Politicians will do anything to get into power. They'll promise the earth and make deals with whoever they need to if it means they can govern.

This is the kind of line you hear the world over. While it has a grain of truth to it, it's not entirely correct. Not everywhere at least.

Take recent events in Sweden. Up until a few years ago, Swedish politics was a Nordic exception. Unlike Norway, Denmark and Finland (and most other countries in western Europe), it hadn't seen the emergence of a strong radical right party. That exception is now decidedly over. The radical right-wing Sweden Democrats (SD) have had one good election after another, culminating in taking 13% of the vote at September's general election. This not only made SD the third largest party in the country, but it handed it the balance of power.

In some countries, this would have resulted in the centre-right parties seeking some kind of a deal with SD in order to remain in government. Not in Sweden, however. There, the mainstream parties refuse to have anything to do with the Sweden Democrats given its past association with extremist positions/personnel and current strong stances on immigration and asylum policies.

So, the mainstream elites apply a *cordon sanitaire* to SD. They isolate the SD like a contagious disease on the grounds that they do not consider it a legitimate democratic partner.

Consequently, the centre-right alliance which had governed Sweden since 2006 returned to the opposition benches and a weak minority coalition led by the Social Democrats took office. This did not last long, however, as the new administration's failure to pass its first budget has seen snap elections announced for March 2015 – the first time this has happened in Sweden since 1958.

Here, the Sweden Democrats have again been crucial to the outcome since – breaking Swedish political conventions – they voted for the centre-right opposition's alternative budget.

What is going on in Sweden reflects a wider question which has come up in many western democracies over the past two decades: how should centre-right parties treat more radical ones which emerge on their right? Should the latter be considered acceptable partners given that they represent a sizeable section of voters?

Or should they be ostracised, as in Sweden, on the grounds that – at least according to mainstream elites – they promote an anti-liberal democratic and ethnically prejudiced vision of society?

While the question is the same, democracies in Europe and beyond have answered it very differently. Mainstream responses to radical right-wing parties can be located at different points along a long continuum running from full inclusion to full exclusion. A clear instance of “full inclusion” is the Northern League in Italy, which held high-profile ministries and was a key member of the centre-right alliance both in government and opposition from 2001 to 2012.

Of shorter duration, but still alike, is the case of the Austrian Freedom Party. Its representatives served as ministers in two governing coalitions from 2000 to 2005.

Moving along the continuum, there are cases of “semi-inclusion” like Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom, which – similar to the Danish People’s Party in the previous decade – did not enter cabinet, but provided parliamentary support from 2010 to 2012 for a centre-right government as part of a formal pact in exchange for policy concessions.

Meanwhile, closer to the opposite end, we find Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in Australia, which the Liberal-National Party encouraged voters to preference above Labor in Queensland state elections in June 1998, before then changing tack and casting as a pariah at that year’s federal election. Australians these days seem to think of Hanson as a blip, but at the time she was a major issue for the country.

And, finally, nearest to the “full exclusion” pole are parties like the Sweden Democrats, the Flemish Vlaams Belang and the French Front National which have long been treated as democratically illegitimate and shunned even when striking some type of parliamentary support deal with them might have enabled the centre-right to access power – as was certainly the case in Sweden this year.

Should mainstream parties have a blacklist of those they just won't do business with? Is this a democratically appropriate response to what is perceived as a challenge to liberal democratic values? Leaving such ethical debates aside and thinking about more strategic ones, will co-operation with radical parties moderate them? Or will it instead serve to validate their policies?

There are no easy solutions to these questions. In our forthcoming book Populists in Power , Daniele Albertazzi and I show that being in office will not necessarily moderate such parties' policies or rhetoric – but nor does exclusion guarantee that radical parties will fade away. France's Front National, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2012 and is doing better than ever under Marine Le Pen, is a case in point.

And, in any event, is it acceptable not to engage whatsoever with non-violent and democratically elected parties that – however unpalatable their policies may be – have received support from hundreds of thousands or even millions of citizens?

These are the types of dilemmas with which centre-right leaders in many western democracies now have to wrestle. And they are dilemmas with which, in all likelihood, mainstream parties in an increasing number of countries will have to wrestle ever more often.

If a similar outcome to the current state of play is produced, how the Swedish centre-right deals with it after the next general election in a few months will be one to watch. So too will the British general election, if UKIP ends up holding the balance of power and if co-operation with it would allow the Conservatives to stay in office.

Politicians won't do quite anything in order to govern, but I've a feeling that 2015 may well see a few current pariahs become accepted as democratic partners.

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