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Norway tilts left and green

Despite the Labor Party's poor results, progressives have every reason to be satisfied after the local elections in Norway

The Norwegian electorate voted heavily in favour of leftist and green parties this past week. The municipal elections showed that Norway's Green Party has become a force every major party now must take into account. The Socialist Left Party (SV) however, organised the most impressive election campaign in this cycle, having been less covered by the media, yet still beating expectations on election night.

There are several important trends that shaped Norway's municipal elections this year: The Progress Party (FRP), Norway's right-wing populist party that is part of the current centre-right coalition government, heavily underperformed with 8.2 per cent of the vote. The results are probably raising some questions for party leader Siv Jensen, who assumed the reigns in 2005, when FRP gained 22.1 per cent. That being said, the Progress Party commonly do worse in local elections than in parliamentary elections. One explanation is the failure to make immigration a centrepiece issue in local elections.

Rising costs for drivers due to a growth in toll roads clearly dominated the election season this year, which resulted in the rise of a new party, 'People's Action – No to More Road Tolls' (FNB), solely focused on this issue. The Progress Party of the past would have been in a position to capitalise on opposition to toll roads, but as members of the ruling coalition, the issue ended up hurting FRP badly. Its result was the party's worst showing in 28 years.

Erna Solberg's Conservative Party also took a beating. The party got 28 per cent of the vote in 2011, but barely broke 20 per cent this cycle.

The national-local divide

It's also significant to look at combined support for these two parties. In 2007, the Progressive Party and the Conservatives won a combined 36.8

per cent of the vote. In 2011, they even received a total of 39.4 per cent. This cycle the two parties ended with a meagre 28 per cent support, combined. This is the worst result since 1993. It seems that the voting population has moved in a more progressive direction. Moreover, the other two coalition partners, The Christian Democrats and the Liberal party, also did poorly.

But by and large, the historically poor showing of the Labour Party dominated headlines after the elections. The party got 24.8 per cent of the vote, a dramatic fall from 33 per cent of the vote tally in 2015. While the result is certainly not a good one, the 2015 election result was also a historic high (best in 28 years). The Labour Party lost voters to parties on its left and green flank. The election represents a challenge for a party that has been able to unite a broad alliance of voters. But on the other hand, as we now see municipality after municipality turning centre-left with the Labour Party as the strongest force in the left camp. That's also a sign of a party that has become a lot better at cooperating.

However, the progressive turn was not limited to Oslo. All the major cities followed suit, and the re-election of Johansen's coalition confirms a trend first visible in the 2017 elections.

The 2011 election, following Breivik's terror attack on 22 July, showed a very strong result for Labour with 31.7 per cent (usually they perform better at parliamentary elections). But after the election, only 33 per cent of the population of Norway lived in a centre-left municipality. That led to a reorientation and an effort within Labour to become better at alliance-building and cooperation. After 2015, 66 per cent of the population lived in a centre-left governed municipality, and probably the number will be quite similar, maybe even higher now.

Major cities are important battle grounds in Norwegian local elections, and ahead of election day, several of the big cities were still in play. In Oslo, the Labour Party's Raymond Johansen and his green-leftist coalition coasted to re-election. This victory is quite historic, as the Conservatives have governed with various coalitions in the capitol more or less since 1971.

However, the progressive turn was not limited to Oslo. All the major cities followed suit, and the re-election of Johansen's coalition confirms a trend first visible in the 2017 elections. That year, more than 160 000 voters supported either the left-wing Red Party or the Green party, many of them residing in Oslo. In the national elections, this paradoxically allowed prime minister Erna Solberg to remain in power, despite a

majority of the population voting for change because neither the Greens nor the Reds reached the magic 4 per cent electoral threshold, and therefore only got one representative each in Parliament.

Green growth

In this election, The Green party really established itself as a national player in Norwegian politics with 6.8 per cent of the total vote share. The results are even more impressive than the numbers imply, as the Greens did not have candidates running in as many constituencies as the rest of the parties.

The Greens are trending in parts of the country, and are particularly popular among younger voters. After the next parliamentary elections in 2021, it's not unlikely that they will be part of a new majority. There are however, larger hurdles for the party to cross in order to be welcomed into a national ruling coalition. Energy policy is still an area of contention, where the Greens hold positions that will be hard for possible coalition partners to accept. Yet, the re-elected coalition in Oslo show that partnership is possible. Here, the Greens have proven to be a party that's open to compromise in order to govern.

The Agrarian Party (SP) was the clear winner of the elections, after taking advantage of a popular uprising against the government's centralising reform politics. From the start, the party established itself as the leading voice in opposition to several reforms, including in the police force, while Labour joined the governing coalition in support. As a result, SP got a staggering 14.4 per cent of the vote, placing itself as the country's third-largest party. The Agrarian Party has a long tradition of advocating that public services should be available close to where people live, even in rural areas. In this cycle, the message hit home with a large portion of the electorate.

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The Socialist Left Party (SV) also conducted an impressive campaign. The party has been faced steep competition both from the Red Party on the left, and the Greens on climate change issues. Despite this increased competition, SV gained votes this year. One explanation is that the party's leader Audun Lysbakken is an accomplished speaker who excels in debates. Moreover, the party has managed to promote solution-oriented politics with realistic plans for the future.

The next national elections

Will this year's results predict anything ahead of the next national elections in 2021ß Here we see some interesting trends. As a large national electoral survey shows, voters on average became more progressive and greener between the years 2013 and 2017. The clear majority for parties on the left in this election confirms this trend. In addition, the municipal elections showed a fragmentation of the political landscape: The major parties are loosing ground to newer, smaller parties. This is the same trend that have ripped across many other European countries, and can probably be attributed to the fact that peoples' lives differ more today than before.

The distribution of seats in the Parliament would, if the opposition parties repeated this year's showing in 2021, change dramatically. As such, the time ahead should be an exciting period for parties on the left.

To actually govern together, the challenge will be to find enough common ground on topics like climate change, welfare and education policy, migration issues. In today's political landscape, there will need to be a balance between the large, traditional ruling parties like the Labour Party, their former government partners Socialist Left and the Agrarian Party, and the newcomers in the Green Party. This past week's elections show that voters support the general direction of these parties. That's a reason to be optimistic.



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