

# 'Make Sweden Great Again'—the far right found each other on Twitter during the Swedish election

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LARGE FOLLOWING: Peter Imanuelson, known on social media as "Peter Sweden", has close to 700,000 followers on X – formerly Twitter. Credit: Screenshot from X.

Media researcher Jessica Robinson has looked at the topics that trended on Twitter—now X—during the 2020 US presidential election and the Swedish parliamentary election in 2018. In her research, she has analyzed around 500 million tweets.

"The Swedish election in 2018 was used as a starting point to address topics such as immigration and nationalism. 45% of the English-language tweets relating to the Swedish election were about topics that engage the far right," Robinson says.

## **Sweden: Focus on nationalism and immigration**

The title of the article about the Swedish findings, "[Make Sweden Great Again](#)" published in *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, is a nod to former president of the United States Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." Robinson authored the article together with her research colleague, Gunn Enli.

The article analyzes just under 200,000 English-language tweets from 92,000 users, sent a few weeks before and after the Swedish parliamentary election in 2018.

"What surprised me most about the findings was how the far right managed to set the agenda for the debate surrounding the Swedish election, and to a large extent make it revolve around nationalism and immigration. Things were more balanced during the US presidential elections in 2020, the political center and left were more visible," Robinson says.

## **General distrust of democracy**

The Twitter debate surrounding the Swedish election did not focus solely

on Swedish factors, but also raised global issues, Robinson explains.

"It seemed as though Twitter users outside Sweden were more concerned about what the emergence of a nationalist party like the Sweden Democrats meant for their country than what was actually happening in Sweden. The British, for example, used it as a starting point to discuss topics related to Brexit."

Other common trends observed in the far-right tweets included immigration resistance, anti-globalism and Islamophobia. The messages are filled with a widespread distrust of democracy, government, and traditional media.

## **Parallels to Trump's immigration resistance**

In her research into the US [presidential election](#), Robinson found that many Scandinavian Twitter users drew parallels between Trump's critical views on immigration, especially immigrants from Muslim countries, and the emergence of the Sweden Democrats.

"A recurring narrative was that it was no wonder the Swedes were now electing a populist party from the far right. Given how bad immigration had become in Sweden, nothing else could be expected," Robinson says.

Robinson had expected topics such as feminism, the [welfare state](#) and climate and environment—political issues that Sweden is known for being at the forefront of—to be prominent. But they received minimal attention.

Retweeted posts, often linked to an article, accounted for 81% of all posts. Among the most retweeted posts were the articles "Far-right Sweden Democrats hope to topple century of socialism" from NBC News and "Swedish party wants to send back all migrants who refuse to

work or contribute to society" from the website Voice of Europe.

The second largest group of Twitter users were those representing the political center or left. They would often retweet articles about the election from The Guardian, BBC, Associated Press and other established media. They accounted for 35% of users.

## **Electoral fraud in Sweden?**

While Robinson was working on the analyses, an unexpected topic arose, the question of electoral fraud.

"Sweden is known as one of the most stable democracies in the world and I found it very strange that anyone would question this. Afterwards, I consider what happened to have been a forerunner of the US presidential election in 2020, when both Trump sympathizers and Trump himself claimed that electoral fraud was the reason why he did not win the election."

The Sweden Democrats ended up becoming the second-largest party in Sweden in 2018 with 17.5% of the votes but performed worse than expected.

Peter Imanuelsen, who is a well-known far-right voice in Sweden, sent the following tweet, "900 reports of election fraud," a post that was retweeted 2,000 times.

## **Sweden = Scandinavia**

Robinson has not observed similar interest in other Nordic countries among Twitter users.

"In the US, Sweden is the symbol of Scandinavia. I am sorry to say, but some people believe that Norway is a city in Sweden," she says.

She argues that the symbolic value of Sweden is so strong that the country has become a key theme in the discourse for the far right.

Researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science wrote an article in 2018 claiming that the far right was responsible for a smear campaign that spread information to "damage the international reputation of Sweden."

"The fact that Sweden has attracted enough international attention to captivate the far right has to do with the growing support for the Sweden Democrats after the migration crisis in 2015, when Sweden was the country to welcome the most immigrants in relation to population size," Robinson says.

"Traditionally, Sweden has symbolized the left in politics and is known for feminism, climate and environmental policy and social democracy. Bernie Sanders, for example, spoke a lot about the Nordic welfare model, especially Sweden, when he ran as a candidate in the US presidential election in 2016," she adds.

## **More difficult to conduct research on X than Twitter**

Digital networks have blurred the boundaries between national and international news and have given ordinary people a more active role in the global flow of information.

Research shows that Twitter has played a more important role in building cross-border networks than Facebook. While Facebook is a more closed platform, Twitter has always been open. Robinson has based a lot of her research on the analysis of tweets.

"This came to an end after Elon Musk bought Twitter and launched X in 2022," Robinson says.

"Twitter is the platform credited with having turned movements such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo into global phenomena. Now, Elon Musk has changed both the way the platform works, and its culture, and I therefore argue that X is not the same as Twitter was."

To the great despair of researchers, X now charges for access to data, so collecting 500 million tweets is currently out of the question.

"Even if X continues to be an important channel for political movements, it will be harder to understand what is happening there," Robinson concludes.

**More information:** Jessica Yarin Robinson et al, #MakeSwedenGreatAgain: Media events as politics in the deterritorialised nationalism debate, *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.2478/njms-2022-0004](https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2022-0004)

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