

# Denmark

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# Introduction

In 1848, Denmark's political system shifted from a benign absolutist monarchy to a more democratic constitutional system with competitive political factions. Until the 1870s, a coalition of traditional elites, aristocrats and large landowners controlled the government, after which it was seriously opposed by growing groups of small farmers, intellectuals and an organised working class. Parliamentarism was therefore affirmed in 1901, with the Liberal Party, the Social Democrats, the Radical Liberals, and Conservative People's Party becoming the most important political groups.

The political culture in Denmark during the interwar period was relatively stable. In the period considered, Denmark suffered no major crisis and enjoyed relatively stable governments. As an example, a Social Democratic and Social Liberal coalition led by Thorvald Stauning ruled for eleven years (from 1929 until the German occupation in 1940). This prolonged period of political continuity stood out in contrast to the prevalent instability experienced by many European countries, characterized by frequent changes in state leadership. The Danish democratic system was later subverted by the German occupation started in April 1940

## Elections

Between 1919 and 1939, 9 elections were held in Denmark. Denmark employed a two-tier PR electoral system with open lists (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010). No party ever obtained a majority of seats; as a result, this period was characterized by frequent minority governments. Starting in 1929, a coalition between two of the major parties (Social Democratic and Social Liberals) was established.

### 26 April 1920

The 26 April election was the first of the three general elections that were called in 1920. The elections took place after King Christian X dismissed the Zahle's cabinet, accused of being too soft in the Schleswig reunification process. The Liberals obtained the most

votes, followed by the Social Democrats and the Conservative People's Party. Christian X therefore asked the Liberal Party to form a government. The Liberals succeeded in forming a single-party government, led by Niels Neergaard and with the external support of the Conservative People's Party.

## **6 July 1920**

After the annexion of Northern Schleswig, new elections had to be called to ratify the constitution amendments. The election results did not produce any significant change compared to the elections held in April.

## **21 September 1920**

Yet another election was held in 1920 to allow voters living in the newly annexed territories to be represented in the Danish parliament. At these elections, the Liberals experienced a contraction in their seat share, mainly due to their poor performance in the new territories in Southern Denmark. Social Democrats, instead, increased their seats, almost approaching the Liberal Party, the Danish largest party since the 1870s. However, the elections did not affect the government composition. Niels Neergaard remained prime minister, albeit with a slightly reduced parliamentary support.

## **11 April 1924**

The election was won by the Social Democrats, who obtained for the first time a plurality of the votes. Socialists got more than 36% of the votes, while the Liberals did not reach 30%. The Conservative People's Party followed as the third-largest party. Social Democrats were able to form a single-party government with the external support of the Social Liberals. The cabinet was led by the social democrat Thorvald Stauning.

## **2 December 1926**

In 1926, the Social Liberal Party withdrew its support to the Stauning cabinet leading to snap elections at the end of the year. Although support for the Social Democrats remained stable, due to a poor performance of the Social Liberals the Liberal and the Conservative People's Parties managed to obtain a majority of seats, which resulted in a government with the leader of the Liberal Party, Thomas Madsen-Mygdal, as prime minister.

## **24 April 1929**

In early 1929, the Madsen-Mygdal cabinet fell as a result of the Conservative People's Party's decision not to vote in favour of the budget bill. The resulting election showed a good performance of the Social Democratic Party, which was voted by more than 40% of Danish voters. The results indicated that the Social Democrats and the Social Liberal Party had regained the majority in parliament. The former prime minister Thorvald Stauning formed a coalition with the Social Liberal Party, thus leading the first government to enjoy a parliamentary majority in decades.

## **16 November 1932**

An unsatisfactory performance of government parties at the upper house elections held in September 1932 made Stauning call snap elections soon after that. The results confirmed a majority for the Social Democratic/Social Liberal Party coalition. The Liberal Party, which was accused by parts of its voters of having been too cooperative with the government, lost a few seats. Given this outcome, a new government led by Stauning with a Social Democratic/Social Liberal Party coalition took office.

## **22 October 1935**

In 1935, the prime minister decided to call a general election in light of the internal challenges faced by the Liberals. Indeed, the Liberals lost 10 seats, while the government

coalition increased its parliamentary support thanks to the outstanding performance of the Social Democratic Party, which was able to win 46% of the votes. The coalition government could therefore continue, with Stauning confirmed as prime minister.

### **3 April 1939**

The 1939 election did not exhibit major changes in the political landscape. The Social Democratic/Social Liberal Party coalition could continue with another government led by Stauning. However, for the first time in 20 years the Social Democrats experienced a vote loss across elections.

## **Parties**

The Danish party system in the interwar period was characterised by four main parties: the Liberal Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Conservative People's Party, and the Social Liberal Party. Adopting Lipset and Rokkan's framework, these parties mainly competed on two cleavages: workers versus employers and primary versus secondary economy (Damgaard, 1974). The Social Democrats primarily represented workers, while the Conservative People's Party defended employers' interests. The Liberal Party was essentially a rural party, whereas the Social Liberal Party had its main electoral base in smallholders.

### **Liberal Party**

The Liberal Party (also known as Venstre or V), founded in 1870, constitutes one of the oldest political parties in Denmark. Venstre, literally "left", originally advocated for a reformist platform, which included the introduction of parliamentary government based on the elected lower house and for greater aid to the rural population (Juul Christiansen, 2020). However, eventually the party evolved into a moderate party, whose primary support came from voters in rural areas. Until 1924, Venstre was the largest Danish party. With the increasing vote share obtained by the Social Democratic Party, in the

second half of the interwar period the Liberals experienced an electoral decline and never held the position of prime minister.

Original Name	Venstre
Other Names	Liberal Party (Left)
Abbreviation	V
Factions	

## Social Democratic Party

The Social Democratic Party was founded in 1871 as a Danish section of the First International (Mariager and Olesen, 2020). In 1884, the party managed to elect its first members to parliament. In the first decades of 1900, Social Democrats consistently increased their electoral support. In 1924, the first Social Democratic prime minister took office. In the following fifteen years, the Social Democratic governments remained in office either in coalition with or with the external support of the Social Liberal Party.

Original Name	Socialdemokratiet
Other Names	Social Democratic Party
Abbreviation	S
Factions	

## Social Liberal Party

*Radikale Venstre*, literally radical left but often referred to as Social Liberal Party, was founded by a group of antimilitarist members expelled from the Venstre in 1905. The ideological platform tried to bridge liberalism and socialism. In their first years in parliament, Social Liberals advocated for reducing social inequalities, adopting a fairer tax system (which implied higher taxes for large landowners), and extending suffrage to women (Madsen and Party, 2007). The first Social Liberal cabinet was formed in 1909. Social Liberals stayed in government until 1920, and were later involved in a coalition agreement with the Social Democratic Party supporting a series of Stauning governments.

Original Name	Radikale Venstre
Other Names	Social Liberal Party (Radical Left)
Abbreviation	RV
Factions	

## Conservative People's Party

The Conservative People's Party emerged from the dissolution of the former conservative party *Højre* ("right"), which dissolved after the introduction of universal suffrage. The Conservative People's Party has been known for advocating traditional conservative principles, emphasizing fiscal responsibility, law and order, and a strong national defense. In the interwar period, it provided external support to Neergaard's Liberal cabinet.

Original Name	Konservative Folkeparti
Other Names	Conservative People's Party
Abbreviation	KF
Factions	

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