

## Mainstream parties in the Nordic countries have tried to deal with the rise of the far-right through a mix of isolation, tolerance and even collaboration.

Blog Admin

*Recent years have seen a rise in support for right-wing populist parties in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark. Anders Ravik Jupskås writes that mainstream parties in these countries, faced with this growth, have chosen between four different strategies: ignoring far-right parties, isolating them, adopting some of their policies, or collaborating with them in order to gain office. He finds that there is no 'best' strategy for mainstream social democratic parties, but that they would also do well to acknowledge some of the issues, such as immigration, that the populist right often gain traction from.*



Since 2010, when the Sweden Democrats (SD) gained 5.7 per cent of the vote and 20 seats in the Swedish parliament, a (right-wing) populist party has been present in all Nordic parliaments. Recent polls show a further increase in support for the SD. Despite several [scandals](#) in late 2012, the SD has become Sweden's third largest party enjoying support from about 9 per cent of the electorate. The SD is, however, still the most inexperienced and smallest of the Nordic populist parties.

In Norway and Denmark, two Progress parties had already emerged in the "earthquake election" of 1973. However, while the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) has become fairly integrated in the Norwegian party system after years of ideological confrontations and organisational disputes, the Danish party disappeared from Danish politics in the 1990s only to be replaced by the Danish People's Party (DF). In the most recent elections in Norway and Denmark, the populist parties gained 22.9 and 12.7 per cent of the votes respectively. These results make FrP the second largest party in Norway, and DF the third largest party in Denmark. However, while the support for the DF seems to have stabilised, recent polls in Norway indicate that the Conservative party will replace FrP as the largest right-wing party in the forthcoming election in September 2013. The FrP has already suffered substantial electoral losses in the local election (down to 12 per cent) which was held in the immediate aftermath of the lethal right-wing terrorist attacks on July 22, and current polls give the party no more than 16-17 per cent.

In Finland, the True Finns (PS) experienced huge

In Finland, the True Finns (PS) experienced huge electoral success in 2011, comparable to FrPd in 1973, Lijst Pim Fortuyn in the 2002 Dutch election, and Forza Italia in the 1994 Italian election. While the PS received 4 per cent in 2007, 19 per cent voted for the party four years later. Recently the party received 18.3 per cent in a nationwide opinion poll, making the party slightly bigger than the Social Democrats.

### **Party family with variation**

Although we might put these four parties into one party family, they differ not only in terms of electoral success, but also with regard to historical legacy, ideology and organisational strength.

The FrP, being rooted in an anti-tax and anti-bureaucracy undercurrent, is far more right-wing in economic policy, more pro-EU and less hostile to globalisation compared to the other parties. In fact, except for its pronounced anti-establishment feature and excessive focus on Islamisation, the party resembles continental, as well as Nordic, conservative parties. The party has also built a more traditional and professional party organisation with quite a few members and local branches. DF also has an anti-tax legacy, but has nevertheless transformed into a more typical populist radical right party focusing on issues such as Islam, immigration, national identity, law and order and anti-EU. DF's party organisation is also more top-down, less comprehensive (in terms of members and local branches) and its members are less active.

The Swedish party, SD, is the only successful populist party in the Nordic region which was – and to some extent still is – embedded in the extreme right subculture. Although the party – and in particular the party leadership – has copied DF and worked hard in recent years to broaden its appeal, it is still by and large a “single-issue” party appealing primarily to anti-immigrant sentiments. Its organisational features are less studied, but formally it is more democratic than DF and it has increased its number of members substantially in recent years. The PS is the only party with a more left-wing populist undercurrent – or what may be labelled “agrarian populism”. The predecessor of the PS, the Finnish Rural party was formed in 1959 as a splinter party from the Agrarian party to protect rural small holders and their traditional values.

Contemporary Finnish populism is still influenced by this tradition, making it less hostile towards state intervention and consequently more left-wing on economic issues. In terms of party organisation, the PS has to a large extent been built up around the charismatic leader Timo Soini. However, just as with the other populist parties, PS, too, seems to work systematically in penetrating local communities organisationally.

The ideology and legacy – and perhaps also organisation (at least in the Danish case) – do constitute an important backdrop in better understanding the different patterns of mainstream reactions in the Nordic countries.

### **Reactions of mainstream parties**

Faced with the rise of populist parties and new issues (e.g. most notably immigration and national identity), mainstream parties can – in theory – choose between at least four different strategies: ignore, isolate, adopt or collaborate. First, mainstream parties need to decide whether they will disengage or engage. If they decide to disengage they can either (S1) ignore the party hoping it will simply go away or they can try to (S2) isolate the party either legally (as often discussed in Germany) or politically (as in the



Credit: c\_nilsen (Creative Commons BY NC SA)

Belgian or French case). If they decide to engage, they can either (S3) adopt the policy or issues put forward by populist parties or they can (S4) collaborate with the populist party in order to gain office (as in the Austrian, Dutch and Italian case). What have been the strategies in the Nordic countries?

## **Sweden**

In Sweden, the mainstream reactions come pretty close to political isolation – or what has been called *cordon sanitaire* elsewhere. While the former populist party New Democracy functioned as a support party for the centre-right government in the early 90's, this is seen as completely unacceptable with regard to the SD, given the party's legacy and illiberal ideology. "We shall not collaborate with the SD", was the message from Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt after the election, and the Greens, initially forming a pre-electoral coalition with the Social Democrats and the Left, agreed to collaborate with the centre-right government in order to make sure that the SD could not blackmail the government on immigration policy.

However, given that the current right-centre government is a few seats short of having a majority in parliament it is difficult to completely ignore the SD. As a result of the 'hung parliament' it should come as no surprise that there has been contact between the government and the SD, though it is still informal, sporadic and marginal.

The most obvious impact from the SD's presence in national politics so far is probably related to the public discourse. SD's position as a parliamentary party has made it difficult for the mainstream parties to stick to the 'defuse' strategy, simply because the SD continuously are trying to politicising the issue. Moreover, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the party might be helped the modern mass media, which values (new) political conflicts. For instance, in the party leader debate at the beginning of October 2012, the TV program *Agenda* for the first time asked the question "How much immigration can Sweden handle?". Not only was this a strong indicator of increased saliency of the immigration issue, but it also shows how fast the populist framing of this particular issue is adopted by mainstream actors.

## **Denmark**

In Denmark, mainstream parties of the right tried to defuse the immigration issue in the 80's, before they started adopting a more restrictive issue position in the 90's and 2000's, even before DF was founded. Not surprisingly, the DF was quickly accepted as a support party for the right-wing government – consisting of the Liberal Party (V) and the Conservative party (K) – which took office in 2001. The prolonged collaboration between the governmental parties and DF, which lasted until 2011, made observers refer to the Danish government as the 'VKO-government', in which 'O' stands for DF. During this period, DF obtained a powerful position, influencing several policy areas (most notably a more restrictive immigration and integration policy). Representative membership surveys in 2000 and 2012 also show that the DF has become less and less disliked among Danish party members, particularly among members of the other mainstream right-wing parties. While half of the members of V strongly disliked the DF in 2000, no more than 14 per cent did so in 2012. Similar figures can be observed with regard to K. Among the centre-left parties (EL, SF, S and RV), the antipathy is still strong: more than 80 per cent say they strongly dislike the DF.

Nevertheless, even the Social Democrats seem to have adopted some of the DF's policy positions in the 2000's, which is partly related to the fact that the restrictive faction within the party seems to be slightly bigger than the liberal faction. In short, the Danish experience can be characterised by mainstream parties collaborating with the populist right and all big parties adopting at least parts of the DF's policies. The DF's success in terms of policy influence and electoral support made the strategy called "one foot in-one foot out" an attractive model for other populist parties elsewhere (e.g. PVV in the Netherlands). This strategy might be abandoned in the coming years, as Pia Kjaersgaard promised the party members (and voters) that the DF will seek office in the future when she resigned earlier this year. However, it should be noted that the current party leader, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, moderated this office-seeking strategy somewhat in a recently conducted interview, saying the party still dislikes politics of compromise.

## **Norway**

In Norway, the relationship between the FrP and the other non-socialist parties is not as formalised or harmonious as it was between the DF and the two mainstream right-wing parties. The centre-left and centre-right governments in Norway have always kept the FrP at arm's length. Firstly, they have not exclusively made state budget agreements with the FrP, but also with the Labour party in two out of nine occasions since 1985. Secondly, all mainstream parties have been morally and ideologically criticising FrP. However, in 2009, the Conservatives declared officially for the first time that they could enter office with the FrP, and in 2012 the Liberals and the Christian People's Party also somewhat reluctantly opened the door for the FrP. Looking at the changing levels of sympathy among party members, this development does not come as a surprise. Among the Conservatives, the share of members who strongly dislike the FrP has never been quite high; 13 per cent in 1991 and 2000, and only 9 per cent in 2009. Amongst the Liberals, the figures have dropped from 75 to 66 per cent from 1991 to 2009, and in the Christian People's Party from 64 to 23 per cent. The opposition against the FrP is simply eroding.

At the local level, FrP has been tolerated for a long time. The party has primarily collaborated with the Conservative Party, most notably in the capital city, Oslo. However, in recent years, collaboration patterns with left-wing parties have also been observed. While there were a few examples of technical collaboration (i.e. non-political agreements of power-sharing) between Labour and the FrP after the 2003 local elections with the two parties collaborating in 13 municipalities, in which four of them expanded to include political agreements after the 2007 local elections. Politically, Norwegian mainstream parties have somewhat half-heartedly tried to defuse the immigration issue. However, in recent years, both the Conservatives and the Labour have adopted some of the FrP's policies, though they still shy away from the conflict perspective advocated by the FrP.

## **Finland**

In Finland, the mainstream reactions towards populism are quite different than in the other three countries. Not only does Finland have a long history of surplus majority governments including the former populist Finnish Rural Party in the 80's, the current Prime Minister, Jyrki Katainen, did everything he could to give the PS governmental responsibility after its successful election in 2011. However, knowing how difficult such a position can be for a populist party, the leader Timo Soini (who, by the way, has written academically on populism) rejected the invitation arguing that the party could not accept the European Union's economic support to Portugal. According to Soini himself, it was "a hard decision to make" and he underlined that the party truly tried to negotiate. The PS is not only different from the other populist parties in that it rejects governmental positions, it also differs in the sense that it would prefer collaborating with the agrarian Centre Party and the Social Democrats and not the other right-wing parties.

## **No straightforward way to deal with the rise of populist parties**

In short, the reactions from mainstream parties to the rise of populist parties have differed substantially across the Nordic countries. While Swedish parties have followed the Belgian and French models of adopting a *cordon sanitaire* vis-à-vis the populist contender, the Danish mainstream right have been closer to the Austrian and Italian model of collaboration and adoption of policy positions. Norway seems to be located somewhere in between, though Norwegian mainstream parties have chosen a strategy which more closely resembles the Danish than the Swedish case. Finland is yet a different story, and has to be interpreted in consideration of PS' legacy and the tradition of so-called inclusive Finnish rainbow coalitions.

So, what is the best strategy – based on the Nordic experience – of containing populist parties? How should mainstream parties position themselves? These questions are truly hard to answer, not only because the national specificity (e.g. role of the media and other parties, previous mainstream policy and real problems of unemployment and immigration) matters a lot, but also because the answer depends on what is seen as the main objective; attracting votes, maintaining internal cohesion, promoting (the best) policy or gaining office?

The Nordic experience does not present any straightforward recipe on how to deal with the rise of populist parties. Different strategies have been put forward at different times in different countries:

political isolation and confrontation in Sweden, collaboration and adaptation in Denmark, confrontation and partial adaptation in Norway and attempts at inclusion in Finland. Despite these different strategies, populist parties have – in all countries – increased their support and been able to politicise their main issue(s).

Like elsewhere in Europe, social democratic parties do not seem to benefit electorally by trying to “steal” the immigration issue from the populist right. Moreover, such policy change might cause problems for any kind of broad left-wing alliance. Instead, social democratic parties should try to politicise economic and welfare issues as a way of confronting mainstream right and populist right parties. In other words, they need to engage in what the Schattschneider once called the “conflict of conflicts”. After all, we know that populist parties in the Nordic countries seem to perform worse when economic issues dominate the agenda.

However, without making it too complicated, it should also be noted that social democratic parties in some countries cannot afford to ignore problems of immigration and integration. Given that social democratic parties do not control the agenda alone, the strategy of ignoring the issue may move them into a defensive position when other right-wing parties (e.g. Denmark) or the media (e.g. Sweden) successfully politicise populist issues. In such cases, social democratic parties could perhaps learn from the Norwegian party, which has acknowledged “the problem” without buying into the “identity threat perspective” put forward by the populist parties.

*This article forms parts of the Policy Network/Barrow Cadbury Trust project on “Populism, Extremism and the Mainstream”.*

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/X2IJIS>

---

## About the author

**Anders Ravik Jupskås** – *University of Oslo*

Anders Ravik Jupskås is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. His research interests include populism and democracy, Right-wing populism, and party organization and culture. He is part of the research project “[Political Parties and Democracy: Decline or Change?](#)”, funded by the Norwegian Research Council.



Related posts:

1. [UKIP's rise is not just a problem for the Conservatives – they are emerging as the party of choice for disaffected and angry voters from all parties \(10.5\)](#)
2. [The rise of virtual activism means that Europe's political parties must embrace digital technologies as campaigning tools. \(11.2\)](#)
3. [Italy's technocratic government is providing ample opportunity for challenges from parties outside of the mainstream. \(11.7\)](#)