

News

Iceland: Trust in politicians almost regained

News

Many Norwegian nurses are planning their escape

Editorial

The Nordic's most precious resource

News

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Sep 08, 2021

Theme: Trust in the Nordics



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 7/2021



Financed by
Nordic Council of
Ministers

NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL

Work Research Institute

OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,

Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130

Oslo

PUBLISHER

Work Research Institute, OsloMet

commissioned by the Nordic Council of
Ministers.

The Nordic Council of Ministers is not
responsible for the content

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An email edition of the newsletter can
be ordered free of charge from
www.nordiclabourjournal.org

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour
journal (online)



Contents

The Nordic's most precious resource	3
Iceland: Trust in politicians almost regained	4
Trust levels in Sweden are swaying	8
Has it become harder to govern the Nordics?	11
Many Norwegian nurses are planning their escape	14
Denmark's stricter requirements cut refugee employment rates	16
Gathering around the kitchen table	18
The Swedish model entering a new era: more power to central organisations	20

The Nordic's most precious resource

Trust is a crucial resource for the Nordic welfare states, but it does not cover everything and everyone. If you look closer, there are big differences in trust between the Nordic countries, but also internally in each of them.

EDITORIAL

08.09.2021

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

September this year is election time in both Norway and Iceland. When Norwegians were asked this summer how much trust they have in different institutions, 78% gave parliament a score of six to ten on a scale where one is low. That is the highest ever score in the Trust Barometer which has been carried out four years running by Respons Analyse.

Icelanders are more sceptical of their parliament. 30% say they trust the institution. After the financial crisis in 2008, that number fell to 13%, from a pre-crisis level of 40%.

“Trust is now close to what it was before the crisis, but that took 12 years,” says Ólafur Þ. Harðarson, professor of political science at the University of Iceland. Together with other Icelandic researchers, he has studied what makes this year’s 25 September elections special.

Norwegians go to the polls on 13 September. Four political parties are hovering around the election threshold, which in Norway is 4%.

Trust is about more than politics. It is important in all types of human relationships. Sweden scores high in international trust surveys. But in the Swedish Trust Barometer, the differences are as big as those between Norway and Iceland – if you look at different city neighbourhoods.

In Södermalm in Stockholm, trust is high. 75% of those living there say they “trust most people”. Yet only 10 km away, in the suburb of Rågsved, things look very different. Only 30% who live there say they trust most people.

“Our starting point is that we have enormous advantages in Sweden, but we want to show that this is a mixed picture and to highlight a controlled unease. This is a trust gap we should take seriously,” says Lars Trägårdh, professor of history and in charge of the Trust Barometer, which is carried out by Statistics Sweden.

The social partners are doing well in various Nordic trust surveys. But are we seeing a considerable shift when Sweden’s

new central organisations get more power than trade unions in Sweden’s new employment act? Our labour market expert Kerstin Ahlberg says “the Swedish model is entering a new era”.

Trust is, of course, also important in terms of public services. The Corona pandemic has brought added strain, but high vaccination rates across the Nordics show trust is high both in medical experts and in the way politicians have handled the pandemic.

The pandemic has also meant greater workloads for nurses and other care staff. The Danish government, with parliament’s support, ended a more than ten-week long strike of about 5,000 Danish nurses on August 27.

a strike announced by Danish nurses. In Norway, seven in ten nurses say they have considered leaving the occupation in the past 12 months. Now, politicians must make sure people do not lose faith in the possibility of creating acceptable working conditions in the care sector.

Trust is also important for immigrants and refugees. Can they trust that they will become fully-fledged citizens at some point in the future? When Denmark introduced tougher language skill demands, fewer refugees ended up finding jobs according to a Danish report from the Rockwool Foundation.

And how have things been for all those working from home during the pandemic? Has the office become an elusive dream we yearn for or do we enjoy our home offices? If so, it is not because we no longer have to commute – that matters far less than how your partner reacts to the new situation, according to the report “Working from home –flexible work is the new normal.”



Iceland: Trust in politicians almost regained

On September 25 the Icelandic voters will elect a new parliament. Majority governments used to be the rule, but with more parties and four years with Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the rulebook has changed.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

There are few events that have affected Icelandic society more than the collapse of the banking system in October 2008. A big part of the effects turned out to be short term, but examples can be found of long-term effects. One of many who lost their trust were politicians, but they are slowly regaining it.

But not everybody lost their trust in them – one of those who kept the faith were the leaders of the labour market, both unions and employers. Another long-term effect is that the four largest parties in Iceland have much less support than before the crisis and the number of parties has also gone up.

To take a closer look at it, we talked to Ólafur Þ. Harðarson, professor in political science at the University of Iceland. He

said that before 2008 trust in politics had been one of the highest in the world and like other Nordic countries.

“In 2009 trust in politics and the banking system takes a huge dive but that doesn’t mean trust in general decreases,” says Harðarson.

“That means people still trusted other people and trust in civil service, health care system, courts and the police remained high. The trust in police even increased that year, which is very interesting when you look at the huge riot that took place at the beginning of the year and was a consequence of the crisis.”



There have been many demonstrations against politicians sitting in Iceland's parliament. Here from 2010, when the Icesave agreement was going through parliament. It was about Icelandic banks' foreign customers who the Icelandic state had to compensate when the banks went bust. Photo: Ane Cecilie Blichfeldt/norden.org

If Alþingi is taken separately over 40% trusted it before the crises. In 2009 it fell dramatically, down to 13%. Then it started to increase gradually and in 2018 it was almost 30%. 2019 came another fall, below 20%. The main reason for that is that in late 2018 a discussion of five parliament members at a bar was caught on tape, where they were saying demeaning things about their lawmaker colleagues and even ministers. But in 2021 the trust was measured over 30%.

“So you can say that the trust is now close to what it was before the crisis but that took 12 years,” Harðarson says.

When asked why it has taken so long, Harðarson says that economically Iceland recovered fast – in 2013 it was on its way up again. That, however, did not show immediately in the trust in Alþingi. “The reason for that is that the collapse in 2008 was not only economic but also social, political and ethical. Icelanders were in shock. This affected the national spirit and self-esteem. What most people took for granted suddenly wasn't there. It's also common that opinions of people take longer to shift than the economy.”

Three more parties in Alþingi

The political system has also changed dramatically. During the last few decades, four parties have had most of the votes. These are the Independence party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, Conservative right), the Progressive party (Framsóknarflokkurinn, centre/right), The Social Democrats (Samfylking – previously Alþýðuflokkurinn - centre/left) and the Left green (Vinstri hreyfingin grænt framboð – previously Alþýðubandalagið – left).

These parties have had over 90% of the votes respectively. But this has changed. In the last two elections, 2016 and 2017, these parties have had 65% of the votes and recent polls suggest that it could be even less in the coming elections.

The number of parties has also gone up. After the elections in 2009, there were five parties, in 2013, they were six, in 2016 seven and in 2017 eight parties were elected. After the next elections parties will be 7-9 in Alþingi according to polls.

“The financial crisis sped up changes in the political system that were perhaps underway,” Harðarson says.

He thinks the increased number of parties is a permanent thing and the crisis contributed to it, but it is also part of a common development in Scandinavia.

“It looks like the times of these big parties in the Nordic countries are over. In Iceland, the Independence party often got up to 40% of the votes, but since the crisis it has had around 25%. And the Social democrats had around 30% before the crisis but they have around 15% now. In fact, since the crisis only the Independence party has had more than 15% of the votes. So, we have more parties and smaller parties, just like in other Nordic countries.”

The behaviour of the voters has also changed – they are more likely to change their votes from one election to another.

“This had started before the crisis and increased faster after it. So, loyalty to parties has been decreasing.”

Harðarson also points out that this has caused inconsistency in governments. The current government will only be the second one since the crisis to finish its term. Three other governments did not manage to do it.

“The current government was unusually formed, where the parties furthest to the left and furthest to the right formed a government with a central party. The main reason was claims for more stability. There you have three of the old parties together, which could be seen as a reaction to them getting a smaller part of the votes.”

Harðarson also points out that the coalition system has changed.

“Unlike other Nordic countries, Iceland has a strong tradition for majority governments. Earlier, the Independence party could practically choose which party he wanted to join in a two-party coalition. But after the last two elections, a two-party coalition has been impossible. In 2017, the leader of the left socialist party became Prime Minister, and that was the first time that happened in the Nordic countries.”

“And now we have a situation, if we look at the polls, that the only chance that the Independence party has to be in government is to be under the leadership of the Left green! This is a whole different landscape from what we are used to.”

Increased government support during the pandemic

The pandemic has of course affected the politics in the world – and that is also the case in Iceland. However, when it hit

full force in March the government made the firm policy of laying low until actual measures are announced and let the scientists – chief epidemiologist and the director of health – and the civil protection unit of the state police be in the public spotlight.

Also, the government followed almost to the letter the suggestions of the chief epidemiologist. This approach seems to have worked well with the public and even the opposition hardly criticized the government approach throughout 2020, when two big waves hit Iceland. That has changed in recent months, but the elections tend to have that effect.

This approach seems to have a good effect on political trust. The latest poll, from April this year, indicates that the trust in parliament is now around 30%, a big jump from around 20% the year before. Harðarson also points out that the pandemic has apparently affected government support.

“Every government after the collapse has started with more than 50% support and then it diminishes. The support of this government was below 50% at the start of last year but it increased during the pandemic and now it has 60% support, which is significantly more than the government parties are getting in the polls. This is common during a crisis. The support of the political parties is also above 50% which is good.”

The labour market maintains trust

But has this development in any way affected the communication between the government, the labour unions and the employers?



Stefanía Óskarsdóttir, photo Kristinn Ingvarsson, University of Iceland.

The short answer seems to be no. Stefania Óskarsdóttir, associate professor in political science at the University of Iceland, who has done research in the communications between the authorities and the labour market, points out that in most areas it is clear which organizations represent them.

This representational monopoly puts these organizations in a strong position and has contributed to a tradition for a good

connection between those organizations and the authorities. Unions and employers are no exception to this.

“These organizations have for example always representation in public committees. So, their position in that way is stronger than in other Nordic countries. This creates a foundation for consultation between the labour market and the state.”

Trust built in 1990

According to Gylfi Dalmann Aðalsteinsson, associate professor in human resource management at the University of Iceland, the collective agreements between labour unions and employers have been assisted with a government promise of reform.

This reached its peak in 1990 when, after years of conflicts with long strikes, a deal was made that is daily called the National reconciliation (“Þjóðarsátt” in Icelandic). In short, this deal contained a modest increase in salaries while the workers got a stable economic environment with lower inflation.



Gylfi Dalmann Aðalsteinsson, photo: Kristinn Ingvarsson, University of Iceland.

“With this deal, much trust was built between the leaders of the unions, employers and the state. And this trust was maintained for over 25 years,” Aðalsteinsson says.

After the banking crisis, trust between the labour market and the government did not diminish even though the trust in politics did. At the time, everybody was adamant about rebuilding the economy.

So, a stability agreement was made in June 2009 between the unions, employers and the government, so that the labour unions would not demand significantly increased salaries if inflation, interest rates, the currency value and other factors would be within certain limits. The Confederation of Icelandic Enterprises pulled out of the deal a year later because they thought it didn’t reach the goals, but this pull-out did not have a long term effect.

That however changed when new leaders were elected in the largest unions. They were Efling, which serves the uneducated workers, and VR, which mainly serves commerce employees. These leaders were elected in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

“This causes more conflict and more critical debate. However, the consultation between the unions, employers and the government continued and lead to a new deal in 2019, called a deal of living conditions,” Aðalsteinsson says.

That deal involved, in short, higher salaries, lower taxes, more flexibility in working hours and ways to create a basis for lower interest rates. So even though the trust seemed to diminish with new leaders of labour unions, the deals have been made without too much conflict.

But all this mainly applies to the private market. This trust and consultation have not entirely reached the public sector. Aðalsteinsson says that usually in the private market the state brings their own suggestions in order to make it easier to reach a deal. The basis there is then used to reach a deal with public employees.

“What has reduced trust in the public sector is that the unions of those employees are not always consulted, and they have not been happy with that. Alþingi has also stopped strikes in the public sector which also affects the trust,” Aðalsteinsson says.

He says that in short, personal communication matters most when trust is being built between parties.

“And right now, with the leader of the Left green as prime minister, the trust should be exceptional since that party has a strong connection with the unions.”



Trust levels in Sweden are swaying

Trust between people in Sweden is high, just like in the other Nordic countries. And despite the pandemic and high death rates, trust remains high in Sweden compared to the rest of the world. But on a local level, there is a growing gap between areas of high and low trust, according to the latest Trust Barometer.

THEME

08.09.2021

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: YADID LEVY/NORDEN.ORG

Södermalm is the Stockholm neighbourhood with the highest level of trust, where 75.2% of citizens “trust most people”. Yet less than 10km away in the Rågsved suburb, things are very different. There, just over 30% say they trust most people. In Malmö, there are also big differences in trust between neighbourhoods depending on income levels, education, employment and social and cultural capital.

There are big differences between different regions across the country as well. In Sorsele and on Hammarö, 79% and 78%

said they could trust most people. In municipalities like Katrineholm, Norrköping and Olofström the figures were between 47% and 49%.



“We have seen this developing over time and it is quite disheartening. We also see reports on gang crime and can see a growing gap between different areas. It is a gloomy development which has gone pretty far – after all, we are not talking about just a few percentage points difference here,” says Lars Trägårdh, a history professor at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, ESBH, in Stockholm.

A trust gap to take seriously

Lars Trägårdh is in charge of the Trust Barometer which is carried out by Statistics Sweden on commission from the Center for Civil Society Research at ESBH. The first was published in 2009, the second in 2017 and this summer the latest survey was published, based on information gathered during the autumn and winter of 2020 and 2021. That was at the height of the pandemic and at a time when there were nearly daily reports of gang crime and deadly shootings.

Around 50 municipalities were represented in the latest barometer, as well as three Stockholm city neighbourhoods and all of the neighbourhoods in Malmö. Just over 40,000 people were asked to participate. Some 14,000 answered – a 34.1% participation rate.



Archive picture of Rågsved. Photo: Arild Vågen - Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0,

“Our starting point is that we have enormous advantages in Sweden, but we want to show that this is a mixed picture and to highlight a controlled unease. This is a trust gap we should take seriously,” says Lars Trägårdh and adds:

“It is harder to get people to participate in an area with low trust levels, so the result could be worse than what we see. Filling in a survey is in itself an exercise in trust, after all.”

Unsafe local community influences trust

The survey includes questions about trust in general – whether you trust other people. It also asks about local community trust, which includes trust in neighbours, people living in the same area and people living in the same municipality. There are big variations between different towns here, the barometer shows.

In Malmö the local community trust is at 67%, the highest in the country. Malmö is at the bottom with 48%. Having local trust seems to be connected to safety. The more scared people are to go out at night, the less local trust there is. The trust barometer also points to great local variations when it comes to optimism and perceived access to welfare services.

“We see a negative trend in the development of safety and falling levels of local community trust, which in the longer term can also influence general trust in a negative way,” says Lars Trägårdh.

General trust is closely linked to education, work and economic resources. Citizens of Södermalm’s median income for 2019 was 458,000 kronor (€45,000), while for citizens in Rågsved it was only 276,300 kronor (€27,000). The education level in Södermalm is higher than the national average and the population is homogenous with one fifth of people born abroad. In Rågsved, most people live in council houses, unemployment is high, education low and 70% of people are of foreign heritage – many are from the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

The importance of work

A high level of trust is of great importance to most dimensions of interpersonal and economic transactions in a society.

The level of trust is simply a sign of how a society is actually doing. The Nordic Council of Ministers has highlighted its importance by describing the high level of trust in the Nordic countries as the Nordic gold. This is evident in many different trust surveys where the Nordic countries often rank highly.

A high level of trust is part of the social contract. The state is expected to deliver, but so too the citizens. Citizens work and pay taxes. The state gives back through education, health and elderly care. Diligent work is a crucial part of this wheel, the survey shows. In order for someone to be considered trustworthy, they must be honest with the information they provide to the authorities, they must pay taxes, not cheat with sick pay, work and provide for themselves.

One survey question is what people consider as important in order to be considered Swedish. Is it being born in Sweden and have parents from there, or is it to respect Swedish rules and laws? The answers were pretty unequivocal, says Lars Trägårdh. A vast majority believed that following rules and laws is what is crucial to be considered Swedish, while ethnicity and religion are far down the list.

“Ethnic and religious dimensions end up in the background. The rule of law beats the right of blood,” says Lars Trägårdh.

Social contract under pressure

Deadly shootings, exposed areas, gang crime, a trust gap between cities and increasing insecurity in towns far away from the cities. And compared to the other Nordic countries – a high mortality rate during the pandemic. What is happening to the social contract?

“Sweden shares the same problems as the other Nordic countries, but the problems are on a completely different level. This is because Sweden has been in the process of privatising welfare services for longer than the other Nordic countries, and we have also had considerably higher immigration.”

Lars Trägårdh underlines that it is not immigration per se that is a problem, but that many end up outside of the labour market and hence outside the social contract. While Sweden had labour immigration, the newly arrived would become part of the moral principle built on working and looking after yourself. When immigration became mainly asylum-based, the journey into Swedish society became longer and harder. The principle became humanitarianism and unlike for labour immigration, there were no plans for work, housing or economy.

“It became a moral duty to look after those who needed to come, but if you decouple people from the labour market you get problems,” says Lars Trägårdh.

At about the same time as labour immigration changed to asylum immigration came the first steps towards a privatisation of the welfare system. Freedom of choice was the watch-

word, but freedom of choice was first and foremost something that benefitted well-off middle and upper classes in the big cities.

In many other places in Sweden, welfare services have increasingly been closed down for economic reasons. Police stations, bank branches, local job centres and unemployment offices are among them. This development has come considerably further in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries.

“Mixed with failed integration efforts this has created a perfect storm. Diversity is fantastic, but it is important to find a common life. When we do something together, like in the labour market, ethnicity becomes less important.”

Lars Trägårdh wants to see a problem-solving and undogmatic discussion aimed at solving existing problems, both when it comes to integration policies and the welfare system.

“Trust is not changed overnight and generally it is stable, but we need to be alert to the changes that we see. Sweden is still high up in international comparisons on trust, but things are a bit more unsteady here than in the other Nordic countries,” says Lars Trägårdh.



Has it become harder to govern the Nordics?

Three of the five Nordic countries are now run by minority governments. Does this mean the political pillar of the Nordic model has grown weaker? While the power of the major established parties is dwindling across the Nordics, trade unions and employers gather in ever-larger organisations.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: MAGNUS FRÖDERBERG/NORDEN.ORG

2021 is already a year of major political change in the Nordic region. And more change is afoot:

- **In Sweden**, Stefan Löfven's government was toppled on 28 June. On 9 July, by the skin of his teeth, he managed to return to power with the same minority coalition comprising the Social Democrats and the Green Party. Only a few weeks later, however, Löfven announced he would step down as both Prime Minister and party leader for the Social Democrats. Sweden has therefore been governed by a transitional government since 28 June.
- **In Norway**, parliamentary elections are being held on 13 September. Opinion polls show the

country might end up with a red-green government made up of the Labour Party and the Centre Party. In all probability, this would be a minority government needing the support of several smaller parties. The most important of these is the Socialist Left, with whom the Centre Party do not want to be in government. Support might also be needed from the even more radical Red Party or Green Party.

- **In Iceland**, parliamentary elections are being held on 25 September. The only possible majority coalition solution would be if the Conservative Independence Party agrees to continue its

cooperation with the Left-Green Movement of current Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir.

General elections were also held in Greenland on 6 April, municipal elections in Finland on 13 June and on 16 November there will be municipal elections in Denmark – the only Nordic country that can call new parliamentary elections at any time but where municipal elections are held every four years.

More and more parties

If we disregard party politics and instead look at how the political systems work, there are certain trends that are found in all of the Nordic countries. Things do not happen rapidly, but if we look at it over a 50 year period the number of political parties in Nordic parliaments has risen from 33 in 1971 to 49 today:

Country	1971	2021
Denmark	8	14
Finland	9	10
Iceland	5	8
Norway	6	9
Sweden	5	8
Totalt	33	49

For the social partners, the opposite is true. The number of trade unions has fallen as various unions have merged into ever-larger units. Denmark is at the forefront here, where LO merged with the white-collar union FTF on 1 January 2019. The new confederation is made up of 64 different trade unions representing 1.3 million members.

In Sweden, there are still three separate central organisations for workers – LO, the Confederation of Professional Employees TCO and the Confederation of Professional Associations SACO.

TCO and SACO along with the independent trade union Ledarna (representing private sector workers) are all members of the council for negotiation and cooperation PTK. At the end of 2019, PTK represented a total of 898,000 members in the private sector. That is a somewhat higher number than LO's estimated 830,000 private sector members, according to Anders Kjellberg, Sweden's leading expert in trade union organisation.

The older parties have in different ways tried to limit the possibilities for new parties to enter parliaments. The main tool has been to impose a threshold for how many votes a party needs in order to be included in the distribution of levelling seats.

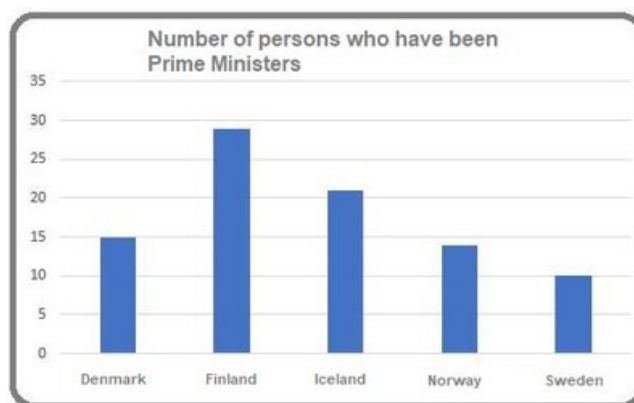
Country	Threshold %	Parties
Denmark	2	10 (+ 4*)
Finland	0	10
Iceland	5	8
Norway	4	9
Sweden	4	8

**The number in brackets in Denmark represents the four places in the Danish parliament reserved for Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Right now these are occupied by four different parties, but these often have Danish sister parties which they usually vote with.*

Finland does not have an election threshold because people vote for individual candidates and not parties. They also use a different mandate distribution model. Denmark's record-high number of political parties is due to that country's low electoral threshold. Several parties have emerged and disappeared over the years, more than those currently in parliament. The Netherlands is a country completely without electoral thresholds. As a result, there are currently 17 parties in parliament.

New parties can receive party support even if they have not reached the electoral threshold. In Sweden, for instance, party support is granted when a party gains 2.5% of votes.

So does a low electoral threshold mean more frequent changes of government? Not necessarily. If you look at how many prime ministers the Nordic countries have had you get a somewhat different picture:



The graphs show how many prime ministers the countries have had as a result of post-WW2 elections. Finland tops the list with 29, while Sweden has had only ten.

In 1971, nearly all the Nordic countries had one large social democratic party and one more radical party to the left of this, one centre party representing farmers and fishermen, one conservative party and one liberal party. Today there is

also one christian democratic party in all the countries except for Iceland. Sweden was the last country where such a party entered parliament, in 1991.

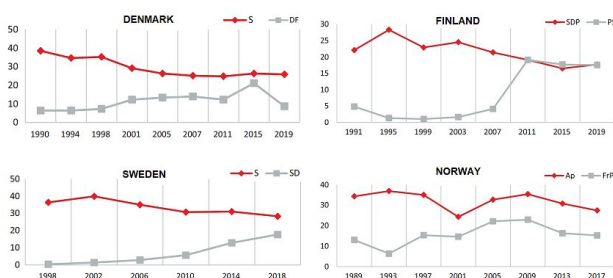
The new parliamentary parties are mainly green and populist parties (although the latter do not always agree with that label). The greens entered parliament in 1983 (Finland), 1991 (Sweden), 1994 (Denmark), 1999 (Iceland) and 2013 (Norway).

The populist parties began emerging in the early 1970s – first in Denmark was the Progress Party which entered parliament on 4 December 1973 with a landslide of 28 MPs. In Norway the party that would become the Progress Party was founded a little later, but gained four seats a bit earlier on 10 September 1973.

In Finnland, the Finns Party was founded in 1995. The New Democracy Party was represented in the Swedish parliament between 1991 and 1998, but split due to internal differences. The Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010.

Iceland is the last Nordic country to get a populist party, the People's Party. They gained four seats in 2017, but split only two years later when two of their MPs were excluded from the party following a Reykjavik bar crawl where they had been caught mocking and criticising their party leader Inga Sæland.

In their book “The Battle Over Working-Class Voters (Routledge, 2021), Sanna Salo at the University of Helsinki and professor Jens Rydgren at Stockholm University have looked at the level of support populist parties in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden get compared with the social democratic ones:



The red line represents the social democratic parties in each country and show how many percent of votes they have secured. The grey line represent what the authors classify as populist parties – the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, the Sweden Democrats and the Norwegian Progress Party.

The populists present a challenge both when it comes to creating stable governments and because they are often opposed to the Nordic model and tripartite cooperation. There are major differences here, depending on how integrated a party

is in parliament or whether they are actually part of a coalition government.

Norway's Progress Party was part of Erna Solberg's government for a total of seven years until 2020, when they chose to leave.

The Finns Party were part of Juha Sipilä's government for two years. In 2017 the party split. All its government ministers left for the newly formed party, Blue Reform, which did not secure any seats in the 2019 elections.

The Danish People's Party supported the liberal-conservative government of Lars Løkke Rasmussen between 2001 and 2010, but chose not to have a formal cooperation with Rasmussen when he returned in 2015 to 2019. The Danish People's Party lost two thirds of its support in that election.

Some parties in the Swedish parliament have just begun to accept the Sweden Democrats as a party they can negotiate with.

The future of the Nordic model probably hinges as much on how the populist parties will fare as on how the trade unions and the main political parties develop.



Many Norwegian nurses are planning their escape

Heavy workloads, poor working conditions, low pay and a feeling of not being appreciated means seven in ten nurses in Norway have considered leaving over the past 12 months.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Even before the pandemic, Norway was 7,000 nurses short according to figures from Statistics Norway. One in five nurses left within ten years after graduating. When the Corona pandemic hit Norway in early 2020, the Norwegian Nurses Organisation and the employer organisations the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and Spekter entered into a new agreement.

The Nurses Organisation agreed to increase the cap for weekly working hours from 54 to 69 hours, as long as this is discussed with employee representatives in advance. It also agreed to a 25-hour cap on overtime.

Without discussions with employee representatives, the number of working hours in a 24 hour period could be raised

to 16 hours. This increase in workload led to a negative spiral with many nurses buckling under the strain.



One in five nurses experienced a major increase to their workload due to the Corona pandemic. Photo: Björn Lindahl

One in every three nurses in intensive care units has had their working hours changed because of the pandemic, according to a report from the Sintef research institute mapping the first phase of the pandemic from March to October 2020. More than one in five nurses (21%) have experienced a major increase in their workload and 14% of all nurses have got longer working hours during the pandemic.

“When more people leave the occupation it becomes very tough for the few who are left. The workload becomes even heavier. We see that fewer and fewer will accept only applause as pay. I don’t think nurses will put up with it anymore,” says Kenneth Sandmo Grip. He is the regional head of the Norwegian Nurses Organisation in Trøndelag.

How to survive as a nurse

“Many nurses ‘survive’ by moving from positions involving rota work and on-call systems to doing only dayshifts. Many take further education to become specialist nurses or midwives. Many also study pedagogy and apply for teaching jobs in upper secondary schools. A few also go to pharmaceutical companies. This has been going on for years,” he says.

His story is supported by a new survey among nurses carried out by the Nurses Organisation’s magazine Sykepleien. In it, 72% say they have considered quitting or changing jobs in the past 12 months. This is a serious increase on earlier years.

1188 Norwegian nurses took part in the survey. Some of the most common reasons they gave for considering quitting the occupation included

- Poor staffing (69%)
- Not happy with the pay (64%)
- Psychological strain (59%)
- Physical strain (57%)
- Not enough time and space for professional discussions with colleagues (51%)

Kenneth Sandmo Grip also points out that it is becoming increasingly common in the Norwegian health service to use staffing agencies. Nurses sign up to these in order to better control their own working hours.

Nurses who are temping often have better conditions than those in full-time work, he points out.

“As a temp, you have a bit more control over your own working hours. Quite a few nurses chose this in order to get better working conditions. I think this is important for nurses, as their workload makes them tired over time. Many want to have as much control as possible over what is controllable by working as a temp.”

He gives an example from Trøndelag county, where a staffing agency has some 2,000 people on their books, and as such has become the biggest employer in the north of Trøndelag.

“Staffing agencies will often cover travel and accommodation for the nurses on their books. One agency offered a bonus in order to get nurses to sign up with them. Everyone knows that the public health service has become completely dependent on the staffing agencies,” he says.

The pandemic has also made it harder to use temping staff from other countries.

"Permanent staff the best solution"

The Norwegian Nurses Organisation argues the use of temporary staff in the public health service must be cut. The best solution is permanent staff which creates continuity and quality, argues Grip.

“The use of temporary staff has become a vicious circle. The public sector seeks to save ever more money and nursing staff leave. This creates a shortage, which means temporary staff are in short supply too. Many millions of kroner are being spent on staffing agencies in Norway every year. We need some temporary staff but we would not need to use just quite so many as we do if there was a willingness to secure permanent staff in the public sector. This would have saved enormous sums of money,” he and the Nurses Organisation argue.

“The pandemic has also increased the workload for many of our members. In addition to doing their normal job, nurses often have to organise testing, tracking and vaccinations. More responsibilities and poor pay seem to be the most important reasons for nurses quitting or moving jobs,” conclude the trade union leader.

Denmark's stricter requirements cut refugee employment rates

A tougher immigration policy in Denmark has had the exact opposite effect of what it intended to have, a new analysis shows.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Low-skilled refugees have been pushed further away from the labour market after Denmark tightened permanent residency rules.

That is the conclusion in a report from the Rockwool Foundation in cooperation with University College London. It looks at what happened after Denmark introduced stricter rules in 2007 for who can get permanent residency as a refugee.

The then centre-right government, with support from the right-wing Danish People's Party, decided refugees had to live in the country for two years and work full time for two and a half years before gaining permanent residency. Demands for language skills were also increased considerably.

This stricter policy's aim was to motivate more refugees to learn Danish and to work, but the Rockwool Foundation's report shows the opposite happened. Employment levels among low-skilled refugees fell by nearly one third, while the employment levels among skilled refugees fell by 7%.

But it had the exact opposite effect. Employment falls by an average of 0.09 years of full-time employment each year, a reduction of 31 percent. Source: Rockwool Foundation.

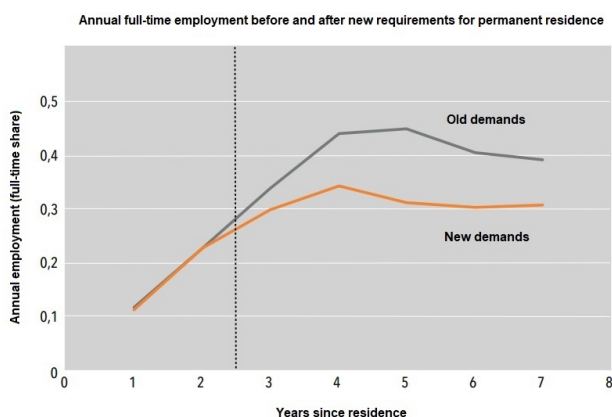
The report also shows that more stringent language requirements had no effect on low-skilled refugees' knowledge of the Danish language. More skilled refugees passed the language test at a higher level, yet employment levels fell for this same group. The researchers interpret this as a sign that skilled refugees chose not to work in order to spend more time improving their Danish, with a view of gaining permanent residency.

Unrealistic demands

Even though the report covers events from 14 years ago, important lessons can be learned, according to the Fund – politicians cannot motivate refugees to find work and learn Danish by increasing requirements if these requirements are impossible to meet. On the contrary; this will demotivate people and have the opposite effect.

“The unintended consequence of the 2007 reform illustrates that policies that are aimed at improving refugee immigrants' skill acquisition by rewarding a specific performance will be effective only if the bar is set at an appropriate level. If the requirements are deemed too costly to fulfill, the reform could be ineffective or result in disincentive effects. This is a particular concern for populations that are badly prepared for the host country's labor market,” writes the Rockwool Foundation.

Since 2007, permanent residency rules have been further tightened through several political agreements. Refugees who are given asylum in Denmark now, get temporary residency rights during which they can apply for permanent residency, usually after eight years. If the situation in their home country improves before this time, their residency permit can be revoked.



When Denmark introduced new conditions in 2007 for obtaining a permanent residence permit, it was a goal that refugees were further motivated to work and learn Danish.

To get permanent residency you also have to have been in full-time employment for at least three years and six months during the past four years, and pass a Danish exam on a fairly high level.

All refugees to Denmark are offered a three-year-long integration programme where a Danish language course plays a central part. There are three levels depending on the participants' education and skills. Before 2007 it was enough to pass level one. After 2007, Danish language requirements were increased so that refugees had to pass level two or three, which means having relatively good language skills.

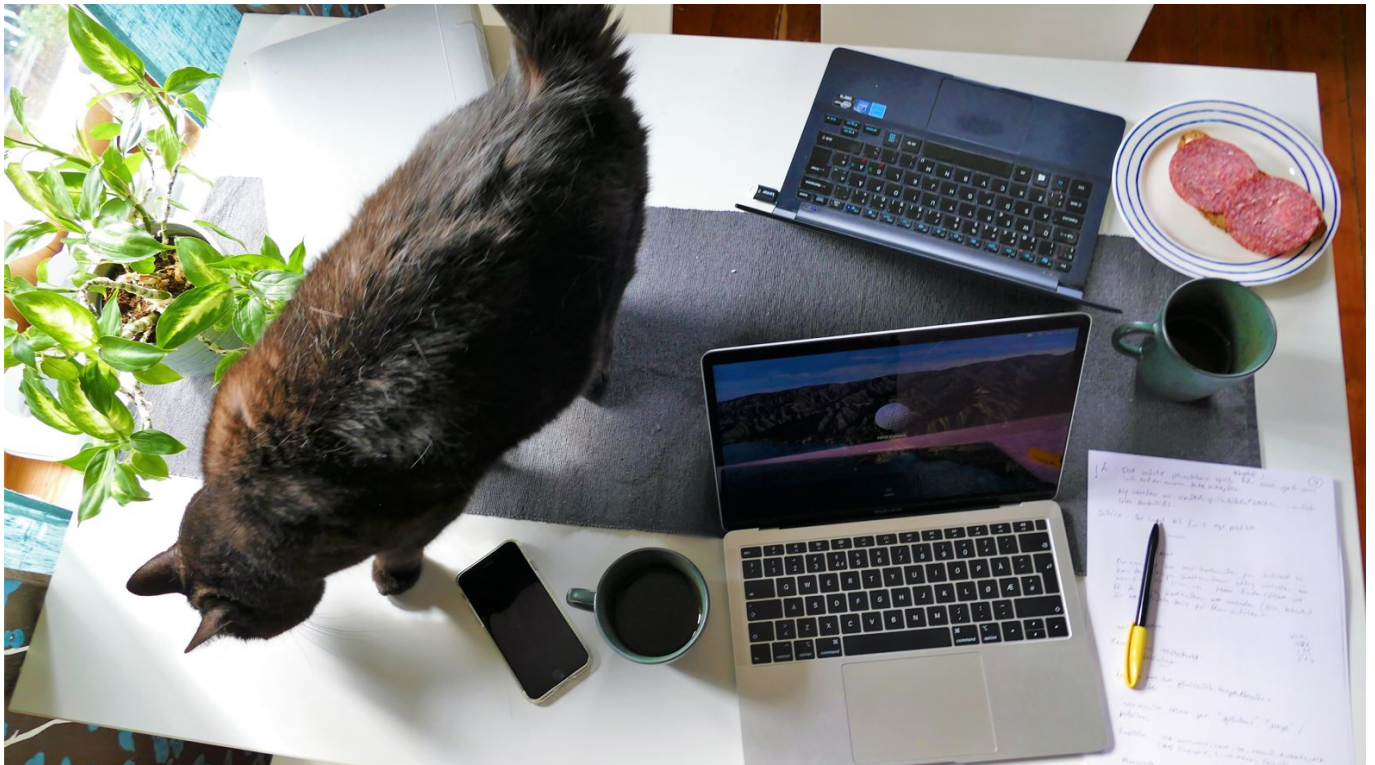
No to changes

The Danish Refugee Council has warned that many legal changes and increased requirements for permanent residency mean some refugees and their families live in Denmark for many years with no secure future there. This has a negative impact on the refugees' desire for social participation, learning the language and committing to the labour market, according to the Refugee Council.

The Danish parliament's largest parties, the Left and the Social Democrats, have no interest in easing the demands for permanent residency, even though the new report from the Rockwool Foundation indicates that this might motivate more refugees to find work and learn Danish.

"I can guarantee that we will not vote for anything that makes it easier to get permanent residency in Denmark," the Left's immigration spokesman Mads Fuglede told the Kristeligt Dagblad newspaper when asked to comment on the report.

In a 2018 report, the Rockwool Foundation compared the requirements for permanent residency in Denmark, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands. Several of these countries have tightened requirements for how long refugees can stay, their language skills and employment, but Denmark's demands are the toughest, according to this report.



Gathering around the kitchen table

The huge increase in remote work during the pandemic became a challenge for families where several people needed a workplace or place to study at home. Surprisingly, the length of people's ordinary commute and the size of their homes are not factors that impact much on their desire to work from home. Something else means much more.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Few were prepared for the new reality of working from home and no longer going into work. It was something new to try out, and it has had different effects depending on people's situations.

The Nordic Labour Journal spoke to Stefan Tengblad, business economist and professor in human resource management at the Center for Global HRM at the University of Gothenburg. He is one of three authors of the report "Working from home – flexible work is the new normal". It is based on a survey of 506 randomly chosen people – evenly distributed across genders, geography, age and income – who answer questions about their remote work during the first half of 2020.



Stefan Tengblad. Photo Erika Holm, Stockholm School of Economics.

67% said they enjoyed working from home. But what about the rest of the respondents?

Stefan Tengblad: The big group was the 19% who answered “neither”. The remaining 14% included those who, to varying degrees, did not enjoy remote work.

What problems did those who did not enjoy it face?

Stefan Tengblad: Some felt socially isolated, others struggled with the actual place they had to work in. They lacked the necessary technical tools or a dedicated room at home where they could work without being disturbed.

**What is most important for people’s well-being
What happens when more than one family member
must work from home?**

Stefan Tengblad: One issue that influenced whether people enjoyed remote work was whether they had children at home and whether they had a quiet atmosphere to work in. Those who did enjoyed working from home more.

We also saw a correlation between those who had a partner who worked from home. If the partner enjoyed remote work, they themselves enjoyed it and vice versa. If the partner did not enjoy working from home, the other did not either.

Was any group happier to work from home than others?

Stefan Tengblad: Women aged 30 to 39 were most content according to the survey. This could be because at their age they have a big responsibility for the family, and distance work offered more flexibility.

Does the survey say anything about which personalities prefer remote work?

Stefan Tengblad: Yes, the survey showed that those with an extrovert personality were more positive about remote working. So too were people with very open personalities. The introverts were not more dissatisfied than others in the group, but an extrovert attitude is linked to job satisfaction and well-being. We don’t know exactly why this is, but other surveys have shown that extroverts handle change pretty easily. It could be that they succeed in using digital technology to create social contacts.

Did anything in the survey data surprise you?

Stefan Tengblad: Yes, the fact that the size of people’s homes mattered so little for how they handled the situation, just like the distance of the commute. It would seem having a ten-minute or two-hour commute does not matter to how much people enjoy working from home. That was surprising.

Different boundaries can create conflict

So what do previous surveys say about remote work and the problems this can create when several people must gather around the kitchen table?



Aleksandre Asatiani, photo: University of Gothenburg.

Aleksandre Asatiani is a senior lecturer at the Department of Applied IT at the University of Gothenburg. He heads a one-year project on remote work as a sustainable working environment, mapping the past 20 years of research covering this subject. The project is financed by Forte – the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare.

He has not focussed particularly on the causes of conflicts in relation to remote work, but he has noted some connections. He tells the Nordic Labour Journal:

“Women tend to integrate remote work with family life and in particular child care, when there are children in the house. Men tend to separate remote work and things related to the household and family. When they are actively participating in home activities, they consider themselves to be ‘helping out’ more than integrating two different work arenas.”

As a result, men find it somewhat easier to maintain the boundary between work and home, while this border is weaker for women.

“It varies between different cultures of course, but you find this trend even in places with high levels of gender equality,” says Aleksandre Asatiani.

There are now good opportunities for future research on how conflicts between household members might arise when they must work together from home, he observes.

“With the considerable increase in remote work, the future will offer a far bigger data set for such surveys,” says Aleksandre Asatiani.

The Swedish model entering a new era: more power to central organisations

It has been described as a victory for the Swedish model. Yet the employment act reform now being proposed by the Swedish government is in reality a structural shift where central labour market organisations will gain greater power at the expense of their affiliated unions. It also changes the division of responsibilities between the state and the social partners, on which the Swedish model is based.

NEWS

08.09.2021

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

As the Nordic Labour Journal has written before, the proposed legislation is built on an agreement in principle between the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, the PTK Council for Negotiation and Cooperation (representing salaried employees in the private sector) and two of Swedish LO's affiliated unions. The other twelve LO trade unions voted against the agreement and thus do not support it. Their main objection is that it would unacceptably weaken employment protection.

So far, there has been less focus on the structural reform issue, but this is now being highlighted in a comment letter from the Department of Law at Stockholm University. The government defends its proposal by saying the Swedish labour law model is built on the fact that the social partners take much of the responsibility for regulating the labour market.

However, the law department points out, the model is built on collective agreements that bind the partners and their members (but nobody else). When it comes to legislation, the legislator has so far been the one to decide which rules are needed. When the government now proposes a solution where certain labour market organisations get a deciding voice over what should be legally binding even for stakeholders other than these organisations, the Swedish model enters a new era.

- Firstly, this means that the state surrenders its responsibility for making the legislation fit for purpose.
- Secondly, it means the parties that have made the agreement will strengthen their role in the legislative process and in society, while the roles of other organisations/stakeholders are weakened.

Since the agreement between the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, the Confederation of Professional Employees PTK and the two LO unions is considered to balance the opposing parties' interests, it will be implemented in its entirety. This means it becomes more or less meaningless for critical consultation bodies to present their points of view, as the agreement cannot be questioned.

Weaker employment protection

The shift in power is also mirrored in the legal provisions on the opportunity to make deviations from employment protection rules. Today's legislation against unfair dismissal is mandatory to the benefit of the employee. It is not possible to make deviations to the rule that employers must have an objective reason to fire an employee. However, it is completely possible to agree on stronger employment protection, both through collective agreements and through the employment contract between employer and employee.

In the future, however, it will be permissible to arrive at a collective agreement containing deviations – detrimental to the employee – from the rule on “objective reasons”. In other words, it will be possible to agree on weaker employment protection than what the law stipulates.

This is, in other words, a step backwards by the state. At the same time, the opportunities that trade unions have today to negotiate *stronger* employment protection for their members will be restricted! Because only central organisations like the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, LO and PTK will be able to reach such agreements in future – not their affiliate organisations.

Want to stop unruly unions

As the law department concludes, the organisations behind the agreement want to hinder trade unions which they do not control (read: deviationists like the Swedish Dockworkers Union or unruly LO unions like Byggnads and the Transport Workers' Union) from trying to dial back the employment protection to today's level.

But the question is whether this limitation is compatible with the ILO conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining. In its continued work with the legislation, the government ought to keep in mind that organisations that are outside of the agreement could complain to the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association that their negotiation scope has been restricted, writes the law department.