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Economic Inequality and Political Engagement: a case study of the applicability of existing theory to the case of Denmark

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Economic Inequality and Political Engagement: a case study of the applicability of existing theory to the case of Denmark

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the effects of economic inequality in Denmark on political engagement, by analyzing parliamentary elections from 2005-2015. The paper also considers whether existing theories of voter engagement capture the effect economic inequality has had on political engagement. Economic inequality, measured by the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) Gini index for disposable income, has risen at an average rate in Denmark when compared to other OECD nations. However, political engagement is quite high as unique Danish political characteristics and trends have prevented economic issues from dominating the political agenda. Denmark still falls within the conflict theory of political engagement, as elections are high-turnout, issue-based, and rooted in a political culture of consensus and stability.

Table of Contents

Introduction: 3

Theoretical Argument and Literature Review: 4

Methods, Case Selection, and Operationalization: 11

Economic Inequality Analysis: 13

Election Analysis: 18

 Background: 18

 2005: 21

 2007: 23

 2011: 25

 2015: 28

Discussion and Conclusion: 30

Bibliography: 33

Introduction

Rising income inequality has been a key trend in Western Democracies since the 1970s. While wealth disparities have shrunk between states, within Western democracies the incomes of the wealthiest individuals have increased while incomes for the poorest and middle class have stagnated.¹ At the same time, political engagement in Western democracies has also decreased. Turnout, trust in politics and institutions, and non-traditional forms of participation have all decreased.^{2,3} This paper seeks to understand how economic inequality affects political engagement in Western democracies. Past research has established a correlation between increased income inequality and lower political engagement through large N quantitative studies, but existing theory may not fully account for dynamics in some Western democracies. This paper will focus on Denmark, a case with average OECD income inequality growth over the past 3 decades but still high political engagement,⁴ via an in-depth qualitative analysis of parliamentary elections that will test how well existing theory explains the interaction between income inequality and political engagement. The paper will provide an overview of existing literature on the topics, outline my theoretical argument, detail my methodology and operationalization, discuss results of the qualitative analysis, and conclude with key implications from the research. Ultimately, this paper finds that Denmark's average level-increase in income inequality has not drastically affected politics; specific characteristics of Denmark's politics, including issue convergence due to the welfare state, a value dimension of politics that has joined the typical

¹ Armin Schäfer, "Consequences of social inequality for democracy in Western Europe," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 6 (2012): 24-25.

² Ibid., 24-26.

³ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (New York: Verso Books 2013), 20-42.

⁴ Orsetta Causa et al., "Inequality in Denmark through the Looking Glass," *OECD Economic Department Working Papers*, no. 1341 (2016): 6.

left-right economic dimension, and Denmark's political culture which focuses on issue-oriented politics, has prevented income inequality from significantly affecting political engagement.

Theoretical Argument and Relevant Literature

The topic of declining political engagement in Western democracies has been a popular focus in literature. Since the 1970s, political participation has dropped significantly while electoral volatility has increased.⁵ At the same time, political party membership has dropped significantly⁶ and currently political parties are at a low point for trust and reputation.⁷ This is a significant change from the 1940s-1970s, sometimes known as the "Golden Age" of political parties in Western democracies, when participation, including turnout and party membership, were relatively high and electoral volatility was low.⁸ During this time political parties were the key institution linking government and civil society, ensuring government was representative of the policy preferences of citizens.⁹ However, changes in political parties, society, and politics have hurt the efficacy of party government and led to lower political engagement in Western nations.

Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void* overviews the decline of the quality of popular democracy in the late 20th Century. He argues that parties are responsible because over time they changed their focus to the complexities of governing and ensuring their own organizational survival instead of their representative function.¹⁰ This shift in the priorities of parties has coincided with a general

⁵ Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 20-34.

⁶ Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke. "Going, going, gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 1 (2012): 27-29.

⁷ Piero Ignazi, "The four knights of intra-party democracy: A rescue for party delegitimation," *Party Politics* 26, no. 1 (2020): 9.

⁸ Andrew J. Drummond, "Electoral Volatility and Party Decline in Western Democracies: 1970-1995," *Political Studies* 54, no. 3 (2006): 631-632.

⁹ Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 77-83.

¹⁰ Peter Mair, "Representative versus Responsible Government," MPIfG Working Paper 09/8, Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, 2009, 5-7.

reduction in ideological distinctiveness between parties because of depoliticization of formerly political issues.¹¹ At the same time, voters have become less involved in party politics as a result of changes in politics and society including dealignment and the individualization of society.¹² Finally, parties have also ceded agency over economic policy to corporations and transnational governing institutions such as the EU and OECD.¹³ While Mair argues that changes in party behavior to ensure their own institutional survival have negatively affected political engagement and the quality of democracy in the West, these changes cannot fully account for the changes in economic policy and resulting distribution of resources and wealth within societies.

Political scientists have also studied how advances in economic theory have affected policy-making processes in connection within the decline of popular democracy and the increase in economic inequality within states. Schmelzer argues that the key policy development of the 20th Century is the creation and maintenance of the growth paradigm, a policy ideal that states that continued economic growth is a remedy for solving society's ills and should be prioritized over all other policy goals.¹⁴ While elements of the growth paradigm can be traced back to the 16th Century, its most notable effects have occurred since the 1940s. Growth-focused capitalism, promoted by the US and its allies as a crucial imperative in the Cold War, became the key economic goal of the Western world and was widely supported by citizens because it initially led to increased standards of living, more funding for welfare programs, and was viewed as unlimited.^{15,16} This Golden Age of economic growth coincided with the Golden Age of political

¹¹ Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 45-59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17-19, 83-89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52-55, 109-119.

¹⁴ Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 138-155.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*. (London: Verso Books, 2016), 78-79.

parties, as political equality and equality of condition were interdependent.¹⁷ In the 1970s, with the OECD and Western governments ignored strong critiques of growth-at-all-costs politics, and instead continued to portray the market as infallible, and something in which governments should not intervene. This focus on growth, and the neoliberal emphasis on free, open markets has dominated economic and public policy through to the present day.^{18,19}

However, in practice, a relentless focus on increasing growth has not been a panacea to solving society's economic and social problems. Meadows et al. show that the growth-focused policies have led to an increase in poverty and a larger gap between the global rich and poor.²⁰ Furthermore, the economic growth that occurs typically happens in wealthier countries and the gains flow inequitably toward the already rich in those societies.²¹ Crucially, they argue that continued growth paradigm policies will only exacerbate these issues, and that inequality will continue to grow over time unless policy makers challenge the growth paradigm.²² Gorz argues that this ever increasing inequitable distribution of resources leads to an inequitable distribution of power within society, which also increases over time and negatively impacts the quality of democracy by granting the wealthiest individuals increased control over politics.²³ They both agree that there is no hope of reversing these trends without a change away from economic policies aimed at creating limitless growth.

¹⁷ Schäfer, "Consequences of social inequality," 24-25.

¹⁸ Aram Ziai, "The Millennium Development Goals: Back to the Future?" *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2011): 41-42.

¹⁹ Bentley B. Allan, "Paradigm and Nexus: Neoclassical Economics and the Growth Imperative in the World Bank, 1948-2000," *Review of International Political Economy: RIPE* 26, no. 1 (2019): 2019 190-193.

²⁰ Dennis Meadows, Donella Meadows, and Jorgen Randers, *Limits to Growth: the 30-Year Update* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004), 41-47.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ André Gorz, *Ecologica* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), 158-161

The growth paradigm and the supremacy of economic policy focusing on ever-increasing growth has also led to the depoliticization of issues and changed the nature of politics for citizens, particularly those living in nations with higher income inequality. Mair notes that a key change in parties since the Golden Age of party politics is their lack of ideological distinctiveness, as parties no longer aggregate citizen's policy preferences and, especially for economic issues, present similar options.²⁴ The growth paradigm's assertion of the perfection of market logic and its rationale rooted in economic theory leads to domestic politicians deferring to its goals and constraining their potential economic options, taking everything from market interventions to larger scale debates about the goal of economics off the table.²⁵ Western democracies have heeded this logic and constrained their economic policy options to allow markets and transnational organizations to control the economy.²⁶ Furthermore, economic integration in Europe and the increased role of supranational organizations lead to a ceding of national sovereignty over economic decisions to a higher authority, which reshapes party competition domestically.²⁷ These changes in domestic governments' focus and role fits with Mair's argument that parties will focus on their own organizational survival at the expense of their representative function, in this case by moving accountability for economic issues away from domestic politicians, which has negative effects on the quality of democracy.²⁸ Thomassen and van Ham argue that changes in voter motivation in the 1990s are a result of declining party

²⁴ Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 45-59.

²⁵ Matthias Schmelzer, "The growth paradigm: History, hegemony, and the contested making of economic growthmanship," *Ecological Economics* 118 (2015): 264.

²⁶ Silja Häusermann, Thomas Kurer, and Bruno Wüest, "Participation in Hard Times: How Constrained Government Depresses Turnout Among the Highly Educated," *West European Politics* 41, no. 2 (2018): 452-454.

²⁷ Dalston Ward, Jeong Hyun Kim, Matthew Graham, and Margit Tavits. "How Economic Integration Affects Party Issue Emphases," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 10 (2015): 1230-1234.

²⁸ Mair, *Ruling the Void*, 19, 71-73.

polarization, because decreased party ideological distinctiveness leads to voters not having their policy preferences available on the ballot.²⁹

This literature clearly shows an increase in economic inequality and decrease in political engagement in the late 20th Century – present day. Large N quantitative studies prove a correlation between these two phenomena, but not all Western democracies experience these changes in the same manner.^{30,31} While some, such as Perrella et al., have attempted studying the effect of income inequality on individual political attitudes via quantitative case studies,³² in-depth qualitative analysis of atypical cases presents a route to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of existing theory. This paper applies theories of political engagement taken in context with the overall literature on increasing income inequality, decreasing political engagement, and key domestic political developments in Denmark, a nation with relatively low, but still steadily growing income inequality and high political engagement, to better understand the relationship between income inequality and political engagement in Western democracies.

The first potential theory of political engagement researchers have focused on in evaluating income inequality and political engagement is conflict theory. Conflict theory posits that in societies with inequality, the clear material differences in quality of life between the rich and the poor will mobilize all members of society to participate more.³³ These differences will polarize the rich and poor into opposite factions, and each will be more likely to participate in

²⁹ Jacques Thomassen and Carolien van Ham, “Failing Political Representation or a Change in Kind? Models of Representation and Empirical Trends in Europe,” *West European Politics* 37, no. 2 (2014): 411-415.

³⁰ Andrea M.L. Perrella, Éric Bélanger, Richard Nadeau, and Martial Foucault, “Does a Growing Income Gap Affect Political Attitudes?” *Canadian Public Policy* 42, no. 1 (2016): 35-36

³¹ Michael Ritter and Frederick Solt, “Economic Inequality and Campaign Participation,” *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2019): 678.

³² Perrella et al, “Does a Growing Income Gap” 45.

³³ Henry E. Brady, “An Analytical Perspective on Participatory Inequality and Income Inequality.” In *Social Inequality*, edited by Kathryn M. Neckerman, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2004), 667–702.

hopes of advancing policies that benefit their group.³⁴ This theory does not fully account for material conditions that make it harder for poorer individuals to participate and influence policy given the inequalities in power that mirror inequalities in wealth. Furthermore, it has not received empirical support in the years since its publication in which the trends of income inequality and political disengagement have grown stronger.³⁵ This theory will be most relevant in a society with low economic inequality and high faith in democratic processes, in which all citizens, regardless of their economic class, are more likely to participate in hopes of winning elections to ensure policies that benefit them are enacted.

A second theory linking economic inequality with political engagement is resource theory. This theory holds that those with more resources are more likely to participate politically than those with fewer.³⁶ Past research, starting with Verba et al.,³⁷ frequently focuses on the role of education as the key variable affecting participation, and shows that education level substantially affects participation leading to a biased electorate favoring those with more education.³⁸ However, resource theory extends to other differences in material resources as a result of income inequality, including resources required to participate in politics such as free time, skills to engage with politics, and income.³⁹ Resource theory holds that over time imbalances in resources will lead to increased participation from the wealthiest, which creates a non-representative electorate and a political system that over-represents the preferences of the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ritter and Solt, "Economic Inequality," 679.

³⁶ Kay Lehman Schlozman, Benjamin I. Page, Sidney Verba, and Morris P. Fiorina, *Inequalities of political voice*, in *Inequality and American democracy What we know and what we need to learn*, eds. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2005), 34-36.

³⁷ Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) 379-387.

³⁸ Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille, "The Education Gap in Participation and Its Political Consequences," *Acta Politica* 45, no. 4 (2010): 394-396.

³⁹ Schäfer, "Consequences of social inequality," 26-27.

rich.⁴⁰ Streeck's analysis of the effects of growth-focused capitalism on individuals are also relevant here. He argues that growth policies lead to individuals with fewer resources needing to be more flexible, and eventually focusing all their resources on surviving and meeting their material needs, with no time left to get involved politically.⁴¹

The final relevant theory linking economic inequality to political engagement is relative power theory. Like resource theory, the relative power theory of engagement argues that greater inequality allows the wealthiest more influence over politics, but there is a different reason for this bias.⁴² Relative power theory holds that in systems with income inequality, the wealthiest in society have more relative power due to resource imbalances, which are increasing in OECD countries as a result of growth-focused economic policies; they use this power to increase costs of agenda setting so that only the wealthiest can shape the political agenda to focus on issues relevant to their economic group.⁴³ Any substantive debate over political issues will occur between the wealthiest in society, and this debate will not represent the interests or policy preferences of the middle and lower classes, as they do not have the power or resources to shape issue prioritization or advocate for different policy preferences not expressed by the rich.⁴⁴ It should be noted that economic issues are particularly relevant in this agenda setting process, as they have the most ability to materially impact the lives of those with fewer resources, and there is clear evidence of governments constraining their economic policy options in favor of growth policies which will lead to worse outcomes for those with fewer resources.⁴⁵ This process leads

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?*, 41-45.

⁴² Ritter and Solt, "Economic Inequality," 678-679.

⁴³ Ibid., 678-679, 686.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 678-679.

⁴⁵ Häusermann et al., "Participation in Hard Times," 452-465.

to a decrease in turnout for all members of society, including the rich, as they know contemporary politics will not address the issues relevant to their lives.⁴⁶

Methods, Case Selection, and Operationalization

As key economic institutions such as the OECD state that income inequality is rising in Western democracies,⁴⁷ and this trend is unlikely to abate without serious systematic or political changes, it is important to fully understand its effect on political engagement. As has been noted in the literature review, there is a clear correlation between increasing income inequality and decreasing political engagement in most cases, but current theory may not fully explain some atypical cases. This paper will seek to better understand the relationship between the two in a unique case using a qualitative analysis of Denmark. This paper will study political developments in Denmark from 2005-2015 in hopes of understanding why increasing income inequality has not led to decreased political engagement, as would be predicted by the resource and relative power theories of engagement. This period is important because while Denmark's income inequality rose from the 1990s to present day at about average levels for an OECD, the recession of 2008 led to a momentary decrease in income inequality, before steadily rising again.⁴⁸ The economic downturn in this time period had an effect on politics, although perhaps not as severely as other countries with lower standards of living and weaker social safety nets, and understanding the role of potential economic grievances during this period is key for a better understanding of how inequities in the economy actually affected voter behavior. Furthermore, there were four parliamentary elections during this period which will provide more data on how increasing income inequality affects elections.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ritter and Solt, "Economic Inequality," 678-680.

⁴⁷ Causa et al., "Inequality in Denmark," 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴⁹ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

The independent variable in my analysis will be the Gini index of disposable income, generated by Frederick Solt in his Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID).⁵⁰ The SWIID is an in-depth database that uses a large swath of observations of Gini indexes for various countries and years, combining many different metrics but ensuring the data is valid and comparable, frequently used by researchers in comparative studies of income inequality.⁵¹ Disposable income represents gross income minus taxes, so it allows for an understanding of how countries' redistributive tax systems affect the experience of income inequality in daily life for individuals.⁵² The focus on disposable income is drawn from existing literature on the topic because it is very relevant to how individuals experience the effects of income inequality, especially given existing theory that individuals' perceptions of their economic standing may be more influential than the overall national economy.⁵³ Inequality of disposable income is also a better data point to use for the Danish case instead of wealth inequality, because the high household debt average and high rental rates, instead of home ownership, may distort some measures of wealth inequality in Denmark.⁵⁴

The dependent variable in my analysis will be political engagement in elections and campaigns. I will measure this by evaluating parliamentary election results and processes, including turnout, trends in political parties, issues focused on and key grievances, and the role of political parties in agenda setting and representing the wills of voters. I will rely on secondary

⁵⁰ Ritter and Solt, "Economic Inequality," 678-680.

⁵¹ Frederick Solt, "Measuring Income Inequality Across Countries and Over Time: The Standardized World Income Inequality Database," *Social Science Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (2020): 1183–1185. SWIID Version 9.3, June 2022.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1187-1188.

⁵³ Ditte Andersen, Malene Lue Kessing, and Jeanette Østergaard, "'We Have Equal Opportunities – in Theory': Lay Perceptions of Privilege, Meritocracy and Inequality in Denmark," *Sociology (Oxford)* 55, no. 6 (2021): 1117-1118.

⁵⁴ Nora Skopek, Sandra Buchholz, and Hans-Peter Blossfeld, "National Patterns of Income and Wealth Inequality," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 55, no. 6 (2014): 479-481.

sources and data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.⁵⁵ The secondary source analysis will help unpack key political developments during the time period with a focus on: electoral dynamics, if parties are responsive to grievances about economics and social equality, what issues winning parties focus on, and if any specific Danish political or institutional factors affect the interaction between economic inequality and politics. Furthermore, I will ground this analysis in the theories of engagement listed in the theoretical arguments, to evaluate which, if any, of these theories hold explanatory value. This will also be particularly beneficial in understanding how responsive political institutions, namely political parties, the government, and potentially civil society groups, are to society, as relative power theory indicates that as income inequality becomes more extreme the political agenda will increasingly be set by elites and will not prioritize issues that motivate middle- and lower-class voters.⁵⁶

Economic Inequality Analysis

From 2005 – 2015 Denmark experienced an average increase in economic equality in comparison with other OECD nations. Specifically, Denmark’s Gini index for disposable income increased over 2 points from about 23.5-26.⁵⁷ This increase is significant but is still relatively low by historical standards.⁵⁸ This measure of disposable income is relevant for understanding the effect of income inequality on citizens because it is the measure of post-tax and post-transfer income, so it focuses on the actual total income citizens earn after taxes and other redistributive policies have taken place.⁵⁹ The increase of 2 on the Gini index is significant because from 1975-2020, Denmark’s Gini index for disposable income increased by only 2-3 points, depending on

⁵⁵ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

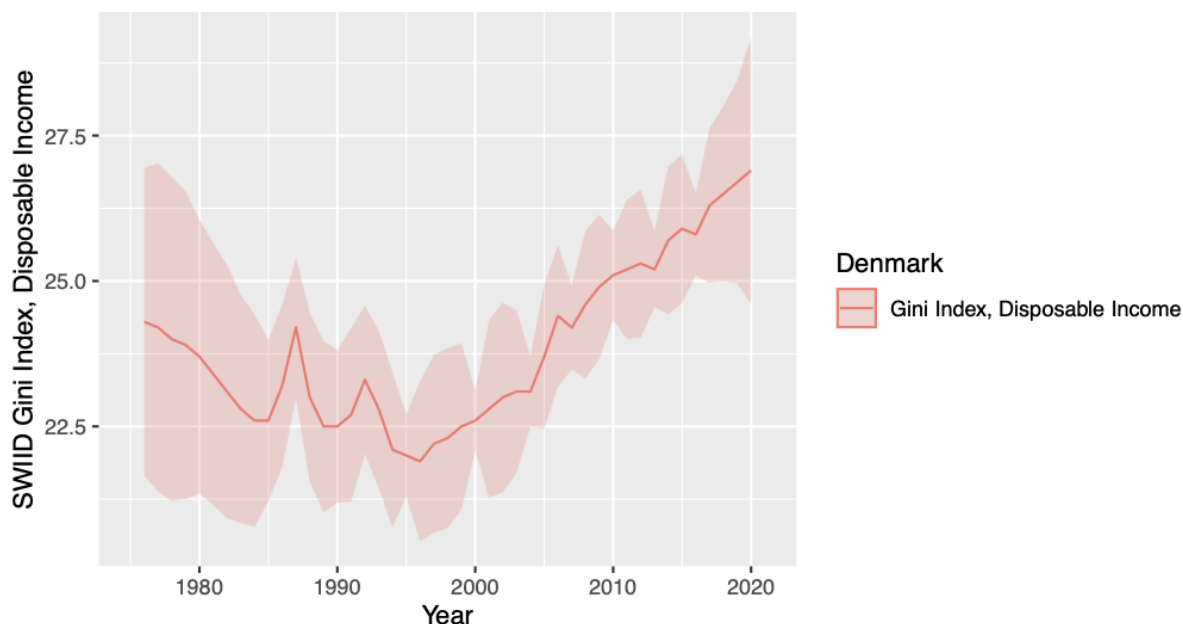
⁵⁶ Ritter and Solt, “Economic Inequality,” 678-680.

⁵⁷ Solt, “Measuring Income Inequality.”

⁵⁸ Anthony B. Atkinson and Jakob Egholt Søgaard, “The Long-Run History of Income Inequality in Denmark,” *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 118, no. 2 (2016): 289.

⁵⁹ Solt, “Measuring Income Inequality,” 1187-1188.

the measure.⁶⁰ This increase was not linear, as can be seen in Figure A⁶¹ below, as economic inequality actually drops from the late 1970s-1995, before it starts to rise again relatively steadily in the 21st Century. The period from 2005-2015 is particularly important in understanding the role of income inequality in modern Denmark due to the sustained increase in the Gini index during this time, even during a worldwide recession.



Note: Solid lines indicate mean estimates; shaded regions indicate the associated 95% uncertainty intervals.
 Source: Standardized World Income Inequality Database v9.4 (Solt 2020).

Figure A: changes in Denmark's Gini index for 1975-2020.

Changes in Denmark's market Gini index for market income are also important in understanding changes in distribution of wealth across Danish society. This measure represents the distribution of income before taxes or redistributive transfers, but this value is influenced by government policies, including minimum wage, public education, and training programs that influence outcomes of the free market.⁶² From 2005-2015 the Danish Gini index for market

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 1196-1197.

income also increased by 3 points.⁶³ This shows that market income is also becoming more unequal, although at a relatively low rate in comparison to other nations, which means Denmark's strong tax and transfer systems are required to prevent disposable income from becoming even more unequal.

Secondary source analysis provides more context on the Danish economy, and income inequality, than just the Gini index. As has been established, during the period of 2005-2015 Denmark experienced an increase in economic inequality that is typical of many Western democracies at the time.⁶⁴ Denmark has also experienced an average increase in GDP over the past three decades in comparison to other OECD nations.⁶⁵ Existing theory indicates that income inequality will increase as growth increases, due to neoliberal growth-focused economic policies that lead to inequitable distributions of wealth. OECD researchers argue that growth-enhancing institutional reforms are partially responsible for rising income inequality in Denmark but note that technological changes in work and structural changes in the global economy are also responsible for this increase.⁶⁶

Denmark is viewed historically and contemporarily as a relatively equal society. In the 1980s, Denmark's top 1% had the lowest historical relative share of income in comparison with other Western democracies, but this has risen in years since due in part to changes in the marginal tax rate.⁶⁷ Changes in redistributive tax policy in the 1990s have led to growing income inequality in Denmark in the 21st Century.⁶⁸ Since 1995, the top income percentiles have

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Causa et al., "Inequality in Denmark," 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Anthony B. Atkinson and Jakob Egholt Søgaard, "The Long-Run History of Income Inequality in Denmark," *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 118, no. 2 (2016): 285-288.

⁶⁸ Søren Leth-Petersen and Johan Sæverud, "Inequality and Dynamics of Earnings and Disposable Income in Denmark 1987–2016," *Quantitative Economics* 13, no. 4 (2022): 1493-1494.

experienced the most marked increases in share of wealth, while the middle class has experienced slight increases, and the lower class has not experienced an increase at all. The top 0.1% has experienced the most growth from 1995-2015, while the lower class has been most affected by global market fluctuations, such as the Great Recession.⁶⁹ While income inequality is increasing, disposable income is more equal than gross income due to redistributive tax and transfer policies, which are still effective despite changes in tax legislation in the 20th Century. Finally, it is also notable that during the time period of 1995-2015 education levels have increased sharply as a result of increased focus on education in politics and society,⁷⁰ which should lead to a more equal distribution of education, a key resource along with wealth in the resource theory of education. While Denmark's strong welfare state, education system, and tax and transfer policies provide a strong backstop in preventing the effects of economic inequality from drastically negatively affecting politics, neoliberal policies have still affected the rise of income inequality in Denmark.

Finally, it is also important to understand the nature of income and changes in income in Denmark to fully understand any connection between economics and politics. While Denmark has a relatively high average income, there have been increasing disparities in income from certain sectors of the economy recently. Still, Denmark has a high net median income, so relative to other nations even those Danes in lower economic classes may have a higher standard of life than members of lower economic classes in other less wealthy nations.⁷¹ Shares of income from labor have remained relatively constant within economic classes in Denmark since 1985,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1494-1499.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1497.

⁷¹ Skopek et al., "National Patterns of Income," 475.

including the key period of 2005-2015.⁷² However, from 1985-2016 the top 5%'s share of income from capital has increased 25%, including a 10% increase from 2004-2016, the closest available dataset to the period analyzed in this paper.⁷³ The other 95% all experienced decreases in their share of capital investment income over both time periods.⁷⁴ Some scholars argue that the inequitable increase in percentage of capital income accrued by the top class is a result of increases in capital accumulation,⁷⁵ as predicted by critiques of growth-focused capitalism that predict an inequitable distribution of capital over time due to structural dynamics.⁷⁶ It should be noted that researchers also attribute the increase in inequitable capital income distribution to changes in tax code that decreased the marginal tax rate.⁷⁷ This increase in inequitable distribution of capital investment income fits with Skopek et al.'s analysis that Denmark has a very high level of wealth inequality, even if income inequality is lower in comparison with other OECD nations; however, above-average levels of household debt in Denmark and high rental rates in lieu of home ownership do affect measures of Danish wealth inequality.⁷⁸

This data from the SWIID shows that income inequality is increasing in Denmark over the late 20th Century and early 21st Century, but crucially this increase is most pronounced during the period of 2005-2015. While the increase in income inequality is significant, it is still within the average for OECD nations and Denmark's strong social safety net and welfare policies ensure a relatively high standard of living for most Danes. Existing theory predicts that increasing income inequality will have one of three effects depending on the extent of the

⁷² Roberto Iacono and Elisa Palagi, "Still the Lands of Equality? Heterogeneity of Income Composition in the Nordics, 1975–2016," *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy* 22, no. 2 (2022): 203-232.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁷⁶ Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth*, 41-47.

⁷⁷ Iacono and Palagi., "Still the Lands of Equality?" 234.

⁷⁸ Skopek et al., "National Patterns of Income," 479-481.

increase and case-specific factors. Conflict theory predicts that an increase in income inequality will lead to increased political engagement, as all voters turn out in hopes of advancing their priorities, and preventing opposition from implementing policies that would hurt members of their economic class. Resource theory predicts that an increase in economic inequality will lead to a decrease in engagement from voters with fewer resources. Finally, relative power theory predicts that eventually even those with the most resources will become less engaged as the upper class is able to control the political agenda and ensure politics does not adequately address redistributive policies that could decrease economic and social inequalities while making society more equal.

Election Analysis

Background

Before analyzing parliamentary elections in depth, it is important to understand the Danish election process. Parliamentary elections are called for by the Prime Minister and elections must happen four years after the prior parliamentary election.⁷⁹ Denmark has very short campaigns which usually last 2-4 weeks from the announcement of an election by the Prime Minister.⁸⁰ Parliamentary elections have multi-member districts and proportional representation in which voters can vote for a party or candidate, with a two percent threshold for representation in parliament.⁸¹ Furthermore, Denmark has a complex distribution mechanism that, along with the low threshold for representation, ensures its elections are very proportional in comparison

⁷⁹ Jakob Linaa Jensen and Sander Andreas Schwartz, “The Return of the “Lurker”: A Longitudinal Study of Citizens’ Use of Social Media in Danish Elections 2011, 2015, and 2019,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 4 (2021): 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Rune Stubager, “The Parliamentary Election in Denmark, September 2011,” *Electoral Studies* 31, no. 4 (2012): 861.

with other Western democracies.⁸² There is automatic voter registration, and Denmark has a very strong culture of voting, including a marked preference for voting in person on election days.⁸³

It is also important to understand the institutional set up of the parliament that parties and candidates are elected to. The Danish parliament operates on “negative parliamentarianism,” in which the government is not required to always have a majority but cannot have a majority against it, which, if this occurs, would require the government to step down and hold a new election.⁸⁴ Elections are very issue-focused and political parties set the agenda by focusing on specific issues in their election campaigns and communicating them via advertisements and media outreach.⁸⁵ Danish governments are typically formed via a minority government with broad support from other parties, potentially from across the political spectrum depending on the specific dynamics of the context, or a bloc that competes with an opposition bloc.⁸⁶ Danish politics is notable for high levels of cooperation and consensus that allow relevant parties and actors to engage in policymaking.⁸⁷

The 2005 election followed a relatively seismic parliamentary election in 2001. Following eight years of Social Democrat control of the government with support from centrist and left-wing parties, the Liberal and Conservative parties won the election and formed a minority government supported by the Danish People’s Party (DPP).⁸⁸ While this election is

⁸² Derek S. Hutcheson, “The 2011 Election to the Danish Folketing,” *Representation (McDougall Trust)* 48, no. 3 (2012): 336.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 336-337.

⁸⁴ Mark Blach-Ørsten, Mads Kæmgaard Eberholst, and Rasmus Burkal, “From Hybrid Media System to Hybrid-Media Politicians: Danish Politicians and Their Cross-Media Presence in the 2015 National Election Campaign,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 14, no. 4 (2017): 338.

⁸⁵ David Hopmann et al., “Effects of Election News Coverage: How Visibility and Tone Influence Party Choice,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 4 (2010): 400-401.

⁸⁶ Hutcheson, “The 2011 Election,” 335.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Karina Pedersen, “The 2005 Danish General Election: A Phase of Consolidation,” *West European Politics* 28, no. 5 (2005): 1102.

significant because it was the start of a decade of Liberal-Conservative coalition government, the role of DPP is also important. DPP, which was created in 1996, transitioned from the role of party with blackmail potential to a party with coalition potential and ambition.⁸⁹ Furthermore, this election marked the first time since World War II that the Danish government did not include centrist parties and was the first election since 1929 that the coalition relied on a right-wing party for parliamentary support.⁹⁰ It should also be noted that a key issue in the 2001 election was immigration, and right-wing parties campaigned and won by advocating for stricter immigration laws.⁹¹ The increased focus on immigration during the 1990s and 2001 election led to commentators arguing that Danish politics could be divided by a libertarian-authoritarian value dimension, which was not consistent with the traditional left-right economic dimension.⁹²

A key aspect of the Liberal-Conservative bloc victory was the ability of the Liberal party to reposition its stance on the issue of welfare and welfare-related reforms from 1998-2001, a stance that it has relied on in the period of 2005-2015. This is crucial, because Denmark's universal welfare system has typically been managed by the Social Democrats, and the high support for the welfare system lends an advantage to the Social Democrats, as they are historically perceived as the protector of the welfare state and owner of welfare reform issues.⁹³ The welfare state was the key issue in elections from 1990-2001, and the issue Social Democrats focused on to win elections during the 1990s.⁹⁴ From 1998 onward the Liberal party strategically moved to the left on the welfare issue, maintaining support for market-liberal policies but

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Jørgen Goul Andersen, "The Parliamentary Election in Denmark, February 2005," *Electoral Studies* 25, no. 2 (2006): 393-394.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Christoph Arndt, "Beating Social Democracy on Its Own Turf: Issue Convergence as Winning Formula for the Centre-Right in Universal Welfare States," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 149-153.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 155.

deliberately communicating that they supported the welfare state and toning down any attempts to make cuts to popular welfare programs.⁹⁵ The Liberals were so successful in converging on the left's position for the issue of welfare that the Danish public believed their ideological position was similar to the Social Democrats, and at times even viewed the Liberals as owning the issues of healthcare and pension welfare reforms, which will be key in Liberal success from the 2001 election onwards.⁹⁶

2005

The 2005 Danish parliamentary election had similar results and competition to the 2001 election. The right-wing blue bloc, made up of the former government and DPP, contested the left-wing red bloc, led by Social Democrats along with the Social Liberal Party, Socialist People's Party (SPP), Christian Democrats, and Red-Green Alliance.⁹⁷ The campaign had a presidential nature, something which has increased since the 21st Century in Danish politics, as both blocs and voters focused on the qualifications of the Prime Minister candidates from the Liberals and Social Democrats.⁹⁸ However, the contest was still firmly rooted in issues and policy, as Danish parties competed to distinguish themselves on policy positions. The multi-party system, as well as Danish political culture, incentivizes Danish parties to attempt to draw voters to their party based on issues, as negative campaigning usually just pushes voters away from a party, and not directly to the party going negative which may occur in other democracies with fewer parties.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 155-156, 161.

⁹⁷ Pedersen, "The 2005 Danish General Election," 1104-1106.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1104

⁹⁹ Kasper M. Hansen and Rasmus Tue Pedersen, "Negative Campaigning in a Multiparty System," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 31, no. 4 (2008): 422-423.

The main issues relevant in the election were unemployment, welfare system care for the elderly, and tax cuts passed by the Liberal-Conservative government prior to the election, but overall the policy positions of the two blocs were very similar, with ads placed by Liberals, Conservatives, and Social Democrats emphasizing these same issues.¹⁰⁰ The Liberals deliberately converged on the Social Democrats' issue stances on the welfare state, by promoting the welfare state as a key buffer to the effects of globalization, touting their protection of the welfare state in government, and promising to not make reforms to the welfare state without the involvement of Social Democrats.¹⁰¹ The one key difference in economic policy was the Liberal's focus on stopping taxes, which was extremely popular in the public in comparison with the Social Democrats' plan which would create a tax ceiling but still allowed for increasing taxes.¹⁰² The other relevant issue was immigration, and the left bloc led by Social Democrats actually moved to the right on immigration in a bid to appeal to more Liberal-Conservative voters.¹⁰³ However, the Social Democrats' ploy on immigration led to strong pushback from other left-wing parties and likely hurt their performance in the election itself.¹⁰⁴

As in 2001, the Liberal-Conservative bloc won the election and formed the government with the parliamentary support of DPP.¹⁰⁵ The Conservatives and DPP each won two seats securing 10.3% and 13.3% respectively, while the Liberals lost a few seats but still won the largest share of votes at 29%.¹⁰⁶ The Social Democrats only won 25.8%, dropping from 29.1% in the previous election; the biggest winner on the red bloc was the Social Liberal party which jumped from 5.2% to 9.2% as a result of their left-wing immigration values, in contrast to the

¹⁰⁰ Pedersen, "The 2005 Danish General Election," 1104-1105.

¹⁰¹ Andersen, "The Parliamentary Election," 394.

¹⁰² Ibid., 395.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 393-394.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 394.

¹⁰⁵ Pedersen, "The 2005 Danish General Election," 1105-1106.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Social Democrats turn to the right on immigration.¹⁰⁷ Turnout was only 84.5%, a drop-off from 87.1% in 2001 and 85.95% in 1998.¹⁰⁸ While this turnout is still extremely high in comparison to other Western democracies without compulsory voting, the slight drop can be attributed to poor performance on the left which failed to distinguish itself from the Liberal-Conservative bloc regarding welfare and immigration. It should also be noted that while the right-wing bloc won the election, political attitudes within the country did not move to the right,¹⁰⁹ and right-wing victory was a result of issue emphasis and specific policy choices to appeal to voters in a complex multi-party election.

2007

The 2007 parliamentary election was held earlier than expected, as a result of strategic choices by the Liberal-Conservative government to call for an early election when they were polling well, as a result of withdrawing troops from Iraq and recently passing a tax cut.¹¹⁰ Again the election was contested by two blocs, with the Liberals and Social Democrats nominating Prime Minister candidates from their respective parties. As in 2005, the election was relatively issued-focused, although presidentialism and focus on prime minister candidates was increasing. One result of the increasing presidentialism was that parties with Prime Minister candidates did have a more prominent role in setting the issue agenda.¹¹¹ Welfare was a key issue, with the Liberals contending they safeguarded the welfare state while passing tax cuts, and the Social Democrats arguing that the Liberal-Conservative government's tax cuts were hurting the welfare

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

¹⁰⁹ Andersen, "The Parliamentary Election," 396.

¹¹⁰ Karina Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2007 Danish General Election: Generating a Fragile Majority." *West European Politics* 31, no. 5 (2008): 1040.

¹¹¹ David Hopmann et al., "Party Media Agenda-Setting: How Parties Influence Election News Coverage," *Party Politics* 18, no. 2 (2012): 183-186.

system and only benefitting the wealthiest in society.¹¹² It should be noted that income inequality did rise relatively sharply from 2004-2006, by almost 1.5 points on the Gini index for disposable income according to the SWIID.¹¹³ However, growth in the Danish economy was faltering before the 2008 global recession which slowed down the growth of income inequality in 2007,¹¹⁴ preventing it from becoming a major political issue in the 2007 election. The other key issue was the treatment of children in asylum camps, following the right-wing bloc's passing of restrictive immigration policies throughout its six-years in government.¹¹⁵ However, the libertarian-authoritarian value dimension was still quite relevant, as a new party, the New Alliance, was formed with the explicit goal of replacing DPP as the support party for the Liberal-Conservative government due to their extreme positions on the value dimension.¹¹⁶

The 2007 election was won again by the Liberal-Conservative bloc, and the government was formed by Liberals and Conservatives with DPP again serving as a support party.¹¹⁷ The Liberal party lost 2.8% of their vote share but retained control of the government, which they viewed as a success.¹¹⁸ DPP and Conservatives each made small gains, securing 13.9% and 10.4% of the vote, and their ability to not lose seats to centrist parties targeting them was key in ensuring right-wing bloc control.¹¹⁹ The Social Democrats secured only 25.5% of the vote, their worst performance since 1906, and the Social Liberals lost half of their vote share, having doubled it in 2005.¹²⁰ SPP was perhaps the biggest winner, doubling their vote share from 6% to 13% as a result of mobilization around their leader Villy Søvndal and positioning themselves

¹¹² Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2007 Danish General Election," 1043.

¹¹³ Solt, "Measuring Income Inequality."

¹¹⁴ Stubager, "The Parliamentary Election," 361.

¹¹⁵ Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2007 Danish General Election," 1043.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 1044 – 1046.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

farther to the left of the Social Democrats on economic issues.¹²¹ The New Alliance finished with 2.8% of the vote, a respectable amount for a new party but an underperformance when considering they lost over half of the support they had in polls early in their campaign.¹²² This election can be seen as a victory for the right-wing bloc and entrenchment of Liberal-Conservative power, given their victory as an incumbent despite legitimate concerns about their management of the economy brought up by left-wing parties.

The 2007 election was notable for its high turnout of 86.59%, an increase from 2005 and the second highest turnout since 1988.¹²³ Voters were mobilized on economic and value issues by multiple parties, and media predictions of a very close election led to high turnout at the polls. It should be noted that this election was relatively volatile, however this volatility is mostly a result of the introduction of a new party, the New Alliance, and SPP's overperformance which shifted votes away from the Social Democrats and Social Liberals. This volatility is notable given that Denmark has relatively stable party allegiance as a result of historical class divisions and more recently clear issue stances.¹²⁴ Studies have shown that about 2/3 of the Danish public know what party they will vote for before the election, with only 1/3 deciding as a result of the campaign; these numbers are significant because other Western democracies have seen large increases in the proportion of voters that switch parties and decide late during elections.¹²⁵

2011

The 2011 election was different from the prior three elections because the Social Democrats bloc won the election and economic issues were more important than immigration

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

¹²⁴ Hopmann et al., "Effects of Election News Coverage," 394.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

and the related libertarian-authoritarian value dimension.¹²⁶ The election had a very long run up before it was called for August 26, 2011, just 2 months before it was constitutionally required.¹²⁷ The Liberal-Conservative government was struggling in the polls as a result of economic issues from the 2008 global recession, particularly a growing government deficit and rising unemployment.¹²⁸ There was also a perception that the government had been governing in a majoritarian fashion instead of the Danish norm of consensus building, especially after a 2011 bill to cut early retirement passed by a narrow majority, supported only by the government and DPP, who supported the measure in exchange for tighter border controls.¹²⁹

In the lead up to the election the Liberal coalition argued that economic issues were a result of the global crisis and the Liberal-Conservatives were best equipped to manage the economy given their perceived ownership of economic and market issues¹³⁰ and the fact that Denmark's economy was still performing better than most European nations.¹³¹ SPP aligned with the Social Democrats by moving towards the center on economic issues to present an unified opposition against the government; however, this move backfired as SPP lost support to the Red-Green Alliance and did not pick up votes from center-right voters after compromising on their left-wing economic policies that helped them achieve success in the 2007 election.¹³² Furthermore, the Social Democrats campaigned positively, focusing on their welfare reform plans instead of attacking the Liberal-Conservative government for the handling of the economic crises and cuts to welfare, which led to intense focus on their proposed funding of the welfare

¹²⁶ Hutcheson, "The 2011 Election," 339.

¹²⁷ Karina Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election: A Very New Government," *West European Politics* 35, no. 2 (2012): 417-418.

¹²⁸ Stubager, "The Parliamentary Election," 861.

¹²⁹ Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election," 416.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹³¹ Hutcheson, "The 2011 Election," 341.

¹³² *Ibid.*

state instead of focus on the record of Liberal-Conservatives.¹³³ This election also focused on immigration, education, and health care, but these issues did not receive as much attention as they typically would due to the global economic crisis.¹³⁴ The political parties and Danish media's focus on issues and policy was successful in educating the public, with studies showing that political knowledge increased for the Danish public and gaps in political knowledge before the election decreased throughout the campaign.¹³⁵

While the Social Democrat bloc won the election, they still underperformed pre-election results and ended up with a narrow 50.2% majority in parliament.¹³⁶ The Social Democrats ended up with 24.4% of the vote, losing .7% of their vote share from 2007 in another historically low performance for the party.¹³⁷ The Social Liberals and Red-Green Alliance each gained vote shares of about 4.5% by picking up votes from the red bloc.¹³⁸ SPP had the worst performance of the red bloc, losing 3.8% of their vote share, largely as a result of their issue convergence to Social Democrat positions.¹³⁹ The big loser on the right-wing was the Conservative Party, who lost 5.5% of their vote share as a result of tumultuous leadership changes within the party, leading their voters to defect to the Liberals and Liberal Alliance, which replaced the New Alliance from 2007.¹⁴⁰ The Liberals and DPP each performed well despite losing their hold on government: the Liberals gained .5% of the vote share and the Danish People's Party only lost 1.5%.¹⁴¹ This was the first time DPP lost votes since their inception, which was particularly impressive given that at the start of the century they transitioned from a non-relevant, blackmail

¹³³ Stubager, "The Parliamentary Election," 862.

¹³⁴ Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election," 418.

¹³⁵ Hansen and Pederson, "Negative Campaigning in a Multiparty System," 312-313.

¹³⁶ Hutcheson, "The 2011 Election," 340-342

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹³⁸ Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election;" 419-421

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 417-421.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 416, 421.

¹⁴¹ Hutcheson, "The 2011 Election," 343.

potential to coalition party while solidifying their base and maintaining their populist appeal via nationalism and anti-immigration positions.¹⁴²

This 2011 election was notable for having the highest turnout since 1981, 87.74%.¹⁴³ Voters were clearly motivated by economic issues and grievances and voted to change government to a left-wing bloc that would prioritize the welfare state. However, poor performance by SPP and the overall bloc led the Social Democrats to align closely with the Social Liberals for coalition building, a move that would prevent the Social Democrats from embracing left-wing economics due to the Social Liberals' centrist, market-focused economic policies.¹⁴⁴ The left-wing bloc was united on the value dimension, but the lack of unity regarding economic policy prevented this election, and subsequent government, from implementing a left-wing economic vision rooted in the grievances of economic inequality. It is also notable that volatility dropped from 2007, back closer to the average range for Denmark, as most party switching was the result of different emphases in policy positions.¹⁴⁵

2015

The 2015 election was notable for the return to power of center-right government as well as the continued decline of the old parties, the Liberals, Conservatives, Social Liberals, Social Democrats, and SPP, with only the Social Democrats increasing their vote shares.¹⁴⁶ The Social Democrats, who ran on an ambitious policy program in 2011, were unable to fulfill their campaign promises during their time in office and delayed the election until summer 2015 due to low opinion polling.¹⁴⁷ Still, the economy was performing much better than in 2011 with

¹⁴² Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election," 421.

¹⁴³ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

¹⁴⁴ Kosiara-Pedersen, "The 2011 Danish Parliamentary Election," 422.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Karina Kosiara-Pedersen, "Tremors, No Earthquake: The 2015 Danish Parliamentary Election," *West European Politics* 39, no. 4 (2016): 870.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

increasing growth leading to a near 1 point rise in the Gini index for disposable income from 2013-2015.¹⁴⁸ The election was contested with the same left and right bloc structure as the prior elections.

The key issues in 2015 were the economy (particularly unemployment), immigration, education, and health care.¹⁴⁹ The Social Democrats argued they had stewarded the economy well and challenged the Liberal's traditional ownership of this issue.¹⁵⁰ However, as has been the trend this century, increasing Presidentialism led to a focus on the two Prime Minister candidates, something that was harmful to the Liberals due to the personal scandals of Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the Liberal Prime Minister from 2009-2011 and candidate for Prime Minister in 2015.¹⁵¹

The 2015 election ended with the Liberal party forming a minority government supported by a broad coalition. They were unable to form a right-wing bloc of Liberal-Conservatives supported by DPP, due to another dire performance from the Conservatives who won only 3.4% of the vote share. The Liberals also lost 7.2% of their vote share, falling to 19.5% due to the scandals embroiling their prime minister candidate, as DPP, Social Democrats, and SPP picked up their votes.¹⁵² The Social Democrats performed well, despite losing control of the government, and gained 1.5% of the vote share to become the biggest party in parliament but their gains mostly came from SPP, Social Liberals, and Liberals. However, the real winners were on the extremes in the 2015 election. The DPP responded to their first ever electoral setback in 2011, by winning 21.1%, an increase of 8.8%, making them the second largest party in

¹⁴⁸ Solt, "Measuring Income Inequality," 1183-1199.

¹⁴⁹ Kosiara-Pedersen, "Tremors, No Earthquake," 872.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 872-873.

¹⁵² Ibid., 872-874.

parliament and the largest right-wing party.¹⁵³ DPP refocused upon value issues following the 2011 election, including anti-immigration, anti-EU, and nationalism, while maintaining a centrist position on economic voters which allowed them to appeal to Liberals and father-right voters on the value dimension.¹⁵⁴ The Red-Green Alliance and Liberal Alliance, which each represent left- and right-wing poles on the economic policy dimension, each experienced small gains of 1.1% and 2.5% respectively. It should be noted that the big loser was the Social Liberals, who lost 4.9% of their vote share, as their message of centrist economic positions and left-wing value positions failed to resonate with the electorate.¹⁵⁵

This election experienced a slight decrease in turnout from the past two years, finishing at 85.89%.¹⁵⁶ The electorate was still motivated by the issues and positions represented by political parties, but failures by the Liberals, SPP, and Social Liberals, may have contributed to the decrease in turnout. This election is notable for its high volatility, as it was the most volatile election in Denmark since the landmark ‘landslide’ election of 1973.¹⁵⁷ While it is still far from the volatility of the 1973 election, in which five new parties were elected to parliament, the gains on the political extremes and pattern of rising volatility during this time period show that political stability in Denmark may be waning slightly. Also, relevant is a slight decline in trust of politicians from the Danish electorate, which has occurred since the 1990s through this period.¹⁵⁸

Discussion and Conclusion

The parliamentary elections of 2005-2015, paint a slightly foggy picture of the full effects of economic inequality. Turnout has not dropped significantly in this period, as it has in other

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database.

¹⁵⁷ Kosiara-Pedersen, “Tremors, No Earthquake,” 872.

¹⁵⁸ Stubager, “The Parliamentary Election,” 863.

Western democracies, and despite increases in volatility Denmark is still notable for a relatively stable electorate in comparison with other Western democracies. In the only election in which economic issues were predominant, 2011, the Social Democrats won and formed the government, but promptly lost control in the following election. Throughout this period the campaigns are notable for predominantly-issue focused politics, with some increasing presidentialism, but overall, the media and parties do a good job ensuring policy is the focus and campaigns are educational. Political contests are grounded in a Danish political culture that emphasizes the duty to vote, and politics based on consensus that incentivizes cooperation and compromise among parties. There are no grievances about a lack of issue representation from the public, and the creation of new parties is a result of new value-related issues instead of economic issues not being represented by parties. Furthermore, there is no evidence that voting inequities are fueled by resources; Denmark's strong culture of voting in-person, option of early voting, and short campaigns ensure the populace is well-educated and generally able to participate in democracy without resource-based obstacles to participation. Ultimately, the theory of political engagement that best encapsulates the elections of 2005-2015 is conflict theory. While the issues being contested are not always economic, voters still organize according to their preferences and turn out in large numbers at the polls to ensure their policy preferences and issue prioritization is reflected in the government.

There are also several unique characteristics of Danish politics that prevent economic inequality from seriously affecting politics. The universal welfare state, which has broad public support, and high tax and transfer policies ensure a relatively high standard of living for most citizens. Furthermore, the predominance of the welfare state in politics has led to the right-wing parties converging on left-wing positions regarding welfare, which has prevented the full

implementation of anti-welfare policies and big changes to tax policies, except for tax breaks passed by the Liberal-Conservative governments. Finally, the creation of a new political dimension, the value dimension ranging from libertarian – authoritarian, and the aggressive positions of DPP, has changed the nature of Danish politics and increased the emphasis on non-economic issues which prevents economic inequality from damaging political participation. Ultimately the Danish case shows that in a system with average growth in economic inequality, political culture and specific characteristics of the universal welfare state in democracies ensure that economic inequality has not drastically negatively affected political participation, and the conflict theory of political engagement holds the most explanatory value in understanding how Danish voters mobilize.

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