

# Petrol for the People

*Sweden's far right defines its vision of  
climate action*

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In a video produced for the 2022 Swedish general election campaign, the leader of the far-right Sweden Democrats poses at a petrol station. “1300 SEK [£100] to fill the tank of a regular Volvo! Do we want it to be like this?” he asks, petrol pump flashing in the background. “If you want something else, vote for the Sweden Democrats.” Since dubbed the “energy election” by political scientists, much of the campaign was fought not on the usual issues of immigration or crime but on energy and climate. Electricity and fuel prices, along with nuclear energy, dominated, particularly in the final days and weeks before polling.

In the end, the Sweden Democrats achieved a stunning success, surpassing the right-wing Moderates for the first time. In doing so they became the country’s largest right-of-centre party. This was by no means unexpected; the far right surged in the decade leading up to the election, growing from zero seats in the 2006 parliament, with under 3 per cent of the vote, to 73 in 2022, with 20.5 per cent of the vote. They are now firmly established as one of Europe’s most powerful parties of the emergent far right.

In response, the other parties of the Swedish right tore down the cordon sanitaire, forming a coalition with Sweden Democrats in the historic Tidö Agreement signed in October of that year. For the first time, the Sweden Democrats were invited into the halls of power, and into the mainstream of Swedish politics.

## *The wedge*

As the centre-left Swedish commentator Ingvar Persson recently noted, “SD now controls Swedish climate politics.” The climate backsliding is well underway. Since 2022, many of the country’s relatively ambitious climate and energy policies have been rolled back, while its emissions have risen sharply.

In 1991, Sweden became the first country in the world to implement a carbon tax. Between 1990 and 2021, it managed to cut a third of its emissions and almost fully decarbonize its power sector. Its net zero target was set for 2045, and its ambitious HYBRIT plan aimed to green the heavily emitting steel industry. In 2022, the country banned

further exploration and extraction of fossil fuels. All these gains are now at risk.

To gain control of climate politics, Sweden Democrats have used climate and energy as what political scientists call a “wedge issue.” Historically, the right’s primary wedge issue has been immigration, with changing demographics used to drive a wedge between themselves and others, feeding an “us against them” narrative that has allowed the far right to distinguish itself from the rest of the political landscape. Only the far right, in this view, can challenge the status quo; via a relentless focus on a single issue, they are able to lump together everyone from socialists to free-market liberals as part of a single corrupt political establishment. In doing so, wedge issues create new rifts between established parties as they scramble to respond.

Most political scientists who study the use of the climate as a wedge issue by the far right have looked principally to their climate scepticism. This is particularly so in the case of the other big success in recent years, the Alternative for Germany. With the Sweden Democrats, however, we can begin to see a new formation, one that reaches beyond any such denialist/acceptance binary. Their historic climate scepticism has in recent years turned into something of a redistributive war of position, where a broad strategic alignment with mainstream climate policies is combined with a more aggressive politics based on the politicization of the *consequences* of climate action, particularly on rural and working-class voters. The result has been a form of climate nationalism, based on an acceptance of mainstream climate science combined with a single-minded focus on technological fixes, particularly the build-out of new nuclear power.

Crucial here has been the party’s campaigning on Sweden’s urban-rural divide along with the growth of place-based resentments from those in the relatively neglected Swedish countryside. The Sweden Democrats are vastly more popular in the country than in urban areas: their weakest electoral performance by far in the most recent general election, came in the capital, Stockholm, where the party received only around half of its national average; Gothenburg and Malmö, Sweden’s next biggest cities, also saw poor returns. Their best results, on the

other hand, came in many of the country's more rural constituencies.

In recent years, this reactionary rural resentment has been mobilized through the *Bränsleupproret* (Fuel Uprising) movement, formerly known as *Bensinupproret* (Petrol Uprising). Directly inspired by, and mimicking, the Yellow Vests in France, the movement emerged in 2019 in response to an increase in fuel duty by the then ruling Social Democrat-Green coalition. Styling itself as “Sweden’s largest popular movement”, and with over half a million supporters, *Bränsleupproret* has since played a key role in the grassroots mobilization against prevailing climate and energy policies, and it is now a key dividing line in Swedish politics. Initially demanding lower fuel prices, *Bränsleupproret* later widened to lower energy prices in general.

## *Energy Politics*

While the Sweden Democrats’s new position on the climate is in some ways close to the right-wing mainstream—a climate realism combining free-market technological optimism with green capitalism—it remains distinct not only in its nationalist orientation but also in its materialist connection to redistributive politics. For the Sweden Democrats, climate policy is now indivisible from energy policy, with the latter a critical terrain of redistributive conflict.

This has been a gradual shift. In their 2014 election manifesto, the party was still emphasising the inability of a single country to solve the world’s climate problems. Sweden, they suggested, had already done enough; no more money should be wasted on ineffective domestic initiatives. The country was, of course, at the time a global frontrunner on climate action. The Sweden Democrats sought to use this progress to curb domestic policy, and to redirect funding to cheaper and more limited international initiatives. In doing so, they echoed a common refrain among far-right parties on immigration, who insist that immigration regimes should be outsourced to countries more proximate to the refugees’ point of origin. At the same time, the party’s focus was on what it called its “environmental policy”, centring on calls to protect rural Sweden and its natural environment. This was matched by calls for a reduction in the price of energy as well as for an

expansion of nuclear power in order for the country to achieve energy independence. Together, these policies formed a kind of climate nationalism, matching techno-fixes with calls to sever links to OPEC+ producers which they viewed as fundamentally opposed to Western values.

Four years later, the party's manifesto showed a growing awareness, indeed acceptance, of mainstream global climate policy. Now, rather than the "environment", the party began to embrace "climate" politics, even if the focus on nuclear power and geopolitical climate realism remained. This greatly accelerated during the 2022 election, when the party's manifesto referenced the then most recent IPCC report for the first time.

At the same time, the party continued to bemoan the empty protest politics of other parties, with their red tape and imposition of high costs of social reproduction for ordinary Swedes. Sweden, it demanded, should rid itself of national climate targets, which were to be replaced with less ambitious EU-set targets. Doing so would mean a curbing of ambition—part of a broader attempt to shift responsibility away from Sweden toward the continent's more polluting countries. Sweden, they claimed, was better off prioritising economic growth over climate action. They also proposed the abolition of the Climate Policy Council, an independent body formed to evaluate government climate policy. This was, the party claimed, more unnecessary bureaucracy and a threat to democracy.

By 2023, the transformation from passive climate deniers to proactive reconfigurers of mainstream climate policy on a materialist basis was nearly complete. Since then, the party has also thrown its weight behind the governing coalition's goal of net carbon neutrality by 2045, rowing back on their previous rejection of national climate targets. Yet equally, with its confidence and supply agreement with the ruling right-wing government that has placed the party firmly in the command room of Swedish climate and energy politics, there has been a rolling back of the country's climate policies. One symptom has been the recent abandonment by the Liberal minister for climate, Romina Pourmokhtari, of her green growth platform in favour of a SD-orchestrated curtailment of ambition.

That same year, despite reneging on its election promise to reduce fuel duty by ten kronor, after capitulating to the right-wing coalition's less radical fuel policy, it cut the amount of biofuels that fuel companies were required to blend with their petrol and diesel—a process that, evidence suggests, is vital if Sweden hopes to reach its climate targets. One of the results of adding biofuels, however, was a rise in the price of petrol, something unacceptable to many Swedes.

The Sweden Democrats are not the only right-wing force fixated on cars and petrol prices. In London, during the 2022 local elections, the newly formed Reform UK managed to successfully politicize the city's Ultra-Low Emissions Zone, though it failed to turn this into an electoral victory against the incumbent Labour mayor. In France, rural residents concerned about increases to fuel tax implemented by a politically remote capital, sparked the Yellow Vests movement.

Sweden's sparsely populated countryside, where many are reliant on their car to get around, proved fertile ground for this kind of politics. In response, the Sweden Democrats formulated what was a broadly egalitarian energy strategy. Fuel duty disproportionately hits those sections of the working class who are reliant on cars for commuting, especially those who live in rural Sweden or who have been priced out of urban areas thanks to the country's recent regressive moves towards the privatization and commodification of housing, which have replaced what was once one of the most radical and left-wing housing policies in the world. The party's promises to cut fuel duty was meant to appeal to these concerns. In doing so, what should have been the home turf of the left—a materialist climate politics, which focuses on its effects on the working class—has been cornered by the far right.

Now, with the Sweden Democrats in control, Sweden is no longer a climate frontrunner. Where once the country pushed forward ambitious policies, these are no more. More worrying still, the country's emissions have begun to rise.

As the Swedish Climate Council's most recent assessment concludes, there is now a mismatch between the government's stated goals and its corresponding actions. Its climate policies, they note, will



further increase emissions. The country is currently on track to miss its 2030 national and EU emissions reduction targets. Indeed, while emissions between 1990 and 2023 decreased by 38 per cent, there has been a 6.7 per cent increase in territorial emissions in the first quarter of 2024. This is particularly the case in the country's transport sector—its largest emitter, accounting for a third of the country's total emissions—thanks in large part to the fuel policies spearheaded by the Sweden Democrats.

## *Questions of National Security*

Sweden's fossil fuel ban, conceived and proposed by the Green Party, was passed in 2022 in the final stretch of the last Social Democrat government. The ban prohibits all exploration and extraction of fossil fuels on Swedish soil, complementing an already existing ban on offshore exploration enacted in 2015. While Sweden does not have any commercial fossil fuel production, the ban was meant as both a symbolic effort to influence other producer states, as well as a safeguard against future exploration and extraction.

Since the ban was enacted, the Sweden Democrats have been pushing for it to be overturned. The Sweden Democrat MP Tobias Andersson, for instance, in a [question](#) to Pourmokhtari, spoke against the ban on defence grounds. "Both military and civil defence will be dependent on fossil fuels for a long time", Andersson said, adding that "the ideological confusion which led the previous government to the ban shouldn't also blind this government too." The government has been assisted in these efforts, if independently, by the fossil fuel lobby.

In May 2025, the Swedish government will publish its inquiry into civil preparedness in the wake of the ostensible threat to the country from Russian aggression. The report is expected to echo the Sweden Democrats's calls for reevaluating the ban in the name of domestic supply security. We can expect more of this in future, wherein an insecure geopolitical climate alongside security and foreign policy concerns are mobilized to justify a continuing reliance on, even expansion of, fossil fuel exploration and use. The danger for those of us on the left is clear: energy security can easily be exploited to

stoke nationalist fervour based on fears about an imminent foreign intervention from the perceived threat du jour, be it Russia, China or any given configuration in the Persian Gulf. In this, there are echoes of both Donald Trump and the Alternative for Germany: the aggressive pursuit of fossil fuel expansion and the jettisoning climate commitments, justified in large part by claims of national security.

Likewise, the Sweden Democrats's single-minded focus on a specific technological fix to the climate crisis—an expansion of nuclear energy as a “fossil-free” path forward—serves to deflect future criticism. Climate delay here takes the form of a pernicious doubling down, claiming to speak for the climate, even in favour of decarbonization, while reasserting the country's dependence on fossil fuels.

The Sweden Democrats's focus on nuclear energy has enabled them to maintain strong opposition to any planning-centred model of renewable energy, and to foment *völkisch* rural anger at the cosmopolitan green elites, all while enabling them to outwardly support calls for an end to the country's reliance on fossil fuels. More importantly, this technological fix gives the far right a lever to pull in any and all discussions of the climate or of energy, whether on questions of Russian imports, proposed wind farms, rising energy costs or the need for other countries to take a lead in wrestling free from its fossil dependence. The party can adopt the mantle of an insurgent anti-establishment actor, representing the real people and their concerns for lower energy prices, while avoiding the trap of being bogged down in the complex technocratic details of energy reduction plans. Instead, the demand is simple: more nuclear power plants!

## *Pathologies of Liberal Climate Politics*

In the most recent election, the Sweden Democrats campaigned on the slogan of being “not like all the others.” In one sense, this is true—their insurgent anti-establishment framing sets them apart from mainstream parties. But in another, they are merely a more extreme version of the mainstream right, firmly grounded in techno-optimism and a climate realism that reticently concedes to the science while renouncing any vision to transform society, and that rejects any call



for the country to take a renewed global role on the climate.

No mere normal pathology of liberal societies, then—a kind of aberration of a well-functioning liberal democracy—the Sweden Democrats represent a “pathological normalcy”, in Cas Mudde’s term, showing us the bankruptcy of market-based solutions to the climate crisis. The party is merely a symptom of a failed approach to the climate, one that refuses to address the concerns of ordinary people, like the rapidly rising costs of fuel or electricity, and offers nothing like a genuinely radical proposal for a socially just, equitable and state-led energy transition.

Equally, the party represents a new formation on the far right, one that has managed to produce a powerful and anti-establishment form of climate politics. In this, they have been enabled by the persistent failures of the left and the centre.

By turning their reluctance to talk about climate and energy into a major policy point, they have changed from a defensive climate scepticism to a redistributive climate nationalism. Against the technocratic policies pursued by otherwise well-meaning environmentalist parties and groups, the Sweden Democrats have formulated a materialist, if reactionary, framing for the climate. By focusing on the economic concerns of ordinary people, it is materialist, while its reactionary character derives from its nationalism and its inability to directly address the crisis, purporting to be about redistribution while remaining congruent with a broader political project that will only further the breakup of the welfare state and deepen the privatization of society.

There are many lessons we can learn from this. To stop the far right’s use of climate as a wedge issue, it is incumbent upon us to adopt a more materialist climate policy framework, one based on hope, a renewed green industrial strategy and a bold class politics. Central to this must be the calls for the building of a strong green state—a centralized, steamrolling green state, even—that can target fossil fuels, corporate power and the rich. To do so would require an ambitious project of decarbonization for the transport sector, in conjunction with genuinely redistributive policies that can cancel

out any of its regressive economic effects. The case of the Sweden Democrats shows that if we fail in this, the far right can seize the redistributive framing, and force a wedge between the regressive but ambitious climate policies of the liberal centre and their own redistributively fairer but less ambitious policies. What the Sweden Democrats get right is their focus on the interests and daily lives of ordinary working-class people, even if it is little more than an empty gesture. By taking actual people's living conditions as the starting point of climate policy, even if only rhetorically, they can speak to their material interests. This used to be the terrain of the left. We must claim it back.

Unlike the past, however, the left-behind are now not only the urban working class, but also the relatively forgotten rural poor. Elite and urban condescension won't win them back. The left must find ways to connect with the millions of people in the countryside who also suffer the failures of neoliberalism and globalization. Addressing the urban-rural divide through a reformulated climate and energy politics, along with radical redistribution and new democratic and participatory economic ownership models, suggests one way forward for the left. Another, as Kennet Bergqvist, an industrial worker from Umeå, in north-east Sweden, rightly points out, in the context of the insurgent fuel uprising, is a change of focus away from regressive demands for cheap petrol toward better public services in the countryside.

By wrapping the debate over energy policy in a redistributive framing, and in so doing deepening its politicization, the Sweden Democrats created a powerful weapon against any more ambitious climate action. The technocratic climate politics of the centre have proved themselves unable to speak to the concerns of ordinary people, increasingly squeezed between a billionaire class, corporate power and rapidly expanding wealth, income and housing inequality.

None of which is not to say the Sweden Democrats are now a permanent force in Swedish politics, nor that the far right are unassailable. Indeed, despite the fanfare, the 2022 election was evenly balanced: if only 0.36 per cent of voters had switched sides, the Sweden Democrats would still be frozen out. The power of the far right is mutable. Nothing about it is inevitable. Growing support can

taper off, even crash, especially as voters become disappointed with the pretence of their anti-establishment heroes as they are sucked into the same establishment they so vehemently oppose, their insurgent promises falling by the wayside.

The Sweden Democrats, like so many far-right movements and parties across the world, seek to give voice to ordinary people without offering any real alternative to a rigged economy, where capital continues to accumulate, poor people are dispossessed from their land and the impacts of escalating climate and ecological damage are felt more deeply with each passing day. Only radical, ambitious, and genuinely transformative change can both disarm the far right and limit planetary destruction. The critique of business as usual will either come from the left or the far right. If the left cannot offer concrete climate policies that speak to the everyday concerns of the working class, an emboldened far right stands ready to swoop in and provide the desired insurgent alternative. For the left, the only viable counter-offer is a strong state with a clearly articulated vision—not of militaries and motorists, but of a new collective future on a climate-changed planet.