



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Despite a win for the left, Norway's elections point right



Norway's Labour party Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre used his election victory to **claim** that it is "possible for the Social Democrats to win elections even when right-wing forces are on the rise in Europe." As usual, though, there are many more ways to interpret what happened.

Let's for once start with something of a positive. Just over six months ago, Støre seemed out for the count, with polls showing a comfortable victory for a right-wing bloc consisting of the centre-right Conservative party and the right-wing populist, some say far-right, Progress party.

In the event, the Progress party doubled its result to some 24 per cent of the vote compared to 2021. But the Conservative party suffered a collapse. The Progress party leader, Sylvi Listhaug, has been accused of the MAGA-fication of Norwegian politics.

She **takes** a hard line on migration and on the integration of the country's small Muslim minority (3.4 per cent of the population).

Norwegian Labour's resurrection might offer hope to left and centre parties elsewhere currently languishing in polls that are led by the far-right. It's a reminder that polls done far ahead of elections are not always good predictors.

This could cheer both Labour and the Conservatives in the UK, currently being outpolled by Nigel Farage's Reform UK with still years to **go** to another election.

In Germany too, just months after a new right-left coalition took power, the far-right AfD has now, in some polls, **become** the largest party.

And in France, despite Marine Le Pen's RN appearing to steamroll to victory last year, the left and the centre managed to hold her off.

## Warning bells for larger European countries

Even so, the doubling of the vote for Norway's Progress party might be more on trend for the rest of Europe than Labour's victory. While the hard- or far-right for now has to bide its time, there's little doubt that it has momentum in Norway as in many other European countries.

The rightward drift is somewhat surprising in an ultra-rich country such as Norway. Norway's wealth, underpinned by its gas and oil reserves and a € 1.7 trillion sovereign wealth **fund**, might be expected to isolate it from the worst of the currents that fan the right-wing flames elsewhere.

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But cost of living pressures, energy price rises – although compensated for by subsidies – and migration are part of the familiar mix that is helping the far-right to recruit ever more disciples. Still, the increasing extremism undoubtedly has a strong cultural component.

Apart from being super-wealthy, Norway is also the country of Anders Behring Breivik, the neo-Nazi and former Progress party member who in 2011 murdered 77 people in Oslo and at a Labour youth summer camp.

His partly online-inspired far-right ideology has, according to some, now gone mainstream in Norway and in Europe.

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## Lessons to be learned

There are other lessons from Norway to be learned, especially by the left. While its Labour party has slightly improved its standing, it will

have to rely on a fractious collection of four other left-wing parties.

These, and Labour, disagree among themselves on a plethora of important issues, such as the future of oil exploration and climate action, energy subsidies, closeness to the EU and action on Gaza.

Many of these issues mirror fractures within Europe's other left-wing parties or coalitions. In France, the broad Nouveau Front Populaire that won last year's parliamentary elections but fell short of a governing majority has effectively splintered between the far-left LFI and the more moderate Parti Socialiste.

### Norway has traditionally had coalitions and even minority governments that rely on consensus building

In the UK, the Labour party has increasing problems keeping its various factions onboard, resulting most recently in the formation of a new left-wing party under former leader Jeremy Corbyn that could cost Labour precious votes in a tight future election.

And even in the US, although the Democrats cannot be compared to a European Labour party, stark divisions on both policy and politics between centrists and progressives hobble the opposition to Trump's MAGA wave.

Norway has traditionally had coalitions and even minority governments that rely on consensus building. A new Labour-led government can be expected to continue along this line and institute moderate welfare, climate and energy reforms.

But, as elsewhere in Europe, the question remains whether this traditional approach suffices to stem the rise of the right.

## The inexorable rise of the European right

Parties of the left and centre often get blamed for stagnation, nothing ever changing and – in Keir Starmer's words – underwhelming 'delivery'.

Far-right parties, on the other hand, mostly get a free pass from their voters, who blame any failures on things such as establishment blockage, a rigged system and the deep state.



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In Norway, one of the big election **issues** was the wealth tax that the country has been levying in one form or another since 1892. While controversial before, the debate surrounding the tax intensified during this year's campaign, with the Progress Party advocating total abolition.

Finance minister Jens Stoltenberg, a former prime minister and NATO secretary-general, has **promised** a cross-party committee to review the tax. Stoltenberg's return to the government this year boosted Labour's numbers, in what was called the 'Stoltenback' effect.

Despite the left-wing majority in favour of maintaining the tax, which is often in effect the only taxation levied on the rich, the issue is bound to remain a flashpoint. It has been seized upon by Trump and MAGA-inspired right-wing activists, mostly young and male.

This gender gap can also be seen in election results, not only in Norway but also in other European countries and the US. It is another feature of the current political landscape that appears to be with us for the foreseeable

future.

Finally, one more aspect of the Norwegian election that has echoes in other European countries: the decline of the mainstream centre-right. The Conservative party of former Prime Minister Erna Solberg **achieved** its worst result in 20 years.

In some European countries, the centre-right has managed to hang on or make a comeback, as in Germany and Greece. But in many others it has been pushed to the margins by its populist and far-right rivals, as in France, Italy and the Netherlands. This might also happen in the UK.

All in all, Norway's elections fit more in the narrative of the inexorable rise of the European right and the decline of the centre, rather than offering encouragement to the left.