

The Uncivic Culture: Communication and the Political System in Denmark 1973 – 1975

STEEN SAUERBERG
University of Copenhagen

1. Explanatory Factors for Attitudes towards the Progress Party

The main reasons for the fertile soil that gave rise to the Progress Party may be sought within three areas: Firstly, the development of the *economic structure* and Danish economic policies. The tax burden is, among other things, highly relevant as direct taxes have surpassed those of all other Western nations within the last decade.

Secondly, *political developments* themselves have contributed. The EEC referendum in the autumn of 1972 clearly showed the distance between the attitudes of the political leaders and those of the electorate, and thereby a feeling of distrust may have been strengthened. Further, the bourgeois government in office from 1968 to 1971 did not pursue a different policy to that of the previous social-democratic administration, which in broad terms had pursued a policy from 1966 to 1968 unaffected by the possibilities of a labour majority. All in all, party political life seemed to carry on its existence regardless of possible differentiated demands in the electorate.

Thirdly, the *political communication* structure has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades. Since the beginning of the 1950s, when it was still the rule that the old parties had their own press in large provincial towns,¹ till the 1970s, when only a couple of towns outside Copenhagen have two local dailies – and none more than two – the press has become more concentrated.

The structure of the press has also changed so that tabloids, with their special form of boulevard journalism, have gained a substantial part of the market. In the same way, morning papers have changed their editorial style, competing with tabloids and conforming to their new role in the communication system as a news medium secondary to television. The first televised election took place as late as in 1960, when more than 50 per cent watched television during the campaign as compared with less than 25 per cent during the preceding one.²

This change in the political mass communication system has primarily resulted in a loosening of party political ties: The party press has been replaced by the tabloid press, less party politically committed; papers left after the concentration are – in the provinces – monopoly papers and, generally, these have felt obliged to show a more blurred party-political profile. To this should be added

The Uncivic Culture: Communication and the Political System in Denmark 1973 – 1975

STEEN SAUERBERG
University of Copenhagen

1. Explanatory Factors for Attitudes towards the Progress Party

The main reasons for the fertile soil that gave rise to the Progress Party may be sought within three areas: Firstly, the development of the *economic structure* and Danish economic policies. The tax burden is, among other things, highly relevant as direct taxes have surpassed those of all other Western nations within the last decade.

Secondly, *political developments* themselves have contributed. The EEC referendum in the autumn of 1972 clearly showed the distance between the attitudes of the political leaders and those of the electorate, and thereby a feeling of distrust may have been strengthened. Further, the bourgeois government in office from 1968 to 1971 did not pursue a different policy to that of the previous social-democratic administration, which in broad terms had pursued a policy from 1966 to 1968 unaffected by the possibilities of a labour majority. All in all, party political life seemed to carry on its existence regardless of possible differentiated demands in the electorate.

Thirdly, the *political communication* structure has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades. Since the beginning of the 1950s, when it was still the rule that the old parties had their own press in large provincial towns,¹ till the 1970s, when only a couple of towns outside Copenhagen have two local dailies – and none more than two – the press has become more concentrated.

The structure of the press has also changed so that tabloids, with their special form of boulevard journalism, have gained a substantial part of the market. In the same way, morning papers have changed their editorial style, competing with tabloids and conforming to their new role in the communication system as a news medium secondary to television. The first televised election took place as late as in 1960, when more than 50 per cent watched television during the campaign as compared with less than 25 per cent during the preceding one.²

This change in the political mass communication system has primarily resulted in a loosening of party political ties: The party press has been replaced by the tabloid press, less party politically committed; papers left after the concentration are – in the provinces – monopoly papers and, generally, these have felt obliged to show a more blurred party-political profile. To this should be added

that TV, having replaced the press as the principal source of political information, runs a policy of equal time for the political parties during the campaigns.³ These developments in communication structure have not only meant less pronounced party affiliation in media contents, but also that general criteria of news as a basis for the evaluation of the media contents have been substituted for this 'party criterion'. Hence, conflicts, personalities, and short-term issues are favoured at the expense of ideological, long-term structural descriptions. This tendency was intensified during the 1973 campaign.⁴ And, surprisingly enough, the news evaluation of the tabloids was very close to that of more exclusive or special papers (*Børsen* and *Weekend Avisen*).⁵ To this should be added that to a large extent TV follows the same criteria of news as the press, and further, that new and small parties are favoured – considering their support. Consequently, it is to be expected that the change in the media system has caused (1) higher turnout, (2) easier diffusion of new parties and a greater mobility in the electorate, and (3) a picture of the parties mainly based on fragments rather than on coherent ideology, and hence dominant short-term issues.

A higher turnout as a result of the introduction of TV has been shown in Norway, and in Denmark the slightly declining turnout since World War II has changed into a rise from 1957 onwards; at the last two elections it was close to 90 per cent of the electorate.⁶ Further, it has been shown that the rate of diffusion of new parties in Denmark has increased to a marked degree since 1960.⁷ But as critics⁸ have pointed out, a temporal coincidence of an increase in the speed of party formations and support with a change in the communication system does not indicate causal interrelations, however tempting it may sound and probable it may be. There is hardly any doubt that the change in the communication system has had a number of effects on the political system at large. The landslide of voters in 1973, when the Danish political system was restructured, may to some degree be explained by the changes in the communication system. The three hypotheses mentioned about the consequences of this communication change – a higher turnout, increased mobility and decrease in ideological awareness – may be seen as part of political conditioning – e. g., to the success of the Progress Party. We shall try to pursue the general idea of the conditioning role of the media for the rise of the Progress Party, being aware that a major part of the problem is hardly detectable by our method and material, partly because many of the effects are of a long-term nature, and partly because much of the communication process – its content formation and later (interpersonal) use – takes place outside the scope of survey.

2. Communication and Political Attitudes Conditioning the Progress Party

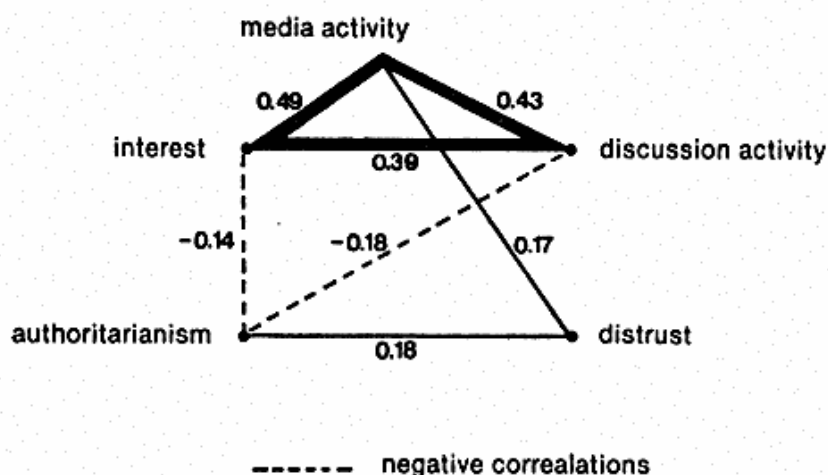
As shown, the three major attitudinal dimensions characterising the Progress Party voters are distrust, authoritarianism and, to some degree, right-wing attitudes. The right-wing attitudes are, however, important mainly in the interplay with the two other dimensions; this is because the Progress Party has become split

into two parties – a rightist action, with more rightist attitudes than voters of the bourgeois parties, and a centre/left-wing faction which, in crude terms, could be described as holding attitudes similar to those of the centrist Social-Democrats.⁹

These complications of heterogeneity and problems involved in applying the right-left scale on communications justify our focus on the relationship between distrust, authoritarianism, and communication, or in other words, our discussion of how the communication may have conditioned ‘a Progress Party’, whether left-wing or right-wing.

As indicators for the communication activities we have chosen political interest, media activity, and discussion activity; they are very strongly inter-related (all $r > .39$), but nevertheless have special and meaningful relations to each other and to other variables.¹⁰ The general tendency is that discussion activity seems to be followed by decreased authoritarianism in the same way that increased interest supports non-authoritarian attitudes (see Figure 1). Media activity does to a limited extent follow the same pattern, but media activity seems first of all to support distrust, whereas the relationship between interest and distrust is virtually non-existent as is the relationship between discussion activity and distrust.

Figure 1. The relationship between Communication/Interest Variables and Attitudes. Pearsonian correlation coefficients.



Note: All correlations are significant at a .001 level.

NOTE:

Interest:

‘Would you say that you are very much interested in politics, somewhat or only a little interested in politics?’

1. Very much
2. Somewhat
3. Only a little
4. Not at all

Media Activity:

Sum of following the campaign programmes on TV (1 = none, 2 = only a few, 3 = the most, 4 = all/nearly all), radio (as TV) and reading ‘about politics in the newspapers’ (1 = not at all, 2 = now and then, 3 = often)

Discussion Activity: 'During the last three weeks before the election did you discuss politics with somebody in your closest family? With some of your friends? With some of your colleagues?'
Scored from 0 to 3

Authoritarianism and Distrust: See note 10, in Hans Jørgen Nielsen's article, p. 155.

The same patterns were observable in the 1973 election and were remarkable because of the insignificant relationship found between political interest and distrust. In Western countries evidence of strong interconnections between political interest, belief in the system and trust have been found repeatedly;¹¹ high status and elitist positions were closely related to political interest and, separately or in combination, to belief in the system which had been so generous to them. In Denmark it seems that these stabilising, elitist attitudes do not appear. On the other hand interest and discussion activity – being closely related to elitist clusters – are closely connected with non-authoritarian attitudes (and are thus working against the forces behind the Progress Party).

Turning to the media system, the general finding is that the media seem to foster distrust – but not authoritarian points of view. These relationships, however, may not be found for any of the media – TV, radio, press – taken separately. It is a tendency, resulting from a combined use of the media. Consequently, the notion that by its programmes *TV* should have increased political distrust cannot be verified. But another recent and important change in the communication system on the *press* side, viz. the rise of the tabloids, may be seen as an important factor. That is to say that the apparently non-existent relationship between reading newspapers and holding authoritarian or distrustful attitudes is concealing major differences between the composition of the readership of the different papers. Thus, the readers of tabloids show a markedly lower degree of authoritarianism (see Table I), and a similarly marked degree of higher distrust. Whether the tabloids have had an impact on the audience of a kind corresponding to these attitudes cannot be said, of course. It might very well be that the readership held these attitudes – among many others – and a combina-

Table I. The Readers of Tabloids¹ Distributed according to Authoritarianism and Distrust, 1975 (Percentages)

		Readers of Tabloids	Readers of other Papers	Non- Readers	All
Authoritarianism	high	20	28	32	26
	medium	40	39	40	40
	low	40	33	28	34
	total	100 (N = 276)	100 (N = 684)	100 (N = 87)	100 (N = 1047)
Distrust	high	45	30	34	35
	medium	23	26	18	24
	low	32	44	48	41
	total	100 (N = 276)	100 (N = 684)	100 (N = 87)	100 (N = 1047)

¹ Ekstrabladet and BT covering 26 per cent of the circulation of dailies (first 6 months of 1975)

tion of these and other characteristics made it read the paper. But it can hardly be doubted that at least the existence of a forum for, among other things, non-authoritarian and distrustful attitudes will help to keep these dispositions alive. And the success of the papers certainly does expand the flock.

As to reading tabloids, the Progress Party voter is very much on the average or, if anything, reads slightly less than average. This – together with the anti-authoritarian aspects – forms a contrast to the popular notion that ‘the tabloids were one of the midwives of the Progress Party’.

Even though there are very few differences between the communication patterns of all voters and the Progress Party voters in particular, some special traits may be found. Hence there is a small tendency for Progress Party voters to watch more TV and read fewer papers than the average voter, but, above all, there is a steady tendency to participate in more discussions than others, this in spite of the fact that high discussion activity goes hand in hand with high political interest – and the Progress Party voters have an average political interest.

On the whole, media activity (plus factors of interest and discussion) cannot from our findings be said to have created the attitudinal background for the Progress Party.

3. The Timing of Decision on Party Preference: Campaign versus Decisions between the Elections

The timing of the decision to support a party before the election may be considered important for two reasons: the obtained stability of the Progress Party and the importance of the political process between elections versus during the election campaign. In 1973 the Progress Party had already gained substantial support before the start of the campaign proper. In the period between the elections it gained most of its support, amounting to about 7 to 8 per cent of the electorate. In 1975, two thirds of its support were gained before the start of the campaign, thus establishing a remarkable likeness between the Progress Party and the existing parties (see Table II).

Table II. Timing of Decision to Support a Party (Percentages)

	Before the campaign	Early in the campaign	Last days before election	Total
1971,				
Active voters	86	5	9	100 (N = 1164)
1973,				
Active voters	67	14	19	100 (N = 493)
Progress Party	56	18	26	100 (N = 66)
1975,				
Active voters	75	11	14	100 (N = 837)
Progress Party	68	14	18	100 (N = 102)

From other indications, however, the stability of the party seems even more striking. For example, in 1975 the percentage of core voters (voters with the same partisanship at two succeeding elections) was 82 for the Progress Party as compared with 75 for all other parties. On the other hand, this stability is not backed up by a high proportion of voters identifying themselves with the party, which is normally the general badge of stability in partisanship.¹² On the contrary, the voters of the Progress Party show much less party identification, compared with voters of other parties. This might indicate that long-time stability has not yet been completely won by the party.

Secondly, the timing of the decision to support the party points to the importance of the campaign in bringing about change of party. 14 per cent, 33 per cent, and 25 per cent changed party during the election campaigns in 1971, 1973, and 1975, respectively. Considerable changes, yes, but nevertheless the Progress Party grew strong between the elections. And long-term studies of developments of the political structure – e. g., seen from a communication perspective – must necessarily be incomplete if these processes between elections are ignored.

4. General Remarks on the Change of Party

A general hypothesis has often been brought forward that party changers are mostly to be found between voters with middle range political interest and communication activity.¹³ According to this floating-voter hypothesis, the medium-range voters are more likely to be influenced by the campaigns, as they are not firmly fixed in a relationship with a given party as are the more interested voters, who as a major motive follow the campaign in order to get reassurance on their standpoint or, alternatively, ammunition for persuading other voters of the excellency of their party. In other words they are stable in much the same way as the uninterested voters who do not even care to change party.

To some degree this pattern was found in the Danish general election of 1971 and was repeated in 1975. But only to some degree. There was a slight tendency for the middle-range, interested voters to switch parties more than on the average, but above all there was a tendency for change of party to increase as political interest and media activity decreased. In the general election of 1973 there seemed to be a deviation from the pattern so that the landslide to the new and smaller parties was made up of voters with slightly above average political interest, whereas the less interested voters were responsible for the changes between the old, established parties. Thus the floating voter pattern was partially found in the changes between the old parties in 1973, but in the Danish version only a tiny minority of the least interest voters showed an increase in stability.¹⁴ The lack of political apathy in the change to new and small parties combined with the drive for change in party affiliation stemming from distrust in the political system, are the major reasons for labelling the 1973 election 'The Danish protest election'.¹⁵

However, on the whole it is striking that the Progress Party voters have a

quite average pattern of interest, communication activity, and general political attitudes. Both in 1973 and in 1975 the correlations on single variables (background, attitudes, activities) and Progress Party vote did not exceed .3. It gives an indication of the low profile the party has as to specific composition of its partisanship. A major conclusion is, in other words, that the Progress Party is a general exponent of the political state of affairs in Denmark: An uncivic political culture.

NOTES

1. Niels Thomsen, *Dagbladskonkurrencen 1870-1970* (Newspaper Competition in Denmark 1870 to 1970) (Copenhagen 1972), p. 523 ff.
2. The figure for 1960 is based on a survey conducted by Gallup A/S for the Danish Radio (library running number 1 B/60). The figure for 1957 is based on information from a small private sample and licence statistics.
3. For a discussion of these points and a general discussion on political mass communication, see Niels Thomsen and Steen Sauerberg, 'The Political Role of Mass Communication in Denmark', (Copenhagen, 1975) (mimeo).
4. Ole Borre et al., *Vælgerskreddet 1971-73* (The Landslide of Voters 1971-73) (Aarhus and Copenhagen: 1974), esp. pp. 169-197. Further, the general discussion on news criteria in, e.g., J. Galtung and M. H. Ruge, 'The Structure of Foreign News', *Journal of Peace Research* 2, 1965.
5. Jens Erik Parsby, 'En undersøgelse af en udvalgt del af dagspressens valgstof under valgkampene til folketingsvalgene i 1973 og 1975' (A Survey of a Selected Part of the Campaign Copy during the Campaigns at the General Elections in 1973 and 1975), Institut for Organisation og Arbejdssociologi, Arbejdsnote 75-8, (mimeo).
6. See discussion by Henry Valen and Per Torsvik in 'Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning' no. 2/3 1967, p. 187 ff.
7. Dan Larsen, 'Politiske proceshastigheder' (The Rate of Political Processes), (Århus 1974) (mimeo).
8. See, e.g., a critical review of the paper by Dan Larsen in 'Pressens Årbog 1975' (Yearbook of the Press, 1975), p. 207 ff.
9. Hans Jørgen Nielsen, 'Fremskridspartiet - Et Højreorienteret Protestparti for hvem?' (The Progress Party - A Right-Wing Protest Party for which Groups?) (Copenhagen, Institute for Political Studies, 1975) (mimeo).
10. Partial correlation coefficients indicate this clearly. As an example, it could be mentioned that there is a high dependence between communication and discussion activity when a control is made for different levels of interest ($r = .3$). Thus the three variables are not different measures of the same phenomenon.
11. Willy Martinussen, *Fjerndemokratiet* (Democracy at a Distance) (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973), passim.
12. In 1975 the Progress Party had 20 per cent strong party identifiers, whereas the percentage for other parties was 45. Q: '...do you feel an adherent of any party?', if 'Yes', Q: '...Do you consider yourself a strongly convinced adherent?' A positive answer to both questions leads to the labelling strong party identifier.
13. For a review of this evidence, see Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), p. 78 ff.
14. Elihu Katz, 'Platforms and Windows: Broadcasting's Role in Election Campaigns', i Dennis McQuail, *Sociology of Mass Communication* (London: Penguin, 1972). In this article Katz gives a brief description of findings connected with the floating voter theory - especially the positive results obtained by Converse in his study of the US presidential elections in the 1950s and the Blumler/McQuail results from the British general election of 1964.
15. See, e.g., Ole Borre, 'Denmark's Protest Election 1973', in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), 9/1974 and Ole Borre, 'The General Election in Denmark, January 1975: Toward a New Structure of the Party System' *Scandinavian Political Studies* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), 10/1975.