

Conservative Americans see coronavirus hope in progressive Sweden

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April 30, 2020

Conservatives have developed a fascination with Sweden’s hands-off approach to the coronavirus — an unexpected twist for a country that once served as a Republican punchline for Bernie Sanders jokes.

On the surface, Sweden’s approach to containing the coronavirus pandemic is a libertarian dream: Restaurants remain open, as long as they adhere to social-distancing rules. Schools are in session. Salons are in business. And by some metrics, Sweden has fared roughly as well as many of its European neighbors, all of which have instituted much stricter lockdown measures.

The combination has made Sweden an object of curiosity — and a possible model — for conservatives and libertarians pushing states to relax the strident social-distancing guidelines that have shuttered much of the American economy. Some on the right have called Sweden an example of what happens when Big Government leaves citizens alone. President Donald Trump himself grappled with Sweden’s approach while talking to reporters on Wednesday, musing that the Swedish leader doesn’t have to tell people, “stay in your house. The people stay there automatically.”

But Swedes are quick to point out that their model relies on elements that are antithetical to American conservative philosophy — namely a high degree of trust in government — in addition to natural factors such as a less dense population.

“It is interesting to see that the Swedish stress on what we call ‘freedom under responsibility’ is getting picked up by the libertarian right in the U.S.,” said Lars Trägårdh, a history professor at [Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College](#) in Sweden. “The big problem with all of that is that Sweden is all built, ultimately, on a very strong alliance between the state and the individual.”

Over the past several weeks, libertarian-leaning conservatives monitoring Sweden have drifted from abject horror over their decision to not lock down — Breitbart, for instance, ran an article warning about a “[coronavirus ‘tragedy’](#)” in Sweden on April 11 — to a cautious consideration of the country’s model, debating whether the approach helped avoid economic devastation without increasing the number of deaths.

“Sweden’s death rate — without a shutdown and massive unemployment — is lower than that of the seven hardest-hit U.S. states,” wrote T.J. Rodgers, CEO of Cypress Semiconductor Corporation, in a Wall Street Journal op-ed earlier this week that was circulated widely in conservative circles.

Setting aside attacks about Sweden’s universal health care system, conservatives have a long-standing interest in Sweden’s inability to fall neatly on a left-right dichotomy: The country has a strong welfare state and high taxes, but also a strong free-market economy. The conservative Heritage Foundation, for instance, places Sweden on par with the U.S. in its yearly Index of Economic Freedom, ranking it the 22nd most economically free country in the world, just five spots behind the U.S.

“Sweden's not really socialist so much as ‘libertarian with a welfare state,’” Dr. Pradheep Shanker, a radiologist and public health policy expert who writes for National Review, told POLITICO. “It's the libertarian part that a lot of conservatives are watching.”

The conservative curiosity has bubbled up to the White House, where Trump on Wednesday seemed genuinely torn about whether to view Sweden as a road map or a warning as he grapples with how to reopen the American economy.

“The people in Sweden, they're not running around, shaking hands and hugging and kissing each other,” he said. “You know, they're using that as an example. But they've been hit hard. They’ve been hit hard.”

Indeed, there is a debate in the global health community over how successful, exactly, the country’s approach has been.

Sweden’s fatality rate is higher than that of their its neighbors. As of Wednesday, the country had over 20,000 coronavirus cases and over 2,400 deaths. In comparison, Norway has only 7,600 cases and 207 deaths.

Trump latched on to the death rates on Twitter Thursday morning.

"Despite reports to the contrary, Sweden is paying heavily for its decision not to lockdown," he tweeted. "As of today, 2462 people have died there, a much higher number than the neighboring countries of Norway (207), Finland (206) or Denmark (443). The United States made the correct decision!"

He stressed the point in response to another tweet linking to an article about Sweden's coronavirus approach.

"Really? Have you looked at the numbers lately!" he tweeted.

In an interview with POLITICO on Wednesday, Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde argued that “it’s not much use comparing” Sweden with Norway and other countries, noting the each country measures fatalities differently.

The Swedish government has also been criticized for not properly protecting nursing homes and the elderly from coronavirus outbreaks. The vast majority of Sweden's coronavirus deaths, 86 percent, have come from its elderly population, a fact that Linde acknowledged as a government failure. In response, Sweden has implemented its most severe social-distancing rules on nursing home visits, while keeping the guidelines more lax elsewhere.

It's those lax guidelines for the broader population that have drawn the world's attention, though.

Officials and academics say the factor that makes such a policy even feasible in Sweden — a firm, long-standing trust in the government — seems exceedingly hard to replicate in the U.S., where many people are skeptical of government authority.

Compared with Americans, Swedes view their government quite positively, according to data collected by the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. It's a view that has held stable over decades, if not centuries, according to Johan Norberg, a Swedish author and historian who is also a senior fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Sweden, he said, historically has had “a population of [independent] farmers basically, who run our own business. And that created this sense that the authority, the people in charge of the citizens, are probably not there to cheat and steal, because they are another property-owning farmer just like you.”

He also described a radical culture of transparency, such as a centuries-old law that allows citizens to read politicians' correspondence.

“They cannot be absolutely horrible because then we would know about it,” Norberg said.

Linde similarly emphasized the cultural differences between Sweden and other countries when asked about the country's decision not to lock down. Any far-right support outside Sweden, she said, “doesn't mean much” because the country was operating within its own “traditions” and its own views of government.

“Government advice is not some tip that you follow if you want, it's seen as something that you should follow,” she added.

At first blush, there's a certain irony in watching Republicans, conservatives and MAGA world hold up Sweden as an exemplar after the GOP spent countless months mocking Sanders for praising Sweden's progressive social safety net policies.

Conservatives, however, counter that the existence of Sweden's welfare state has nothing to do with their concerns about how lockdowns affect civil liberties and damage national morale.

“Sweden has single-payer health care, but so does Italy, and Italy's system crashed,” said Avik Roy, a health care policy adviser to Mitt Romney and Rick Perry's presidential campaigns, and the president of Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, a think tank based out of Texas.

“The countries that have done well or poorly, if you look at it across what kind of health care system they have, there’s zero correlation.”

Americans, he added, had plenty of reasons to distrust their government, bringing up Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s strict lockdown policies, which he described as “arbitrary.”

“I think there’s a lot that elites and leaders have done in the United States to lose that public trust,” Roy said.

Norberg, the Swedish author and historian, noted that Swedes’ level of trust also extended to the scientists and experts that American right-wing polemicists increasingly excoriate.

“We sort of tend to listen to the experts and the bureaucrats rather than to [do] political grandstanding,” he said.

In the U.S., Trump has repeatedly politicized the coronavirus — initially blaming Democrats and the media for overhyping the disease as a means to attack him, then later sparring with Democratic governors over their requests for medical supplies.

Ultimately, though, it’s impossible to know which approaches will stand the test of time, given how little is still known about the arc of the coronavirus.

Sweden is “taking a big gamble,” said Shanker, the public health policy expert who writes for National Review. If a vaccine isn’t widely available for several years, “then Sweden comes out of this looking good, because their population will reach herd immunity a lot faster.”

But, Shanker added, “if we get a vaccine by this fall, then they had all these diseases and deaths that may not have been necessary.”