

The state of Denmark: What voters can tell us about the future of the Danish ideal

*Denmark is often held up as an ideal society with a well-functioning welfare state, low levels of corruption, and high levels of social and political stability. But behind this perception, the country is facing up to a number of important challenges. Drawing on a new book, **Rune Stubager, Kasper M. Hansen, Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Richard Nadeau** explain how voters have responded to key macrosocial challenges since the 1970s and assess where this leaves the future of the Danish ideal.*

Of late, Denmark has been much in the political news. During the 2016 American presidential campaign, it became an ideological lightning rod among Democratic candidates, with Bernie Sanders praising Denmark as a role model for American society, a goal Hillary Clinton claimed was impossible. In [her words](#), “I love Denmark... But we are not Denmark.”

Forces on the right were more blunt, with Trish Regan, Fox Business Host, saying Denmark revealed the “horrors of socialism. Paul Krugman, directly countering that view, [stated](#) “The simple fact is that life is better for more Danes than it is for their U.S. counterparts.” Where does the truth lie? Specific answers to such questions, as understood from the perspective of the Danish voters themselves, are offered in our new book, [The Danish Voter: Democratic Ideals and Challenges](#).

The investigation draws on the long public opinion series of Danish National Election Studies (1971-2019), arguably one of the best collections of scientific national election surveys of democratic voters in the world. With these data we are able to thoroughly explore what moves individual voters, guided by two important theories – the structuring of the electorate by social cleavages, coupled with the organising vote choice mechanism of the funnel of causality. These complementary perspectives reveal the underlying stability of the electoral system, at the same time marking adaptive changes.

First, change exists via socio-demographic anchors such as gender where the more Left-Bloc orientation of women compared to men has grown, or education where the Left-Bloc gap between the more educated and the less has increased. Second, there are changing psychological anchors such as party identification, which remains high but in noticeable decline. Thus, Denmark does not stand as a Nordic system “frozen in time,” lacking any dynamism. The ongoing nature of the causal variables plays against the backboard of a wide array of parties. Indeed, it registers a higher effective number of parties – six – than does The Netherlands, so encouraging the continued high level of voter turnout.

Nevertheless, there are serious signs of a changing pattern of vote choice, one underlined by heightened party volatility. To take a leading example, support for the “four old parties,” i.e., the Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Conservatives and Liberals, has been falling, from a peak in 1994 of almost 80 percent to just over 60 percent today.

To some extent, this drop has come about as voters seek to match their more complex preferences with their party choice. The ideal Denmark represents an open egalitarian society girded by the canonical value of the welfare state. As our analysis makes clear, Danes are wedded to welfare for all and are willing to foot the taxes for it. For instance, overwhelming majorities express their support of generous public spending for health care, including home care and day care. But does a divorce threaten that collective wedding?

This ideal social foundation faces two big political challenges – managing economic prosperity and managing the culture of immigration. With regard to the economy, Danish voters pay a good deal of attention to its rhythms and are very willing to “throw the rascals out”, in order to install a government team that will deliver the needed prosperity. But what if that government, facing an economic growth crisis, must raise taxes even more (beyond the current 50 percent of GDP level), in order to produce the necessary transfer funds? Relatedly, what about the immigrant population from less well-off and culturally very different countries, a population that has steadily risen as a percentage of the total population. And with immigrants seen by many more as a financial burden on the state, rather than an asset of new, able-bodied workers.

We fully explore these political risks and opportunities. Thus far, the Danish state has managed these challenges rather well, holding intact “the Danish ideal,” or at least keeping it within reach. Until the early 1990s the economy and the booming welfare state were the issues of main importance to Danish voters. Today, the cultural dimension, not least the immigration issue, has acquired the same level of importance, as a change happening incrementally from election to election, allowing parties and voters to find each other.

That is, in Denmark, the democratic people-to-policy link between ordinary citizens and their chosen leaders remains strong and unbroken. But what if such challenges come to be regularly unmet by elected politicians? Then voters may observe their representatives as unable to deliver on the public policies people prefer. In the [felicitous phrase](#) of V.O. Key, they could alter their “standing decision” by defecting from their traditional party, turning to another, more extreme party. If these defections are widespread and persistent, then the Danish ideal could be put on notice.

Fortunately, this crisis has been averted, with leading parties exhibiting policy flexibility, changing platforms in response to changing public demands. Of course, such an adaptive strategy faces difficulties in implementation, particularly when multiple issues become highly salient. The different governments have been nimble in that regard, more or less deftly avoiding bringing the system to the brink.

The latest example of such manoeuvring is the current governing party, the Social Democrats, who after following a Third Way-inspired policy line for a few decades, swung back towards the left on economic matters and took a sharp turn to the right on immigration since losing the election of 2015. This move has brought the party in line with the preferences of its traditional, core electorate in the working class that had been struggling to find a party offering their preferred policy mix. We have no grounds for believing those deft policy moves will not go forward. Also, we have no grounds for believing that “luck alone” will see the country through.

Rune Stubager, Kasper M. Hansen, Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Richard Nadeau are the authors of [The Danish Voter: Democratic Ideals and Challenges](#) (University of Michigan Press, 2021)

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