

# The worries of wealth: What Monday's election might mean for the future of Norway



On 11 September, Norwegians will head to the polls to elect a new government. [Mi Ah Schoyen](#) and [Are Vegard Haug](#) preview the vote, writing that alongside the choice between a centre-left and centre-right administration, the country must also make a number of important strategic decisions in the coming years that will set its future trajectory.



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Coalitions are the norm in Norwegian politics. For the last four years, the country has been ruled by a minority centre-right coalition of Høyre (Conservatives) and the populist *Fremskrittspartiet* (Progress Party), headed by Prime Minister Erna Solberg. All eyes are now on the Arbeiderpartiet (Labour Party) leader Jonas Gahr Støre to see if the centre-left can strike back.

## Brown or green energy? Blue or white collar workers?

The Labour Party is faced with two dilemmas in the coming election: On the one hand, the party is being squeezed between either supporting future investment in the oil and gas sectors or directing more resources toward the transition to a low-carbon future by investing in renewables and green technologies. On the other, it is wavering in its approach to immigration: should they attract voters who would otherwise vote for the populist Progress Party by following a populist track or stay true to their historical roots of international worker solidarity on an ideologist path?

With regard to the first dilemma, Labour normally goes to great lengths to please the Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), traditionally the main financial sponsor of Labour's electoral campaign. This year, the [total financial contributions from LO and Fagforbundet](#), the largest private sector union within LO, equal the record high of 15 million Norwegian kroner (more than €1.6 million). Some of the large blue-collar unions within LO have been particularly keen to highlight that declining investments in the oil and gas sectors will lead not only to further job losses, but will also jeopardise the high level of public social services and benefits provided by the Norwegian welfare state.

At the same time, Labour, along with other parts of the LO, recognise that the country needs to invest in more future-proof industries and technologies to reduce economic dependency on the country's oil wealth, meet the commitments of the Paris Agreement, and more generally secure a future emphasis on Norway's first female prime minister and former Labour leader Gro Harlem Brundtland's famous notion of "sustainable development". The choice between brown or green energy policy, represented by contrasting images like oil versus fish and tourism, or offshore gas versus renewables, can also be framed as a choice between solidarity towards current workers or securing the welfare and economic prosperity of future generations.

Regarding the second quandary, one would think that it would be natural for Labour to advocate a liberal approach to immigration and the integration of foreigners. Appealing to international worker solidarity is a tradition inherent in their ideological roots and even today they still sing the old socialist anthem *L'Internationale* at Labour assemblies. However, Labour is being challenged by an aggressive and well-trained Progress Party, with which they compete for working-class voters.

This right-wing populist party is sceptical of mass immigration, campaigns heavily on current migration issues, invokes the preservation of so-called traditional Norwegian values, and frequently adopts an "us vs them" style of rhetoric. Faced with this competition from the right, Labour has experienced some difficulties in defining a coherent position in debates about immigration. The party leaders keep repeating that they support a "hard but fair" line towards immigration and the treatment of migrants, but what that means in practice is not always evident.

### The task facing the winner

The dilemmas that Labour face mirror the main challenges that Norwegian society currently has to tackle. The blessing brought to Norway by the rich petroleum and gas reserves located off its shoreline has turned into a real political challenge, which, if not handled in a sensible way, could well turn into a curse not only for Labour but for Norwegian politics in general. In the words of the authors of the latest [Norway Country Report](#) of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI): "The oil price drop since 2014 has had a significant impact on the economy, exposing its vulnerability." To manage the effects of a potentially long period of significantly lower oil and gas prices they strongly recommend "reducing the dependency on the oil and petroleum sectors".

The populist right, in Norway represented most successfully by the Progress Party, often sets the agenda in the debate about immigration. Not only Labour, but all of the main political parties are obliged to define their stance on immigration if they do not want to leave this field to the far right. The main challenge here is to better integrate migrants. As the authors of the [SGI Country Report](#) put it: "Integration policy is fairly well-organised and well-funded in Norway... and policies have to date been less than fully effective." The issue is highly controversial in Norwegian society. Not surprisingly, the Progress Party's Sylvi Listhaug, the current Minister for Immigration and Integration, advocates a restrictive approach to immigration and more sticks than carrots in integration policy. Her strategy and rhetoric frequently alienate parties and voters at the centre and on the left in Norwegian politics.

According to the [latest polls](#), Labour is unlikely to win a majority of seats in the Storting, the Norwegian parliament. Even if they succeed in winning the most seats, they will need coalition partners to form a government after the election. However, the choice between "oil or nature" is crucial here, too. The political parties that can be considered potential junior partners in a Labour-led government, such as the *Sosialistisk Venstreparti* (Socialist Left Party), the *Senterpartiet* (Centre party with core voters located in the periphery) or *Miljøpartiet De Grønne* (Green Party, which is particularly successful in urban areas), advocate a more prudent and environmentally protectionist line in favour of nature tourism and the fishing industry.

Whoever emerges as the winner on 11 September will have to make important decisions. New effective approaches to integration policy and setting a course to reduce the country's high dependency on the oil and gas sectors will be among the most important priorities for the next government, regardless of whether that government comes from the centre-left or the centre-right.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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