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Transparency Against Democracy: The Sweden Democrats, Radical-Right Populism, and Political Trust

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Abstract

Existing explanations for the rise of populist radical-right parties often focus on two primary factors: economic insecurity, driven by globalization, financial crises, and technological disruptions; and cultural backlash, which stems from intergenerational and immigration-related value conflicts. While these perspectives offer valuable insights, there is little doubt that the growth of populist radical-right parties is also closely linked to political distrust and declining confidence in democratic institutions. Supporters of populist radical-right parties tend to exhibit lower political trust as compared to voters in mainstream parties. However, these explanations often overlook the complex relationship between anti-establishment populist radical-right parties and the very democratic accountability mechanisms designed to uphold transparency and institutional integrity. This study explores the paradoxical role of public transparency and press freedom in facilitating the rise of populist radical-right and anti-establishment movements, with a particular focus on Sweden—a country with exceptionally strong public transparency mechanisms. Traditionally regarded as pillars of democratic governance, these mechanisms have been strategically repurposed by the Sweden Democrats, an anti-establishment, radical-right party, to expose political scandals and erode trust in traditional elites. Leveraging alternative media platforms and even troll factories, the party has effectively weaponized transparency to amplify anti-elite populist narratives. This research critically examines whether transparency and media freedom serve to strengthen democracy or instead enable the politicization of scandals, reinforcing populist distrust of institutions. By analyzing the intersection of transparency mechanisms, free press dynamics, and anti-establishment populist strategies, this study provides a new perspective on how accountability tools can be manipulated for partisan gain. In doing so, it sheds light on the broader implications of transparency policies in an era of rising populism and increasing democratic polarization.

Keywords

democracy; free press; radical-right populism; Sweden democrats; transparency; trust

1. Introduction

The rise of populist radical-right parties raises concerns, as these parties often promote anti-establishment and anti-immigration stances that can, at times, challenge the core principles of liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). In Sweden, this trend is exemplified by the rise of the Sweden Democrats, who have cemented their political influence by signing the “Tidö Agreement” with the Moderates, Christian Democrats, and Liberals, forming an unprecedented coalition. Their influence is reflected in recent polls that rank the Sweden Democrats as the country’s second-largest political party, with their leader, Jimmie Åkesson, emerging as one of Sweden’s most popular political figures (Löfgren, 2024; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Literature on the rise of populist parties typically focuses on two phenomena. The first revolves around globalization and growing economic insecurity, notably as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the China shock, automatization, rising protectionism, and economic nationalism (Newton, 2024, p. 50). These factors enable party leaders to take advantage of the population’s economic anxiety to mobilize them to vote for an anti-system party (Dannerhäll, 2023). Some researchers interpret the rise of populist radical-right parties as a reflection of declining trust in the political system, particularly in the aftermath of economic disruptions (Algan et al., 2018).

The second type of explanation is the cultural backlash theorized by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019). According to this thesis, there is in Sweden as elsewhere in the world an intergenerational cultural clash between older people who identify with their countries and younger people who characterize themselves as “citizens of nowhere” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In the context of Sweden, there is also a clash of values when it comes to immigration, particularly Muslim immigration in the wake of the refugee crisis of 2015. The significant growth in the number of immigrants and the cultural clashes that may result are said to favor the nativist rhetoric that is the trademark of populist parties (Tomson, 2020).

While these explanations provide valuable insights, this research aims to explore a less-examined dimension of populism: the role of transparency and freedom of the press mechanisms in enabling political gains for anti-establishment radical-right populist parties like the Sweden Democrats (Abedi, 2004). According to the OECD (2024) the Government of Canada (2025), and other specialists (Erkkilä, 2020; Ilter, 2022; Sgueo, 2018), transparency and free press mechanisms are tools that can help restore citizens’ political trust and thus curb populist parties. For example, the Canadian government’s position is that public trust can be strengthened by increasing transparency with measures such as legislation on improving access to information (Government of Canada, 2025).

This research argues that mechanisms of public transparency and press freedom, which were originally designed to foster political trust and strengthen democratic legitimacy by promoting meaningful democratic accountability, can also be exploited by populist radical-right parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, to undermine that trust. Radical-right populist movements frequently position themselves as defenders of transparency, leveraging publicly available information to expose alleged corruption or misconduct among political elites (Fenster, 2021; Moffitt, 2016, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017).

The Sweden Democrats have clearly benefited from leveraging information made available through public transparency mechanisms to strengthen their political position. By selectively amplifying scandals and

framing elite behavior as proof of widespread corruption, these actors transform transparency into a tool for delegitimizing democratic institutions and eroding citizens' confidence in representative governance. In doing so, they strengthen political support within an increasingly polarized public, taking advantage of the very openness that democratic systems depend on to maintain trust. The causal process unfolds as follows. First, regarding transparency mechanisms and press freedoms, these mechanisms expose government actions, as well as the behaviors of political and administrative elites, highlighting institutional shortcomings and increasing the visibility of potential issues. Populist radical-right party leaders rely on the perception of scandals and corruption as a central element of their strategy to gain power. Without these controversies, they would have much less material to exploit.

Second, concerns the scandal framing and amplification through digital media. Populist radical-right party entrepreneurs strategically highlight and frame these revelations, emphasizing misconduct, inefficiency, or moral failings as evidence of systemic corruption within the political elite. The Sweden Democrats' ability to effectively use digital media—media that are not subject to journalistic standards—to bypass traditionally hostile mainstream media amplifies their message. Crucially, the sources disclosing this information are often perceived as legitimate, further reinforcing the Sweden Democrats' narrative and lending credibility to their claims of the elite's moral failure. This strategic use of credible sources strengthens their position and deepens the resonance of their populist rhetoric within an increasingly polarized public sphere.

Third, concerns the erosion of political trust. The ongoing emphasis on these narratives gradually erodes citizens' trust not only in specific institutions, leaders, or policies, but in the legitimacy of representative institutions as a whole.

And at last, we turn to the consolidation of populist support. As trust in political institutions diminishes, populist radical-right parties position themselves as the authentic voice of the “people,” capitalizing on citizens' disillusionment to secure electoral support in an increasingly polarized public sphere. Hooghe (2018) and Newton (2024) highlight a strong connection between low political trust and the tendency to vote anti-incumbent, as well as to support populist parties.

This research situates its analysis within the Swedish context, where transparency and freedom of the press mechanisms are exceptionally robust, much more than what is seen in France, the US, and Canada for example. Sweden's principle of public access to official documents (“offentlighetsprincipen”) ensures an unparalleled level of governmental openness. However, while these mechanisms can foster trust in government, they also expose political actors to significant scrutiny.

The methodology of this article is qualitative in nature. It is based on an extensive review of primary, secondary, and grey literature sources, including newspaper articles, government documents, and expert analyses on these issues. The methodology employed in this study is grounded in a longitudinal content analysis of political scandals in Sweden over the past 30 years, with a particular focus on the last decade, during which new disinformation strategies have emerged. The research investigates how public transparency mechanisms and press freedom—originally intended to uphold democratic accountability—have been strategically utilized by the Sweden Democrats, to erode trust in traditional political institutions. The study examines how the nature, media coverage, and public perception of these scandals have evolved over time. Additionally, it explores the historical evolution of transparency laws and press freedom regulations in Sweden, assessing their role

in exposing unethical behavior and political misconduct. Furthermore, the research analyzes the rise of new disinformation strategies over the past decade, including the deployment digital media and the deployment of “troll farms” to manipulate online discourse, the use of segmented messaging to target specific audiences, and the expansion of parallel media ecosystems, particularly alternative right-wing media platforms. These elements are analyzed to understand how they contribute to amplifying political scandals and diminishing political trust.

By examining the intersection of transparency, free press mechanisms, and far-right populist politics, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how accountability tools can be wielded for partisan advantage. In doing so, it sheds light on the broader implications of transparency policies in the context of rising populism, polarization, and the evolving challenges to liberal democracy.

2. Conceptual Framework: Trust and Populist Radical-Right Parties

In recent decades, numerous studies and reports in the social sciences have highlighted the crucial role of trust in maintaining a well-functioning society. Trust has been linked to social cohesion (Larsen, 2013), the development of “successful societies” (Hall & Lamont, 2009), the resolution of collective action problems (Ostrom, 1990), and the stability of democratic institutions (Warren, 1999). At the economic level, trust is essential for commercial transactions (Arrow, 1972), economic growth (Algan & Cahuc, 2010), macroeconomic stability (Sangnier, 2013), and the sustainability of the welfare state and income equality (Bergh & Bjørnskov, 2014). Beyond these institutional benefits, political trust is fundamental to the maintenance of the public good and the rule of law. Without it, everyday decisions, such as boarding a plane or sending children to kindergarten, would be significantly more difficult (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017).

Rothstein (2005) argues that cooperation is only possible when individuals trust that others will do the same. Trust, as an abstract concept, is built upon shared narratives and collective memory, shaping a common understanding of good governance and civic responsibility. It serves as a key mechanism in discouraging behaviors such as free-riding, which can undermine collective efforts. As Rothstein (2000, p. 477) states, “Without norms of trust, the ‘tragedy of the commons’ is unavoidable.” In essence, trust functions much like the air we breathe, its importance often goes unnoticed until it begins to disappear.

Trust in government can be defined in various ways, depending on the context and purpose. In the literature on trust, there is a clear and consistent distinction between social trust and political trust, with social trust generally being higher. In surveys, social trust refers to the belief that most people in society are trustworthy, whereas political trust reflects the confidence citizens have in government institutions and political leaders (Newton, 2024, pp. 8, 40–41). A broader understanding of political trust encompasses citizens’ confidence in the political system as a whole, which is rooted in an assessment of whether political institutions demonstrate good decision-making and transparency (OECD, 2024, p. 115).

Erkkilä (2020) and Sgueo (2018) argue that strong social trust can act as a counterbalance to risks such as corruption, social unrest, high crime rates, and even populism. However, when political trust erodes due to issues like corruption, political instability, or high levels of polarization, social trust also tends to decline. For many years now, researchers have noted that trust in governments has been in general decline since the 1960s–1970s (Freedom House, 2021; Nye, 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). A 2024 OECD report highlights a

concerning trend: an increasing proportion of the population reports low political trust in national governments. Among the 30 countries surveyed, 44% of respondents expressed low or no trust in their national government, compared to only 39% who reported high or moderately high trust (OECD, 2024, p. 11).

According to Ilter (2022), political trust is a fundamental pillar of governance and transparent governance is key to fostering trust. According to the OECD (2024), one of the key elements in building trust in public institutions is government transparency. For the OECD, there is a causal link between transparency, freedom of the press, and the perception of public integrity, as well as low corruption. For the OECD (2024), increasing transparency fosters citizens' political trust in their institutions. Transparency is regarded as a fundamental principle in modern governance (Hood & Heald, 2012). It is frequently linked to democratic accountability and good governance (Newton, 2024). According to Fenster, "Transparency has become a preeminent administrative norm with unimpeachable status as a pillar of democracy" (Fenster, 2021, p. 286). In order to implement the principles of public transparency and accountability, there has been a rapid adoption of access-to-information laws around the world (Erkkilä, 2020).

However, this causal relationship has been called into question by several experts. Moore (2018), for example, offers a sociological critique of the transparency agenda and the assumed connection between institutional openness and public trust. Building on Simmel's insights, she contends that open government initiatives often prioritize visibility at the expense of clarity and overlook the role of communication in fostering political trust. According to Tsoukas (1997, p. 827), more information may lead to less understanding; more information may undermine trust; and more information may make society less rationally governable.

Fenster (2021) argues that transparency has become a dominant administrative norm, firmly established as a pillar of democracy. However, he also suggests that the rise of right-wing populism threatens this position. Recently elected governments, in the US, Europe, and elsewhere, represent a shift away from liberal democratic institutions that promote the visibility and public accountability associated with transparency. Yet, contemporary populist movements have not fully rejected transparency as an ideal. Their critique of power inequalities and advocacy for popular sovereignty implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, calls for a more visible and accessible state. According to Fenster (2017), this paradox reveals the complex politics of transparency and highlights the challenges of ensuring legal compliance in an era of resurgent populism. He contended that public transparency is unlikely to strengthen trust in institutions, as the information disclosed cannot be effectively controlled.

Transparency can thus have unintended consequences for democracy. Transparency, originally intended to foster political trust and strengthen democratic legitimacy, can be weaponized by populist radical-right parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, to undermine that very trust. A key argument of this article is that public transparency and freedom of the press expand the strategic toolkit of radical-right populist parties. By making government information more accessible, these mechanisms provide anti-establishment populist movements with material to fuel their criticism of the ruling elite, whom they portray as "corrupt" and "incompetent" (Moffitt, 2016, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Newton (2024, p. 52), a leading expert on trust, recognizes that, although various theories exist regarding the rise of populism, its strong correlation with political distrust and declining confidence in institutions is widely acknowledged. Likewise, Hooghe (2018) highlights a clear link between populist parties' hostile rhetoric

toward political elites and decreasing levels of social trust. Growing public dissatisfaction with the government often fuels support for populist movements, which, in turn, aim to further erode trust in political institutions to advance their own agenda.

A decline in political trust can have far-reaching consequences for democratic stability. Even in societies with generally high levels of political trust, significant disparities among different groups can create serious challenges. When certain segments of the population exhibit notably lower trust levels, the effects extend beyond those groups, influencing the broader social and political landscape. Larsen (2013) attributes declining trust in the UK and the US to perceptions among many middle-class individuals that certain ethnic minority groups are disproportionately seen as untrustworthy, undeserving, or even threatening. A lack of trust disrupts social cohesion and economic interactions, making exchanges involving low-trust groups slower, more expensive, and less effective. Over time, this dynamic can create a negative feedback loop, further eroding trust and deepening societal divisions (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017; Larsen, 2013).

A similar pattern emerges in public finance and governance. The sustainability of public goods—such as infrastructure, education, and welfare programs—depends on the public's confidence in the fairness of taxation and in their fellow citizens' willingness to contribute. When people doubt the integrity of tax authorities, suspect widespread tax evasion, or perceive excessive dependence on public services, maintaining these systems becomes increasingly difficult. Without sufficient trust in the tax system, the ability to fund and uphold essential public services is severely compromised, leading to systemic failures akin to a modern-day Greek tragedy (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017).

Political mediation of scandals is often carried out through digital media and social networks, which are particularly effective in the case of the Sweden Democrats. These platforms allow for the strategic amplification of scandals, enabling the party to bypass traditional media channels and shape public discourse in ways that align with their political agenda (Schroeder, 2019). Da Empoli (2019) examines the growing influence of radical-right political strategists and experts in public opinion manipulation in the digital age. The author highlights how behind-the-scenes advisors leverage big data, algorithms, and social media to shape political discourse, deepen societal divisions, and fuel the rise of radical-right populist movements. Populist leaders do not succeed solely based on their charisma or political platform, but rather due to strategists who harness new technologies to manipulate public opinion. Da Empoli argues that the recent successes of populist figures such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini, and Orbán, can be attributed to digital experts—whom he calls “engineers of chaos”—who use sophisticated techniques drawn from marketing and behavioral science. These strategists excel in spreading misinformation, micro-targeting electoral segments, and exploiting emotions to reshape the political landscape in their favor (da Empoli, 2019). The Sweden Democrats have effectively leveraged social media and platforms to amplify scandals, turning them into key rallying points for their cause. Additionally, they have garnered significant support through alternative media outlets—news websites that advocate for right-wing populism and anti-immigrant policies (Newman et al., 2018; Schroeder, 2019).

3. Trust, Transparency, and the Free Press in Sweden

Sweden is a country with high levels of social trust and low levels of corruption. Data from the World Values Survey waves 5 and 6 (2005–2013) showed that in established democracies, an average of 46% of citizens

report having social trust. Sweden ranks significantly higher at 65%, compared to 42% in Canada, 38% in the US, 30% in the UK, and just 18% in France (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017, p.3).

According to the OECD, political trust levels in Sweden, as measured in two separate OECD surveys, increased by four points between 2021 and 2023, compared to an average increase of 2.4 points across OECD countries (OECD, 2024, p. 24). The OECD further reports that, as in most OECD nations, Swedes place greater trust in institutions such as the police (69%), the judicial system (64%), and fellow citizens (62%), than in the national government (43%). Less than half of the respondents expressed moderate to high trust in the national parliament (46%) or the news media (45%), while political parties (31%) remain the least-trusted institutions in Sweden (OECD, 2024, p. 4). There is a significant gap between trust in the police and the judicial system compared to trust in the national parliament and political parties. This creates an opportunity for the Sweden Democrats to weaken political trust in these institutions further for political gain.

As discussed, political trust involves multiple factors, but governmental transparency is often seen as central. In Sweden, transparency mechanisms, freedom of the press, and administrative policies are the most effective means of preventing possible situations of corruption or breach of ethics (Paquin et al., 2015). Law professor Madeleine Leijonhufvud, who was also head of the Swedish Anti-Corruption Institute, believes that laws aimed at prohibiting behavior are less effective than public transparency measures and freedom of the press in combating corruption and ethical abuses (as cited in Marilier, 2017, p. 2). Rothstein agrees. In his opinion, transparency mechanisms remain more effective (as cited in Marilier, 2017, p. 2).

Sweden differs from many other OECD countries in its emphasis on preventing corruption rather than criminalizing it after the fact. Indeed, it has adopted a different approach to influencing the behavior of public officials. Sweden, for example, is not very active in regulating the financing of political parties or in regulating the practice of lobbying (Leijonhufvud, 1999, p. 144), and it has no major action plan or large institution coordinating the fight against corruption (European Commission, 2014, p. 2; Salminen, 2013, p. 60). Despite their tightening in 2012 and 2014, Swedish laws dealing with the issue of influence peddling are not particularly severe. The OECD (2010, 2012, 2017) has even criticized the lack of firmness of several Swedish anti-corruption laws.

Freedom of the press is a fundamental principle in Sweden (Andersson, 2002, p. 69), which was the first country in the world to adopt a law on the subject. The law, which dates back to 1766 and is therefore almost 260 years old, not only protects freedom of expression, but also gives Swedes the right to access all public documents (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). The application of this law goes much further than in most OECD countries, since very few Swedish public agencies or organizations escape this right of access to information. In practice, this law gives all citizens access to public documents, including the travel expenses of civil servants and elected representatives. As a result, citizens may at any time consult detailed information on government projects, the personal expenses of elected officials, or the budgets of the state, municipalities, and agencies (Andersson, 2002, p. 62; Larsson, 2002, p. 181). Elected officials and civil servants are free to disclose information since it is public in nature (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). Documents can also be requested anonymously.

There are, however, certain restrictions. This is particularly the case when the documents involve international relations or organizations, or when they deal with budget preparation or deliberations on monetary policy.

In some cases, courts may grant access to documents, but behind closed doors. Such a situation can arise when matters affect minors or people suffering from mental disorders (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018).

Sweden was also a pioneer in the field of disclosure requirements for elected representatives and the civil service. Ministers, for example, have been obliged to disclose their financial interests since September 1986, and they must also declare the names of any companies or employers with which they have had links in the past (Leijonhufvud, 1999, p. 143). The Swedish state requires public officials, including elected representatives, to disclose all sources of additional income (Andersson, 2002, p. 60). Moreover, since the salaries of civil servants and public officials are funded by taxpayers, citizens have a legitimate right to access this information (Larsson, 2002, p. 190). As in many countries, elected officials must declare any gifts received in the course of their duties.

Beyond laws promoting whistleblowing and access to information, the institutionalization of ombudsmen and auditing practices in Sweden have significantly contributed to embedding a culture of transparency while exerting sustained pressure on public actors (Rothstein, 2007). In the case of Sweden, auditing and verification institutions deserve to be considered as guardians of ethics (Larsson, 2002, p. 199). These include the National Audit Office, the Swedish Agency for National Financial Management, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret), and parliamentary audits.

In Sweden, it is thus easy to investigate the misuse of public assets by politicians and civil servants. Swedish newspapers and media enjoy significant public financial support in order to maintain a diverse and competent media sector (Milner, 2014, p. 140). The laws are organized in such a way as to make the denunciation of any act of corruption or system of corruption easy, inexpensive, and low-risk (Erlingsson et al., 2008, p. 601). For example, the law not only prohibits journalists from revealing their source, but also prohibits public officials from undertaking investigations aimed at finding the source of a leak. Thus, public servants who wish to disclose information to the media are protected by law. They also have the right to remain anonymous, and disclosing the identity of a whistleblower is a criminal offense. In 2016, Sweden went so far as to strengthen protection for “whistleblowers,” becoming the first Scandinavian country to adopt a whistleblower protection law, which now also applies to the private sector.

What makes Sweden’s case particularly noteworthy is that many of the scandals brought to public attention since the mid-1990s have been uncovered through the work of Swedish traditional media. Their investigative efforts are significantly facilitated by public transparency mechanisms, which provide access to the crucial information needed to substantiate their reports (Paquin et al., 2015). One of the most infamous ethical scandals in Swedish history was the 1995 “Toblerone Affair,” involving Deputy Prime Minister Mona Sahlin. As a leading candidate to succeed Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson, Sahlin’s career was derailed when the daily *Expressen* revealed her use of an official credit card (available through public records) for private expenses totaling SEK 50,000 (Radio Sweden, 2010). In 2006, the daily *Dagens Nyheter* revealed that the Moderate Party’s Minister for International Trade, Maria Borelius, had failed to declare her children’s babysitter to the public authorities (Reuters, 2006). A few days later, the Minister of Culture, Cecilia Stego Chilo, also resigned. The media had reported that she had not paid the TV license fee (a tax on the number of TV sets in a household) for 16 years. In 2016, Minister of Secondary Education Aida Hadzialic resigned after being stopped at a roadside check in Malmö with a blood alcohol level of 0.2 g/l, the legal threshold for an offense in Sweden. Since the information was public, the media exposed the affair, leading to the

minister's resignation. Aida Hadzialic described this incident as "the biggest mistake of [her] life" ("Ivres elle démissionne," 2016). The same year, Erik Bromander, state secretary to the minister of infrastructure, resigned after media revelations of frequent business-class travel, incurring costs of SEK 829,000 for 27 international trips since 2014. These cases highlight the critical role of transparency and press freedom as fundamental factors in ensuring ethical governance in Sweden. These elements serve as key pillars for holding public officials accountable, thereby fostering a culture of openness and integrity within Swedish political institutions.

Journalists can investigate politicians and civil servants without difficulty since public documents are readily available. Transparency extends to the social insurance numbers and tax returns of all Swedes. In addition, ministries are required by law to make all invoices public, and the tax authorities are obliged to share personal and corporate tax data with citizens. From this information, a journalist can learn which company a person has been involved with, access their income over the last 15 years, and even discover their school exam results.

There is more. Every year the Swedish government publishes the *Taxeringskalandern*, an official publication of tax returns. Using this publicly available data, a private company created the Ratzit directory, which is accessible online and compiles information such as the name, address, age, salary, marital status, and credit rating of all Swedish citizens. It is even possible to view a photograph of a citizen's house through Google Street View or to find the name of their spouse. According to the company's information, millions of users consult the directory each year. While private individuals use it to assess potential tenants or inquire about a neighbor's income, journalists rely on it as a valuable resource for their investigations.

It is evident that public transparency mechanisms and press freedom collectively generate a substantial amount of public information, which the Sweden Democrats can exploit to undermine trust in public institutions and the actions of the governing elite.

4. Ethical and Corruption Scandals in Sweden: A Growing Concern

Despite Sweden's reputation for high transparency and low corruption, the country has not been spared from political scandals. As Herkman (2018, p. 350) notes, political scandals are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Nordic countries. While they began to surface more frequently in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until the 21st century that they became a regular feature in Nordic media coverage. During the first decade of this century, Sweden recorded 34 political scandals, while Denmark and Finland each had 20, averaging two to three major scandals per year in these countries.

Hivert (2024) reports that corruption indictments in Sweden have surged threefold over the past three years, with 93 cases recorded in 2023, of which 77% led to convictions. Louise Brown (2014) insists that there is a culture of corruption in Sweden that is largely underestimated. Linde and Erlingsson (2013, p. 585) observe that Swedes are significantly more inclined to perceive corruption among politicians and public officials compared to their Nordic neighbors. These perceptions influence public trust in democratic institutions, underscoring the potential risks of declining legitimacy even in a nation traditionally viewed as a low-corruption environment. Past surveys further illustrate these challenges. Erlingsson et al. (2008) argue that corruption and deviations from impartiality norms may have become increasingly problematic over the past three decades. In particular, the authors highlight that several public corruption scandals have been

uncovered in Sweden since the 1990s. They conclude that retrenchment initiatives and organizational reforms, often linked to “new public management,” may have increased the risk of corruption. While hard empirical data are still lacking, the article emphasizes that the suspicion of a growing corruption problem in Swedish municipalities should not be dismissed, urging further empirical investigation into this issue.

Between 2014 and 2017, several high-profile corruption scandals impacted public trust in Swedish institutions. Sweden’s approach to political party funding has also faced scrutiny. Historically, political parties operated with minimal regulation of financial flows. Until 2014, there were no legal restrictions on how parties raised or spent funds. This changed after external pressure from the Group of States Against Corruption (Ohman, 2016). In 2017, three employees of the National Property Board of Sweden were convicted of bribery-related crimes, leading to a prison sentence for accepting bribes totaling SEK 7.6 million (700k USD). These crimes included the misuse of public funds to renovate private vacation homes. These individuals were exposed by TV4’s investigative program *Kalla Fakta* (Marilier, 2017). Other incidents involved the National Audit Service, the Swedish Tax Agency, and state-owned enterprises, where corruption and mismanagement went unaddressed despite internal whistleblowing. Moreover, some managers who were dismissed for corruption retained their salaries and benefits, raising further concerns (Hoff, 2017).

In 2018, a scandal involving allegations of tax evasion and mismanagement of public funds by members of traditional parties significantly impacted perceptions of Sweden’s political elite (Fund, 2018; “The Guardian view,” 2018). More recently, in 2024, the Social Democratic Party was embroiled in a controversy over the financing of its political activities. Since 1956, the Social Democrats have partially funded their activities through lottery ticket sales, a common practice in Sweden. However, allegations have surfaced that Kombispel, a telemarketing company and subsidiary of A-lotterierna, which is owned by the Social Democrats, has engaged in aggressive telephone sales tactics, reportedly exploiting elderly individuals to boost lottery ticket sales (“The CEO of S-Lottery,” 2024). The company is alleged to have used dubious methods to force elderly and mentally ill people to buy tickets (“Sweden: Scandal over lottery,” 2024). In addition, alleged links between Kombispel and organized crime were raised. The affair sparked a media outcry and put the spotlight on political party funding practices in Sweden, raising questions about ethics and transparency. Although the Social Democrats have announced measures to rectify the situation, the controversy has tarnished its public image.

5. Weaponization of Scandals by the Sweden Democrats

In 1998, Larsson’s analysis of Sweden’s approach to government transparency argued that while openness fosters public trust, the Swedish government can afford to be transparent precisely because there is no significant social pressure or widespread distrust in its institutions. This is not the case anymore with the rise of the Sweden Democrats. Media scandals with ethical implications are frequent enough to provide the Sweden Democrats with ample opportunities to challenge and criticize the ruling elites. This dynamic creates a favorable environment for a populist, anti-elite party like the Sweden Democrats, allowing them to tap into public dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, effectively mobilizing disillusioned voters.

According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, surveys were designed to assess citizens’ satisfaction with the state of democracy in their own countries, aiming to understand voters’ perceptions of their national democratic systems. The findings indicated that as dissatisfaction with democracy increases,

citizens' perceptions of right-wing populist parties become more favorable (Pew Research Center, 2019, as cited in Newton, 2024, p. 55). In Sweden in 2019, 17% of the population had an unfavorable view of right-wing populist parties, while 57% viewed them favorably. Comparatively, these figures stood at 37% and 69% in Germany, 48% and 71% in France, 27% and 49% in the Netherlands, 63% and 73% in Italy, 52% and 63% in Hungary, and 59% and 50% in the UK. The dissatisfaction gap—the difference between favorable and unfavorable views—was 40 points in Sweden, compared to 32 in Germany, 24 in France, 22 in the Netherlands, 20 in Italy, 11 in Hungary, and 9 in the UK (Pew Research Center, 2019 as cited in Newton, 2024, p. 55).

Research indicates that Sweden Democrat politicians are disproportionately drawn from groups with weaker ties to the labor market and traditional nuclear families—demographics that are underrepresented among politicians in other parties. As Bo' et al. (2023, p. 675) observe, "Surveys show that politicians and voters of the Sweden Democrats share strong anti-establishment and anti-immigration attitudes that drastically set them apart from Sweden's other parties." Their voter base also exhibits lower trust in political institutions, the judiciary, and the media compared to supporters of other parties. Bo' et al. (2023, p. 681) further illustrate this disparity: "Among other parties, only 5–25% of voters and politicians report high or very high distrust in parliament. Among Sweden Democrats, these figures reach approximately 60%." Electoral support for the party is also significantly higher in regions where these marginalized groups constitute a larger proportion of the population. These findings suggest that the political mobilization of socially and economically disadvantaged groups has played a crucial role in the party's rise.

Trust in political parties, politicians, and the traditional media has recently diminished among Sweden Democrat supporters, particularly in the aftermath of the "migration crisis" of 2015. On immigration issues, the public has shown relatively low confidence in the media, 93% of Sweden Democrat supporters express distrust, compared to 60% among the broader population (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 451). Sweden Democrat supporters often view media criticism of their party as evidence of corruption within an elite class with overly liberal views (Herkman, 2018, p. 351).

The party's populist strategy is built around a dichotomy between the "corrupt elite" and the "virtuous people." By highlighting the perceived hypocrisy of mainstream politicians, the Sweden Democrats have effectively mobilized discontent (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Their messaging frequently focuses on instances where politicians fail to uphold the progressive or egalitarian values they publicly advocate. By portraying themselves as the only political force committed to holding the powerful accountable, the Sweden Democrats have reinforced their image as a party of reform and integrity (Tomson, 2020).

Transparency mechanisms and press freedom have enabled the Sweden Democrats to exploit political scandals to bolster their political standing. Historically recognized for its strong governance, Sweden has seen increasing incidents of corruption, hypocrisy, and misuse of public funds, which have eroded public trust in mainstream parties (Herkman, 2018). The party has relied on troubling elements that have affected the Swedish people's trust and further exacerbated the issues. The repetition of scandals and ethical issues revealed through various transparency mechanisms has strengthened the Sweden Democrats' ability to exploit these scandals. While all opposition parties utilize transparency mechanisms to scrutinize the government, populist radical-right parties distinguish themselves by strategically leveraging these tools to undermine institutional legitimacy and weaken public trust in political institutions. This aligns with their

representatives and electorate, reinforcing their anti-elite stance. By capitalizing on these controversies, the Sweden Democrats have strategically positioned themselves as a moral alternative to the political establishment, appealing to a growing number of disillusioned voters.

Using scandals as a political tool has allowed the party to amplify its narrative of a morally compromised establishment. Cases of financial mismanagement, such as allegations of fund misappropriation or coercive practices targeting vulnerable populations, have served as platforms for the party to question the integrity of traditional political actors. These events are framed not merely as individual failings but as symptomatic of a broader dysfunction within the political system (Fund, 2018). Such narratives further erode public trust in mainstream parties while enhancing the credibility of the Sweden Democrats, who present themselves as defenders of “clean politics” and traditional moral values. This strategy resonates particularly with voters who already feel disconnected from the political establishment (Bo’ et al., 2023).

The reluctance of mainstream parties to engage with the Sweden Democrats has contributed to increasing political polarization. This dynamic allows the party to position itself as an anti-establishment force, rallying support around an anti-elite narrative (Hellström et al., 2012, p. 204). The “populist” label is particularly fitting, as the party consistently blames the political establishment for failing to recognize and address the concerns of ordinary citizens. The historical “*cordon sanitaire*”—in the sense of political isolation imposed by other parties—has further reinforced this image, allowing the Sweden Democrats to position themselves as the “true representatives of the people” in opposition to a “consensual and disconnected elite” (Hellström et al., 2012, p. 60). Bo’ et al. (2023, p. 680) similarly emphasize that the party “consistently presents itself as a champion of the people, standing against an unresponsive political elite.” Not only do Sweden Democrat politicians and voters share anti-establishment and anti-immigration views, but these perspectives contrast sharply with those of supporters and representatives of other parties (Bo’ et al., 2023, p. 700).

Since the traditional media has largely portrayed the Sweden Democrats negatively, often focusing on various scandals associated with the party (Oscarsson & Stroembaeck, 2019; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019), the party has promoted the development of digital media and party-affiliated platforms, to ensure that scandals gain widespread attention, transforming them into rallying points for their cause (Birdwell, 2012; “Revealed: Sweden Democrats’ secret,” 2024; Schroeder, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2018). In Sweden, public service broadcasting continues to dominate as the primary source of news (Schroeder, 2020). Nevertheless, the Sweden Democrats find considerable support through alternative media platforms—news websites that advocate for a right-wing populist and anti-immigrant stance (Birdwell, 2012; “Sweden Democrats to boycott,” 2018; Switzer & Tümler, 2023).

Schroeder (2019) argues that, while much attention has been paid to the negative effects of social media, this focus often overlooks how far-right populists have adeptly used digital platforms to circumvent traditional media. Determining the impact of these alternative media platforms is complex since individuals often access multiple sources of news even among younger audiences who rely more on social media for political updates. These websites align with the Sweden Democrats’ views and are classified as partisan or alternative media outlets in the Reuters report. The narratives presented by these alternative media outlets diverge significantly from those of traditional Swedish media. They portray Sweden as a nation struggling with widespread crime linked to immigration, as well as corruption, while emphasizing perceived threats to Swedish and Western culture posed by multiculturalism, the left-wing bias of public service media, Islam, and foreign populations

(Schroeder, 2020, p. 99). Former members of the Sweden Democrats also run even more radical alternative media news sites *Exakt24* and *Samnytt* (Switzer & Tümler, 2023).

In Sweden, according to Newman et al. (2018, p. 44):

The audience of *Fria Tider*, *Nyheter Idag*, and *Ledarsidorna* are further to the right of the audience of the top 15 news brands. Academic research shows that these sites tend to come from a right-wing position and present themselves as alternatives to the legacy media, who they perceive as censoring critical information on issues such as immigration.

In the past decade, alternative online news outlets have gained significant importance, with the Sweden Democrats successfully establishing or supporting such platforms to promote their political agenda. For instance, the web-based news site *Avpixlat* attracted between 200,000 and 300,000 unique visitors per week (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 452). The 2018 Reuters Digital News Report highlights the weekly usage rates of certain sites. These platforms have generated substantial outreach (see Table 1). More Swedes (41%) use alternative or partisan media compared to the US (34%). In Sweden, *Fria Tider* is more widely followed than *Breitbart* in the US (Newman et al., 2018, p. 46). In the case of *Fria Tider* users, 50% of the Swedish population had either heard of or used the news site in the week prior to the survey. Users of sites like *Fria Tider* and *Nyheter Idag* in Sweden tend to have lower trust in news compared to the national average. While the general population in Sweden has a higher level of trust in the media, those accessing right-wing or anti-immigration sites like these show significantly less trust in the news (Newman et al., 2018, p. 46).

Table 1. Awareness or use of alternative/partisan media within the past week (2018, Sweden).

News Site	Weekly Usage (%)	Awareness (%)	Combined (%)
<i>Fria Tider</i>	11	39	50
<i>Nyheter Idag</i>	10	27	37
<i>Ledarsidorna</i>	8	17	25
<i>Samhällsnytt</i>	8	18	26
<i>Nya Tider</i>	6	31	37
<i>Samtiden</i>	6	22	28

Notes: Adapted from Newman et al. (2018).

Recent scandals have provoked both public and media backlash, yet they have also increased the visibility of the Sweden Democrats. For their supporters, this criticism is viewed as additional proof of an elite bias against them (Herkman, 2018, p. 351). Despite the controversies, traditional media continues to cover the party predominantly in a negative light (Oscarsson & Stroembæck, 2019; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). The tension between populist movements like the Sweden Democrats and the media has grown more pronounced in Sweden, as reflected in the increasing number of media-related controversies involving the party. While these incidents provoke public outrage, they also amplify the party's presence and visibility.

In 2024, the Sweden Democrats party was accused of operating a so-called "troll factory" (Gelin, 2024). A journalist from Sweden's TV4 conducted a year-long undercover investigation within the Sweden Democrats' communications department. According to the network, the investigation uncovered at least 23

anonymous accounts being operated from within the department. Over a period of three months, these accounts collectively generated 27 million views on social media platforms (Gelin, 2024). In TV4's investigative program *Kalla Fakta*, Sweden Democrat's politician Julian Kroon acknowledged that the party had employed approximately 10 individuals as "online warriors" in the lead-up to the 2018 general election. Their responsibilities included maintaining a prominent presence on social media platforms and engaging actively in comment sections. The TV program also disclosed that the party communications department utilizes numerous anonymous accounts to disseminate content on social media designed to bolster the far-right party's image (Szumski, 2024). These accounts were allegedly used to coordinate attacks on political rivals and journalists. Hidden camera footage reportedly captured employees targeting various opponents, including conservatives viewed as insufficiently aligned with the Sweden Democrats' agenda (Gelin, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This research reveals that while transparency and media freedom are often seen as essential to promoting meaningful democratic accountability, they can be strategically repurposed by populist movements to erode public trust in political elites and institutions. Contrary to the OECD's (2024, p. 11) assumption that increasing transparency fosters citizens' trust in their institutions, the case of the Sweden Democrats demonstrates that transparency mechanisms, when manipulated, can have the opposite effect, exacerbating political polarization and undermining democratic stability.

By capitalizing on these controversies, the Sweden Democrats have strategically positioned themselves as a moral alternative to the political establishment, appealing to a growing number of disillusioned voters. By selectively leveraging scandals and ethical breaches, the Sweden Democrats have successfully capitalized on public disillusionment with the political establishment, reinforcing their anti-elite narrative and consolidating electoral support. Moreover, the Sweden Democrats have skillfully harnessed Sweden's various recent scandals to amplify their anti-establishment messages.

While all opposition parties utilize transparency mechanisms to scrutinize the government, populist radical-right parties distinguish themselves by strategically leveraging these tools to undermine institutional legitimacy and weaken public trust in political institutions. As a recent book on populism explains, populist movements "tend to call for more transparency and the implementation of more democracy...to break what they perceive as the stranglehold of the elite" when they are out of power (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 93).

The findings suggest that transparency mechanisms, originally designed to promote accountability, can fuel political polarization when manipulated by populist movements. These parties effectively weaponize transparency, mobilizing digital media platforms to amplify systemic distrust and reshape public discourse. Critics argue that the Sweden Democrats selectively emphasize scandals involving opponents while downplaying their own missteps, exemplifying a populist strategy of portraying themselves as both victims of traditional media bias and champions of transparency.

These results invite further reflection on the role of transparency in an era of rising populism, emphasizing the need to rethink transparency policies. Transparency advocates promote laws and norms as means for the public to protect itself, while populist movements present themselves as the force that can protect the public

from the elites who currently control the state. Populism, therefore, both aligns with and involves tension with transparency ideals, with transparency advocates often using populist language without necessarily viewing the state as an instrument of an organized elite. The danger posed by populist radical-right parties when they win elections and gain power lies in their skepticism toward pluralist norms and democratic institutions. Populist movements often express deep skepticism toward pluralism as a political theory and view pluralistic governance as an institutional and procedural hindrance. This skepticism ultimately distorts these norms and institutions, subverting democracy itself. A purely populist understanding of transparency, detached from the technocratic rules and institutional mechanisms required to enforce the disclosure of information, will harm both democracy and accountability.

The rise to power of populist radical-right parties serves as a global warning of the potential consequences should the Sweden Democrats ever become the government. The example of Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has consolidated power by creating an "illiberal state" with restricted access to information, illustrates how populist regimes can undermine transparency. Similarly, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's election in 2018 marked a return to authoritarian right-wing rule after years of left-wing governance, during which he curtailed government transparency and targeted independent journalists. Even the US, traditionally seen as a leader in transparency through its Freedom of Information Act, has experienced a shift under President Donald Trump. Despite often claiming to be the "most transparent president in history," Trump's administration repeatedly undermined transparency norms, especially regarding his personal finances and business dealings. His refusal to disclose critical financial information, combined with the dismissal of established norms for transparency, has set a dangerous precedent. These examples show how populist radical-right parties, once in power, can erode democratic principles. The Sweden Democrats' rise could bring similar threats, where transparency and accountability are weaponized to target political opponents and solidify power. Instead of fostering open governance, the manipulation of transparency could lead to a breakdown of democratic norms, a cautionary tale for what might unfold if right-wing populism continues to grow in Sweden.

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