

Third Essay on Danish Politics and Welfare
in Comparative Perspective

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1. 1. How is EU scepticism reflected in Danish voting behaviour and in Danish political institutions?

Through all over Europe the “[t]he issue of [European] integration is [...] characterized by pro-EU consensus at the elite level, including most political parties that form governments, and widespread EU skepticism among the European public, which has been highly visible in recent referendums” (Green-Pedersen 2010: p. 5). Denmark – like other Nordic countries - does not differ from this observation. The Danish voters are more EU-skeptic than pro-EU and it was never more visible than whilst the remarkable Danish EMU referendum 2000 about further EU integration and the participation in the Euro-currency.

The Scandinavian countries share common “feelings of belonging, a common idea of the welfare state, and a [...] conception of democracy” (Marcussen, Zølner 2001: p. 382), which lets them feel more likely as Nordic countries rather than European. That’s why they always were very curious and skeptic about the EU integration and preferred a model of northern cooperation.

It seems like the more north a country in Europe is located the more skeptic it is, the more south a country is located, the more the country likes the EU. In the southern view the “EU is believed to guarantee democracy and welfare” (Bergman 1997: p. 380), in Denmark the EU is more like a threat to the well-established welfare state. The people in the southern European countries are more dissatisfied with their national government (Eurobarometer 2009: p. 70). Denmark on the other hand is amongst the countries with the highest trust in their government.

Actually, “there is no mention of the EU in the Danish constitution” (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.35). If there is no five-sixth majority in the Folketinget who approves a treaty, the people have to decide through a referendum. In two out of the last six referendums the Danish voters rejected the treaties and every referendum had a remarkable high turnout: the lowest 1986 with 75.4 per cent, the highest in 1972 with 90.4 per cent (Marcussen, Zølner 2001: p. 388). Germany voters for example don’t have the opportunity to express their selves through referendums. With handling European issues this way, the Danish voters don’t need to express

their attitudes through their elected officials (MPs and MEPs) and actually do have a strong option to overrule the political elite. That also explains why the Danish voters don't care so much about the European parliament and that turnout on the EP election compared to the national elections is very low - "the turnout for EP elections in the period 1979-99 was 49.9 per cent [...], whereas it was 85.3 per cent for national elections during the same period" (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.39).

One other observation in the voting behavior of the Danish people is the success of anti-EU-skeptic parties in the elections for the European Parliament. The "voter turnout was higher among voters in anti-EC parties and [...] those voters who disagreed with their national party abstained more often" (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.39), which was especially a very big problem for the Social Democrats. And, in average, "voters in all the major parties [...] perceive their MPs to be more pro-integrationist than they are themselves" (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.40).

In sum, the Danish voters are aware of their importance in referenda, when it comes to vast changes in EU integration. But they also prefer more anti-EC parties in the elections for the European Parliament. However, recent studies in Denmark show that the EU-skepticism is beginning to decline and "the public increasingly sees the EU as a matter of identity and not just of economic integration" (Green-Pedersen 2010: p. 11).

The EU skepticism is also reflected in the Danish political institutions, particularly when it comes to one institution: the European Affairs Committee (EAC). The long tradition of minority governments in Denmark "undoubtedly increases the importance and influence of committees" (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.42) in every policy field. In sum, the EAC seems to control the national position on EU integration, but why is that?

The degree of binding from the positions stated in the Danish EAC for the government is the highest amongst all other European member states. The parliament found a way to control the government *ex ante*, so before the government is starting to negotiate with other member states about certain issues and policies they need to inform the EAC and receive an oral mandate for negotiations, but only if

there is no majority against the mandate (once again the expression of negative parliamentarism in the Danish political system). The EAC is the most attractive committee for the Danish MPs, all party leaders are member of it, which is unusual again, e.g. in Germany the finance committee is the most attractive committee. The EAC also is the biggest committee in terms of staffing with an official representative of the Folketinget in Brussels.

The EAC is meeting every week and once again compared to Germany the high presence of ministers is very unusual. They have to report every European interaction and there are even special procedures to ex post-control the behavior of the ministers (Damgaard, Nørgaard 2000: p.44).

Nevertheless, there is some criticism on the importance of the EAC. For example the EAC is getting involved late in the decision-making process and the committee is also very dependent on the information of the government. The Government can control every information the EAC gets, which leads to an information gap between government and EAC.

2. 2. Discuss the ability of political parties to introduce welfare state cutbacks in Denmark. In particular: What are the main differences between the Social Democrats and the right-wing parties in this respect?

“The friends of the welfare state are the enemy”

The welfare state development today is very closely connected to the social democratic parties all over Europe. Especially in states with a well-established welfare state the success of the social democrats back in the 1960s to 1970s is linked to an all-time peak in welfare state development. But – almost forgotten – the first movements towards the welfare state usually came from bourgeois parties more than 100 years ago. Chancellor Bismarck for example established the first health insurance and the first pension scheme in Germany, in Denmark the bourgeois parties, in particular the Liberals “had a crucial influence on the choice of funding model and administrative structure” of the welfare state (Nørgaard 2000: p.183).

Nevertheless, it is “[o]ne of the most well-established facts of the comparative political economy literature [...] that left-wing governments have a positive long-term effect on welfare state effort” (Jensen 2009: p. 282).

But the welfare state is in trouble nowadays, the “new politics of the welfare state” (e.g. Pierson 1996) are mostly heading into welfare state retrenchment. We are living in an era of permanent austerity: The welfare state has grown since its establishment and people, who didn’t fit into it yesterday, are receiving benefits from it today. The demographic shifts towards older people and less newborn are a competition for the social contract across the generations. There are some other factors which are troubling the welfare state, but more challenging for any reform are the growing vested interests through people who are dependent of the welfare state and support the existence of it, for example staff in hospitals, staff in universities, the well-grown administration and so on.

So there is no doubt about the need for a reform on the welfare state, but especially and surprisingly the right-wing parties are having more trouble with it, than the Social Democrats.

Right-wing parties are traditionally expected to cut down the welfare state, because they are reasonable with money and economic successful. They are facing a lack of public trust in the handling of the welfare state, especially compared to the Social Democrats. This is for example the case in Denmark, where a long tradition of left-wing governments formed the well-established welfare state.

Surprisingly the situation in Denmark leads to an usual behavior of the right-wing parties. They are compensating their images as anti-welfare-parties and actually are giving more attention to the welfare state spending more money on it than the Social Democrats. In the Danish case the median voter is the main explanation for this behavior, “right-wing governments both have to capture [him] and other vested interests by matching the left-wing as well as compensate for the electorate’s default mistrust of the right-wing” (Jensen 2009: p. 283).

On the other hand Social Democratic parties are trying to get rid of their image as economic unsustainable and irresponsible, because of their failure during the economic crisis in the 1970s. The more or less successful “Agenda 2010” started by the Social Democrats for example in Germany could be described as a compensation of public mistrust along the left-wing for sustainable politics.

Nevertheless, the behavior of the right-wing parties in Denmark needs a surrounding like the Danish political system. As Green-Pedersen stated out, party competition and party consensus “affect what governments are able to do in terms of welfare-state retrenchment” (Green-Pedersen 2001: p. 981). If the party cannot achieve a broad coalition of retrenchment along the parliament, it won’t try to retrench the welfare state. This is more likely the case in pivot systems of party competition like in the Netherlands, where “the (Christian Democratic) center party opts for retrenchment”.

Literature

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