

**The Centre for  
European  
and Asian Studies**

**REPORT**

**2/2007**

**ISSN 1500-2683**

*The Norwegian local election of 2007*

**Nick Sitter**

A publication from:  
**Centre for European and Asian Studies at  
BI Norwegian Business School**  
0442, Oslo  
Norway

Report prepared for the PSA Specialist Group on Scandinavia

## The Norwegian local election of 2007

Nick Sitter, Norwegian School of Management

2007-09-17

Thanks to Elin Haugjerd Allern and Nick Alylott for helpful comments.

Three parties can plausibly claim to have emerged victoriously out of the local elections that took place in Norway on Monday September 10th. The Conservative Party, which is currently in opposition at the national level, was the only party that saw a substantial rise in its vote in the 2007 local elections compared to both the 2003 local elections and the 2005 national elections. It recaptured its claim to being Norway's largest non-socialist party, a position that the right-populist Progress Party captured in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The centre-right Liberals also performed strongly, securing a result well above the five-percent threshold that applies in parliamentary elections and increasing its vote by nearly half since the 2003 local elections. Labour also saw a considerable improvement on its 2003 result, but did not manage to translate its electoral success in the 2005 parliamentary election into the kind of results some Labour optimists had hoped for.

### Election results for the local authority elections

Party	Votes	Percent	Change since local els 2003	Change since nat els 2005
A – Labour	654135	29,6	+2,2	-3,0
SV – Soc. Left	136723	6,2	-6,2	-2,6
RV – Red. El. List	41268	1,9	+0,3	+0,6
SP – Centre Party	175495	8,0	0,0	+1,5
KRF – Chr. PPl. Party	140804	6,4	0,0	-0,4
V – Liberals	129448	5,9	+2,0	-0,1
H – Conservative	425265	19,3	+1,2	+5,2
FRP – Progress Party	387216	17,5	+1,1	-4,5
Others	116531	5,3	-0,6	-

Note: County elections were held at the same time: Labour performed somewhat better (30.8%); whereas the gap between the Conservatives (18.8%) and the Progress party (18.5%) was smaller.

Source: Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development

### THE RESULTS

As is often the case with local elections in Europe, the recent local election results in Norway can be interpreted at least partly as a reaction to the successes and failures of the national government. Because the changes to local government across Norway were many and varied, and some of the implications for political leadership in the major cities

have yet to become fully clear, the following discussion focuses mainly on the impact of the local election on the overall party system.

Although local elections invariably also centre on local issues, and feature large variation across the country, three broad trends can be discerned that seem to apply to the Norway as a whole (this is of course an initial interpretation; we will have to await the comprehensive electoral studies that invariably follow each local and regional election in Norway to confirm or disprove this interpretation). The most recent national election, in 2005, resulted in a majority in the Storting for the new red-green alliance of Labour, the Socialist Left and the agrarian Centre Party. This was the first time ever the Socialist Left took part in a coalition. The three trends in the local election that were common across most local authorities can be seen against this national-level back-drop.

The clear loser in the 2007 local elections was the Socialist Left. The party lost a substantial share of its vote in a large number of constituencies; and this trend was clear across the country. The trend came as no surprise, but its magnitude was unexpected. For example, in Oslo the party lost almost half its vote and 6 of its 12 seats. Having originally broken away from Labour over opposition to NATO membership before the 1961 election, and consolidated around opposition to EEC membership in the 1970s, the Socialist Left had been a classic left-populist opposition party until two years ago. In this situation, it was almost inevitable that the party would suffer from an anti-incumbency effect. It entered coalition negotiations with little or no experience, and came up against two partners with considerable experience and skill in this area. Party leader Kristin Halvorsen became minister of finance, and got the thankless task of explaining limits on government spending to a set of voters who would generally like to see more of the country's oil wealth spent. Two of the party's other ministerial portfolios covered issues of considerable importance to the party and its voters: environment and education. However, these two portfolios are also notoriously difficult to handle, and the Socialist Left ministers have earned considerable criticism even from their own party activists. In addition, it was hardly going to be helpful that the Socialist Left seems to have lost some of its 'issue-ownership' over the environment question: the other mainstream parties all focussed on this issue too. While it seems certain that the party lost a considerable number of voters to the Labour party (from which it has 'taken' them in previous elections), it also lost some of its more radical supporters to the far-left Red Electoral Alliance (Red), and perhaps an even greater number decided to remain at home on the couch rather than head for the polling-booth.

However, the question of an incumbent government's success or failure turns out to be very much in the eye of the beholder. Both Labour and the Centre Party could claim considerable success, and both parties seem to have been able to mobilise their voters in the 2007 local election. Both parties are well organised locally, and focussed on mobilising their core electorates. Despite the comparatively high turnout in Norway's national election, the low turnout in local elections (61.1% this time) means that preventing potential supporters from opting for the 'couch-party' is important.

Interestingly, the government's success seems to have had a galvanising effect on Conservative voters as well. Although this is an impression that must await full analysis of the polls and surveys, it seems as if the Conservative Party was particularly successful in mobilising its voters (rather than attracting disaffected former Labour voters).

## THE LOCAL ELECTIONS AND BLOC POLITICS IN NORWAY

The 2005 national elections saw clear competition between two blocs: on the left, Labour, the Centre Party and the Socialist left formed the red-green alliance; on the right, they faced the then incumbent non-socialist ('bourgeois') government made up of the Conservatives, Liberals and Christian People's Party and supported on the right flank by the populist Progress Party. Both blocs have been shocked by the local elections.

On the centre-left, there seems little doubt that Labour has won (back) a number of votes from the Socialist Left. This raises three major questions. First, has the Socialist Left given up too much in exchange for a few seats at the cabinet table, and achieved too little? Several party members argue that this is the case, and some voters seem inclined to agree. Second, will the result weaken the position of the Socialist Left within the government? The party will in all likelihood reconsider what its central goals are, and in particular the trade-off between policy, votes, office and party management. The words 'identity crisis' have been bandied about. Third, how will the now increasingly obvious competition between Labour and the Socialist Left for the same group of voters affect their relationship, and coalition dynamics? It was no secret that in 2004 Labour wooed the Christian People's Party, and that it only turned to the Socialist Left after this failed.

On the right, the competition between the Conservatives and the populist Progress Party on their right flank mirrors that between Labour and the Socialist Left. Both the major mainstream parties now face a relatively strong challenger on their respective flanks. The Conservatives face the additional problem that the Liberals will not countenance a coalition with the Progress Party (this is a major bone of contention in Oslo and Bergen).

## THE LOCAL ELECTIONS AND THE NORWEGIAN PARTY SYSTEM

The local elections of 2007 seem to confirm and reinforce three trends that shape the current development of the Norwegian party system.

First, Labour and the Conservatives are back in the role as the largest party on the left and right respectively. To be sure, Labour's position is much less precarious than that of the Conservatives, but even so, the dramatic rise of the Progress Party over the last decade and a half seems to have been halted. This means that the left-right dimension remains central to party competition in Norway. Despite the Progress Party's efforts to position itself as Labour's main adversary (and the help some Labour politicians have provided in this endeavour), the Conservatives maintain a credible claim to the role as Labour's main rival. The fact that the Conservatives and Labour compete with their flank-parties on the

same kind of issues (mainly a question of how far to go in one direction, not of emphasising very different issues), makes it particularly difficult for either of the main parties to work in coalition with the flanking parties at the national level.

Second, after the turbulent 1990s, Norwegian party politics may be setting back into a more stable and predictable pattern. The 1990s saw the interest-parties in the centre reach out beyond their traditional core electorates: the agrarian Centre Party capitalised in its anti-EU stance and the Christian People's Party (re-labelled in English as the Christian Democrats, but not changing their Norwegian name) moved closer to a catch-all strategy and attracted some conservative voters. The present local elections confirm the trend seen in the 2003 local elections and 2005 national elections: the Centre and Christian People's parties are back to their solid core electorate. The 2003 result was seen as a complete disaster for the Christian People's Party; now an identical result was hailed as a partial success. Recent electoral studies indicate that the Christian People's Party has lost a substantial share of voters to the Progress Party, which has raised its religious profile somewhat over the last decade. At the same time the Liberals, who were torn asunder over the EEC issue in the 1970s along a cleavage that reflects its dual identity as a social liberal urban party and a Christian conservative party of the south-west periphery (as Stein Rokkan famously pointed out), seems to have consolidated above the five-percent mark in an uneasy truce between its two wings.

Third, the two developments outlined above might well drive Norwegian party politics back toward the centre ground. It has proven considerably easier for Labour to deal with the Centre Party than the Socialist Left. Labour and the Centre hardly compete for the same voters: the Centre mobilises along a (rural-urban) cleavage the cross-cuts the left-right axis. Consequently, cooperation is relatively easy: the Centre can be, and is, bought off with specific policy concessions in its core issue areas – the party's "heart-issues" as they are often called in Norwegian politics. Much the same can be said for the Christian People's Party, and to a lesser extent the Liberals. In short, it seems that the interest parties in the centre are better coalition partners than the populist parties on the flanks, particularly when they focus on their core electorates and their core issues – which is what the 2007 local elections suggest that they now do. More importantly: the leadership of the three centre parties seem content with this strategy.

In short, although the main trends in the 2007 elections were predictable, these trends were stronger than generally expected. The biggest surprise was the success of the Conservatives; and to a lesser extent the Liberals' strong performance. The set-backs on the flanks (severe for the Socialist Left, mild for the Progress Party) and the centre parties' success in holding and consolidating their bases is likely to affect both party competition and coalition building at the national level; probably in a more centrist direction. However, these are first impression in the days after the results. The team of political scientist that regularly analyse local and national elections results (and the data-rich election day surveys) will be able to shed more systematic light on a number of important questions that remain the subject of speculation at this stage. Who are changing parties; which party is taking voters from which? What parties were most successful at mobilising their voters, and which suffered most from their former supporters staying at

home? Is there evidence of a systematic national trend (as the present note suggests), or is this merely an aggregate pattern that hides more complex local dynamics? If the latter, some of the trends discussed here might not be sustainable.