

Summary:

The phenomenon of the strong position of labour parties in Norway, Sweden and Denmark

My thesis deals with the unique phenomenon of the strong position of the labour parties in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. These parties have held a position of a dominant party in the Scandinavian party systems for several decades from the late 1930s till the 1970s which is a remarkable achievement among the Western European political parties.

The key to the phenomenal success of the Norwegian Labor Party, the Swedish Social Democrats and the Danish Social Democrats have been particularly high party identification of voters. The success of the welfare state also lies in the widespread feeling that everyone benefits from this state policy not only the poor. These party systems had been due to its stable and unchanging character described as "frozen party systems". The frozen part of the party systems in that period represented an average of about 85% of the votes in Norway and Denmark. In the case of Sweden the figure was even higher – about 94% of all votes. In the case of Norway and Sweden, the Social Democrats as predominant party held even up to 30% more seats than the second strongest political party. In such an environment it is almost impossible for a newly established political group to enter the party system. Early 1970s saw a sudden increase in volatility and the frozen party systems melted very quickly. The 1973 witnessed "earthquake elections" in Norway and Denmark and several new political parties entered the parliaments, even far right populist Progress Parties.

Election turmoil in the party systems in Norway and Denmark in 1973 was largely a result of demographic changes taking place in other developed countries. The fall of the class-voting rate and party identification came as consequences. In the early 1970s the welfare state started to be associated with a high degree of bureaucracy and high taxes rather than a social security. Greater political fragmentation and decline in electoral support for traditional political blocs and in particular long-ruling parties - the Social Democrats - was therefore a logical consequence. Last but not least, the catalyst for these changes to join the discussion to the EC, which in case of Norway largely polarized society as well as the political scene. The key to understanding the decline of labour parties is their programme shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s. From 1973 till the mid 1990s the Scandinavian governments had to introduce a wide scale of reforms to deal with serious economic problems. The center-right governments were much keener to enforce such reforms, but the fact is that the Social

Democrats didn't have a choice but to continue in these reforms. National economies were undergoing through crisis and could not support strongly redistributive welfare state any longer. The result is that the Swedish Social Democrats, who are always talking about themselves as "a party of 40 %" were not able to gain more than 40 % of vote since 1994. Until recently it was common for labour parties not to form a government with any other political party. In 2005 Norwegian Labour Party entered its first coalition government with the socialists and the Centre Party

All in all it appears that the principles of the welfare state remain largely preserved. Cuts and reforms have been made, but the extent of social security remains in comparison with other countries very high. The Scandinavian governments, both center-right and labour cabinets, perhaps found a reasonable compromise between maintaining a healthy economy and preserving the Scandinavian welfare state after all. Although the Social Democrats gradually lose their position, other political parties seem to take part of the labour welfare programme, and take it for their own.

At the end of my thesis I consider the possible development of Scandinavian labour parties in near future.