

The General Election and the Formation of Government in Denmark 1971

In order to understand the outcome of the Danish general election in September 1971, one has to look back — not only to the election in 1968, but also to that of 1966.

Until then one could speak of two major blocs in Danish politics: the Social Democrats and the Radical Liberals on the one hand, and the Agrarian Liberals and the Conservatives on the other; but as from the campaign in 1966 the Radical Liberal Party gradually dissociated itself from the Social Democrats. The Radical Liberals had received a declining share of the votes since the general election in April 1953, and in 1964 they received support from a mere 4.5 per cent of the total electorate. This downward trend was, however, reversed in 1966 by a 1.9 per cent gain.

Another important event in the 1966 election is to be mentioned here: the Socialist People's Party nearly doubled its share of the electorate, adding 4.7 per cent to the 4.9 per cent from 1964.

The Social Democrats had until 1966 held the Socialist People's Party at a distance, but since neither of the two 'classical' blocs could form a parliamentary majority, the Social Democrats sought support from the Socialist People's Party, and the two parties signed an agreement of cooperation.

In late 1967 some M.P.'s from the Socialist People's Party joined the non-labour opposition in voting down a government proposition, and after this a dissolution took place. The dissenters from the Socialist People's Party formed a new party, the Left Socialists.

The non-labour opposition, i.e., the Radical Liberals, the Agrarian Liberals, and the Conservatives, had come closer together in the period from 1966 to 1968. The formation of a coalition government between these parties was, however, only hinted as a mere possibility throughout the campaign.

The election in January 1968 resulted in losses for the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party. The former's share of the electorate declined to 30.4 per cent, the lowest level since 1945. The Socialist People's Party lost 4.2 per cent of votes cast, and thus lost almost all that it had gained in 1966. The Left Socialists only just got the 2.0 per cent of the votes cast necessary for parliamentary representation so the labour parties, as a whole, were the losers.

The incontrovertible winner was the Radical Liberal Party which more than doubled its share of the votes. Its level of 13.3 per cent was in fact the highest in a general election since World War I. A panel study made by the Observa Institute indicated that most of the new Radical Liberals were former Social Democrats.

The Agrarian Liberals had a loss in 1968 and the downward trend, started in 1960, was thus continued. The Conservatives made a gain which for the first time made this party larger than the Agrarian Liberals.

The outcome of the 1968 election was the formation of the 'non-labour' triangle of the Radical Liberals, the Agrarian Liberals, and the Conservatives. A Radical Liberal, Mr. Baunsgaard, became Prime Minister, and thus the role of this party was completely changed: The small coalition partner of the Social Democrats had now become a very influential party in a government which had the Social Democrats as its major opposition.

This also meant that Danish politics had to be re-defined. Former Social Democratic governments had been influenced by the Radical Liberals — a party without a labour tradition. After 1968 the gap between the Social Democrats and the non-labour parties

has widened. The support for the Social Democrats now came from the Socialist People's Party. One can say that the dimension of socialism has become accentuated in a degree hitherto unknown in Danish politics.

1. Themes in the 1971 Campaign

The leading theme in the 1971 campaign was whether the Baunsgaard government should continue or be replaced by a Social Democratic government.

Behind this main theme were several issues. In the centre of the debates was the national economy. Such an issue can hardly split and move the electorate, but has rather an effect of encouraging the electorate to stick to their already taken standpoints. The most important 'real' issue in a classical sense was Denmark's potential entrance in the European Economic Community. This question is not to be decided upon in Parliament, but by a referendum. Its rather dominant place in the debate must be ascribed to the Socialist People's Party's campaign against Danish entrance.

Another rather important issue was the Baunsgaard government's policy on abortion, pornography, and obligatory sex education from the first grade in school. The propositions were in most cases formulated by the Conservative Minister of Justice, Mr. Thestrup, and passed in Parliament with the consent of the opposition. In spite of the parties' general agreement, there were some reactions in the electorate which led to the formation of a new party, the Christian People's Party. The founding of a party on moral and religious views is something new in Danish politics. This party should not be compared with parties with Christian labels in continental Europe, but rather with the Norwegian party of the same name. The religious dimension is of minor importance in most of Denmark, but is rather significant in the rural parts of North and West Jutland, the traditional core of the Agrarian Liberals.

The Agrarian Liberals had, as mentioned above, been subject to a protracted downward trend. The question was whether the trend would turn or continue. Another question was what would happen to the Conservative Party which had lost several of its leaders since 1968. Many of its spokesmen may have been rather unknown to the party's electorate. The question of persons probably plays an important role in a party where the ideological traits are not very stressed. The question was, therefore: How would it fare without its spokesmen from the 1968 campaign?

The Left Socialists had since 1968 been exposed to several conflicts. Two of its four M.P.'s had left the party, one of them changing party allegiance to the Communists. It was now an open question whether it would be represented again. Another marginal party was the Communist Party which, according to the public opinion polls, had some chance of getting the necessary number of votes for representation.

When these minor parties are mentioned here, it is due to the trend indicated by several pre-election polls towards a deadlock between the government parties on one hand and the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party on the other. A minor change of votes towards one of the minor parties could tip the scale.

The question of the central persons was clearer in 1971 than in 1968: The candidates for the post as Prime Minister were Mr. Krag, for the Social Democrats, and Mr. Baunsgaard for the former government parties.

The problem for the Radical Liberal Party was whether it could retain its 1968 gain. The basis of this gain had been former Social Democrats, and the party's role in Danish politics had changed since the previous campaign.

Most public opinion polls indicated an advance for the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party. The problem was whether the advance would be large enough to ensure a change of government.

It is in the light of the possibilities of a deadlock that one should see most commentators' descriptions of the campaign as 'surprisingly dull'.

2. The Turn-Out

The turn-out in 1968 was the highest in Danish peace-time history. The rate of abstention in 1971 was somewhat higher, but still low in comparison to both the general level since World War II and to the international standard.

Table I. Voting Turn-Out at Danish General Elections, Percentage of the Electorate

	1971	1968	1966	1964
The Capital	83.8	86.4	86.5	82.8
The Islands	88.0	90.3	89.7	86.8
Jutland	87.6	89.5	88.5	85.6
Whole Country*	87.2	89.3	88.6	85.5

* Excluding Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

The declining tendency of the turn-out is general in the sense that when considering the counties, no significant correlation can be found between the level of turn-out in 1968 and the difference between the turn-out in 1968 and 1971. This means that the general picture of the turn-out in the major districts is unaltered: It is still at its lowest in Copenhagen and highest in rural districts.

3. The Net Swings

The net swings of the parties are here seen in relation to the total electorate while changes in parties' strength on the county level will be regarded in the relation to the votes cast.

One can talk about a net swing towards the left, when comparing the outcome of the 1971 election to the previous one. The socialist parties (i.e. the Socialist People's Party,

Table II. The Outcomes of the Danish General Elections in 1966, 1968, and 1971, Percentage of the Electorate*

	1966	1968	1971		
Social Democrats	33.8	30.4	32.3	} The socialist parties	} The labour parties
Socialist People's Party	9.6	5.4	7.9		
Left Socialists	—	1.8	1.4		
Communists	0.7	0.9	1.2		
Radical Liberals	6.5	13.3	12.4	} The non-labour triangle	
Conservatives	16.5	18.1	14.5		
Agrarian Liberals	17.0	16.5	13.5		
Justice Party†	0.6	0.7	1.5		
Liberal Centre	2.2	1.2	—		
Independents	1.4	0.5	—		
The Schleswigan Party ±	—	0.2	0.2		
Christian People's Party	—	—	1.7		
Blank/illegal votes	0.3	0.3	0.6		
Abstainers	11.4	10.7	12.8		
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0		
N (thousands)	3162	3209	3332		

* Excluding Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

† Single Taxers.

± German minority party.

— Means that the party did not participate in the election.

the Left Socialists, and the Communists) made a gain of 2.4 per cent while the Social Democrats advanced by 1.9 per cent. The government parties had altogether a loss of 7.5 per cent. The losses were especially heavy for the Agrarian Liberals (3.0 per cent) and the Conservatives (3.6 per cent).

The Left Socialists lost votes and thus their parliamentary representation came to an end. The Communists had a gain, but not enough to get representation. The small Justice Party (the Single Taxers) was the only non-labour party that was a declared opponent to the Danish membership in the EEC. It more than doubled its share of the votes, but even this was not enough to achieve representation. The Christian People's Party was on the edge of attaining representation, since it lacked only 0.02 per cent of the necessary 2.0 per cent of the votes cast.

This picture of a shift towards the left changes somewhat if the outcome of the recent election is compared to that of 1966. One is then tempted to describe the election in 1968 as abnormal and the election in 1971 as a step back to normality. In relation to 1966 the Social Democrats had a decline of 1.5 per cent of the electorate while the socialist parties made a total advance of 0.2 per cent. The government parties had in relation to 1966 a total gain of 0.4 per cent. Thus, in 1971, the major blocs deviated only a little from their 1966 positions. Behind this picture of stability between the blocs, there were, however, remarkable shifts within them. The Agrarian Liberal Party was in 1966 the largest of the non-labour parties, closely followed by the Conservatives, but in 1971 the three government parties had become even.

4. The Ecological Pattern

In spite of the communal reforms, comparable voting data on district and county basis have been available from *Danmarks Statistik*,¹ whereas comparable data are not available for the 1966 election. As for the 1966 election, the patterns found by Borre and Stehouwer² will be used here.

At the 1968 election a tendency towards an ironing out of the regional differences in the Social Democrats share of votes was present, the decline since 1966 being greatest where this party's strength was hitherto greatest. However, in 1971, in spite of this party's advances, the regional differences remained much the same as after the election in 1968, i.e., one could for this party talk of a parallel shift over time of the 1968 results.

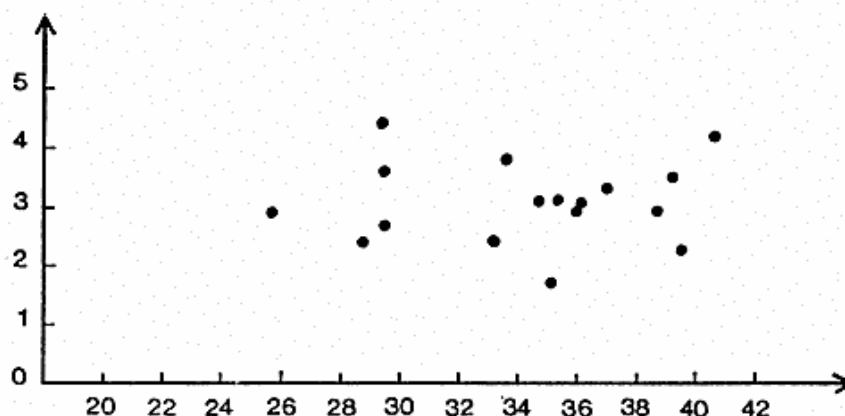


Figure 1. Variation in Votes for the Social Democrats in 1971 as against Difference in Votes 1968-71, County Constituency Figures in Percentages.

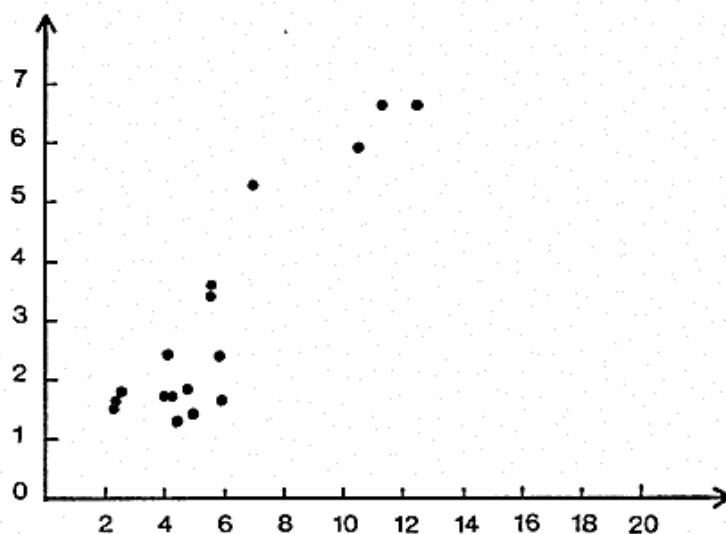


Figure 2. Variation in Votes for the Socialist People's Party in 1971 as against Difference in Votes 1968-71, County Constituency Figures in Percentages.

Among the five major parties, the Socialist People's Party made the biggest advance in relation to its position in 1968. There is for this party a clear correlation between the points of origin and the variation in strength: The advance was biggest where its share of votes in 1968 was highest. This means that the votes for the Socialist People's Party were to a higher degree concentrated in the metropolitan area. The loss in 1968 was also concentrated here, so one may speak of a return to the party's 1966 position.

A similar ecological pattern can be found for the Left Socialists but with the sign reversed; the decline was largest, where its support was highest in 1968. For the Communists the variation is too small to allow for conclusions, but there is for the socialist

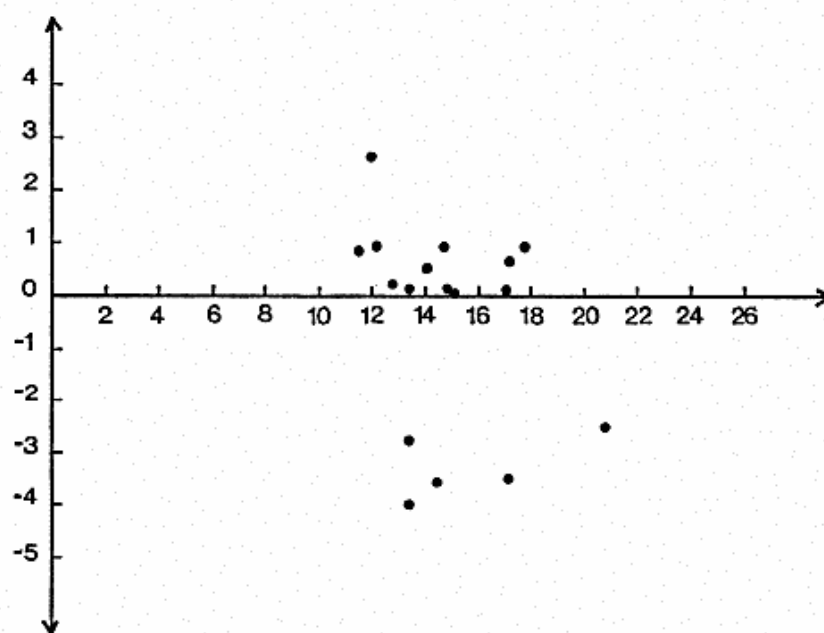


Figure 3. Variation in Votes for the Radical Liberal Party in 1971 as against Difference in Votes 1968-71, County Constituency Figures in Percentages.

parties as a whole a tendency towards a concentration of votes in the Metropolitan area.

The pattern for the Radical Liberal Party shows that its geographical distribution of the votes has changed to a high degree; thus probably also the socioeconomic structure of its electorate has changed, in spite of the stable net picture. When the net decline is so low, it is due to the fact that the rather substantial decline in the metropolitan area was to some degree nullified by the small advances in the provincial districts. The advances in 1968 were especially high in the capital's middle-class districts, and the decline in 1971 was found here. However, no clear correlation can be found between the strength of this party in 1968 and its losses or gains in 1971; but while its electorate was evenly distributed in the counties in 1968, the centre of gravity had shifted towards the provincial districts by 1971.

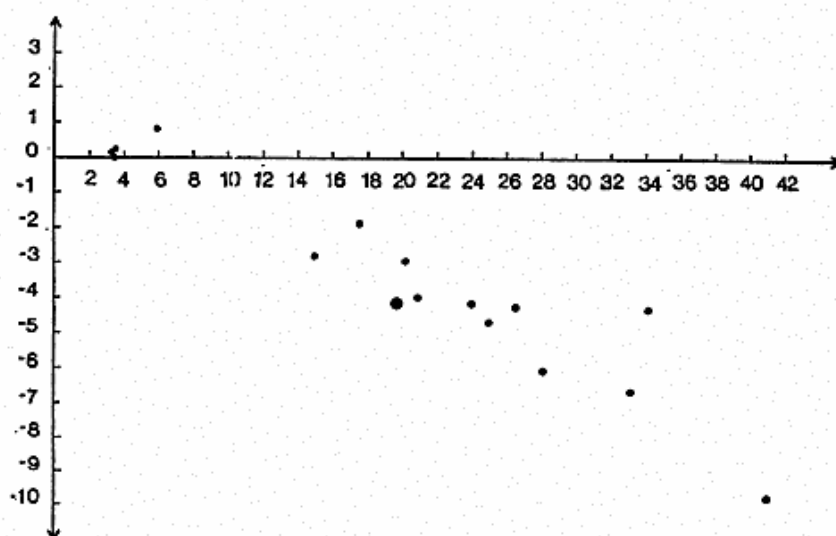


Figure 4. Variation in Votes for the Agrarian Liberal Party in 1971 as against Difference in Votes 1968-71, County Constituency Figures in Percentages.

On the regional level there is a clear pattern for the Agrarian Liberals: The decline since 1968 was largest in the party's strongholds. The decline ranged typically from 4 per cent to 10 per cent in the rural parts of Jutland, where it got more than 25 per cent of the votes in 1968. The decline was somewhat smaller in the more urban districts, and the party even had a tiny gain in the Capital, where it traditionally is very weak. The party had fared relatively well in its strongholds at the two previous elections, and thus concentrated its votes; but although the pattern is still clear in 1971, it has weakened somewhat.

No significant correlation can be found between the regional variation in the electoral turn-out and the variation in the Agrarian Liberals' share of the votes. This indicates a confutation of the hypothesis of a lower turn-out among the party's supporters at this election. One should, however, be aware of the problems involved in testing a hypothesis that seeks to explain individual behaviour on the basis of ecological data.

The Christian People's Party got some 5 per cent of the votes in Western and North-Western Jutland. The party's share of the votes was, however, very low in most other districts, especially in Copenhagen, and the party did not gain representation due to a lack of only some 600 votes.

The ecological variation for the Conservatives leads to the same conclusion as for the Agrarian Liberals: The greater the 1968 strength, the greater the 1971 loss. This means that the greatest losses for this party are found in the urban areas. Among these are,

of course, the districts in the metropolitan area where the Conservatives advanced most in 1968. They have, as the Agrarian Liberals, levelled the regional variation in strength. Further, we can find no significant correlation between the variation in turn-out and the variation in the Conservatives' share of the votes.

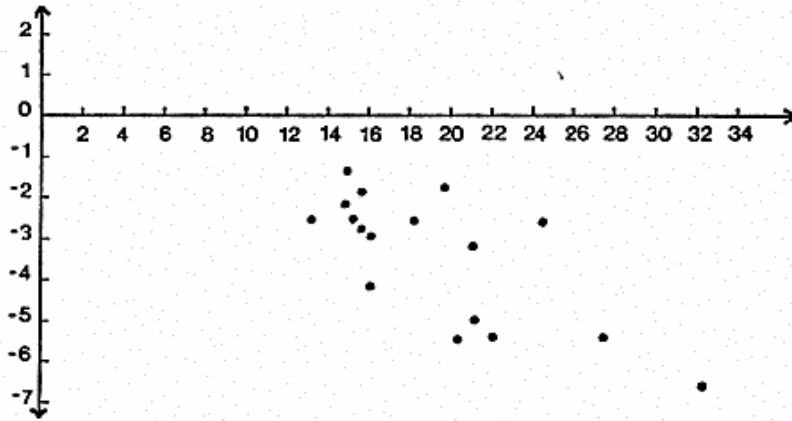


Figure 5. Variation in Votes for the Conservative Party in 1971 as against Difference in Votes 1968-71, County Constituency Figures in Percentages.

This ecological pattern indicates that, of the Conservative and the Agrarian Liberal Parties, the one which stood strongest in the district lost the greatest number of votes. One could before this election talk of a clear 'division of electorate' between the Conservatives and the Agrarian Liberals, since the former's votes were concentrated in the urban districts and the latter's in the rural districts. The fact that the Agrarian Liberals lost most in the rural areas, the Conservatives most in the urban areas, while the Radical Liberals advanced in the provincial districts means that the three parties now stand more even than ever before in most districts. They can now be regarded as competitors to a higher degree than before, since their support has become more alike, at least geographically.

5. The Formation of Government

Only five of the ten parties attained representation in Parliament. As a consequence 6 per cent of the electorate and 6.9 per cent of the votes cast were blocked from representation. The Social Democrats got 70 mandates and the Socialist People's Party 17. The Radical Liberals got 27, the Conservatives 31, and the Agrarian Liberals 30. One could then be tempted to single out the former government parties as the winners if only the election in Denmark proper was considered; but the Danish Parliament has 179 seats. Two seats are kept for the Faroe Islands and two for Greenland. These four mandates have most often been to the advantage of the Social Democrats. In Greenland a candidate with Social Democratic leanings and an independent candidate with socialistic traits were elected. The election on the Faroe Islands was held a fortnight later than the election in the rest of the country. The outcome of the election on these islands would determine whether the Social Democrats could form a minority government, supported by the Socialist People's Party, and turnout was therefore expected to increase sharply from its normal 50 per cent level. However, the turnout was less. The result was the election of a Social Democrat and an independent candidate. A Social Democratic minority government could then be formed, since the independents from the Atlantic islands normally attend only when the direct interests of their districts are under debate.

Mr. Krag has then become Prime Minister again. The Social Democratic government is supported in Parliament by the Socialist People's Party, but contrary to 1966, no collaboration agreements have been signed between the two parties. The divergencies between the two parties are, however, very great on one central question, that of Denmark's entrance in the European Economic Community. Most of the Social Democratic M.P.'s are for Danish membership, as are the three opposition parties. The whole question is to be settled in a decisive referendum to be held on October 2, 1972. The outcome of this referendum will surely be of great importance when considering not only foreign, but also domestic politics.

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NOTES

1. *Statistiske Efterretninger*, No. 74, 1971.
2. Ole Borre and Jan Stehouwer, *Fire Folketingsvalg, 1960-68*, Aarhus: Akademisk Boghandel, 1970.