

Why has the Ap persisted in Norway while the Dutch PvdA has been marginalized

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INTRODUCTION

All social democratic parties in Western Europe have experienced electoral decline since the 1980s (for a review of the literature, see Bandau, 2023). However, the electoral fortunes of social democratic parties have varied widely across European countries since the 2000s. The Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), for example, suffered a dramatic defeat in the 2017 elections, losing almost 20 percentage points and securing only 5.7% of the vote. In the 2021 elections, it achieved a similar result. To survive and remain relevant, the PvdA formed an electoral alliance with the Green-Left Party (GroenLinks) for the 2023, and forthcoming 2025 elections, and the PvdA is set to merge with GroenLinks in 2026. Meanwhile, although the days when the Norwegian Labour Party (Ap) won more than 40% of the vote are long gone, and despite a small drop in average support from 30.8% (2001–2013) to 28.0% in 2025, the Ap remains Norway's largest party.

This raises the question: why has the Ap persisted in Norway while the Dutch PvdA has been marginalized? To address this question, we draw on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and examine the social background of voters for these parties. We study three related mechanisms that may explain the difference in electoral success between the Ap and the PvdA: 1) Changes in the size of their constituencies, 2) the loyalty of those constituencies, and 3) the parties' ability to attract new support bases. While the current analysis is limited to the Netherland and Norway, it may offer important lessons for understanding the recent diverging electoral trajectories of social democratic parties elsewhere in Europe.

First, the explanation may lie in structural differences between the two countries and how the electorates of the two parties have evolved. These include, for example,

generational composition, education levels, the occupational structure, and union membership. Differences in the composition and evolution of the electorate may have resulted in different levels of support for the PvdA and Ap.

Second, the explanation may lie in the electoral behavior of core constituencies and their loyalty to the party. The likelihood of voting for the PvdA may have decreased substantially among some social groups, while the same group may have remained more loyal to the Ap. The Ap thus may have been more capable of maintaining its core electorate despite broader societal changes.

Third, the Ap may have been more successful than the PvdA in attracting new groups of voters. Structural changes in the electorate and/or shifts in the behavior of core constituencies since the 1970s have pushed social democratic parties to seek new support bases, for example among the middle class (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015) or socio-cultural professionals (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021). The differences in electoral success may therefore also reflect the Ap's success in attracting a new social base. These mechanisms can interact and reinforce each other: a shrinking and less loyal electorate combined with weak recruitment of new voters, can increase the electoral decline of a party.

DATA AND METHOD

To test whether these three mechanisms can explain the diverging levels of electoral success of the Ap and the PvdA, we use data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a biennial survey conducted in most European countries since 2002. The aim of the ESS is to map social structures and attitudes. Both the Netherlands and Norway have participated in all 11 rounds (2002–2023) of the ESS. In each round, respondents were asked about their vote in the most recent national election. Respondents who did not vote, could not recall their vote, or did not answer were excluded from the analysis. In those note, we include background variables on occupation (based on the ISCO classification), union membership, education, generation, and place of residence.

To compare the electoral trajectories of the PvdA and the Ap, we analyze not only cross-country differences but also variation across two time periods. We divide out

data in two time periods: 2002–2016 (ESS rounds 1–8), when both the PvdA and the Ap were relatively successful and 2017–2023 (ESS rounds 9–11), when the PvdA was reduced to 5.7% of the vote, while the Ap persisted.

To assess if the diverging electoral results of the Ap and PvdA can be explained by structural differences between the Netherlands and Norway, changes in voter loyalty to the party, and the ability of parties to attract new voters we include three indicators. Structural changes are measured by the relative composition of the electorate (share of each social group among the voting respondents). Loyalty is measured by the relative support levels of different social groups. The ability to attract new voters is measured by the relative composition of the party's social base (the share of a party's electorate drawn from each social group). We first calculated averages using post-stratification weights for each ESS round. Subsequently, we averaged the ESS round averages and calculated confidence intervals for each party for the two periods.

RESULTS

Generation

In both countries, the Greatest/Silent Generation has largely disappeared from the **electorate**, and these generations were replaced by Millennials and Generation Z, this pattern and relative sizes of generations have been similar in the Netherlands and Norway. Before 2017, the PvdA and Ap showed broadly similar generational **loyalty** patterns, with older cohorts somewhat more likely to support Ap than the PvdA. Since 2017, the PvdA has not attracted much support from Millennials and Generation Z, despite that these groups have become a large proportion of the electorate. The Ap, by contrast, continues to secure sizeable support among all generations, including the youngest generations. Regarding the **social base**, the Ap's electorate has since 2017 also included younger voters, whereas the PvdA's has aged considerably, with Baby Boomers now making up nearly half of its voters.

Place of residence

Self-reported place of residence of the **electorate** is stable over time in both countries. The Netherlands has a larger share of voters living in country villages than Norway, but otherwise the patterns are similar. **Support** differences between places of residence have been small in both countries and, apart from the general falling levels of support, relatively unchanged between places of residence for the two periods. In both countries, the parties' **social bases** mirror the national distribution of place of residence, with no major shifts between the two periods.

Education

Both countries have seen a clear trend among the **electorate** toward higher educational attainment, with the share of tertiary-educated voters rising. The Netherlands continues to have a relatively larger group of voters with low educational attainment compared to Norway. In Norway, **loyalty** among tertiary-educated voters has remained relatively stable, although their share of the electorate has grown, while loyalty among the least educated has declined somewhat. In the Netherlands, support has fallen sharply across all education groups, with the steepest drop can be observed among voters with post-secondary vocational qualifications, the previously most loyal group towards the PvdA. In Norway, the Ap's **social base** now includes a much larger share of tertiary-educated voters (up from 30% to almost 45%), reflecting both the higher educational attainment in Norway, and the party's ability to maintain support in this group. The educational profile of PvdA voters has been or less more stable over time.

Occupation

In 2002–2016, the Dutch **electorate** had a larger share of “managers,” while Norway had more “service and sales workers.” Over time, the electorates in both countries have seen a marked increase in “professionals,” while the proportion that is employed in traditional blue-collar categories has remained relatively stable. Before 2017, **support levels** were broadly similar across occupational groups in both countries. Since 2017, Ap loyalty patterns remain relatively even across occupations, while PvdA support has fallen for all occupations. The Ap has seen a major shift in its **social base** toward “professionals” (from 17% to nearly 35% of its voters), while the PvdA's

occupational mix has changed more modestly, with a smaller increase among professionals and a decline in managers.

Public sector employment

The share of public sector employees among the **electorate** is similar and stable in both countries. Public sector workers in Norway are consistently more **loyal** to Ap than their Dutch counterparts are to PvdA. Since 2017, loyalty has fallen for both parties, but the public–private gap in levels of loyalty in Norway has persisted. The Ap’s **social base** remains evenly split between public and private sector workers, while the PvdA has shifted from a strong private sector majority (almost 70% of its voters) to a more balanced 55–45% split.

Union membership

Union membership among the **electorate** is far higher in Norway (more than 50%) than in the Netherlands. Membership levels have been stable in Norway but have declined slightly in the Netherlands (from 20% to 15%). Union members are much **more** loyal to Ap than to PvdA. While there has been a small decline in loyalty among Norwegian union members, the drop in the Netherlands has been far steeper. Roughly 60% of Ap’s **social base** are union members in both periods, whereas only about 20% of PvdA voters were and are union members.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of Dutch and Norwegian electorates, their loyalty to social democratic parties, and the composition of the social bases of the PvdA and the Ap suggest that these three factors all contribute to the diverging electoral fates of the Ap and the PvdA.

First, Norway’s high and stable level of unionization has provided the Ap with a larger, more loyal, and stable base than the PvdA. While other structural characteristics of the electorate such as generational change, rising educational attainment, and the growth of professional occupations have been broadly similar in both countries, the size of the

unionized electorate remains a major difference between the countries, although this difference has not drastically changed between the two periods.

Second, the Ap has been more successful in retaining loyalty among its core constituencies. Although support declined for both parties across social groups between 2002–2016 and 2017–2023, the losses were much steeper for the PvdA. In Norway, loyalty among union members, higher-educated voters, professionals, and younger generations remained relatively strong, while these groups have become more prominent among the electorate. In the Netherlands, support from these same groups fell sharply.

Third, the Ap has demonstrated greater capacity to attract new voters. It has expanded its base among younger voters (Millennials and Generation Z), higher-educated voters, and professionals. The PvdA, on the other hand, has seen only limited changes among their voters among these emerging groups.

In addition to these individual-level factors, there could also be institutional factors that help explain why the Ap was better than the PvdA at maintaining their core supporters and attracting new voters. First, it may not only be union membership itself, but also the relationship between unions and social democratic parties, which appears to be much weaker in the Netherlands (Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017) compared to Norway (Allern et al., 2007). In addition, there are differences between the party systems in the two countries. Norway's system of competition between clearly defined political blocs may have benefited the Ap by offering voters a distinct alternative to mainstream right-wing parties. In contrast, the PvdA has on several occasions formed coalition governments with center-right parties, which may have blurred its ideological profile. This may have been particularly damaging in the highly competitive and fragmented Dutch party system. Other factors could also play a role, such as the relevance of new social cleavages, the ideological positioning of the two parties, and political leadership. These institutional factors may also interact with individual-level factors.

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