

## Comments and Reviews

### A. John Berrigan on Realignment in Denmark: A Critical Comment

Mogens N. Pedersen, Odense University

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A. John Berrigan's article on Danish politics in a recent issue of *Scandinavian Political Studies* (Berrigan 1982) did not come up to expectations.

The topic — how to interpret recent electoral patterns in Denmark — is fascinating, given the turbulence in the party system, and the opening conclusion certainly wets the appetite. "Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the study concludes that a secular, not critical realignment occurred in Denmark during the 1970s", states the author in the abstract that precedes the article.

The form and the content of this paper are, however, thoroughly disappointing. I shall provide some premises for this conclusion.

It is appropriate to start with some formalities. The author would have benefited from the loving care of a copy-editor. He might then have avoided an assortment of errors: tables would not have been named "figures", and all of the tables might have been given a title; simple misspellings of Danish names might have been avoided; in the list of references a few items would have been added, because they appear in the text, and therefore should also appear in the list; it would not have been necessary to use more space for this purpose, since the reference list also includes at least one reference that does not appear in the text; all references might have been checked for inconsistency and errors with regard to years of publication etc. — and if this had been done quite a few errors would have been detected, etc.

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tutes a puzzle. If we use the “authorized” terminology of American electoral specialists, there cannot be much doubt that this election was a realigning election (e.g. Key 1955; Kay 1959; Campbell 1966). Before that fateful election, the “normal” percentage of the vote cast for the four “old” parties was close to 90%. Since 1973, the “old” parties have only obtained approx.  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the votes, the remaining  $\frac{1}{3}$  being divided among 6-9 newer parties, of which only a few had been represented in parliament before 1973.

About such a situation, where the electoral realignment is both sharp and durable, V.O. Key coined the term “*critical election*” (Key 1955,1). It is important to note that V.O. Key explicitly stated that this new concept was a Weberian “ideal type”. In a later study he introduced the concept of “secular realignment”. “A secular shift in party attachment may be regarded as a movement of the members of a population category from party to party that extends over several ... elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections” (Key 1959, 199). When Key introduced this concept, he also made it clear and explicit that “how long such a trend should persist to fall within the definition may be left inexact, but a movement that extends over a half century is a more persuasive indication of the existence of the phenomenon in mind than is one that lasts less than a decade” (Key 1959, 199).

Given these specifications it is rather puzzling to read in Berrigan’s article that “according to Key, the secular realignment is defined by a threshold election which signals a reordering of the electoral partisan affiliations” (p. 262). Let that be considered a slip of the tongue.

Berrigan is not in doubt that a realignment has taken place; what is new is his argument that “contrary to appearances, the realignment exhibited in the parliamentary elections of 1973-1977 was secular and not critical in form ... Empirical evidence is presented to demonstrate that the Folketing elections of 1973 were the product of a secular alignment with origins in the elections of 1957” (p. 262).

Again we have to forget about V.O. Key and his definition. The period from 1957 to 1973 is not that long, but let it be. We will also forget about the two elections in Denmark since 1977.

A lot can be forgotten or at least forgiven, but when the author tells us that the beneficiaries of the redistribution of the Danish vote in 1973 were, among others, the Socialist Peoples’ Party (p. 262) a creeping suspicion emerges in one’s mind. Could it be the case that the author does not know anything about recent Danish politics? We will let the author himself answer this question.

Berrigan starts out with a brief historical sketch of the party system. Let us — again — forget about a number of historical inaccuracies. This description leads to the assertion of a certain “electoral equilibrium”, which is, in part, seen as a “tribute to the historical compromises of the past” (p. 264). Thus en-

lightened, we next hear that in contrast to the United States “Denmark is a unitary parliamentary system where one sovereign government controls county and local governments, and directs social and economic development. Responsibility and authority are simple to locate in Denmark: they belong to the majority coalition in the Folketing. The adoption of a unicameral legislature in 1953 all but eliminates legislative deadlocks ...” (p. 264).

At this point serious students of Danish politics have already made up their opinion about Mr. Berrigan’s scholarship. But let us listen a bit more in all fairness: “In general, the Danish parliamentary system fosters electoral stability because it guarantees minority representation and majority governance ... Regardless of the short duration of majority coalitions, 2.5 years, the four traditional coalitions (sic! MNP) have maintained an enduring and dominant position in the government of Denmark.” (p. 264).

The attentive reader will now ask if the author, the editor, or the printer is most to blame for this passage?

Just to make sure that there should not be any doubt about Mr. Berrigan’s complicity, we may add that Kenneth Miller — erroneously — is quoted (wrong year of publication, though) for having said about the Danish electoral system that “those who seek reform and find the dominant parties are unresponsive can, via petition, get on the ballot ... Aggrieved electors, frustrated with an unresponsive elite, can, at minimum, vent their frustration by casting an opposition vote ...” (p. 265).

Apart from these and several other errors of fact, the article contains quite a few debatable, not to say strange, statements of evaluation. This reader is ready to forgive A. John Berrigan when he says about a venerable Danish party, that “opportunistic, centrist parties such as the Radical Liberals switch back and forth to whichever wing is dominant” (pp. 264-65). It is harder to follow — and understand — the author, when he, for example, says that “as a unitary parliamentary system employing proportional representation, the Danish political system conveys psychic satisfaction to those who seek recognition for their demands” (p. 266). If they were just wild hypotheses, one might smile, but these allegations are in fact used to build up a case for interpreting recent Danish politics in terms of a secular realignment.

Now we approach the critical point in the argument. Mr. Berrigan wants to demonstrate that “the Folketing elections of 1973 were the product of a secular realignment with origins in the elections of 1957” (p. 262). In order to make this point he analyzes electoral statistics pertaining to the period 1947-66. We are not being told — at least not satisfactorily — why he does not extend his main analysis to the crucial years after 1966. Nor are we told why only a small — and undoubtedly unrepresentative — portion of the constituency results are being scrutinized.

Through various obscure, i.e. not intersubjectively transmissible, proced-

ures, Mr. Berrigan purports to demonstrate what has been known for years, namely that the Danish electorate was not at all stable during the two decades that preceded the 1973 elections. Danish scholars, however, tend to see 1960 and not 1957 as the crucial election (see e.g. Stehouwer 1967; Borre & Stehouwer 1968, 1970; Thomsen 1979). Since the cost of printing is high, I will not exhaust the reader with a thorough criticism of the methods used including the application of an opaque, if not impenetrable, index and a highly debatable factor analysis.

Instead we will move directly to the conclusion about the period under inspection. We will have to quote full length: "Taken together, our indices and factor analyses clearly demonstrate that the Danish electorate began a slow, almost imperceptible shift in allegiance away from the four traditional parties: The Social Democrats, Radical Liberals, Conservatives and Agrarian Liberals. What differentiates this form of change from mere deviating behavior is the continuity of the change across all parties and across all counties tested. It is apparent, then, that the Danish electorate was in the process of realignment during the observed base period" (pp. 273-77).

This is an interesting conclusion, but before we accept it — irrespective of the methods used — we ought to ponder a bit over the plain and simple fact that the "four traditional parties" really did not lose that many votes to *other* parties during the period, see Table 1.

Table 1. The Share of the Vote for the Four "Old" Parties 1953-73, in per cent.

1953	1957	1960	1964	1966	1968	1971	1973
89	89	87	89	84	88	84	58

Does the reader see here any signs of secular realignment, as V.O. Key defined the concept? If so, he should stand forward and take part in the discussion.

There is not much doubt that Mr. Berrigan lost his track somewhere, while he was labouring with the Danish statistics. I have tried to figure out what went wrong. The answer — suggestive, I admit — is that Mr. Berrigan, because he has not done his homework on Danish politics, may have thought that the four "old" parties lost substantial support to some *new* parties during the 1960's. If he had studied the basic facts — or just the figures — he would have known that during that decade aggregate electoral volatility was increasing, albeit not following a linear trend. This increase to some extent reflects a tendency among voters to switch party more than they did in earlier decades. But no single party, nor any distinct group of parties, gained systematically from these developments. During the same period traditional regional differences in electoral support for the "old" parties apparently were eroded a bit. It is, however, important to note that neither the first, nor the second of these tendencies did build up gradually to a loss for the "old" parties. In that respect

no systematic trend is visible in the electoral data. In terms of electoral support, the so-called "old" parties played "musical chairs" during the years before 1973. It was only in the election of that year that they — *and* the newer Socialist Peoples' Party — lost a considerable amount of votes, and seats, to *other* parties. For good reasons, the election of 1973 has been characterized as a landslide election, even as an "electoral earthquake" (Sartori 1976, 150).

Immediately after erroneously concluding that "it is apparent, then, that the Danish electorate was in the process of realignment during the observed base period", the author states that "in support of these data (sic! MNP) several Danish scholars have called attention to changing Danish electoral patterns during this period" (p. 277). A few references are given; I doubt if any of these authors would sign the conclusion.

Mr. Berrigan especially likes an article that appeared in *Scandinavian Political Studies* years ago. It was published by the Danish sociologist Jan Stehouwer, not in 1972 as said in Berrigan's text, nor in 1955 as said in Berrigan's references, nor in vol. 10 of *SPS*. The correct reference is *SPS 2/1967, pp. 94-116*. I wish to bring this excellent study, titled "Long Term Ecological Analysis of Electoral Statistics in Denmark", to the attention of the readers in its correct form, since the late Jan Stehouwer (†1970) was the scholar who collected the data upon which Mr. Berrigan performs his analyses. Jan Stehouwer also analyzed the data in several well-known studies, of which some unfortunately have been published in Danish only; it is an understatement to say that he did it in a more satisfactory way than the American author.

It can in fact be said about A. John Berrigan's article that to the extent it contains something that is new, this new information is no good; on the other hand, what is good in the article is not new. So, why has it been published at all?

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