

Nordic populism – changes over time and space. A comparative and retrospective analysis of populist parties in the Nordic countries from 1965 – 2012.

by Björn Fryklund

Denmark belongs to the Danes. [...]A multiethnic Denmark would mean the breaking down of our stable homogeneous society by anti-development and reactionary cultures. (Danish People's Party Work Programme 2007)

The above quote comes from the Danish People's Party Work Programme. Together with similar parties in the Nordic countries and in Europe, the Danish People's Party belongs to the group of populist parties that has secured a greater footing in recent decades and become a permanent feature on the political stage. It is clear that parties with a right-wing populist profile have gained strength in Europe since the end of the 1990s. Indeed, the years 1999-2000 can be regarded as a turning point with regard to the participation of these parties in the political arena. During these years the Front National enjoyed considerable success in France and Jean-Marie Le Pen challenged Chirac in the presidential election. In the same period, Jurgen Haider's FPÖ [Freedom Party of Austria] made significant gains in Austria to the extent that the party became influential in the government. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party also gained influence – so much so that the party played a crucial political role in the Danish Parliament. Many right-wing populist parties also made significant headway in the European parliamentary elections held in 1999. Since then these parties have increased their representation in the European Parliament, despite the general trend of parties losing places due to EU expansion. Since 2005 the Danish People's Party has strengthened its position and increased its electoral support. The Fremskrittspartiet [The Progress Party] has done the same in Norway. In Finland, the party known as the True Finns, successor to the Finnish Rural Party, developed and greatly increased its electoral support in the municipal elections of 2008. In Sweden the Sweden Democrats attracted almost three percent of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary election and at the same time acquired a large number of seats in the municipal elections, especially in the southern part of Sweden, in the landscapes Skåne (Scania) and Blekinge.

The presence of populist parties gives rise to a democratic dilemma that society, with its various institutions, is forced to take account of. The dilemma can be regarded as having two dimensions. The first dimension is

that in a strict definition of the democracy concept populist parties ought to be regarded as democratic. The parties have taken part in free and democratic elections and have gained so much support for their politics that they have been able to acquire a number of seats in decision-making assemblies. The challenge, and also the dilemma's second dimension, occurs when these parties establish themselves and in their policies and rhetoric advocate a society based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity. This leads to certain groups, people with foreign background, being excluded from participating in society, their freedom and rights limited and exclusion and inclusion mechanisms in society strengthened (Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007; Kiiskinen & Saveljeff 2010).

The history of Nordic populism can be described as a wave-like process; a process that moves from political dissatisfaction based on populist appeals related to the tax issue during the 1970s to those concerning refugee and immigrant issues in the 1980s, the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century. Although in the Nordic countries the populist parties – Mogens Glistrup's Fremskridtsparti [The Progress Party] in Denmark, Anders Lange's Fremskrittsparti [The Progress Party] in Norway and Veikko Vennamo's Rural Party in Finland – found themselves close to extinction in the latter part of the 1970s, they experienced a second wave of popularity in the 1980s. A third wave of popularity then helped to keep these parties buoyant during the late 1990s and into the 21st century. In Denmark, Pia Kjaersgaard's Danish People's Party took over from the Progress Party and had a significant electoral breakthrough in the 2001 election. The party obtained victories partly through its marked balance-of-power role in the parliament and partly through being a driving, supportive partner for both the previous and present liberal-conservative government. In Norway, Carl I. Hagen's Progress Party, now under the leadership of Siv Jensen, continues to harvest political successes and at the time of writing is Norway's second largest party, with 37 seats in the Norwegian Parliament after the last elections in 2009. Although in Finland the Rural Party has now played out its political role, it has been replaced by a similar party known as the True Finns. In the municipal elections held in November 2008, support for the party increased to the extent that they gained 5.4 percent of the vote, which was a marked increase in relation to the election results of 2004 (Betz 1994; Björklund & Andersen 2004; Rydgren & Widfeldt 2004; Wold 2005; Banks & Grinrich 2006; Ringsmose & Pedersen 2006; Marsdal 2007).

As this description indicates, populist parties have been part of the Nordic political scene for several decades and constitute a real challenge to the other parties. A better understanding of how these parties and their successors

have developed and changed over time, in combination with factors that benefit or obstruct populism, also leads to new opportunities to address and deal with the challenge that populist parties can be said to represent (Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007).

Attempting to capture the changes in Nordic populism over time and space is, I think, best done through a comparative perspective. An understanding and explanation of today's Nordic populist parties is best achieved by retrospectively analysing what these parties have done, how they have changed over time and what they are like today.

How is this development to be regarded and understood? Which factors might, via an historic reconstruction of the development of Nordic populism over the last fifty years, contribute to an understanding of the parties that are now active and successful in a Nordic political context? Including the Swedish societal context in this overarching Nordic framework is also important, since here the development of populism appears to differ from that of the other Nordic countries. In this sense Sweden can be regarded as "a straggler". How is it, for example, that only now, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century and after the developments that have taken place in many other European and Nordic countries, do we also begin to see a marked populist party on the increase in the Swedish context? Analysing this development could reveal why Sweden increasingly resembles other Nordic countries and large parts of Europe, and be an important key to the understanding of which political, social and economic factors counteract or support populism. An overall perspective of the political, social and economic changes that have taken place in the Nordic countries over a fifty year time-span is necessary if we are to fully understand the Nordic development of populist parties.

Research overview

Research on populist parties has so far been based on three main focus areas. **The first** has been concerned with an exploration of general and social structural changes that can explain the growth of populist parties (Betz 1994; Taggart 1996; Kitschelt 1997; Betz & Immerfall 1998). **In the second**, research has focused on charting the ideology of populist parties (Canovan 1981; Mudde 2000; Taggart 2000; Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2007; Davies & Jackson 2008). **In the third**, the emphasis has been on doing case studies in the countries in which populist parties have been successful (Rydgren 2002; Mény & Surel 2002; Rydgren & Widfeldt 2004). From a Nordic point of view, the research highlighted a problem that was discussed as early as 1981 in the study *Populism och missnöjespartier i Norden* [Populism and Protest Parties in the Nordic Countries), carried out by myself and my research

colleague Tomas Peterson, which related to why no party based on popular discontent had emerged in Sweden during the early 1970s. In Sweden at that time no political party could be likened to those that were developing in the other Nordic countries. During the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, though, and more specifically in the general elections of 1988 and 1991, a process developed in Sweden that resulted in the growth of two completely new parties, namely the Green Party and New Democracy. The Green Party had a position to the left on the traditional political scale and New Democracy to the right (Taggart 1996). To some extent New Democracy adopted a populist appeal and in 1991 won parliamentary seats, although unlike its Nordic counterparts did not manage to maintain its parliamentary successes. In connection with the 1994 elections New Democracy disappeared from the political scene altogether and ceased to exist. But a change is now in the air, given that in Sweden a populist party known as the Sweden Democrats has stepped into the political arena. Unlike many of its Nordic counterparts, however, the party does not yet enjoy national representation. After the 2006 election the party was represented at municipal and regional levels in about half of Sweden's municipalities. If the Nordic development of populist parties is compared with that which took place in many other European countries, it is clear that the Swedish case is something of an anomaly. A number of attempts have been made to explain the Swedish exception. With regard to the success of the Sweden Democrats at municipal level, it would appear that the previous Swedish immunity to populism is now on the wane. Against this background, a greater focus on the factors that support or counteract populism is needed which can contribute to a further understanding of this complex field. Why has it taken so long for an expressed populist party to gain a foothold in Sweden? Up to now research has mainly focused on a number of explanatory factors. The strong historical position of the Social Democrats has led to a unique political and ideological hegemony in Sweden in the form of a far-reaching consensus on the Swedish democracy- and welfare model. The lack of any decisive political and ideological social issue to unite or split the population has also played a role. The Swedish economy has been in good shape too, and social welfare worked well until the beginning of the 1990s. These relations are considered to have made Swedish society and its political culture almost immune to populism during the period in which it took shape in neighbouring Nordic countries and in a number of other countries in Europe (Taggart 1996; Kitschelt 1997; Rydgren 2002, 2006; Bennich-Björkman & Blomqvist 2008).

When social relations are changed this specific immunity is also nullified, which can in turn open the doors to populism. In Denmark and Norway, the referendums relating to membership of the EC (now the EU) in the early 1970s became a watershed that polarised the political system, the political parties and popular and electoral opinion for a long time. In Sweden people had to wait until the 1990s to vote on membership of the EU, which was then followed by a referendum in 2003 about participation in the EU's monetary union. The referendum in Sweden could have had as lasting an effect on politics and public opinion as it did in Norway and Denmark. Research also shows that neither xenophobic tendencies nor an emphasis on issues related to immigration are sufficient grounds for the growth of, or sympathy for populist parties. If such issues are to affect how citizens decide to vote, then they need to be politicised and linked to political dissatisfaction in other social fields, which in turn means that the immigrant issue becomes the organising principle for the political dissatisfaction. Research shows that so far the immigrant question has not influenced how the Swedish electorate votes (Holmberg & Weibull 2001, 2005). In addition, immigration has not been politicised in Sweden to the same extent as it has in other Nordic and European countries in which populist parties have won victories (Rydgren 2002).

Populism's forms of expression in the Nordic countries vary and change with the social context. Although this might seem obvious, it is unfortunately often forgotten in analyses and social debates. The political, social and economic change processes can be broken down into a number of variables that are central for the analysis of populist parties, namely **class, popularity, political culture and ethnic nationalism**. The concept of class is basically decided by professional affiliation (Esping Andersen 1993; Olin Wright 1997; Goldthorpe 2007). *Populist parties have a tendency to describe themselves as not belonging to any specific class and instead see themselves as the representatives of "ordinary people" and their interests.* These parties also level strong criticism at other parties which they maintain contribute to the creation of a society based on class affinity and where the special interests of different classes are prioritised (at the expense of those of "ordinary people"). *Populism is given the opportunity to develop from the contexts in which sections of the population feel slighted by the political elite and experience that this elite does not look after people's interests.* Populist parties have a capacity to encapsulate these tendencies and create populist appeals around experienced class differences. The significance of the class concept thus becomes an important variable to relate to (Fryklund & Peterson 1981; Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007).

The concept of **popularity**, consisting of popular traditions, popular appeals and popular dimensions, is regarded as part of an ongoing struggle between the people and the powers that be; a struggle that has found expression in the history of every nation. It is a common heritage that outlives different social systems and remains in the political and ideological domains as complete traditions or parts of them, or as experiences in institutional or thought forms. Traditions of a political, ideological and cultural nature, as well as of thought and action, are woven into the opposition between the people and those in power. Such traditions have been developed around themes relating to nation, ethnicity, culture, religion, polity, democracy, work, family, morals and social solidarity. *Popularity and popular appeals have been and still are important components of the Nordic countries' political development.* They have presumably had a greater significance in Denmark and Norway, and to a certain extent also in Finland, than they have in Sweden. Popularity thus constitutes another central variable in the study of populism, since populism is about popular appeals (the people vs. the elite) that are regarded as being deeply rooted in every nation. When the popular appeals of the established parties waver, populist appeals are given the opportunity to compete in the struggle to attract voters (Fryklund & Peterson 1981; Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007).

With regard to the third central variable of the analysis, **political culture**, this can be exemplified by the different construction and basis of the welfare state in the Nordic countries (Bennich-Björkman & Blomqvist 2008). Here my main thrust is that *a nation's political culture is popularity's concrete forms of expression in the political arena.* The shape that political culture takes in a nation has, in my opinion, its origin in the definition of the popularity concept. Different and selective interpretations of the popularity theme give rise to a limited number of meaningful and consistent political cultures with a specific content. Political culture is the cornerstone on which politics rests and from which it is enacted, and gives meaning to politics by justifying material, cultural, social and political institutions. It is not enough to simply analyse political, social and economic structures in order to understand how a political system is supported or dissolved. That would be to disregard the foundation on which the system, the national political culture and its traditions rest. How people judge politics is important for the system's legitimacy and serviceability (Edgerton, Fryklund & Peterson 1994). Even if similarities exist in the Nordic countries with regard to the democratic and social welfare model, there are also important differences between them. These are central factors to keep in mind.

In simple terms one can talk about a petit bourgeois-popular liberal Denmark, a popular-national Norway, a Swedish “People’s Home” (welfare state) and a strongly class-polarised Finland. These differences are matched by disparities in the political system, which also affect the articulation of popular appeals and the populism that results. When talking about a Nordic welfare model, Sweden tends to stand out as a typical textbook example. In other Nordic countries the development of the political system has characteristic features, e.g. (petit-) popular-liberal Denmark with its personality votes, collaboration and diffusion of class conflicts, Norway with its emphasis on decentralisation and district politics as well as a mistrust of central power and central control, and Finland, which due to its special history did not acquire any comparable political system until after World War II. When we talk about Swedish social development as a typical case for the formation of the modern welfare state, this mainly refers to an efficient and smooth economic growth and its structural effects on societal development. What is of importance here is a long-standing social democratic governance and a tradition of agreements between parts of the labour market (without government interference) – that which is usually called the Swedish labour market model (Fryklund & Peterson 1983; Taggart 1996; Kitschelt 1997; Rydgren 2002). Populist parties have a tendency to take over parts of the popular political culture and, in the struggle for votes, use these as tools with which to undermine the political establishment. Analysing the national political cultures in the Nordic countries with a focus on origin and (new) reproduction over time is therefore important.

Nationalism can be politically or ethnically based (Kohn 1944; Smith 1986). With regard to (a lack of) democracy, there is an inbuilt ethnic national dimension in the populist appeal that relates to the struggle between the people and the powers that be and in that concerning how social welfare should be distributed. In the former case, people with an ethnic background other than that of the national majority population are not included in the popular democracy, and in the latter case social welfare is only regarded as being available for the majority population (ethno-national welfare chauvinism) (Kitschelt 1997; Taggart 2000; Mény & Surel 2002; Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007). In the analysis of populist parties an ethnicity-based nationalism is central, in that an experienced Danish-ness, Norwegian-ness, Swedish-ness or Finnish-ness forms the basis on which refugee and immigrant issues are used as *organising principles* for these parties’ social critique in other political issues. Suspicion of foreigners, xenophobia and racism are most deep-seated in a nationalism formed on ethno-cultural

grounds, and can differ between the Nordic countries and how they have been articulated over time and space. Discussing how nationalism, on the basis of ethnic and/or political preferences, is used in populist appeals in the various Nordic countries is therefore important. Studying the development of populism in the Nordic countries during the period 1965 to 2012, by means of a comparative analysis, is interesting. The choice of 1965 as a starting date for the analysis refers to the point in time when the first indication of populist parties in the Nordic countries (Veikko Vennamo's Rural Party in Finland) could be observed. The period 2009-2012, which we find ourselves in now, is of special interest because it is during this period that we are able to follow and analyse national election proceedings in all four countries at a time when populist parties appear to be gaining an increasingly prominent political role.

Is populism a threat to democracy?

The political landscape has changed (Mény & Surel 2002). Populism has returned both as an empirical reality and as an important research topic. Populism is increasingly used to describe political phenomena that do not fit into the traditional political system, as a description of unusual political events and forms of expression and as a *challenger* that questions the basis of liberal democracy, liberal institutions, values and laws/rules (Hainsworth 2000; Schain, Hossay & Zolberg 2002; Eatwell & Mudde 2004; Panizza 2005; Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007). A key issue that has been discussed in recent years is whether the presence of populism constitutes a natural, functional strand of liberal democracy or a threat to it, or whether it should rather be seen as a challenge to it. The **first** approach sees populism as a *natural feature* of today's democratic social system (Canovan 1999, 2002). In order to understand populism and its relation to democracy, populism is regarded as a *side effect* that democracy might give rise to, rather than as an intractable and temporary flare-up reaction to the system itself. The relation between populism and democracy can thus be described as a constant shadow relation (Canovan 1999). A **second** approach is that as populist parties de facto constitute a *threat* to democracy they should be resisted with moral weapons, rather than be regarded as worthy political opponents to be addressed using political resources within the framework of the democratic process (Eatwell & Mudde 2004; Mouffe 2008). A **third** approach that has dominated the discourse surrounding populism in recent years is to regard these parties as a *challenge* to democracy. This has mainly focused on which aspects of democracy are challenged and, subsequently, why populist parties are an important research object for politically-oriented sociologists to take note of (Capoccia 2001; Bale 2003; Meguid 2005;

Mudde 2007; Kiiskinen, Saveljeff & Fryklund 2007; van Spanje & van der Brug 2007; de Lange 2008; Kiiskinen & Saveljeff 2010). A **fourth** approach concerns the emergence of new parties, like populist parties, as an indication that voters have *demands* that have not been sufficiently considered by the established parties. If the established parties are less sensitive and open to the electorate's demands, the possibility of a new party profiling itself on the basis of these demands, and thereby winning political influence, is greater.

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