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# Picking a loser? A social choice perspective on the Danish government formation of 1975<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** All democratic systems are theoretically open to so-called election inversions, i.e., instances wherein a majority of the decision makers prefer one alternative but where the actual outcome is another. The paper examines the complex 1975 Danish government formation process, which involved five rounds of negotiations and at least five competing alternatives. We demonstrate that in terms of party preferences the final outcome was not the Condorcet winner but rather one that could have been beaten by at least three other government alternatives in head-to-head comparisons. The Danish procedural system of “negative” parliamentarism combined with simple plurality rule to produce the electoral inversion.

**Keywords:** Social choice; voting paradoxes; election inversions.

*JEL-codes:* D71; D72.

*“Politically, it [i.e., the parliamentary situation] is rather impossible.”*

Poul Hartling, Danish Prime Minister,  
in his diary, following the 1975 election

## 1. Introduction

It would seem counterintuitive for a parliamentary democracy to produce a government that is less preferred than other alternatives by a majority of parliament (cf. Dahl 1989; Miller 2011). Nonetheless,

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as social choice theorists have been pointing out for decades, if not centuries, whenever three or more actors must choose between three or more alternatives, it is logically possible for situations to exist wherein the chosen alternative could be beaten by at least one of the other options (Condorcet [1785] 1994; Condorcet [1789] 1994; McLean and Urken 1995).

This may occur because there is a “cycle” in the preferences of the decision makers, whereby there simply is no so-called “Condorcet winner”, i.e., an alternative that cannot be defeated by a majority favoring at least one other available alternative in head-to-head comparisons. In such a case, whatever the outcome happens to be is, another will be preferred. Put differently, every option defeats every other option in pairwise, simple majority rule votes. While seemingly rare, such examples are found in the real world (Riker 1982) and also occasionally in Danish politics (Kurrild-Klitgaard 2001; cf. Kurrild-Klitgaard 2008). The problem may also occur when the decision-making procedure is such that it allows an alternative to win without being able to beat all other alternatives in head-to-head comparisons, either because of a “defect” in the procedure or because of strategic behavior by the decision-makers—phenomena found widely in politics (Riker 1982; Riker 1986). These two problematic outcomes—the possibilities that no Condorcet winner exists and that a non-Condorcet winner is selected, even when a Condorcet winner exists—are both known to become more likely as either the number of choosers or the number of alternatives under consideration increase, especially when the electoral rule merely demands a plurality of the votes rather than a majority (Wright and Riker 1989: 156).

If a multi-party political system is such that the process of government formation allows a winner to be selected by a plurality (rather than by an absolute majority), and if there is no requirement of a formal investiture vote, whereby the MPs need to “come out” as to whether or not they support a given government, the result may conceivably be one with a government that more than half of the parliamentarians oppose. Such is the case in the parliamentary

political system of Denmark, at least potentially (Kurrild-Klitgaard 2005), but how often—if ever—does it occur in practice? A possibly instructive empirical case to consider is the formation of the Danish government in 1975, since the process resulted in the winner (the incoming government) that was supported by less than a majority of the members of parliament (42%, in fact). The government formation process that led to this outcome was one of the most complex and lengthy (in terms of “rounds”) in Danish political history.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it was unique in that the negotiations leading to the eventual appointment of the new government included an intermezzo wherein an alternative government’s new ministers were all dressed up and almost literally on the way to their appointed posts and had to be stopped on short notice. The leading historian of modern Danish governments (Kaarsted 1988) has referred to that event as “the government we never had” (*“Regeringen vi aldrig fik”*).

The purpose of the present analysis is not to rehearse all of the details of the 1975 government formation process, but rather to try to identify the various parties’ preferences over the alternatives as they appeared in the final stages. The purpose will be to use social choice theory to investigate the extent to which the government ultimately formed may have been something other than the Condorcet winner. If that was the case, it will be evidence of an inherent and counterintuitive flaw in the Danish democratic process and not one that is simply an armchair possibility. In the following we shall do this by first giving an overview of the historical events as they unfolded in January-February 1975 (section 1), then try to reconstruct the political parties’ preferences over government alternatives (section 2), and finally to analyze the collective preference vis-à-vis the real-world outcome (section 3).

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<sup>2</sup> Another lengthy and complex government formation was that of 1957, in which a majority of the seats went to the non-socialist parties, but the end result was a coalition government headed by the Social Democrats in partnership with the Radicals and the “Georgist” single-tax Justice Party. See Kaarsted [1964] 1969, 1988).

## 2. The 1975 government formation

### 2.1. *The Danish government formation process*

The Danish parliament consists of 179 members, whereof 175 are elected in “continental” Denmark, while the two semi-autonomous North Atlantic territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands each have two MPs. Danish government formations are guided by a few formal rules found in the Constitution and a number of informal norms that have evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the process of government formation is initiated after a Prime Minister has resigned, either voluntarily or forced out by parliament, or after a general election when the incumbent government has lost its parliamentary majority. The (acting) Prime Minister typically advises the monarch to initiate a “round” of consultations amongst the political parties, in the course of which their leaders visit the royal palace of Amalienborg in order of party size. During these consultations the various parties each present the monarch with written advice as to whom they think should form a new government, possibly including a number of stated goals or limitations. The pieces of advice are then summarized by the Queen’s Cabinet Secretary in terms of how many MPs are behind the various alternatives and the result is—in practice—interpreted by the acting Prime Minister and his office. The rule applied informally is one of simple plurality rather than of absolute majority, so that if, say, 85 of the 179 members support alternative *A*, 80 support alternative *B* and 14 support some other alternatives or give no specific advice, then *A* will be given the task of forming a new government. The constitution and evolved practice have meant

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<sup>3</sup> On the procedures and empirical evidence with respect to government formation in Denmark, see Elklit (1999), Damgaard (2000) and Skjæveland (2003). On some of its problems when seen in a social choice perspective, see Kurrild-Klitgaard (2005, 2013).

that a government does not need to face a formal investiture vote but cannot be formed if it is known that there will be a majority against it.

## **2.2. *The 1973-1975 elections***

The 1973 election for the Danish parliament, the *Folketing*, was seminal in modern Danish politics and is usually called “the landslide” or “earthquake” election, since the number of political parties represented doubled, from five to ten, an unprecedented one-third of the incumbent MPs running lost their seats, and “the four old parties” (Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives and Radicals), which had ruled the country since World War I, were weakened significantly. Particularly noteworthy was the emergence of a new second largest party, the right-wing populist, anti-tax Progress Party, led by the intelligent but somewhat erratic and eccentric Mogens Glistrup (1926-2008). The end result was a highly fractionalized parliament wherein the traditional patterns of coalitions and collaboration broke down. The government coming out of the 1973 election had a feeble parliamentary base, consisting of only one party, the Liberals, led by former Foreign Minister Poul Hartling (1914-2000), who had only 22 of the parliament’s 179 MPs behind him and a cabinet so small that many ministers were responsible for more than one policy area. Hartling encountered serious problems getting his post-1973 OPEC oil embargo “crisis policies” through parliament and in December 1974—after only a little more than a year in office—called an early election for January 9<sup>th</sup> 1975. The unspoken purpose was to get a parliamentary majority independent of both the Progress Party (on the right) and parties on the far left.

In essence, the choice emerging on the basis of the 1973-75 sessions of parliament was between either a center-right government (consisting of the Liberals and one or more other parties), headed by Hartling and backed by the Liberals, the

Conservatives, the Christians, the Center-Democrats and the Progress Party, or a left-wing government backed by the socialist parties (the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party, the Communists and the Left-Socialists) and headed by Anker Jørgensen (1922-), leader of the Social Democrats and himself a former Prime Minister (1972-73). The Radicals—often the median party in Danish politics—viewed (perhaps owing to internal divisions) these options as a choice between cholera and the plague and most of all saw the solution to the highly fractionalized and unstable parliamentary situation as being one of a broad, multi-party majority government coalition including both Social Democrats and one or more center-right parties (Kaarsted 1988: 50). The latter sentiments were to some extent shared by the Conservatives, the Christian People's Party and the Center-Democrats, although if given a binary choice they surely preferred Hartling over Jørgensen as Prime Minister, whereas the Social Democrats were unwilling to let anyone but themselves head a government in which they took part (Kaarsted 1988: 48ff).

Table 1. Outcome of Danish general election 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1975.

| <b>Party</b>                | <b>Seats</b> |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| Progress Party              | 24           |
| Conservative People's Party | 10           |
| Liberal Party               | 42           |
| Christian People's Party    | 9            |
| Center-Democrats            | 4            |
| Radicals                    | 13           |
| Social Democrats            | 53           |
| Socialist People's Party    | 9            |
| Danish Communist Party      | 7            |
| Left-Socialists             | 4            |

Note: Parties are arranged from right (top) to left (bottom).

Overall, the outcome of the January 9<sup>th</sup> election was an unchanged status quo in terms of the ideological "blocs". Table 1 lists the seat

allocations, with the parties placed on the familiar left-right dimension found to be quite ubiquitous in Danish politics, both in terms of voter preferences and party behavior (Kurrild-Klitgaard, Klemmensen and Pedersen 2008), going from “right” (top) to “left” (bottom).<sup>4</sup>

Although the election did not change much, some realignments materialized within the blocs. Most notably the number of seats held by the Liberal Party of Prime Minister Hartling almost doubled (from 22 to 42 MPs) and came close to rivaling the once so all-dominant Social Democrats (53) in size. This success created some tensions between Hartling’s Liberals and the smaller center-right parties that had supported his one-party minority government, but whose parliamentary survival was endangered by the Liberals’ “political cannibalism”.

The parliamentary situation was a mess. Including the Radicals there were a total of 102 non-socialist MPs (out of 179), but only by spanning parties that more or less intensely disliked each other’s policies. The left wing controlled a total of 73 of the 179 seats. Adding the Radicals (who historically often had supported or joined Social Democrat governments) would only give the left 86 seats, still shy of an absolute majority. On the other side, the picture was even less clear: The four center-right parties controlled a total of 65 of the 179 seats; adding the Radicals would give control of only 78 seats, also a non-majority. Adding the Progress Party’s 24 MPs to the four center-right parties would be hard to swallow for many, but that at least would provide a working majority (89 seats).

The latter was a consequence of the aforementioned fact of Greenland and the Faroe Islands each having two seats in parliament. In general, the four North Atlantic representatives take

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<sup>4</sup> The specific ordering made here—Progress Party/Conservative People’s Party/Liberal Party/Christian People’s Party/Center-Democrats/Radicals/Social Democrats/Socialist People’s Party/Danish Communist Party/Left-Socialists—is based in the legislative voting behavior of the parties in the 1975-77 sessions using the so-called Distance Index (cf. Kurrild-Klitgaard, Klemmensen and Pedersen 2008: 196f).



a stand only when their votes will make a difference in the outcome and then usually support the Danish parties with which they caucus, and in such situations they have played a decisive role in government formations (cf. Skjæveland 2003; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2013). Following the 1975 election, the four “non-continental” MPs split evenly between the right and the left, thus making it possible to have an absolute majority even if the parties in a coalition controlled only 88 or 89 of the 179 seats (cf. Kaarsted 1988: 51).

### *2.3. The informal rounds of negotiations*

Hartling’s parliamentary hope of avoiding being dependent on the Progress Party had failed. However, Hartling and his government technically had not resigned when he called the election and so in principle he was not forced to go through a new formal round of government-formation negotiations. Nonetheless, a majority of parliament wanted such negotiations—either because they wanted to get into a government themselves, wanted a totally different government, or simply wanted a stronger, more stable government (cf. Kaarsted 1988: 52f). The day following the election Hartling engaged the political parties in informal negotiations about a possible new government. Hartling’s conclusion on January 11<sup>th</sup> was that 73 MPs (Social Democrats, Socialist People’s Party, Communists and Left-Socialists) wanted a new prime minister, while 102 had not recommended a replacement (Kaarsted 1988: 54).

So, initially, Hartling’s government simply continued, although now with many more Liberal MPs. But then what Kaarsted called “an orgy of tactics” began to unfold. Negotiations during the following weeks over support for the government’s economic policies and the annual budget were difficult and stalled. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January the Social Democrats (following negotiations with the Radicals and the Socialist People’s Party) proposed a motion in parliament calling on the government to resign and initiate a formal round of negotiations for the purpose of forming “a broad majority

government” (Kaarsted 1988: 69). At the subsequent roll call three MPs were absent, while five MPs abstained (four Center-Democrats and one Conservative MP); the motion was opposed by 85 of the 179 MPs (Liberals, Conservatives, Christians, Progress Party), but passed with a mere one-vote plurality (86) in favor (Radicals, Social Democrats, Socialist People’s Party, Communists, Left-Socialists).<sup>5</sup>

#### 2.4. *The first formal round*

The following day, January 29<sup>th</sup>, Hartling handed in his resignation to the Queen and what would become the first of a total of four formal rounds of government formation (so-called “Queen’s rounds”) began.<sup>6</sup> An extraordinarily complex set of recommendations gave a result that was interpreted as 89 MPs supporting a proposal that the Radical chairman of the *Folketing*, Karl Skytte (1908-1986), would lead negotiations for the purpose of forming a majority coalition government (supported by the Radicals, the Social Democrats, the Socialist People’s Party, and the Center-Democrats). Another set of recommendations was interpreted as showing that 75 MPs (Liberals, Progress Party, Conservatives, Christians) wanted the task to be assigned to Hartling. The remainder (Communists, Left-Socialists) recommended that the negotiations be led by an unnamed Social Democrat.

Skytte was given the role—as the first such ever in Danish politics—of “royal investigator” (*kongelig undersøger*), i.e., as someone having the task of negotiating a government formation but without the responsibility of actually forming such a government (with himself as leader). On January 30<sup>th</sup> Skytte met with

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed treatment, see Kaarsted (1988: 69-71). Of the four North-Atlantic MPs one was absent, one voted against, and two in favor, i.e., with the three aligning themselves with parties with whom they caucused.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the first round of government formation, see Kaarsted (1988: 78-88).

delegations from the political parties for negotiations, which proceeded in great detail for more than a week, until he, on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1975, went to the Queen to inform her that he saw no possibility of forming a broad majority government.

### *2.5. The second formal round*

Now, a second round of government formation negotiations could begin, again with the parties visiting the Queen to present their advice on what to do next (cf. Table 2).<sup>7</sup> Following yet another series of complicated recommendations, the results were tabulated as follows: parties representing 85 MPs recommended that the acting Prime Minister, Hartling, should be given the task of negotiating the formation of a new government (Liberals, Progress Party, Conservatives, Christians), while 86 backed Jørgensen (Social Democrats, Radicals, Socialist People's Party, Communists, Left-Socialists). The Center-Democrats repeated the suggestion of Skytte, alternatively the leader of one of the two largest parties. The North-Atlantic MPs did not participate. The Queen then asked Jørgensen to lead the negotiations but with the instruction that he had to propose a majority government. Within less than 24 hours (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> of February) Jørgensen could conclude that there was no possibility of him negotiating the formation of such a government.

### *2.6. The third formal round*

On Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup>, exactly a month after the election, the third formal "Queen's round" began at the royal palace of Amalienborg.<sup>8</sup> This time the recommendations were somewhat easier to tabulate and interpret (cf. Table 2): Parties representing 89 MPs

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<sup>7</sup> On the second round of government formation, see Kaarsted (1988: 89-95).

<sup>8</sup> On the third round of government formation, see Kaarsted (1988: 96-108).

recommended that Hartling be given the task: Liberals, Progress Party, Conservatives, Center-Democrats and Christians. The only qualification was that the latter suggested that at least three parties should form the coalition. Parties representing 75 MPs recommended Jørgensen (Social Democrats, Socialist People's Party, Communists, Left-Socialists), while the 13 Radicals realized that a majority government could not be formed and in acknowledgment of that fact recommended that an unspecified minority government be formed. So, in contrast to Jørgensen, Hartling now had not only a plurality but also a "working majority", since he could count on an additional two North-Atlantic MPs. Hartling's situation as acting Prime Minister and government *formateur* with a majority was quite strong, and on the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> he announced that he would proceed to negotiate the formation of a four-party government with the Conservatives, the Christian People's Party and the Center-Democrats; over the next day the four parties agreed on a program and divided the cabinet posts between them, with Hartling set to continue as Prime Minister. However, they had not expected the reaction from a disappointed Progress Party, with whom they only wanted to negotiate policies and not posts. On Monday the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1975 Mogens Glistrup stated on national television that such a four-party government (without his party) would soon be faced with a majority against it. This was obviously a strategic move in order to force Hartling to include the Progress Party, since Glistrup knew that it could be perceived as being constitutionally problematic for Hartling to recommend to the Queen that she should appoint a government that would not be able to survive its first meeting with parliament.

The next morning the new cabinet members-to-be met. "Everything was ready now", Hartling noted in his diary. However, he decided to meet with the leaders of the Radicals and the Social Democrats to ascertain that they would not greet the new government with an immediate vote of confidence (and vote no). When he was not able to receive such unconditional assurance, and while Glistrup simultaneously continued to make erratic comments

in public, Hartling made the fatal decision to ask for a new “Queen’s round” to clarify matters.

### *2.7. The fourth and final round*

The last round of negotiations began on Tuesday the 11<sup>th</sup> of February (cf. Table 2).<sup>9</sup> Here the same 75 MPs who had supported Jørgensen in round 3 recommended that he form “the broadest possible government”, while the leaders of the 13 Radicals repeated their vague recommendation. The four parties behind Hartling’s negotiated coalition (Liberals, Conservatives, Christians, Center-Democrats) held the line and recommended that Hartling be given the task of forming a government comprising them. The Progress Party did not trust Hartling this time around and submitted a very complex and detailed recommendation that, in essence, would force Hartling either to include the Progress Party in the cabinet or give it veto power. Without the Progress Party’s 24 seats combining with the 65 recommending a four-party government, there was now a plurality behind Jørgensen bound by no conditions. It was clear from the beginning that Jørgensen aimed for a Social Democratic minority government with himself as head, and he formed such a government on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1975. Jørgensen continued as Prime Minister for the next seven years, albeit as leader of a long series of unstable and weak governments, interrupted by frequent elections (in 1977, 1979 and 1981).

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<sup>9</sup> On the fourth and final round of government formation, see Kaarsted (1988: 109-112).

Table 2. Danish government formation, February 1975, 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> rounds: Processes and hypothesized preference orderings.

| Party (seats)<br>Hypothesized<br>preference ordering           | 2nd round, 7th of February 1975   | 3rd round, 9th of February 1975   | 4th round, 11th of February 1975  |
|--|---|---|---|
| <i>Progress Party</i> (24)<br>$R > (L \sim C) > G > S$         | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Wanted a right-wing government; did explicitly not want a Social Democrat (Kaarsted 1988: 70 & 73f). Signaled that they were interested in joining a majority government, one way or another (Kaarsted 1988: 57).  | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Demanded influence and preferred a narrow Liberal government to a multiparty government without themselves (Kaarsted 1988: 101). | <b>Advice:</b> A government based in “a formalized collaboration among at least 89 MPs, either a ‘magistrate government’ or a majority government or a [one party] Liberal government, which will follow the political decisions made in a parliamentary committee, about whose work there is agreement among at least 89 MPs.” |
| <i>Conservative People’s Party</i> (10)<br>$C > G > R > L > S$ | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government, preferably a majority government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Had repeatedly stated that they wanted a broad and/or majority government (Kaarsted 1988: 50). Preferred a center-right government, without Progress Party, but the latter was not a cardinal issue (Kaarsted 1988: 62f). Wanted to be a part of such a government.  | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   |
| <i>Liberal Party</i> (42)<br>$L > C > G > (R \sim S)$          | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Probably ideally would prefer a continuation of a one-party (Liberal) minority government, i.e., $L >$ all other alternatives. Would prefer not to be dependent on Progress Party.   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   |
| <i>Christian People’s Party</i> (9)<br>$C > G > L > R > S$     | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government, preferably a majority government and one consisting of at least three parties.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Most preferred a broad majority government, with themselves as participants (Kaarsted 1988: 50). Called a government with only Liberals “the least of evils” (Kaarsted 1988: 50). Willing to collaborate in some form with Progress Party (Kaarsted 1988: 64f).   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government with at least three parties.   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   |
| <i>Center-Democrats</i> (4)<br>$G > C > L > S > R$             | <b>Advice:</b> Chairman of Parliament (Karl Skytte) to negotiate formation of majority government, alternatively the largest or second-largest party.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Probably most wanted a broad majority coalition (Kaarsted 1988: 50), followed by a minority government based in a working agreement (Kaarsted 1988: 54). Did not want a one party Liberal government (Kaarsted 1988: 50). Parliamentary group split between those wanting Jørgensen as prime minister and those wanting Hartling. Would not like a government with Progress Party. | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Hartling to form government.   |
| <i>Radicals</i> (13)<br>$G > S > (L \sim C) > R$               | <b>Advice:</b> Social Democrats (no name) to lead formation of a majority government including the Social Democrats, the Radicals, the Conservatives, the Christians and the Center-Democrats.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Disliked both a Social Democratic and a Liberal minority government (Kaarsted 1988: 50). Claimed no strict preference over possible Prime Ministers (Kaarsted 1988: 50) but may have weakly preferred a Social Democrat   | <b>Advice:</b> A minority government (unspecified)<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Broad majority government $>$ ( $S/L$ ) but now considered the former unrealistic (Kaarsted 1988: 96). They did not want  | <b>Advice:</b> A broad majority government, alternatively a minority government headed by either Liberals or Social Democrats.  |

|  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | (Kaarsted 1988: 67 & 75). Most wanted a broad coalition government (Kaarsted 1988: 50, 61f). For ideological reasons it may be hypothesized that they preferred a government dependent on the Progress Party (R) least.   | to take part in a minority government themselves, and hence $S >$ Social Democrats + Radicals (Kaarsted 1988: 96).   |   |
| <i>Social Democrats</i> (53)<br>$S > G > (L \sim C \sim R)$        | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Refused to support a government led by anyone except themselves (Kaarsted 1988: 48ff). Could be open to broad government coalition (Kaarsted 1988: 48ff).   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.  |
| <i>Socialist People's Party</i> (9)<br>$S > G > (L \sim C \sim R)$ | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.  | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.  |
| <i>Danish Communist Party</i> (7)<br>$S > G > (L \sim C \sim R)$   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Wanted a left-wing government. Would be willing to support a Jørgensen government in order to keep Liberals out.  | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.  |
| <i>Left-Socialists</i> (4)<br>$S > (G \sim L \sim C \sim R)$       | <b>Advice:</b> A Social Democrat (unnamed) to form government.<br><b>Known preferences:</b> Did not want a government including non-socialist parties.  | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.   | <b>Advice:</b> Jørgensen to form government.  |
| Government formation process/<br>Outcome:                          | <b>7<sup>th</sup> February:</b> With 85 MPs* supporting Hartling to form a government (Liberals, Progress Party, Conservatives, Christians) and 86 MPs* supporting Jørgensen/a Social Democrat (Social Democrats, Radicals, Socialists, Communists, Left-Socialists) and with 4 MPs supporting (as one of several possibilities) negotiations led by the largest party (i.e. Social Democrats), Jørgensen was asked to investigate the possibility of forming a majority government.<br><b>8<sup>th</sup> February:</b> Jørgensen gave up.  | <b>9<sup>th</sup> February:</b> With 75 MPs** supporting Jørgensen to form government and 89 MPs supporting Hartling (and 13 Radicals supporting an unspecified minority government) Hartling was asked by the Queen to form a government.<br><b>9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> February:</b> Hartling successfully negotiated a four-party center-right minority government (Liberals, Conservatives, Christian, Center-Democrats) (= C).<br><b>11<sup>th</sup> February:</b> Hartling gave up due to public remarks from Progress Party. | <b>11<sup>th</sup> February:</b> With 75 MPs** supporting Jørgensen to form government and 65 MPs supporting Hartling (and 13 Radicals supporting a broad, centrist majority coalition government or a unspecified minority government led by one of the major parties, and 24 Progress Party MPs behind a center-right majority coalition government) Jørgensen was asked by the Queen to form a government.<br><b>13<sup>th</sup> February:</b> Jørgensen formed a one-party minority government. |
| Sources:   | Kaarsted (1988: 48ff, 89-107).  | Kaarsted 1988: 96-108.   | Kaarsted 1988: 109-112.   |
| Notes:   | * None of the four North Atlantic MPs were counted.   | ** Of the four North Atlantic MPs two were counted as supporting the left.   | ** Of the four North Atlantic MPs two were counted as supporting the left.  |
| Abbreviations:   | R: A center-right majority coalition government headed by Hartling, including five parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christians, Center-Democrats and Progress Party). L: A center-right minority government headed by Hartling, consisting only of the Liberal Party. C: A center-right minority coalition government headed by Hartling, including four parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christians, and Center-Democrats) and excluding Progress Party from direct influence. G: A "grand coalition", cross-center majority government headed by either Hartling or Jørgensen or a third politician and including both Social Democrats and non-socialists. S: A leftist minority government headed by Jørgensen and including only Social Democrats. |  |   |

### 3. The government preferences of the parties

We shall now attempt to analyze the preferences over government alternatives held by the political parties. The focus largely disregards the informal government negotiations in January 1975 as well as the first “Queen’s round” later the same month, led by Skytte. The reason is that the informal rounds included no specific recommendations but rather comprised a complex and somewhat “secret” set of negotiations, and that the first round must be seen mainly as a strategic move to avoid Hartling being given the “first serve”, and with Skytte not being a candidate for Prime Minister himself.

Instead the focus will be on the three rounds that took place February 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>, as a result of which the political parties submitted specific and public “advice” on whom they wanted to lead the formation of a government and on what type of government they wanted. Also, at these three stages the stated preferences of the parties seemed quite stable; only on two occasions did a party make significant changes to its “advice” (the Center-Democrats changed from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> round and the Progress Party did so from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> round), and only in one case did this have any important effect. To a lesser extent prior statements have also been taken into consideration. Ultimately, all “data” are derived from the episode’s premier chronicler, the historian Tage Kaarsted, who wrote an entire book on the topic (Kaarsted 1988).

The three rounds, the advice given and most important statements made by the parties have been summarized in Table 2. In order to make a social choice theoretic analysis of the outcome vis-à-vis the preferences of the decision makers, we also need to make some plausible assumptions about their preferences, which have also been attempted in the table.

To make such estimates of the preferences is not easy. The set of feasible alternatives may have changed over the government formation process (with some alternatives gradually being ruled out



and others appearing for the first time); strategic signaling and information availability may also have affected the evaluation of the alternatives and, hence, led to strategic behavior. Nonetheless, we may make some educated guesses given in the alternatives that were actually put forth as alternatives and given the knowledge that we have about how the main actors of the political parties are believed to have viewed them.

In essence, only two options actually were in play: A government headed either by Jørgensen (Social Democrats) or by Hartling (Liberals) (cf. Kaarsted 1988: 51f). However, looking at the actual proposals made we may summarize the alternatives put “on the table” before the Queen and her Cabinet Secretary during the days of February 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> 1975, as well as a few other relevant alternatives as being these five:

- R: A center-right majority coalition government headed by Hartling, including five parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christian, Center-Democrats and Progress Party).<sup>10</sup>
- L: A center-right minority government headed by Hartling, consisting of the Liberal Party only.<sup>11</sup>
- C: A center-right minority coalition government headed by Hartling, including four parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christian, and Center-Democrats) and excluding the Progress Party from direct influence.

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<sup>10</sup> This was not suggested specifically but is largely identical to what the Progress Party is known to have wanted and what the party recommended at the fourth round (cf. Table 2): A so-called “magistrate government”, wherein all parties would take part and be assigned a number of cabinet posts corresponding to their parliamentary strength. For the present purposes we will view this as essentially identical to the alternative R, since it would have given the Progress Party cabinet level influence and some form of veto.

<sup>11</sup> This alternative was not suggested specifically by any party but may be seen as “the elephant in the living room”, since it was the status quo and a latent possibility. It is also plausible to see it as the alternative most preferred by Hartling and the Liberal Party, albeit one disregarded for tactical reasons in favor of a four party coalition government (C).

- G: A “grand coalition”, cross-center majority government headed by Hartling, Jørgensen or a third politician and including both Social Democrats and non-socialists.<sup>12</sup>
- S: A leftist minority government headed by Jørgensen and including only Social Democrats.

No mention ever was made of a left-wing coalition government including, e.g., the Socialist People’s Party, the Communists, or the Left Socialists. One obvious reason was that such a coalition would not have had a majority of its own and would have needed support from the Liberals, the Progress Party or at least two of the smaller centrist parties, none of which would have seemed likely. In fact, the Left-Socialists made it clear that they would not support a government including non-socialists.

Table 2 summarizes our estimates of preference orderings of the ten parties over the five government alternatives. The estimates are based in the actual recommendations given and statements made, but with a few additional assumptions. In some cases, an interpretation of the preferences over sets of alternatives has either been impossible or alternatively the parties have signaled that they basically were indifferent amongst them; in these cases the relevant alternatives have been placed in brackets with an indifference sign (~) between them.

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<sup>12</sup> A specific “grand coalition” including the Social Democrats and at least one non-socialist party other than the Radicals was a constant focal point of several parties but a specific coalition was never proposed formally. Among the informal suggestions were, e.g., a Social Democratic-Liberal coalition (Kaarsted 1988: 70 & 80) or a Social Democratic-Liberal-Radical coalition (Kaarsted 1988: 68 & 81). The former would have had 95 seats (a majority), while the latter would have had 108 and been larger than a minimal-winning-coalition (cf. Riker 1962). Other suggestions included a Social Democratic-Radical-Conservative coalition (Kaarsted 1988: 84 & 96), which would have required at least one more party (and most likely two) in order to have a working majority, and even a “national government of unity” encompassing more or less all parties except the Progress Party and the three parties to the left of the Social Democrats, cf. Kaarsted 1988: 80f.

#### 4. The collective preferences

On the basis of the hypothesized party preferences we may now make a social choice examination of the collective preference over the alternatives. This is done in Table 3, where the alternatives are compared in head-to-head matchups and tabulated given the parties' number of seats in parliament.

Table 3. Head-to-head comparisons of five government alternatives based in hypothesized preference orderings of Table 1 (N = 175 MPs).

|   | G                      | L                       | C                       | S                      | R                      |
|---|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| G | -                      | <u>105</u> > 66<br>(4)  | <u>86</u> > 85<br>(4)   | <u>102</u> > 73        | <u>157</u> > 24<br>(4) |
| L | 66 < <u>105</u><br>(4) | -                       | <u>42</u> > 23<br>(110) | <u>89</u> > 86         | <u>68</u> > 34<br>(73) |
| C | 85 < <u>86</u><br>(4)  | 23 < <u>42</u><br>(110) | -                       | <u>89</u> > 86         | <u>78</u> > 24<br>(73) |
| S | 73 < <u>102</u>        | 86 < <u>89</u>          | 86 < <u>89</u>          | -                      | <u>90</u> > 43<br>(42) |
| R | 24 < <u>157</u><br>(4) | 34 < <u>68</u><br>(73)  | 24 < <u>78</u><br>(73)  | 43 < <u>90</u><br>(42) | -                      |

Note: First number is number of seats supporting column alternative; second number is number of seats supporting row alternative. Underlined numbers are those of the majority winner of the match-up. Numbers in brackets are the number of seats of parties hypothesized to be indifferent between the compared alternatives. The four North Atlantic seats have been left out of consideration for the present purposes.

Abbreviations: *R*: A center-right majority coalition government headed by Hartling, including five parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christian, Center-Democrats and Progress Party). *L*: A center-right minority government headed by Hartling, consisting only of the Liberal Party. *C*: A center-right minority coali-

tion government headed by Hartling, including four parties (Liberals, Conservatives, Christian, and Center-Democrats) and excluding Progress Party from direct influence. *G*: A “grand coalition”, cross-center majority government headed by either Hartling or Jørgensen or a third politician and including both Social Democrats and non-socialists. *S*: A leftist minority government headed by Jørgensen and including only Social Democrats.

Given these results we may conclude that there certainly was no “cyclical” majority; the MPs collectively had a transitive preference ordering looking as such:

$$(1) \quad G > L > C > S > R$$

A “grand coalition” (*G*) was the Condorcet winner, while the proposal that unraveled Hartling’s government—a five party center-right government with the Progress Party (*R*)—was the Condorcet loser (i.e., an alternative that is beaten by all other alternatives in pairwise majority rule comparisons). It is noteworthy that the actual outcome of the government formation—a Social Democratic, one-party minority government (*S*)—was not only not the Condorcet winner but in fact ranked fourth of five and thus could have been beaten in head-to-head contests by three other alternatives including the one almost put into office after the third round.

Some objections may be raised. Most fundamentally, we might note that the supposed Condorcet winner, a “grand coalition”, is extremely unspecified: There was no specific proposal considered formally. None of the alternatives known to have been debated during the negotiations in January-February 1975 was able to assemble a majority (see note 12). Accordingly, the supposed Condorcet winner may in reality be a winner only because it is left unspecified and it may thus be a contrived result and spurious. In that case the Condorcet winner may actually have been neither that nor the government that almost was formed (*C*), but rather the relatively unpopular government that was already in place (*L*).

However, there are some possible problems with this analysis. First of all, there is—due to assumed indifferences between some alternatives—a large number of “indifferent” MPs, e.g., in the comparisons of *C* versus *L* and *L* versus *R*, where the numbers are so large that the outcome might go one way or the other, if a choice was forced. Second, the alternatives *G* and *L* were never formally considered, except with the latter as an implicit possibility (cf. notes 11 and 12).

If we had limited the analysis to the specific proposals on the table in round 4 (and hence excluded *G* and *L*), then we would get the social ordering:

(2)  $C > S > R$

In that case, *C*, a center-right coalition headed by Hartling but without cabinet posts for the Progress Party (“the government we never had”), would have been the Condorcet winner, beating both of the two other alternatives in head-to-head contests.

However, we may take a “robustness check” a bit further and try to force the cases of indifference. Specifically, let us assume that the parties have Euclidian preferences in the sense that they, everything else being equal, prefer alternatives closer to themselves to alternatives further away. Let us also make the general assumption that parties, again everything else being equal, will prefer to be in government to be outside of it.<sup>13</sup>

Given these assumptions, we may say that rather than the left-wing parties being indifferent between the alternatives *C* and *R*, they will prefer the former to the latter because it will be more likely to behave in a centrist (less right-leaning) way. On the other hand, let us assume that Hartling—often accused of being an “office

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<sup>13</sup> There are exceptions. The Center-Democrats with only four MPs generally made it clear that they did not seek a place in government; however, at the third round of government formation they actually agreed to be part of a four-party coalition. The Radicals made it clear that they only wanted a place in government if it was a broad majority coalition.

seeker” —if push came to shove in a hypothetical match-up – would have preferred *R* (with himself as Prime Minister) to *S* (with Jørgensen in the role).

Table 4. Head-to-head comparisons of three government alternatives, with forced strict preferences (N = 175 MPs).

|   | C               | S              | R               |
|---|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| C | -               | <u>89</u> > 86 | <u>151</u> > 24 |
| S | 86 > <u>89</u>  | -              | <u>90</u> > 85  |
| R | 24 < <u>151</u> | 85 < <u>90</u> | -               |

For notes and abbreviations, see Table 3.

Doing so, we get—again—the ordering (2). In other words, *S*, the actual winner, was not the Condorcet winner. In order for *S* to have been able to beat *C* in a head-to-head comparison, it would be necessary for some party other than the Radicals (or a party to the left of them) to prefer *S* to *C*. But we know that none of the five parties’ behaviors or statements ever even remotely suggested Jørgensen, when they had the chance to do so. In fact, we know that four of the five no doubt preferred *C* to *S* because they themselves were part of *C* and consistently pointed towards Hartling in rounds 3 and 4. So did the Progress Party prefer *S* to *C*? This would go against the logic of Euclidean preferences but more importantly against the statements by Glistrup that a Social Democrat would be unacceptable.

## 5. Conclusion

A social choice analysis suggests that the final outcome of the complex 1975 government formation in Denmark was one that was not preferred by a majority of the democratically elected parliamentarians. It won for the simple reason that the (at least) 89 MPs who would have preferred another government split their

support, thereby enabling an alternative supported by only 75 of them to win.

Institutions matter (Ostrom 1986). If the Danish political system had had an actual investiture vote or required not simply a plurality of MPs behind a government but an actual majority, things might conceivably have looked quite differently. Such a requirement would following the third round have forced Hartling's coalition to confront the parliament, including the Progress Party—who in turn would have been forced to choose between whether or not to defeat a brand-new government before it had had a chance to propose anything. The Radicals are known to have been on record that they would not have voted against such a government, and the Social Democrats stated that while they would not save such a government's life, they would not vote it down immediately either (Kaarsted 1988: 106f). In contrast, it is at least plausible that a Jørgensen government supported by only 75 of 179 MPs might have had a hard time surviving an investiture vote. One might add that such scenarios, of course, might have affected the parties' behavior at earlier rounds of negotiations.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, the case of the 1975 government formation is a good exemplification of the possibility of a system of even a democratic system failing to deliver an alternative preferred by a majority. It may not happen frequently, but it is obviously not only a theoretical possibility.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Wright and Riker 1989 on the possible relationship between given rules (plurality versus runoff) and the number of alternatives coming forth.

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