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Populism – Changes over Time and Space: A Comparative and Retrospective Analysis of Populist Parties in the Nordic Countries from 1965 to 2012

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)

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 (2007). It is clear that parties with a right-wing populist profile have been gaining in 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; Jean-Marie Le Pen even challenged Chirac in the presidential election in 2002. During the same period, Jörg Haider's FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs or 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 seats due to European Union (EU) expansion. Since 2005 the Danish People's Party has strengthened its position and increased its electoral support. The Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party) has done the same in Norway. In Finland, the party known as the True Finns, the successor to the Finnish Rural Party, developed and greatly increased its electoral support in the respective municipal European elections

Table 18.1 General election results (per cent and mandates) for RRP-parties in the Nordic countries during the twenty-first century

Elec./ Country	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Sweden		1.4 (—)				2.9 (—)				5.7 (20)	
Norway	14.6 (26)				22.1 (38)				22.9 (41)		
Denmark	12.0 (22)				13.3 (24)		13.8 (25)				12.3 (22)
Finland			1.6 (3)				4.1 (5)				19.1 (39)

of 2008 and 2009. In the general election in 2007, the True Finns gained 4.1 per cent of the votes and five seats in Parliament. In the elections in 2010, the party obtained 19.1 per cent of the votes and 39 seats. This means that currently, in 2012, populist parties in Norway and Finland attract about a quarter of all voters. These are significant figures. The challenge is to decide how to analyse and understand these parties. In Sweden, the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) attracted almost 3 per cent 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, for example, Skåne (Scania) and Blekinge. In the 2010 election, Sverigedemokraterna obtained national representation in the Swedish Parliament for the first time, with 20 seats and 5.7 per cent of the votes (see Table 18.1).

The presence of populist parties gives rise to a democratic dilemma of which society, with its various institutions, is forced to take account. This dilemma can be regarded as having two dimensions. The first dimension is that, according to a strict definition of the concept of democracy, 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 gain a number of seats in decision-making assemblies. The challenge, and also the second dimension of the dilemma, 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, especially people with a foreign background, being excluded from participating in society, having their freedom and rights limited and to exclusion and inclusion mechanisms in society being strengthened – a development that runs the risk of challenging central principles in today's liberal democracies (Kiiskinen et al. 2007; Kiiskinen & Saveljeff 2010).

The history of Nordic populism – a brief overview

The history of Nordic populism can be described as a wave-like process, a process that moves from political dissatisfaction based on populist appeal, 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 twenty-first 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 twenty-first century. In Denmark, Pia Kjaersgaard's Danish People's Party took over from the Progress Party and saw a significant electoral breakthrough in the 2001 election. The party won a number of 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 governments. In Norway, Carl I. Hagen's Progress Party, now under the leadership of Siv Jensen, continues to harvest political success and is Norway's second largest party, with 22.9 per cent of the vote and 41 seats in the Norwegian Parliament in the general election 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 per cent of the vote, which was a marked increase in relation to the election results of 2004. As previously indicated, in the parliamentary elections of 2007 and 2011, the True Finns increased their vote from 4.1 per cent and five seats to 19.1 per cent and 39 seats (Betz 1994, Björklund & Andersen 2002, 2008, 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 et al. 2007).

Attempting to capture the changes in Nordic populism through time and space is best done from a comparative perspective. 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' (see also Ch. 19 by Oja and Mral in this volume). How is it, for example, that only now, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century and after the developments that have taken place in many other European and Nordic countries, do we also begin to see a markedly populist party on the increase in the Swedish context? Analysing this development could reveal why Sweden increasingly resembles the other Nordic countries and large parts of Europe, and be an important key to gaining an 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 50-year time span is necessary if we are to fully understand the Nordic development of populist parties.

Survey of the research field concerning the Nordic countries

Research on populist parties has, thus far, focused on three main areas. **The first** has been concerned with an exploration of the general and social structural changes that might 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 (Mény & Surel 2002, Rydgren 2002, Rydgren & Widfeldt 2004). From a Nordic viewpoint, the research has 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. This 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. However, during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, 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. On the traditional political scale, the Green Party was positioned to the left and New Democracy to the right (Taggart 1996). To some extent New Democracy adopted a populist appeal, and in 1991 won parliamentary seats; however, unlike its Nordic counterparts, it 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. The tide has again turned, however, and in the general election of 2010 the Sweden Democrats succeeded in holding the balance of power in the Swedish Parliament. 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 this Swedish exception. With regard to the success of the Sweden Democrats at the municipal level in 2006, and then at the national level in 2010, 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 in order to contribute to a further understanding of this complex field. Why has it taken so long for a manifestly 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, this takes the form of a far-reaching consensus on the Swedish democracy and welfare model. The lack of any decisive political or ideological social issue to unite or split the population has also played a role. The Swedish economy has generally 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 door 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 polarized 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 politicized and linked to political dissatisfaction in other social fields, which in turn means that the immigrant issue becomes the organizing principle for political dissatisfaction. Research shows that, so far, the immigration question has not influenced how the Swedish electorate votes (Holmberg & Weibull 2001, 2005). In addition, immigration has not been politicized in Sweden to the same extent as in other Nordic and European countries in which populist parties have won victories (Rydgren 2002). According to the Swedish official analysis of the general elections in 2006 and 2010, only minor changes could be observed during the period with regard to these tendencies. Both the importance and politicization of the immigrant question are still rather low-key in Sweden compared to other political issues, even though a minor increase can be observed over time.

Populism's different forms of expression in the Nordic countries – a comparative analysis

Populism's forms of expression in the Nordic countries vary and change with the national and social context. Although this might seem obvious, it is unfortunately often forgotten or neglected in analyses and social debates. Political, social and economic change processes can be broken down into a number of variables that I regard as central to 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 that they claim contribute to the creation of a society based on class affinity and, where the special interests of different classes are prioritized, 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 perception that this elite does not look after people's interests. Populist parties have a capacity to encapsulate these tendencies and create populist appeal based on experience of class differences. The significance of the class concept thus becomes an important variable to relate to (Fryklund & Peterson 1981, Kiiskinen et al. 2007).

The concept of **popularity**, or **popularism**, consisting of popular traditions, popular appeal 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 or 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/popularism and popular appeal have been and remain important components of the Nordic countries' political development.* They have presumably had 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 appeal (the people versus the élite) that is regarded as being deeply rooted in every nation. When the popular appeal of the established parties wavers, it is given opportunity to compete in the struggle to attract voters (Fryklund & Peterson 1981, Kiiskinen et al. 2007).

With regard to the third central variable of the analysis, **political culture**, this can be exemplified by the different constructions and bases of the welfare states in the Nordic countries (Bennich-Björkman & Blomqvist 2008). Here my main thrust is that *a nation's political culture is popularity's concrete form(s) of expression in the political arena.* The shape that political culture takes in a nation has, in my opinion, its origins in the definition of the concept of popularity. 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, it gives meaning to politics by justifying material, cultural, social and political institutions. It is not enough simply to 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 a system's legitimacy and serviceability (Edgerton et al. 1994). Even if similarities exist in the Nordic countries with regard to their democratic and social welfare models, there are also important differences between them. These are central factors to keep in mind.

In simple terms one could talk about a *petit bourgeois*-popular liberal Denmark, a popular-national Norway, a Swedish 'People's Home' (welfare state) and a strongly class-polarized Finland. These differences are matched by disparities in the political system, which also affect the articulation of popular appeal 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, for example, (*petit bourgeois*) popular-liberal Denmark with its personality votes, collaboration and diffusion of class conflicts, Norway with its emphasis on decentralization 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 the Second World War. When we talk about Swedish social development as a typical case for the formation of a modern welfare state, this mainly refers to efficient and smooth economic growth

and its structural effects on societal development. What is of importance here is 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 when explaining and understanding the different forms of populism.

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, within 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 popular democracy, and in the latter case social welfare is only regarded as being available to the majority population (ethno-national welfare chauvinism) (Kitschelt 1997, Taggart 2000, Mény & Surel 2002, Kiiskinen et al. 2007). In the analysis of populist parties, ethnicity-based nationalism is central, in that the experience of Danishness, Norwegianness, Swedishness or Finnishness forms the basis on which refugee and immigrant issues are used as *organizing principles* for these parties' social critique of other political issues. Suspicion of foreigners, xenophobia and racism are most deep-seated in nationalism formed on ethno-cultural grounds, and can differ between the Nordic countries and how they have been articulated over time and space. How nationalism, on the basis of ethnic and/or political preferences, is used in populist appeals in the various Nordic countries is therefore important when explaining and understanding the different specific forms of populism. The choice of 1965 as a starting date for the analysis refers to the point where the first indication of populist parties in the Nordic countries (Veikko Vennamo's Rural Party in Finland) could be observed. The period 2009–12, is of special interest because it is for this period that we have been 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 or a functional natural feature of 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 et al. 2002, Eatwell & Mudde 2004, Panizza 2005, Kiiskinen et al. 2007). A key issue, 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 systems (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, since 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 2008, Mudde 2007, Kiiskinen et al. 2007, van Spanje & van der Brug 2007, de Lange 2008, Kiiskinen & Saveljeff 2010, Saveljeff 2011). A fourth approach concerns the emergence of new parties, such as 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 not open to the electorate's demands, then the possibility of a new party profiling itself on the basis of these demands, and thereby winning political influence, is greater.

The established parties find it difficult to provide answers to the question of how to solve the democratic dilemma, although they do signal that a strategic approach towards radical right-wing populist (RRP) parties needs to be formed in a way that gives the established parties an opportunity to *handle* this democratic dilemma. In this sense, the presence of the democratic dilemma causes a *strategic dilemma*, in relation to which the established parties need to weigh the goals they are striving towards with the strategic approach of the RRP party at the same time as they relate to the strongly value-charged issue that has been politicized by the RRP party and the democratic dilemma that the presence of the RRP party gives rise to. As a result of this, the character of the democratic dilemma is somewhat changed, and the goal of not losing votes becomes paramount. This also leads to *the democratic dilemma becoming subordinated to the strategic dilemma* that the presence of the RRP parties also gives rise to (Kiiskinen & Saveljeff 2010: 229ff., Saveljeff 2011).

Taking the results of the Swedish general election on 19 September 2010 as a point of departure – when the Swedish RRP party known as the Sweden Democrats won parliamentary representation for the first time – it becomes clear that the presence of RRP parties represented at a national level is now also a tangible part of the Swedish political context. In the aftermath of the election results in September 2010, much of the debate focused on how the presence of the Sweden Democrats in Parliament should be dealt with and what kind of influence the party could expect in Swedish politics in relation to its electoral support. It is therefore possible to conclude that, in the current Swedish political climate, the topicality of research related to the presence of RRP parties in the democratic institutions is high. The same goes for the political situation in the other Nordic countries, and probably for many other European countries too. It also reveals the need for future research into what affects the content of the strategic

approaches used by the established parties to deal with parties perceived as *the ugly ducklings of politics*.

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