

History suggests that Norway is in line for a change of government in September's elections.

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Norway is due to hold parliamentary elections in September. [Sveinung Arnesen](#) looks ahead to the elections, arguing that the cost of ruling is taking its toll on the governing centre-left coalition. Despite the country's oil-rich economy, evidence suggests that the incumbent government is still likely to lose support. He concludes that the stage is set for a centre-right government to come into power in September, unless they stumble like they did in the last elections four years ago.



The political scientist Helmut Norpoth [once wrote](#) that “as long as people have chosen political leaders through some form of election, it has been noted, almost like a law of politics, that popularity diminishes with time in office.” The general argument for the cost of rule is that decreasing support comes as high expectations of the newly elected leaders turn into citizen disillusion when they realise the gap between their expectations and what is actually being fulfilled. An alternative explanation is that the electorate changes governments so that the policy outcomes over time remain stable at the centre of the ideological spectrum.

This regularity is also found in Norway, as there is empirical evidence of a general depreciation in support for incumbents. For example, Gallup polls going back to the mid-1960s describe a negative relationship between holding office and maintaining support among citizens. Whenever one or more parties from the left side of the spectrum are governing, the left bloc as a whole is punished in the poll ratings. Supported by the Socialist Left Party and the agricultural Centre Party, The Labour Party has now lead a majority red-green coalition in Norway for eight consecutive years. Even though more seasoned voters can recall both majority governments and long periods of Labour party reign, the norm in recent decades has been minority governments and fairly frequent changes of government – to be sure more often than every eighth year. For this reason, the sitting government is paddling against the current.



Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway (Credit: Kjetil Ree, CC BY SA)

Out of sync with other European countries, Norway is experiencing an oil-induced economic boom almost unprecedented in the history of the nation. One might think that this would help the sitting government gain reelection, but for a red-green coalition, economic prosperity is not good news when it comes to winning votes at the ballot. In the research field of economic voting, it is known that voters punish failing governments, but do not necessarily reward successful ones. Therefore, the incumbent parties cannot expect to reap benefits in the form of vote shares when election day comes. What is more, voters do not fear for their jobs, something which could have helped the parties on the left win over the electorate in September. As paradoxical as it may seem, the economic situation is not likely to help the red-green coalition get reelected.

The structural situation thus leads us to expect a change in government after the next election. This is also the current consensus among pundits and polls. Nevertheless, there is still plenty of time for the centre/right parties to lose their lead by September – just like they did four years ago, as a matter of fact. In the 2009 election the opposition parties were ahead in the polls around this time of the year, yet the incumbent government parties fought back first by fending off the international financial crisis, and second by pointing to the opposition parties' lack of

unity.

In 2009, the four opposition parties were not able to establish a truly convincing coalition alternative to the red-green government. For instance, with only days of the election campaign remaining, the leader of the Liberal Party refused to support any government that involved the Progress Party, effectively blocking a four party centre/right coalition. Whenever the left bloc has held the majority in parliament during the post Second World War era, there has been a left party in government. The non-left parties, on the other hand, have held parliamentary majorities and often failed to retain the executive branch. The Norwegian centre/right bloc is hence arguably distributed on a wider range of the ideological spectrum than the left bloc is. Indeed, one may speak of not two, but three party blocs in Norway, namely left, centre, *and* right. For the non-left opposition, it is therefore imperative that they find some common ground this time from which they can all shoot their arrows towards the left, without running the risk of striking each other in the back. They do seem better coordinated this year, yet the election campaign has not started.

Depending on the election outcome, the Liberals, the Christian People's Party, the Conservatives, and the Progress Party will look to form a coalition government in one form or another. The party that works as a necessary component in that coalition is the Conservative Party. It has historically been the largest party among them, has been involved in most non-left governments, and is also able to bridge the gap between the centrist Liberal and Centre parties and the far right Progress Party. Plausible coalitions are all four together, any combination of three parties where the Conservative Party is one of them, and finally the Conservatives in combination with the Progressives.

Forming expectations about the future is always tricky in the social sciences. An unforeseen economic or political shock may drastically change the context in which the election takes place. Moreover, the incumbent parties will not go down without a fight, and there is a full election campaign ahead of us with the potential for twists and turns that we cannot foretell. That said, after two full election periods, it looks likely that the left coalition will be succeeded by a centre/right government after the election in September.

For a longer discussion of the topic covered in this article see: [Arnesen, Sveinung \(2012\) 'Forecasting Norwegian elections: Out of work and out of office', International Journal of Forecasting, 28 \(4\): 789–796.](#)

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