

# Nordic variation of Christian democracy – a comparison of Christian Democratic parties in the north

## Introduction

Christian Democracy has at least since the 1990s faced strong structural challenges across countries and across party systems. These challenges include secularization, individualization, and a weakened relation between civil society organizations and parties (Van Kersbergen 2008, Brommesson 2010). We have witnessed the effect of these challenges in continental Europe, with the collapse of Christian Democracy in Italy and serious challenges in other countries (with Germany as an important exception for long). For Christian Democratic parties in the Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden)<sup>1</sup> these challenges have been particularly strong, due to strong secularization but also due to the rather late development of Nordic Christian democracy (for the history of Nordic Christian Democracy see Madeley 2004).

In this report I first develop the argument for why Christian Democracy is facing structural challenges. In particular, I zoom in on the challenges facing Nordic Christian Democratic parties. I then turn to an empirical analysis of the challenges Christian Democrats have faced in national elections in the Nordic countries. After this, I turn to the various strategies Nordic Christian Democrats have used to improve their situation. Finally, I reflect on the future for Nordic Christian Democracy.

## Challenges and strategies for Christian Democratic parties

The Christian Democratic parties in the Nordic countries share an important characteristic compared to their continental friends; their limited size. In the Nordic countries Christian Democracy has for long been a limited political force in terms of election results and number of seats in the different parliaments. However, from time to time they have managed to play important roles and gain considerable strength in terms of actual political influence, in relation to their size. This is especially true for Norway and Sweden.

The relative success in terms of political influence, and also a few relatively successful elections, could be seen as surprising due to the structural challenges Christian Democracy have faced (Van Keersbergen 2008). Why is that so?<sup>2</sup> Starting with secularization, the process through which different parts of societies and cultures are separated from the influence of religious institutions and symbols

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<sup>1</sup> The Nordic also includes Iceland, but Iceland is excluded here due to the absence of an Icelandic Christian Democratic party. The parties of relevance here is *Kristendemokraterna* (DK), *Kristdemokraterna/Kristillidemokraatit* (FI), *Kristelig Folkeparti* (NO) and *Kristdemokraterna* (SE). However, below I refer to the parties as Danish/Finnish/Norwegian/Swedish Christian Democrats.

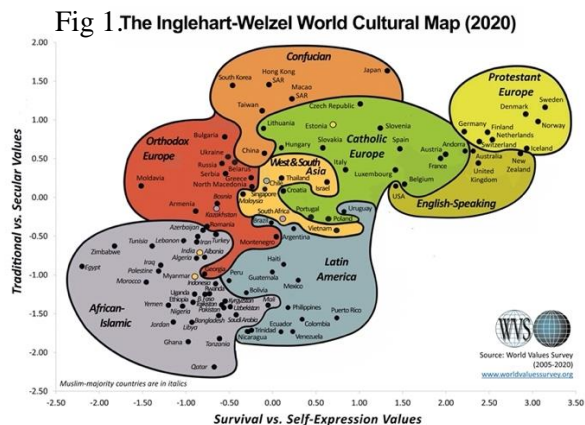
<sup>2</sup> The section on the three challenges is based on Brommesson (2010), with inspiration from van Keersbergen 2008.

(Berger 1990: 107), it is perhaps not so difficult to see how this process implies a challenge for Christian Democracy when the Christian philosophy that these parties are basing their ideology on, becomes less visible in society and is no longer a natural part of the everyday life of the voters.

The second challenge, individualization, implies a process where stable collective communities are weakened. The communities have often been stable for a long time, forming the basis for political movements with lifelong members (Sörbom 2002: 51ff; cf. Oscarsson 2005: 60ff). These lifelong belongings have instead been replaced by more temporary belongings, with single-issue movements and less formalized networks. A political movement, like Christian Democracy, built on strong collectives or a clear moral message that can be understood as authoritative, is then seriously challenged when individuals detach themselves from such collectives or moral reasoning.

This relates to the third challenge when citizens detach themselves from old civil society organizations. Of particular interest here for the Nordic Christian Democrats is the relationship to the free church movement, that for long formed the main recruitment base for members of the Christian Democratic parties in the Nordic (in contrast to the continental Christian Democratic people parties). When the free church movement started to lose members it potentially also implied a loss of people to recruit into the parties.

Another way to illustrate the challenges Christian Democratic parties are facing in the Nordic more specifically is to relate to the results from the World Value Survey, illustrated in the often cited *The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map*.



Comment: The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map - World Values Survey 7 (2020) [Provisional version].  
Source: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

Here we find the three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) in the upper-right corner, with Finland being quite close, taking extreme positions compared to the global mean values, in terms of secularism and self-expression values. In other words, the Nordic countries are highly secular and highly individualistic. For Christian Democratic parties this is not necessarily good news. For a political movement that is based on ideas originating from a specific religion and often seen as traditional, with emphasis on family and community rather than the individual, it is not surprising if the context proves to be challenging. On the other hand, a Christian Democratic party may find it easier to develop a unique profile in such a context.

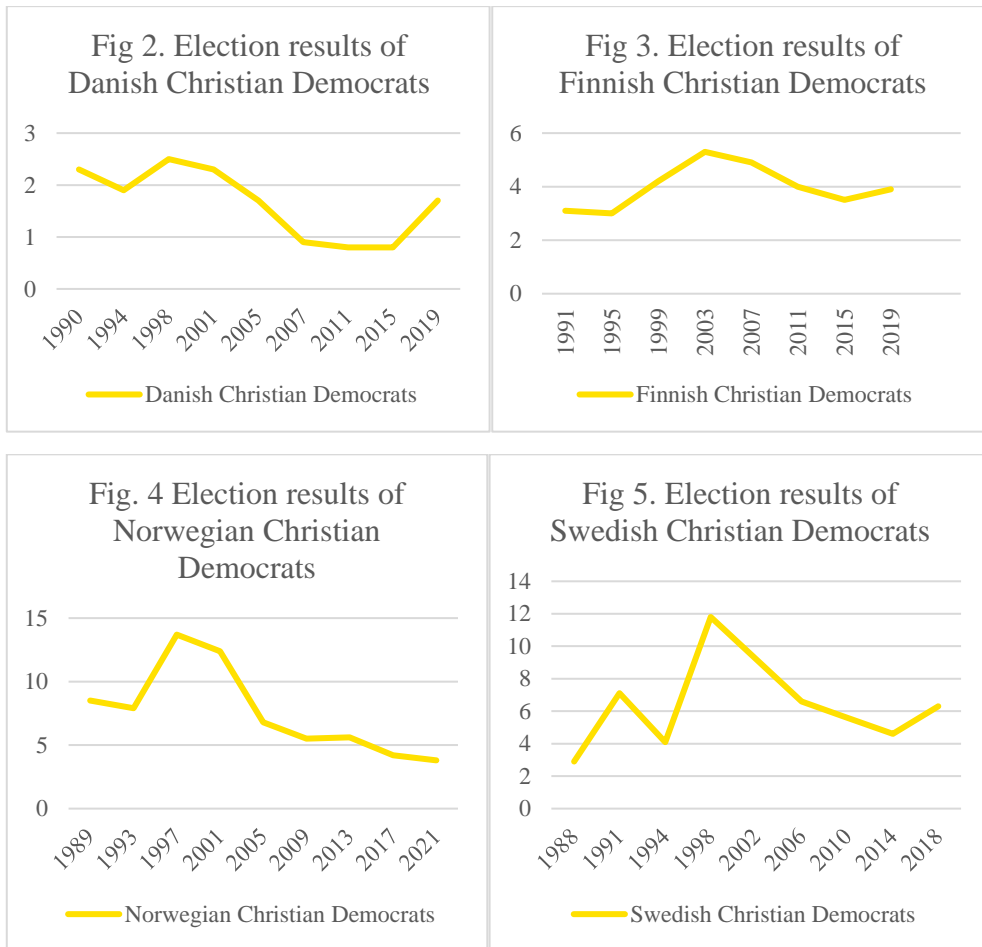
All the three challenges discussed above, together with the challenges expressed through the unique position of the Nordic countries according to the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, have hit Christian Democratic parties hard and have forced these parties to find new strategies to attract voters and members. These

strategies have varied across parties and nations, but I have in my previous research argued that the ideas these strategies represent can be sorted along two dimensions (Brommesson 2010; Brommesson 2020). The first is the dimension between confessional inspired ideas and secular inspired ideas. Here we can on one hand find political ideas based on religious thinking, and on the other hand political ideas based on secular thinking detached from any religious tradition. The second dimension concerns universalism and particularism. The universalist position puts emphasis on the general, where for example rights are motivated based on the receiver's status as a human being, while the particularistic position instead puts focus on the belonging to a certain group, community, or nation. In this two-dimensional universe of Christian Democratic ideas we can find positions combining secular inspiration with universalism, ending up in positions coming close to liberal-oriented cosmopolitanism where human beings have rights beyond nation borders in their capacity as humans and these rights are defended on a secular basis; ideas combining secular inspiration with particularism, ending up in positions leaning towards national oriented communitarianism or conservatism where the specific delimited community is understood as the key political entity and its' specific traditions are defended; ideas combining confessional inspired ideas with universalism, ending up in positions leaning towards Christian social teaching with a universal understanding of human rights that is defended based on Christian philosophy, or ideas combining confessional inspired ideas with particularism, resulting in positions emphasizing a particular Christian culture of the specific state (Brommesson 2010, see also Van Keersbergen 2008 and the debate on different strategies within the Dutch CDA).

While the two-dimensional model discussed so far is developed in relation to Christian Democratic parties specifically, positions in this model relates to other dimensions often used to position political parties. The left-right dimension and the GAL-TAN dimension are two prominent examples. The universalist positions are often, although not necessarily, described as leaning more to the left, while particularistic positions often lean more to the right. The confessional positions, as well as the particularistic positions, are often related to the TAN (traditional, authoritarian, nationalist) position in the GAL-TAN model developed by Hooghe, Marks & Wilson (2002), while secular inspiration and secularist positions more often are related to the GAL (green, alternative, liberal) position. While I agree that the GAL-TAN dimension can be useful in many ways, I maintain my position that the two-dimensional model presented here is more fine-grained in order to position Christian Democratic parties. This is illustrated by the fact that both the Social Christian position and Christian Nationalism would end up in a TAN-position according to the GAL-TAN model, while the ideas these positions represent are rather different compared to each other. I will return to the model as an analytical tool when I discuss the ideological development of the Nordic Christian Democratic parties. Before that, I will give a short empirical illustration to the challenges facing the Nordic Christian Democratic parties.

## Empirical proof of challenges for Nordic Christian Democracy

The most obvious proof of the challenges facing Nordic Christian Democracy is the election results. In figures 2-5 the election results of the Christian Democratic



Comment: Data retrieved from Statistics Denmark, Statistics Finland, Statistics Norway, SCB, and NSD European Election Database. Election results in percentage of total number of votes in national elections.

parties in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are reported.

The election results are of course well-known, but for the purpose of this report it is of relevance to note the relatively well synchronized development of the election results in these four Nordic countries. From the late 1980s or early 1990s we saw a positive development up until the early 2000s. There was a major breakthrough in Sweden, a return to the levels of the all-time high in the 1970s in Norway (where the Christian Democrats had been a serious political force much longer compared to the other three countries), more modest but still positive developments also in Finland and Denmark. From the early 2000s the development has once again been well synchronized, but now in negative terms, when the Nordic Christian Democrats have all struggled to maintain their parliamentary representation. In Denmark, the party have since 2005 not been able to secure an election result above the low threshold of two percent to *Folketinget*.<sup>3</sup> In Norway, the downward journey from

<sup>3</sup> The Danish parties have been torn between liberal and conservative wings and have since 2005 played a minor role in Danish politics. This also explains why the Danish Christian Democrats receives limited attention in this report. However, one should note that the party now has returned to *Borgen* (the seat of the Danish parliament, *Folketinget*), after Jens Rohde, a former member of the Danish Social Liberal Party (*Radikale Venstre*) and a former

13,7 percent in 1997 resulted in an election result for the Christian Democrats in 2021 slightly below the threshold of four percent (3,8%).<sup>4</sup> A similar trend is visible in Sweden, from the all-time high in 1998 (11,8%) to a result slightly above the four percent threshold in 2014 (4,6%). However, the Swedish Christian Democrats was somewhat relieved in 2018 when the party returned to safer ground (6,3%). Still, this must be seen as the exception to the general finding of weak election results for Nordic Christian Democrats. In Finland the Christian Democrats have more or less held their ground, around four percent of the votes.

## Ideological development at the party level

Turning to the responses from the Nordic Christian Democratic parties to the structural challenges, as well as to the negative developments in term of election results, we can see both variation and joint strategies. Starting with the internal debates within the Christian Democratic parties we can see variation in different ways.

Starting with Sweden and the Swedish Christian Democrats the ideological development has been rather dramatic over the last extended decade. In an earlier analysis by this author their ideological development in 2010, after a rather dramatic decline in the number of votes in the election in 2006 and a negative prognosis before the election in 2010, was analyzed. In the light of the two dimensions discussed above the conclusion in that analysis was that the Swedish Christian Democrats had moved towards less Christian inspiration, and towards a more particularistic profile. Examples of this was a more liberal policy on abortion, but also very few references to the Christian tradition or Christian ethics in speeches and platforms (Brommesson 2010). More than a decade later the tendency that was under way already in 2010, now have accelerated. After the election of Ebba Busch as new party leader in 2015, the party has taken a more tough stance on issues relating to law and order, developed a more restrictive policy on migration, while downplaying its previous profile in issues like foreign aid, family policy and Christian ethics (for examples see Brommesson 2020; Dagen 2021a). Since the far-right Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010 the debate on how to relate to this party have been heated. In 2014 the established parties agreed to let the biggest coalition alternative govern, even if no alternative reached a majority. The result of this agreement was that the Social Democrats together with the Green party could form a coalition government. The Christian Democrats, under the leadership of Göran Hägglund, was one of the key architects behind this agreement, motivated by the will to exclude the Sweden Democrats from influence over the government formation and to provide stability and predictability to Swedish politics (SVT 2021). Not long after, when Ebba Bush was elected as new party leader, the party changed position and became the first party to withdraw from the very same agreement and not long after opening for negotiations with the Sweden Democrats in different issue specific discussions. Today the Christian Democrats, together with the Moderates, have opened up for a potential government in 2022 with the active support from the Sweden Democrats (SVT 2015). The debate within the Swedish Christian Democrats on how to relate to the Sweden Democrats can be argued to reflect a move from a more social oriented position in the center of Swedish politics, to more clearly taking a position to the right. This has resulted in criticism from party

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MEP, joined the Christian Democrats in 2021 when he already was elected to parliament for the Social liberals (BT 2021).

<sup>4</sup> The party remains in parliament since they won three regional seats.

members identifying with the old position,<sup>5</sup> but there has been a strong support for the new profile, after a relatively strong election in 2018. With a negative tendency in the opinion polls the last couple of years, it is still an open question if the support will remain strong.

The Norwegian Christian Democrats have to some extent been through a similar debate, but there are also important differences. In 2018 the party decided, against the will of the party leader Knut Arild Hareide, to join the center-right coalition government. This government included the Progressive party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), an anti-migration party. After the election in 2017, the Norwegian Christian Democrats had stayed out of government since it included the Progressive party, but after strong internal critique of this decision a slim majority at the party congress in 2018 decided to join the government. This decision meant that many leading Christian Democrats to the left and at the center decided to leave the party, and after a while the support of the voters also declined (NRK 2018). Even today, after the worst election since the 1930s, the debate is ongoing within the Norwegian Christian Democrats (SvD 2021). It is obvious that the Norwegian electorate has moved to the left, while the Christian Democrats have moved to the right. The strategic question for the Norwegian Christian Democrats is then how to seek increasing support in this new political landscape.

While this development bears resemblance with the choices made by the Swedish Christian Democrats, there are also important differences. While the Swedish Christian Democrats have downplayed their Christian heritage and lost support among Christian voters (Hagevi 2018), the Christian profile is still considerable stronger among the Norwegian Christian Democrats. The strong support from Christian believers would also make it much more difficult for the party to move as far to the right as the Swedish party has moved, since the Christian voters are much more positive towards migration, foreign aid, climate policy, etc. (Dagen 2021a, Dagen 2021b, see also Jungar 2017: 35). Hence, while the Norwegian party has indeed moved to the right in terms of coalition building, this move has not implied the same dramatic change in policy or ideology as it has in Sweden. The ongoing debate within the Norwegian Christian Democrats could potentially also be seen to illustrate that the internal support for a move further to the right has not the same support as in Sweden.

Turning to the Finnish Christian Democrats the degree of stability is striking, both in election results and in terms of ideological profile.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, the Finnish Christian Democrats reflects the Swedish Christian Democrats 20-30 years ago. The party is sending conservative signals on moral issues (but see below), the references to Christian ethics is present, and the party has kept a strong profile in family issues, including the support for families who want to stay at home with their children, but also opposition to gay marriages (Yle 2015, see also Nygård & Duvander 2021). Election studies shows how the Finnish Christian Democrats are stronger among young and middle-aged women, in the age when they form families (Grönlund 2019).

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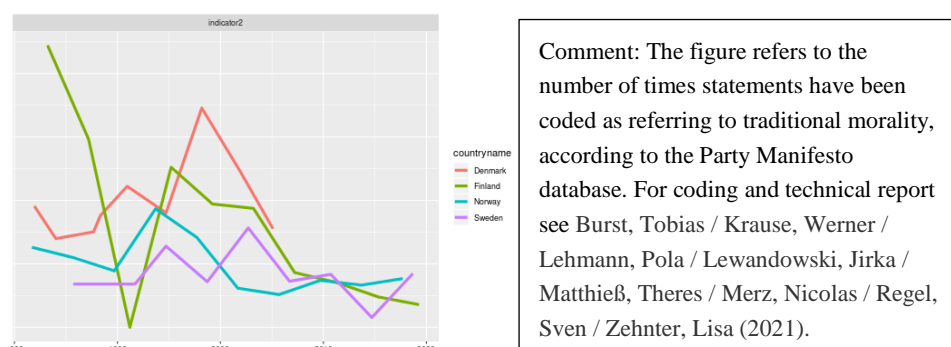
<sup>5</sup> This argument is illustrated by the decline of religious voters, voting for the Swedish Christian Democrats. Magnus Hagevi (2018) have shown how the number of voters who regularly go to Church and also vote for the Christian Democrats have declined over time. Hence, there are signs of how the Christian Democrats are changing old voters for new voters. For examples see Dagen (2018a).

<sup>6</sup> Still, the party has clearly moved to the right, at least according to how the voters understand the ideological position of the party (Finnish National Election Studies 2019).

While the Christian profile have given the Finnish Christian Democrats a stable group of voters, it is fair to say that it has also limited the possibilities of increased popularity (Yle 2015). There may be contextual explanations for this, since the Christian Democrats share the support for traditional values with the populist True Finns. The room for expansion is thus rather limited, but a clear Christian profile can then at least secure the support of a loyal group of voters (cf. Jungar 2017).<sup>7</sup>

So far, the analysis has revealed both differences and similarities across three of the Nordic Christian Democratic parties. Another way to describe the ideological development of political parties is to analyze how the parties themselves describe their basic ideas in party manifestos and election manifestos. Here, the consistency is more striking. In the Manifesto project database manifestos from European parties are coded along a wide range of variables over time. The data from this database thus make it possible to compare positions of a single party over time, and to compare party positions between parties. A couple of variables from the Manifesto project database can be used in order to operationalize the two dimensions discussed above. When turning to this data the secular – confessional dimension is operationalized through the variable “traditional morality”. Although one must admit that traditional morality can be supported by other arguments than religious arguments, it is still possible to argue that “traditional morality” often relates to religious arguments or arguments from philosophy based on a religious tradition.

Figure 6. References to traditional morality in party manifestos 1987-2001

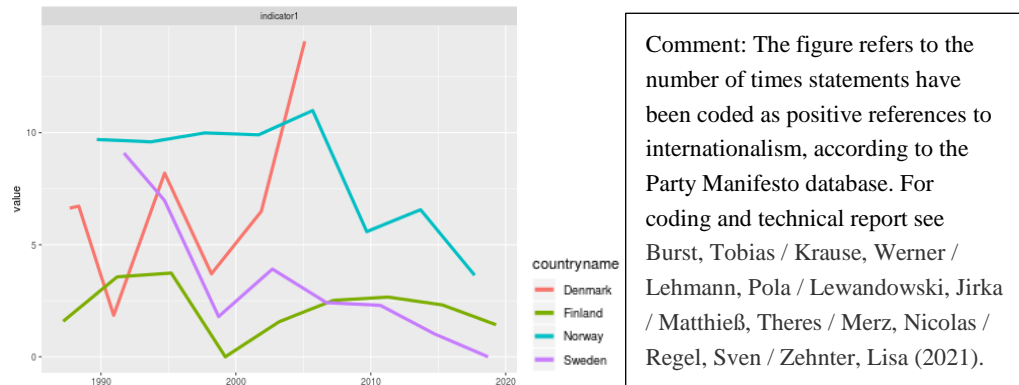


Although there is some variation in the results reported in figure 6, the trend is still clear. During the heyday of Christian Democracy in the Nordic countries, the different parties tended to be positive to traditional morality. With the challenges facing these parties in the new millennia, they tended to choose a new path with a more negative attitude towards traditional morality. This is not to say that there is a necessary causal relationship between the negative attitudes towards traditional morality and a decline in the number of votes, but the co-variation is present in the results and at least it points in the direction of the Nordic Christian Democrats choosing a new ideological path when facing negative election results. To determine if this new path have had a significant effect on the election results is a task beyond the scope of this report.

<sup>7</sup> See Polk et al 2017 for an expert survey on political parties ideologies. In the survey it becomes clear that the Finnish Christian Democrats are perceived by experts to defend religious principles to a significantly higher degree, compared with the Swedish Christian Democrats.

The second dimension, universalism – particularism, is here measured by the degree of positive attitudes towards internationalism. In figure 7 the trend for the number of times the party manifestos refer to internationalism in a positive way is reported. The graphs illustrate a downward trend among the Norwegian and Swedish Christian Democrats, and lately also among the Finnish Christian Democrats. As I have showed elsewhere, in the Swedish case this development is paired with an increasingly restrictive migration policy among Swedish Christian Democrats (Brommesson 2020).

Figure 7. Positive references to internationalism in party manifestos 1987-2001



Based on the variables reported here, the trend among the Nordic Christian Democrats goes in the direction of less confessional inspiration, and a more particularistic position. However, as we have seen in the discussion on the internal debates there are examples that to some extent show how both Christian inspiration and universalist positions are well alive in some of the parties. Still, despite these examples, the trend is to be found in a direction of more limited importance of this heritage.

### The future of Nordic Christian Democracy

Nordic Christian Democracy is in a difficult situation. The support from the voters is weak and in all four countries studied in this report, the Christian Democrats have already lost their parliamentary representation or are seriously facing the risk of doing so.

In this report I have argued for different potential structural explanations for the challenges facing Nordic Christian Democracy; secularization, individualization, the weaker ties to civil society organizations, but also the unique character of the Nordic societies that in many ways stands in conflict with Christian Democratic ideas.

The challenges have motivated Christian Democratic parties in especially Norway and Sweden, to reflect on their positions and the best strategies for changing their situations. While such reflection is natural when facing a downward trend in elections, it has also opened up for internal divisions and defections of longtime party members. In Norway in particular, the conflict between left leaning and right leaning groups has continued to tear the party apart, which seems to at least has contributed to the all-time low in the election in 2021. In Sweden the move to the



right seems to have been more accepted in the party, at least as long as the support in opinion polls have been somewhat positive. In Finland, the Christian Democrats have chosen a more modest approach and have relied on their core constituency, securing stable election results but also limiting the possibilities for any considerable increase in the number of votes.

The rise of a populist right has changed the political landscape also in the Nordic countries. Christian Democrats are no longer the only force that talk about traditional values, and at the same time the political spectrum has become more crowded. The choice then seems to be standing between being a light version of the populist parties, or to develop a Christian Democratic profile in the center of politics. Both strategies have their risks for Christian Democrats and in both cases the Nordic Christian Democrats will face the challenge of uniting their parties behind a strategy that can provide the parties with a unique profile and attracting voters.

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