

The populists become Denmark's leading right-wing party

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Results

Abstract:

Earthquake in Denmark (and in Europe) where the People's Party (DF) came second behind outgoing Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt's Social Democratic Party (SD) (26.3% of the vote) but took first place amongst the right-wing parties in the general election on 18th June. The People's Party led by Kristian Thulesen Dahl won 21.1% of the vote and 37 seats in the Folketing, the only chamber of parliament (+15 in comparison with the previous elections on 15th September 2011).

It confirmed that its European election results were not a "fluke" (it easily came out ahead with 26.6% of the vote in May 2014) and it has widened its electoral base by attracting new, younger voters from the middle classes. The party achieved its highest results in the South of Denmark and notably in South Jutland, a border region with Germany. Finally Kristian Thulesen Dahl's personality and his discourse, which is more moderate than that held by the party's previous leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, helped a great deal in increasing the score. Whilst the People's Party has managed to impose its agenda on all of the parties in the country over the last few years it chose to focus its discourse on the defence of the Welfare State in the election on 18th June, like all populists now do in Europe. "*The People's Party stands as the Social Democratic Party did in the beginning, generous from a social point of view and concerned about the situation of the poorest,*" maintains Marlene Wind, a political scientist.

The populists came out ahead of the Liberal Party (V) led by former Prime Minister (2009-2011) Lars Lokke Rasmussen which won 19.5% of the vote – its lowest score in 25 years – and 34 seats (13 less which is the sharpest decline amongst all of the parties in these elections).

The Liberal Alliance (LA) led by Anders Samuelsen won 7.5% of the vote and 13 seats. The People's Conservative Party (KF), led by Soren Pape Poulsen, won 3.4% of the vote and 6 seats (- 2).

"*Two issues will be decisive,*" maintained Kasper Hansen, a teacher of political science at the University

of Copenhagen before the vote: "*the Welfare State and immigration, the first benefits the left and the second the right.*" The latter issue won the day but most Danes wanted to vote both for the upkeep of the Welfare State and a reduction in immigration as they opted for the populists.

The right-wing opposition, Blue Block won – but only just. It clinched 51.4% of the vote and 90 seats (+4) against 48.6% and 85 seats (- 4) for the Red Block which rallies the parties on the left.

Outgoing Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt's Social Democratic Party came out ahead in the election with 26.3% of the vote and 47 seats (+3). The Unity-Red/Green Alliance List became the country's second left-wing party with 7.8% of the vote and 14 seats (+ 2). Conversely the Social Liberal Party (RV) led by Morten Ostergaard paid for his participation in the outgoing government coalition taking 4.6% of the vote and just 6 seats (-9). The People's Socialist Party (SF) led by Pia Olsen Dyhr suffered the same fate winning 4.2% of the vote and 7 seats (-9).

The decline of the latter two parties is to the advantage of the Alternative (A) a recently created party led by former Culture Minister (2011-2012) Uffe Elbaek which in its first electoral battle won 4.8% of the vote and 9 seats.

Turnout was slightly lower than in the previous general elections on 15th September 2011 totalling 85.8% (-1.9 points).

General election results of 18th June 2015 in Denmark

Turnout : 85,80%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
Social Democratic Party (SD)	925 636	26,30	47
Danish People's Party (DF)	741 539	21,10	37
Liberal Party (V)	684 521	19,50	34
Unity-Red/Green Alliance (E)	273 937	7,80	14
Liberal Alliance (LA)	264 489	7,50	13
Alternative (A)	168 619	4,80	9
Social Liberal Party (RV)	160 697	4,60	8
People's Socialist Party (SF)	148 056	4,20	7
People's Conservative Party (KF)	118 032	3,40	6
Christian Democrats (KD)	29 166	0,80	0

Source : <http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/valg2015/resultat>

**THE POPULISTS, DENMARK'S LEADING
RIGHT-WING PARTY**

"The People's Party is now turning into a truly popular party which we have been fighting for years. We are a party that the others cannot ignore, a party that has to be taken seriously," declared its leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl when the election results were announced.

During the entire electoral campaign the People's Party repeated that it was not necessarily interested in taking part in government with the Liberals. *"What we are interested in is having political influence. We shall act to have as much influence as possible. If this means being a government member we shall enter government. If it means being on the outside, we shall remain outside,"* stressed Thulesen Dahl.

The possible upkeep of this position and therefore the refusal of the populists to govern might have been misunderstood by the electorate. According to a poll 69% of them want the party to enter government. *"Indeed it seems strange that they always try to avoid taking responsibility. It is easy as a party to point fingers if it remains in the back seat. No risk is taken. And therefore probably many people are expecting to see whether they take on ministerial posts, including some of their voters who would not understand that*

they always protest loudly in several areas and never take the opportunity to change matters when they can;" indicated Martin Lemberg-Pedersen of the University of Copenhagen.

The party has still not taken its decision. *"We think that we shall have greater influence by remaining outside of the government run by Lars Lokke-Rasmussen and by making him totally dependent on us;"* indicated MEP Morten Messerschmidt (DF), who returned to national politics for the occasion of these general elections.

The People's Party and the Liberal Party are opposed on two main points: the Welfare State that the populists want to protect at all costs (they also campaigned on a 0.8% increase in government spending during the next legislature) whilst the Liberals support stagnation in terms of government spending and Europe: the Liberals are pro-European whilst the populists would like the country to exit the Union. They also want Denmark to organise a referendum on the issue like the UK is doing.

"Over the next few days we shall decide whether it is possible to find a majority for a government programme that will take Denmark in the right direction. This evening we were given a chance, but only one chance to

take the leadership of Denmark," declared Lars Lokke Rasmussen after the announcement of the results. *"What I suggest is that I head the government,"* he added. The liberal leader acknowledged that his party had lost voters. *"We did not have very good results but the majority believes that Denmark must change government,"* he said however.

The Liberals focused on immigration issues during the latter days of the campaign since this theme was a central point according to the polls that could influence the Danes who had not made up their minds. They maintained that if they came to power they would *"put an immediate stop to the massive influx of asylum seekers"* and would convene an emergency session in Parliament this summer to vote in a reform of asylum. Lars Lokke Rasmussen put forward an eight-point plan amongst which feature the obligation of having a job and speaking Danish in order to remain permanently in the country, the reduction of social benefits paid to asylum seekers and the withdrawal of the Danish citizenship from anyone suspected of being a terrorist. As often seen in Europe, the Danes, a majority of whom believe that the country hosts too many asylum seekers, (more than 14,000 in 2014 in contrast to around 4000 in 2011 according to figures provided by Kristian Thulesen Dahl), preferred the original to the copy and voted for the People's Party to remedy the situation.

THE LEFT SANCTIONED

Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt quickly acknowledged her defeat announcing her resignation as Chair of the Social Democratic Party. *"I assume the entire responsibility for the government's actions and for my decisions. I was the first woman Prime Minister of Denmark and I shall not be the last,"* she stressed declaring that she would be ending her activities as head of the party.

Many analysts indicated that the elections would be decided on one issue: *Is Denmark doing better than four years ago?* During her electoral campaign the outgoing head of government based herself on her socio-economic results: GDP growth of 0.4% in the

first quarter of 2015 (which is the 7th consecutive quarter of growth since 2000), household consumption was up by 0.7% in comparison with the last quarter of 2014, unemployment lay at 4.8% in April i.e. the lowest level since.

The Prime Minister also committed to the defence of the Welfare State deeming that *"it was not enough to have put the economy back on track. There is something more important and that is we have the means to have a society in which people can stand together and take care of each other."*

All of this was not enough however. Helle Thorning-Schmidt lost many voters on her left many of whom have accused the outgoing government of having followed a budgetary austerity policy initiated by the Liberal Party and of having forgotten its campaign promises as it reduced corporate tax by three points (from 25 to 22%), student grants and unemployment benefits and as it sold off 19% of the state company, Dong Energy to the American investment bank Goldman Sachs for 8 billion crowns (1.07 billion €) in November 2013. This privatisation led in January 2014 to the resignation from government of six ministers from the People's Socialist Party.

On 27th May last when she announced the date of the general election, Helle Thorning-Schmidt tried to give guarantees to the left wing electorate by publishing several measures in support of healthcare, the situation of the elderly, education and public research into green technologies.

Finally the social democrats toughened up their discourse on immigration but again it was to the advantage of the People's Party. In all, although the Social Democratic Party won voters in the centre, it lost too many on the left for it to stay in power.

WHO IS LARS ROKKE RASMUSSEN?

Aged 51 and from Vejle (South Jutland) Lars Lokke Rasmussen is a law graduate from the University of Copenhagen. He worked for five years as an independent consultant after graduation.

He started his political career on a local level as town councillor for Græsted-Gilleleje (North-East of Sjælland island) in 1986. He entered the Folketing in

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1994 and became the Prefect of Frederiksborg in 1998. In 2001, he was appointed Minister for Home Affairs and Healthcare in the government led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen (V). Six years later he took the Finance portfolio which he retained until his appointment as Prime Minister in 2009, the year in which he replaced Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who was appointed Secretary General of NATO. Lars Lokke Rasmussen is now the youngest person ever to have been head of government in Denmark.

He lost the general election on 15th September 2011 and had to relinquish his post as Prime Minister but he remained the leader of the opposition.

Lars Lokke Rasmussen might therefore return to Marienborg, the residence of the Danish Prime Minister since 1962. *"Tomorrow I shall go to see Queen Margrethe II and tell her that the government is*

resigning. It is now up to Lars Lokke Rasmussen to try and form a government," declared outgoing Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt when the results were announced.

The task may be complicated for the Liberal Party leader which was beaten by the Danish People's Party but which has a little room to manoeuvre. The formation of the government, traditionally quite fast in Denmark did however take 17 days in September 2011 – a record for this country.

If Lars Lokke Rasmussen's Liberal Party manages to form the next government coalition three of the four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland and Norway will be governed by the right, a first since 1945. And if the People's Party decides to enter government each of the three governments will include a populist party.

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