

Summary

Tuesday's election, called by Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen on 24 October, ended with a surprising, but narrow win for the governing Liberal-Conservative coalition and its parliamentary ally the Danish People's Party. Even though the Liberal Party suffered some losses, the coalition and its partner still hold 89 of the 175 seats in parliament which with the conditional support of one MP elected on the Faroe Islands gives the government the slimmest of working majorities.

The election was a triumph for the Socialist Party which after nearly two decades of decline celebrated its best result since 1988 and to a lesser degree the Danish People's Party which against all predictions not only gained 0,5 percentage points compared with the 2005 election - itself a significant triumph for the party - but also still holds the crucial parliamentary votes needed for the government.

In terms of votes, the election was a major defeat for the Social Liberal Party which saw all of the gains from the 2005 election wiped out while the Social Democrats also recorded losses. Viewed in isolation, the 2007 result was the party's worst performance since the 1906 election when the Social Democrats held 25,4% of the vote.

The election was also a major disappointment to the New Alliance party which was formed in May by members of the Social Liberal, Liberal and Conservative Parties to bring about a change in co-operation patterns in parliament. The party not only saw its share of the vote fall well below expectations - opinion polls in the early part of the campaign suggested that the party would stand to gain 5-6% of the vote - it also failed to capture the median position in the Folketing, minimising its chances of influencing tax and immigration policies.

Finally, turn-out - traditionally high in Denmark - was up from 84,4 to 86,5%. This is slightly surprising as the campaign was very short and lacked an overriding theme.

As there is no majority against the present government in the new Folketing, the government will not resign. Instead, Anders Fogh Rasmussen invited to a round of consultations with the Danish People's Party and New Alliance on Wednesday.

As the counting of the personal votes (usually around 50% of votes are cast as personal votes) hasn't finished at the time of writing, I won't comment that distribution.

The Campaign

When Anders Fogh Rasmussen called the election on 24 October, he ended nearly six months' of speculations and rumours about an early election. Political commentators and politicians already expected an election in September but preparations were aborted when the government entered an agreement about tax cuts with the Danish People's Party. A minor government reshuffle also indicated that an election had been postponed for some time.

Fogh Rasmussen motivated the election with the need to create support for the government's quality reform drive and to counter excessive demands for pay rises in the public sector but neither issue played a central role in the campaign. Instead, a number of issues promoted by different parties competed for the voters' attention while a poll conducted by Gallup suggested that the voters' political agenda had changed from 2001 and 2005, where immigration and health care were central themes, to an emphasis on general social policy and welfare.

The campaign was also characterised by a number of policy reversals among the opposition parties.

The Social Liberals and Socialists gave up their fundamental opposition to the so-called "24-year-clause" which is one of several rules limiting the right for spouses and relatives to enter Denmark, while the Social Democrats promised to cancel their participation in a primary education agreement with the government which introduced a series of national tests for primary school pupils.

These reversals, on the one hand, removed a number of stumbling blocks in the co-operation between Social Democrats, Socialists and Social Liberals. On the other hand, they also raised questions about the internal and external stability of these parties' policy positions.

The government's campaign was more subdued and focused on the need to continue the welfare and immigration policies introduced since 2001. A bizarre element of the campaign was that voters, when asked, found it easier to remember the Social Democrats' pledges than the governments'. This recognition factor still didn't help the Social Democrats.

Compared with earlier elections, the Danish People's Party also kept a relatively low profile with the party's campaign film presenting an idyllic rural Denmark under threat from Islamist terrorism as the high point. On the other hand, the party already had carried out a massive poster and newspaper campaign during the late summer and early autumn emphasising a number of "Danish values" and the party's commitment to pursuing them in day-to-day politics. To the DPP, the election campaign could be seen as a continuation of the values campaign.

The left-wing Unity List had drawn a lot of attention both before and during the campaign because of the party's nomination of social worker Asmaa Abdol-Hamid as one of its top candidates in Copenhagen. Abdol-Hamid, who is of Palestinian origin, had been the object of much internal and external criticism because she emphasised her religious views (She conspicuously wears a head-scarf and refuses to shake hands with men). The Unity List had lost support during the summer but whether the decision to field Ms. Abdol-Hamid played the decisive role remains to be seen. The party may have gained some of the immigrant vote in the election as Muslim leaders endorsed her candidacy.

Finally, the New Alliance party showed itself to be somewhat accident-prone during the campaign. The party which had only been formed in May and was in the process of creating a proper membership organisation was rushed into picking candidates and this lack of preparation showed in a number of uncoordinated initiatives by several of the high-profile candidates nominated by the party.

Basically, the party ran on three issues - reducing the Danish People's Party's influence over government policies, more liberal immigration and integration policies and a tax reform reducing top-bracket income tax rates significantly - but found it difficult to deliver its message. That the party's most prominent figure, Naser Khader, became involved in a conflict with the editor of the illustrated weekly *Henrik Qvortrup*, a former advisor to Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and handled the situation less convincingly only added to the party's misfortunes.

A Short Preliminary Analysis

One thing which is worth noting about the election result, is that if New Alliance is counted as a part of the government bloc, the balance of power between the main blocs didn't change between 2005 and 2007: After the 2007 election, Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the government can count on 94 MPs, while Helle Thorning Schmidt can count on 81 MPs. All *net* movement took place within the political blocs - this of course allows for quite a lot of gross movement both within and across blocs.

Second, given the lack of an overriding issue in the campaign, the increase in turn-out is interesting. Commentators have suggested that New Alliance may have played a role here by targeting the Danish People's Party in its electoral propaganda. That, in turn, could have motivated DPP supporters to turn out in higher numbers than expected. The fact that the DPP was only marginally under its 2005 result in many opinion polls during the campaign should also have served as an indication that the DPP would make a strong performance at the polls.

Third, even if immigration wasn't a major issue in the campaign - though there was some discussion about the handling of Iraqi asylum seekers which had been denied a permanent stay in Denmark and the DPP made what it could from Asmaa Abdol-Hamid's candidacy, the Danish People's Party still

made a strong performance and even gained vote shares compared with 2005. The DPP is an anti-immigration party but its electoral success also builds on a strong position in social policy issues.

Fourth, I suspect that this election confirmed that we now have a leftist parallel to the “general rightist” voter which has long been a feature of Danish politics.

The “general rightist” voter is a voter which has a clear position on the left-right scale without being particularly committed to any particular party. In this way “general rightists” would float between Liberals, Conservatives, Christian Democrats, Social Liberals (when they positioned themselves on or to the right of the centre) and the now-defunct Centre Democrats. Similarly, the “general leftist” will flow between Social Democrats, Socialists and Social Liberals - and to a lesser degree the Unity List. In 2005, the Social Liberals won the hearts and votes of the “general leftists”, in 2007 the Socialists did the same.

This mobility isn't primarily a protest vote. Rather, research has shown that many Danish voters generally have strong second and third preferences when it comes to parties. The Unity List and the Danish People's Party are the only parties existing outside of this general consensus.

Fifth, the indication is that the electorate identified with the Social Democrats' policies without voting for the party. One reason was the strong performance of the Socialist Party (see under “general leftist”), another that the Liberals and the Danish People's Party managed to hold on to potential swing voters. I'm looking forward to seeing a break-down of voter movements involving the Liberals. The Social Democrats are not in a hopeless position but need to review their strategies.

Finally, the weak performance of New Alliance merits attention. Given the original polls, I would have expected the party to win 4-6% of the vote and 2,8% is well below the expectations of both external observers and the party itself.

Outlook

Predicting anything in Danish politics is notoriously difficult but the coming parliamentary term may be rather more uncomfortable for the government than the 2001-2005 and 2005-2007 terms.

The government will be operating on a very narrow majority after the election. Experience has shown that the Danish People's Party usually lose one or more MPs during an electoral term and there are also significant disagreements between the government and the DPP on a number of policy issues that will reach the political agenda in the coming year, most significantly the adoption of the new EU treaty and pay for social and health care workers.

The government can count on the Social Democrats, New Alliance and the Social Liberals to support the EU treaty, but the Social Democrats in particular may feel less obliged to help the government in controlling wage negotiations. More generally, the government may be exposed to a lot of demands for higher public expenditure on a lot of areas related to education, health care and social policy while finding it difficult to reach political agreements in parliament.

The negotiations about the 2008 Budget, due to begin very soon, will be an interesting indicator of things to come.

The Social Democratic leadership also faces interesting tasks. After a long period with internal conflicts and after losing at least two generations of experienced politicians during the last terms, the party are now left with a new, relatively united group of front-bench politicians which will have to formulate a programme for the next election which can position the party as a contender for government.

The early election and the electoral set-back could turn out to be blessings-in-disguise for Helle Thorning Schmidt: Either the next election will be on the background of a conflict between the government and the Danish People's Party or it will be 3 years out in the future, giving her time to reassess and revise the party's policies and strategies. At the same time, she will have a crew of politicians

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Jacob Christensen

who have not been brought up in the belief in Social Democratic hegemony but exposed to a much more competitive situation on the electoral and parliamentary arenas.

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Jacob Christensen
jacobchristensen.se@gmail.com

Appendix: Results

	Votes 2007	Seats 2007	Votes 2005	Seats 2005
Minority Party			0,3%	
Unity List	2,2%	4	3,4%	6
Socialist Party	13,0%	23	6,0%	11
Social Democrats	25,5%	45	25,8%	47
Social Liberal Party	5,1%	9	9,2%	17
Centre Democrats			1,0%	0
Christian Democrats	0,7%	0	1,7%	0
New Alliance	2,8%	5		
Liberal Party	26,3%	46	29,0%	52
Conservative Party	10,4%	18	10,3%	18
Danish People's Party	13,8%	25	13,3%	24

Turn-out was 86,53% (2005: 84,4%) with 0,67% invalid votes. Data do not include the Faroe Islands and Greenland

Source: Indenrigsministeriet, Foreløbigt valgresultat FV2007