

The General Election in Denmark 1988

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Background

Folketing (Parliament) states that for the last 30 years it has been Danish policy not to accept nuclear arms on Danish territory (including ports). The government is urged to inform visiting naval ships of this.

Hereafter the *Ting* (Parliament) proceeds to the next item on the agenda'.

Proposal for motivated agenda set forward by the Social Democrats on April 14 1988

This proposal was supported by a majority in Parliament and, innocent enough as it may sound, this was sufficient to make the government five days later decide to call a general election to take place on May 10 – only eight months after the previous election.

The proposal was innocent in the sense that visiting naval ships were only to be *notified* of Danish anti-nuclear weapon policy. It was not the New Zealand model under which visiting ships had to guarantee that they were not carrying nuclear weapons.

The government knew the proposal was coming up, and had made a counter-proposal; namely that only governments should be informed of Danish nuclear policy. In short:—the disagreement seemed too marginal an issue to lead to an election. But there were many reasons for this.

First of all the prime minister, Poul Schlüter, stated publicly that the government's own compromise proposal had been supported by the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, specifically, a promise of support by Svend Auken, party chairman. In the following period and during the campaign, accusations of foul play and political cheating were made, notably by Paul Schlüter against Svend Auken. Auken had just taken over the chairmanship on October 3 1987 after Anker Jørgensen's 15 years in the office. The election could in other words depart from a situation, where the leader of the opposition had shown his immaturity and lack of sense for decent political conduct.

Secondly, the timing would be right for the reason that such an unexpected election would not give the small parties outside of Parliament time to collect the approximately 20,000 signatures they would require to participate in the election. This proved to be true when only 12 parties ran compared with the national record of 16 parties in the 1987 election.

Thirdly, the issue itself, defence policy, and especially a rather strong commitment to NATO, is supported by a vast majority of the electorate.¹ Negative attitudes to NATO are clearly concentrated on the left of the political spectrum, while pro-NATO attitudes penetrate far into the core of the Social Democratic voters, where a certain disenchantment with their own party's lukewarm NATO commitment had been especially marked since 1979. There was, in other words, good hunting ground for Social Democratic voters, with a negligible chance of annoying own voters. And, as proved to be the case, it was indeed very easy to turn the issue into one of pro or anti NATO. That is how the election was perceived abroad.² In the international media the election was portrayed as if it was a referendum on the New Zealand model.³ Or, in other words: 'yes' (vote for the government) or 'no' (vote for the opposition) to membership in NATO.

But probably most important is the *fourth* of the many reasons for this unexpected election. In spite of the fact that it was a minority government,⁴ it had tried to 'govern'. And at the election in 1987 it had waited to issue the writs for the election until the four-year period had almost elapsed – as allowed in the Constitution. It had, however, meant that the government had virtually only ruled with a majority on the budget. Most other policy areas, such as security and defence, energy, environment, culture and law, had been decided by the so-called alternative majority consisting of the Socialists and the Radical Liberals. Never before in Danish political history had a government survived so many defeats without having to resign. Erik Damgaard goes as far as to call it 'a radical change in the parliamentary culture in Denmark'.⁵

The government had for example pursued a foreign policy against its own declared goals, but in accordance with the express wishes of the majority of the parliament. The decision on how to treat visiting naval ships was the 23rd formal defeat for the government on defence issues. The situation was not only tiring, it was also unhealthy for the 'parliamentary culture'.

Hence the argument for a quick election on a promising issue. Afterwards the cards might be dealt differently. It would probably be too much to hope for a majority for the ruling coalition (together with the Radical Liberals) such as had actually been the case for part of the period 1984 to 1987 because of two defections from the Progress Party. But at least a firm and more committing cooperation with the Radical Liberals would be necessary if defeats from the alternative majority were to be avoided.

The major dangers in calling the election were the short period of time from the previous election and the low saliency connected with foreign policy issues. Both factors might alienate voters and thereby create an even greater annoyance with politicians, and especially those responsible for the election.

The opinion polls reflected only minor changes since the previous election, indicating that there would only be a 'muddy bourgeois majority' as the disappointed Radical Liberal leader, Niels Helweg Petersen, commented at the 1987 election, the outcome of which was that a bourgeois majority was only possible with the support of the Progress Party. Otherwise the Radical Liberals have – in spite of their minute size – with few exceptions⁶ been in the decisive middle position between the socialist and the bourgeois parties.

So the stage was set for the campaign, with limited prospects and relatively little enthusiasm – it was after all the shortest period between two elections in Danish political history.⁷

The Outcome

The outcome of the election did not bring any change in possible government combinations.

The major surprise was an almost doubling of the votes for the Progress Party – from 4.8 percent in September 1987 to 9.0 percent. It was the largest change for any party and the net gain for the Progress Party of 4.2 percentage points accounted for two thirds of the total net change. All other changes were minor and also fairly consistent from left to right in the party-political spectrum.

Between the *socialist parties* there was an unexpected loss of 1.6 percentage points for the Socialist People's Party (SF). Considering Scandinavian political conditions, however, this party maintains a unique high level of support – 13.0 percent of the votes compared with 5.3 percent (1985) for its Norwegian sister party and 5.4 percent (1988) for the Communist Party in Sweden. The Left Socialist party (US) which lost its representation in 1987 after 12 years in Parliament, suffered a further loss, and its chances of getting new representation seem minimal.

The other small splinter groups on the Left did not participate in the election, but had little chance of representation anyhow. Also the Communist Party, not represented in Parliament since 1977, suffered a small loss, but with a support of 0.8 percent of the votes has a long way to go in order to pass the Danish 2 percent threshold for representation.

Close to the threshold – lacking only a good 3000 votes – was the

Table 1. Results of General Parliamentary Elections in Denmark, September 8 1987 and May 10 1988 (percent).

Party	1987		1988	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
International-Socialist Labour	0.0		—	
Marxist-Leninist	0.0		—	
Communist	0.9		0.8	
Common Course	2.2	4	1.9	
Left Socialist	1.4		0.6	
Socialist People's	14.6	27	13.0	24
Social Democratic	29.3	54	29.8	55
Total, socialists	48.4	85	46.1	79
Radical Liberal	6.2	11	5.6	10
Christian People's	2.4	4	2.0	4
Justice	0.5		—	
Center Democratic	4.8	9	4.7	9
Conservative People's	20.8	38	19.3	35
Liberal Democratic	10.5	19	11.8	22
Progress	4.8	9	9.0	16
Total, bourgeois	43.8	79	46.8	86
Green	1.3		1.4	
Humanistic	0.2		—	
Individual candidates	0.1		0.1	
Total, others	1.6		1.5	
Total, all	100.0	175	100.0	175
Voters/turn-out	3 907 545/86.7		3 911 897/85.7	

Source: *Statistiske Efterretninger* 1988:6, 23 and 31.

Note: The older parties are ranked according to voter's perceptions of their left-right position. The Green and Humanistic parties, together with the individual candidates, might – with some reservation – be placed together with the bourgeois parties. Common Course is a populist party and has only with reservation been placed among the socialist parties.

The table is a record of the elections in Denmark proper, and consequently does not include the results in the Faroe Islands and Greenland, where two MP's are elected in each place.

colourful left-populistic party, Common Course, headed by the leader of the Seamen's Union, Preben Møller Hansen. This party was represented by four MP's for eight months in 1987/88. (It is very doubtful whether they will get further new representation.) Incidentally, Common Course is the only party that lost its representation in the new Parliament.

These losses for the socialist parties were slightly offset by a minor gain for the Social Democrats, but as a whole the socialist parties suffered a loss of 2.3 percentage points and, if Common Course is discounted, a loss of 2.0 percentage points.

In the *middle ground* we find the Radical Liberals suffering an unexpected, though minor, loss from 6.2 percent of the votes to 5.6 percent.

Table 2. Change of Party 1971 to 1988 (percent).

	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1984	1987	1988
Net change	9	29	18	18	11	13	11	9	6
Gross change	19	40	25	21	17	20	19	26	17
Decision during the campaign	14	33	25	27	24	29	23	24	22
(N=)	1302	533	1600	1602	3192	1500	1035	1423	1144

Note: The net change is equal to the sum of the losses, which again is equal to the sum of gains. The gross change is the percentage of the voters that voted at both elections, but for different parties.

The N's in 1975, 1976, 1987 and 1988 are weighted.

The DK/NA answers to the time of decision varies between 7 and 25 percent.

The gross change in 1988 is based on approx. 3000 unweighted interviews.

The *bourgeois parties* were in other words the winners. It was certainly a Pyrrhic victory, however, since the Progress Party took not only the biggest slice of the cake, but also more than the total gain of the bourgeois parties. Consequently there was a loss for the bourgeois coalition parties. The biggest loss was taken by the Conservatives, the party that had provided the prime minister. They lost 1.5 percentage points, receiving 19.3 percent of the vote. This, however, was still a very high level for the Conservatives. In 1975 they were capable of mustering only 5.5 percent of the vote.

The two small bourgeois, governmental parties, the Centre Democrats and the Christian People's Party, were also to suffer minor losses. For the Christian People's Party the loss was almost fatal: they lost 0.4 percentage points receiving just 2.0 percent or 66,583 votes, passing the threshold by only 1,464 votes. The Center Democrats could be said to be stable since they suffered an insignificant loss of 0.1 percentage points to 4.7 percentage points. Stability, incidentally, is something new for the Center Democrats, as the party ever since its emergence on the political arena in 1973 had alternated between good results (around 8 percent) and bad ones (down to 2 percent).

The only successful four-leaf clover party was the Liberal Party, with a gain of 1.3 percentage points to 11.8 percent of the vote.

In sum, the outcome of the election meant a return to the situation that had prevailed since 1973. The mandates of the Progress Party were necessary in order to obtain a bourgeois majority, but also a negative majority with the socialist parties putting the other bourgeois parties in the minority. This in fact happened in 1983 and led to the 1984 election.⁹ But the timing was bad. Only in 1984 was the election so successful for the four-leaf clover parties that they came close to forming a majority together with the Radical Liberals without the Progress Party. In 1984, the Conservatives, with 23.4 percent of the vote, had their best result this century.

This outcome was hoped for and according to opinion polls a possibility in September 1987, but it failed. The May 1988 election not only confirmed this situation, the increased strength of the Progress Party made their presence even more apparent. Even though Mogens Glistrup's heir, Pia Kjærsgaard, had done her best to make the party more acceptable to the establishment, with the resulting voter success, the other bourgeois parties certainly had their reservations concerning the possibilities of practical political cooperation. In the eyes of the Radical Liberals the situation was even muddier than before.

Forming a New Government

Hence the political situation after the election was most unclear, and it took considerable time before a solution was found. Three different leaders of the negotiations tried to form a government in four so-called formal rounds. Much dirt was thrown, just as at the beginning of the election campaign, and a not too flattering picture of political life was presented to the public.

On June 3, after a good three weeks of negotiations, a Conservative, Liberal, Radical Liberal coalition government was announced. The two former governmental parties, the Christian People's Party and the Center Democrats, aired feelings of deep disappointment and deception, but their votes in Parliament could hardly be expected to bring about the fall of a bourgeois government.

Instead, the Radical Liberals had to join in a more committing cooperation if alternative majorities were not to be formed with their help. It was on this basis that the government was formed.

The surprise in a historical context is that the Radical Liberals have only participated in *majority* governments – in post-war time in 1957–60, 1960–64 and 1968–71. In all other political situations they have preferred to be in their broker role forming majorities to the right or left in Parliament according to their policy, and have hence enjoyed a political influence far beyond their relative size.

Party Change

The changes between the relative support of the parties, however, are net changes and reveal only the surface of the political landscape. It might be worthwhile to look more closely into the electorate and the changes of parties.

Table 3. The Inter-party Change of Voters, 1987 to 1988 (per cent).

Vote 1987	Vote 1988									
	SP	SD	RL	CP	CD	Cons	Lib	PrP	Oth	Vote
Socialist People's	83	12	1			1		1	2	16
Social Democrats	2	92	1	1	1	1		2		30
Rad. Lib.	2	10	69		4	8	4	3		6
Christian People's			1	88	3	2	2	3	1	2
Center Democrats		1		4	80	5	4	5	1	3
Conservative		1	1	1	2	87	4	4		19
Liberal		1	1		1	4	89	3	1	12
Progress Party	1	8					1	90		5
Others	n.i.									7
Votes	15	31	6	3	4	18	12	8	3	100

Note. The matrix is based on 2,659 interviews conducted nationally by Gallup Marketsanalyse A/S from May 14 through June 20 1988. Others have been collapsed to give a clearer picture, but a limited amount in absolute terms has been included in the gross changes.

The net change of party from 1987 to 1988 was the lowest since 1953/1957. Nevertheless, the gross change and the uncertainty about party choice was on a level that has become normal since the early 1970s, when the new and higher level of party instability was established.

The mobility of around one fifth of the electorate resulting thereby only in the low 6 percent net changes means, in other words, that most of the changes have offset each other. But not completely, as the net result was a turn to the right, or, more precisely, a turn to the Progress Party.

The matrix of change presents a visual image of the rather consistent shift to the right, but very limited changes of parties between the blocks. Only the Radical Liberal Party, holding the middle ground, is a party with a considerable in- and outflow of voters. This is surprising considering its relative stability in voter support, and especially in view of the fact that the Radical Liberal voters have always been (at least for the period for which we have data) the most unfaithful of all voters. The only other party, also close to the middle ground, the Center Democrats, have almost the same number – around one third – of its voters that desert them at any new election. New voters come, however.

The larger and older parties, especially the Social Democratic Party, have a rather loyal stock of voters. This is also a normal finding. The other party with stable voters from 1987 to 1988 is the Progress Party. This is no surprise, however, since it was at its lowest level ever, just beginning to rise, but left with only the old core voters. And then an electoral success of course also reflects on the old voters. Why leave in heydays?

For the smaller parties, where the statistical uncertainty is considerable it is not surprising that it is here the larger changes are to be found. A few prolific findings are:

- half of the Left Socialists have gone to the Socialist People's Party
- Common Course has lost its largest fraction (one sixth) to the Progress Party
- the Greens lost all over the party spectrum but got votes from the former Justice Party.

The central question then is: why these changes in party affiliation? and in a longer perspective, of course, how stable are they?

NATO as a Reason for Vote

'Full membership of NATO' was the election theme launched by the government. And it seems as if this contributed to their keeping their voters and even to their recruiting a few from the Social Democrats. However, only 11 percent mentioned NATO as important for their decision on how to vote. On the other hand, considerable attention was given to foreign policy, which normally at elections attracts prime importance only for 2-3 percent of the voters.

It is especially noteworthy that *none* of the Progress Party voters mentioned NATO as a reason to vote. This is probably due not only to the low importance the party attached to the issue during the campaign, but also to the possibility that voters for the Progress Party felt that NATO was an irrelevant issue. And this might have more serious consequences for the

Table 4. NATO as a Reason to Vote (percent).

	Voted in 1988					All
	Left-wing	Soc. Dem.	Rad. Lib.	Four-leaf	Progr. P.	
NATO as a reason to vote	16	5	14	16	0	11
(N=)	134	223	58	301	58	785

Note: Answers to the question 'What was the most important reason for voting like you did at the general election on May 10 1988?'

future support of the 'old parties', to use a term much applied by the founder of the Progress Party, Mogens Glistrup.

Recent Development in Party Support

Since the election the change in the relative size of the bourgeois parties has accelerated. The Progress Party is increasing dramatically. In Norway it had a peak in early spring 1988, averaging 23 percent.

There are many good explanations and nervous political guesses concerning the reason for this dramatic development. A few comments will suffice here. There is reason to believe that the NATO election in itself caused annoyance with politicians, and their lack of sense of proportion. The election was an accident caused by a tired prime minister and a new opposition leader, and showed with clarity that party politics had very much to do with deals, intrigues and games. And there is no excuse in 'the people get the parliament they compose and deserve'. The same was seen by the

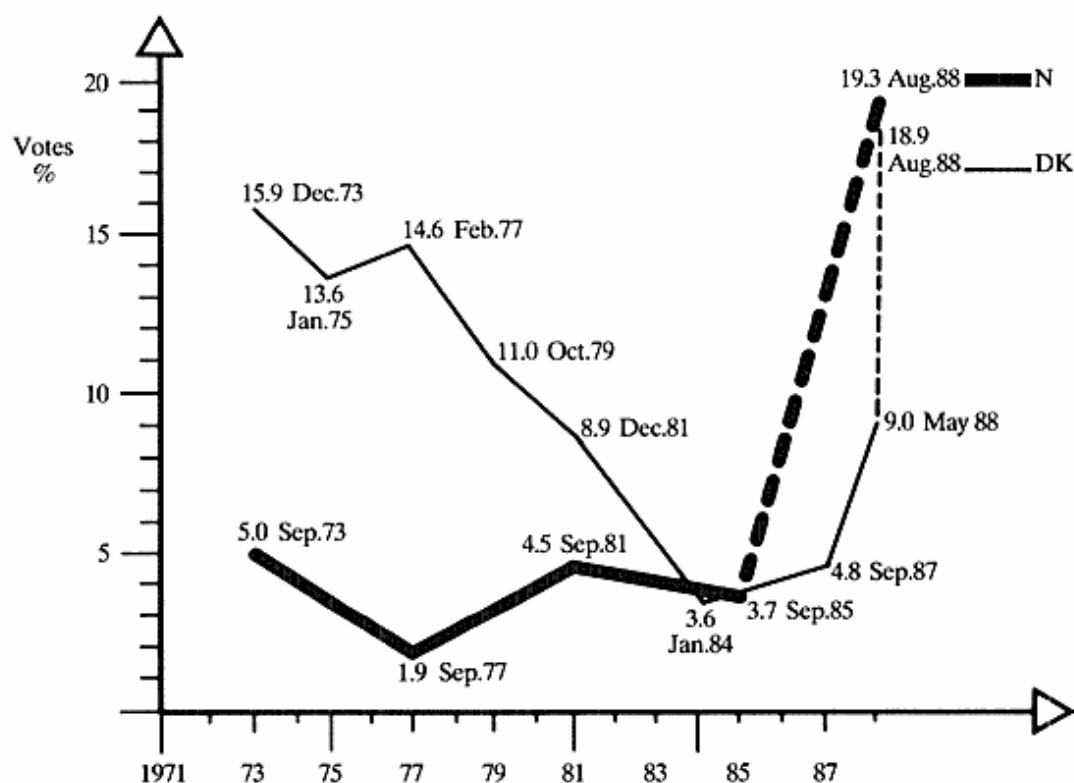


Fig. 1. Support for the Progress Parties in Denmark and Norway (percent). Sources: National election statistics and average of opinion polls. Denmark: by Gallup Markedsanalyse A/S, Vilstrup, AIM, Observa og Greens. Interviews from mid-August to mid-September 1988. Norway: Norsk Gallup (NOI), MMI, A-S Opinion, NMD and Scanfact/VG. Three months sliding average from May to August 1988.

unusual long theatre around the forming of a new government. A theatre that by law and custom included the Queen.

But as there is an almost parallel development in Norway and now perhaps a similar one in Sweden, where the Greens entered the political arena on September 18 1988 with 5.3 percent of the vote – an unheard of development which can only be interpreted as a similar, though more civilized form of disenchantment with the policies pursued by the older parties.

For Denmark the Progress Party is remarkable in being the party that most accurately reflected the socio-demographic profile of the country as a whole. The days are gone when protest was aimed at 'too much abuse of the social system' and a severe down grading of the welfare system – that is, the way the voters somewhat inconsistently see it. It is a deep disenchantment. But, contrary to 1973, when the big wave rolled in over all the 'old parties', it is only the bourgeois parties – especially the Conservatives – that suffer losses now. The Progress Party is finding its place in the left-right party picture. It remains to be seen if parliamentary behaviour lives up to the 'old' political etiquette. And misconduct is to be expected with consequent oscillations in voter support giving its contribution to the Danish and Norwegian political instability.

NOTES

1. The Gallup Institute (Gallup Markedsanalyse A/S) has followed up the attitudes towards NATO since 1949, and on the question 'Are you for or against Danish membership of the North-Atlantic Treaty (NATO)?' the answers have been heavily in favour. The latest results, from March 1988, showed 59 percent for, 16 percent against and 25 percent don't know (N = 1.023).
2. This simplistic notion of the election was helped by certain public NATO government statements, notably from the UK. On the other hand, in the United States, a White House spokesman said on April 27: 'a Danish election? To me "Danish" is breakfast'. An official apology followed the same night.
3. E.g. *The New York Times* carried articles on April 26 and 29, May 4, 5 and 9, as did the *Guardian* on May 3 with a clear perception of the Danish election being held on the issue of 'yes' or 'no' to NATO. This was matched with electronic media coverage among others by the BBC on May 2.
4. The so-called four-leaf clover government was formed in December 1981, when the Social Democratic government unexpectedly resigned. Poul Schlüter from the Conservatives had headed it. The other parties were the Liberals, the Center Democrats and the Christian People's Party, the latter two being the smaller partners in the company.
5. Erik Damgaard, 'Changes in the Parliamentary Culture', *Politica* no. 3, 1987, p. 288.
6. Since 1920 the Radical Liberals have oscillated between 15 percent (1968) and 3.6 percent of the vote (1977) and still kept the decisive balancing power. After the landslide election of 1973 a Socialist/Radical Liberal majority could not be formed. This was still the situation in 1975, but with the extended support of the Center Democrats and the Christian People's Party a Social Democratic government was nevertheless formed.
7. In 1953, only five months elapsed between two general elections, but this was due to an election caused by the Constitution and in order to confirm its change.

8. In Norway almost the same situation was created by the Progress Party in 1985, when the bourgeois government resigned because it could not get its budget proposal through parliament due to the Progress Party's stance. The Progress Party is certainly no guarantee for a bourgeois government.
9. The data are based on national, representative surveys carried out by the National Institute for Social Research in 1971 and 1973 and since then by the Danish Gallup Institute. Complete documentation and access can be obtained through the Danish Data Archives.