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Divided We Fall? Negotiating Responses to a Radical Right-wing Party within the Swedish Labour Movement

Sanna salo, Jens Rydgren and Pontus Odmalm

Divided We Fall? Negotiating Responses to a Radical Right-wing Party within the Swedish Labour Movement

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Abstract: This paper analyses the responses of the Swedish labour movement – the Social Democratic Party and the blue-collar union confederation, the LO – to the populist radical right-wing party the Sweden Democrats between 2007 and 2018. Yet it does so from a novel perspective, highlighting the role of 1) temporality and 2) intra-party/organizational dynamics in determining external strategies. The paper shows how intra-organizational learning played a key role in fostering change in the Social Democrats’ and the LO’s strategic responses. Actors learned from the effects of their past strategies and readjusted them accordingly. We hence argue that party responses to challenger parties are best analysed as processes, instead of discrete events, and that acquiring internal consent for strategic shifts represents a central task in this process. The paper is a single-case study of Sweden, a crucial case for studying the de- and realignment of the West European political space since support for the centre-left has declined, while it increased for the radical right. We conduct a chronological, qualitative analysis of intra-party and union sources, defining key events at which strategic shifts took place. Conceptually, we stretch the notion of intra-party politics to include the unions as well, serving as a prime example of the need to internally negotiate external strategies.

Keywords: Intra-party politics, radical right-wing parties, Social Democratic parties, trade unions

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1. Introduction

Recent changes to party system dynamics and the related rise of radical right-wing parties (RRPs) generated increased interest in how parties adapt to this new political environment. The literature points to three key responses. First, parties adjust their policy positions following a perceived change in voters' preferences (Downs 1957; Klüver and Spoon, 2016), second, parties adjust considering recent election results (Somer-Topcu 2009; Adams 2012), and third, parties adapt in response to the changing behaviour of their competitors (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Koedam 2022). With such foci, however, the *internal* on-goings of initiating these changes received relatively less attention, and this literature does not sufficiently address the following questions, namely, what kind of intra-party dynamics precede these strategic changes? Through what type of mechanisms do parties gather information on voters' preferences? And more specifically, what is the role of *intermediary organizations*, such as trade unions, in transmitting key information and thus fostering changes to party strategies?

This paper analyses how the formal Swedish labour movement, that is, the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokratiska Arbetarpartiet*, SAP), and the main blue-collar union confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige* (LO)), internally negotiated different approaches in response to the electoral rise of the RRP party, the Sweden Democrats. Studying “the labour movement” is essential to understand the centre-left's internal dynamics of strategy formation since it involves two separate but closely associated organizations, first, its political wing, the SAP, and second, its economic one, the LO (Jansson, 2017). Our theoretical framework combines research on mainstream responses to RRP (see e.g., Meguid 2005; Bale *et al.*, 2010; Heinze 2018; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018) and the decline of the centre-left (see e.g., Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Bremer and Rennwald, 2023; Abou-Chadi *et al.*, 2021; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2022; Rennwald and Mosimann 2023) with insights from neo-institutional theorising, particularly its ideas of path-dependency (Pierson, 2015).

As such, the paper makes a three-fold contribution to the study of mainstream and RRP. First, by appreciating the role of *timing*. As Heinze (2022) points out, few studies consider the effect of timing on mainstream responses, which are better understood as an evolving process rather than one-off events. Consequently, they include numerous feedback loops and information sharing events where different actors learn from each other and about the effects of historical choices and decisions. Thus, we pay special attention to how the labour movement's strategies have evolved over time, and previous choices continued to impact and shape their subsequent

responses. Second, by appreciating the relevance of the *internal* party arena. The literature on the relationship between the political mainstream and the RRP tends to focus on parliamentary and/or electoral arenas (Sjöblom 1968). However, the internal organizational dynamics are equally important, we argue, because effective strategies require intra-party cohesion (Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2022; Little and Farrell 2017). When mainstream actors fail to stem the rise of RRP, this could also be due to flaws in their internal communication strategies and failures to achieve sufficient internal backing. To reach such unity, then, parties can devise various approaches targeted at an internal audience. The defuse strategy, for example, is not solely an inter-party concern but can also be used in internal communications aiming to affect party members' and activists' *perceptions*. Third, analysing the internal dynamics of the centre-left is particularly pertinent since we also include *the trade union movement* in our study. This extends the internal arena to also encompass interactions within the tightly knit – yet also separate - organizational platforms of the SAP and LO.

To capture these processes of internal strategic response formulation, we conduct a chronological and qualitative analysis of a single case, namely, the organized labour movement in Sweden. We argue that Sweden is an illuminating yet also overlooked case when it comes to the de-and realignment of the political space following the decline of Social Democratic parties and the rise of RRP. Sweden long exhibited a largely unipolar political space, dominated by the traditional left-right socio-economic cleavage and its main carrier, the Social Democratic party. For example, in the elections between 1932 and 1994, the SAP gathered, on average, 45 per cent of the vote and rarely had to coalesce with other parties to form a government. And through an exceptionally strong relationship with the blue-collar confederation - the LO – the SAP managed to capture most of the working-class vote as well. This alliance acted as a shield towards worker mobilization by the radical right up until the 2010s when the SD broke free from the left-right cleavage, entered parliament and has grown into becoming the country's second-largest party, mobilizing roughly a quarter of the unionized working class (Rydgren 2002, Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019; Demker and Odmalm 2022, Oskarson and Demker 2015).

Thus, our analysis centres on the different strategies pursued by the organised Swedish labour movement to counteract this drastic development and proceeds as follows. In the next section, we outline our analytical framework, and a focus on the different strategic options available to mainstream (left) parties and trade unions. We then examine some of the key factors influencing party strategies and bring in trade unions since they are an understudied yet important intermediary. After that we introduce our research design and methods. What follows

is the analysis, divided into sequences of time, and, finally, we discuss our findings.

2. Analytical Framework: Response Options for Parties and Trade Unions in the External and Internal Arenas

The rise of RRPs fundamentally changed the dynamics of party competition in Western Europe (Marks *et al.*, 2022; Demker and Odmalm 2022; Bale *et al.*, 2010; Kitschelt, 1994), and scholars point to overlapping working-class constituencies between RRPs and the centre-left, with the ascent of the former particularly affecting Social Democratic parties (see e.g., Rennwald 2020). Research also identifies a middle-class shift in the support base of the Social Democratic party family (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Bremer and Rennwald 2023) and asks whether the “authoritarian worker” (Lipset, 1959) contributed to the “proletarianization” of the radical right’s support base (see further Betz 1994; Rydgren 2013; Afonso and Rennwald 2018). While the conclusions by, for example, Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) and Abou-Chadi *et al.* (2021), suggest it is less common for former Social Democratic and working-class voters to defect directly to the radical right, they also find working-class voters are overrepresented amongst radical right parties. Yet the working-class vote is still indispensable for Social Democratic parties (Kurer and Palier, 2019; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Häusermann *et al.* 2013; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986) leading to a situation where “social democracy and the radical right share commonalities in the class profile of their supporters” (Rennwald 2020: 60). At the party system level, then, scholars identify two types of challenges by RRPs. First, regarding the *form* of party competition, Heinze (2022) suggests the growth of RRPs alters party system dynamics by forcing the political mainstream to reconsider its cooperation and coalition partners (see also Meguid, 2005). Typically, it means forming ideologically coherent majorities – in parliaments as well as executives – becomes difficult along the traditional left-right dimension (see e.g., Heinze and Salo 2024). Second, regarding the *substance* of party competition, RRPs contribute to raising levels of issue salience of so-called socio-cultural questions, notably immigration (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020), which may incentivise mainstream parties to move closer to the RRPs on these issues (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016). That said, it is analytically helpful to also distinguish between different types of response options depending on the arena of party competition, namely, the electoral, legislative, or the executive (Strom 1990). Different types of logic apply to different arenas. For example, once RRPs enter parliament, they start to benefit from certain privileges (say, allocated speaking

time or party funding) which can limit the response options for other parties (Heinze, 2022). One arena, which received less scholarly attention, however, is the *internal* party environment (although see Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022). Given our focus on timing and sequencing of centre-left responses, we include the internal arena in our analysis as well. Arguably, intra-organizational learning, such as feedback loops between one type of response strategy to another, can best be observed on the internal arena of party and trade union communications. Different party-behavioural motives are also associated with each arena. On the electoral one, for example, parties tend to be vote-seeking, while on the parliamentary and executive arenas they typically are policy- and office-seeking, respectively (Strom, 1990). Conversely, on the internal arena the main motivator is achieving intra-organisational *coherence* (Little and Farrell, 2017), which is essential if parties are to speak with one voice, in this case, presenting a unified and coherent front towards RRP. In Table 1 we thus present a typology of response options available to parties, and for reasons of parsimony, we divide these arenas into the internal and external ones only.

Table 1: Response options in the external and internal arenas

	Formal	Policy	Motive
External	Ignoring, isolation, ad-hoc toleration, legislative or executive cooperation	Hold/oppose, defuse, adopt	Vote/office/policy-seeking
Internal	Legal means: bans, expulsions	Education campaigns, internal defuse	Internal cohesion

Regarding the relationship between mainstream parties and the RRP, there are broadly three developmental stages. The first concerns the entry of RRP, which established parties might try to prevent (Downs, 2001). They can therefore *ignore* it, which is particularly effective as long as the RRP is not represented in parliament (Heinze 2022). The point of this strategy is to deny the RRP any legitimacy or relevance, but it may also amplify attention to exactly those issues that drive the RRP’s success in the first place. Mainstream parties might also find legal ways of complicating or delaying entry, such as banning party families. This stage effectively ends once the RRP gains representation in parliament, which also means it has become large enough to be labelled a “relevant party” (Sartori, 1976).

During the second stage the political mainstream struggles to ignore the RRP or downplay its parliamentary relevance but can still try to diminish its political impact. At the formal level,

then, mainstream parties may *exclude* the RRP by erecting a cordon sanitaire or forming a grand coalition of centrist-type parties to minimise the policy influence of the RRP. This strategy, too, comes with certain risks. First, it can strengthen the RRP's position as a political outsider in relation to the "cartel" of old parties and, second, it may cause dysfunctional governing coalitions as the only thing they have in common is opposition to RRP (Downs 2001). Yet at the policy level, mainstream parties can *hold* on to their original positions and thereby *oppose* the RRP's stances (Bale *et al*, 2010). Alternatively, the political mainstream can *defuse* the debate by drawing attention away from the RRP's favoured issue, namely immigration, and instead steer public debates towards issues they own, typically socio-economic ones (Bale *et al*, 2010). The defuse strategy may, however, lead to criticisms that mainstream parties do not care about voters' 'legitimate grievances' (Heinze 2018).

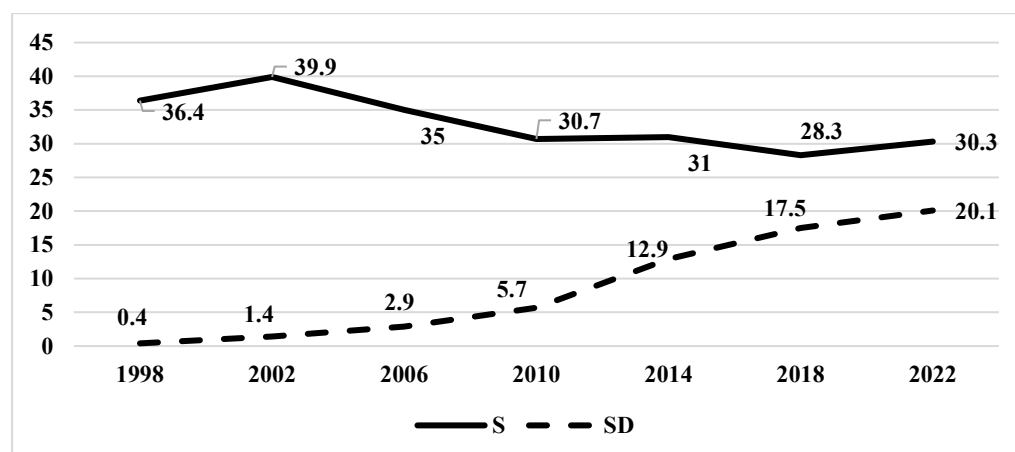
During the third stage, however, the calculus changes and mainstream parties no longer see it as strategically viable to fully exclude RRP or fully oppose their policy positions. At the formal level, Heinze (2022) identifies three forms of cooperative responses by the political mainstream. First, *ad hoc-toleration* (voting with the RRP on a case-by-case basis); second, *legislative cooperation* (introducing joint motions or supporting those submitted by the RRP), , third, *executive cooperation* (making the RRP a formal coalition partner or entering a confidence-and-supply arrangement). Such collaborative strategies may of course further legitimise RRP as credible political partners and normalise their policy positions (Rydgren 2006; Heinze 2018). At the policy level, conversely, mainstream parties may *adopt* some of the RRP's issue positions with the hope of enticing (back) the median voter. Yet this may not only continue to legitimise the RRP's positions but likely also to raise intra-party disagreements within the political mainstream (Bale *et al.*, 2010, Heinze 2018).

But existing studies (implicitly) conceptualise these response options as taking place in various types of external arenas. That is, as strategies directed at an extra-party audience. Arguably, different actors also engage in intra-organisational analyses and discussions of how to engage with RRP as well as devise strategic responses directed at an *internal* audience. These aim to establish a degree of internal coherence, which is necessary for effective external communication and in the case of potential voter overlap with RRP. In addition to the internal *party* arena, the paper extends this notion, so it applies to trade unions, and thus redefines the term as the *intra-organizational arena*. In the next section, we describe the transformation of the Swedish party system over the past 20 years, and the main external responses to the SD's rise. We then move on to our methods and data used for the analysis of the internal and external responses by the labour movement.

3. The Transformation of the Swedish Party System and Competing Over the Working-Class Vote

The Swedish case is particularly illuminating for studying the de- and realignment between working-class voters and the centre left. The legacy of SAP is remarkably strong. For example, between 1932 and 2006 it was out of government for only some nine years and averaged circa 40 percent of the popular vote (Aylott and Bolin, 2006). Moreover, Sweden has a comparatively high rate of unionization of around 81 percent (Kjellberg and Nergaard, 2022). The dominance of the class cleavage meant the Swedish party system became structured around a single - and very solid - left-right socio-economic axis, which effectively marginalised other political fault lines up until the early 2000s (Demker and Odmalm 2022). Consequently, Swedish politics was long lacking the kind of radical right-wing mobilization seen elsewhere in Europe (Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019, Oskarson and Demker, 2015). Rydgren (2002) identifies five conditions to explain this anomaly. First, social class strongly predicted voting behaviour; second, the working class was closely tied to the SAP, which meant this pool of voters was largely unavailable to RRP; third, socio-economic issues dominated political agendas to such an extent that socio-cultural issues, such as immigration, became challenging to raise; four, voters perceived clear policy alternatives across the left-right divide, and, finally, the extremist history and reputation of the SD made it unappealing for many voters. But by the late 2010s, these conditions had become less relevant (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Figure 1. Vote shares (%), the SAP and SD in parliamentary elections, 1998-2022



In the 2006 election, the SAP suffered its worst result ever, and lost office to the centre-right “Alliance” coalition. This election matters because during the campaign, and at a time of rising unemployment, the SAP lost ownership of its core issues, namely, jobs and employment, to the

centre-right, in particular the Moderates, which had labelled itself the new “workers’ party” (Aylott and Bolin, 2007). Consequently, ideological divisions and identities between the left and the right got blurred, and a positional space opened for the SD to occupy. The SD is a peculiar member of the European radical-right family, especially in terms of its journey into the political mainstream. The contemporary incarnation of the SD is a nationalist and value-conservative party. However, its roots trace back to the white power and neo-Nazi movements of the 1980s. Although the party was founded in 1988 it only took off electorally as of the late 2000s. Its current and long-time party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, assumed the role in 2005 and dedicated his tenure to polish the party’s image in the eyes of the political establishment, with the aim of making the SD respectable enough to govern. Nevertheless, the SD’s extremist roots continued to stigmatize the party, and diminished its prospects of cooperating with other mainstream parties. Yet the SD transformed into a “relevant” party in 2010 after entering parliament. Up until then, the response by the political mainstream was to ignore the SD as much as possible. The labour movement had, however, become vigilant of the fact that the SD was mobilizing parts of its working-class constituency.

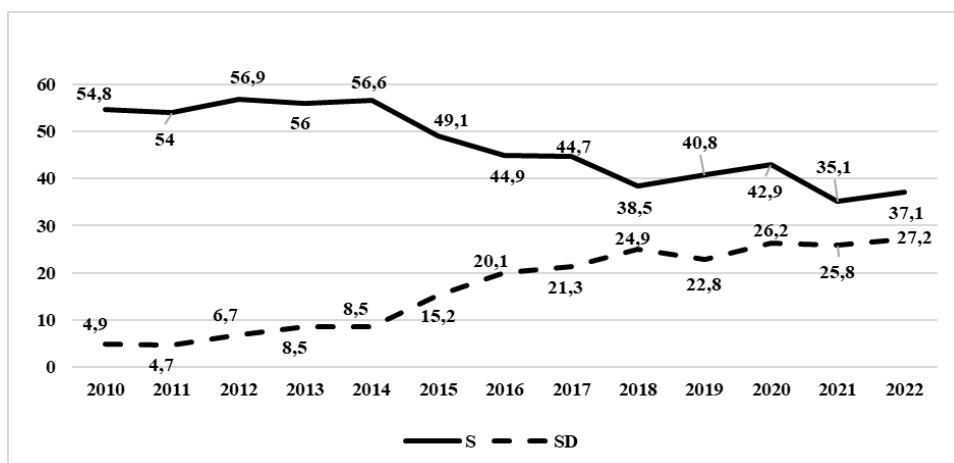
When the SD gained parliamentary representation, the formal response by all mainstream parties was to isolate and erect a *cordon sanitaire* around the party. This involved both parliamentary and executive cooperation between the centre-left and centre-right blocs, with the common aim of excluding the SD from any form of power or influence. Although cooperation between different mainstream parties and the SD was not uncommon at neither local or regional levels (Loxbo and Bolin, 2016), it took until the 2022 election for parliamentary as well executive cooperation to emerge at the national level. Regarding legislative cooperation, the strategy of isolation thus changed into a form of *ad hoc toleration* as the SD was granted chairmanship in several parliamentary committees. Regarding executive cooperation, the SD was accepted as an active support party yet remained outside the formal coalition consisting of the Moderates (M), Liberals (L), and Christian Democrats (KD).

Regarding policy responses, the changing dimensionality of the Swedish party system over the past decade is key to understand this development. Historically, socio-economic class has structured voting behaviour in Swedish politics (Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019) and the left-right socio-economic cleavage was accordingly dominant (Demker and Odalm 2022). The party system was thus comparatively polarised on the socioeconomic dimension whereas the GAL-TAN dimension remained largely long dormant (Oscarsson *et al.*, 2021). In the past decade, however, the importance of the GAL-TAN cleavage has grown, and both parties and public opinion have become increasingly polarized, especially on immigration, integration, and

law-and-order issues. Party system polarization on the GAL-TAN dimension peaked in 2014, as all mainstream parties, including the SAP as well as the Moderates, gradually moved towards the GAL-end of the spectrum, while the SD occupied the TAN side (Oscarsson *et al*, 2021). After that, the saliency level of immigration peaked during the so-called asylum crisis of 2015-16, and the Moderates and SAP both moved slightly towards in the TAN direction. Using changes to mainstream positions on the GAL-TAN dimension as a rough policy proxy for their responses to the SD, the hold strategy thus lasted up until 2014, after which it changed, and mainstream parties adopted some of the policy positions of the SD (Oscarsson *et al*, 2021). So far, we have discussed formal external policy responses by the political mainstream in general, and we now move on to how the labour movement responded.

We argue that Sweden is prime example of dealignment between working-class voters and the centre-left, as prevailing relationships between class and voting behaviour not only witnessed a rapid and steep decline but also a drop in the rates of union membership, from 81% (2000) to 69% (2020) (Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019; Kjellberg and Nergaard, 2022). Figure 2 shows the evolution of LO-members party sympathies¹ over the past decade and a half.

Figure 2. Support (%) for the SAP and SD among LO members, 2010 – 2022



In 2018, working-class voters made up 46% of the SD’s support base (Thelin and Oscarsson, 2022), and 27.5 % of the LO-affiliated blue-collar workers chose the SD over SAP in the 2022 election. This development presented challenges to the SAP since the working-class vote is

¹ Figure 2 is based on the bi-annual Party Preference Surveys, where respondents are asked to which party they feel closest to (www.scb.se). This measure is hence slightly different from a vote choice measure. Oscarsson and Demker (2015: 635) have considered using the party preference measures an advantage, as these “focus more on the underlying trends of party support rather than on short-term effects of campaigning and mobilization”

fundamental for purposes of office-seeking, even though the party also attracts a growing number of middle-class voters, typically employed in the public sector (Cederholm *et al.*, 2022).

A key mechanism for securing the working-class vote has been SAP's traditionally close association with the LO. The two organizations have a symbiotic relationship based on an exchange of resources where the LO supports the SAP financially and mobilises its members to vote for the party. In exchange, the LO gets privileged access to political information and decision-makers (Jansson, 2017). Considering the SAP's long-standing position as a "dominant party" (Sartori 2005) such access was a significant resource for the LO. Yet the rise of the SD also posed dilemmas to the LO. Since an increasing share of its members openly sympathised with the SD, how could the LO reconcile its organizational integration with the SAP? And how could the organisation maintain the core values of the labour movement, based on international solidarity, class affinity, and the – equally important principle – of internal democracy?

The literature on trade unions and the radical right is relatively scant but addresses important perspectives on the radical right's attitudes and strategies towards trade unions (Rathgeb and Klitgaard, 2023), the electoral implications of such strategies (Mosimann, Rennwald and Zimmerman, 2019) and the abilities of trade unions to act as a shield against far-right mobilization (Arndt and Rennwald 2016, Mosimann and Rennwald 2023). The latter literature finds a "union effect" on this relationship, that is, union members – as the wider electorate – vote for radical right-wing parties based on their socio-cultural, anti-immigration preferences, but unions also have the capacity to reduce such socio-cultural voting by translating "their members' pro-redistribution preferences into pro-redistribution voting" (Mosimann and Rennwald, 2023: 1). This works via two mechanisms: first, a "mobilization effect" where unions mobilize members during election times through different campaign efforts and, second, through a "saliency effect" where unions communicate pro-distribution positions to members to help them prioritize between different issues (Mosimann and Rennwald, 2023).

Conceptualized this way, then, the dilemma for the Swedish labour movement was that the "union effect" appeared significantly weakened over the past decade, as shown by nearly every third LO-member now supporting the SD. We would then expect the LO to respond to this development – given its strategic interest in maintaining the cooperative exchange with the Social Democrats – by trying to invoke the above mobilization and saliency effects. While the format of campaign mobilization is relatively straightforward, the saliency effect, in the internal organizational arena, could primarily be achieved through *internal defuse strategies*, that is, communication strategies aimed at an internal union and party audience, which sought to raise

the level of salience of socio-economic issues at the expense of immigration and other socio-cultural questions. Having set the context for our case study, the next sections briefly introduce our data and methodological choices, before moving on to the analysis.

4. Research design: methods and data

Bale *et al* (2010) underline the importance of timing and sequencing for centre-left responses to RRP and argue therefore these are best captured by qualitative case studies. Following the reasoning of Pierson (2015), a chronological, sequential approach is best suited to capture *influence* in political contestation, as struggles over power are not atemporal but rather evolve over time. If we consider contestation between mainstream parties and RRP as not solely over voters in a specific time and place, but as influence over the political agenda more broadly, then it is essential to also investigate this development over time.

We argue the period between 2007 and 2018 is particularly consequential for understanding how the SD have come to exert influence in the Swedish party system, as this was the time span in which the party rose from obscurity to the centre of national politics. Furthermore, it is a period in which the Swedish mainstream parties transformed their strategic approaches to the radical right, from full disengagement to varying degrees of engagement and subsequent adoption of the SD's policy positions. Undoubtedly, the period between 2018 and 2024 is key, as after the 2018 election the SD was, finally, accepted as a quasi-coalition partner of the centre-right government. Our primary data was collected as part of a larger project [authors, 202] and ends therefore in 2018, but we reflect on the most recent years as well in the end of our analysis. The analysis consists of two parts. First, to understand the sequencing of events and determine relevant critical junctures between 2007 to 2018, we relied on secondary data, such as newspaper articles and relevant literature. For purposes of parsimony, then, we reduced periodization to correspond with the general elections. This also is empirically justified, as according to our observations, these elections were indeed key turning points, alongside leadership changes and particular external events, such as the refugee crisis of 2015, which our analysis also addresses. Second, to analyse the intra-organizational interactions between the LO and SAP, and determine their main strategic choices over this period, we rely, as mentioned, on data collected as part of a larger project, the results of which are published elsewhere (Salo and Rydgren 2021). This data is a large, original corpus of text covering the period between 2007 and 2018 and consists of newsletters - *Aktuellt i Politiken (AiP)* - published by the SAP and the LO-affiliated newspaper, which was called LO-tidningen until

2012 and thereafter named *Arbetet*. We searched the data for any mentions of the SD (using the keyword “Sverigedemokraterna”), then manually eliminated irrelevant observations (e.g., when the SD was mentioned as part of a list of election results) and, finally, we read through all the articles that discussed the SD as a party and/or its politics.

Mainstream party strategies towards the radical right have mostly been studied as positional shifts, i.e., switching policy positions on a political issue towards the RRP’s position, with positions identified with, e.g., data from election manifestoes (e.g., Krause, Cohen and Abou-Chadi 2023) or expert surveys (e.g., Backlund and Jungar, 2019). Election manifestoes and expert judgements, however, represent rather static views on party positions. Arguably, the arena where cues of positional changes can first be detected is in the public press, where politicians express their present views – which may not yet have translated into changes in official party documents. This is the advantage of our data, based on both party-internal and external press sources.

Our analytical framework centres on three domains. First, the *temporal* aspect of when responses formulated. We consider the *timing* of these strategic responses as constituting a series of deliberative processes rather than discreet events. Consequently, we identify a time-lag between the RRP becoming a serious contender and when responses by the labour movement are implemented. Second, the *location* where these responses are formulated. Maintaining a healthy degree of core democracy is paramount to the labour movement. Therefore, the *internal* party arena is crucial in order to anchor strategies and responses with the grass roots. Third, we study the distinctive *motives* that drive the internal strategic work, namely, building intra-party coherence. The implications of these theoretical considerations are the following. When analysing the internal press debates, we should be able to identify several feedback loops where different actors manifestly learn from the past when they debate strategies and strategic changes towards the SD. We should also observe internal debate regarding (dis)advantages of previous strategies, and considerations regarding which new ones to adopt. And, finally, we should observe a differentiation between the external strategies and those intended (primarily) for an internal audience. The aim of the latter is to construct a shared narrative of what is at stake when competing with the radical right (e.g. what kind of party is the SD? To what extent does it pose a threat?), and how to go about dealing with this threat (e.g. what is the best way to respond? Should the labour movement accept or oppose the problem definition of the SD?).

5. Analysis: How has the Swedish labour movement responded to the Sweden Democrats over time?

Table 2. summarizes our findings regarding labour movement strategies in the external and intra-organizational arenas. In the following, we scrutinize the strategies in more detail.

Period	External Strategy	Internal Strategy
2007–2010	Ignore	Debate entry
2010–2014	Isolate	Educate, defuse
2014–2018	Isolate, defuse, adopt	Justify adoption
2018-	Isolate, adopt	Justify adoption, update past strategies

5.1 From ignoring the challenger to debating its entry (2007-2010)

Two events during the 2006 election stand out. First, the SAP lost with ‘only’ 35% of the vote. Although this result was comparatively high, it nevertheless was the party’s worst result since the 1920s. The SAP had lost particularly amongst the urban and educated middle-class, which was the group the party then decided to focus on. But it also lost because ownership over core party issues had changed (Aylott and Bolin, 2007). But the decision to prioritise “the battle over the middle-class” (SAP, 2006: 103) rather than address the perceived loss of competence on core working-class issues was a consequence of underplaying the threat of the SD who was still in the margins. In some respects, the SAP took the working-class voter for granted and did not expect defection since it was believed to share a close “value-based affinity” with the party (SAP, 2006: 99). Second, the centre-right “Alliance” won the election, and with the lead of the Moderates formed a coalition government together with the Christian Democrats (KD), the Liberals (L) and the Centre Party (C). However, the centre-right in question was of the urban, liberal, and centrist type, which left the market interventionist, authoritarian and nationalist corner free for the SD to capitalise on (Oscarsson *et al*, 2021). The results of the 2006 election thus created an important change in the opportunity structure, which allowed the SD to focus on the value *conservative* working-class.

However, to change strategy - from ignoring the SD to debating its entry – also required an

awareness of the SD's electoral growth amongst relevant segments of the electorate. In 2007, then, the newspaper *Dagens Arbete* (27 November 2007) published a survey according to which 8.2 per cent of young industrial workers would consider voting for the SD. The SAP and LO were thus prompted to reconsider the strategy they had employed so far, of fully *ignoring* the SD. The discourse around the SD was highly ideological with a strong moral overtone. The SD was portrayed as a “*xenophobic and single-issue party*” (LO-Tidningen 22/2008, emphasis added), with “racism” and a feeling of being “politically abandoned” cited as the main reasons for voting for the party (AiP 33, April 2007).

During the first stage of mainstream party and RRP relations the distinction between formal and substantive responses, discussed above, did not yet apply, but the two categories were certainly blurred. This was because the point of debating the RRP's entry to the party system was about refusing to recognize the SD as a legitimate political opponent. Accordingly, the SAP and LO did not engage with or debate the SD's policies but rather discussed its value base and highlighted differences with the labour movement's core values. “(...) [T]he labour movement always stands up for equality//...//and our policies are based on openness and welcoming the skills and dynamism that people bring from other countries and cultures (...)” (AiP 15, April 2007).

As the SD was considered an illiberal and racist party whose entrance to Swedish party politics was highly undesirable, engaging in any political exchanges with the party or its leading figures was deemed profoundly difficult and best avoided. The SAP leader, Mona Sahlin, took a highly divisive step therefore when she decided in April 2007 to debate the SD leader, Jimmie Åkesson, during a televised event. Sahlin justified her decision by referring to a need to defend democracy and compared SAP's approach to a form of safeguarding, “(...) I'm prepared to take that debate. We can't avoid the democratic cleansing anymore” (AiP 15, April 2007). Although the labour movement talked about the SD with some contempt, the SAP nevertheless acknowledged there also was a need to engage more respectfully with the SD's voters - “[T]he labour movement now faces an important task, how should it engage with these voters and how should it engage in a serious discussion about serious issues [such as] unemployment, residential segregation, and the “turbo economy” which easily makes them feel left behind.” (AiP 15, April 2007).

5.2 Parliamentary isolation and internal defuse strategy (2010-2014)

After the 2010 parliamentary election, the Swedish parties found themselves in a changed political landscape. The gap between the SAP (30,7%) and Moderates (30,1%) had shrunk to an all-time low. “The election result is a disaster”, said the LO-leader Wanja Lundby-Wedin (*LO-tidningen*, 21 September 2010), referring both to the Social Democrats’ loss and the fact that the SD had passed the 4% threshold and with 5,7%, gained 20 seats in parliament. After the election, the Moderate-led Alliance government continued.

The SD’s entry to parliament in 2010 marked the beginning of the second stage of mainstream and RRP relations. The SD could no longer be ignored and dealing with it required a new political strategy. The common *formal* strategy for all mainstream parties was thus to isolate the SD behind a *cordon sanitaire*. Left outside any parliamentary cooperation, the party essentially formed its own third grouping outside the Swedish two-bloc system.

In the SAP and LO’s post-election analyses, the decision to cooperate with the Greens and the Left Party stood out as one of the potential reasons for the electoral defeat. According to the LO, this venture blurred the Social Democrats’ ideology making voters unsure of what they would be getting (*LO-tidningen*, 21 September 2010). Another observation was the SAP had now lost ground within its LO-constituency, that is, the unionized worker, since only around 50% of the LO-membership base had voted for the SAP. When coupled with the fact that jobs and employment were the most important issues for the LO-voters (SAP 2010: 21), the SAP’s lack of attention to these issues since the 2006 was considered a major reason for the loss among this group.

These three developments – the SAP’s weak electoral result, the LO’s critical stance to the red-green cooperation, and the losses among LO-voters - together with the rise of the SD led to an internal analysis, according to which the SAP should re-engage with the working-class voters as these were potential defectors to the SD. An example of this debate was when a Social Democratic union activist warned against “the consequences of (...) courting voters in the service sector in the big cities while ignoring the working-class voters elsewhere (...) Sweden is more than just Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö (...) the party loses its soul if it loses the working-class vote” (*AiP* 38, October 2010). This re-orientation towards the working-class was further exemplified by the 2012 resignation of Mona Sahlin, who had a distinctly middle-class profile, and her successor – following a short tenure by Håkan Juholt – Stefan Löfven, a welder by profession and then leader of the mighty Metal Workers’ Union.

However, what the labour movement appeared less certain about was why the working class would vote for the SD in the first place. There was a discrepancy between the conclusions reached by the internal analyses and what the SAP and LO's leading figures subsequently said in the press. In the internal debate, socio-structural reasons for voting for the SD (e.g., unemployment) were mentioned but externally, racist attitudes were brought to the forefront. In the analysis of the 2010 election, the SAP thus cited "20 years of unemployment" and various "social problems" as probable reasons behind the SD's rise and emphasised that anti-immigration attitudes "have not increased [in Sweden], on the contrary" (SAP 2010: 43). Yet, directly after the election, Mona Sahlin also stated in the party press that she would "never stop fighting against racism and xenophobia. The battle begins here and now" (AiP 36, September 2010). In the same newspaper, Stefan Löfven, argued that "(...) everybody who defends the equal value of every human being must see to it that this [the Sweden Democrats entry to parliament] remains an *inconvenient parenthesis*" (AiP 36, September 2010, emphasis added). The next month, however, the same party newspaper featured an article arguing that "[it] is not about protest voting or grievances (...) it is about xenophobia and racism. The Sweden Democrats were built by Nazis for Nazis and their value base remains as it was back then (...)" (AiP 38, October 2010).

The labour movement consequently changed strategy after the 2010 election. The recommendation from the post-election analysis, prepared by the SAP's "Crisis Commission", was therefore to engage with the SD on an "issue basis", instead of focusing on the political game (SAP 2010: 44). This constitutes an example of how strategic responses are better understood as a series of processes that develop over time as the party learns from its past strategies. The labour movement thus adopted a *defuse* strategy. It probed the SD's political positions and suggested instead its own preferred issue emphasis to replace those of the SD. At its core was to substitute the SD's preferred ethno-nationalist framing of political conflict with the labour movement's preferred frame of class conflict as the basis of political divisions (Rennwald and Mosimann, 2023).

An illustrative example of this strategy can be found in the pamphlet - *Alla kan göra något – allas lika värde och lika rätt* (Everybody is able to something – equal value and equal rights), which the LO published internally during the summer of 2012. Its aim was to educate members that the SD was, in fact, not a worker-friendly party. The pamphlet identified "neoliberalism" on the one hand, and "nationalism and xenophobia" on the other, as the main threats facing the labour movement (LO 2012: 14). It included large segments dedicated to the history and politics of the SD and tried to reinforce the point that the SD were not the new labour party -

“The right-wing populist parties nowadays sound like they are the “new” workers' party, But in their nationalist views lie the idea that we all are subordinate to the interest of the nation. This means that these types of parties have traditionally sided with the employers. Basically, they reject the class struggle as the driving force for improvement.” (LO 2012: 27).

Yet the LO's campaign at the central level also masked considerable friction at the individual union level. Regarding *formal external* responses, then, the LO's headquarters' response to the SD was to systemically refuse any contact with them as a party. However, local chapters also varied in their handling of union members who also were active supporters of the SD. The Transport Workers' Union (*Transport*) and Paper Workers' Union (*Pappers*), for example, took the hardline approach of excluding members who also were active SD-supporters. Although not uniform, most labour unions adopted a response not unlike the coordinated isolation of the SD in the national parliament.

The LO's decision to use legal means against SD-supporters raised concerns regarding which types of viewpoints that were permitted in the labour movement. The LO's newspaper, *Arbetet* (11 October 2013) interviewed a former union member who sympathized with the SD and who had left the union because of intolerance towards different political opinions: “[S]hould not people with different values be allowed in the LO? The unions should fight work-related issue but today they are busy with stuff that has nothing to do with either work or labour law”.

At times, cases of expulsions were tried in courts. In December 2022, a court ruled it illegal for the *Transport* union to expel an SD-politician, as it had no basis in the union's statutes. *IF Metall* has since changed its statutes, so that only people who share its core values, including “democracy and feminism” (IF Metall 2023: 4), can become members. Arguably, legal bans as a formal response to the SD were used to safeguard *internal* ideological coherence regarding the labour movement's core values, egalitarianism and internationalism, although doing so was directly at odds with organisational democracy. The trade-off between upholding core values and letting the membership base democratically determine what those values were was a trade-off the LO was willing to make.

5.3. Internal strategic debate, refugee crisis and external defuse strategy (2014-2018)

The 2014 to 2018 era marked an important transition period in the relationship between mainstream parties and the radical right. This second era was characterised by non-collaboration and seeking to diminish the political impact of the SD. During this stage, however, the SD not only kept on growing electorally but also started to gain a foothold among

the LO-constituency. These developments were further intertwined with by two major party system-level changes, both regarding the form and content of party competition, which necessitated changing the responses by the labour movement.

First, the 2014 election result meant neither the centre-left nor the centre-right bloc could by itself command a majority in parliament. Although the SAP won the election with 31 % of the vote, it had to form a minority government with the Greens, marking the first time in half a century that the SAP ruled in coalition with another party. Yet, with neither side claiming a majority but also refusing to make themselves dependent on the SD, policymaking thus rested on volatile and fragile majorities. The downside of ruling in minority manifested itself as soon as in the fall of 2014 when the SAP government, led by Stefan Löfven, could not get the SD's backing for its budget. The government was close to collapsing and this situation threatened an early election. In an unprecedented move therefore, the centre-right Alliance parties agreed to support the government's budget to avoid early elections that would surely only have benefited the SD. The *December Agreement* was the first sign of the difficulties that the SD's rise would bring, despite mainstream efforts to isolate it. Reaching consensus across the left-right divide was a way to reduce the political impact of the SD, but also meant potentially dysfunctional and ideologically incoherent policy results.

Second, coinciding with the fallout of the 2014 election was the start of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. Immigration and integration consequently became highly salient issues, and polarization of the Swedish parties on the GAL-TAN dimension peaked. The SD occupied the TAN-end of the spectrum, while all other parties – apart from the CD – were on the GAL side (Oscarsson *et al.*, 2021). The overall liberal position of the Swedish mainstream culminated in the now famous speech by the Moderates' party leader and then Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, where he, in August 2014, urged the Swedish people to “open their hearts” to the incoming refugees – even if that meant less spending on public services.

Yet it was the red-green government that had to deal with the challenges posed by the refugee crisis, which intensified between September and November 2015 when roughly 80 000 people sought asylum in Sweden. The government responded in November by introducing the cross-party *Migration Pact*, which contained several measures that brought the Swedish immigration legislation into line with the minimum standards set by international conventions and EU law. In January 2016, Sweden introduced temporary controls at the Danish border to limit the number of entries, thus, together with several other countries, breaking with the EU's Schengen regulations. The changes were considered a U-turn in Swedish immigration policy and were profoundly difficult for the coalition parties.

“I have not met a single party member (...) who thinks any of what was presented last Tuesday was satisfactory. People feel betrayed. We have members leaving the party because of [the changes to asylum policy]. It’s particularly tough here in Stockholm. Many [party members] come from the asylum- and anti-racist movements” (AiP 49, December 2015).

The SAP leadership responded in two ways to these internal criticisms. First, it underlined the SAP’s traditional role as a state-bearing party, which “has been forced to make tough decisions in the past (...) that run counter to the opinion of the party congress” (AiP 49, December 2014). Second, the party tried to defuse the issue of immigration by making it secondary to socio-economic questions since they were “real” societal problems to which the centre-left had the best solutions – “[H]istoric decisions are made on a daily basis. No, not the temporary closing of the Öresund bridge. But decisions such as when the Alliance government deprived thousands of workers from the right to sick leave, because the money was needed for tax cuts for the rich.” (AiP 49, December 2015).

At the same time, however, the labour movement’s own post-election analyses suggested immigration was the top issue *particularly* for the SAP’s core voters, the LO-affiliated working-class. (SAP. 2014). According to Arena Idé, a think tank closely affiliated to the labour movement, immigration was the top issue for 70% of the LO-voters in the 2014 election with health care a distant second (55%) - “Issues of immigration and integration often dominated the debate during our visits to workplaces and in our discussions over the phone”, stated the post-election analysis, and continued with a quote from a campaign worker: “Xenophobia was a consistently present at all workplaces. We have continuously talked about this issue. Sometimes that was all we talked about! At least in male-dominated workplaces. It was bad last time around, but it’s much worse now” (Arena Idé 2014: 17). However, the problem for the labour movement was it did not have ownership of these issues. “The Social Democrats have been busy solving other societal problems rather than addressing the issue of how to give refugees a good start. But now the Social Democrats must develop its policy on refugees. It is time to listen to the politicians in the local municipalities (...)” (AiP 49, December 2014). Yet the analysis by the SAP concluded it was the SD who had dominated the immigration debates and therefore been able to set the agenda (SAP 2014: 46). While one of the responses by the labour movement was to defuse public debates by raising the saliency of socio-economic questions, it also had to figure out where to stand on questions of immigration and integration, and whether these issues should be at the heart of the party’s response to the

SD. The main feedback loop during this period, then, was when the labour movement readjusted its strategy in response to the perceived failure of previous strategies, concerned shifting the focus away from antiracist drives (such as the *Alla kan göra något* campaign in 2012) to emphasizing socio-economic grievances, notably economic inequality, as the root cause of the SD's success. Such a change in emphasis was also a way of bringing debates back to the labour movement's familiar socio-economic terrain.

“The election result (...) led to a major discussion about whether anti-racist campaigns really are the best way to fight the Sweden Democrats (...) instead, we should take the underlying reasons for the Sweden Democrats' growth more seriously. Why do so many voters worry about the future, and why do they link this worry to immigration? (...) [T]he acceptance of a generous migration policy does not tend to increase if it also means dumped wages and worse conditions on the labour market. (AiP 36, September 2014).

This change in perception also had profound implications for the type of strategies available to the labour movement. A problem definition based on individuals' malign and xenophobic attitudes would lead to a solution based on re-educating these voters, but if the problem was defined as socio-economic inequality and insecurity, then it required political solutions. Hence, the labour movement accepted that it had to engage with the SD, its ways of framing and their policies to show that the SD's policies did not benefit the working-class.

“We have examined and scrutinized the Sweden Democrats' policies. They have so far got off lightly and have not been held responsible for their anti-worker policies”, said the LO's First Vice President, Tobias Baudin, in June 2015 (LO 2015) and concluded that “the Sweden Democrats pursue policies that are the exact opposite of what benefits an LO-member”. The LO then decided to put inequality at the centre of its political work and launched an Equality Commission tasked with analysing the reasons for growing inequality in Swedish society. The Commission's proposals were presented in 2016 and suggested the labour movement to make an overall shift and increased its emphasis on the working-class voters, who had been sidelined in “the battle over the middle-class” during the 2010 to 2014 period. Moreover, there was clear pressure from the grassroots to perform such a turn to the left, as exemplified by the following quote from an open letter, which two SAP-affiliated union activists wrote in the November 2015 issue of the SAP's newspaper: “The fact is that many LO - members vote for the Sweden Democrats despite their anti-labour policies. The LO now campaigns to shed light on their policies regarding labour market regulation and welfare (...) which it should have been done two years ago (...). Most people we talk to at different workplaces feel forgotten and betrayed

by “their” party. (...) It is high time to listen to their opinions (...) Never forget who built this party (...) there should be a balance between international solidarity, labour market and housing issues. Left-wing parties must be brave and make labour-friendly policies again (...) so that we do not lose more of the grassroots. You want the LO to support your election campaigns, but we are starting to wonder when we are going to get something back” (AiP 45, November 2015)

Another example of this shift in the LO’s focus was the “inequality tour”, which the then leader Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson embarked on in August 2015. The point of the tour was to show that the LO cared about its members’ grievances and that the labour movement cared about the entire country – not just about Stockholm. This was the LO’s attempt to achieve a “mobilization effect” (Mosimann & Rennwald, 2023) amongst its members. The first stop was at the old industrial town of Västerås, which was precisely the type of place where the SAP were losing to the SDs. “The issue of jobs is not decided in Stockholm. We must have a discussion with our members and elected representatives throughout Sweden regarding the road to full employment”, said Thorwaldsson (LO 2015). Approaching the 2018 election, the LO-chief was thus convinced that these “lost” workers were exactly what the LO should focus on - “They have working-class jobs and are members of the LO, yet they vote for the Sweden Democrats. They consequently are the labour movement’s biggest challenge” (*Arbetet* 28 September 2017) Throughout the 2014-2018 period the perception of the SD as the major competitor over the working-class vote grew within the labour movement. And the SD-leaning workers were the most important ones to focus on. “[I]n September 2018, the choice for many LO members is between the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats. It is therefore important to examine what the Sweden Democrats want to achieve, and above all, how this party will hurt the members of the LO (...) we have big task ahead of us, we must explain the negative impact the Swedish Democrats’ policies will have on the LO membership. And we also need to show the positive impact Social Democratic policies will have on workers (...)”. (*Arbetet* 16 June 2017).

5.4 Political Adaptation to Sweden Democrats, 2018-

The 2018 election proved another critical juncture in Swedish politics. The SAP only managed 28,3 % of the popular vote and lost 13 seats in the *Riksdag*. The SD, on the other hand, achieved 17.5% and gained of 13 seats, which meant margin to the Moderates (19,8 %) was shrinking. However, the SD was still isolated outside the semi-formal bloc structure, and neither the green-left nor the centre-right parties would negotiate with it. Yet the SD’s growth also led to

a situation where neither the centre-left nor the centre-right bloc had a clear majority, with 40.7% (144 seats) and 40.3% (143 seats), respectively). Government formation without involving the SD in one way or the other was thus very complicated. But the centre-right “Alliance” parties were increasingly divided on how to respond to the radical right. The C and the LP were keen to continue the strategy of isolation, whereas the Moderates and the CD became increasingly ambivalent. Yet the M and CD also needed the other bourgeois parties to form a majority government. As no consensus was reached on how to deal with the SD, and the role of government formation fell on the sitting Prime Minister and Social Democratic leader, Stefan Löfven. The ensuing government negotiations took place between the SAP, C, LP and the Greens. In other words, the lack of consensus regarding how to deal with the SD split the bourgeois Alliance and led the SAP to seek support for a minority government from the other side of the left-right divide. Yet the ideological differences between the negotiating parties proved difficult to surpass. After five months of negotiations, the prospect of ruling in coalition with parts of the centre-right still seemed distant in the SAP party press - “[N]ame any problem and you can count on the Centre Party to have a solution, which either involves new tax reductions or further deregulation. In other words, the Centre Party is the Swedish Employers’ parliamentary branch” (AiP 2, January 2019). Despite these difficulties, a government deal, known as the “*January Agreement*” was signed, in January 2019. The SAP and Greens formed a minority coalition government, with the passive support of the C and LP, and Stefan Löfven continued as Prime Minister.

Such cross-bloc coalition building was unprecedented in Swedish politics, and it was hard to swallow for the SAP’s membership base. In the internal party arena, the SAP leadership justified said coalition with reference to the party’s traditional position as a state-bearing party, which pragmatically had to work towards the common good, which in this case meant keeping the SD out of power. “Sure, there are parts of the agreement that feel like a bitter pill to swallow. Proposals about profits in the welfare sector and private sector rents in the housing market are some of the most challenging to accept (...) Those Social Democratic observers who now claim that it is only greed for power that drives the party leadership have not understood their party particularly well. Maybe that has to do with their lack of experience regarding politics in practice? Negotiations and reaching consensus are perhaps the most vital ingredients (...)” (AiP 3, January 2019). Moreover, the SAP were said to be the party that put national interest and responsibility before its own interests: “(...) To //...// [seek] compromise on one’s own politics is not going to be praised or rewarded (...) But the job needs to be done, because the alternative is unthinkable” (AiP 4, January 2019).

For the labour movement, the election result had other alarming implications. In the election campaign, the explicit aim of both the LO and SAP had been to target voters prone to defect to the SD (*Arbetet*, 31 Jan 2018). Yet in the election, for the first time ever, less than half (38,5 percent) of the LO-affiliated members voted for the SAP, while 24,9 percent opted for the SD. The SAP's post-election analysis noted that "many of the LO-voters who left the SAP have gone to the Sweden Democrats" (SAP 2018, 15). The SAP's newspaper, in turn, observed that the "Sweden Democrats now seriously threaten the Social Democrats' position as the main labour party (...) the Sweden Democrats got 24 per cent [among LO-voters] and among the unemployed, and those on sick leave (...). The Social Democrats lost the most in the groups where they used to be strongest. Their core voters, on the other hand, who were taken for granted for decades, are now leaving the party" (AiP 46, November 2018).

Both the SAP and the LO took this scenario into account during their election campaigns, although in different ways. The LO had made an explicit effort to reconnect with the SD-prone working-class voters (*Arbetet*, 28 September 2017). The LO also changed its campaign style, from a top-down to more horizontal and deliberative strategies, which included a massive communications effort to reach out to "at least 500 000" members (*ibid*). Inequality, along with traditional labour market issues, such as secure employment and working conditions, were core to the LO's campaign platform.

The SAP's campaign themes, in turn, reflected these changing political realities (SAP 2018, 24). Aside from core Social Democratic themes of work and welfare, the campaign also emphasized security, law-and-order, and immigration and integration. The SAP's campaign manager, John Zanchi, set the tone when he announced key election themes in January 2018, "[W]e have a political agenda today that is in some sense authoritarian. Voters seem to want someone to take control of society and how it should develop" and continued to state that "[e]lections should be about what voters want them to be about. That is the core of democracy" (Eriksson 2018).

This was the SAP's attempt to (re)connect with the "authoritarian worker", who was identified as main defector to the Sweden Democrats. It was also a manifestation of the changes to SAP's strategies that been on-going since the asylum crisis in 2015. The SAP still preferred to defuse political issues into socio-economic questions but had also adjusted to the changing political landscape by *adopting* some of the positions that were perceived to be popular². As part of the

² It should be noted, however, that party strategies are not exclusive, but can and do overlap. In other words, the SAP still, surely, preferred to bring the debate back to its familiar territory of left-right issues, but at the same time it increased the emphasis placed on socio-cultural issues in its political offer.

SAP's campaign, Stefan Löfven presented the Social Democrats' new immigration programme in May 2018, which proposed further measures to tighten existing policies, on top of the significant taken at the height of the 2015-2016 crisis.

Within the LO, the SAP's renewed and tougher stance was initially greeted with mixed feelings. On the one hand, *Arbetet* (1 June 2018) quoted LO union leaders who saw "(...) the change of course as a 'return' to a regulated type of immigration regime (...) a stricter approach is indeed needed, and we trust the government's assessment." On the other, the same newspaper also published an op-ed on 1 June 2018 by seven union representatives who wished to "(...) distance the labour movement from the tough voices on asylum who compete on who has the strictest suggestions."

The disagreements within the labour movement on immigration and integration were nothing new, but rather indicative of a long-standing, "latent internal conflict over migration policy" which, according to the SAP's post-election analysis, contributed to "uncertainty among many voters" regarding what the SAP's position on these questions were (SAP 2018: 49). Moreover, the analysis suggested the positional change in 2015 "should have been discussed earlier within the party and properly anchored with the membership base" instead of presented as a temporary measure to ease the pressure on the public sector (ibid). The analysis by *Tankesmedjan Tiden* (2016: 76), a labour movement think tank, went further stating the SAP did not even have a clear position on integration because the idea of formulating one had been abandoned during the 2013 party conference. The think tank also referred to a speech by then head of the party board, future Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, where she declared "(...) current integration policy has reached the end of the road. It takes too long for people to become self-sufficient and part of Swedish society. The idea of pursuing an integration policy separate from employment and welfare policies is outdated" (SAP 2013: 81).

Hence, in the internal arenas the need for an updated immigration and integration platform was justified as way of correcting the strategic flaws of the past, which the SD subsequently exploited.

6. Conclusion

While our primary data ends in 2018, a few observations regarding developments since then can be made. Overall, the tenor of the Swedish political debate, particularly regarding law-and-order and immigration issues, has continued to shift towards the authoritarian right, and the SAP has not been an exception to this trend. What was labelled as a “paradigm shift” in the Swedish politics of immigration meant that, post-2015, consecutive SAP governments, both under Stefan Löfven (2018-2021) and his successor Magdalena Andersson (2021-2022), continued to embrace the tough rhetoric on immigration, integration and law-and-order issues. The labor movement has thus broadly continued with its dual strategy of attempting to distance themselves from the SD by, for example, ruling out any parliamentary cooperation, but still adopting parts of its rhetoric.

In the 2022 parliamentary election, the SD (20,5 %) ended up as the largest party of the right-wing side, ahead of the Moderates (19,1 %). The SD’s growth contributed to the formation of a new right-wing bloc together with the Moderates and the Christian Democrats, which filled the void left by the dismantling of the Alliance and can seriously challenge the Social Democrats’ long-standing position as a “dominant” party. The new right-wing bloc formed a minority government of the M, L, and KD as coalition partners, and the SD as an extra-coalitional support party. The formation of such government broke the long period of parliamentary isolation of the Sweden Democrats and ended the coordinated strategy of the mainstream parties behind it. The government deal, known as the *Tidö Agreement*, further solidified the strict policy stance in the fields of immigration and law-and-order, a gradual development since the 2015 migration crisis.

Furthermore, the election reinforced the trend of the SD chipping away at the SAP’s support from LO-affiliated voters. This time, 27.5 percent of its members chose the SD, while 41.2 percent supported the SAP. The SD has therefore become the largest party particularly in former SAP strongholds of small- and middle-sized industrial towns. Consequently, the growing support for the SD among LO members and the increasingly middle-class profile of the SAP’s supporters pose long-term challenges for the labor movement. If this trend continues, the traditional alliance between the SAP and the LO could be seriously weakened and lead to significant changes to the Swedish party system and the role of organized labor.

The rise of the Swedish radical right has been particularly challenging therefore to the centre-left and our analysis focused on three factors behind the responses that the SAP and LO have

used to counter this dilemma: namely, the internal party- and organizational arenas, intra-organizational debates and learning from previous decisions, and conceptualising the timing of strategic responses as an evolving process rather than a series of discreet events.

Our findings point to a four-stage development. The first phase (2007-2010) was characterized by the labour movement slowly realizing that its strategy to ignore the Sweden Democrats might no longer work, since an increasing share of the unionized working-class voters would consider voting for the SD. The internal debate at the time concerned changes to strategy, regarding engaging with the SD in public debates. When the SD entered parliament, the second next phase began (2010-2014). The labour movement acknowledged it no longer could simply ignore the SD but could try and isolate it through a coordinated strategy with the other parties in parliament. Internally, then, the labour movement tried to educate SD-prone trade union members away from such voting intentions, with internal defuse campaigns seeking to expose the SD's anti-labour character. The strategy of formal isolation then continued through stages 3 (2014 – 2018) and 4 (2018 – 2022). But during this time, the labour movement was not only responding to the Sweden Democrats as a party, but to a changing party system and political issue agenda, where the levels of salience of immigration and law-and-order steadily increased. The first response by the SAP to was with the defuse strategy. Thereby, the party sought to bring back the debate to its familiar terrain of socio-economic politics, but then gradually started to focus on socio-cultural issues and pushing stricter positions on them. In the internal arena, this involved a strategic debate on the direction of policy in immigration and law-and-order, and the party leadership having to justify the changed positions to the members. In a feedback loop, speaking to the importance of intra-organizational learning for effective external strategies, such justification also involved probing the labor movement's own past strategies and trying to see whether their flaws had contributed to issue space opening for the SD to exploit.

Given the continuous rise of far-right – and -left – parties across Western democracies, academic interest in how to respond to these challenger parties is likely to continue. Yet few have so far been able to explain whether any of the strategies employed by the mainstream parties have been successful in reaching the goal of retaining voters otherwise prone to defect to the far right. One of the reasons for this, we suspect, is that studies have so far neglected the importance of internal cohesion-making for effective external strategies. Strategic shifts take time, and require intra-party/organizational debate that may, as we show, lead to internal feedback loops where the party learns from its own past strategies and readjusts not only in response to the challenger party, but also to its own track record.

Future research should further disaggregate paths of action that have led to outcomes such as accepting a radical right-wing party, after a long period of isolation, as part of a governing coalition. What kind of intra-organizational debates and contests preceded such choices in the mainstream parties? How did party actors perceive the choices available for them in such moments? Responses to such questions will surely remain relevant in a context where the political middle appears to continue shrinking and new blocs including the political margins are forming across the advanced democracies.

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