



**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

**ELECTION BRIEFING NO 48
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Key Points:

- Despite the global economic crisis, the centre-left majority coalition government led by Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg of the Labour Party (DNA) won re-election in September 2009. The coalition, which also included the Centre Party (Sp) and the Socialist Left (SV), had served the full 2005-09 parliamentary term (it is not possible to call early elections in Norway).
- Labour and the Red-Green coalition emerged as the main winners of the election. Labour improved its share of the vote compared to the 2005 election, and the coalition as a whole held its ground and lost only a single seat. However, Labour's gains were offset by the decline in the vote for the Socialist Left, and a small reduction in support for the Centre party.
- On the right flank the Progress Party (FrP) consolidated its lead. In 2005 it firmly replaced the Conservatives (H) as the largest party on the right, and in 2009 it improved its vote marginally. However, the Conservatives recaptured about half of the support they had lost in 2005, and closed some of the gap to the Progress Party.
- The big loser was the Liberals (V), which campaigned for a centre-right coalition government without the Progress Party and lost a third of its support.
- Although several parties sought to focus their campaign on specific policy issues, governability remained the key theme throughout the campaign. Whereas Labour and the Red-Green coalition emphasised their stable record, the Liberals and Progress Party got involved in a bitter dispute over co-operation on the centre-right.
- The EU issue was completely absent from the campaign. The Red-Green coalition promised to maintain the 2005-09 agreement whereby the three parties would not seek to alter Norway's current association with the EU. The centre-right Bondevik coalition of 2001-05 was based on a similar agreement, the so-called 'suicide pact'. Although the EU issue threatens to rip apart every Norwegian coalition government, the question has been firmly parked on the sidelines for another four years.

On the second Monday of the ninth month of every fourth year, Norwegian voters go to the polls. Like most recent elections, the 2009 election was a close race. However, for the first time since 1969, a majority coalition government completed a full term in office, successfully defended its record and achieved re-election. Despite the global economic crisis the three governing parties' share of the vote dropped by less than 0.3%. In fact the government's handling of the global economic crisis probably contributed to its success, and this issue proved relatively un-controversial. The election returned the Red-Green coalition to office with a majority of 86 to 83 seats, which by Norwegian standards constitutes a safe majority.

The election also confirmed the return to two-bloc competition in Norway that the 2005 election hinted at,¹ after a more fluid three-bloc pattern for almost two decades. Having successfully navigated the un-chartered waters of coalition government for the previous four years, the Red-Green coalition had a safer starting point as it embarked on their second four-year term. In 2005 Labour had entered its first proper coalition government, while the Centre Party had worked formally with the left and the Socialist Left entered government for the first time. Come 2009, all were veterans of coalition politics. On the right, however, coalition politics remained the main bone of contention. The centrist Christian People's Party (KrF) remained sceptical of cooperation with the right-populist Progress Party, and the Liberals explicitly ruled out any coalition government with the Progress Party. In turn, the Progress Party made a point of emphasising that it would not lend parliamentary support to any centre-right coalition government of which it was not a member. The Conservatives were caught in the crossfire, internally divided over the question of coalition politics, and left the door open to both camps. As in 2005, the matter of presenting a clear and governable coalition became a central question in the 2009 election, and division on the right helped propel the centre-left back to executive office.

The European question remained in the shadows during the election campaign. While Labour and the Conservatives both continued to support full EU membership for Norway, Labour's two coalition partners remained firmly opposed and were formally committed to dismantle even the quasi-membership that Norway enjoys through the European Economic Area agreement, Schengen and various forms of ad hoc participation in European integration. The Christian People's Party and the Liberals were more neutral. Although both formally opposed EU membership, they explicitly supported the status quo. The Progress Party explicitly took no position on the matter. As it has done more or less permanently since the early 1960s, the question of EU membership therefore hung like Damocles' sword over the current coalition government. But the 2009 election result secured this sword as firmly to the ceiling as it did in 2001 and 2005.

Background

Three factors that are somewhat unique to Norway made up the backdrop for the 2009 election, and indeed the 2001 and 2005 elections too. First, the European question reinforced Norway's crosscutting political cleavages. Although voters rejected

¹ See: Nick Sitter, 'The Norwegian General Election of 12 September 2005', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Election Briefing No 20* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-eb-norway2005.pdf>.

EEC/EU membership in referendums in 1972 and 1994, the European question remained pertinent. Second, for the last four decades minority government was the rule rather than the exception. Third, the wealth that Norway had accumulated in the oil fund meant that economic prosperity was generally no guarantee that the incumbent would be re-elected. The flip-side of this coin was that the oil wealth also made it easier for governments to weather economic crises, as turned out to be the case with the global economic crisis over the two years running up to the September 2009 election.

Political parties in Norway compete along three broad dimensions: left-right, centre-periphery, and on the flanks. The dominant left-right dimension (based on economic policy and redistribution) is crosscut by cleavages that pit the centre against the periphery, urban interest against rural, and religious against secular. Labour and the Conservatives compete along the first dimension; the Liberals, the Christian People's Party and the agrarian Centre Party compete on the second. The three grew out of the nineteenth century 'Left', and are usually considered 'centre' parties in left-right terms.²

When participation in European integration first became an issue in 1961 the Conservatives welcomed EEC membership and Labour embraced it more cautiously. The three centre parties all came out in opposition to membership before the 1972 referendum, although the Liberals split (nearly fatally, as it turned out) over the issue. All maintained their positions in the 1994 referendum, and only the Liberals have since moved towards neutrality. In 2009, all these five parties held the same positions on EU membership that they had elaborated four decades earlier.

Two parties compete on the flanks: the Socialist Left and the Progress Party. The Socialist Left, which was formed in 1975 as the Socialist People's Party, expanded to defend the 'No' victory in the 1972 EEC referendum. Euroscepticism was its very *raison d'être*. Like the Centre Party, it is Hard Eurosceptic, and opposes most of Norway's agreements with the EU. The Progress Party was formed in 1973, principally as a right-wing, populist anti-tax party, and included both opponents and proponents of European integration. It advocated a 'Yes' in the 1994 referendum, but subsequently returned to neutrality. In the 2000s it avoided taking any stance on the matter, other than to say that the question was a matter for the people and that it should therefore be settled by referendum rather than a parliamentary vote.

Coalition government in Norway has proven possible only when parties can circumvent the European question. Only minority single-party Labour governments have been able to apply for EEC/EU membership; whereas this issue broke up the centre-right coalition governments in 1971 and 1990. Since the 1960s all centre-right coalitions have been predicated on a truce on 'Europe'. The 1965-69 coalition was able to survive this division largely because France vetoed EEC enlargement. In the 1980s the European question was firmly off the agenda. In 2001-2005 the centre-right parties cooperated under the terms of a 'suicide pact' whereby the coalition would terminate if the EU issue were raised. In 2005 the centre-left copied this arrangement,

² See: Stein Rokkan, 'Norway: Numerical Democracy and Corporate Pluralism', in Robert A. Dahl (ed.), *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966; and Nick Sitter, 'The Politics of Opposition and European Integration in Scandinavia: Is Euro-scepticism a Government-Opposition Dynamic?' *West European Politics*, 24:4 (2001), pp22-39.

which allowed the pro-EU Labour party to work with two hard Eurosceptic coalition partners and win re-election on a similar formula in 2009.

Minority governments have been common in Norway ever since Labour lost the absolute majority of seats that it held between 1945 and 1961 (it never polled a majority of votes). It is no coincidence that Labour's dominance waned at the time the European question was first raised: Labour lost its majority when dissidents opposed to NATO formed the Socialist People's Party. This new party won two seats in the 1961 election. Since then, majority cabinets have been rare. Moreover, governments often fail to survive the full four-year parliamentary term. Because parliament cannot be dissolved - and it is not possible to call elections outside the regular fixed four-yearly schedule - governments that fall tend to be relieved by other minority governments. As **Table 1** illustrates, the 2000s represented an exceptional decade of government stability since 1961 inasmuch as the governments elected in 2001 and 2005 both survived to serve the full four-year terms.

Table 1: Norwegian governments since 1961

<i>Election</i>	<i>Government, coalition parties and status. Re-elected governments in bold</i>
1961	Minority Labour; Replaced by four-week centre-right cabinet in 1963, Replaced by minority Labour
1965	Majority centre-right (H, KrF, V, Sp)
1969	Majority centre-right (re-elected), fell over EEC issue 1971. Minority Labour, resigned after NO result in 1972 referendum on the EEC Minority Eurosceptic centre (KrF, V, Sp).
1973	Minority Labour
1977	Minority Labour (re-elected)
1981	Minority Conservative; Expanded in 1983 to majority centre-right (H, Sp, KrF)
1985	Minority centre-right (re-elected); Replaced by Labour minority 1986
1989	Minority centre-right, fell over divisions over EU membership; Replaced by Labour minority 1990
1993	Minority Labour (re-elected)
1997	Minority Eurosceptic centre (KrF, V, Sp); Replaced by Labour minority 2000
2001	Minority centre-right (H, KrF, V)
2005	Majority centre-left (Labour, SV, Sp)
2009	Majority centre-left (Labour, SV, Sp) re-elected

The 2005 election introduced two new factors. It was the first time Labour campaigned for a coalition government, and after the election the Socialist Left entered a coalition for the first time. Until then, Labour had preferred one-party minority government, negotiating support from other parties on either side. By 2009, the new pattern of centre-left cooperation was clearly more than a one-off experiment. However, as Table 1 illustrates, the centre-right parties have shied away from co-operating with the Progress Party at the national level (co-operation in local politics is not uncommon). The question of how to accommodate the rise of the Progress Party

since the mid-1980s continues to divide the non-socialist parties and has prevented majority governments on the right since 1985.

Norway has used proportional representation electoral systems since 1924, and successive post-war reforms have made the system more proportional. In 1953 the D'Hondt formula was replaced by the more proportional Modified Sainte-Laguë system; the number of seats were increased incrementally before the 1973 and 1985 elections; and in 1989 a two-tier system was introduced, with eight top-up seats for which parties that poll more than 4% qualify (joint lists were prohibited). The new 2003 law increased the number of top-up seats to 19, one for each of the counties that serve as multi-member districts (the number of seats allocated to each district is to be revised every eight years, taking into account population and area). This took the number of seats in the Storting to 169. The revisions of the electoral system have generally benefited the medium-sized parties and, notwithstanding the establishment of the Socialist Left and the Progress Party, the party system has been remarkably stable throughout the Twentieth Century. Only the Liberals have struggled to reach the 4% threshold regularly, and have fallen below this threshold several times since the party split over European integration in the 1970s. In 2001 and 2009 it scored 3.9%, whereas it increased to 5.9% in 2005.

Norway has hardly suffered economically from the decision not to join the EU. In 1994 the European Economic Area was already in operation, and this effectively provided membership of the Single European Market. It also obliged Norway to adopt relevant new EU laws (in theory, the government could 'veto' new EU legislation, but this has not been tested). Over the last two decades the mainland economy has grown steadily, interest rates decreased, and unemployment is low compared to European standards. Even the global economic crisis did not hit Norway with anything like the force that it hit other European countries.

The key unique feature is Norway's oil wealth. Norway's main source of wealth is also its governments' curse. In the mid-1990s Norway began to accumulate a surplus in the designated 'Oil Fund', which in September 2009 was in the neighbourhood of £275 billion.³ In March 2001, after a sharp rise in oil prices, the then minority Labour government established the rule that it would not use more than 4% of the oil fund to finance the budget. Although this rule has since been honoured mostly in the breach (the Bondevik 2001-05 government broke the limit every year; the Stoltenberg government of 2005-09 dipped into the fund to deal with the effects of the global economic crisis), this self-imposed limit has proven controversial. The Progress Party has long taken the lead in advocating that more 'oil money' be used to cut taxes and improve public services. Only Labour and the Conservatives adamantly defend the '4% rule'. Every election campaign, therefore, sees some parties advocate expenditure of more 'oil money'. The 2009 campaign was no exception.

The Campaign

The 2009 electoral campaign was remarkable for its focus on potential governing coalitions rather than policy issues. Part of the reason for this was the widely

³ As of 30 September 2009, the market value of the Petroleum Fund was NOK 2,549 billion. For this, and all other economic data cited in this report, see the English-language web-pages of the Norwegian Central Bank (including its Inflation Reports): <http://www.norges-bank.no/english/>

anticipated closeness of the result: it was clear from opinion polls that the Red-Green collation could only survive with a smaller majority, if at all. Part of the reason was the controversy over what a non-socialist government might look like, as the Liberals ruled out any co-operation with the Progress Party and the Progress Party ruled out supporting a government of which it was not a member.

Despite the global economic crisis, economic policy did not dominate the election campaign. Labour emphasised stability and spending on infrastructure, promising to keep taxes at the 2004 level (i.e. of the last centre-right government). Although the Socialist Left joined the Liberals and Christian People's Party in opening for tax increases, Labour's focus on stability dominated the Red-Green campaign. The Conservatives and Progress Party consistently spoke out in favour of lower taxes, with the latter defending its traditional emphasis on lower taxes on cars, petrol and alcohol. While there was broad consensus on the extent of the welfare state, the two big parties on the right advocated more competition, privatisation and user choice in public service provision; whereas the Socialist Left emphasised spending on education.

A range of other classical issues temporarily surfaced in the campaign, from the Progress Party's focus on immigration (on which the other parties declined to take up the bait, this was not a winning issue for them), to the Socialist Left and Liberals' effort to get environment policy and oil exploration in the North on the agenda. The Progress Party clashed with all other parties by advocating cuts in public subsidies to culture; while the Red-Green coalition promised that 1% of the budget would be spent on culture by 2014.

All the parties kept the European question firmly off the campaign agenda. The Red-Green coalition had nothing to gain by focussing on this divisive issue, the debates about centre-right competition were fraught enough without introducing this controversial dimension as well, and the Progress Party had nothing to gain by emphasising a question on which its supporters are split down the middle. The lone voice on the EU question was the leader of the Conservatives' EU Committee Nikolai Astrup, who chided Progress Party leader Siv Jensen for cowardly refusing to engage in debate on the issue and added that the Conservatives would refuse to take part in any coalition government that ruled out the possibility of an application to join the EU in the coming parliamentary four-year term. In the event, the EU issue turned out not to be the main obstacle to co-operation on the centre-right.

In the summer of 2009, the policy debates were over-shadowed by the question of governing coalitions and which parties might work together. The Liberals made their refusal to work with the Progress Party the main element of their campaign platform, arguing that a vote for the Conservatives was a vote for Progress Party participation in government and that centre-right non-populists should vote Liberal. The Conservatives countered by suggesting that a vote for the Liberals was a vote for continued Stoltenberg government, in one form or another. The Progress Party stuck to its position from 2005: it would not support a government led by the Conservatives except as a full partner of the coalition. In the event, the Liberals' strategy backfired, and party leader Lars Sponheim announced that he would resign. As in 2005, the lack of a clear and coherent coalition on the centre-right contributed to a Red-Green victory.

The Results

As Tables 2 and 3 show, in contrast to the two previous elections, both the two mainstream catch-all parties emerged as the winners in 2009. In 2001 Labour, running as a minority government, saw its worst result since its breakthrough in the 1920s; and in 2005 the Conservatives, running as the biggest party in a centre-right coalition, were the unambiguous losers. In 2009, however, Labour returned to its 1990s level, and the Conservatives recaptured about half of the votes and seats they lost four years earlier.

Table 2: The September 2009 Norwegian election results (turnout 76.4%)

Party	Votes	%	Change	Seats	Change
Socialist Left	166,361	6.2	-2.6	11	-4
Labour	949,049	35.4	2.7	64	3
Centre	165,006	6.2	-0.3	11	0
Christian. People's Party	148,748	5.5	-1.3	10	-1
Liberals	104,144	3.9	-2.0	2	-8
Conservatives	462,458	17.2	3.1	30	7
Progress Party	614,717	22.9	0.8	41	3
Others*	72,420	2.7	-0.4	0	0

Source: Official results, as per the *Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development*, <http://www.regjeringen.no/krd/html/valg2009/bs5.html>.⁴

* Includes 36,219 votes for Red, formerly the Socialist Electoral Alliance (which won a seat in 1993).

Table 3: Norwegian elections 1961 – 2009 (%). Source as per Table 2

Party	1961	1965	1969	1973	1977	1981
Socialist Left	2.4	6	3.4	11.2	4.2	5
Labour	46.8	43.1	46.5	35.2	42.3	37.1
Centre	6.8	9.4	9.0	6.8	8.0	4.3
Chr. People's Pty.	9.3	7.8	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9
Liberals	7.2	10.2	9.4	2.3	2.4	3.2
Conservatives	19.3	20.3	18.8	17.2	24.5	31.8
Progress Party				5.0	1.9	4.5
Others	8.2*	3.2*	5.1*	10.4*	5.9*	5.2*

* includes joint lists of non-socialist parties

Party	1985	1989	1993	1997	2001	2005	2009
Socialist Left	5.5	10.1	7.9	6.0	12.5	8.8	6.2
Labour	40.8	34.3	36.9	35.0	24.3	32.7	35.4
Centre	6.6	6.5	16.7	7.9	5.6	6.5	6.2
Chr. People's Pty.	8.3	8.5	7.9	13.7	12.4	6.8	5.5
Liberals	3.1	3.2	3.6	4.5	3.9	5.9	3.9
Conservatives	30.4	22.2	17	14.3	21.2	14.1	17.2
Progress Party	3.7	13	6.3	15.3	14.6	22.1	22.9
Others	1.6	2.2	3.7	3.3	5.5	3.1	2.7

Source: Official results, as per the *Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development*, <http://www.regjeringen.no/krd/html/valg2009/bs5.html>.

⁴ *Statistics Norway* publish historical election statistics, <http://www.ssb.no>

In terms of the contest between government and opposition, however, the Socialist Left and the Centre Party had good cause to join Labour in its celebrations. Their Red-Green coalition became the first government in more than two decades to win re-election after a serving full four-year term in office. On the balance the coalition lost 0.2%, and one seat in parliament. For the Centre Party this represented a successful defence of its first ever participation in a centre-left coalition (the party has now been a coalition partner of all Norwegian parties except the Progress Party). Since the Socialist Left fought its first election ever as an incumbent party, and defended a record of considerable policy compromises, a loss of only 2.3% could be considered a reasonable success. The transition from protest party to coalition partner proved more costly for many other parties on the left and right flanks across Europe.

Although the total votes for the four opposition parties barely changed from 2005, the distribution among them involved a rightwards shift. The main winner was the Conservatives, for whom the gain of 3.1% represented not only a recovery from their dismal 2005 result, but also a campaign triumph because the party had improved steadily in the opinion polls in the three months leading up to the election.⁵ During the first half of 2009 the party had languished around the level of its 2005 results in the polls, whereas their rival on the right flank had polled in the mid-20s for much of the previous two years. Although the Progress Party defended its gains of 2005, and thus its status as Norway's second biggest party and the largest non-socialist party, the 2009 results, therefore, provided only limited cause for celebration.

The two non-governing centre parties suffered most in the election, with little to show either in terms of their own votes or coalition politics. Collectively, the three centre parties have not polled lower for more than half a century. With 15.6% of the vote and the Centre Party firmly anchored in the Red-Green coalition, talk of a centre alternative was all but gone. The Christian People's Party continued its decline to a post-war low of 5.5%, losing another seat (they lost 11 seats, or half their parliamentary group, in 2005). The Liberals dropped back under the 4% threshold, thereby losing 8 of their 10 seats in the Storting.

Conclusions/Future Prospects

The 2005 election did not bring about major changes to Norwegian politics, at least not on the scale of more recent elections. The 1993 election was an 'earthquake' election in the shadow of the EU membership debate, and saw the hard Eurosceptic Centre Party almost triple its vote and nearly match the Conservatives' 17%. The 1997 election was interpreted as a major defeat for Labour, which had declared that it would leave office unless it matched the 36.9% it had polled four years earlier. Consequently the Centre, Christian People and Liberal parties formed a Eurosceptic minority government that barely controlled a quarter of the seats in parliament. The 2001 election was an electoral disaster for Labour, and the 2005 election proved almost as difficult for the Conservatives. In contrast, the 2009 election indicated that three broad trends that developed over the 2000s may actually be consolidating.

⁵ For opinion polls in the run-up to the election, see Bernt Aardal's web-page (in Norwegian, see 'Partibarometer'): <http://home.online.no/~b-aardal/>, or Norwegian television TV2 at <http://www.tv2nyhetene.no/innenriks/politikk/valg09/partibarometeret-2677103.html>.

First, Labour has become a party of coalition government. In 2005 it entered a coalition government for the first time ever (not counting the 'grand coalition' during the Second World War), amid much speculation that this would not last. In 2009, Labour governing on its own as a minority government was a much-debated possibility, though most among commentators agreed that this would only be a second-best alternative that might be necessary if the Red-Green coalition lost its majority. Moreover, the 2009 results gave the three centre-left coalition parties another chance to consolidate the centre-left bloc.

Second, the Progress Party has consolidated its position as Norway's second largest party, and in large measure Labour's main adversary. Centre-right politics in Norway revolve around the question of how the Conservatives and the Progress Party relate to each other, and how they might be able to co-operate with the Liberals and Christian People's Party.

Third, the centre-right's formula for defusing the European question has proven durable on the centre-left too. Although the Red-Green coalition remains far more divided over EU and EEA membership in principle, and in 2005 seemed less likely to be able to handle this issue, the three parties' co-operation over four years suggests that they are as capable as the centre-right of chaining this Damocles' sword firmly to the ceiling.

In short, in 2009 Norwegian party politics again looked like a two-bloc party system. Although there were divisions with each camp, and much was made of the existence of a range of realistic minority government alternatives, this result indicates three conclusions for the short to medium term. First, Norwegian party politics is characterised by two-bloc competition, at least in the short term. Second, most parties take a relatively pragmatic approach to potential cooperation with other parties. The exception is the fierce debate over whether the Progress Party should be considered 'coalitionable'. Third, European issues continues to cast a shadow over Norwegian politics, but a major external shock would be required to warrant even discussion of another EU application.

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This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.