

The General Election in Denmark, January 1975: Toward a New Structure of the Party System?

The Danish *Folketing* election on 9 January 1975 concluded one year of Agrarian Liberal government on the slim base of 12 per cent of the votes and seats allotted to this party at the spectacular election of 4 December 1973.¹ By adding five new or hitherto unrepresented parties, backed by more than one-third of the voters, to the previously represented five parties, the 1973 election had created an entirely new political reality, to which the *Folketing* adapted tentatively and painfully in the course of 1974. In particular, the sudden emergence of the Progress Party advocating a radical anti-tax and anti-bureaucracy policy, as second largest in the system had prevented a new order of parliamentary coalitions from crystallizing. As a consequence, the Prime Minister, Poul Hartling, and his government had taken the initiative in forming *ad hoc* coalitions to carry through one wave of bills after another.² In February, 1974 a cost-reducing support to employers and a compulsory savings act was passed with the assistance of the Social Democrats, Christian Peoples' Party and Center Democrats. In May, measures to protect the balance of trade were passed in the form of taxes on automobiles and other durable consumer goods, together with some changes of the taxes on fixed property; besides the Agrarian Liberals, the Progress Party, the Conservatives, Center Democrats, Christian Peoples' Party, and, on some points, the Radical Liberals took part in this coalition. In June, a package of bills and agreements on future housing policy was passed with the aid of the Social Democrats, Radical Liberals, Conservatives, Center Democrats, and Christian Peoples' Party. In September, a reduction of the income tax by 7 billion *kroner* was passed by coalition partners who also agreed to curb governmental expenditures by the same amount (but disagreeing somewhat on *which* expenses!); Radical Liberals, Conservatives, Center Democrats, Christian Peoples' Party, and the Single-Taxers were partners of the Agrarian Liberals in this coalition which was saved only by last-minute defections among candidates of the Progress Party.

The pattern of coalition-formation shows that the Center Democrats and Christian Peoples' Party functioned as close allies, and Conservatives and Radical Liberals as relatively close allies of the Agrarian Liberals. On one side of this group of five parties the Social Democrats offered periodical support. On the other side the Progress Party occasionally might join its forces with the coalition group, though this support was less welcome and, for example, during the formation of the May coalition led to violent protests from the socialist side (a number of political strikes followed in the wake of this so-called 'black compromise'). The two parties to the left of the Social Democrats, namely the Socialist Peoples' Party and the Communists, were never seriously considered as coalition partners. Of the remaining parties the Left Socialists (not in parliament during this election period) would be expected to align with the left-wing group, while the Single-Taxers (not in parliament after the 1975 election) took stands that suggest a highly erratic centrist course.

The agility of Poul Hartling in staging these successive coalitions undoubtedly played a large role in raising Agrarian Liberal support in the opinion polls from the original 12 per cent to upwards of 20 per cent in the course of the year 1974. In December the Agrarian Liberal government launched a comprehensive plan, including a 'zero solution' to the current wage negotiation in order to counter the dramatic increase in unemployment to over ten per cent. The alleged cool reception of this plan by the *Folketing* was used by Prime Minister Hartling as the cause for announcing the January election. The significance of his party's standing in the polls seemed, however, implicit in the prime minister's declaration that he was hoping for a 'handshake' with the voters.

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The election campaign, alternating with Christmas and New Year broadcasts on TV and radio, revolved around the aggravated economic situation and prospective governmental constellations. As shown by Table I, the economic conditions were the overwhelming concern of the voting public. The only other problem area which rose in salience since the previous elections was the quality and behavior of the political leadership.

Table I. Important Problems Perceived by the Respondents 1971-75*

	Distribution of Responses in Per Cent**		
	Oct. 1971	Dec. 1973	Jan. 1975
General Economic Conditions	26	18	71
Wage or Business Income	2	21	1
Taxes and Public Expenses	11	24	7
Housing Policy	12	9	2
Social Problems	15	10	5
Environment, Traffic, etc.	8	4	1
Education and Culture	5	2	1
Foreign Policy, EEC	20	4	1
Quality of Politicians and Government	1	8	11
Total	100	100	100
No. of Responses (= 100%)	(1091)	(1185)	(1753)

* The question, which headed the questionnaire, was 'As you know, we have just had a general election, and therefore I want to ask you: What problems do you think are the most important ones today which the politicians ought to take care off?' (If only one or two problems stated:) 'Can you think of any other important problems?'

** Up to three important problems were coded for each respondent. The entries show the distribution of these problems irrespective of whether they were mentioned first, second, or third. Missing or diffuse responses were omitted.

The outcome of the election as presented in the last column of Table II suggests a tendency to rally around the Social Democratic and the Agrarian Liberal parties, which were seen as the major alternatives for government, and indeed by some commentators as possible partners in a strong coalition government. Given the political polls of the previous months, the major surprises of the election were, however, the sustained strength of the Progress Party, which had suffered from internal conflicts as late as during the selection of candidates for election, and the relatively poor showing of the Communists in face of the widespread unemployment. The voting turnout was high, as expected, around 89 per cent.

The decreasing number of Conservatives, Radical Liberals, and Center Democrats confirms a typical experience from Danish politics: that the role of supporting party is risky. All three parties vented some bitterness during the campaign against the prime minister's party, and in a close roll call one week after the reassembly of the *Folketing*, Mr. Hartling was forced to resign. Successive attempts to form a majority government failed despite the unprecedented appointment of the *Folketing* chairman, Mr. Karl Skytte, as a 'royal investigator' of the possibilities. Specifically, it proved impossible to reconcile Agrarian Liberal and Social Democratic solutions to the economic problems because of (1) Social Democratic demands for rapid measures to increase employment, (2) Agrarian Liberal insistence on stable wages, and (3) the distance between the two parties with regard to the amount of reduction of the governmental budget.

Table II. Results of General Elections in Denmark 1971-75, as a Per Cent of Votes Cast

	Sep. 1971	Dec. 1973	Jan. 1975
Communists	1.4	3.6	4.2
Left Socialists	1.6	1.5	2.1
Socialist Peoples' Party	9.1	6.0	4.9
Left wing, combined	(12.1)	(11.1)	(11.2)
Social Democrats	37.3	25.7	30.0
Agrarian Liberals	15.6	12.3	23.3
Radical Liberals	14.4	11.2	7.1
Conservatives	16.7	9.1	5.5
Christian Peoples' Party	2.0	4.0	5.3
Center Democrats	-	7.8	2.2
Center-right, combined	(48.7)	(44.4)	(43.4)
Progress Party	-	15.9	13.6
Single-Tax Party	1.7	2.9	1.8
German Minority Party	0.2	*-	*-
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0

* The German Minority party put up candidates in 1973 and 1975 on the list of the Center Democrats.

The solution of the government crisis then hinged on which of these parties could form a government – possibly with the inclusion of minor parties – that would not encounter an immediate defeat in the *Folketing*. In these efforts Poul Hartling failed when the leader of the Progress Party, Mogens Glistrup, refused to accept a government composed of the center-right coalition parties (cf. Table I) under Poul Hartling. Finally, five weeks after the election, the Social Democratic leader, Anker Jørgensen, (prime minister, 1972-73) formed a single-party Social Democratic minority government that was not opposed by the Radical Liberals, and therefore might be expected to survive in the new session of the *Folketing*.

In an attempt to abstract from these searching and erratic manoeuvres, one may venture to suggest that a new structure of the party system is slowly rising from the ashes of the 1973 debacle. Four blocs seem to be crystallizing: (1) the left wing, (2) the Social Democrats, (3) the center-right group with the Agrarian Liberals as the dominating party, and finally (4) the Progress Party. Considering the relative size of these four blocs as indicated by Table II, governmental power would normally be expected to remain with the center-right group, especially if these parties can resist the temptation to compete among themselves for votes. Except for the Agrarian Liberals, however, the parties in this group encounter problems of visibility because of their very similar profile in legislative behavior. It is perhaps significant that the Christian Peoples' Party with its clear stand on moral and religious issues appears to be the one with the largest capacity for resisting erosion of strength. A similar struggle for visibility is of course proceeding on the left wing, but with much smaller implications for governmental power because the net effect is fairly predictable. In the first place the combined strength of the left wing has proved relatively constant, varying only between 9 and 12 per cent for the five elections since 1966; and in the second place neither of the three parties in question can leave their combined *niche* in the party system in order to interfere with center politics without being seriously damaged by the other two. The Social Democratic government in sizing up this situation at the opening session in the *Folketing* declared that its proposals would recognize the fact that a bourgeois majority prevailed.

More generally, the major political problem at the present time appears to be whether the fragile crystallization of the party system into these four groups will be reinforced

or whether the party system has more permanently entered a period of flux. In the latter case, it is unlikely that any long-range solution to Denmark's economic problems can be executed. In order to evaluate the stability of the present Danish party system and the relationships between its major components, some initial results from a Gallup poll that included research-directed items are presented below.

Table III displays four indicators of partisan stability for each of the party groups, except that the governing Agrarian Liberal Party is distinguished from the minor center-right parties. Of the four indicators, the first shows the level of party identification to be particularly high within what is left of the Social Democratic electorate. An intermediate level of party identification is found on the center-right and on the left wing, whereas Progress Party voters have formed identifications to only a smaller extent. The next two indicators deal with the timing of a final decision and the consideration of alternatives in the voters' own perception, respectively. Social Democratic voters tended to be early deciders and to exclude other parties from consideration, results that are in line with the high level of party identification. Agrarian Liberal voters rank second in both respects. Left-wing voters were those most likely to consider voting for another party, though often the choice was limited to the other two parties in the same group. Voters of the minor center-right parties appear, on the average, to have made up their mind relatively late before election time. As to the Progress Party voters, their decision process seems much more determined than one might expect on the basis of their lack of party

Table III. Differences between the Party Groups with Respect to Indicators of Vote Stability

	Vote January 1975				
	Left Wing	Social Dem.	Minor Center-Right Parties	Agrarian Liberal	Progress Party
Per cent who:					
Termed themselves 'adherents' of party they voted for	51	72	57	52	34
Decided on party before the election campaign	59	79	56	72	65
Did <i>not</i> consider voting for a different party	52	83	69	74	65
Reported having voted for the same party in 1973	56	76	71	60	80
No. of respondents (= 100%)	(113)	(364)	(246)	(327)	(158)

identification. The final indicator, stability of the party choice between the two elections, is based on recalls of the 1973 vote rather than on panel data. It is likely to overstate the actual stability; for example, 20 per cent have reported that they voted Agrarian Liberal already in 1973, although the party actually received only 12.3 per cent of the votes (cf. Table II). For what this indicator is worth, it suggests a quite high stability among Progress Party voters and thereby argues against the notion that this party changed its composition of voters to any high degree in the course of the year.

Table IV presents data on the voting behavior of respondents who displayed some psychological identification with a party within the four party groups outlined above, and of respondents without any party identification. Party identifiers were defined here as people who generally thought of themselves as adherents of one party or another, or who at least felt closer to one of the parties. In order to assess the relationship between

Table IV. Party Identification and Choice of Party at the 1975 Election in Denmark

Party Identification	Party Choice					No. (= 100%)
	Three Left-Wing Parties	Social Dem.	Four Minor Center- Right Parties	Agra- rian Liberal	Progress Party	
Three Left-Wing Parties	92	6			2	(89)
Social Democrat	2	90	3	1	4	(354)
Four Minor C-R Parties	2	2	75	15	6	(199)
Agrarian Liberal			3	91	6	(240)
Progress Party	4	1	1	4	90	(77)
None	7	15	12	42	24	(106)

the four party groups, only respondents voting within these groups have been included. We find that people tended to prefer their own party or party group to the other groups almost in the relation 9 : 1, except that identifiers of the minor center-right parties showed a marked tendency to defect to the Agrarian Liberal party, thereby displaying much less loyalty than other party identifiers. In addition, defection occurred with some frequency from the minor center-right parties to the Progress party, and from the left-wing parties to the Social Democrats. Furthermore, the bottom row indicates that the Agrarian Liberals received a disproportional number of non-identifiers, and to a lesser extent this is also true of the Progress party.

Finally, Table V offers a crude measure of the feelings at different points in the party system toward the three largest parties. To elicit the positive or negative affect toward each party, respondents were invited to assign scores on a 'sympathy thermometer' ranging from + 100 to - 100 degrees according to how well the respondent liked the party. The results suggest that left-wing voters on the average show positive feelings toward the Social Democratic party and are almost as negative toward the Agrarian Liberal party as toward the Progress Party. Social Democratic voters, on the other hand, are negative only toward the Progress Party, but fairly indifferent toward the Agrarian Liberal Party. Voters of the four minor center-right parties are very positive toward the Agrarian Liberal party and on the average rank the Progress Party higher than the Social Democratic party. Further, the Agrarian Liberal voters on the whole seem to prefer the Progress Party to the Social Democratic party, whereas Progressives themselves strongly prefer the Agrarian Liberal Party to the Social Democrats; however, Progressives are not nearly as resentful of the Social Democrats as the other way round.

Table V. Evaluation of the Three Major Parties on the 'Sympathy Thermometer' by Voters of Different Parties

Evaluation of:	Mean Thermometer Rating by				
	Communists Peop. Social Left Soc.	Social Democrats	Rad. Lib. Cons., Chr. Peop. Cen. Dem.	Agra. Lib's	Prog. Party
Social Democratic Party	39°	81°	11°	5°	7°
Agrarian Liberal Party	- 33°	- 1°	58°	86°	34°
Progress Party	- 40°	- 43°	- 7°	19°	82°

Pending further and more detailed analysis, we may tentatively conclude that very likely the greater part of the variance in these evaluative data as well as in the pattern of defection from party identification (Table IV) will turn out to be absorbed by a single left-right dimension showing the Progress Party at the right-hand end. The reactions of the Conservative, Radical Liberal, Center Democratic, and Christian Peoples' Party voters suggest that these four parties cluster around the Agrarian Liberals. The remaining two important points would be occupied by the Social Democrats and the cluster of three left wing parties. On the whole, this array suggests that the distinct two-dimensional picture which could be observed in connection with the 1973 election³ is in the process of flattening out. But the delicacy of this emerging balance, especially originating on the center-right, where five parties are massing, should not be underrated and has already led to a Social Democratic minority government which is far from representative of the governmental preferences of the voting majority.

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NOTES

1. A review of the December 1973 election is to be found in Vol. 9 of this yearbook, Ole Borre, 'Denmark's Protest Election of December 1973', *Scandinavian Political Studies* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), 9/74, pp. 197-204.
2. The following account is summarized from an article in *Politiken* by Poul Petersen, November 10, 1974.
3. Cf. Jerrold G. Rusk and Ole Borre, 'The Changing Party Space in Danish Voter Perceptions, 1971-73', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2 (1974) pp. 329-361.