense rule that a government coalition must control 50%+1 of parliamentary seats. Of those six, the three Hansson war-time governments between 1939 and 1945 ruled upon more than 95% of Riksdag seats, but this was clearly due to the fearful international situation. In fact, at the end of the war in 1945, the SAP was able to form a one-party government that ruled upon 52% of seats, one of its best results in parliamentary history. The other two majority governments were Edén in 1917-20 and Hansson II in 1936-

39, both formed by SAP in coalition with another party and both again related to a threatening war or war-like situation around Sweden.

Table 1 (data elaborated from Demkel-Svåsand 2005:397,407)

Cabinet	Cabinet parties	Parliamentary support
1905.04.13 Ramstedt	-	
1905.08.02 Lundeberg	-	
1905.11.07 Staaff I	Lib	47.39 %
1906.05.29 Lindman I	Mod	46.95 %
1908.09.12 Lindman II	Mod	39.56 %
1911.01.07 Staaff II	Lib	40.52 %
1914.02.17 Hammarskjöld I	-	
1914.02.17 Hammarskjöld II	-	
1914.02.17 Hammarskjöld III	-	
1917.03.30 Swartz	Mod	46.05 %
1917.10.19 Edén	Lib-S	55.00 %
1920.03.10 Branting I	S	33.15 %
1920.20.27 De Geer	-	
1921.02.23 von Sydow	-	
1921.10.13 Branting II	S	37.63 %
1923.04.19 Trygger	Mod	27.10 %
1924.10.18 Branting III	S	41.05 %
1925.01.24 Sandler	S	41.05 %
1926.06.07 Ekman I	Lib	16.57 %
1928.10.02 Lindman	Mod	32.19 %
1930.06.07 Ekman II	Lib	16.57 %
1932.08.06 Hamrin	Lib	12.36 %
1932.09.24 Hansson I	S	42.63 %
1936.06.19 Pehrsson	C	15.26 %
1936.09.28 Hansson II	S-C	62.10 %
1939.12.13 Hansson III	S-Mod-Lib-C	96.84 %
1940.09.15 Hansson IV	S-Mod-Lib-C	98.94 %
1944.09.17 Hansson V	S-Mod-Lib-C	95.52 %
1945.07.31 Hansson VI	S	52.10 %

S: socialdemocratic Party; Mod: moderate party; Lib: liberal party; C: centre party

in bold: majority governments

Why has Sweden been so eager to form minority governments, from the very beginnings of the XX century? Literature tries to give some reasons for such a question.

a) Negative Parliamentarism

By the point of view of government formation rules, parliamentary democracies can be distinguished between Positive Parliamentarisms and Negative Parliamentarisms (Bergman 1995:41).

In the model of positive parliamentarism, a new government must have an explicit level of vote support in Parliament, acquired through a vote of investiture and tested throughout time by the possibility of a vote of no confidence. This form of parliamentarism is related with fewer minority governments, of a larger size, and with a longer process of government formation.

In the model of negative parliamentarism, a government just needs to be tolerated by the Parliament, fact that can be tested throughout time by the possibility of a vote of no confidence; a vote of investiture is usually not required. This form of parliamentarism is related with a high frequency of minority governments, of a smaller size, and with a shorter process of government formation.

In fact, the negative rule of government formation historically dates back to the times in which governments were appointed by the kings (Bergman 1995:43); governments were initially not responsible to Parliaments, that later became able to force them to resign by a vote of no confidence. Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway and Denmark) are all negative parliamentarisms, and they effectively show an history of small minority governments. In fact, until 1975 in Sweden governments were formally appointed by the king, and they remained in power until resignations or until the Riksdag forced them to resign by a vote of no confidence. The constitution did not provide any specific rule about the processes of government formation and resignation (Bergman 1993:290).

b) Short electoral term

Swedish electoral law requires elections to be held in a very short term (three years in the periods 1905-20 and 1970-94, four years in 1920-70 and after 1994), regardless of early elections taken. This provides a disincentive for early elections, increasing the likelihood of short, transitional minority governments, and informally restricts the government's ability to call an early election (Bergman 1995:64).

c) The committee parliamentary system

Another peculiar feature of the Riksdag is its committee system, through which the opposition parties are able to influence policy decision even being out of the cabinet (Bergman 1995:63).

The Riksdag's 16 committees can take legislative initiative and have full time staffs. Their specializations roughly correspond to ministries, and chairs into committee are distributed proportionally to each party. Allowing parties to influence policies, the committee system reduces the incentives to enter a government, contributing then to the high frequency of minority governments.

d) Administrative institutions

Another factor explaining the likelihood of minority government in Sweden is the peculiar form of ministerial powers (Bergman 1995:65). In fact, the implementation of laws is a task dealt by independent administrative state agencies, that do not fall under the direct control of a minister, but under the authority of the government as a collective. This corrodes the utility of ministerial portfolios in two ways: by one side, without a direct control over administrative agencies, the power of ministries is reduced, as much as the office utility is; by the other way, lying the administrative agencies under the authority of the government as a whole, a minister might have to defend a policy with which he personally do not agree. Both facts are disincentives to join a governmental coalition, without a valid assurance about future policies.

2- THE COSTITUTIONALIZATION OF NEGATIVE PARLIAMENTARISM

Institutional and electoral factors shown above can explain why the practice of minority governments has become usual in Sweden.

In fact, as shown by table 2, from 1945 to 2007 the practice of minority governments in Sweden continued and consolidated its roots. Out of 27 governments, only 7 were majority cabinets. Of those, four gained majority through government coalitions; two gained majority by the only force of the SAP, who reached majority by himself (Erlander X, Palme I); at last, the Erlander I cabinet in 1951 would have had majority by the only force of SAP, but engaged in coalition with the Centre Party. The remaining 19 governments were minority governments, mainly guided by socialdemocrats.

Table 2 (data elaborated from Demkel-Svåsand 2005:397-8,408; Bergman 1995:57; val.se)

Cabinet	Cabinet parties	Parliamentary support
1946.10.11 Erlander I	S	50.0 %
1948.09.19 Erlander II	S	48.7 %
1951.10.01 Erlander III	S-C	61.7 %

1952.09.21 Erlander IV	S-C	59.1 %
1956.09.26 Erlander V	S-C	54.1 %
1957.10.31 Erlander VI	S	45.9 %
1958.06.01 Erlander VII	S	48.1 %
1960.09.18 Erlander VIII	S	49.1 %
1964.09.20 Erlander IX	S	48.5 %
1968.09.15 Erlander X	S	53.6 %
1969.10.14 Palme I	S	53.6 %
1970.09.20 Palme II	S	46.6 %
1973.09.16 Palme III	S	44.6 %
1976.10.07 Fälldin I	C-L-M	51.6 %
1978.10.12 Ullsten	L	11.2 %
1979.10.11 Fälldin II	C-L-M	50.1 %
1981.05.19 Fälldin III	C-L	29.2 %
1982.10.07 Palme IV	S	47.6 %
1985.09.15 Palme V	S	45.6 %
1986.03.12 Carlsson I	S	45.6 %
1988.09.18 Carlsson II	S	44.7 %
1991.10.03 Bildt	C-L-M-K	48.7 %
1994.10.06 Carlsson III	S	45.2 %
1996.03.21 Persson I	S	46.1 %
1998.09.20 Persson II	S	37,5 %
2002.09.15 Persson III	S	41,2 %
2006.10.05 Reinfeldt	C-L-M-K	48.2 %

S: socialdemocratic Party; M: moderate party; L: liberal party; C: centre party; K: Christian-Democrats
in bold: majority governments

1) Voting pattern and policy disagreements between other parties

A non-institutional factor that helps to explain the predominance of minority governments (and specifically Socialdemocratic minority governments) is the general pattern of voting in Swedish elections (Bergman 1995:67,81). In fact, Socialdemocrats were favoured by an high an stable electoral support, with an average value of 46,7 % in the period 1945-91, while non-socialist parties were affected by significant fluctuations and intra-bloc shifts. SAP held an optimal bargaining position, usually owning the Median Legislator.

Communists showed the same electoral stability than SAP, and until the 1980s their great divide from the bourgeois parties made them supposed to unconditionally support any Socialdemocratic government.

On the right-wing, policy disagreements made bourgeois parties unable to form an electoral coalition able to present himself as a credible alternative to SAP's governments; on the other hand, the same disagreements made SAP able to create legislative coalitions *ad hoc* with one or more of the same bourgeois parties.

2) System institutionalization

Since the 1950s, the practice of minority government went through a process of institutionalization. In order to explain why did it consolidate, it is necessary to briefly describe the process that brought finally to the constitutionalization of negative parliamentarism into the new Swedish constitution of 1975 (Bergman 1993:290-299).

Two multi-party commissions were appointed by governments in order to study a large-scale constitutional reform: the first (FU, *Författningsutredningen*) worked from 1954 to 1963; the second (GLB, *Grundlagberedningen*) worked from 1966 to 1972, concluding its work with some institutional reforms, implemented in 1970, and with the new Constitution, that came into force in 1975. All the reforms proposed by the two commissions were aimed to strengthen governments in charge and to allow a higher grade of minority governments.

a) Institutional Reforms

Among the institutional reforms of 1970, some affected directly or indirectly the government formation process and the possibility of minority governments.

First, the electoral system was revised, excluding from Riksdag parties who do not reach a 4 % threshold nationally or a 12 % threshold in a constituency. This, by one side, prevents excessive parliamentary fragmentation; by the other, prevents little parties from entering an office, by the threat of falling under the threshold at the next elections (as reported by Bergman 2000:225, being in office in Sweden at election time causes an average vote loss of 2,2 %).

Second, it was stated that local and national elections will be held in the same day, allowing the governments to work freely during its term without pressures from different types of elections.

Third, the Riksdag was reduced to a single-chamber organ, simplifying the accountability from Parliament to Government. In fact, this did not affected that much the real political scene, since SAP had always kept control of the First Chamber (Bergman 1993:61).

b) The new Constitution of 1975

The compromise between parties upon the new Constitution reached before the commission's appointment removed the King from its powers in the government formation process. As

letting Riksdag elect the Prime Minister would have exposed to embarrassing tactical manoeuvres, and might have constrained a party to openly refuse a candidate-PM that it could have implicitly tolerated, the Speaker was given responsibility for appointing a candidate-PM. To avoid possible partisan manoeuvres by the Speaker (that would usually have been a socialdemocrat), moderates and liberals strongly required a vote in the Riksdag before the PM could assume his powers: the candidate will then be able to form a cabinet if no more than half of the Riksdag MPs vote against him.

This investiture vote is, primarily, a negative vote; this feature has been chosen exactly in order to preserve negative parliamentarism; moreover, it is an absolute vote, in which absences and abstentions are counted as implicit support, in order to avoid the possibility for a minority to block the Speaker's candidate-PM. Both features reveals the aim to keep the possibility of minority governments and to ensure government stability. They reveal a deep preference for the flexibility of minority government, compared with large coalitions without policy cohesion, and for getting rapidly a government, even in spite of the broadness of its support.

The introduction of a vote in the Riksdag in the government formation process brought some authors to assimilate Sweden to positive parliamentarisms (Ricknell 1975:116, cited in Bergman 1995:45) or to see Sweden going a step further toward it (Holmberg and Stjernquist 1980:32,409, Westerståhl 1976:10; both cited in Bergman 1995:45); in facts, the characteristics of this vote make it the lowest-powerful of votes in Parliaments upon a new government forming, not requiring the government to win any vote, but being aimed only to show if the cabinet is really tolerated by the Riksdag. For those reasons Bergman (1995:45) continues to consider Sweden as a fully-negative parliamentarism.

After twenty years of political discussions, the new constitution come into force in 1975, when the factors that had supported the minority government practice began to decline.

Bergman (1993:80) point out five changes in the Swedish political sphere that weakened the previous patterns in coalition formations: first, despite policy disparities, non-socialist parties have been able to form a coalition; second, Communists became reluctant to give unconditional support to SAP; third, new parties gained representation in Riksdag: the Greens in 1988, Christian Democrats in 1991; fourth, voters behaviour have become more volatile and class-voting have lost most of its importance; fifth, in 1994 SAP's austerity budget program was second only to the one of the Moderates.

In fact, Swedish governments structure seemed not to have changed that much, as the only majoritarian coalition governments in the whole period from 1970 to 2006 were the two

Fälldin cabinets of 1976 and 1979. Since the first of those, the right-wing parties adopted as a necessary strategy for reaching office the building of a right-wing coalition. They were forced to do so by the fragmentation and volatility of non-socialist voters, without a party able to stably gain predominance, forming a cabinet supported by the others. Moreover, their unity was jeopardized by disagreements over policies, e.g. nuclear power. The SAP exploited the situation continuing to form minority governments supported by Communists, even if in 1991 Bildt cabinet managed to get the right coalition back to office, even if still as a minority government.

3- TOWARD AN END OF THE MINORITY GOVERNMENT MODEL?

Between 1994 and 2006 Carlsson's and Persson's SAP cabinets tried to use the same strategy, while the context was slightly changing. As unconditioned support by the Left and the Greens was not granted anymore, in 1998 Persson had to sign a deal with them, securing a majority base for his cabinet in return of cooperation about support parties' priority policies. The renewal of the deal in 2002 brought also advisors from the two parties into their priority-issue ministries (Aylott 2007). Despite the good results of the deals, discontent increased in support parties. In 2002 Greens pretended to enter a coalition government if the left bloc had won majority again. As SAP refused, they declared to be ready to embed into a right-wing majority; the move proved to be a bluff, due to the deep policy disagreement between Greens and bourgeois parties. At the end, Greens had to accept the renewal of the 1998 deal. The party leaders repeated the menace in 2006, but electoral result did not allow them to prove their coherence. SAP might also have thought about building a coalition with the Greens, as policy differences had softened, but the same approaching path was, however, unthinkable between Socialdemocrats and the Left Party. Since 2002, traditional radicals regained leadership in the party, preventing SAP to even think to a coalition, as had been the "red-green" Norwegian alliance in 2005 (Sitter 2006), that could have brought SAP to lose more votes than those acquired by the Left (Aylott 2007). However, Left Party conserved its force to block any possible SAP-Greens coalition.

Even more changes had broke out in the right wing in the meanwhile. The pragmatic shift of the new Moderates' leader Fredrik Reinfeldt and the construction, in 2004, of the "Alliance for Sweden", a coalition between the four main right-wing parties, appeared as the main changes. Alliance's consultations brought to a common electoral platform on policies before

the 2006 elections, that made the right able to present herself to the electorate as a credible coalition, whose election could have brought to well-predictable consequences, confronting with a split left bloc, whose victory might have had uncertain consequences due to the uncertain Left and Greens' support to SAP.

Having set its campaign on the employment issue, the Alliance gained a huge victory, and Reinfeldt was able to form the first right-wing coalition government since Bildt's and Fälldin's. At the contrary, Socialdemocrats faced their worst result ever. After Persson's resignation, Mona Sahlin was appointed as unique candidate for the party congress in march 2007.

It is possible to argue over Mona Sahlin's next strategy to regain power to the Socialdemocrats; until now she has not spent a word upon it. In fact, if we consider the four main goals for each political party, policy, office, votes and unity (Müller-Strøm 1999), we can see that Mona Sahlin's leadership has to face contradictions. On unity, she needs a path toward the left wing of her party and the trade unions, who still do not trust her; to regain office, she might need as well a path toward the left, as in no case SAP will be able to gain a majority on its own. This aim could however come in contradiction with the objective to gain votes, as in the last elections SAP lose support exactly among young people and in big cities; to maximize votes, she may need a policy path toward the right, taking back from the Alliance SAP's traditional issues, such as employment. Finally, the direction that SAP will take upon policies will depend exactly on how she and the new SAP leadership will deal with the previous goals: in fact, the more oppositional SAP behaviour will be, the more it will become left-wingy upon policies; at the contrary, if Sahlin will try to fight Alliance on the median part of the electorate, she will have to take a more centrist approach upon policies.

Anyway, if the Alliance coalition will prove to be solid and able to last until 2010 elections, the left bloc's parties will not help but trying to build a similar solid coalition on their side of the political arch, following the example of Norway.

In fact, the possibilities for electoral multi-lateral moves by the SAP have been stopped by the rise of the Alliance coalition. Still in 2006, just before the election results were published, Persson argued about a possible deal with the Centre Party (Aylott 2007); in fact, such a possibility was quite far from real: as the Centre Party has become embedded in the right-wing coalition, the only alternative left to SAP is an alliance with Greens and Left. The same happened to the Greens: the bluff they played in 2001, about supporting a right coalition if SAP would not have allowed them to enter a coalition cabinet, was even less credible in 2006, as the right parties had previously agreed about policies and did not need Greens' electoral

support. Finally, the rise of a strong coalition on the right may force the left parties to recognize they have no other way to regain office but to compete unitarily.

It is sure that many obstacles remains on the path toward a left-wing coalition in the Swedish political system: the main one is thought to be the Left Party revert to traditional radicalism since 2002, that made unthinkable to the SAP the possibility to build a serious coalition (Aylott 2007). At the contrary, relationships between SAP and Greens were already warm with Persson, as the 2004 joint seminars state. As well, after the 2006 election both Left and Greens' leaders regretted for the lack of a clear, joint pre-electoral statement over a possible supported SAP cabinet policy program to be presented to the electorate. If the left parties will be able to learn from losing, as the bourgeois bloc did since 2002, they may be able to reach an agreement and form a coalition before the 2010 elections.

A similar evolution may be traced up in Italian politics in the "Second Republic" period, since 1994. At the beginning, coalitions were not coherent: in 1994 the main right-wing party, Forza Italia, presented a coalition with the Northern League regionalist party in northern constituencies, and with National Alliance, southern-based unitarian party, in the southern ones. As well, in 1996 Prodi's Ulivo alliance between centre-left parties had to sign a deal with the Communists; the broke of the deal in 1998 brought the cabinet to an end, and forced the centre-left parties to seek for centrists' support. In the meanwhile, the four main opposition parties (the previous ones had been joined by right-wing Christian democrats) had formed a common bloc under Berlusconi's leadership, the House of Freedom, that was able to present a concrete and accountable policy platform, defeating a left bloc affected by lack of leadership and of policy programs, and gaining a strong parliamentary majority. The left bloc learned the lesson and before 2006 elections presented itself as a single alliance, the Union, with a well-structured pre-electoral program hopefully able to resolve the many policy disagreements between its nine parties. However, a major cause in bloc polarization in Italy, before the 2005 proportional reform, was the majoritarian electoral law, whose lack in Sweden may decrease the bloc polarization speed.

If a left bloc coalition will be built by 2010, Swedish political system may go through a major change. In fact, since the end of the 1960s some authors explained the Swedish distinctive split between a socialist bloc and a non-socialist bloc in terms of a modified two-party system (Ruin 1968, 1985, cited in Bergman 2000:192). And even if the system was complicated by the beginning of the 1990s as new parties got into it, it has mainly maintained its coherence. At last, the electoral term 2002-2006 brought the two blocs to firm up more than ever (Aylott 2007).

The two bloc polarization may bring, by time, to a minor frequency of little minority governments. As two coherent blocs will compete on the scene, giving less space to minor parties, they may be quite always sure to acquire at least a 40 % of the votes. Still, such a structure of the party system will not be enough to transform Sweden into a majoritarian parliamentarism. Institutional factors, such as the proportional electoral law and the negative parliamentary rule in government formation, will still provide the possibility for minority governments to rule even in absence of the support of 50% +1 of the Riksdag members.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the model of Swedish minority governments is deeply rooted in Swedish democratic history, since the very beginning of the XX century. Its arising have been favoured by Swedish peculiarities, such as the rule of negative parliamentarism, the short electoral terms, the committee system and the independent state agencies.

The practice of minority government have continued and consolidated in the second part of the century, encouraged by the stable voting patterns for SAP and the policy disagreements between other parties. The system have been institutionalized by the work of two Commissions in the '50s and the '60s, bringing to the institutional reforms of 1970 and to the new Constitution of 1975, whose new rules on government formation process were built exactly in order to respect the usual minority government formation process. Since the '70s, however, changes appeared in the Swedish political sphere, able to weaken the previous patterns that supported minority governments. In the years 2000s, the bloc polarization has improved, bringing to a solid right-wing alliance that was able to win the 2006 elections. Future implications are disputable, but such a political scene may force the left party to renew their quasi-coalitional deals of the '90s into a real coalition, despite of the many institutional and political obstacles still on their way. Such a perspective may also be suggested by comparison with the Italian political evolution since 1994.

If such an hypothesis should be verified, Sweden may go a step further through a modified two-party system; institutional factors, such as the proportional electoral law and the rule of negative parliamentarism may then hold down this evolution, still allowing minority governments and preventing Sweden from losing its historical path.

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