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The twilight of the Scandinavian model

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Abstract. This article examines how the changing political landscape in Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) is challenging the traditional understanding of the Scandinavian model. Once lauded for its stable party systems and successful welfare state, the region now faces increasing voter volatility and a decline in party loyalty. The analysis explores how social transformations, particularly the rise of a post-industrial society, are weakening the link between social class and political party choice. Studies of voting behavior show a rise in issue-oriented voting and a decline in traditional class voting patterns. This electoral dealignment is forcing parties to adapt and embrace "catch-all" strategies, while also contending with lingering ideological attachments among some voters. The article further highlights the rise of voter apathy and abstention, particularly among young people. This disengagement from the political process adds another layer of complexity to the changing nature of Nordic political behavior. Overall, the research suggests that the once-stable Scandinavian model is undergoing a significant transformation, demanding a reevaluation of how we understand Nordic politics and its future trajectory.
Keywords. Scandinavian model; Voter volatility; Party loyalty; Electoral dealignment; Post-industrial society.
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1. Introduction

The basic interpretation of politics in 'Norden' (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) has been that of the so-called Scandinavian model (Kuhnle, 1990). Nordic politics and economics impressed an international audience because it seemed so successful in terms of resolving political issues in Parliament as well as stimulating a high rate of growth in the economy. Political consensus was parallelled by a social consensus between the trade unions and the employers' associations to avoid industrial conflict and jointly reap the benefits from sustained economic growth (Rustow, 1955; Almond, 1956; Eckstein, 1966; Lijphart, 1984; Elder et al., 1988).

Herbert Tingsten claimed that 'Norden' hosted 'happy democracies', combining a stable party system representing a wide range of interests with an extensive welfare state that appeared to be capable of achieving a considerable amount of equality (Tingsten, 1955 and, 1966). To Mancur Olson, Scandinavian exceptionalism could be retrieved also in the economy where corporatist interest intermediation and policy consultation solved the collective action problems, securing rapid economic growth - the bright Northern light (Olson, 1990).

This is only history now. The major signs of instability already showing up in Western Europe at the end of the 1970s, finally reached stable Scandinavia during the 1980s. Volatility is increasing, transforming the party system and the welfare state is being reconsidered. How are these profound political

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changes dealt with in the academic literature by Nordic political science scholars?

2. Voter volatility

The analysis of voting behaviour has had strongholds in Nordic political science since the 1950s, providing much relevant and reliable information about the fragmentation of the party systems and the increase in issue voting. Scandinavian politics used to reflect the class divisions in industrial society, sweeping into the Nordic countries quickly at the end of the nineteenth century. The emergence of a post-industrial society has created a new middle class that lacks the traditional attachments of industrial society. The median vote, decisive for the victory or defeat of political parties, is a volatile one. It forces the parties to move towards the centre and take a stand on the issues that are important to new groups of voters. The increasing voter volatility is conducive to the attempt at catch-all strategies, a temptation checked by lingering groups of ideologically conscious voters, with net volatility around 20 per cent and gross at 30 per cent.

Studies of voting behaviour reveal the strong increase in voter volatility. Volatility or shifts between parties may be measured on an aggregate level (net) or on the level of individuals (gross). The net volatility index is obtained by adding the losses and the gains for each party from one election to another. On an individual level, gross volatility is measured by the number of the voters who shift among parties between elections. Since voters tend to shift in all directions, the gross volatility scores are higher than the aggregated net scores.

As shown by Soren Holmberg and associates in several publications, the Swedish electorate has become increasingly mobile as well as issue and person orientated, which has resulted in the decline of political party loyalty and relevance (Gilljam & Holmberg, 1990 and 1993). The erosion of the classical tie between the social groups of industrial society and the structure of the party system appears in data about class voting. The Gothenburg analysis of each Swedish election dates back to the 1950s but it was expanded considerably in the 1980s.

Henry Valen and his co-workers in Oslo reach the same findings, supported by a continuous analysis of national elections over a long time period (Valen, 1992; Valen *et al.*, 1990). Norway has experienced considerable turbulence in the electorate during the past two decades. There is a decline in party identification, driving up gross volatility sharply. The party system has not managed to adapt to the electoral dealignment without major changes, such as the rise of new parties both on the left and the right.

Danish studies reveal that the breaking up of the frozen party systems in the Nordic countries first began in the earthquake election of 1973 (Damgaard, 1974 and, 1990; Borre, 1977 and, 1990; Pedersen, 1987; Svensson & Togeby, 1986 and, 1991; Andersen, 1992). The creation of the huge public sector after the second world war loomed large in Danish society's transformation from an agricultural and industrial society to a post-industrial society comprising a large number of public employees but also a rising level of taxation that as early as 1973 caused the first welfare state backlash in the Nordic countries as argued by Palle Svensson.

Broad social structure transformation led to the slow erosion of the foundation of the class-based party system, Social Democrats being the party

of the workers, the Liberals the party of the farmers and the Conservatives the party of urban business. Even though the social cleavages did not determine political party orientation, the tie between social groups and party has been lessened considerably during the last decades. Danish turbulence since the early 1970s stemmed from the lack of correspondance between the economic and social transformation and the classical party system and the traditional lines of cleavage.

In Finland, Tuomo Martikainen has shown not only that volatility is increasing but also that passivity and abstention have grown to such an extent that they play a significant role in the power game. Abstention from voting among the young, particularly in urban areas has become an accepted pattern of behavior (Martikainen & Yrjönen, 1991). The instability of Finnish politics is first and foremost expressed in voter disengagement. Participation culminated at 85.1 per cent in the 1962 general election and since then there has been continuous decline, the lowest figure in the parliamentary election of 1991 being 72 per cent.

Gross and net volatility have increased in Finland to almost the same extent as in the other Scandinavian countries. It was estimated on the basis of panel surveys that 25 per cent of the voters changed their party preference in 1991. In the later 1950s and early 1960s, the corresponding figure in 'normal elections' was in the neighbourhood of 11 per cent (Pesonen & Berglund, 1991; Berglund *et al.*, 1991).

In the Nordic context electoral behaviour is now markedly different. Party loyalty has crumbled as fewer and fewer voters support the same party as in the previous election. Political mobility among the electorate is now so large that the model of a simple and stable relationship between social group adherence and party choice is no longer true.

3. Government instability

The gist of the Scandinavian model was stable party government operating efficiently in a nexus of neo-corporatist institutions within a mixed economy with a pragmatic trade-off between capitalism and socialism. A number of recent studies shows that three elements of the model - efficient party government, corporatist interest articulation, and interest intermediation as well as piecemeal social engineering by means of public policy-making - no longer operate as they used to (Ruin, 1982; Elvander, 1988 and, 1992; Lewin, 1988; Rothstein, 1992, Pedersen, 1988). Gone are distinctive characteristics such as compromise politics, social consensus expressed in corporatist interest articulation and interest inter-mediation. It has been claimed that the Scandinavian model expressed social democratic hegemony, implying that the labour movement has had to face increasing difficulties, which is true. To other observers it was the unintended but balanced outcome of the clash between the socialist camp and the so-called bourgeois camp (Helco & Madsen, 1987; Tilton, 1990; Milner, 1990).

During the 1980s a general swing towards market values has taken place in Scandinavian societies. There is hardly any support for more public sector solutions to social problems. At the same time, parties have emerged that question the size of the welfare state in the Nordic countries. One set of major empirical studies revealing the other side of the Scandinavian model is the Swedish power study conducted between 1985-1990. Olof Peterson not only

managed the investigation but also delivered its main report, where the overall characterization of the interaction between citizens and elites in Sweden came as a surprise to those with a firm belief in the Swedish model's idealistic conceptions.

A major finding of the Swedish power investigation is that there are two distinct elite groups. Not only are they adherents of different political ideologies but there is also a sharply different organizational affiliation. The first elite dominates the public sector, whereas the second prevails in the private sector. Elite persons with a socialist creed are to be found in the centrally placed institutions of the interest organizations, cultural organizations and public administration. As much as 70 per cent of the sample that belongs to these institutions states an ideological preference for socialism. The bourgeoisie predominate among key persons in the private sector, in military and legal institutions as well as the press. It used to be stated that the Swedish political system comprised a socialist government but a non-socialist administration. This is no longer true. The extensive period in power for the SAP has meant that gradually people with socialist views have been recruited into the central bureaucracy in Stockholm.

Socialist Sweden is portrayed as a colossus with feet of clay. Involvement in broad citizens' organizations was high in terms of formal membership (94 per cent of a national sample) but the real level of participation by ordinary people was very low. The headquarters of the trade unions and the interest organizations in Stockholm are heavily staffed and these officials have extensive contacts with key government people in Stockholm. Although participation is still at a high level of 90 per cent among those entitled to vote, actual participation indicates apathy as only 15 per cent of the sample stated that they were members of a political party and a mere 10 per cent stated that they had participated in a political meeting for a long period of time. Substantial citizen groups reveal that they lack the ability to interact with government on a formal basis in a society dominated by a large public sector.

The Swedish power elite consists of people having top level positions within either the private sector or the public sector. In order to occupy an elite position in Sweden, one usually has to be a male middle-aged person, as only 13% are women and 80% are between 44 to 64 years of age. Part of the Swedish political elite has a working class background. There is also a group of rural origin. Although a blue-collar background is more characteristic of the Swedish political elite than of elites in other comparable nations, it should be emphasized that a majority of the Swedish political elite originates from a white-collar background as well as from an urban setting. The elite tends to be more positive than the population at large towards government actions that help people in various disadvantageous positions, whereas the opposite is true when it comes to the size of health care and environmental protection programmes. This confirms the observation in Swedish electoral studies that the representatives of the political parties tend to be more left-wing than the population in general.

The Danish voters have consistently elected a Parliament that is evenly divided between the socialist and the bourgeois bloc, making it difficult to arrive at stable governments. Since 1971 Denmark has had new elections almost every second year. In 1982 the Social Democratic leader, Anker Jorgensen, resigned without calling an election, because new elections only six months after the last election in December 1981 could not be held. However,

1982 marked a major change in Danish politics, because a bourgeois Coalition Government was formed between Conservatives, Liberals, Centre Democrats and the Christian Peoples' Party. The Conservative party chairman Poul Schluter became the first Conservative Prime Minister this century and he remained in power until January 1993, although the coalition did not have an overall majority. The Radical Liberals supported the Conservative Government in its economic policies, as the Progress Party often did (the protest party led by Mogens Glisterup). Denmark was always a little different from Sweden and Norway, reflecting the weaker position of the labour movement.

Government instability and overload were made worse by the economic crisis that hit the Nordic countries with a vengeance in 1990. It is fair to say that it came as a surprise to several admirers of the special combination of the private and the public that characterized the Nordic 'neo-corporatist' model of democracy when, for the first time after the second world war, it ran into a deep economic slump. Finland was hit first and hardest, which increased the political problems. By the end of the 1980s, tensions in the Finnish economy had developed. The reversal of the steady economic growth since 1950 shattered the ideological foundations of the egalitarian welfare state. Corporatist decision-making, all-pervasive consensus, stability and continuity of political life revealed themselves, more or less, as products of 'good times'. Building up the welfare state from the mid-1950s onwards integrated decision-making partners and brought about structural stability and policy continuity. The inflationary economy of the late 1980s has led to a lack of trust in its economic institutions. Even the prospects of EC membership have not improved economic development. Lack of confidence in institutions and leadership has accumulated. Finland's political parties and leading politicians are distrusted, as the proportion that replies that; 'Parties are interested in people's votes, not their opinions' rose from 52 per cent to 72 per cent from 1983 to 1991. The proportion who believed that, 'There is at least one party to stand for my cause' decreased from 68 per cent to 44 per cent in the same period of time. In the present depression, when saliency of politics and stakes for the public are extremely high, hesitancy and uncertainty among the public have increased, allowing for the fact that after the 'Kekkonen era' -strong presidential rule for a quarter of a century (1956-1981) - the change in leadership style was inevitable as shown by Martikainen.

In Norway only two kinds of governments can be formed: either a minority Labour government based upon a socialist majority or a bourgeois coalition. These blocks, reflecting the cleavages of industrial society, broke down during the EC debate in 1970-72, but were restored a few years later, Despite great electoral changes, Labour as well as the non-socialist coalitions managed to provide the country with relatively viable government. However in the election of 1985 and again in 1989, the coalition parties as well as the parties on the left failed to obtain a majority. The right-wing Progress Party became pivotal. Government crises have become frequent, but most of the time a minority Labour government has been in power. As the non-socialist parties hold a majority in the Storting, the parliamentary situation has been characterized by numerous compromises. Since the EC issue has cropped up on the agenda for the 1990s, the non-socialist parties are split, so that there is no alternative to the minority Labour government.

Summing up, the tendency among the electorate to disengage from politics is evident from a decreasing level of voter participation, fragmentation of the

party system, increasing political mobility, increasing attitudes of political cynicism and distrust and lack of faith in leadership.

4. The Welfare State Reconsidered

The Scandinavian model faces an institutional crisis to which there is no straightforward alternative solution. The general shift away from a collectivist policy model towards individualist values has to be made within existing institutions displaying inertia. The typical policy-making style conducive to organized complexity has more and more been replaced by crisis management. There are now three main interpretations of the Nordic welfare state: new institutionalism, the public choice approach and the traditional public administration perspective, more or less modified.

The theory of institutional change launched by Johan P. Olsen (with T.G. March) seems to be particularly illuminating for Nordic politics (Olsen, 1988 and 1990). Olsen argues that change processes in institutions are inherently of a political nature. Rejecting the idea that organizations can be restructured according to formulae by means of policy fiat, Olsen questions the basics of the Nordic welfare state. The new search for institutional reform has to recognize that organizational change is a contested process involving accidental outcomes and random activity, meaning that results cannot be predicted and change cannot be controlled by command. Olsen underlines sluggishness, resistance to change, randomness, surprise and unintentionality, that is exactly what countries which traditionally have relied on top-down implementation as well as on planning models did not take into account. The attempt to find new institutions means that the interpretation of the welfare state has become a most difficult problem. What kind of state is feasible in a capitalist democracy? Olsen presents four model alternatives: the sovereign state, the moral state community, the classical liberal or guardian state and the segmented state.

The sustained process of public sector growth since the end of the second world war has meant that the segmented negotiation state has become the prevalent model in Norden. It was first presented by Gudmud Hennes and Leif Johansen (Johansen, 1979; Hennes, 1978). The segmented state is different from the sovereign state as there is no one single centre of control and no uniform channels of authority, meaning that parliamentary power has been reduced. The segmented state is separated from the state as a moral community, because interaction takes place between organized interests and not individual citizens and it is determined by the logic of collective action and not by moral appeal. The segmented state is very different from the guardian state as market processes are continuously interfered with by negotiations between monopolists and oligopolists within both the public and private sector. The era of big government is also the time of weak government, the segmentation of power and authority within public and private organizations.

In the Nordic countries, the 1980s have seen a reappraisal of state models, their pros and cons. The adherents of the sovereignty model want to see more democratic decision-making in representative assemblies, as well as more political leadership; those that speak for the guardian state wish to replace budget allocation with market allocation; and the believers in the community

model look for morally attractive ways of life which promote individual rights and ecological balance.

The public choice school is represented by scholars at Aarhus University. Starting with Ole P. Kristensen, the most recent book is that of Jorgen Gronnegird (Kristensen, 1987; Grönnegard, 1991). Kristensen claimed that the so-called asymmetry model offers an explanation of public sector growth: the forces that have an interest in and promote public sector expansion are stronger than the forces that have an interest in and wish to strengthen the private sector. The fundamental asymmetry operates at three levels of the public sector: decision-making, production and financing. The first refers to the lack of balance between collective decisions that are valid for the whole population and the benefits from collective action that are private in the sense that they are better for some special interest groups than for the general interests of citizens. The second occurs in public resource allocation proper, due to the absence of efficiency criteria guiding the interaction between the interests of various producer groups like bureaucrats or professionals on the one hand and consumer groups. Finally, the third stands for the gulf between the consumption of goods and services in the public sector and the decision to pay for this consumption. Whereas consumption of particular goods and services is mostly free of virtually any charges, the public sector is paid for by means of general taxes and charges. This fosters the asymmetry between those that benefit from the public sector and those that pay for its goods and services.

According to economic organization theory, the Nordic state rests upon a confusion of two basic functions: resource allocation and redistribution. The welfare state and its programmes have little basis in the rationales for the use of the budget instrument, that is provision of public goods to handle market failures. Welfare spending results in big government because it attempts redistribution in kind, not in terms of money. Choice means government choice, so that each and everyone gets the same service for the same price.

Grönnegard unravels the operation of the invisible state or the regulatory branch of government. Deregulation was a popular policy theme during the 1980s. The Danish Government under Schliiter embarked on a very ambitious reform of the public sector, involving rolling back the regulatory state. Gronnegird explains the failure of the Danish regulation policy by focussing on the interests of the major actors, stated in terms of the public choice emphasis on self-interest, personal ones or collective ones. Out of some 3,000 proposals for regulatory reform, only a tiny fraction were implemented. Why? Government rules are often introduced by reference to the public interest but once enacted they attract various kinds of special interest groups. Not only do government ministries and bureaux fight for their own regulatory schemes; strong interest organizations among both employees and employers find opportunities to turn the application oflaws to their own advantage. Whereas the citizen or the consumer could benefit from deregulation by increased competition and less expensive products, the public sector works with a basic asymmetry, favouring narrow interest groups ahead of large and hidden interest groups.

The dominant mode of conducting research on the welfare state is still the public administration approach. In Norway there is the focus on local government finances (Dente & Kjellberg, 1988; Kjellberg, 1985; Fevolden *et al.*, 1992) as well as on the organizational structure of the state and local

government, concentrated now at the "LoS"-centre in Bergen (Baldersheim *et al.*, 1993). In Sweden public policy-making is stressed in Stockholm, whereas Gothenburg focuses on local government (Wittrock & Lindstrom, 1984; Premfors, 1989; Strömberg & Westerstahl, 1984). Some scholars in Denmark (Mauritzon) concentrate on local government and others look at crisis management (Jorgensen) and institution revival (Bogason and Pedersen) (Mouritzen, 1990; Jörgensen, 1981; Bogason, 1988). The research cooperation between Lund and Abo should be mentioned when public administration is considered (Lundquist & Stahlbert, 1983). Lennart Lunquist has published a number of works, from basic text-books to pure research studies on implementation, bureaucracy and norms, whereas Krister Stihlberg is more down to earth, identifying trends in the development of Nordic welfare state before anyone else (Lundquist, 1987; 1988; 1991; Stahlberg, 1990; Stahlberg, 1990; Sjöblom & Stahlberg, 1989).

5. Theory: Public interests and institutions

Political theory has never been strong in 'Norden' for reasons that are not clear. A few scholars at Oslo University (B-E. Rasch) have tried social choice analysis with good results, as well as R. Malnes and K. Midgaard in the history ofpolitical theory (Rasch, 1992; Malnes & Midgaard, 1993). Another major stronghold of Nordic political theory is Abo, where Hannu Nurmi and Dag Anckar are active in this field (Ankar, 1984; Nurmi, 1987). Finally, there is Skytteanum at Uppsala with several studies, notably by Hermansson. One may get a feeling for the kinds of difficulties that political theory faces in 'Norden' by examining Leif Lewin's claim to have empirical evidence which once and for all demolishes the public choice school, in particular the basic axiom of rational self-interest maximization (Hermansson, 1990; Lewin, 1991).

As a matter of fact, the public interest is often referred to when defending the Scandinavian model, but it is not an entity easily observed in the world of social phenomena. People tend to have different conceptions of the public interest(s) and it is hard to say which one corresponds to the public interest. Examining Nordic political rhetoric alerts us to the crucial difference between the interests that actors have in their own minds and the interests which they state explicitly. Defending the large public sector in the Nordic countries by referring to the public interest, one has to remember that to be a public interest it is certainly not enough simply to claim it to be such. Could the public interest be the same as that which electors, politicians and bureaucracies state is the best for others or the community as a whole. If so, anything would count; the public interest requires more. Lewin reaches his conclusion that Nordic homo politicus is motivated by public interests and not by self-interests, by considering survey data about voters, politicians and bureaucrats. When asked whether they are influenced by their perception of their personal and selfish interests or their perception of public interests, voters, politicians and bureaucrats in the Nordic countries refer to the latter. Is that adequate evidence? Looking at real electoral outcomes and the rent-seeking activities of the immensely strong Nordic interest organization (Micheletti, 1985 and, 1991), it seems capricious to deny the relevance of self-interests, (narrow selfish, and broad collective ones), in the distributional coalitions in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo and Stockholm. Populist personalities and fluctuating trends in the electorate dominate the climate,

where volatility, unpredictability and the myopic sensibility of voters are the new elements of instability in Nordic politics, which are conducive to vacillating policy-making and the lack of effective leadership. The public choice approach seems highly relevant to understanding the fading of the Northern lights, as the access of the distributional coalitions to state power hampers economic efficiency. The interests of the major actors are no longer in harmony with the institutions of the Scandinavian model.

6. Conclusion

The frustration with the Scandinavian model has called forth a search for new approaches to the Nordic welfare state. Some scholars emphasize the new institutionalist framework (Pedersen, 1989, Laegreid, 1990; Dyrberg & Torfing, 1992). Others underline the potential fertility of the cultural approach (Berntzen & Selle, 1990). Yet, it will probably be necessary to find some combination of a focus on the interests of the major actors and a recognition of the special features of the Nordic political system institutions. What the Scandinavian model bypasses was the importance of the incentives of the electorate, the oliticians, the bureaucrats and the trade unions. Implicit in the model was the benevolent principal-agent perspective where each and everyone strived for optimal solutions. The role of opportunistic behaviour, strategic gaming and rent-seeking was totally neglected. Sweden seems to face the gravest difficulties among the three Scandinavian countries. The harsh realities of Finland stem at least to some extent from the drastic changes in its relations economically to Russia. For the first time since 1945 the Swedish economy is in terrible shape. The reform of the welfare state has been initiated first and foremost in Sweden where dramatic changes have already been made and more will come. The target of the reforms is to make the much too large welfare programmes incentive-compatible. Similar policies are being contemplated in the other Nordic states.

The Northern lights no longer shine as they used to do. Nordic economies are characterized by increasing institutional sclerosis. The internationally highly visible Scandinavian welfare state has run into mounting problems in the early 1990s, calling for a re-evaluation of the place of market values in an advanced economy. Various cut-back and privatization strategies have been tried in almost every part of the public sector, but the rates of economic growth remain exceptionally weak or may even be negative for several years. The consequences of these developments have not as yet yielded a new Scandinavian model.

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