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The Norwegian Progress Party: an established populist party

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Abstract This article sheds light on one of Europe's successful right-wing populist parties, the Norwegian Progress Party. Since 2013 the party has been in a coalition with the Conservative Party. The history, ideology and position of the party in the Norwegian political system are factors that explain how a centre-right party and a populist one have been able to form a viable coalition. Over time the Progress Party has become increasingly well integrated into the political system. The fact that no *cordon sanitaire* or total boycott policy was implemented against it may explain why the party developed a more moderate and pragmatic approach than most other right-wing populist parties. In turn, this made it possible for the Conservative Party to offer to form a coalition with the Progress Party and placed the centre-right in the strategic position of cooperating with parties both in the centre and to the right.

Keywords Populism | Right-wing politics | Political parties | Centre-right | Norway | The Progress Party

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Introduction

The Norwegian Progress Party is an example of a successful European populist party which has not only gained seats in parliament, but has also become a governing party. Established in the early 1970s, mainly as an anti-tax protest party, it transformed into an anti-immigration and anti-establishment party in the 1980s, before positioning itself as one of the main political forces in Norway. The Progress Party entered government for the first time following the parliamentary elections of 2013. It is therefore one of very few European populist parties to have exerted governmental power. However, the so-called cost of governing (see Jennings and Green 2014) seems to have been higher for the Progress Party than for its coalition partner, the Conservative Party. Once in power, the Progress Party—like all political parties—has had to compromise, prioritise and make concessions. For the Progress Party this has resulted in internal splits, low poll ratings and increasing tensions between its grass-roots members and political elites. This article will shed light on what has happened since this right-wing populist party entered government in Norway and the lessons we might draw from this for Europe's centre-right. Indeed, it gives the centre-right an opportunity to assess an example of conservative-populist cooperation.

Populism may be understood as an 'ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups': the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004, 562). It usually argues that politics should be an expression of the general or people's will. In turn, right-wing populism is defined as an ideology appealing to the 'man in the street' rather than to specific classes or social or interest groups (Hartleb 2011). Right-wing populist parties are marked by anti-immigrant, authoritarian and anti-establishment tendencies (Jupskås 2013; Mudde 2007). Overall, the literature defines the Norwegian Progress Party as a right-wing populist party, distinguishing it from extreme, radical or far-right populist parties (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2007). The party holds anti-establishment, anti-immigration, and strict law and order positions. The majority of the party's delegates view immigration as 'a serious threat to our national identity', while almost all agree that people who break the law should be punished 'more severely' than they are today (Jupskås 2013). Also the party's slogan, 'Partiet for folk flest' ('the party for most/ordinary/common people'), illustrates how the party's populist rhetoric addresses the man in the street. This article will not enter further into the debate on what defines right-wing populism, but instead will focus on the ideology and programme of the Progress Party and the effect that governmental power has had on it.

Populism, differently?

The Progress Party was established in 1973. It was initially named Anders Lange's Party for a Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Intervention. Its unusual name was attributed to its colourful leader, the journalist and editor Anders Lange. Lange was a staunch critic of state intervention and of what he viewed as the welfare

state's over-regulation. His personality played well on television and in the media. It was not uncommon to see him waving his Viking sword or drinking eggnog in his television appearances. In its early years, Lange's party was often viewed as a typical 'flash-party' or 'one-man-party', which would fade away after the next elections (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990; Bolleyer 2013). The party would, however, not only remain part of the Norwegian party system, but also radically change it. In the 1973 elections the party gained 5% of the vote and four seats in parliament. Three factors were key to this unexpected breakthrough in what was a relatively stable party system (Bjørklund 2000): a growing anti-tax sentiment in public opinion, a change in voting patterns in the aftermath of the polarising Norwegian referendum on accession to the European Community in 1972 and the charismatic personality of Anders Lange.

Internal disputes and the death of Lange left the party with no seats in parliament after the 1977 elections (Jupskås 2013). The party changed its name to the Progress Party, and in 1978 Carl I. Hagen was elected as its chair and started the process of reorganising it with a stronger hierarchical structure. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Progress Party reoriented its political message to focus on immigration, criminality and care for the elderly (Jupskås 2013). Lange's critique of the lavish welfare state in the 1970s was replaced with 'welfare chauvinism', pleading for better care for 'our own' inhabitants (Bjørklund and Saglie 2004). The party started arguing for an increase in public spending and tax cuts at the same time. This combination would, in most cases, be rebutted as unrealistic, but with the Norwegian oil resources available, the Progress Party became the foremost spokesperson for spending rather than saving the oil money. Over the years, the party went from being an outsider to the second largest party in the parliament after the elections of 1997, 2005 and 2009, and the third largest in 2001 and most recently in 2013.

To a certain extent, the electoral success of the Progress Party can be understood as what Kitschelt dubbed the 'winning formula' (Kitschelt and McGann 1995). The winning formula describes right-wing parties that have an ideological profile combining socio-economically liberal and socio-culturally authoritarian measures, snatching voters from both the traditional left and right. In the early 2000s, several right-wing parties in Western Europe moved towards the centre on economic issues, defending some aspects of the welfare system and redistribution for part of the population, in what De Lange labelled 'the new winning formula' (De Lange 2007). The Progress Party should best be understood as combining both formulas. On the one hand, it remains the foremost critic of welfare state overspending, arguing for minimal social benefits, downsizing the public sector and strongly reducing taxation. On the other hand, it is the foremost defender of public spending through the oil fund and on investments in infrastructure such as roads, telecommunications, hospitals, schools and nursing homes (Fremskrittspartiet n. d.).

The shift towards being a right-wing populist party shaped the Progress Party as we know it today. However, its past also differentiates it from other typical right-wing populist parties. It has, for example, never had an extreme-right militant past like that of the National Front in France, the Sweden Democrats, the Freedom Party in Austria or Flemish Interest in Belgium (Mudde 2007). Comparing the programme of populist right

parties in the Nordic region, Jungar and Jupskås (2014) conclude that the Progress Party is less authoritarian and more economically right-wing than its sister parties in Scandinavia, the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats, while remaining, nonetheless, equally anti-establishment and anti-immigration.

Such differences may be partly explained through the origins of those parties. The Finns Party (previously known as the True Finns) is the successor of the Finnish Rural Party and is considerably influenced by agrarian populism and social-conservatism. The Sweden Democrats was founded in the late 1980s following a merger of far-right and more militant organisations that operated under banners such as 'Keep Sweden Swedish' (Rydgren 2006). In contrast, the Norwegian Progress Party and the Danish Progress Party were both founded on the basis of neoliberal populist and tax protest movements in the early 1970s. Much like its Norwegian counterpart, the Danish Progress Party was established by an outspoken tax protester, Mogens Glistrup. However, long-standing internal disputes led to the party splitting and a new party, the Danish People's Party, being created in 1995. This party, with Pia Kjærsgaard as leader, was established on the basis of an anti-immigration ideology inspired by continental radical right parties such as the French National Front (Rydgren 2007).

Of the Nordic right-wing populist parties, the Norwegian Progress Party is the oldest and probably the best integrated into the political system. It entered parliament for the first time in 1973 and has been a part of the Norwegian political landscape ever since. It has exerted political power locally, regionally and nationally. But perhaps more importantly, it has not been frozen out of political cooperation to the same extent as populist right-wing parties in other countries. The National Front in France, Flemish Interest in Belgium and the Sweden Democrats, for example, have been subject to a *cordon sanitaire*, whereby established parties commit, more or less explicitly, to a political boycott of the party (Jupskås 2013). In contrast, the Progress Party has helped to pass several state budgets and has been included in several local governments. Most notably it has participated in local government in Oslo for a total of 10 years, where it has also held the mayoral office twice. Moreover, the fact that the Progress Party is now in a national government coalition makes it, together with the Finns Party and the Swiss People's Party, one of the only right-wing populist parties in government in Western Europe today.

Populism in practice

After becoming leader of the party in 2006, Siv Jensen put a lot of effort into transforming it into a credible office-seeking party (Jupskås 2013). When seeking office, parties need to appear as relevant and serious coalition partners. Therefore the party is not solely addressing the voters, as it would with a vote-seeking strategy, but also potential coalition partners and their electorates. In so doing, parties may moderate their positions, expand their issues agenda and express their willingness to negotiate.

Jensen is, in many ways, viewed as having a less confrontational and more balanced leadership style than her predecessor, Carl I. Hagen, enjoying better relationships with

other party leaders (Jupskås 2013). She has distanced herself from other populist parties, criticising the Danish People's Party's 'pure nationalism' and the Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party for being 'extremists' (Jupskås 2013). Jensen's office-seeking strategy has been successful. Following the 2013 parliamentary elections the party entered parliament for the first time in its existence and after 40 years of being part of the opposition.

In the elections the Progress Party won 16.3% of the vote and became the third largest party after Labour (30.8%) and the Conservatives (26.8%). A Conservative-Progress Party minority coalition was formed with confidence and supply from the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party in parliament. The two centre parties declined to participate in the coalition for fear of becoming 'hostages' without real influence in a government that included the Progress Party (*Vårt Land* 2012; Helljesen et al. 2013). The Liberal and the Christian Democratic parties have also hinted at the fact that they would be ready to enter government if the Progress Party were to leave (Glomnes 2015; Helljesen et al. 2013). However, in recent years, the leadership of the Progress Party has repeatedly stated that it would not give its support to a centre-right government that it was not a part of. This has made them, for the time being, an indispensable coalition partner for the Conservatives.

Not having a majority on their own, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party have had to make concessions to secure the support of the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties in parliament. The government agreed, amongst other things, to rule out oil and gas explorations off the coasts of Lofoten, Vesterålen and Senja; to maintain a strict alcohol policy; and to grant permanent residency to the children of illegal immigrants who have lived in Norway for more than three years (Fossan 2013). These concessions were not well received by the Progress Party's own electorate, as stricter immigration rules, a liberal alcohol policy, and the intensification of oil and gas explorations have, for several years, been among the party's main electoral promises. After four months in power, support for the Progress Party had dropped from 17 to 11.7% in the polls, while support for its coalition partner, the Conservatives, increased from 25.7 to 30.5% (Pollsopolls n. d.). This represents an all-time low for the Progress Party.

The Progress Party has, nonetheless, achieved a breakthrough in relevant policy areas while in government. Various taxes and duties have been removed or reduced, such as the inheritance tax, which has been abolished. In addition the level of non-taxable income has been raised and more room has been given for private health services. A new ministry for immigration and integration has been established and overall there are stricter rules on immigration and the granting of permanent residency in Norway. There has also been a toughening of the criteria regarding the social benefits that refugees are eligible for. Further minor, but symbolically important, changes have also been implemented, such as higher speed limits on highways, and the legalisation of professional boxing and poker.

However, many voters and party members feel that progress has been limited. In addition to the concessions already mentioned, the party's electors have had difficulty

accepting the government's decisions not to abolish toll roads, to increase taxes on diesel and to take in more Syrian refugees (Sandvik 2014). Moreover, the refugee crisis, with the arrival of up to 31,000 refugees in Norway in 2015, has certainly caused a lot of frustration for voters who hoped for less immigration, even if the crisis is clearly global in nature (Stiegler and Zaman 2016). In the local elections of 2015 the party received just 9.5% of the vote, its lowest share in local elections since 1991.

Since being in power, the party has, moreover, experienced increased internal tensions between its grass-roots members and the political elites (Pileberg 2015). The majority of politicians appointed to ministerial positions after the elections came from the party's more moderate wing, while those from the party's more radical wing—who are often more outspoken—were kept at arm's length. Several high-profile, essentially more radical Progress Party politicians have, on numerous occasions, criticised the party's work in government. Per Sandberg, the party's deputy leader, declared that the party 'is not anymore what it once was' and has become too 'vague' (Løset 2013), while Christian Tybring-Gjedde, second deputy in the parliament's foreign affairs committee, asked for the Progress Party to leave the coalition (Nordahl et al. 2015). Sandberg initially stated that he would step down as deputy leader in 2014, before retracting his statements a couple of months later. Even former leader of the Progress Party, Carl I. Hagen, has criticised the government and said that the party should tell the Liberal and the Christian Democratic parties to 'get lost' if they approach the government with further demands (Johnsen 2016).

Based on interviews with regular Progress Party members, Jupskås (2015) has observed that the ideological gap between the grass roots and the elites has increased since the party entered government. Several thousand members have left the party, and the grass roots are increasingly interested in policy areas other than those of interest to the party elites. This, in combination with losing out in the polls, is quite a common trend for anti-establishment parties in power. According to Van Spanje (2011), the cost of governing is, on average, higher for an anti-establishment party, as it 'loses the purity of its message by being seen to cooperate with the political establishment' once in government. For the Progress Party the process of becoming an institutionalised and integrated part of the party system started before entering government. According to the literature, the party is considered to have reached the last stage of integration of political parties by entering government (Deschouwer 2008).

If applying Sartori's typology of party systems, the Progress Party would be defined as 'relevant' and having 'blackmail and governing potential' (Sartori 1976). The latter refers to a party being considered a potential coalition partner, while 'blackmail potential' refers to the ability of more anti-system parties to politically influence them from outside of the government. Over the years the Progress Party has gone from being a marginalised protest party to a party with political influence outside of government, to a governing party that is well integrated—at least on the party elite level—into the party system.

Populism and Europe's centre-right

The emergence of right-wing populism in Europe is not a new phenomenon. Right-wing populist parties are, however, increasingly turning into influential and relevant governing parties. The Finns Party and the Norwegian Progress Party are examples of this. The question, then, for the centre-right political family is: how should it deal with the rise of office-seeking populism?

First, centre-right parties should not implement policies that intend to freeze out right-wing populist parties. A *cordon sanitaire* policy, consisting of boycotting the party in question, may not only show itself to be ineffective, but may also have the opposite effect to that of weakening the party. By being marginalised, populist parties can easily highlight exactly what they see as the root cause of all problems: the establishment. In turn, such parties may capitalise on their status as outsiders and claim to be the only alternative to 'the powers that be'. A good example of this is the National Front in France, where Marine Le Pen has gained increasing electoral support as the result of her constant references to the 'UMPS'—a neologism alluding to the idea that the Union for a Popular Movement (now renamed The Republicans) and the Socialist Party are one and the same. In the case of the Progress Party, the fact that the party was not totally frozen out, but had exerted power locally and regionally before exerting power on the national level meant that it had already experienced being held politically accountable. Such experience may compel a party to propose more realistic and achievable policies.

Second, centre-right parties should realise that a populist party well-integrated into the political system is often a better one. When still on the political margins, the ideology of populist parties can tend to become radicalised (Meret 2010). A well-integrated populist party sees the need to moderate its policies and rhetoric in order to develop effective office-seeking strategies. The Progress Party did so in the run-up to the 2013 election, and again before entering government with the Conservative Party in order to get support from the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties in parliament. Also, by becoming part of the political establishment, populist parties may lose the 'purity' of their message. Whether we like it or not, centre-right parties are often viewed as being associated with the established elites. And, in many ways, the claim made by right-wing populist parties that they are the party for the man in the street or 'for most people' (as the slogan of the Progress Party claims) has been a successful electoral strategy. This is undoubtedly one of the main electoral challenges facing centre-right parties today.

Finally, centre-right parties should consider, depending on the political context, offering political cooperation to and coalitions with right-wing populist parties. Once in power, parties have to negotiate, compromise and are held politically accountable. For populist parties this may prove a challenging task. Their electorates are often more volatile and less willing to accept political compromises. In the case of the Progress Party this has been demonstrated in the recent low poll results and poor support in local elections. Moreover, when in power, populist parties may experience internal tensions between the grass roots and the party elites. Tensions may also arise between the more moderate wing of the party that defends a more pragmatic approach and its more radical wing

that argues that the party has become unrecognisable. Centre–right parties should map out potential partners in the party’s moderate wing.

Of course, the possibility of cooperating depends on the political context and the party in question. Indeed, some populist parties will remain too radical and distant from centre–right values to be included in a governmental coalition. Yet, right-wing populism, in contrast to far-right and extreme-right populism, does not operate as an anti-democratic movement (Hartleb 2011). In general, it accepts the ‘rules of the game’. Centre–right parties should therefore not discredit right-wing populist parties from the outset. They should acknowledge the legitimacy of some of the concerns of their electorate, while still fighting the parties in elections.

Conclusion

The minority government in Norway is an example of a successful coalition between a conservative party and a populist party. Overall, the cooperation has gone smoothly. For the Conservative Party, opening up to cooperate with a party on its right has proven to be both difficult and strategically wise. It has been, and still is, a very laborious task to negotiate and mediate between centrist parties supporting the government in parliament and a right-wing populist party in government. And there is no guarantee that the government coalition will hold together in the long term. However, by offering cooperation with the Progress Party on its right, the Conservative Party has positioned itself strategically in the middle of the political spectrum. The party may now choose according to the political circumstances to cooperate with parties on either its right or its left. Of course, this does not mean that cooperation with populist parties will always be successful. But for the Progress Party, the fact that the party had already been held politically accountable, had developed office-seeking strategies and was well-integrated into the political system made cooperation with the Conservative Party possible.

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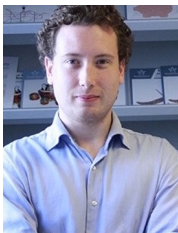
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