

Review Article

The 1979 Local Elections in Norway

Bjarne Kristiansen and Helge Holbæk-Hanssen, University of Bergen

The result of the 1979 local elections in Norway showed that a strong Conservative wind was blowing over the country.¹ The Conservative Party (Høyre) made an average progress of 8.5 per cent, compared with the previous local election results in 1975. The big loser was the Centre Party, which suffered a decrease of 2.8 per cent as an unweighted average. The governing party of Norway, the Labour Party, experienced only minor changes compared with the 1975 results, but compared with the last Storting election in 1977, the party's vote dropped from 42.2 to 36.1 per cent. Besides the Conservatives, gains were registered by the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the right-wing Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, formerly Anders Langes Parti). A local election in Norway has traditionally seen a good many local non-partisan election lists. In this election, however, such lists won only 2.3 per cent of the vote, thus confirming a decline in their strength and a process of politicization that have been observed during all elections in the 1970s.

1. The Campaign

The election of 1979 was a local one, but the campaign did not seem to reflect this fact. During the campaign, much criticism was made of the fact that the political events on the national level did not leave much room for local politics. Partly, this characteristic of the campaign had to do with the type of mass media coverage. One of the most central channels through which the parties sought to present their views was radio and television. Both brought a heavy dose of daily news, interviews, and debates with the central leadership of the parties. Another reason for the national imbalance of the campaign came from the parties themselves. Already at the start of the Labour campaign, so much attention was paid to some statements by the party's own ministers that the whole campaign turned out to be a large public debate on the reduction of personal income taxes, a debate on policies that had not been on the campaign agenda of the Labour Party. A third reason might have been the tremendous increase in Conservative strength over the past two years, an increase displayed in the monthly opinion polls. A Conservative wave was expected, and party spokesmen clearly stated that they also considered the local elections to be a testing ground for the national struggle between the Labour

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Party and the three coalition partners (Høyre, Senterpartiet, and Kristelig Folkeparti).

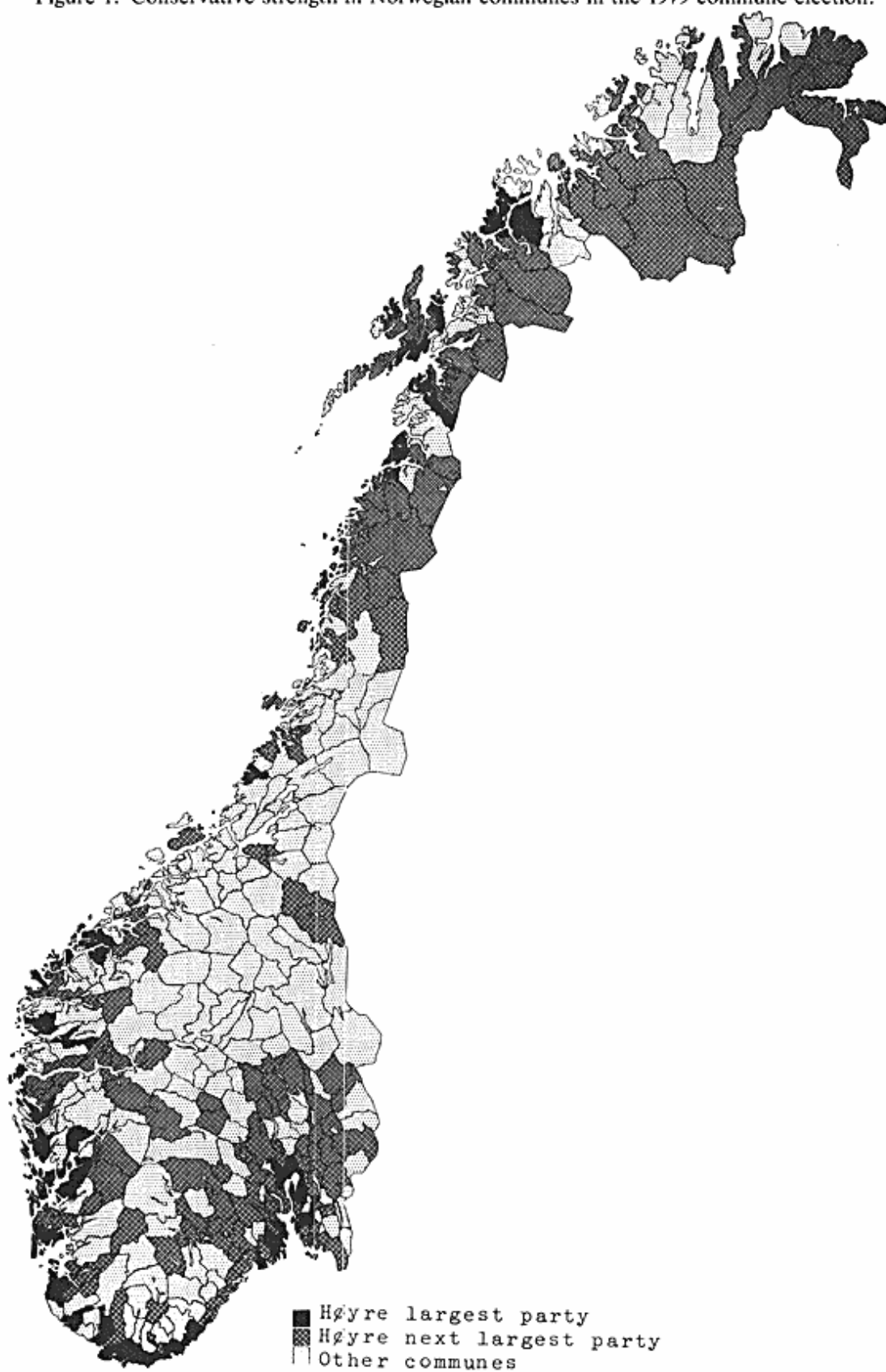
The Conservative Party was generally successful in its approach. The party elite managed to force a public discussion with the Labour Party and the representatives of the trade union federation (LO) over important national issues, such as crime, law and order, education, and property ownership. As noted above, the Labour Party introduced a debate on income tax. However, the party as a whole was not prepared to handle such a debate, and its strategy misfired. The tax proposals were strongly connected with the government budget. The Labour ministers did not therefore feel free to discuss the matter in general terms. This gave room for much criticism from the opposition parties.

The Conservative Party argued generally against the Labour Party along the lines of industrial freedom and the protection of individual rights. This was especially true for the debate on a government proposal for more liberal criminal policies, and also for that around Labour arguments for eliminating the system of marks hitherto practised in grades 7–9 (ungdomskole) of the compulsory school. Both proposals were clearly not backed by a united Labour Party, and the Conservatives were able, with a fair degree of success, to capitalise on the internal Labour divisions. In addition, the Labour Party was also unsuccessful in taming its youth organization: in one instance the party became involved in a conflict over its relationship to Christian activists, arising from a more strongly anti-church stance by its youth movement. The positive efforts on the part of the Labour Party in the campaign were concentrated on traditional socialist arguments, stressing the 'collective interests' of the citizens and trying to discredit the Conservatives by referring to the latter's 'old sins' (that is, not being responsive to new reforms). The campaign was also partly dominated by a debate between the two leading parties on the central government policies towards the communes. The Conservatives, now in a governing position in many city communes, criticized the government over its economic policies towards the communes. The Labour Party, in return, answered by arguing that the Conservative criticism was a way of covering up ineffective bourgeois policies.

The Christian People's Party (Kristelig Folkeparti – KrF) chose to concentrate its campaign upon its main interests within social and cultural politics. The abortion question, against which the party had earlier sought to mobilize opinion, did not become a major issue in the campaign.² However, the KrF did succeed in its stress upon the problem of alcohol and upon the question of a Christian basis (formålsparagraf) for kindergartens: at any rate, it forced the Labour Party to debate these two questions. On the other two main issues in the campaign, however, the party did not succeed in manifesting itself as essentially different from Conservative policies. On the national level, the relationship between the Christian People's Party and the Conservatives has been relatively stable, but during the campaign there was some unrest in their relations at the local level. Some local Christian activists saw too many differences on cultural policies between themselves and the Conservatives. In the final stages of the campaign, more and more local party activists came to realise this contradiction, and publicly vented their frustration with their coalition partner. Overall, however, the close national ties of the two parties were not unduly disturbed.

The Centre Party (Senterpartiet) did not succeed in the 1979 campaign. The main

Figure 1. Conservative strength in Norwegian communes in the 1979 commune-election.



issues for the party concentrated upon 'green politics', but these arguments were in fact better taken care of by the Liberals. On the whole, the Centre Party has recently suffered too much internal strife concerning both its basic policies and its relationship with its coalition partners, especially the Conservatives. This disarray was not only reflected in the campaign, but also in the election results.

The socialist parties left of Labour (the Socialist Left Party, Communist, and the Marxist-Leninist Red Election Alliance) all concentrated on being very pragmatic in the campaign. The expected ideological statements did not come at the usual rate. Their main efforts focused on criticising the Conservatives, but they were also the main critics of a government proposal on the future of Norwegian industry. One point in the proposal dealt with the necessity to increase the mobility of the work-force, and this point was heavily criticized by the left socialist parties, as well as by those that espoused green politics.

One party, the Progress Party, was an unambiguous victor in the campaign. Although its interests were geared more to national politics, it rather unexpectedly increased its local vote, particularly in the larger urban communes. In Oslo, the leader of the party secured well over 6,000 votes from other party lists, an unusually high number. It is a generally held opinion that his personal campaign was very effective. One might also argue that the party has taken over some of the core issues of the Conservatives, thus appearing as a more 'respectable' alternative to the voters.

As one might expect, the relationship and the disagreements of the two large parties dominated the public attention during the campaign. As has been pointed out, the debate was over ideological as well as basic economic questions. The smaller parties were, on the whole, more inclined to run a campaign at the local level, but were inevitably forced into the national struggle between the two large parties.

2. The Election

The overall winners in the local elections were the Conservatives. The party became the largest party in three regions of the country: the Oslofjord area, the South, and the West (see Figure 1). In the two latter regions, the Conservatives have taken over the leading position from the Labour Party. The Conservatives are also relatively strong in the North (see Table 1), a region that previously has been a very dominant 'red' area. The weakest Conservative regions in terms of electoral strength are the Inner East and Trøndelag areas. Both regions are traditionally strongholds of the Labour and Centre parties. In terms of increase in voting strength, the Conservative Party gained less in these two regions than elsewhere. The Trøndelag region had the lowest increase in Conservative voting, 6.3 per cent as an unweighted average.

The Conservative Party had a very good election in the West and the North. Both regions range well above the average mean of increase of electoral strength (8.5 per cent). In the West the Conservatives had an average increase of 10.3 per cent, and in the North, 9 per cent. In the Western region of Norway, one can obviously point to structural explanations as well as purely local ones. For the cities and the smaller towns in the region, especially in the southern part, the central communes have experienced the positive effects of the oil industry. This is very true for the county of Rogaland, where the central parts have seen tremend-

Table 1. Party strength in the 1979-election. Regional and national figures.

	Labour party	Conservative party	Centre party	Christian Peoples party	Liberals (Venstre)	Liberals (DNF)	Progress party	Socialist Left Party	Communist party	Red election alliance	Non-socialist Coalition lists	Others; local non-partisan lists
Oslofjord	35.7	38.0	4.6	7.6	4.3	0.7	3.1	4.6	0.3	1.0	0.2	0.4
Inner East	48.8	21.1	11.4	7.1	3.4	0.3	0.8	4.9	0.4	0.1	0.7	1.0
The South	27.6	28.1	8.0	18.4	6.7	2.0	2.0	2.1	0	0.2	1.3	3.5
The West	26.2	28.0	9.9	15.5	6.8	2.1	2.2	2.9	0.2	0.6	0.7	4.7
Trøndelag	39.6	20.7	14.6	7.4	6.8	1.5	0.8	4.1	0.5	0.7	1.6	1.8
The North	38.4	24.0	8.4	8.1	5.1	0.3	0.9	5.6	0.8	1.2	1.8	5.5
Urban communes	36.0	35.5	3.2	8.9	5.0	1.3	3.1	4.9	0.5	1.2	0.1	0.4
Rural communes	36.2	23.8	12.9	10.4	5.2	0.9	1.1	3.7	0.2	0.2	1.3	3.9
Total	36.1	29.1	8.9	9.7	5.1	1.1	2.0	4.2	0.4	0.7	1.3	2.3

ous changes over the last decade, and which for some time has been defined as a pressure area. In all elections in the 1970s the Conservative electoral strength has increased markedly in this county, especially in the most central areas. In the region as a whole, the party had earlier increased in the cities and towns: the new phenomenon of 1979 was that the party also gained strongholds in the rural areas. In the last few years there had been a strong build-up of local Conservative organizations in these areas: the result of this activity became rather evident in this election.

One can also point to national politics to explain Conservative progress in the West. In the last few years of international economic crisis, particularly in the mechanical industries, the Western part of Norway has seen several large enterprises go bankrupt. To a certain extent, the Labour Government has been blamed, not only because of certain dispositions regarding economic aid through guarantees or loans, but also because of the centralizing effect of relatively large orders from the oil activity. It is evident that in all the localities concerned, the strength of the Labour Party has decreased as that of the Conservatives has increased.

In the North it is harder to explain why the Conservatives increased their strength so much. As Table 1 shows, the Conservative Party has an electoral strength of 24 per cent in the North, which ranks the region as the fourth strongest Conservative area in the country. This region has traditionally been 'red'; the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party have been very strong in this region, although the socialist vote has shown a tendency towards electoral decline in the 1970s. Electoral commentaries have thus looked upon the region as a possible new basis for the centre parties (Centre, Christian People's, and Liberals). But in this election, it is obvious that the Conservatives took many of the floating votes in the

Table 2. Electoral change 1975–1979. Regional and national figures, (Unweighted averages).

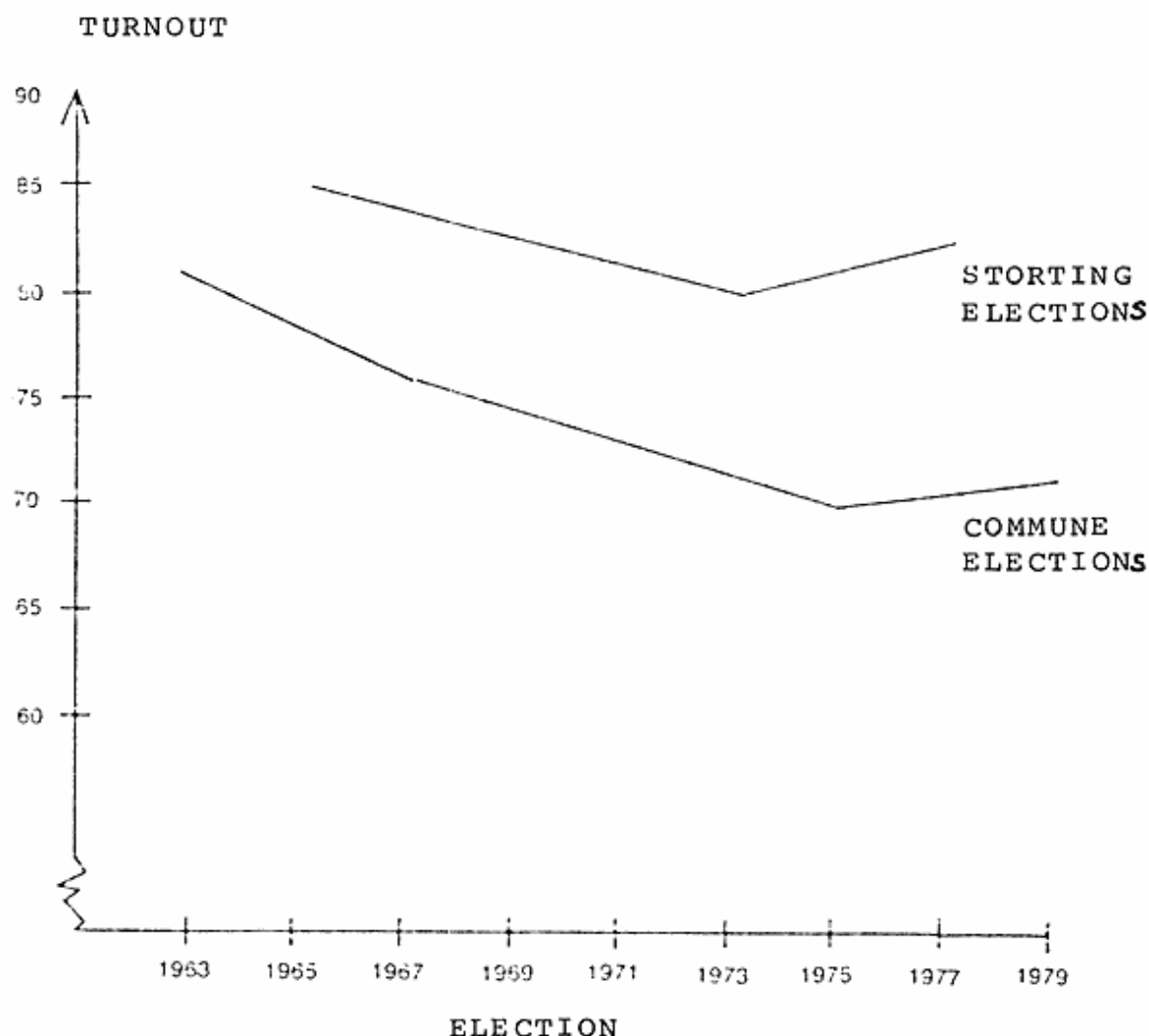
	Labour	Conservatives	Centre party	Christian People's party	Liberals (Venstre)	Liberals (DNF)	Progress party	Socialist Left party	Red election alliance
Oslofjord	-2.1	7.7	-3.4	-1.6	1.2	-1.1	0.5	-0.9	0.1
Inner East	-0.3	7.7	-3.3	-1.4	0.7	-0.3	0.2	-1.2	0.1
The South	1.1	8.0	-3.1	-1.2	2.1	-3.1	0.8	-1.0	0.2
The West	-0.2	10.2	-3.5	-0.7	2.0	-1.4	0.3	-0.3	0.1
Trøndelag	0.9	6.3	-2.3	-1.0	1.3	-0.7	0.2	-2.2	0.1
The North	-1.6	9.0	-1.9	-0.1	0.4	-0.2	0.0	-1.4	0.2
Urban communes	-1.8	6.8	-1.7	-2.4	1.5	-2.0	0.8	-1.6	0.5
Rural communes	-0.4	8.7	-2.9	-0.8	1.2	-0.8	0.2	-1.0	0.1
Total	-0.5	8.5	-2.8	-0.9	1.2	-1.0	0.5	-1.1	0.1

North. In the last few years there has been a rather extensive discussion concerning the government's policies in the North on the extraction of natural resources. The issues involved the exploration for oil in this part of the country, and the construction of a power plant in the county of Finnmark. In both matters, the Labour Party has been criticized by the Centre Party, Liberals, and Socialist Left. The parties did not, however, have a particularly successful election in the North. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, has been totally in favour of the government proposals, and has even criticized the government for giving in to 'green' pressure, for example by postponing the decision to begin oil exploration in the northern offshore waters. This paradox, however, may not be clearly analysed with any ecological analysis of the election results, but should be investigated by region-specific survey analysis.

The overall impression of the Labour Party's performance in the 1979 election is one of failure. Although the changes from the local election in 1975 are quite insignificant, it is evident that the party did not manage to continue the progress shown in the 1977 general election. While the Conservative Party has made the most impressive increase in rural areas (8.7 per cent), the Labour Party's vote has decreased most heavily in the towns (1.8 per cent as an unweighted average: see Table 2). The largest regional decrease is found in the most central region, the Oslofjord area, where the average decrease was 2.1 per cent. Outside this region, it is only the North (1.6 per cent) and the South (1.1 per cent) that have average decreases greater than one per cent. It is highly relevant to point out that on its present electoral strength, the Labour party has been forced back to its core area, the Inner East: here there is almost no change compared to the 1975 election.

The Centre Party and the Christian People's Party did not have a good election either. The KrF had an average decrease of only 1.6 per cent, but the regional figures show that the party's losses were greater in regions where they had had a successful mobilization in previous elections. The largest decreases were in the

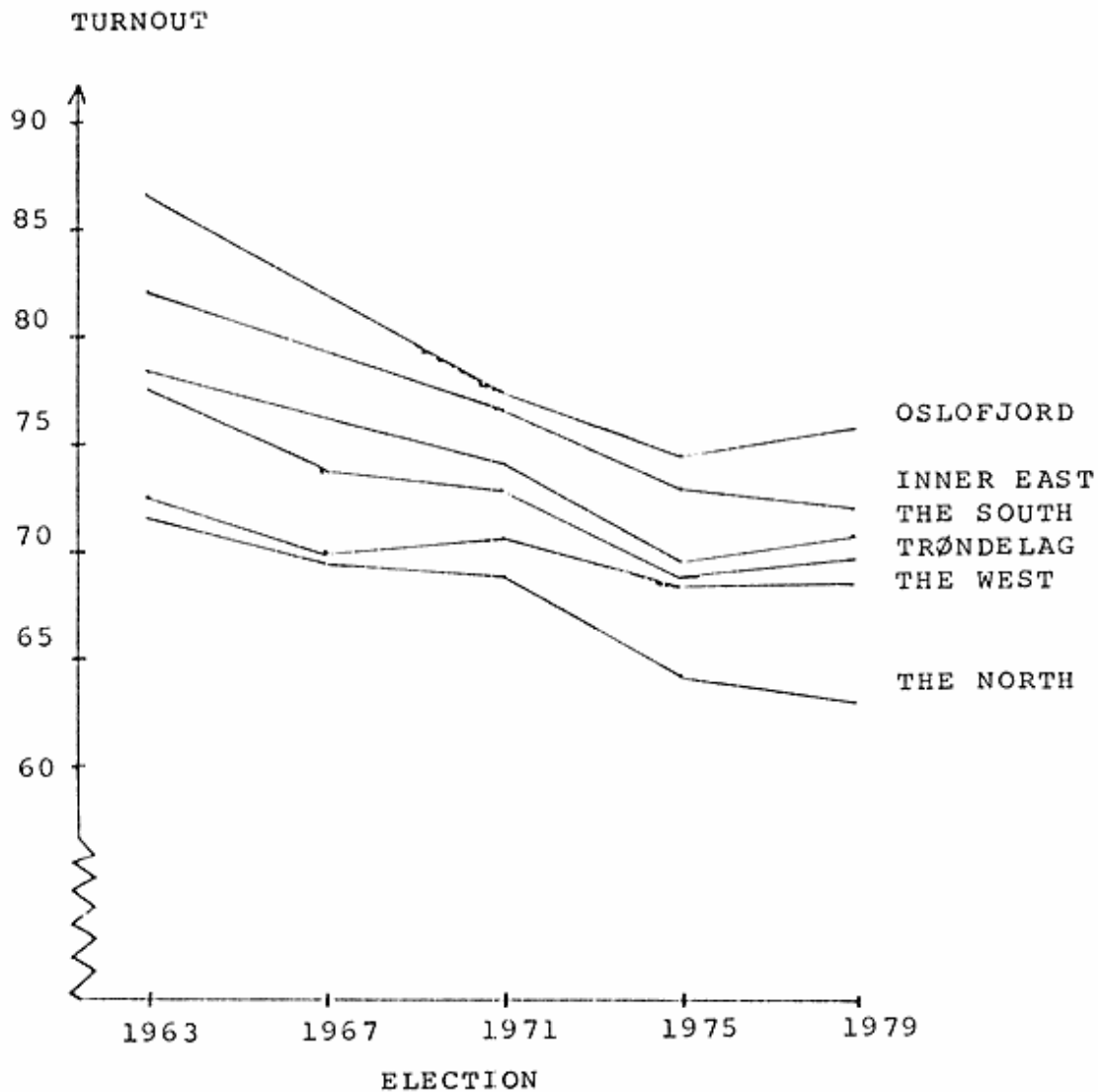
Figure 2. Turnout in Storting and local elections in the 1960's and the 1970's.



Oslofjord (1.6 per cent) and the Inner East (1.4 per cent) regions. The Centre Party declined by 2.8 per cent as an unweighted average. The greatest decreases were in the West (3.5 per cent), Oslofjord (3.4 per cent), Inner East (3.3 per cent), and the South (3.1 per cent). The party had some good electoral performances in the years immediately after the EEC referendum in 1972, but over the last few elections its electoral strength has declined steadily. On the national level, the party has cooperated with the Conservatives and the KrF, but it seems now that it is being squeezed between the Conservatives and the new 'green' policies of other parties (Socialist Left and Venstre). In contrast to their Swedish counterpart, the party has still not succeeded in obtaining a foothold in the cities.

The Liberals (Venstre) had a good electoral performance, being the only party that secured a result quite different from that forecast by the polls. The largest increases came in the South and West: these two regions now rank as the strongest Liberal areas. The other liberal party in Norway (the New People's Party) has shrunk to a minimum. It is now rather doubtful whether it will be able to raise itself and survive as a meaningful, albeit small, party.

Figure 3. Turnout in local elections in the 1960's and 1970's by region.



Finally, the Socialist Left Party was among the electoral losers. The party decreased mostly in those regions considered to be its strongholds (North and Inner East). The party has decreased steadily since the Storting election of 1973, when it appeared to represent a threat to the Labour Party in the socialist arena.

Participation was higher in the 1979 election than had been expected. As shown in Figure 2, the average turnout in both Storting and local elections has decreased since the beginning of the 1960s. In the 1977 Storting election and in the 1979 local election the trend has been turned. For the 1979 election, a continued decrease was anticipated because the suffrage had been extended to incorporate those aged between 18 and 20. In the 1969 election, when the suffrage age limit had last been lowered, turnout declined. This time, however, there was a rather strenuous campaign to persuade new voters to use their vote: it would seem that this campaign had a positive effect. The average regional participation figures for

elections since 1963 are displayed in Figure 3. Interestingly, they show that the ranking of the regions is consistent throughout the whole period. The most central area, the Oslofjord region, shows the highest turnout for the whole period while the most peripheral region, the North, has the lowest figures throughout the whole timespan.

3. Conclusion

The result of the 1979 election was quite overwhelmingly in favour of the Conservative Party. Still, two facts should be borne in mind. Firstly, the party put up candidates in more localities than ever before (94 per cent of the communes, or 99 per cent of the population). This was partly the consequence of its organizational build-up: the party had been very active in establishing local organizations where none existed previously, and in reviving the inactive ones. The second fact to take into consideration is the party's strength in the 1977 election. Most of the increase between 1975 and 1979 came in the Storting election. Since 1977 the party's electoral strength has increased by 'only' 3 per cent. The regional figures show that the Conservatives over the past two years have had their largest increase in the Oslofjord (an average of 4.4 per cent) and Inner East (3.9 per cent) regions. On the other hand, the Labour Party has had a rather substantial decline since the elections two years ago (an average decrease of 5.3 per cent). In the North the party has lost 9 per cent of its 1977 vote, and in the Oslofjord and Trøndelag areas, about 6 per cent. These figures fit nicely with the comments on 1975–1979 changes.

The Christian People's Party must also record a large decline over the past two years. In the West, which has been one of the core areas of the party, the average change since 1977 is 8.5 per cent: in the North the decrease is 6 per cent. Still, in these two regions the party showed nil change between 1975 and 1979; it has merely lost the gains of two years ago. The Centre and Socialist Left parties show a rather steady decline for the whole period. Between 1977 and 1979 the Centre Party recorded its largest decrease in the Inner East and Trøndelag regions (1.2 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively). Changes in the Socialist Left vote were more minor, the most severe decline being 0.8 per cent in Western Norway.

As a result of this election, one of the most striking features of the party system was a confirmation of the trend apparent in the most recent elections of Norway moving from a one-party dominant party system to a two-party system. In the country as a whole, the two big parties, Labour and Conservative, gained 65.2 per cent of the votes. In the cities their weighted average was 71.5 per cent, while for all the communes in the central Oslofjord region their weighted average was well above 70 per cent. In the first election after the EEC referendum, one saw the rise of the centre and the extreme socialist parties. But in all later elections, the tendency has been towards a strengthening of the two large parties at the expense of the centre. To a certain extent, this process of polarization has to do with the question of what real governmental alternatives are available. Because the Labour and Conservative parties have dominated the political debate on the national level in recent years, it might be expected that they would see positive results of such a debate in the national election results. The local election of 1979 has demonstrated that such consequences can also be expected on the local level. In some respects Norway represents a special case in that election periods are fixed. The set

time-span of four years will clearly cause strains on the political system, especially when the electorate has undergone fluctuations as large as those manifest in recent years. In such an environment, it can also be argued that a local election will inevitably have a national importance.

NOTES

- 1 There were two distinct elections in 1979, an election for county governments as well as for local governments. However, the differences in the electoral results for the two elections were extremely small. Hence, this review will concentrate only on the electoral statistics for the local election.
- 2 The abortion issue has previously occupied a prominent position in Norwegian party politics.