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The 2019 local and regional elections in Norway: The periphery strikes again

Jonas Stein ^a, Bjarte Folkestad^b, Jacob Aars^c and Dag Arne Christensen^d

^aDepartment of Social Sciences, UiT—The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway;

^bSocial Science and History, Volda University College, Volda, Norway; ^cDepartment of Administration and Organization Theory, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; ^dNORCE, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT



The 2019 local and regional elections in Norway took place against the backdrop of a historical local and regional amalgamation reform initiated by the Conservative-led government in 2014. We find six key outcomes from these elections. (1) The 2019 election witnessed an increase in turnout of 4.5 percentage points compared with the 2015 elections. This is the highest voter turnout in local and regional elections since 1991. (2) The four parties in government all suffered substantial losses. (3) The winner of the election was the Centre Party, which surged in the peripheral areas (4) The 2019 election results for the Labour Party are yet another confirmation of a long-term decline in electoral strength. (5) The emergence of a new political list, The People's Action Against Toll Fees (FNB). (6) In the urban areas, the Greens and Socialist Left Party mobilized younger voters, securing both parties an increase in electoral support.


KEYWORDS Regional and local elections; Norway; turnout; amalgamation; centre-periphery

Introduction

The Norwegian 2019 local and regional elections mark a historical change in the local and regional elections. To start, there was a much lower number of municipalities than before: the number of municipalities (*kommuner*) was reduced from 428 to 356 following a local amalgamation reform initiated by the Solberg government in 2014. Furthermore, for the first time since introducing county elections in 1975, the number of counties (*fylker*) was reduced from the original 19 counties to 11.

The electoral results combined the protests from peripheral interest, an increase in climate/environmental supporters, and a movement against toll

CONTACT Bjarte Folkestad  bjarte.folkestad@hivolda.no  Social Science and History, Volda University College, Volda 6101, Norway

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fees for cars, translating into an electoral success that ‘no one’ saw coming. Overall, these elections were a success for the opposition parties but with very different geographical expressions. In the peripheral areas, the Centre Party emerged as the major winner by mobilizing peripheral protests against reforms imposed by the right-wing government. In urban areas, the smaller left-wing parties enjoyed success by mobilizing on green issues and against the new protest party, The People’s Action Against Toll Fees (FNB). The major electoral loser was the Labour Party, but because of the success of the minor parties, the loss of mayors for the Labour Party was relatively limited.

The current electoral report proceeds as follows: We first describe the context of the local and regional electoral system. Then, we move on to report on the electoral outcome before discussing the results of this remarkable 2019 election. Our report will deal with both municipal and county council elections because they are held simultaneously. They will be referred to as local and regional-level elections, respectively. The municipal elections are generally considered the main subnational elections, and county council elections are, accordingly, second order to the elections for the local councils (Mjelde et al. 2016).

Municipal and county elections in Norway

Local democracy of Norway has a long-standing tradition, with local elections being introduced in 1837 by constitutive laws for local self-government. The current local government system consists of two tiers with 356 municipalities and 11 counties. The capital Oslo has a special status, being both a county and a municipality. There is no hierarchical division between the counties and municipalities. Thus, the two are distinct government entities with separate tasks. The Norwegian regional counties were first elected by popular vote in 1975. Until then, the regional councillors were selected by the local assemblies. Regional elections are held simultaneously with local elections, both with a fixed term of four years.

The typical municipality has about 15 000 inhabitants, while the average size of a county is about 490 000 inhabitants. However, there are considerable variations between these units. For example, the new county Viken (the county surrounding the capital of Oslo, which consists of what used to be the three counties of Akershus, Buskerud and Østfold) has more than 1.2 million inhabitants, whereas the smallest county, Nordland, has around 240 000 inhabitants. Regarding the municipalities, there are 21 municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants, whereas the top five municipalities range from 125 000 to almost 700 000 (Oslo).

The municipalities are the key providers and producers of services such as kindergarten, primary education, and elderly care, all of which consume most of the local budgets. Over the years, more specialized and complex services

have been placed at the local level, which has been one of the driving arguments for the local amalgamation reform. Although the complexity and number of tasks has been expanded at the local level, this cannot be said for the regional level. The main tasks for the regional counties in Norway were, until 2001, upper secondary education, hospitals, and regional infrastructure (roads, ferries, collective transportation, etc.). In 2002, however, the domain of special health care (i.e. hospitals) was transferred from counties to the national level in the transformation of the sector to a state-run organization with regional health enterprises covering five different health regions in Norway (Hagen and Kaarbøe 2006). This more than halved the counties' budget, leading many to question the longevity of the three-level administrative structure in the Norwegian political system (Rose and Hansen 2013).

In 2016, the Norwegian parliament voted in favour of instituting some degree of constitutional protection for local self-government after Norway – for a long time – had been one of the few Western countries with no mention of local government in its basic law. With respect to finances, local and regional revenues are distributed between local taxes and national government grants. Because there is a cap on the level of income tax (11.55% for municipalities and 2.6% for county councils), taxation is a restricted policy tool for local and regional governments. Yet property tax has become a contested issue in many municipalities. County councils, on the other hand, have no revenues from property tax (Jacobsen 2020, 73).

Elections are based on proportional representation and are held every second year, alternating between elections for the parliament (Storting) and local/county government. So, between every parliamentary and local/regional election there is a four-year interval. Although Norway uses a de facto closed-list system in parliamentary elections (Aardal and Bergh 2018), voters can influence the choice of candidates on the party lists in local elections. Voters may cast a personal vote, but they are not obliged to do so. Although voters can vote for as many candidates as there are candidates on the list, candidates cannot be ranked. In municipal elections, voters can also cast a personal vote for a fixed number of candidates from other lists (up to a quarter of the seats to be filled in the council). Each voter writes down the names of the preferred candidates from the other lists in a special section on the ballot. For county elections, preferential voting was introduced in 2003. In regional elections voters may only cast a personal vote for candidates on the list, and candidates need more than 8% of their party's votes as personal votes for these preference votes to influence the final ranking of the candidates. Relatively few candidates meet the threshold of 8%, though. Personal voting has increased over time, with around 40% of voters casting a personal vote in municipal elections. The results from the municipal and county elections tend to be highly correlated (see supplementary online material).

The electoral results

The 2019 election was marked by six key outcomes. (1) Higher voter turnout since 1991 (2) Important losses for the national governing centre-right coalition (3) The rise of the Centre Party and the return of the centre-periphery cleavage (4) The decline for the Labour Party (5) The peculiar emergence of The People's Action Against Toll Fees (FNB). (6) Electoral gains of smaller left-wing parties.

An important aspect of the 2019 local elections distinguishes this election from previous elections: the turnout. [Figure 2](#) shows that turnout in parliamentary elections is high in Norway. In the 2017, Norwegian national parliamentary turnout was 78.2%. Municipal- and county-level turnout has been lower and decreasing over time. The fact that participation is lowest in county elections probably reflects the voters' minor interest in county politics (Rose and Hansen 2013). In the September 2019 municipal elections, however, turnouts increased by 4.5 percentage points compared with the 2015 elections. Not since 1991 has participation in Norwegian municipal and county council elections been so high. In both the local elections of 2011 and 2015 and the parliamentary elections of 2013 and 2017, research has identified an increase in turnout among young voters, even if the general turnout has fluctuated somewhat (Ødegård, Bergh, and Saglie 2020). This trend has continued in the 2019 elections when turnout among 18–19-year-old voters increased by 10 percentage points compared with the previous two municipal elections (NOU 2020:6). Research on youth participation links this mobilization among young voters both to the 2011 terrorist attacks a few weeks before the 2011 local elections and to the 2011 and 2015 trials in which 16-year-olds were allowed to vote in select municipalities (see Ødegård, Bergh, and Saglie 2020) ([Figure 1](#)).

In addition to these long-term trends, voters have been mobilized by the issues at stake. What were the issues that helped mobilize voters in 2019? [Table 1](#) shows the most important issues in the election as they appear in the Local Election Studies (NLES); these tentative results depict that environmental and climate policy was the most important issue for the voters. Voters have never been so concerned with the environmental issue as in 2019. Actions such as the 'climate roar' and school strikes for the climate have received much attention in the media and engaged many. Greta Thunberg became a symbol of youth involvement in the climate issue. Furthermore, the debate about toll fees for cars led to the formation of a new political party: The People's Action Against Toll Fees (FNB). The debate on toll fees for cars also became a debate on climate measures more generally.

Despite trailing in the opinion poll and ending up with fewer votes than the opposition parties, the centre-right coalition managed to retain control of the government after the parliamentary election in 2017 (Aardal and

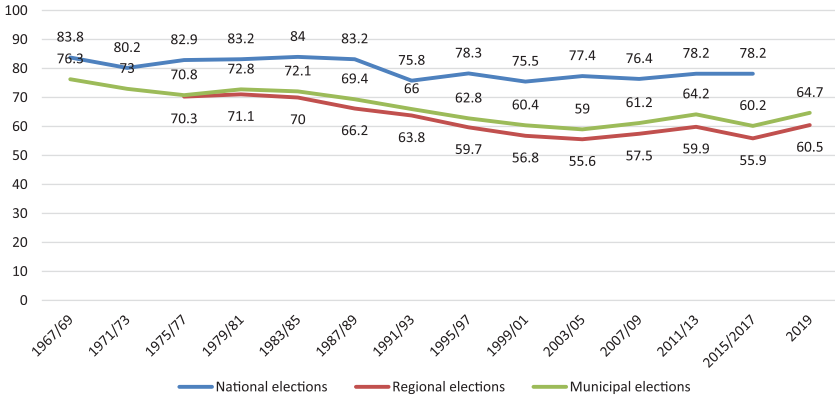
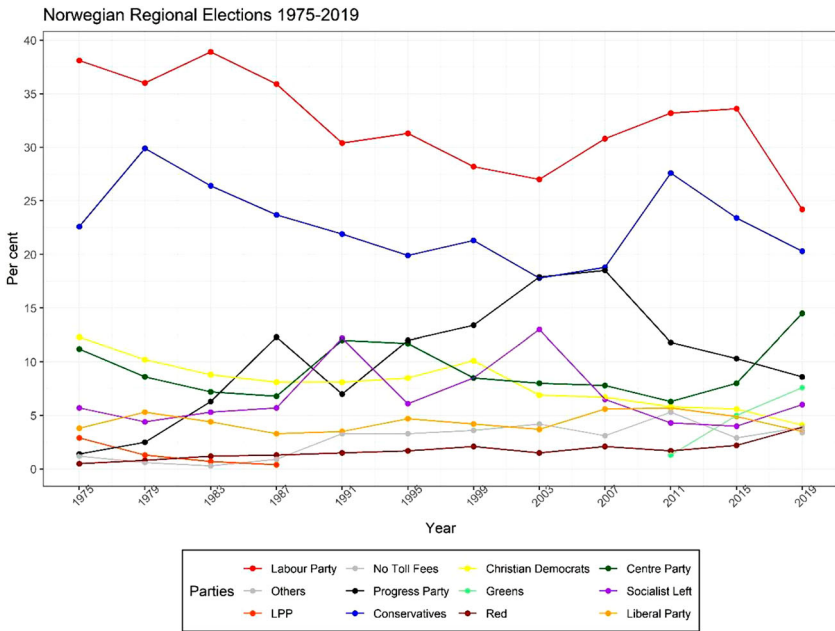


Figure 1. Turnout in national and local elections 1967–2019 (%).

Bergh 2018). Mjelde et al. (2016) found that the 2015 Norwegian local elections displayed many features of a ‘second-order’ election: the governing parties lost considerable support, the minor parties did well, and voter turnout was low. Some features from 2015 repeated themselves in 2019; this is true as well for the cost of ruling, which studies have found expensive for the parties in government (Paldam 1986). Over the last 30 years, a



Data: aardal.info, Graphic: Jonas Stein

Figure 2. Norwegian regional elections 1975–2019.

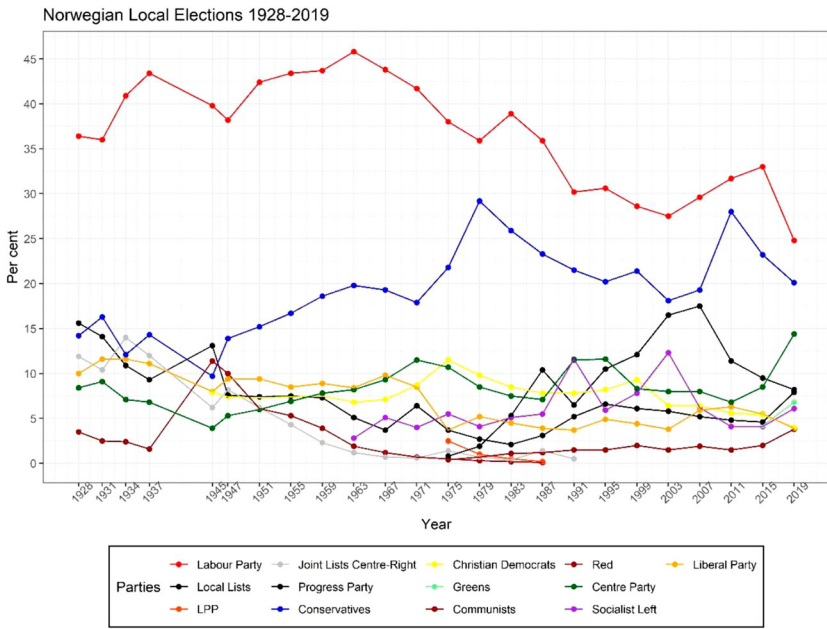
Table 1. The four most important issues in the local and regional election according to voters, 2019 compared with 2015 (%).

	2015	2019	Change
Environment and climate	8	15	+7
Economy, taxes and car tolls	5	10	+ 5
Schools and education	12	9	-3
Transport/infrastructure	6	8	+2

Note: The results are based on an open survey question coded into general categories. Question: ‘Can you name one or two issues which had particular influence on the way you voted?’.

Norwegian government has, on average, lost 4.4 points the next parliamentary election (Bergh and Haugsgjerd 2019). Consequently, the combined loss of 7.8 percentage points for the four parties (Conservatives, Christian Democrats, Liberals and Progress Party) in the regional elections (7.3 at the local elections) should be no surprise (see Figures 2 and 3).

This loss in electoral support for the centre-right parties also caused a significant impact on their office-seeking endeavours. On the regional level the Conservative parties went from having 10 regional mayors in 2011, to 4 regional mayors in 2015 and only 1 in 2019. Some of the losses can be ascribed to the regional amalgamation reform from 19 to 11 counties in 2019, but still the power shift towards the centre-left, now having 10 and out 11 regional mayors, is striking (5 Labour, 4 Centre Party, 1 Socialist



Data: aardal.info, Graphic: Jonas Stein

Figure 3. Norwegian local elections 1928–2019.

parties: the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberals. This is no surprise because both Conservatives and the Progress Party have policies calling for a replacement of the three-level administrative structure in favour of a two-level structure composed of municipalities and the state level. However, to get parliamentary support for the municipal-level amalgamation reform, this was seen as the price to pay for the Solberg government. The regional merging process varied substantially: from the eager and voluntary process in Trøndelag (which merged in 2018 already) to the highly contested and forced merger of Troms and Finnmark, where the county of Finnmark held a referendum after the decision in the national parliament to merge these two counties. In the referendum, 87% voted against the merger, but the results did not reverse the decision made in parliament. The regional reform was supposed to be followed up with changes/transfer of political task to the county level. An expert commission initiated by the government delivered a report in February 2018 with suggestions of different tasks to be transferred from the state to county level. Even though the political elections to the county council may be less important, the county structure has a significant influence in Norwegian societies. The political parties and many organizations have branches at the county level. The county structure has also served as electoral districts for parliamentary elections since 1953, and the existence of 19 electoral districts for parliamentary elections is regulated in the Norwegian constitution (Figure 4).

Since they took office in 2013, the centre-right government had initiated many reforms designed to modernize the public sector and improve welfare services and make municipalities and counties more robust units. Nevertheless, from the view of the critics, these reforms could be portrayed as central authorities imposing structural reforms in the periphery that would lead to more centralization and deteriorated services in the periphery. Five of the most significant reforms are (1) the consolidating municipal reform from 428 to 356 municipalities, (2) police reform leading to more specialized police, (3) mergers of higher education institutions, (4) structural reform of military bases and (5) a broader merger reform of several counties, going from 19 to 11 counties. Especially, the three latter ones were particularly salient in Northern Norway, and in all these reforms, the Centre Party was profiled as the most vigorous opposition against the reforms. For many of the reforms, the Labour Party was held responsible because they had also voted for some of them. In some municipalities marked with the strongest opposition and that were hardest hit by the structural reforms of the military bases (e.g. Andøy and Bardu), the Centre party gained an outright majority. Even though elections at the county level in general seem to be heavily influenced by the performance at the municipal level, the difference between votes at the county and municipal levels in Troms and Finnmark for the Centre Party shows that when a particular issue, in this case the forced

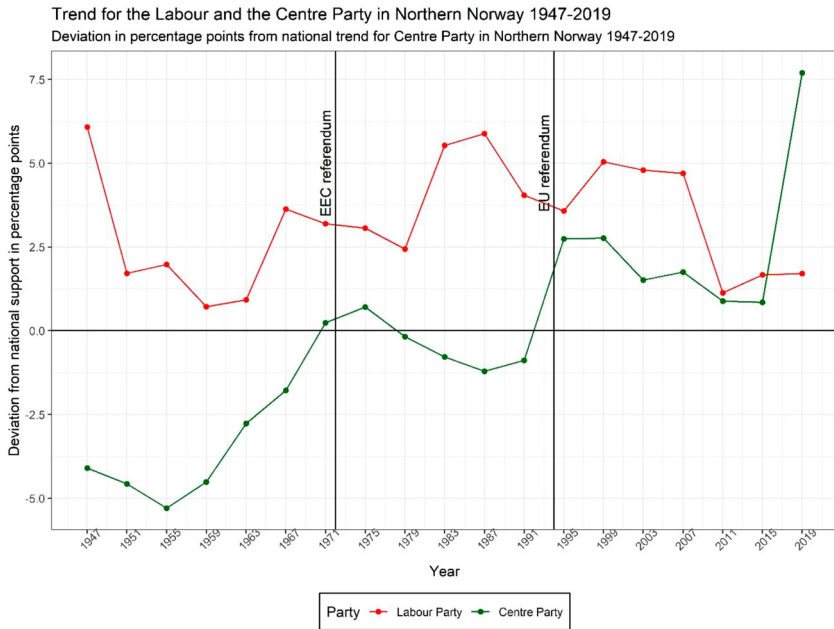


Figure 4. Trend for the labour and the centre party in Northern Norway in 1947–2019 in local elections.

merger at the regional level, is at stake, it could lead to a vote split. The Centre Party had 19.2% of the vote share in the municipal election in Troms and Finnmark and 24% at the county level. This peripheral and rural political mobilization is not unique for Norway, and we have seen similar mobilization, albeit with different political expression, in other countries (Cramer 2016; Ford and Jennings 2020; Jennings and Stoker 2016, 2017; Lee, Morris, and Kemeny 2018; Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

The decline of the largest opposition party, the Labour Party, might be more surprising, especially in light of the literature on cost of ruling. The Labour Party gained an all-time low support of only 24.2% of the votes (regional elections), a loss of 9.5 percentage points from the last regional elections. However, when we look back on the historical trends in Norwegian local and regional elections (see Figure 2 and 3), we find that the elections in 2011 and 2015 may be the outliers from the overall trend, not the 2019 election. Since their peak in 1963, the overall trend for the Labour Party has been a steady decline in electoral support in Norwegian local elections (see Figure 3). This is not surprising compared with their similar negative trend in parliamentary elections in Norway and the overall long-term decline for social democratic parties in Europe (Benedetto, Hix, and Mastroiocco 2020). Nevertheless, the Labour Party remained the largest political party and managed to get 42% of the

mayors and 5 out of 11 regional mayors. So, despite losing votes, their loss in offices has not been that significant, mainly because of the success of other minor parties in the centre-left coalition.

Even though the Centre Party obtained respectable results in urban areas, the party has never been strong in cities (for differences in urban-rural municipalities see online supplementary material). The implementation of new environment-friendly urban growth packages, which were made between municipalities, counties and the national government around urban areas, led to a citizen revolt against the increase in toll fees for cars. Although never as violent as the *Gilets Jaunes* in France (Boyer et al. 2019), there were some similarities in terms of suburban protest, but in contrast to the French case, the protesters organized themselves as a political party called 'The People's Action Against Toll Fees' (FNB). At some point, they had 25% electoral support in the opinion polls in Bergen. However, on election day, their support decreased (but still received an impressive 16.7% of the votes). In many municipalities, the emergence of the FNB party led to a counter-reaction in support for existing parties that were for the increased toll fees. Who gained the most from the increased issue salience of environment issues varied between municipalities. Still, the two 'winners' were the Socialist Left Party and the Green Party. In Oslo (where regional and municipal elections are the same), the Greens got 15.4% of the votes, thereby securing the capital for the Labour Party. The success of the smaller centre-left parties also meant that the Labour Party gained or retained control of all the major cities in Norway. This success of the smaller, more radical and more green parties within the centre-left bloc, often at the sacrifice of the Labour Party, could mean that a realignment of the centre-left bloc from a large centre-left party based on the traditional economic left-right cleavage to a more fragmented party system, where the post-industrial cleavage would be closer to what Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson (2002) has described as the GAL versus TAN dimension. In urban areas, the green and alternative parties are making substantial progress, and in more rural areas, the more traditional Centre Party is progressing. This is shown in Figure C (supplementary online material), where the vote share in the county election for the Green Party and Centre Party is presented based on the centrality index from Statistics Norway. The more central a municipality is, the higher the votes for the Green Party and vice versa for the Centre Party.

Interpreting the results of the 2019 elections

The results from the 2019 local elections were characterized by a protest from peripheral interests (especially salient in Northern Norway) and a mobilization in the cities on issues concerning the environment. The peripheral protest led to increased support for the Centre Party, while the Socialist Left and the Greens gained support on environmental issues. The latter issue also led to

the formation of a party dedicated to fight against toll fees for cars (FNB). Moreover, the 2019 elections bucked the trend of a decreasing turnout. Especially interesting is the fact that young voters contributed to this increase. The continuing problems for the once mighty Labour Party are something that followers of Norwegian politics should take interest in. However, this is not a unique phenomenon for Norway but rather is something that is happening in many other European countries. Compared with their sister parties in the Netherlands or France, the Norwegian Labour Party is still a large party at around 25% of the votes and is currently in pole position for gaining control of the government in the 2021 general election. If the trends seen in these elections continue, the Norwegian political party system could follow some changes that have been seen in, for instance, Denmark and the Netherlands, where the political landscape is more fragmented and more parties are required to form a governing coalition. Here, a coalition led by the Labour Party, with at least the Centre Party as a large junior partner, seems to be the most likely outcome.

The more than unusual off-election year of 2020 started with the Progress Party leaving the majority government, turning the Conservative-led Solberg government into a minority coalition with the Liberals and the Christian Democratic Party. While the Conservatives have surged in public opinion polls partly because of the government's decisive handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the junior partners of the Solberg government are consistently scoring below 4% which is the threshold in national elections for getting 19 levelling seats in the Norwegian parliament.

The future of regional territorial units in Norway seems uncertain. This goes both for the territorial composition of the counties and the political tasks of these administrative units. Although some counties seem certain to stay on as a merged unit (i.e. Trøndelag), others seem more uncertain, with several significant political actors calling for a break-up of the newly merged region (Finnmark and Troms in particular), and the opposition parties have all promised to start the process of reversing the forced county merger in Troms and Finnmark. As for the promised transfer of political tasks to the regional level, this remains uncertain.

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ORCIDJonas Stein  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2902-042X>**References**

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