

DENMARK



Denmark's Populism at the Crossroads: Insights into the 2024 European Parliament Election Results

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Abstract

The populist moment that defined Danish politics from 2001 to 2019 has recently transitioned into what can be described as mainstream populism. Two concurrent developments drive this shift: first, the Social Democrats' strategy to reclaim (white) working-class support by adopting populist right-wing stances on immigration and integration, and second, the existential crisis confronting the Liberals (Venstre, V) and the Conservative party (Det Konservative Folkeparti, KF), whose electoral support reached historic lows. The 2024 European Parliament elections differed significantly from those of 2019, marked by the emergence of new political entities and pressing global issues such as the Russia–Ukraine and Israel– Hamas conflicts, along with the existential threat of climate change and the lingering effects of the post-pandemic time. Traditional populists are exploiting these issues to regain support, advocating for greater national sovereignty and cohesion in the face of perceived global threats. This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Danish politics, focusing on how the intersection of domestic and international changes is reshaping EU-related positions and the role of populism.

Keywords: *populism, European Parliament elections, Danish People's Party, Denmark Democrats, Socialist People's Party*

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Background

Electoral campaigning for the European Parliament in Denmark is usually characterized by a slow start, with an agenda focusing more on national issues than European ones. Moreover, voter turnout for European elections is notably lower than for parliamentary elections. Historically, Danish turnout has ranged between 50–60%, which is relatively low for a country renowned for its high political participation and robust civic engagement.

The lower interest in European elections is influenced by different factors, including the limited understanding of the European Parliament's composition and EU decision-making processes, various degrees of EU scepticism, the relatively short campaign period and the perception that these elections are less impactful on people's daily lives, leading to reduced participation. At the 6 June 2024 European Parliament election, 58% of the electorate voted, an 8 percentage-point decrease from the 66% turnout registered in 2019.

The higher participation at the previous European Parliament election was influenced by different factors. Chief among these was the heightened mobilization around climate issues, which significantly boosted the voting turnout among younger voters, who are generally less likely to cast their vote, particularly in European elections. The 2019 national parliament election, held just ten days later, contributed to increasing the overall political interest and engagement, influencing the result of an election generally considered to be second order. Participation in the 2024 election was lower than in 2019; nonetheless, it registered the third-highest turnout recorded so far at a European election. The result outdid most of the predictions by polling institutes and experts, and it could be interpreted as a sign that Danish voters are recognizing the importance of European elections for European and international matters. The impact of global health challenges post-COVID-19 and the uncertainties stemming from the Russia–Ukraine conflict and Israel–Hamas tensions have kept the interest high in Denmark's role within the EU, motivating voters to participate, albeit the elections lacked high-profile candidates and are still viewed as less impactful and crucial than national ones.

The shifting landscape of populism in Denmark

Over the past five years, Danish politics, especially on the radical right wing, have become increasingly fragmented and prone to radicalization. This trend is partly

driven by the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and nativist positions, which were once primarily supported by the populist parties on the radical right (Meret, 2010). These views have now permeated the mainstream right-wing and also the centre-left political discourse and programs (see e.g., Meret, 2021; Rathgeb & Wolkenstein, 2022). The Danish People's Party (DF) is the most renowned among the radical right-wing populist parties in Denmark and within the Nordic context. The DF has existed since 1995 and for about two decades, it has served as a textbook example of a successful and influential radical right-wing populist party in Western Europe (Meret & Siim, 2013). Its sustained electoral growth and political influence since the turn of the century seemed to provide the Western European radical and populist right-wing parties with the successful case and political 'winning formula' (Kitschelt, 1997) merging nativism with welfare chauvinist positions and a good portion of "heartland" (Taggart, 2000) and nostalgia (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022; Meret, 2018).

In recent years the DF has lost significant electoral support (Meret, 2021; Etzerodt & Kongshøj, 2022; Meret forthcoming). The DF has since 2019 been in opposition under the governments led by the Social Democrat prime minister, Mette Frederiksen. Since its peak in 2014, when the DF came first in the European Parliament elections and its candidate Morten Messerschmidt received the highest number of personal votes ever recorded in Denmark, the party has experienced a striking decline. At the 2019 European Parliament and national elections, the DF support was slashed by half compared to 2014 and 2015. The endeavours of the party leadership to regain terrain and electoral support remained unsuccessful. This failure signalled an end to the DF's golden epoch, triggering deep-rooted interparty disagreement and conflict among the ranks and files and igniting personal conflicts about who should follow Kristian Thulesen Dahl into the party leadership. The choice of hardliner and former MEP Morten Messerschmidt in January 2022 came after intense lobbying for him by party founder Pia Kjærsgaard, who exerted concerted pressure on Thulesen Dahl to step down. At the time of the DF leadership shift, Morten Messerschmidt was still under investigation for fraud in the so-called 'MELD and FELD' case concerning the misuse of EU funds. In August 2021 he had been sentenced to prison, but the verdict was later declared a mistrial, following complaints about the judge's ability to rule in the case. In December 2022, Messerschmidt was then acquitted of all charges. Yet all this took place while the DF was in deep crisis and after his appointment, several high-profile DF members of parliament exited the party to join a new party, the Denmark Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne, DD), led by former Liberal MP Inger Støjberg, who had been strongly encouraged to take over the DF leadership but declined.



The Danish People's Party has only one MEP, Anders Vistisen, who was re-elected for the 2024–2029 period. The party was one of the cofounders of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament in 2019. Vistisen also participated in the rally organized by Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's Lega in Milan in 2019, which launched a new radical right-wing coalition within the European Parliament. From 2015 to 2019, the DF was affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists, a group it had previously sought to join but was turned down (primarily due to the determination of Britain's Tories). Before that, the DF was part of the Eurosceptic European Freedom and Democracy group (2009–2014) alongside the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Lega Nord.

Today, the DF advocates for a complete halt to asylum and migration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, seeking also to put 'an end to all special demands by Muslims'. Besides making use of the slogan 'Danish First!', the party wants Denmark to withdraw from the Schengen Agreement (and eventually from the EU), reinstate permanent and effective border control, and put a stop to further EU enlargement, particularly in the case of countries with large Muslim population, such as Turkey, Albania and North Macedonia. The party claims the EU needs to be strongly downsized to safeguard national sovereignty. This stance would entail keeping all Danish opt-outs and eventually adding a new one concerning the welfare state if Denmark continues to be part of the EU. On gender equality issues, the party opposes what it calls 'gender ideology' and 'woke-ness', supporting the heterosexual family as the cornerstone of Danish society and reproduction (Meret & Siim, 2013). However, the party does acknowledge the rights of homosexual individuals, as long as these rights do not include further demands, such as the right for homosexual couples to be married in the Church. Also, the party does not oppose abortion rights, although it disagrees with the recent and widely supported proposal to increase the period a woman can legally get an abortion from 12 weeks of pregnancy to 18. In several respects, the DF is among the most progressive on such issues among the parties that belong to the brand new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group and, before that, the ID group in the EP (like the DF, many from the latter have now joined the former).

The formation of the DD brought another notable right-wing populist party into Danish politics. Established in 2022 by former Liberal party and MP Inger Støjberg, who was convicted in 2021 for illegally separating underage asylum-seeker couples – the party is firmly based on the profile and populist charisma of the leader, who promises further hardline stances. DD, which now includes several

former high-profile members of the DF, compete directly with the latter for support on the radical and nativist right, particularly in rural areas where voters feel neglected and left behind.

The DD shares several political issues with the DF, contending, for instance, that all spontaneous asylum seekers coming to Europe should be transferred to a non-Schengen third country, even if this means reviewing the content of the existing international conventions. Also, the party asks for 'less EU' and more national sovereignty and is against any further enlargement and political integration within the EU. Yet the party does not ask for Denmark's exit from the EU. Both the DF and the DD want to scale down EU environmental policies, advocating that Denmark has already contributed sufficiently to carbon reduction efforts and should not pursue further aggressive climate actions that could adversely impact the national interests and economy. These positions reflect broader concerns among radical right and nativist groups in Denmark, besides issues concerning EU integration, asylum and migration policies, including the plans for further enlargement.

Another topic is the economic and military aid to Ukraine. In contrast with some of their European allies, who may hold pro-Russian views, the DF and the DD are declaredly pro-Ukraine and also pro-Israel and do not question the military support to the Ukrainian government. However, the situation gets less limpid when it comes to justifying the cohabitation with parties that are questioning the support given to Ukraine or even more overtly against it, which was the case with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) before the party was expelled from the ID group (but currently, it could also be argued in the case of Hungary's Fidesz). When asked about how the party copes with this, Vistisen's standard reply is that 'foreign policy should be defined and conducted nationally. In every group in the European Parliament, there is someone who is too close to Putin and Russia and does not provide enough support for Ukraine' (Thomsen, 2024). Vistisen argues that this is a subject that should be dealt with nationally and is therefore not a matter of concern for the European Parliament groups.

More generally these positions suggest the preparedness of the DF today to support more radical stances, indicating the overall increase of competition on the Danish far right, which is also an effect of the populist mainstreaming of positions in relation to migration, asylum and integration within the country (see Rytter et al., 2023). Recently, for instance, plans to transfer asylum seekers to third countries, effectively outsourcing their reception and management overseas, have gained



widespread political support from both the centre-right and left-wing. This, despite the clear humanitarian, legal and political concerns that have emerged in relation to the accomplishment of such plans, as shown by the attempts made in other countries (see Meret, 2024).

The 2024 European Parliament campaign

The European Parliament party campaign focused primarily on national and European security issues, emphasizing the need to increase investments in the armed forces and enhance cross-border cooperation on cybercrime and military security. These concerns were fuelled by national politics (the Danish government is to significantly increase the defence expenditures in the years 2024–2028) and by international events that also generated alarm among the public. Notably, the Nord Stream gas pipeline explosion in the Baltic Sea near Bornholm in September 2022 (which Danish authorities attributed to sabotage) heightened security discussions and fears. Additionally, a Nordic investigative documentary titled *Shadow War* revealed how Russia is conducting hybrid warfare in the Nordic countries using spies, troll farms and advanced underwater programs, posing serious threats to energy supplies and other critical infrastructure in the Northern European countries. The Hamas terror attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent escalation of the conflict in the Middle East further contributed to the general perception of a situation of international instability and uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent words used during the EP campaign were ‘global transformations’, ‘security’, ‘insecurity’, and ‘safety’.

Another very prominent topic on the political agenda was climate change and the EU’s decarbonization policies. This is one of voters’ priority issues, and several political parties have highlighted these issues to emphasize their positions. The Socialist People’s Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti, SF) spearheaded the call to accelerate decarbonization efforts and to implement policies that can achieve concrete results quickly, given the urgency of the climate crisis. In recent years, the SF has shifted towards more socially liberal positions on redistribution, migration and asylum policies. The party is now much less critical of the government’s stern stance on these issues, and the years the party supported the Social Democrats in government (2019–2022) influenced these choices.

The SF has significantly enhanced its green profile, aligning with the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament. This strategy has attracted voters who

prioritize environmental issues and are less convinced by other parties' agendas. While most parties agree on the main climate objectives, the competition has in fact been limited. Danish politics lacks a strong Green Party, especially since the party Alternative has lost substantial electoral support and has also failed to get representation in the European Parliament. According to polls, nearly 70% of left-wing voters consider climate change one of the most important questions politicians must address. In contrast, among supporters of one of the governing parties, only 46% cited climate change as a priority (see Flinch 2024). The Social Democrats, burdened by the declining popularity of the broad government coalition, lost ground. The party struggles to stand out on major issues like climate change since it also collaborates closely with parties that downplay the importance (and speed) of decarbonization policies.

The political divide on climate change in this European Parliament election was primarily centred on reducing agricultural emissions by taxing CO₂ production. The left, including the SF and the Unity List (Enhedslisten, EL), along with the Social Liberals (Det Radikale Venstre, RV), advocated for more decisive and impactful measures. In contrast, the populist right (the DF and the DD) opposed environmental regulations, which they believed harmed the competitiveness of Danish agricultural products in the European market. They argue that Denmark is a small country that has already made significant efforts to protect the environment, whereas others, more polluting EU member states lag behind.

Compared to the previous election round, EU migration policies were less prominent on the agendas of parties and voters. This is partly because most established parties running for election agreed on a strict immigration policy. When the MEP candidate for the Moderates, Stine Bosse, suggested that Denmark could take in 7,000 refugees to comply with the migration solidarity pact, most mainstream parties on both the left and right rejected the idea. The Moderates eventually withdrew the suggestion, emphasizing that the party does not support relaxing existing rules and standards. Denmark still has an opt-out on Home and Justice, including asylum and migration policies. There are occasional discussions about holding a referendum to convert the opt-out into a case-by-case opt-in or abolish it altogether. This was considered in 2015 but was rejected by 53% of voters, closing the book on the issue. In contrast, the early summer 2022 referendum to put an end to the Danish defence opt-out saw over 66% voting in favour, highlighting greater concerns among the electorate over international security and defence issues, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the same year.



This referendum marked the largest difference between yes and no votes in any Danish EU opt-out referendum to date. Despite this, there remains EU scepticism among swathes of the Danish electorate concerning immigration and asylum, as well as debates about the minimum wage and the EU neighbourhood policy with potential future EU enlargement. These issues are still capitalized on politically by the populist right to gain electoral support.

Populist party performance in the 2024 Danish European election

The biggest surprise at this 2024 European Parliament election was undoubtedly the result for the SF, which secured 17.4% of the vote, making it the biggest party in this election round. The Social Democrats garnered only 15.6%, a drop of almost 6% compared to 2019. The poor electoral outcome prompted the Social Democrats to acknowledge the party's significant (and indeed historical) losses. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen recognized this as 'a clear signal' from the party electorate, adding to these words that 'from a Social Democratic perspective, it was definitely not good enough' (Tofte, 2024). The broad government coalition with the Liberals and the Moderates does not convince part of the Social Democratic traditional electorate, who sought elsewhere. Most of them cast their vote for the SF (Nørgaard & Refsing 2024), which is not in government, although still ideologically and politically near to the Social Democrats.

Additionally, the Social Democrats' lukewarm stance on climate change and the party's right-wing turn on asylum and migration policies (Meret, 2021; McManus & Falkenbach, 2022) may have contributed to the party's poorer result in this European election. The SF has moderated its profile and program, especially since exiting the centre-left government in 2014, shifting towards a centre-left stance (Augustín & Jørgensen, 2016: 78–79). The party employs populist rhetoric and positions to appeal in particular to (rural) constituencies, who feel neglected and betrayed by Copenhagen politics. It gains votes by staying outside the government, either in opposition or as a government supporter. Remembering the negative experience during its first time in government (2011–2014), the SF has managed to regain electoral support but still needs to demonstrate its reliability when in power. Revealingly, the party's leader, Pia Olsen Dyhr, toured the country with the DD's Inger Støjberg at so-called 'CO2 rallies'. They performed together, boasted about their friendship when on stage, and praised Danish democracy and consensus

politics, demonstrating that political competitors can collaborate despite differing political positions.

Established parties on both the right and left have generally experienced a decline in electoral support at these European Parliament elections. Notably, the Liberals recorded another historic drop in the voters' support, garnering only 14.7% of the votes, a loss of nearly 9 percentage points compared to 2019. The Moderates and the DD, both led by former high-profile Liberal members of parliament, appear to have gained from this, along with the Liberal Alliance, whose electoral gains continue to surprise.

Overall, the populist right received 13.8% of the votes: the DF garnered only 6.4% of the support, losing 4.4% of the votes compared to 2019. These results indicate that the decline of this party since 2019 does not necessarily reflect a decreased demand for populist and nativist politics in Denmark. On the contrary, new political organizations and groups have emerged to meet the existing demand, despite the efforts of the established parties from both the right and the left, to contain it by adopting some of the branding issues. These strategies seem in fact to have contributed to further radicalizing and polarizing the electorate, particularly on asylum, immigration and integration policies, but also on issues that have to do with the discontent of the periphery/countryside towards the centre/city.

Recently, the DF joined the new group, the PpE, launched by Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister and Fidesz leader. Within this new radical right-wing European Parliamentary group, Vistisen has been designated as the 'chief whip' (Wax, 2024). He ran a highly critical campaign against the EU and Ursula von der Leyen's tenure, directly confronting her during a public event attended by representatives of all European Parliament groups. He accused her of lacking democratic legitimacy, stating that 'No one has ever voted for you, and that is not worthy of a European democracy. Therefore, you will be the first one we fire'. He further asserted: 'Brussels has become a swamp, and we need to put a stop to it' (Jorsal, 2024).

The 2024 election also marked the first time the DD reached the European Parliament with an agenda focusing on reducing EU influence and safeguarding national sovereignty. The party garnered 7.4% of the votes, which allowed their leading candidate, Kristoffer Hjort Storm, to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. Storm had previously served as the DF representative on



the Aalborg municipal council for several years. Notably, the slogan supporting Storm's DD candidacy for the European Parliament was: 'Trust [Inger] Støjberg. Vote for Storm', complemented by a video in which party leader Inger Støjberg spoke while Kristoffer Storm listened. Yet, this year's MEP candidates were relatively unknown to the Danish electorate. To bolster their credibility and visibility, many required direct endorsements from their party leaders on billboards, in political advertisements and at events; an indication that European Parliament elections are still not considered crucial enough to the country's politics.

Discussion

The Danish political landscape is today more fragmented, including at the European Parliament level, where party groups exhibit variations in their positions on key issues. For example, there is a wide range of stances on the support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, with parties like the DF and the DD advocating for strong military and financial aid while others call for diplomatic solutions to put an end to the war, or even express scepticism about European involvement. The role of the EU is another area of divergence. While some of the parties accept the EU as a regulating entity for market integration purposes, others ask for the country's withdrawal from the EU.

On LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights, the spectrum of opinions is broad among the radical and populist right. The DF and the DD view homosexual and reproductive rights as achieved and indisputable rights in contemporary societies, and they rather make use of these to attack what they deem to be Islam's backwardness among the Muslim minority (see Farris, 2017). This stance positions them in uncomfortable company, sharing the ultraconservative and traditionalist views held by parties that belong to their European Parliamentary groups, such as Spain's Vox, the Fratelli d'Italia, Portugal's Chega party and Hungary's Fidesz. Political internal and intra-group divergences were little addressed by the MEP candidates during the electoral campaign, both on the right and left of the spectrum. However, as these issues come to the forefront during the upcoming parliamentary activity within a political landscape that, after the elections, has tilted more to the right, they will need to be addressed, inevitably impacting party relationships within their respective groups and activities. Political tensions, conflicts and new alliances may arise as the populist right – but also the left – navigates internal differences and degrees of extremeness within the European Parliament.

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