

Ahead of September's election, cracks in support for Norway's centre-left coalition are beginning to show.

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*In September, Norwegians will head to the polls in a vote that on current polling, is likely to be won by a re-branded centre-right party at the expense of the long-dominant Labour party and its two coalition partners. **Sten Inge Jørgensen** writes that concern among Labour voters and undecideds at the increasingly populist and protectionist policies of its junior coalition partners has been a major cause of this decline in support.*



The Norwegian Labour party's two coalition government partners, the Centre-party (Farmers Party) and the Socialist Left, have been floating around the 4 per cent electoral threshold for a couple of years now. Being part of government for almost eight years has certainly taken its toll, especially for the socialists. Together, the three parties will struggle to get even 40 per cent of the votes in September's election, while the opposition can form a government based on several different coalition constellations. At the same time, the main opposition leader, the Conservative's Erna Solberg, has beaten Labour-leader Jens Stoltenberg as the preferred prime minister in several consecutive opinion polls.

All three coalition partners have now finished their national conferences, where they committed to go together for a third term. This strategy makes sense for the Centre-party and the Socialist Left party, who undoubtedly have gained more for their core voters being inside government rather than outside – more money to farmers and rural areas (Center-Party), and several social and environmental gains for the Socialist Left.



Prime Minister of Norway, Jens Stoltenberg Credit: Håkan Dahlström (Creative Commons BY)

It is more difficult to understand why the Labour party remains committed to the coalition agreement. It has traditionally governed alone for most of the post-war-period, and it has usually found a majority vote for most of its core policies in parliament. To be big enough to go alone, however, it needs to win undecided voters who might as well vote for one of the centre-right parties. And a substantial part of this large group of voters are so sceptical of Labour's current junior partners, that they would rather prefer a conservative government than a third red-green term. Even among those who vote for the Labour party today, as many as two thirds would prefer that the coalition ended now, according to a recent poll by TV2.

There are several reasons why many potential Labour voters dislike the Centre-Party and the Socialist Left.

For example, in the energy and environmental sectors, very important in Norwegian politics, numerous issues split the three parties. Perhaps even more important is that many potential Labour-voters fear the junior partner's protectionist and anti-EU attitudes. The socialists want Norway to cancel the EEA-agreement, and the Centre-Party recently decided they want to pull Norway out of Schengen (claiming they want to fight criminality). This populist and nationalistic stand has particularly frightened liberal and urban voters. Although full EU-membership is out of the question for a long time to come, due to polls showing that around 70 per cent of the population are against it, Labour wants to remain a committed partner to the European project within the broadest possible framework.

It is easier to sympathise with the Socialist Left, as part of their stance against the EEA is based on the democratic deficit Norway experiences by adopting almost all EU-rules without taking part in the decision-making. But the truth remains that the party is against the EU and “free markets” as such, and many see their opposition to the EEA as a big risk for Norwegian trade interests.

As it has been part of the coalition’s gentlemen’s agreement not to raise the controversial EU question (Labour does not push for full EU membership either), both junior partners know that they are playing with fire. After the party conferences, both party leaders stated that they will drop their EU positions in the eventual negotiations on a third coalition governing programme. But this assurance does not stop them from pushing these issues in the election campaign, and thereby scaring Labour voters away. It is probably not very risky to conclude, that if the coalition does not break before the election day, Labour will stand alone in 2017.

If nothing unexpected happens, Conservative-leader Erna Solberg will become prime minister on 9th September. However, due to the many possible coalition-constellations, it is difficult to predict how this will change Norway. Solberg’s party (Høyre) seems quite moderate, after a process of [rebranding as a more centre-oriented party](#). But if they have to govern with the right-wing party (Progress Party), and especially if the right-wingers gain more weight (they currently poll around 15 per cent), the negotiations will be very hard. For example, the Progress Party wants to scrap the “holy rule” which says that only a modest amount of the income from the massive oil and gas wealth should be channeled into the national budget. Many potential voters of Høyre find this worrying, but whether it’s more of a turn-off than the Socialists and the Centre-Party’s nationalistic outlook, remains an open question.

This article is a contribution to [State of the Left](#) – Policy Network’s monthly insight bulletin that reports from across the world of social democratic politics

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