

Election Commentary

The 1994 Storting Election: Volatile Voters Opposing the European Union

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Background

On 13 September, 1993 a parliamentary (*Storting*) election was held in Norway. As there is no provision for dissolving the *Storting* and calling for new elections in the midst of the four-year parliamentary term, it was a regular election. The election returns revealed an extraordinarily high level of change in support for several parties, compared to the last election in 1989. At the same time individual shifts (volatility) among voters reached a new high, even surpassing the former high in 1989. In addition, there was a record-low turnout of 75.8 percent. One has to go back to the 1927 election to find a lower turnout at national elections in Norway. There has, however, been a downward trend at *local* elections in the last 10 years. The lack of a serious alternative to the incumbent Labour government was probably one of the most important factors behind the low turnout. The election campaign did not create a widespread interest among the voters, although the highly controversial question of membership in the European Union (Community) once again was put on the agenda. What has happened in Norwegian politics to warrant the low turnout and high volatility? In this article I will try to give a few preliminary answers to these questions.

Election Results

The election results are reported in Table 1. The Centre Party almost tripled its share of both votes and seats. This made it the second largest party in the *Storting*. Although the Conservative Party received 0.3 percent *more* votes than the Centre Party, it won four seats *fewer* than the Centre

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Election Results

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Table 1. Votes (percent) and Seats in 1989 and 1993. Changes from 1989 in Parentheses.

	Votes			Seats		
	1989	1993	Diff.	1989	1993	Diff.
Red Electoral Alliance	0.8	1.1	(+0.3)	0	1	(+1)
Socialist Left Party	10.1	7.9	(-2.2)	17	13	(-4)
Labour Party	34.3	36.9	(+2.6)	63	67	(+4)
Liberal Party	3.2	3.6	(+0.4)	0	1	(+1)
Christian People's Party	8.5	7.9	(-0.6)	14	13	(-1)
Centre Party	6.5	16.7	(+10.2)	11	32	(+21)
Conservative Party	22.2	17.0	(-5.2)	37	28	(-9)
Progress Party	13.0	6.3	(-6.7)	22	10	(-12)
Green Party	0.4	0.1	(-0.3)	0	0	(-)
Stop Immigration	0.3	0.1	(-0.2)	0	0	(-)
The Aune list	0.3	(-)	(-0.3)	1	0	(-1)
Retired People's Party	0.3	1.0	(+0.7)	0	0	(-)
Others	0.5	1.4	(+0.9)	0	0	(-)
Total	100.0	100.0		165	165	(-)
Number of votes	2653173	2472551	180622			
Turnout in percent	83.2	75.8	(-7.4)			

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics.

Party. Contrary to what one would expect, this discrepancy was not caused by the well-known disproportional allocation of seats to the various electoral districts.¹ Rather, the uneven distribution of Conservative votes, the weakening of support for this party in contrast to the increasing strength of the Centre Party, and the strength of other parties competing for seats contributed to this paradoxical result. Whereas the 1989 election resulted in increased support for the two "extreme" parties on the left and the right (Socialist Left and Progress Party), both parties lost considerable support in the 1993 election. For the Socialist Left Party the situation was more dramatic in terms of decreased individual loyalty than in loss of aggregate support.² The election was even more disastrous for the Progress Party. The party lost more than half of its support among the voters at the aggregate level, while only one quarter of its former voters remained loyal in 1993. The Conservative Party also lost heavily in the election, reducing the joint support of the parties on the right from 35 to 23 percent. According to opinion polls assessed only three to four months before the election, the governing Labour Party was in for a severe loss in the election. The polls predicted a *loss* of 10 percentage points. Despite the gloomy forecasts Labour *gained* almost 3 percent compared to 1989. Labour did not, however, win a majority on its own. The minority government led by Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland will still depend on support from at least two other parties in the *Storting* in order to implement its policy.

The proportion of female Members of Parliament reached a new high in 1993. While 35.8 percent of the *Storting* representatives were women in 1989, their share increased to 39.4 in 1993. This is one of the highest levels of female representation in any representative body in Western democracies. In particular, the Centre Party increased its female representation.

The number of parties running for office was higher than ever before in Norwegian history. Twenty-four parties competed for the 165 seats of the national assembly. Most of them were insignificant parties, with little hope of obtaining a seat of their own. The Aune list, a protest list which won one seat in the province of Finnmark in 1989, did not run this time. The old Liberal Party mobilized itself in a desperate attempt to be represented after eight years' exile from the *Storting*. This time the party succeeded in the Hordaland province, although the party only increased its share of the votes by 0.4 percentage points at the national level. The Liberal Party did not, however, succeed in reaching the threshold of 4.0 percent for additional seats. This would have increased their group by four to five more seats. Furthermore, the Red Electoral Alliance won one seat in the Oslo electoral district. The Green Party received only 0.1 percent, even less than the meagre result of 0.4 percent in 1989. This emphasizes the conclusions drawn earlier about the problems facing a green party in Norway (Aardal 1990a).

Record High Volatility

Thanks to panels including voters interviewed at two consecutive elections, we are able to estimate more precisely the extent of individual shifts in party preference between elections. While 20–25 percent changed between parties or between voting and non-voting, in the 1960s, the instability increased to above 30 percent in the early 1970s. It remained around this level until the end of the 1980s. In 1989, however, the shifts increased to 39 percent of the voters (Valen, Aardal & Vogt 1990, 28). The diagonal in Table 2 indicates that 44 percent of those who could vote in both elections changed voting preferences in the period 1989–93.³ This is the highest number of shifts ever measured in the Norwegian Election Studies since their initiation in 1957.

If we only count voters who actually voted on both occasions, the party shifts increase from 30 percent in 1989 to 36 percent in 1993. This indicates that decreasing turnout alone cannot explain the increasing volatility. Shifts between parties played a considerable role. The Centre Party attracted a large number of new voters from practically all the other parties. A similar tendency can be observed for the Labour Party, although to a lesser extent.

Table 2. Voting 1989-93. Transition Matrix. Percentages Based on Grand Total. N = 787.

Voting 1989	Red El.AI	Soc. Left	Voting 1993							Non- vot.	
			Lab.	Lib.	Chr.	Cent.	Cons	Prog.	Oth.		
Red Electoral Alliance	0.8	-	0.1	-	-	-	0.1	-	-	-	-
Socialist Left	0.1	4.4	3.6	0.4	-	-	2.0	0.1	-	-	1.1
Labour	0.3	0.8	22.6	0.3	0.3	-	2.9	0.1	0.1	-	3.2
Liberal	-	0.4	0.5	1.4	0.1	-	0.6	0.3	-	-	0.1
Christian Centre	-	0.1	0.5	0.5	4.4	-	0.8	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.1
Conservative	-	-	0.1	-	-	-	5.0	-	-	-	0.6
Progress	-	0.3	2.5	1.3	0.4	-	1.7	10.8	0.6	0.6	1.8
Others	0.1	0.1	1.9	0.1	0.4	-	0.6	1.1	2.4	0.5	2.4
Non-voting	-	0.1	0.3	-	-	-	0.1	-	-	-	0.5
			1.7	-	-	-	1.1	1.3	0.5	0.4	4.2

Source: Norwegian Election Studies.

These two parties have also been much more successful in keeping their 1989 voters than the other parties. At the other end of the stability scale we find the Progress Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Liberal Party.⁴

Campaign Issues

The lack of clear-cut government alternatives was a major aspect of the election campaign, and is probably the most important explanation for the low turnout. This obviously led to a general decrease in interest in the campaign. According to the Election Study fewer people cared much about the election in 1993 than in 1989 (32 vs. 39 percent). In addition, only 20 percent said they discussed the election with friends or relatives, a dramatic decrease compared with the 40 percent who did so in 1989.

The non-socialist (bourgeois) parties, which traditionally have been able to muster a joint government alternative, were hardly on speaking terms in this election. The break-up of the non-socialist coalition government in 1990 was clearly related to internal disagreement on the Norwegian entry into the European Union. Because the most uncompromising opponents were found within the non-socialist "bloc", a coalition government between these parties after the 1993 election was out of the question. The main adversaries on the non-socialist side were the Conservative Party on the pro-EU side and the Centre Party on the anti-EU side. The strong showing of the latter party in the election, and the weakening of the former party, makes a non-socialist government even more unlikely in the next *Storting* period, at least as long as EU membership is on the agenda. The internal disagreement among the opposition parties gave the ruling Labour Party a chance to make *governability* a major issue in the electoral campaign. The party succeeded in convincing voters that there was no realistic alternative to a Labour government. Attempts at declaring the Conservative Party a credible government alternative failed, because it was demonstrated in the campaign that a Conservative government would not have the necessary backing in the *Storting*, almost no matter how the election turned out. In addition to the discredibility of the non-socialist parties, and to the credibility of the Labour Party in this question, there was the break-up of the non-socialist coalition government in the previous parliamentary terms (Aardal 1990b). Both in 1986 and 1990 Gro Harlem Brundtland was "forced" to take government responsibility despite a weak parliamentary basis.

Table 3 shows the issues that the voters emphasized as the most important ones.⁵ The table gives the percentage mentioning the issues, and the corresponding figures from the election in 1989 in parentheses.

The European membership issue was definitely the most important issue

Table 3. Most Important Issues at the Election (Percentage).

	1993	(1989)
The European Union (EC)	65	(9)
Unemployment	22	(19)
Health care/social policy	15	(46)
Child care/family policy*	8	(-)
Environmental protection	7	(37)
Immigration	6	(9)
Taxes	5	(6)
Other economic issues	5	(8)
Education	5	(3)

Source: The Norwegian Election Study.

* Not separate category in 1989.

in the 1993 election: 65 percent of the voters said that Norway's relationship with Europe was their most important concern, a tremendous increase from a modest nine percentage points mentioning this issue in 1989. Although unemployment ranks as the number two issue, it may surprise some observers that the number of people mentioning this problem has not significantly increased from 1989, despite the increasing unemployment figures. The reason for this lies in the widely shared belief that the Norwegian government and the Labour Party alone were not responsible for unemployment. Only 16 percent of the voters said that government policy was the major cause of the high unemployment. Regarding the other issues, we find a striking reduction in the number of people mentioning environmental protection, and health care/social policy. This obviously reflects the dominance of the EU issue in the campaign. Very few mentioned government ability, the other main theme of the campaign. This may have to do with the tendency of voters not to consider the government question an "issue" in the same way as those mentioned in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the frequencies of issues mentioned for each party's electorate. Concerning the European Union, almost 90 percent of the Centre Party voters mention this issue, with the Socialist Left voters following suit. Unemployment seems to concern socialist voters more than the non-socialist voters, but the differences are not very pronounced. This confirms the impression that unemployment was not considered a *partisan* issue at the election. Health care and social policy are in the same way not a controversial issue, although Labour voters and Progressive voters give somewhat more attention to this theme. Child care and family values are very much a concern for the Christian People's Party, and this is reflected among its voters. Although environmental protection was low on the agenda, the Liberal and Socialist Left voters express more interest than

Table 4. Most Important Issues by Party, 1993 (Percentage).

	Soc.L.	Lab.	Lib.	Chr.	Centre	Cons.	Progr.
The European Union (EC)	81	55	65	58	89	60	42
Unemployment	23	32	19	12	14	16	18
Health care/social policy	15	20	9	13	8	11	24
Child care/family policy*	7	5	7	28	4	9	6
Environmental protection	19	5	28	2	10	2	3
Immigration	3	3	7	2	2	5	42
Taxes	2	4	4	1	2	19	10
Other economic issues	2	7	6	1	2	11	4
Education	3	6	4	4	2	9	1

Source: The Norwegian Election Study.

* Not separate category in 1989.

others. But compared to 1989, even these voters are considerably *less* interested in the environment. Immigration policy and refugees have for many years especially attracted voters for the Progressive Party. This was even more so in 1993. Taxes and economic issues were not prominent in the campaign, which may have hurt the Conservative Party. Conservative voters are relatively more concerned with this type of issue than the rest of the electorate. The overall impression given in Table 4 is the presence of a number of *issue-publics*, i.e. segments of the electorate attracted to particular issue areas and parties.

Role of the Media

The 1993 election represents a major change as regards media coverage in Norway. For the first time commercial television channels covered the campaign *on a par* with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). Both TV 2 and TV Norge aired presentations and debates in which the parties themselves participated. In terms of hours this at least doubled, if not tripled media coverage. But despite the quantitative increase the campaign did not "catch fire" among the voters, as our data indicate. The political circumstances, especially the lack of trustworthy government alternatives, seem to have subdued the intensity of the election campaign, despite the increased attention given by the electronic media. The long-term consequences of the breakdown of the television "monopoly" of the NRK might, however, be more pronounced in future campaigns.

Discussion

The gains of the Centre Party can only be explained in terms of the strong

anti-EU sentiments among Norwegian voters. The main factor behind this remarkable surge was the increased salience of the EU (European Union) issue. After Norway's no to EU membership in the national referendum in 1972 (Valen 1973), the question of the country's relationship with the European Community was a "non-issue" for almost 20 years. As late as 1989, only a small fraction of the electorate mentioned EC membership as the most important issue. In 1993, however, the opposite is true (cf. Table 3). The Centre Party not only opposes EU membership, but also opposes closer European cooperation within the European Economic Area (EØS). An aggregate analysis based on election results at the commune level shows that 53 percent of the Centre Party's increase can be explained by the percentage of "no" votes in the referendum on Norwegian entry into the Common Market in 1972 (Valen 1994a, b). The Socialist Left Party is a staunch opponent of the EU as well, but the party lost momentum in the last part of the campaign. Being the only serious challenger to the left of Labour, one would have expected the Socialist Left Party to benefit from the internal unrest that had troubled the Labour Party in the 1989–93 *Storting* period. The Labour Party was divided on the EU issue, and the increasing unemployment was putting a heavy strain on a party which has had full employment as a major political goal. Unemployment increased from the 6 percent level in 1989, to about 8 percent in 1993. When the election campaign started, the economic outlook was a bit mixed. The unemployment was still record-high, according to Norwegian standards, but there were signs that it was not increasing as much as before. At the same time the interest-rate was decreasing, inflation was only between 2 and 3 percent (one of the lowest in Europe) and the foreign trade balance was positive. It was not easy for the opposition then, either to the left or to the right of Labour, to convince the voters that the Labour government was doing a poor job. At the same time Mr Erik Solheim, leader of the Socialist Left Party, obviously scared some of his anti-EU voters by suggesting that Labour and his own party might enter into closer cooperation after the election. The Socialist Left Party lost many anti-EC voters to the Centre Party, especially in the northern regions. This happened towards the end of the campaign. The Socialist Left Party also lost support in the province of Oslo where it had joined with the Labour Party to form a city government after the 1991 local election. Labour, on the other hand, was able to convince many anti-EU voters that the election would not foreclose the question of EU membership. The "neutralization" of the EU issue, and the emphasis on Labour being the only government alternative, was definitely a successful strategy for the Labour Party.

The tension between the central areas and the more peripheral areas has been a recurring theme in Norwegian politics. With the renewed interest in the European question, this conflict has come to the fore again. There

are clear indications that this has led not only to a revitalization of the regional conflict, but even to an intensification of the conflict (Bjørklund & Hellevik 1994).

Superficially, the results of the 1993 election might seem to indicate a crisis in the Norwegian party system: the turnout was lower than at any national election since World War II, the change in support was high for a number of parties, and the parliamentary situation has been unstable. But, despite these signs, we do not necessarily experience a *delegitimization* of the party system proper. Results from the Election Study indicate that the general level of trust has *not* decreased among Norwegian voters. The low turnout and the number of party shifts can, to a large extent, be explained as a consequence of the disrupting effects of the EU issue. Our data show that the opponents of EU membership were more prone to change party than the adherents of the European Union. In addition, many voters may have abstained from voting because they disagreed with their party's position on the EU question. Why is the European "connection" so controversial in Norway? In short, it tends to mobilize all underlying cleavages and creates great tensions *between* parties as well as *within* individual parties. Until this question is decided in a new referendum, the EU issue will continue to "disturb" Norwegian politics. But past experience may indicate that Norwegian politics will stabilize and return to a more "normal" situation when the EU issue has been settled. The party system was able to cope with the disrupting powers of the EC issue in the 1970s, and we have no indications that the situation will be different this time. But the interesting question is to what extent the present disagreement and tensions between the parties will have *lasting effects* on the party system in the years to come. Although the party system returned to a more "normal" state after the referendum in 1972, the system was not the *same* in the sense that nothing had changed. New parties were established and old parties changed profile in the aftermath of the former EC debate. A similar "adaptation" and change may take place this time. In the meantime the instability and volatility create problems both for students of elections and for party strategists.

NOTES

1. This has been tested in a simulation of the 1993 election based on an allocation of seats proportional to the number of voters living in each of the 19 electoral districts. A proportional allocation of seats would actually have increased the over-representation of the Centre Party.
2. Only 37 percent of the Socialist Left Party's 1989 voters voted for this party in 1993.
3. The diagonal actually shows the percentage of *stable* voters (56 percent), but the focus here is on those who changed their affiliation.
4. Only 25 percent of the Progress Party's 1989 voters voted the same in 1993, and only 40 percent of the Liberal voters from 1989 voted for the same party in 1993.

5. The respondents were allowed to mention two issues. The figures show the percentage of voters mentioning each issue either as their number one or number two issue.

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