

# The Rise of Neo-Populist Parties in Scandinavia: A Danish Case Study

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## Abstract

This paper is an analysis of “neo-populist” parties in Scandinavia, focusing on the People’s Party in Denmark. Such parties in the countries of Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark have experienced an increase in votes and seats in the most recent parliamentary elections, primarily due to their appeal to Euroscepticism, concerns about multiculturalism, and economic difficulties. Our discriminant analysis of individual-level data suggests that the electoral success of the Danish People’s Party is primarily due to their ability to attract conservative voters *and* those who oppose the EU. This two-pronged appeal is not shared by any other party in Denmark.

**Keywords:** Neopopulism, Denmark, euroscepticism, Scandinavia

## 1. Introduction

In the last two years, the countries of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway have experienced growing electoral support for “populist” parties. Two other parties (the True Finns and the Danish People’s Party with 19.1% and 13.8% of the vote, respectively) have achieved third-place status in the most recent elections. The Progress Party in Norway is the second-strongest party in that country and received 22.9% of the vote in the 2009 elections.

Although many of these neo-populist electoral successes have been met with concern by the media, particularly because of the anti-immigrant message that characterizes most of these parties, the nature of their appeal is more complex. Some have defied the “right-wing” label; others have attracted former leftists or urban dwellers; and each contains certain elements of the different strands of populism. Moreover, many of these parties focus on issues, where to a large extent, the general population shares one or more of the party’s positions (See Mudde, 2010).

## 2. The Concept of Populism

Populism is a term that is used in both social science and the public arena to denote a controversial form of antiestablishment political activity. Studies of populism have sought to avoid the normative discussion of populism and instead develop it as a concept. Mudde (2000, pp. 34-39) notes that much of the scholarly debate centers on whether there is one all-encompassing form of populism or whether there are only different types of populism. He describes three different types of populism: 1) agrarian populism; 2) economic populism; and 3) political populism. We briefly review these three types; yet, we argue the recent electoral successes of populist parties in Scandinavia can be attributed to their ability to combine elements of all three types, and that most of these parties do not fit conveniently into a left-right political spectrum – hence I use the term “neo-populist.”

### 2.1 Agrarian Populism

The origins of agrarian populism are found in two rather different movements from the end of the nineteenth century: the Populist Party, a political movement comprising mainly, though not exclusively, farmers in the upper Midwest section of the United States, and the *narodniki*, a cultural movement comprised mainly of the urban intelligentsia in tsarist Russia (Walicki, 1969; Mudde, 2000). These movements shared an anti-elitist ideology in which the peasant or farmer was considered a moral figure and that agricultural life was the foundation of society. Vehemently opposed to the urban dwellers and the centralizing tendencies and materialist basis of capitalism, these agrarian populists argued for the preservation of small family farms by founding cooperatives, strengthening their communities, and pushing for self-governance (Mudde, 2000).

## 2.2 Economic Populism

Arising in Latin America in the 1920s, economic populism made a second appearance in the region in the 1970s. In the Latin American tradition, populism is described in terms of a multi-class political movement, often characterized by a personalist, charismatic leader, *ad hoc* reformist policies, and a repudiation of revolutionary tactics (Weyland, 1999). This definition is only partly useful outside of the Latin American situation, especially when applied to Scandinavia, although Denmark's neopopulist party has been led for most of its existence by one charismatic female leader with working class roots. The term "multiclass political movement" has much less relevance in a region, such as Scandinavia, that has been characterized by a well-established welfare system and relatively high level of taxation (Mudde, 2000, 2007).

## 2.3 Political Populism

This more recent conceptualization maintains that populism is, first and foremost, a particular style of politics, referring to "the people" (das Volk) as a homogeneous group with a direct connection between the people and the populist leader. Because of this ambiguity, this definition has often been criticized, making political populism virtually identical to political campaigning. Mudde (2000) sharpens this distinction, by defining political populism as "a political style that builds upon a rigid dichotomy of 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.'" It is important to note is that these two categories are not defined strictly in formal terms, but rather in *moral* terms. Both categories may even be imagined ones, but that is less relevant than the centrality, consistency, and rigidity of this dichotomy. Populists have an ambivalent relationship with politics; on the one hand, they consider politics a dirty job, typical of the corrupt elite, yet they still need the political world to return the power to the people. At the same time, they tend to be nationalists, rejecting any alleged limitations set by international agencies such as the EU. In terms of policies, they support forms of direct democracy, such as referendums (Mudde, 2000, 2007). This type of "politicians' populism" has been linked predominantly with the right wing, most notably in recent studies of the phenomenon in Western Europe (Dunphy & Bale 2011; Mudde 2000). In fact, political populism's reference to the undivided people sits well with nationalists' belief in the nation. The two concepts are often mixed in the dichotomy of the national people versus the anti-national elite. However, non-nationalist and left-wing political actors have also excelled in political populism (Mudde, 2000, 2007).

## 3. Previous Work on Scandinavian Neo-Populist Parties

Several scholars believe that the political "cleavages" of European societies have changed over recent decades, and that this shift has contributed to the rise of neo-populist parties in Scandinavia (Hout et al., 1996). Western European nations typically have been characterized by two major cleavages: 1) the economic dimension, which pits workers against the capitalists, and also concerns the degree of state involvement in the economy, and 2) the socio-cultural dimension, which is about issues such as immigration, law and order, abortion, etc. (Rydgren, 2010) Rydgren believes that neo-populist parties have become increasingly popular as the economic cleavage's importance has become less salient, alienating many working class voters from their traditional parties such as the Social Democrats. Rydgren (2010) analyzed why neo-populist parties have been highly successful in Denmark but have done well in Sweden. He argues that Denmark and Sweden share anti-immigrant sentiments among the electorates and feelings of disenchantment toward the political institutions, but also that these two countries are different with regard to the socioeconomic dimension. While socioeconomic cleavages have lost much of its importance in Danish politics, it is still highly salient in Swedish politics. Secondly, the issue of immigration has been much more politicized in Denmark than in Sweden. While immigration has dominated Danish politics during the last decade, in Sweden the socioeconomic dimension has been more salient.

Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008) focus on the incentives for parties in drawing attention to different issues, in their study of the immigration issue in Denmark and Sweden. Attention to immigration by the parties has been considerably stronger in Denmark than in Sweden. These authors explain this phenomenon by the different strategic situation of the mainstream right-wing parties in these two countries. Focusing on the immigrant issue can lead to a conflict with the center-right, especially socially liberal parties. In Sweden, such a conflict would undermine mainstream right-wing attempts at winning government power. In Denmark, the Liberals governed with the Social Democrats in the 1990s, which made it attractive for the mainstream right-wing parties to focus on the issue in order to influence the formation of a government which needs the support of neo-populist parties (Note 1).

We now turn to an examination of one country's neo populist party – the Danish People's Party. This particular party shares the same nationalistic, anti-immigration stances as do other neo-populist parties in Scandinavia, but it is noteworthy in that this party is not a traditional rightwing party. It appeals to working class voters, is pro-welfare and education, and is opposed to the expansion of EU powers (The Party Program of the Danish

Peoples Party, 2013; Pedersen, 2002; Meret, 2009).

#### 4. A Case Study of Denmark and the Danish People's Party

The Danish People's Party was formed in 1995 as a spinoff party of the Progress Party. Pia Kjaersgaard became leader of the Progress party in 1984, but she formed a separate, more pragmatic party when conflict over strategies divided the Progress Party. Pia Kjaersgaard was not only the charismatic leader of the DPP but, during the first couple of years, she *was* essentially the party (Pedersen, 2002). Kjaersgaard led the party until 2012, when she passed the leadership on to Kristian Thulesen Dahl.

At the party's first national election in 1998, the Danish People's Party got 7.6 percent of the votes. In 2001, the DPP got 12 percent of the vote and 22 seats out of a total of 175 elected. The combined vote for the Liberal Party, the Conservative People's Party, and the Danish People's Party gave them a majority of the seats in parliament, so the Liberal party leader, Anders Rasmussen, created a Liberal/Conservative minority government with the parliamentary support of the Danish People's Party. The DPP increased its electoral support in 2007, and the government continued with the parliamentarian support of the DPP (Pederson, 2002).

In Denmark, only two parties have been against all new EU treaties throughout their existence. Those parties are Danish People's Party and the left-wing Enhedslisten (Red-Green Alliance), although the DPP's predecessor, the Progress Party, was generally supportive of the EU. (Meret, 2009). Although most mainstream politicians favor a more prominent role for the EU, Danish public opinion is generally skeptical and in favor of the retention of strong national power. Referendums have rejected the Maastricht treaty and entry into the Eurozone. The DPP has managed to take advantage of this Euroscepticism more effectively than the other left-wing parties that have also expressed concerns about the EU. (For a full description of the DPP's position on the EU and foreign affairs, see (Meret, 2009)).

Despite international and domestic criticism of its anti-immigration stance, the party's popularity has grown since its inception, taking 25 seats in the 179-member Folketinget in the 2007 parliamentary election (13.8% of the vote, remaining the third largest party in Denmark, and it maintained this third-place status in 2011 as well. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Danish parliamentary elections in 2011

Party	% of Vote	% of Seats
Liberals	26.7%	26.2%
Social Democrat	24.8%	25.1%
<u>Danish People's Party</u>	12.3%	12.3%
Social Liberal Party	9.5%	9.5%
Socialist People's Party	9.2%	8.9%
Red-Green Alliance	6.7%	6.7%
Liberal Alliance	5.0%	5.0%
Conservative People's Party	4.9%	4.5%
Others	4.1%	4.0%

Source: EDF European Election Database

Table 2 below is an assessment of left-right placement of the DPP. This data suggests that the party is decidedly conservative but has moved in a more moderate direction since 2005. This analysis also suggests that their recent success may be due to their ability to provide a contrast to the more numerous left-leaning parties, as well as the less conservative stance of the Liberal Party since 2001.

Table 2. Denmark – CMP left-right scores

Party	1990	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007	Average
Liberal	10.1	54.1	28.6	36.2	-1.6	-6.9	20.1
Social Democrat	-35.5	-7.4	5	-13.4	-37.1	-8.6	-16.1
Danish People's			8.2	35	38.6	14.9	24.2
Socialist People's	-15.3	-27.1	-38.8	-33.8	-40	-37.1	-32
Conservative People's	10.1	15.9	19.1	20.4	13.3	-17.4	10.2
Radical Liberal	-26.8	-7.8	-7	-3.8	0	-9.6	-9.2
Liberal Alliance						-12.5	-12.5
Red-Green Alliance		-25.3	-32.5	-10.7	-43.1	-33	-28.9

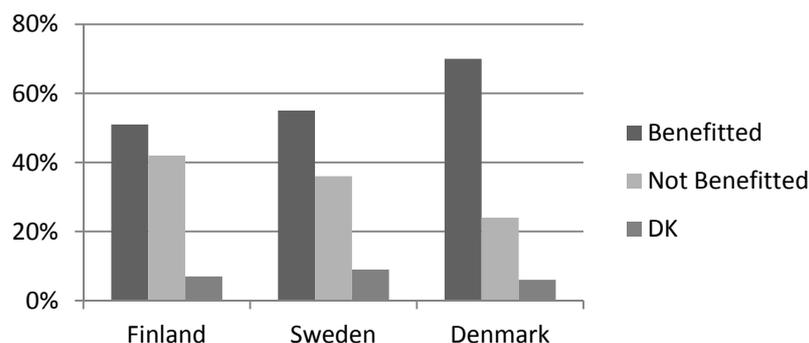
This table shows the periodical scores on left-right position as given in the *Comparative Manifesto Project* (Volkens, et al., 2010). The scores range from -100 (left) to +100 (right).

### 5. Analysis of Opinion on the EU

Much of the appeal of these neo-populist parties has been their concerns about the EU. Table 4 below suggests that this Danish position is not at odds with many other Scandinavians, albeit a minority in each country. One-quarter to one-third of the respondents did not believe that their country had benefitted by membership in the EU. These sentiments, coupled with concerns about multiculturalism, help to explain a good deal of the DPP's recent electoral success.

Table 3. Opinion on EU in Finland, Sweden and Denmark (2010)

“Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefitted or not benefitted from being a member of the European Community?”



Source: Eurobarometer - 2010

We also need to examine individual level data to determine which factors influenced how Danish voters actually cast their votes. Table 4 below shows the results of discriminant analysis of Danish voters (Note 2). Data are from the Eurobarometer Number 61, published in May of 2004 (See Appendix A for full description of variables. More recent Eurobarometer data is available but individual voting data is not publicly available.) In the stepwise analysis, only two variables, opinion on EU membership and left-right self placement, met the F score to be included in the model, suggesting that these two variables were the two best discriminators of vote for a particular party. See Appendix B for a full description of the discriminant analysis.

Table 4 underscores that electoral appeal of the Danish People's Party differs considerably from that of other parties. While there are clearly other right-leaning parties, (with a positive score on the first dimension) such as the Conservative People's Party and the Radical Liberal Party, none of these conservative parties also has an anti-EU stance, as indicated by a positive score on the second dimension. Although the People's Movement Party is anti-EU (a positive score on the second dimension), it is left-leaning. As such, the Danish People's Party has “cornered the market” on the portion of the electorate that is both conservative and anti-EU.

Table 4. Discriminant analysis\* of Danish political parties

Party	Dimension	
	Left-Right	EU Opinion
Conservative People's	1.486	-.340
Danish People's	1.208	1.038
Radical Liberal	.169	-.813
Social Democrat	-.128	-.263
Christian Democrat	-.483	.169
People's Movement	-.978	1.124
Socialist People's	-1.111	-.024
June Movement	-1.121	.613

\*Unstandardized canonical discriminant functions evaluated at group means  
N= 291

## 6. Conclusion

These findings suggest that the electoral success of the Danish People's Party can be attributed, in part, to their conservative ideology *and* their Euroscepticism. While more mainstream parties vary in their left-right positions on more traditional political and economic issues, few of their leaders have been publicly opposed to the European Union. The Danish People's Party has simply filled the void. As such, it is somewhat inappropriate to label this party, and others in Scandinavia, as merely right-wing. Just as the American Independent Party candidate, George Wallace, appeared to many observers in 1968 as a segregationist from the southern region of the United States, his anti-elitist, populist stance received support from many presumably non-racist voters in the presidential primaries and the general election in nonsouthern areas of the U.S. Clearly, populist movements are multi-faceted in their electoral appeal. The recent success of the Danish People's Party can be seen as yet another example of "issue ownership" that often allows smaller, nonmainstream parties to increase their popularity (Mudde, 2010, p. 1180).

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## Notes

Note 1. See also Barr, 2009; Deschouwer, 2008; Dunphy & Bale, 2011; Elias & Tronconi, 2011; Goodwin, 2009; Kitschelt, 2008; Klandermans & Meyer, 2005; Kriesi et al., 2006; Lucardie, 2009; Luther, 2011; Mair & Mudde, 1998, Mudde, 2000 and 2007; Roemer and Van der Straeten, 2006; Taggart, 2000; Van Spanje, 2007; Weyland, 1999.

Note 2. Discriminant function analysis involves the determination of a linear equation like regression that will predict which group a case belongs to. The form of the equation is:

$$D = v_1X_1 + v_2X_2 + v_3X_3 + \dots + v_iX_i + a$$

Where D= discriminant function

V= discriminant coefficient or weight

X=respondent's score for that variable

a= a constant

i= number of predictor variables

Discriminant analysis is used to investigate difference between groups on the basis of the attributes of the cases, indicating which attributes contribute most to group separation (Burns & Burns 2008). The analysis was done using stepwise discriminant analysis which systematically adds each IV to the model, in order to determine which variable or variables make up the best predictor, or set of predictors for the model.

### Appendix A – Description of Data

The Eurobarometer is a series of public opinion surveys conducted regularly on behalf of the European Commission since 1973. 291 cases from Denmark were used in the analysis.

Questions included in the analysis:

- Q2 Frequency of Political Discussions
- Q3 Political Discussions- Convince friends
- Q5 Personal Situation – Five years ago
- Q6 Personal Situation - Next five years
- Q8 EU Membership Good/Bad
- Q10 EU Membership Image
- Q15 Fears-Power loss - Small states
- Q15 Fears-Increased drug/org crime
- Q15 Fears- Our language used less
- Q15 Fears- R's country paying more
- Q15 Fears- Loss of social benefits
- Q15 Fears- Lose national identity/Culture
- Q15 Fears- Economic Crisis
- Q15 Fears -Transfer jobs to other members
- Q15 Fears- Difficulties of farmers
- Q15 Fears- End of Natl Currency
- Q29 EU proposals-Enlargement
- Q29 EU Proposal- Future enlargement
- Q33 EU member state-Veto preference
- Q34 EU constitution-Council of ministers vote
- Q35 EU Budget- Mostly spent on
- Q39a Democracy satisfaction- Country
- Q39b Democracy satisfaction-EU
- D1 Left Right placement- five categories
- D7 Marital status
- D10 Gender
- D11 Age- six categories
- D25 Type of Community
- D29 Household Income

### Appendix B – Full Description of Discriminant Analysis

Table 1. Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients

	Function	
	1	2
EU MEMBERSHIP - GOOD/BAD	-.297	.955
LEFT-RIGHT PLACEMENT	.956	.293

Table 2. Variables entered/removed<sup>a,b,c,d</sup>

Step	Entered	Wilks' Lambda							
		Statistic	df1	df2	df3	Exact F			
						Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1	LEFT-RIGHT PLACEMENT	.623	1	7	283.000	24.474	7	283.000	.000
2	EU MEMBERSHIP - GOOD/BAD	.439	2	7	283.000	20.494	14	564.000	.000

At each step, the variable that minimizes the overall Wilks' Lambda is entered.

a Maximum number of steps is 58.

b Minimum partial F to enter is 3.84.

c Maximum partial F to remove is 2.71.

d F level, tolerance, or VIN insufficient for further computation.

This table shows that in the stepwise analysis, there were only two variables that met the F score to be included in the model.

Table 3. Wilks' lambda

Step	Number of Variables	Lambda	df1	df2	df3	Exact F			
						Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1	1	.623	1	7	283	24.474	7	283.000	.000
2	2	.439	2	7	283	20.494	14	564.000	.000

This table shows the model fit for each step, indicating that the model is a good fit for the data with just one predictor (Left-Right Placement) or with two predictors (Left-Right Placement and Opinion on EU). We can reject the null at the  $P < .001$  for both.

Also, the lambda provides the proportion of the total variability not explained by the model, indicating that 62.3% is unexplained with just one variable and only 43.9% is unexplained with the 2-variable model.

Table 4. Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients

	Function	
	1	2
EU MEMBERSHIP - GOOD/BAD	-.297	.955
LEFT-RIGHT PLACEMENT	.956	.293

These are interpreted as in multiple regression analysis. They are similar to weights, which index the importance of each predictor and direction of the relationship.

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