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country report

Regional Project Nordic Countries



The 2021 Norwegian Parliamentary Election: a KAS Nordics Primer

by

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With less than a week until the 2021 Norwegian parliamentary elections on September 13th, most polling suggests a likely change of government, with a center-left coalition led by Social Democrat (Arbeiderpartiet/Ap) Jonas Gahr Støre holding a significant gain in the polls ahead of the current center-right government led by the Conservatives' Erna Solberg (Høyre/H).

The current Conservative-led center-right minority government includes the Liberal Party (Venstre/V) and the Christian Democrats (Kristelig Folkeparti/KrF), and enjoys the indirect parliamentary support of the Progress Party (Fremskrittpartiet/FrP), which left the government in 2020. Meanwhile, the largest party of the opposition, the Social Democrats, is languishing with some of its lowest polling numbers in its 100-year history. The second-largest opposition party, the agrarian Centre Party (Senterpartiet/Sp), has gained in the polls since the 2017 election to *Stortinget* (Norway's parliament), and the hard left Red (Røde/R) and Green Parties (Miljøpartiet de Grønne/MDG) have also risen in the polls.

The Centre Party as an Uncertainty Factor

During 2020 the Centre Party, under the leadership of Trygve Slagsvold Vedum, has reached historically high opinion ratings, although Sp's polling now has fallen somewhat. Benefiting from public frustration with the Solberg government's centralization reforms of the police, municipalities, and regions (*fylken*), in August Sp polled at around 14 percent, in comparison with the party's 2017 election result of around 10 percent. Following next week's elections to *Stortinget*, the Norwegian parliament, Sp has been seen as a potential member of a center-left coalition together with the Social Democrats and (potentially) the Socialist Left Party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti/SV), similar to the Ap-led second Ap/SV/Sp government of Jens Stoltenberg (2005-2013).

Besides its critique of the Solberg government's centralization efforts, Sp has also received attention for its EEA- and EU-critical rhetoric, and has positioned itself as an opponent of many newly suggested government and municipal environmental policies, such as a raise of the CO2 fuel surcharge.

The traditionally largest party of Norway, Ap, led by Jonas Gahr Støre, is still experiencing some of Ap's worst polling in history. Gahr Støre also faces coalitional uncertainties, with Sp's Slagsvold Vedum during the zenith of Sp polling positioning himself as a candidate for prime minister – a candidacy that did not receive much support among the electorate. The Sp party leader's unwillingness to clearly sign onto a Ap-led left-wing government that contains the SV has also posed questions as to how Gahr Støre will be able to form a government that enjoys a majority in *Stortinget*. To make matters even more complicated, Slagsvold Vedum has also hinted at a potential Sp cooperation with H, with some voices within Ap questioning the viability of Sp participation in an Ap-led government.

Monthly average	R	SV	MDG	Ap	Sp	V	KrF	H	FrP	Red	Blue	Lead
August '21	5,2	8,8	5,5	24,0	14,1	4,1	3,6	20,1	10,3	57,5	38,1	Red +19,4
April '21	4,2	8,0	4,3	23,6	17,5	2,9	3,4	23,5	9,9	57,6	39,7	Red +17,9
December '20	4,1	7,5	4,1	21,2	21,0	3,3	3,4	22,3	11,0	57,9	40	Red +17,9
August '20	4,3	7,3	5,1	24,4	14,0	2,9	3,8	25,4	11,0	55,1	43,1	Red +12
2017 Election	2,4	6,0	3,2	27,4	10,3	4,4	4,2	25,0	15,2	46,1	48,8	Blue +2,7

Data from Poll of Polls¹

On a similar note, Slagsvold Vedum's populist critique of Norwegian "power elites" and Norway's EEA agreement with the EU has also frustrated Jonas Gahr Støre, who is a SciencePo Paris-educated economic historian and former Ap foreign minister, who also personally worked as policy advisor to the group negotiating Norway's EEA accession agreement in the 1990s. Gahr Støre, a multimillionaire, also personally counted among those supporting full Norwegian EU membership in the 1990s, and is by most considered a very established political insider.

No Stable Centre-Right Majority

On the right wing of Norwegian politics, H has stumbled in the polls, with the risk of H's coalition partners V and KrF not reaching the 4% hurdle to *Stortinget* posing a further potential challenge for a continued center-right government. H's sometime coalition partner, the populist FrP, has languished in the polls under the new leadership of Sylvi Listhaug.

To the advantage of the sitting government, Norway and the Solberg government has so far weathered the corona crisis comparably well, with an upfront and successful covid lockdown and closing of the country's borders giving Norway one of the lowest 2020 excess mortalities experienced anywhere in Europe. The Solberg government has faced criticism, however, for the government's police and healthcare centralization reforms. Regionalist critique in turn disproportionately lowers the chances for a continued Solberg government, as Norway's regions wield a disproportionately large influence in *Stortinget* elections, as the allocation of mandates is calculated both as a factor of both constituencies' population and land area.

At the same time, Erna Solberg remains quite popular as a candidate for prime minister, being only marginally beat by Gahr Støre in the latest opinion polling about Norwegians' preferred candidates for prime minister (receiving 36,8% of the votes vs. the Ap leader's 41%)². To the Conservatives' detriment, however, the Solberg family's breach of coronavirus restrictions when celebrating her 60th birthday in February 2021 did cause some indignation among Norwegian voters facing strict domestic coronavirus restrictions.

Central Election Themes

As concerns Norwegian voters' most urgent areas of political concern, the latest polls put social inequalities (28%) on the top of the list, followed by environmental concerns (26%), health policy (25%), taxes and surcharges (24%), and labor market issues (17%)³.

After a summer of increasingly worrying climate-related news headlines and the release of the latest IPCC report, environmental issues have risen by 6,4% in Norwegian voter's list of top concerns since the last poll in March 2021. Reflecting this increased concern, Oslo's and Bergen's city councils, where the Greens are represented, plan to ban non-emission-free vehicles from their city centers, causing much debate in Norway, a country largely dependent on the Norwegian oil and gas sectors. Also liberal V, under the new party leadership of Guri Melby, has tried to capitalize on the most recent climate debates with ambitious new environmental policies from a less left-field perspective.

With other suggested reforms such as increasing CO2 fuel surcharges, limiting the state's long-term financial guarantees for new oil exploration and the raising of already divisive congestion charges, an environmental split risks emerging in Norwegian politics, with populist parties such as Sp and FrP hoping to capitalize on the electoral backlash against what some perceive to be too interventionist climate policies.

¹ Poll of Polls, 2021-09-03, "[Gjennomsnitt av nasjonale meningsmålinger om stortingsvalg](#)".

² TV2, 2021-08-15, "[TV 2s statsministermåling: Bare 1 av 7 vil ha Trygve](#)".

³ Aftenposten, 2021-08-19, "[Norske velgere har endret mening. To saker er blitt mye viktigere i løpet av sommeren](#)".

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