

Denmark: The surprising success of pro-European mainstream parties

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INTRODUCTION

A National Parliament election was called in Denmark in early May 2019. Hence, much of the focus that would otherwise have been devoted to the European Parliament (EP) election went to the national election campaign. Nevertheless, the two elections thematically overlapped. The overall focus was on the climate crisis and, secondly, immigration. This focus secured a successful EP election for green-leaning parties – the Socialist People’s Party (SF) and the Danish Social-Liberal Party (RL). But the mainstream parties, particularly the Liberals, also enjoyed increases in their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), which was mainly at the expense of the right-wing Eurosceptical Danish People’s Party (DF).

THE CAMPAIGN SUMMARIZED: CLIMATE, CLIMATE, AND IMMIGRATION

When the Danish PM Lars Løkke Rasmussen (the Liberals) called a national election to be held on 5 June 2019, the EP election campaign was deemed to yet again become second order. Placing core national events, including national elections, on top of EP elections always challenges the opportunity to put European politics on the agenda (e.g. Hix and Marsh, 2011). Competition for scarce electorate attention is fierce – and, most often, attention to the national election context wins. After all, the EP election remains second order – even in a country famous for its high voter turnout also in the EP election (e.g. Nielsen and Franklin, 2017).

Consequently, the focus on the EP election in national news came very late. As usual, national and European topics were overlapping. On top of this, the climate crisis gained critical attention from the voters, continuously ranking highest when Danes were asked about their top priorities in European and Danish polls (e.g. Eurobarometer 90.3). Amongst other topics that received attention were immigration, both from other European countries and from third countries outside the EU, fighting

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international tax evasion, and avoiding social dumping. Since Denmark reinstated border control at the Danish-German border in January 2016, as a response to the immigration crisis, this move has been heavily disputed. The border patrol and, thus, Denmark's suspension of the Schengen agreement continues to be a salient issue in Danish politics. Meanwhile, the economic aspects of the EU, including the future of the Eurozone, are low of low salience in Denmark, which has an opt-out from the third phase of the Euro (e.g. Nielsen, 2015).

Despite their reputation as being Eurosceptical, Danes remain fond of their EU membership. In academic terms, they are soft Eurosceptics (i.e. reluctant to integrate some political aspects of EU integration) or EU pragmatics (e.g. Raunio, 2007; Nielsen, 2017; Nielsen and Franklin, 2017). Danes have, however, never been hard Eurosceptics (i.e. never wished to leave the EU altogether) (Nielsen, 2017). Nevertheless, Danes have obtained this reputation because of strong referendum traditions on critical EU questions where a small minority has occasionally turned down, for example, full participation in the Maastricht Treaty (1992) or the Euro (2000). Figures published just weeks before EP election day, 26 May 2019, showed that 77% of Danes would vote to stay within the EU if presented with a referendum similar to the 2016 Brexit referendum. The European average was 68%. In general, whether Denmark should join the UK in a so-called "Dexit" has been an idea loosely circulated both amongst left- and right-wing Danish parties. Yet, as the Brexit negotiation increasingly shed light on the complexity of leaving the Union, the Danish EP election debate was not dominated by Dexit discussions.

Because Denmark only has thirteen MEPs – a number which increases to fourteen MEPs after the expected Brexit – the Danish MEPs rely strongly on European allies and alliances to make their voice heard. In the 2019 EP election campaign, two strands of pan-European cooperation were closely followed by the media. The dominating focus went to the Italian deputy PM Matteo Salvini's (Lega) new alliance consisting of right-wing anti-European parties, which included, amongst others, parties from Finland (The True Finns), Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*), and Austria (The Freedom Party). From Denmark, the Danish People's Party, which belongs to the ECR group in the EP, was an early adherent of Salvini's alliance. One of DF's top candidates – Anders Vistisen – was portrayed side by side with Salvini at the meeting announcing the alliance in Milan in early April 2019. Secondly, on the left, the Danish anti-establishment party the Alternative (*Alternativet*) joined the first pan-European party list European Spring on an agenda predominantly focused on the climate crisis. This list, however, did not attract as much attention as Salvini's alliance.

ELECTION RESULTS:

THE SURPRISING SUCCESS OF PRO-EUROPEAN MAINSTREAM PARTIES

The Danish EP election witnessed four broad trends. Firstly, contrasting with the tendency in most European countries, mainstream Danish parties witnessed strong support (see Table 1). The mainstream liberal party (the Liberals), which also heads the current minority coalition government with Lars Løkke Rasmussen as PM, enjoyed

an increase in vote share from 17% (2014) to 24% (2019), thereby doubling their MEPs from 2 (2014) to 4 (2019). One of these liberal MEPs is the so-called “fourteenth mandate”, which Denmark will obtain when the seats from the British MEPs are divided amongst the remaining EU27 Member States after Brexit. Since Brexit has been postponed to October 31st, the fourteenth Danish Member will only become a full MEP at that time. The mainstream opposition party *the Social Democratic Party* also had a better election than predicted. They went from 19% (2014) to 22% (2019), maintaining their three MEPs. Finally, the mainstream center-party *The Danish Social-Liberal Party* (RL) secured a stronger representation in BXL and doubled their mandate from one (2014) to two MEPs (2019).

The second trend is the success of left-wing green parties. While the Alternative did not manage to obtain a seat for its lead candidate, the Socialist People’s Party (SF) acquired an extra mandate, going from one (2014) to two MEPs (2019). In addition, the left-wing Red-Green Alliance managed to secure one MEP. However, while the SF indeed secured a successful election outcome, a scandal broke out only days after the election when it became clear that one of its prominent candidates had decided to turn down the MEP spot in favour of a potential seat in the national parliament. This event highlights the ongoing controversies associated with an election system that enables candidates to run for office both at the EU and the national level simultaneously.

Thirdly, Danish voters went against an otherwise firm European trend of increasing support for right-wing populist parties. The main loser of the election was the Danish People’s Party (DF), which went from four MEP’s (2014) to one (2019). Another right-wing anti-immigration party *Nye Borgerlige* attracted attention in the last days of the EP campaign when its leader announced she would not vote in the EP election.

Lastly, the EP 2019 election results in Denmark witnessed a decrease in support for the traditional left Eurosceptic parties. While the soft Eurosceptic left-wing party – The Red-Green Alliance – for the first time secured one MEP, the Movement against the EU, which has for decades been a critical Eurosceptical Danish voice in the EP, did not get re-elected.

As in a majority of other EU countries, Denmark also witnessed a dramatic increase in voter turnout. While Denmark has always enjoyed high levels of voter turnout, which has constantly been higher than the European average, 2019 witnessed an increase of 10 percentage points in voter turnout from 56% (2014) to 66% (2019). This increase has been attributed in particular to the enhanced focus on the climate crisis. The Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg headed a widely popular climate march in Copenhagen on May 25th 2019 – one day prior to the election – which manifested many Danes’ commitment to this agenda.

RESULTS

The Danish EP 2019 results beg two questions: why did the Eurosceptical right-wing parties not obtain the support that such parties gained in other EU countries? And

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Denmark

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
The Liberals	ALDE	648,203	23.5
The Social Democratic Party	S&D	592,645	21.5
The Socialist People's Party	EFA	364,895	13.2
Danish People's Party	ECR	296,978	10.8
The Danish Social-Liberal Party	ALDE	277,929	10.1
The Conservative People's Party	EPP	170,544	6.2
The Red-Green Alliance		151,903	5.5
The People's Movement against the EU	GUE-NGL	102,101	3.7
The Alternative		92,964	3.4
The Liberal Alliance		60,693	2.2
Total		2,758,855	100
Turnout (%)			66.1
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>

Source: www.euoplysningen.dk *the 14th Danish MEP will join as full MEP when Britain leaves the EU.

why did the mainstream parties enjoy such unusually high support when governing parties tend to be specially punished in EP elections?

The answers to these questions may be many, but one obvious answer to the first question is the fact that, unlike previous EP elections, the climate crisis was on top of the Danish agenda. Climate is traditionally a left-wing concern, and the right-wing

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	4(3)*			+2.0	
	3.0				
	2.0			+1.0	
	1.0			-3.0	
	2.0			+1.0	
	1.0				
	1.0			+1.0	
				-1	+1

parties did not prioritise this concern in their campaign. Furthermore, responding to the manifest complexity of Brexit negotiations, the Danish fondness for EU membership has increased. While it is too early to say whether Brexit should be credited with this evolution, EP 2019 in Denmark nevertheless signalled strong support for a cosmopolitan Europe championed by the mainstream parties.

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