

CENTRE-RIGHT PARTIES IN GERMANY AND SWEDEN

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Sanna Salo & Tuomas Iso-Markku



CENTRE – RIGHT PARTIES IN GERMANY AND SWEDEN

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

- Centre–right parties have played a central role in stabilising European party politics and advancing European integration, but the increased fragmentation of party systems and the rise of the radical right present serious challenges to them. The way that centre–right parties respond has important implications for domestic and EU politics alike.
- Many European centre–right parties have become divided on their political profile and programme, debating between leaning towards the progressive–liberal or the conservative–authoritarian end of the political spectrum.
- In Germany, the rise of the radical–right AfD has fuelled disagreements within the CDU/CSU and generated demands to sharpen its profile. However, this has thus far not led to major changes to the CDU/CSU’s platform, as it is also challenged from the political centre by the SPD and the Greens.
- In Sweden, the Moderates have clearly reshaped their political agenda in the last decade, focusing on immigration and law–and–order issues, as well as adopting positions and rhetoric reminiscent of the SD. This shift culminated in the formation of a Moderate–led coalition government supported by the SD in late 2022.



SANNA SALO

Postdoctoral Fellow
 The European Union and Strategic
 Competition research programme
 Finnish Institute of International Affairs



TUOMAS ISO–MARKKU

Senior Research Fellow
 The European Union and Strategic
 Competition research programme
 Finnish Institute of International Affairs

ISBN 978-951-769-753-8

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphics: Otso Teperi

Cover photo: Jonathan Nackstrand, AFP / Lehtikuva

CENTRE-RIGHT PARTIES IN GERMANY AND SWEDEN

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the relative vote shares of centrist, mainstream parties have declined across advanced democracies. Party systems have fragmented and smaller challenger parties, particularly on the radical right, have made gains. Most contemporary analyses of party system change have focused on the decline of centre-left, social democratic parties or the parallel rise of the radical right.¹ This Briefing Paper, by contrast, examines the relative weakening of centre-right, conservative and Christian democratic parties and its implications for European and EU politics.

Historically, cohesive centre-right parties have been instrumental in creating political stability by, for example, containing forces on the far right of the political spectrum. The centre-right has also had a major role in promoting European integration. Currently, however, the centre-right in many EU member states, and the UK, appears increasingly unable to fulfil such functions. This is due to both the fragmentation of party systems and, importantly, the internal fracturing of centre-right parties, whose liberal and conservative factions have moved further apart.

This Briefing Paper looks at two European multi-party systems, Germany and Sweden, both of which have experienced many of the abovementioned developments during the past decade. The paper analyses how the leading centre-right parties in the two countries, Germany's Christian Democrats (consisting of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, CDU, and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, CSU) and Sweden's Moderate Coalition Party (M or the Moderates), have responded to the changing political landscape, focusing in particular on their strategies in the face of the rise of the radical right-wing parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sweden Democrats (SD), as well as the political consequences of those strategies.

THE CENTRE-RIGHT IN A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Germany's CDU/CSU and Sweden's Moderates have faced similar challenges during the last 10–15 years. From a high point in the early 2010s, their popularity has decreased in each parliamentary election, whereas their respective radical-right challengers have grown stronger. In the 2021 federal election, the CDU/CSU received 24.1% of the votes, hitting a historical low. The AfD, for its part, won 10.3%, losing some votes compared to 2017 but consolidating its place in the German party system. In the 2022 Swedish parliamentary election, the Moderates got 19.1% and were surpassed by both the Social Democrats (30.3%) and, notably, the SD, which achieved its best-ever result, 20.5%.

These electoral trends are symptomatic of broader changes in European politics. First, party systems are fragmenting, with more parties successfully competing for votes. As a result, centrist parties are finding it more difficult to form viable majorities and often need to strike compromises with ideologically distant competitors – which may further affect their electoral fortunes. This is visible both at the domestic level and in the European Parliament, where the centre-right and the centre-left groups together no longer constitute a majority.

Secondly, in the changing political landscape, centre-right parties have become increasingly divided on their political profile and cooperation options, with their constituent parts pulling in different directions. Centre-right parties are, by definition, “big tent coalitions” that draw support from multiple right-wing currents at the same time.² However, the divides between different factions have widened in recent years.

In terms of programmatic positions and cooperation opportunities, the main choice available for the centre-right is between leaning towards the progressive-liberal (green and liberal parties) or the conservative-authoritarian (radical-right parties) end of the political spectrum. The range of choices varies across countries, depending on the electoral strength of

1 Gidron, Noam and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) “Centre-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies”. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 17–35.

2 Gidron and Ziblatt 2019.

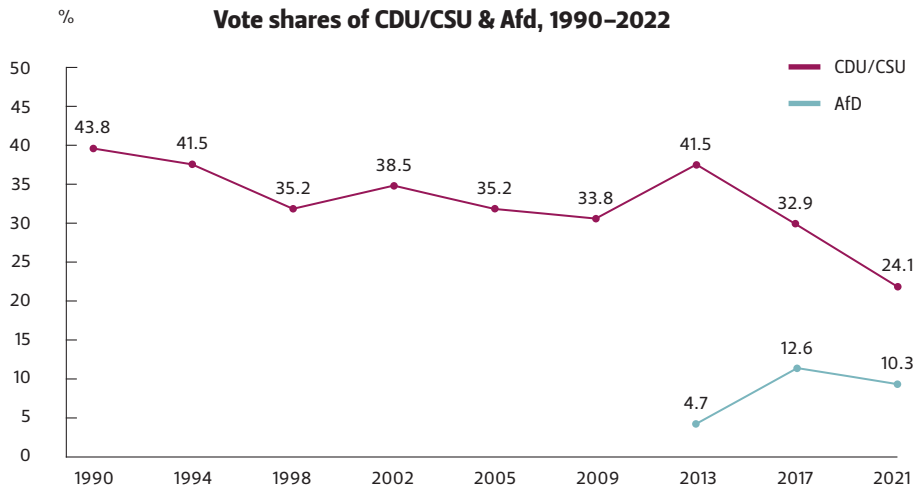


Figure 1. Vote shares of the CDU/CSU and the AfD in the Bundestag elections, 1990–2021.
Source: Bundestag

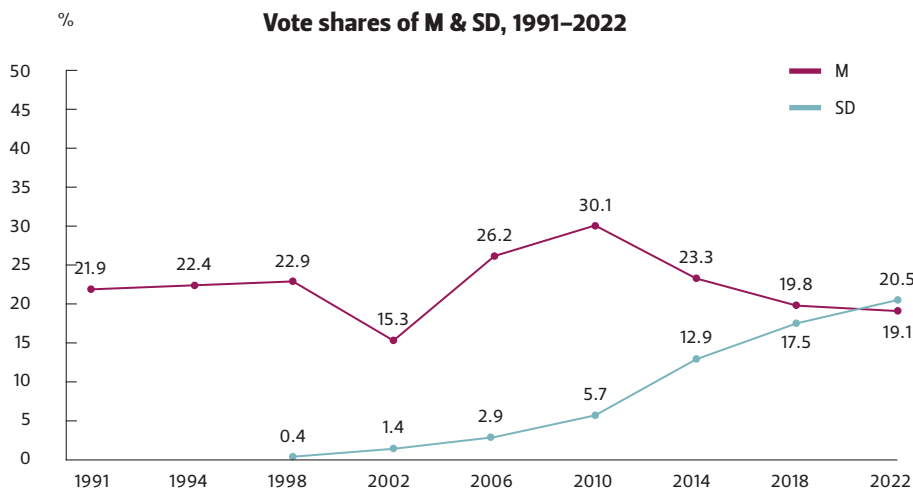


Figure 2. Vote shares of the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats in the Riksdag elections, 1990–2022.
Source: Statistikmyndigheten SCB

competitor parties. However, in many cases, adopting positions from and/or cooperating with the radical right appears to be a lucrative option for the European centre-right – with profound political consequences both at the national and the EU level.

In domestic politics, emulation of or cooperation with the radical right largely means a stronger emphasis on the centre-right’s political supply on law-and-order issues and immigration matters, as well as a stricter position on these. At the EU level, the likely implications are greater stress on national sovereignty and interests, less room for compromise, and little impetus for deepening integration. The strategies that centre-right parties choose in response to the changes in their political environment are thus highly consequential both in terms of domestic politics and EU decision-making.

THE CDU/CSU: BETWEEN TWO FRONTS

The CDU and the CSU together form one of Germany’s two traditional Volksparteien – catch-all parties that have been able to mobilise broad groups of voters. The CDU/CSU itself emphasises that it brings together three political strands: a Christian-social, a liberal, and a conservative one. Together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the CDU/CSU has dominated German post-war politics, but their combined vote share has declined since the 1980s. Beyond Germany, the CDU/CSU has played a crucial part in shaping European integration, promoting a pro-EU agenda while also highlighting fiscal discipline and subsidiarity.

The CDU and its Bavarian sister, the CSU, form an electoral alliance at the federal level, choose a joint

chancellor candidate and work in one parliamentary group. However, the two have somewhat differing political profiles, with the latter being more conservative and populist, occasionally also displaying Eurosceptic tendencies, thereby widening the CDU/CSU's political appeal. Long-time CSU leader Franz Josef Strauß famously argued that there should be no democratically legitimate party in Germany right of the CDU/CSU, providing an apt description of the role that the CDU/CSU has sought to play.

In practice, the CDU/CSU was long challenged right of the centre mainly by the (much smaller) liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) with which it has often formed coalitions. While the CDU/CSU also faced some far-right competitors, this phenomenon was mostly limited to individual states. However, since 2013, German politics has been shaken by the emergence of the AfD.

The AfD was founded in the context of the Eurozone crisis, advocating the dissolution of the euro and a Europe of sovereign states with a common market. Its Euroscepticism directly challenged the course of Chancellor Angela Merkel and her then government – consisting of the CDU/CSU and the FDP – in managing the crisis. Tellingly, many of the AfD's leading figures were former members of the CDU/CSU or the FDP. In its first federal election in 2013, the AfD gained 4.7% of the votes, narrowly missing the 5% electoral threshold. By contrast, the CDU/CSU won the 2013 election with 41.5% of the votes. Nevertheless, both the CDU/CSU and the FDP lost a significant number of voters to the AfD, the latter failing to re-enter the Bundestag.

In the following years, the AfD quickly transformed into a full-blown radical-right party. Subsequently, its focus shifted from Euroscepticism to asylum and immigration policy as well as identity politics more broadly, with the 2015 refugee crisis giving the party an opportunity to highlight its anti-immigrant views. Having previously entered the European Parliament and many state parliaments, the AfD achieved notable success in several state elections in 2016. In the 2017 federal election, it then entered the Bundestag with 12.6% of the votes, becoming Germany's largest opposition party. While the AfD's result in the 2021 federal election was not as good (10.3%), it masked significant variation at the state level, with the AfD becoming the largest party in the eastern states of Saxony and Thuringia.

The AfD's initial rise coincided with a period in which some voices within and outside the CDU/CSU started to criticise Angela Merkel's course as party chair and chancellor. Under Merkel's first

governments, Germany decided to end conscription, phase out nuclear energy, and provide bailouts to the struggling Eurozone member states, thus giving up long-standing positions of the CDU/CSU. The AfD's earliest incarnation in particular clearly aimed to capitalise on this by competing for the votes of disgruntled CDU/CSU supporters.³

The 2015 refugee crisis and the Merkel government's decision to temporarily suspend the EU's Dublin regulation amplified the divisions within the CDU/CSU, challenging its traditionally reserved position on immigration. In response, the CSU – led by Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer – distanced itself from Merkel, demanding that Germany set an annual upper limit for the number of asylum seekers it takes in, a demand that Merkel rejected repeatedly. While the government quickly adopted stricter asylum laws and played a central role in negotiating the EU-Turkey refugee deal, the criticism from outside and within the CDU/CSU persisted.

The debates about asylum and immigration policy within the CDU/CSU intensified further after the AfD's success and the CDU's disappointing performance in several state elections in 2016, as well as the 2017 federal election. The federal election saw the CDU/CSU lose 8.6 percentage points compared to 2013. According to estimates, most of the CDU/CSU voters that abandoned the party switched either to the FDP (1.3 million) or the AfD (980,000).⁴ After the federal election, CSU leader Seehofer as well as the prime ministers of Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt were among those who demanded the CDU/CSU to sharpen its profile, especially regarding immigration, in order to challenge the AfD. By contrast, figures close to Merkel emphasised that elections are won in the political centre, not on the fringes.⁵

Although the CDU/CSU managed to form a government coalition with the SPD in March 2018, the disagreements between the CDU and the CSU about asylum policy continued to deepen, even reaching a point where the two parties' long-standing union appeared to be in jeopardy. However, the outcome of the 2018 Bavarian state election in particular pushed the CSU to modify, and soften, its views. Initially, the CSU

3 Dilling, Matthias (2018) "Two of the Same Kind?". *German Politics and Society* 36(1): 84–104.

4 ARD (2017) "Deutschland: Bundestagswahl 2017: Wählerwanderungen". *Tagesschau*, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2017-09-24-BT-DE/analyse-wanderung.shtml>.

5 Spiegel (2017) "Mein rechter, rechter Platz ist frei". *Spiegel Online*, 1 October 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cdu-fraktionschef-volker-kauder-lehnt-rechtsruck-ab-a-1171314.html>; Spiegel (2017) "Kauder will nicht nach rechts rücken". *Spiegel Online*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cdu-fraktionschef-volker-kauder-lehnt-rechtsruck-ab-a-1171314.html>.

campaigning using a tone similar to the AfD. However, the election result called this strategy into question, with the CSU losing its long-held absolute majority in Bavaria. The election winners were not only the AfD, but also the increasingly centrist Greens, who finished second after the CSU, also thanks to former CSU voters. This made it clear to the CSU that it had to give more thought to the Greens as well.

The question about the CDU/CSU's profile remained central, as the CDU started to prepare for the time after Angela Merkel. Following a meagre result for the CDU – and sizeable gains for the Greens and the AfD – in the state election in Hesse in 2018, Merkel decided to step down as CDU chair. The subsequent contest for CDU leadership was essentially a battle between those embracing Merkel's centrist legacy, represented by the party's secretary general Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, and those willing to challenge it, embodied by the conservative pro-business politician Friedrich Merz and Health Minister Jens Spahn. While Spahn criticised Merkel's refugee policy and Merz promised to halve the support for the AfD by winning back conservative voters, Kramp-Karrenbauer struck a more moderate tone. Unlike migration, European integration did not feature prominently in the candidates' debates, all of them being essentially pro-EU. In the end, the centrist forces around Kramp-Karrenbauer won by a tight margin over Merz.

Kramp-Karrenbauer's term proved short, however. After several missteps, it was the question of the CDU's relationship with the AfD that prompted her resignation. In February 2020, the fragmented state parliament of Thuringia struggled to elect a new prime minister. In the end, the minor FDP's candidate prevailed, receiving the votes of the FDP, the CDU, and the AfD. This informal cooperation between the CDU and the AfD was unacceptable to the CDU's federal leadership, violating the party's official position on the matter. However, Kramp-Karrenbauer struggled to convince the CDU branch of Thuringia of the necessity for a new election and, with her authority undermined, announced her departure.

In the leadership race that followed, the divisions within the CDU were again present. Centrist and liberal forces grouped around Armin Laschet, whereas conservative and market-liberal parts of the CDU supported Merz. A third candidate, Norbert Röttgen, did not make it past the first round. Once again, the centrist forces won, with Laschet narrowly defeating Merz and later becoming the CDU/CSU's chancellor candidate for the 2021 federal election. However,

after the CDU/CSU's poor performance in the election, Laschet stepped down and Merz was elected as his replacement.

Despite some controversial statements, Merz has not driven a notably more conservative course. Moreover, he has promised a "fire wall" between the CDU and the AfD. This may reflect the CDU leadership's reading of the results of the 2021 federal election. While the AfD presents a major challenge to the CDU in eastern Germany, where the AfD is on average twice as strong as in the west, at the federal level the CDU/CSU lost the election in the political centre, with voters defecting to the SPD, the FDP, and the Greens. In essence, the CDU thus fights a 'two-front battle' with regional variations. In terms of its EU policy, the CDU/CSU has remained pragmatically pro-European, demonstrated, for example, by its support for Next-GenerationEU, the EU's temporary recovery instrument funded from joint debt.

THE MODERATES: SHIFTING TO THE RIGHT

In Sweden, the Moderates have been the most important political force right of centre since 1979, a position the party took from the agrarian Centre Party (C). Since October 2022, the Moderates have led a conservative coalition government composed of the Liberals (L) and the Christian Democrats (KD), supported by the radical right-wing SD. Previously, the Moderates have been in government twice: in 1991–1994 and 2006–2014, both times governing together with the pre-electoral bourgeois Alliance for Sweden, consisting of the M, L, KD, and C. The Moderates have traditionally supported European integration, emphasising, among other things, the significance of the common market and the EU's foreign and security policy role.

In terms of its strategy and programmatic profile, the Moderate Party has undergone a profound shift since the 1990s, a decade during which it was an economically liberal, policy-seeking party, moving towards centrist economic pragmatism in the 2000s. In the latter half of the 2010s, the party clearly adopted a vote- and office-seeking strategy, championing a culturally conservative agenda with a heavy focus on law-and-order and immigration issues. This is, to an extent, also reflected in the party's EU policy priorities, where a similar shift in focus towards external and internal security issues can be detected.

These shifts have coincided with the rise of the populist radical right-wing party Sweden Democrats.

The SD, established in 1988, has roots in extremist, neo-Nazi milieus, something that long made the party a pariah in the eyes of the other Swedish parties and the establishment more broadly. The SD entered parliament in the 2010 election, coming sixth with 5.7% of the votes. Since then, it has grown steadily, reaching 20.5% in the 2022 election and becoming Sweden's second biggest party.

The Sweden Democrats' growth has challenged the two-bloc structure of Swedish politics. In recent elections, neither the left bloc, led by the Social Democrats, nor the right-wing bloc, led by the Moderates, has been able to gain a majority in the Riksdag, which has forced the parties to seek uncomfortable cooperation from across the ideological aisle. In terms of substance, the SD has successfully politicised immigration and law-and-order issues, which have become increasingly important for all parties' political platforms.

The year 2014 was a watershed regarding these changes. The refugee crisis erupted and the number of people seeking asylum in Sweden multiplied. As a result, public debate on immigration became increasingly polarised and reflective of the SD's preferred framing, presenting immigration as problematic for Sweden. The Moderates initially responded by defending a liberal-cosmopolitan position on immigration, with the then party leader and Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt famously asking the Swedes to "open their hearts" to refugees.

Yet the 2014 parliamentary election was a disaster for the M, which received 23.3%, a loss of 6.8 percentage points compared to 2010. The SD, for its part, received 12.9%, gaining 7.3 percentage points. Post-election analysis showed that the M had lost voters particularly to the SD. The centre-right Alliance was split on whether to seek support from the SD to form a government. The Social Democrats used the opportunity, forging a centre-left minority government with the Greens.

The SD leveraged its swing position between the two blocs in autumn 2014, nearly bringing down the centre-left government by voting in favour of the M-led opposition's budget proposal. The danger of a new election – an unappealing prospect for the M – led to a historic decision, the so-called December Agreement, where the bourgeois parties agreed to indirectly support the centre-left government's budget. The agreement was deeply unpopular among the M activists, who put pressure on the party leadership to reconsider the

party's position on cooperating with the SD.⁶

A strategic reorientation was facilitated by a leadership change from Fredrik Reinfeldt to Anna Kinberg Batra, who led the Moderates in a more socially conservative direction. The party shifted focus to law-and-order issues and immigration and assumed a stricter position in these. In early 2017, Kinberg Batra broke a taboo in Swedish politics by signalling readiness to "talk to" the Sweden Democrats in parliament. Yet the time was not ripe for such a gesture, which led to an intra-party crisis, a steep drop in the polls and, ultimately, Kinberg Batra's resignation in August 2017. Her successor, the current M leader Ulf Kristersson, began his tenure by repeatedly stating that he would not "discuss, cooperate or compromise with the SD".⁷

Heading towards the 2018 election, the Moderates' strategy was a strange combination of policy positions and rhetoric similar to that of the SD – its election campaign included, for example, images of burning cars in Gothenburg's immigrant-dense neighbourhoods – and denials of any cooperation with the SD. The 2018 election was also the first since 2006 where the bourgeois Alliance did not put forward a common election manifesto, as the parties were divided on the question of how to deal with the SD.

The election result was a tie between the green-left (144 seats) and the bourgeois blocs (143 seats). The SD continued to grow and, with 17.5% of the vote, again held a swing position. The historically long, six-month government negotiations that ensued formally split the bourgeois Alliance. The Moderates, in line with their office-seeking strategy, indicated their readiness to build a right-wing government with the SD's support. However, the Alliance parties C and L did not agree and switched sides, supporting a Social Democrat-led government instead. The Moderates were thus forced into opposition again.

Going towards the 2022 election, the emergence of a new, conservative bloc composed of the Moderates, the SD and the KD looked increasingly clear, even if M leader Kristersson preferred to use the term "my side in politics" to describe the emerging cooperation.⁸ Again, the Moderates' election campaign was an

6 Ravik Jupskås, Anders (2021) "Sweden: The Difficult Adaptation of the Moderates to the Silent Counter-Revolution". In *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis*, edited by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 DN (2017) "Nej, jag tänker inte samtala med Sverigedemokraterna". Dagens Nyheter, 7 November 2017. <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/ulf-kristersson-nej-jag-tanker-inte-samtala-med-sverigedemokraterna/>.

8 DN (2022) "Ulf Kristerssons lag har inget namn: 'Jag brukar säga på min sida i politiken'", 19 August 2022. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/ulf-kristerssons-lag-har-inget-namn-jag-brukar-saga-pa-min-sida-i-politiken/>.

uneasy combination of policy positions converging with those of the SD and public denial of any formal cooperation. The election in September 2022 resulted in yet another situation where neither the left-green nor the bourgeois parties could form a majority without the SD. Meanwhile, the Sweden Democrats were the biggest winners (20.5 %), finishing ahead of the Moderates (19.1%) for the first time ever and duly becoming the largest party in the emerging right-wing bloc.

In a development that would have been impossible just a few years earlier, the Moderates agreed to build a conservative coalition government with the KD and the L with the support of the SD. Although the SD is formally outside the coalition and does not have ministerial posts, it received significant policy concessions regarding immigration and law-and-order issues in particular, and will have a say in related EU issues.

In the space of a decade, the Moderates have thus transformed from a socio-economically and culturally liberal party into a conservative force, ready to rule with the radical-right SD's support. This has already changed the tone of Swedish politics both internally and externally. Comparing the agenda of the Swedish presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2023 to Sweden's previous presidency in 2009, also then under a Moderate prime minister, a clear shift in focus towards security and law-and-order issues can be observed. While external security understandably tops the agenda due to the war in Ukraine, the emphasis on law-and-order issues such as tackling cross-border organized crime or strengthening the EU's external border controls arguably also reflects a broader shift in the Moderates' political priorities, echoing the effects of cooperation with the SD.

CONCLUSIONS

This Briefing Paper has analysed the responses of Germany's and Sweden's leading centre-right parties – the CDU/CSU and the Moderates – to a changing

political landscape characterised by fragmentation as well as the rise of radical-right challengers and, especially in Germany, the Greens.

In response to the new political constellation, Sweden's Moderates have clearly reshaped their political agenda during the last decade, shifting focus to immigration and law-and-order issues as well as adopting positions and rhetoric reminiscent of the SD. The party has thus chosen to pursue an office-seeking strategy, which materialised, in a historic manner, after the 2022 election in the formation of a Moderate-led conservative coalition government that is supported by the SD.

In the case of Germany's CDU/CSU, the trajectory has been less clear. While the rise of the AfD has put the CDU/CSU under pressure, generating demands to sharpen its political profile, the CDU/CSU has also acknowledged the importance of appealing to centrist voters – a conclusion only reinforced by the result of the 2021 federal election. Nevertheless, the strength of the AfD in eastern Germany means that the CDU/CSU's approach to the AfD remains an important question.

One factor that may account for some of the differences between Germany and Sweden is the somewhat different nature of the SD and the AfD: the SD has consistently sought to clean up its extreme-right reputation to become a credible coalition partner, whereas the AfD has constantly radicalised.

The success of the CDU/CSU and the Moderates' strategies in dealing with the challenges they are facing remains an open question. In both Germany and Sweden, the ongoing legislative term and the following elections are likely to be indicative of where things are going, with the Moderates now leading a government dependent on the support of the SD, and the CDU/CSU playing the role of Germany's main opposition party after sixteen years in government. The way these parties, along with equivalents elsewhere in Europe, position themselves in the changing political landscape will be important in terms of domestic and European politics alike. /