

The Storting Election of September 1985: The Welfare State under Pressure*

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Introduction

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To some extent the election constitutes a reversal of the 1981 election. At that time the Labour Party was defeated after having been in power for eight years, albeit as a minority government. A shift toward the right wing parties had been the dominant tendency since the middle of the 1970's. This trend culminated in 1981 when the Conservative Party realized an impressive victory and obtained nearly 32 per cent of the votes (Valen 1981). After the election the Conservative Party leader, Mr. Willoch, formed a minority government with parliamentary support from the agrarian Centre Party and the Christian People's Party. When joined by the two latter parties in the summer of 1983, the government became a majority coalition.

In the election of 1985 the voters were faced with two competing government alternatives: either maintenance of the bourgeois coalition, or a minority government formed by the Labour Party with support from the Socialist Left Party and the tiny Liberal Party. Three aspects of the 1985 Storting election are particularly interesting:

- The campaign was dominated by issues of social policy, in particular health problems and care for the aged.

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- Great territorial variations were evident in the election results. The Labour Party made substantial inroads into bastions of bourgeois strength in peripheral areas, particularly along the coast, while the Conservative Party maintained its strong position in urban areas in central parts of the country. The electoral changes cut across traditional regions in Norwegian politics.
- Women's political independence was clearly manifested, partly by a record high recruitment of women representatives, partly by a further widening of the gender gap at the polls.

These three aspects will be the main themes of the subsequent preliminary analysis. First, however, it is necessary to consider briefly the outcome of the election.

Election Results

The results may be briefly summarized:

- The Labour Party, which enjoyed the greatest gains, increased its share of the votes by nearly four percentage points. It is nevertheless worth noting that in only two previous elections (1973 and 1981) during the post-war period has Labour obtained less support than in 1985.
- Minor gains for the Socialist Left Party strengthened the socialist alternative.
- The tiny Liberal Party, however, which had also pledged its support to a possible Labour government, was defeated and lost its representation in the Storting. In 1984 the Liberal Party 'Venstre', i.e. the Left), which is the oldest party in Norway, celebrated its centennial. Until the Second World War the party played a dominant role, but since 1945 it has been on the decline. Even so, the election of 1985 is the first time the Liberal Party did not manage to obtain parliamentary representation.
- Together, Labour, The Socialist Left Party, and the Liberals obtained 49.4 per cent of the votes and 49.0 per cent of the seats in the new Storting.
- The Conservatives, the leading party of the government coalition, suffered a minor loss. Except for the 1981 election, however, the electoral strength of the party is still higher than the whole period since the 1920's.
- The Centre Party maintained its electoral support, while the Christian People's Party, the other junior partner of the coalition, declined by about one percentage point. Largely by virtue of an electoral reform, however, both parties gained an additional seat in the new Storting.

Table 1. Distribution of Votes and Seats in the 1985 Storting Election.
(Figures in Parentheses Indicate Changes from 1981 to 1985)

Party:	Distribution of votes (in per cent)	Number of seats*	Percentage distribution of seats
Labour Party	40.8 (+3.6)	71 (+5)	45.2
Conservative Party	30.4 (-1.3)	50 (-3)	31.9
Christian People's Party	8.3 (-1.1)	16 (+1)	10.2
Centre Party (Agrarian)	6.6 (- .1)	12 (+1)	7.6
Socialist Left Party	5.5 (+ .6)	6 (+2)	3.8
Progress Party	3.7 (- .8)	2 (-2)	1.3
Liberal Party	3.1 (- .8)	0 (-2)	0.0
Marxist-Leninists (AKP)	0.6 (- .1)	0	0.0
Liberal People's Party	0.5 (0.0)	0	0.0
Communist Party	0.2 (- .1)	0	0.0
Others	0.4 (- .3)	0	0.0
Total	100.0%	157	100.0%
Number of votes cast	2,597,378		
Turnout	83.8%		

*The total number of seats was raised from 155 in 1981 to 157 in 1985.

- Together, the three coalition parties obtained 45.3 per cent of the votes, but 49.7 per cent of the seats. This over-representation is due to a system of list coalitions, which was introduced prior to the election in 1985. According to this method two or more parties may choose to have their votes counted together in individual constituencies, if that will increase their representation.¹ By applying this method in a number of constituencies, the two parties at the centre of the spectrum gained six additional seats, while the Conservatives gained one extra seat.
- The Progress Party, which is a right-wing populist party formed in 1973 (Valen & Rokkan 1974), suffered a heavy setback, but the loss in seats was relatively greater than the decline in votes. One of the lost seats was captured by a list alliance of the bourgeois coalition parties.
- The 1985 election marks a further step towards polarization of the party system. Jointly the two big parties obtained 71 per cent of the votes, the highest proportion ever. The four parties at the centre, the Liberals, the Christian People's Party, the Centre Party, and the Liberal People's Party which together obtained about 18 per cent, have gradually declined since 1973 when they reached a post-war maximum support of 30 per cent.

The Election Campaign

A couple of months before the election, the outlook was indeed promising for the coalition parties. The Norwegian economy, benefiting from favourable business cycles and handsome oil revenues, experienced growth, increasing activity, and declining unemployment figures. Unemployment had been negligible until the end of 1981, about the time when Mr. Willoch came to power. Although unemployment in Norway remained low by international standards, it gradually became a burden for the government and contributed to the defeat of the Conservative Party at the local elections of 1983 (Valen & Hanisch 1984). In January of 1984 unemployment figures reached their zenith with 4.7 per cent of the labour force out of work. By the beginning of the election year, 1985, however, the figure was 4.1 per cent, and then subsequently declined to 2.7 per cent in May – June.

In the spring of 1985 opinion polls indicated growing instability in the electorate, but by and large they predicted a continuing majority for the coalition parties. Under the slogan that 'now everything is going much better' the coalition faced the election with great confidence. Optimism was particularly high in the Conservative Party, while expectations were correspondingly low in the leading opposition party, Labour.

However, when the campaign started in the middle of August, the Labour Party seized the initiative and maintained it throughout the campaign. The party focused upon two sets of issues in which it enjoys disproportionately high confidence among the voters (Valen & Hanisch 1984): (1) employment policies and (2) social policy issues. The first one did not catch great attention, owing to the fact that unemployment figures were quite low at the time of the election. But social policy issues, in particular health problems and care for the aged, became the dominant theme of the campaign. Interestingly enough, the debate on the topic focused mainly upon the shortcomings of government policies in this area, and in particular on the question of whether public spending had been high enough for specific purposes. Only one issue involving clearcut partisan differences occurred: the question of 'privatization' of some services within the public health system. Increased privatization was recommended by the coalition government, but opposed by the opposition parties to the left.

In general the 1985 campaign was characterized by a lack of controversial partisan issues. In one area after another the debate boiled down to questions of confidence in the respective parties and the ability of the two government alternatives to handle specific problems. This was clearly the case with regard to economic policies, in which the coalition government, according to opinion polls, enjoyed widespread confidence. In particular, voters tended to trust the ability of the government to handle inflation. When foreign policy was thrown into the campaign, it occurred in the form of an accusation by the Prime Minister against the Labour Party for not being trustworthy in its support of the NATO alliance.

The campaign, in short, turned out to become a debate on the past record without clearcut partisan issues on current policies.

It is too early to assess the relative impact of the various campaign issues on the outcome of the election.² However, it can be stated that the election campaign clearly had an impact on public opinion. Opinion polls during the campaign indicated a swing in favour of the opposition Labour Party, as did mock elections at a great number of secondary schools throughout the country. On the eve of the election the question was whether the swing would be strong enough to bring about a change in government. The margins were indeed narrow, and the election night turned out to be a thriller. The coalition barely managed to remain in power.

Social Policy Issues

After the election, all parties have acknowledged the significance of social policy issues for the campaign. Among other things the government subsequently amended its proposal for a national budget by increasing allocations for the public health system and care for the aged.

The current situation is one characterized by a marked discrepancy between private affluence and public poverty, a gap which has apparently widened during the last decade. Budgetary shortages in the area of social policy are not a new theme in Norwegian politics, however. This subject has been on the agenda at several elections, in fact, but never before did it achieve such prominence as in 1985. The increased saliency of social issues thus offers a major clue to understanding the 1985 election.

The campaign debate itself was not very enlightening in this regard. The left wing opposition parties claimed that public services, and particularly the health system, had deteriorated under the bourgeois government. The coalition parties, on the other hand, contended that public allocations for health services had reached record high levels during the last four years. These statements, of course, need not be as contradictory as they might look. Both may be true and merely indicate that demands have been growing faster than public allocations. Emerging problems with regard to social policies were indeed a recurring theme in the debate, since it has been documented that the proportion of old people is due to increase sharply during the next two decades. Hence any government will have to cope with increasing demands regarding care for the aged as well as medical services in the years to come.³

Growing needs alone, however, cannot account for the great prominence of social policy issues in the 1985 campaign. Another explanation is to be found in the campaign strategies of various political parties. The Labour Party, focusing on precisely these kinds of questions, ran a vigorous campaign, while the Conservatives, the leading party of the government coalition, held a low profile at least in the first part of the campaign. Yet, high campaign intensity is not enough to catch

the public attention for a specific issue; the topic must also hit a responsive chord in the electorate, conditioned by some perceived needs or ideas regarding a given situation. This was precisely the case with regard to social policy issues in the 1985 election. The debate on the deficiencies of the health system and appropriate care for the aged touched on basic values of the welfare state and prompted a debate involving important ideological positions. Indeed, the 1985 election must definitely be interpreted in an ideological context. Influenced by neo-liberalist ideas, public debate during much of the previous decade had focused on the needs and interests of individuals. The welfare state had largely been taken for granted during this period. Yet after four years of bourgeois government and increasing evidence of emerging problems in the health care and social services sector, the time was ripe for a debate which brought the welfare state back onto the political agenda.

It may be noted in this regard that the Conservative Party, which has profited substantially from neo-liberalist tendencies since the mid-1970's, has nonetheless been a declared supporter of the welfare state, and the party suffered only minor losses in the election. A more serious electoral setback was suffered by the Progress Party, the only genuine neo-liberalist party in Norway. The partisan distribution of votes in the 1985 Storting election indeed suggests that the neo-liberalist trend in Norway has been halted, at least for the time being.

As indicated above, the significance of social issues coincided with rather peculiar territorial variations in the outcome of the election. Whether these tendencies are related to one another is worthy of further consideration.

The Centre Periphery Contrast Revitalized

Great territorial variations have always been evident in Norwegian voting. The variations have been described as a contrast between, on the one hand, the central region of the East, in particular the areas around the capital, and on the other hand, two distinct peripheries – the South and West region and the North (Rokkan & Valen 1964). The Conservative Party has always enjoyed its greatest support in the East, i.e. in Oslo and the provinces around the Oslofjord. The parties at the political centre, the Liberals, the Christian People's Party and the agrarian Centre Party, have traditionally had their stronghold in the South and West, while the Labour Party and other socialist parties have enjoyed most support in the East and in the North. It should be observed that regional variations tend to be much stronger in rural than in urban areas, with the parties at the centre obtaining relatively greater support in the countryside. Over the last few elections, however, regional variations have been declining (Valen & Aardal 1985). Most visible is the changing pattern of the South and West regions, where the Conservatives and even the Progress Party have made relatively substantial inroads while the parties at the centre have lost ground.

Table 2. Average Share of the Votes for Labour and the Conservatives in 1985: by Region and Type of Commune. (Figures in Parentheses Indicate Changes from 1981 - 1985)

Percentage in fishing sector	East		South + West		North + Central	
	Labour	Conserv.	Labour	Conserv.	Labour	Conserv.
0-1.9%	47.1 (+3.4)	25.5 (-.2)	33.8 (+5.3)	24.5 (-2.9)	47.6 (+4.9)	18.9 (-2.3)
2.0-9.9%	*	*	30.3 (+6.1)	25.8 (-3.3)	49.6 (+7.6)	21.5 (-3.8)
10.0% and more	*	*	28.1 (+5.3)	26.3 (-3.3)	54.1 (+9.2)	18.5 (-3.8)

*One single fishing commune in the East has been omitted from the table.

The 1985 election indicates a reversal of the old centre-periphery contrast, although in a slightly new configuration. The gains of the Labour Party were relatively greatest in peripheral areas, especially along the coast. Conservatives, on the other hand, maintained their position best in urban areas in southern Norway, most conspicuously in Oslo and the surrounding provinces. In a sense this result confirms the described trend towards deregionalization: the Labour Party in particular has made substantial gains in the Western region where it has traditionally been rather weak.

A few figures based on aggregate electoral statistics for individual communes (municipalities) may illustrate these tendencies. The 454 communes, the total number in Norway, have been classified according to the proportion of the labour force employed in the fishing sector. In the most peripheral communes, i.e. where more than 10 per cent of the population is employed in fishing, Labour increased its share of the votes by an average of 8 per cent. In communes with a low fishing population (2.0 - 9.9 per cent) Labour gained on the average 7.0 per cent, while the gains were only 4.3 per cent in communes with no or an insignificant fishing-based population. The corresponding losses for the Conservative Party were respectively -3.7, -3.6 and -1.5 per cent. The tendency for the Christian People's Party was similar to that of the Conservatives, although differences were relatively smaller. For other parties there was no consistent pattern in gains or losses according to size of fishing population.

For the two larger parties it may also be useful to look at changes in electoral support for different regions. The tendency for the Labour Party to gain most in fishing communes is clearly supported in Mid-Norway (Trøndelag) and in the North, while it is less regular in the South and West. However, coastal areas of the latter region have traditionally given the weakest electoral support to the Labour Party. Considering this, the relative growth in 1985 was strongest in the fishing communes in the South and West. In fact the party obtained greater support than ever before in a number of coastal communes in this region.

It is important to emphasize that Table 2 presents average figures of aggregate

data for local units. Since peripheral communes tend to be more sparsely populated, and since the Labour Party did much worse in urban areas, Table 2 may give an exaggerated picture of the actual changes that took place at the election (cf. Table 1). A similar discrepancy is evident for the Conservative Party. Substantial losses in peripheral communes were outweighed by more favourable results in densely populated urban areas. As indicated in Table 2, the Conservative Party's share of the votes declined by an average of only 0.2 per cent in the East. But even in this region we find great variations in Conservative strength. Thus in the city of Oslo the party obtained 43 per cent of the votes, a gain of 0.7 per cent since 1981, and in the surrounding province of Akershus it obtained 41 per cent (+1.3). Despite some notable exceptions, the Conservatives fared above average in urban areas, not only in the East, but also in the South and West and even in Mid-Norway (Trøndelag).

In terms of regional variations we are left with two significant questions:

- (1) How did the Labour Party mobilize support in peripheral areas? and
- (2) How did the Conservatives manage to maintain their strong position in urban centres?

Further research is needed to answer these questions properly. At this point we may speculate about some possible explanations.

As already suggested, it is quite likely that the described territorial trend is related to the highly salient issue of social policy discussed in the preceding section. Although deficiencies in the health system and care for the aged are problems facing the entire nation, it may be expected that they are felt with varying strength from one part of the country to another. In general, programmes of social policy are decided by the national government and apply throughout the nation, but are normally left to local and province authorities to implement and administer. Thus health institutions are almost entirely run by province or commune authorities, and care for the aged is administered exclusively by local (commune) government. The quality of social services is, of course, dependent upon availability of resources. Although substantial resources are annually transferred from the national treasury to communes and provinces authorities, economic capabilities of individual communes and provinces depend largely upon local taxation and resources. It may be suggested that public poverty in recent years has been felt most strongly in small and sparsely populated communes in peripheral parts of the country. It should be added that social services in the periphery have been suffering not only from a lack of material resources but also from a shortage of professionals such as doctors, dentists, teachers, social workers etc. This problem, which has been evident for a long time, has been felt most urgently in the county of Finnmark in the far north.

Economically, peripheral areas are also less industrialized and relatively less prosperous than other parts of the country. This is an old phenomenon, but in recent years problems have increased, partly because of a recession in the fishing sector, and partly due to growing unemployment, which has hit the periphery considerably more than central areas. Thus in the city of Oslo and most suburban communes unemployment figures have been relatively insignificant.

In this respect available data suggest interesting relationships between election results in 1985 and unemployment figures for individual communes. The gains of the Labour Party tend to be greatest in communes with high unemployment, while they are moderate in urban areas with low unemployment figures. For the Conservative Party the tendency is reversed. These variations are reflected not only in contrasts between regions, but also between communes within individual regions.

As suggested in the preceding discussion, economic as well as social problems in recent years have affected various parts of the country in different ways, with peripheral areas along the coast at one extreme and urban centres in southern Norway at the other. Most probably the territorial variations in the 1985 election are related to this kind of problems. But the electoral forces at work probably differ in strength and character from one region to another. Thus the mobilization in coastal areas by the leading opposition party may possibly be interpreted as a protest vote against the incumbent government. It remains to be seen to what extent this trend will have a lasting effect. The tendency for the parties to the right to maintain their support in urban centres is consistent with a long-term trend which started around 1960 (Valen 1981). A corresponding big city tendency in favour of conservative parties has also been evident in recent elections in Denmark and Sweden. The big-city trend offers a challenging task for electoral analysis. Does it mean that individual citizens are attracted by liberalist ideas owing to economic conditions and private prosperity in urban society? Why is the swing to the right most consistently expressed in urban settings?

The Role of Women

The election of 1985 is also noteworthy because it constitutes a major breakthrough for women's representation in the Storting. Of a total of 157 representatives elected, 54 were women, i.e. 34 per cent. Presumably this is the highest proportion of seats ever obtained by women in any national parliament. In Norway, as in most other nations, women's representation has tended to increase during the last two decades. At the Storting election of 1977 women obtained 22 per cent of the seats and in 1981 23 per cent. The enormous growth in 1985 primarily reflects the fact that the parties to the left, i.e. Left Socialists, Labour, and Liberals, decided to introduce a quota system in their nominating procedures in order to promote equality between the sexes.⁴

The proportion of women actually elected, however, varies greatly from one party to another. The Socialist Left Party has the lead with 50 per cent, next comes Labour (42 per cent), the Conservatives (30 per cent), the Christian People's Party (25 per cent), the Centre Party (17 per cent), and finally the Progress Party with no women elected.

The importance of women in politics in the 1985 election was not only demonstrated in the nomination of candidates, it was equally evident at the polls. At recent elections we have witnessed a cross-national trend referred to as 'the gender gap': women have tended to move in the direction of the parties to the left, while men have been more attracted to the right. This tendency, which started in the 1970's, represents a break with the traditional pattern under which men and women voted pretty much the same, although with some propensity for women to vote more in favour of parties to the right.

Gender differences in Norwegian politics have been dealt with in a recent publication (Listhaug et al. 1985). In this context it should suffice to note that differences in the direction described were clearly evident already in the 1981 Storting election. According to numerous opinion polls, the gender gap continued to widen during the subsequent four years and was even more prominent in the 1985 election, as noted in Table 3.

In one sense the data of Table 3 reflect a traditional pattern, the attraction of women to the Christian People's Party. In general, women tend to be more affected than men by religious values, and in Norway the political expression of this inclination is found in support for the Christian People's Party. As indicated in Table 3, moreover, the tendency is most manifest in older age groups. The main message of Table 3, however, is that women are more inclined than men to vote for the socialist parties. Men, on the other hand, are relatively more attracted to the Progress Party and the Conservative Party. The gap is widest for voters below 30, but it is also evident for older age groups, except those above 60.

In trying to explain the gender gap, previous analyses have focused partly upon differences in values between men and women emerging from the socialization process, partly upon variations with regard to social background, including participation in the labour force and involvement in social organizations (Listhaug et al. 1985, Boulding 1984, Goul Andersen 1984, Miller 1983). Similar variables will be applied in further analysis of the 1985 Storting election results. However, emphasis also will be given to circumstances surrounding the election. Two major aspects deserve particular attention: (1) the saliency of social policy issues, and (2) the significance of women's struggle for equality.

It may be anticipated that women are more likely to be concerned with social welfare than men. Women are most likely to be exposed to problems in this area, partly because more women than men are employed in public service occupations, partly because women are, according to traditional sex roles, most likely to be in charge of social care within the family, with children, and with sick or old relatives.

Table 3. Party and Age, by Sex

Party	Age				
	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-59	60 and more
<i>Men</i>					
Communist factions	0	2	2	1	0
Socialist Left	6	6	8	5	3
Labour	32	27	29	40	46
Liberal	8	3	7	2	1
Christian People's Party	3	5	6	8	11
Agrarian Centre	7	5	5	8	11
Liberal People's Party	0	1	0	1	0
Conservative	35	41	40	32	25
Progress	9	10	3	3	3
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	152	88	239	292	229
Joint socialist	38	35	39	46	49
<i>Women</i>					
Communist factions	1	0	2	0	0
Socialist Left	12	13	7	3	3
Labour	33	33	35	46	44
Liberal	4	4	9	1	1
Christian People's Party	8	15	8	12	19
Agrarian Centre	4	1	6	7	8
Liberal People's Party	1	0	0	0	1
Conservative	32	32	29	28	24
Progress	5	2	4	3	0
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	132	89	189	282	228
Joint socialist	46	46	44	49	47

Source: The 1985 election study

The new movement for women's liberation has also undoubtedly contributed to making women more politically conscious and active. The increasing number of women elected to political office may be seen as a result of these activities. Parties to the left have traditionally been most responsive to questions on women's rights. Thus the observed gender gap at the polls is consistent with the greater number of women nominated by parties to the left. It is therefore pertinent to ask to what extent these tendencies are related to one another. The socialist parties are perceived to be the most concerned with problems of improving the position of women (Listhaug et al. 1985). It is therefore a reasonable hypothesis that young women tend to move in a socialist direction because they see these parties as instrumental in their struggle for equality.

The New Parliamentary Situation

In conclusion it should be noted that the election of 1985 created a new and less stable parliamentary situation in Norway. The governing coalition was forced into a minority position. Minority parliamentarism is certainly not a new phenomenon in Norway, and by and large it has provided stable government previously (Strøm 1985). The problem in the current situation is that the socialist bloc is relatively strong with 77 out of 157 seats, and the coalition needs the support of the right-wing Progress Party in order to remain in power. The political distance between the latter party and the parties at the centre is rather great. Thus the budgetary process after the election led to several threatening confrontations because the Christian People's Party and the Centre Party refused to negotiate with the Progress Party. In the end a compromise was reached, but unless the coalition is able to work out some satisfactory arrangement with the Progress Party, Norway may be in for a period of political instability during the next four years.

NOTES

1. A similar system of list coalitions was introduced in Norway in 1930, but removed in 1949. The method can only be applied by parties which are politically close to one another. Thus in 1985 it was applied almost exclusively by parties at the political centre.
2. A nationwide voter survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research in Oslo will hopefully contribute to understanding the election. The study is directed by Bernt O. Aardal.
3. Ivar Brevik, *Eldreomsorgen i Norge 1981-83: Vekst og mangel på vekst*. (Care for the aged in Norway 1981-83: Growth and lack of growth.) Oslo, Norsk Institutt for by- og regionsforskning, NIBR-notat 1985: 118.
4. The Liberals and the Socialist Left Party introduced as a provision in their statutes that an equal number of men and women should be nominated. Labour decided that neither of the sexes should have less than 40 per cent of the candidates.

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