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How Elections Are Won

A comparative analysis of centre-left successes in Europe and North America

Dr. Fabio Ellger and Prof. Sebastian U. Bukow



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How Elections Are Won: A comparative analysis of centre-left successes in Europe and North America

Dr. Fabio Ellger and Prof. Sebastian U. Bukow

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Foreword

Those who want to shape the course of a democracy need political majorities. Yet for the centre-left spectrum, they are currently difficult to achieve. Populist discourse, authoritarian tendencies, the rise of autocrats: Liberal democracies in Europe and North America are under pressure from both within and beyond their borders. Public sentiment is being stoked from the political fringes, which are increasingly shaping the political centre as well, thereby strengthening the influence of anti-democratic forces. As a green political foundation, we are grappling with the following question: How can centre-left parties and alliances win elections in times of affective polarisation and geopolitical challenges?

This paper examines seven case studies, spanning two continents and three levels of government: national, state and local. As varied as the cases in Europe and North America may be, typical patterns are strikingly apparent: It is not radical demands but rather concrete, well-defined policy proposals and credible candidates that can win over people. To this end, campaigns must appeal across all social milieus in order to reach people who do not belong to the core electorate. It is clear from the various contexts that successful centre-left candidates have unequivocally condemned attacks on democratic rules and institutions. Past campaigns have generally focused less on debates and conflicts relating to identity politics than on economic and social policy issues affecting everyday life.

This study does not examine how it is possible to govern successfully and bring about change following elections, or which coalitions could enable this. Instead, the authors focus deliberately on the period leading up to an election as a central element of a democracy founded on freedom and the rule of law. This journey is both challenging and exciting. With this in mind, we wish you, dear readers, an enlightening read. Our special thanks go to Dr. Fabio Ellger and Prof. Sebastian U. Bukow for planning and carrying out this study.

Berlin, July 2026

Jan Philipp Albrecht
President of the
Heinrich Böll Foundation

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Executive summary

Democracy means government for a limited term. This applies to elected politicians, yet democracy itself also appears increasingly constrained. The number of democracies is declining, as is their quality, and liberal democracies are losing ground and regressing into so-called electoral democracies, in which key pillars such as equal rights, the separation of powers, the system of checks and balances, and the rule of law are being eroded. In elections, democratic parties and candidates need to stand their ground against rising populist, extremist and anti-democratic forces in order to defend or restore democracy. At the same time, multiple crises and growing affective polarisation have significantly altered political competition across the democratic spectrum – that is, between democrats from the left to the right.

Against this background, the study examines how parties and candidates from the centre-left spectrum can win elections. The analysis covers seven case studies of recent elections held in established liberal democracies in Europe and North America. It analyses strategic and communication approaches at the national, state and local levels. Despite political, institutional and socio-economic differences, common patterns become evident: Many successful centre-left candidates not only set themselves apart from their political rivals but also represented personnel and policy renewal within their own parties.

This renewal was often linked to key political issues that addressed the needs of broad sections of the electorate beyond the core left-wing base. “Affordability” – that is, the ability to meet rising living, energy and housing costs – was a key issue in almost all election campaigns. Candidates who put forward concrete proposals to solve these pressing problems were rewarded by the electorate. In some cases, the candidates even called their own party's established principles into question.

Successful centre-left candidates have remained true to the values of liberal democracy. Attacks on democratic rules and institutions by autocrats were clearly identified and criticised. Commitments to liberal democracy were neither abandoned nor watered down for tactical reasons; debates on identity politics were generally avoided or at least not actively initiated. Economic and social policy issues remained at the heart of the campaigns.

The study focuses exclusively on the path to electoral victory. No research was carried out into whether this resulted in successful government action. The study clearly shows that the centre-left can win elections even in challenging times.

1 Democracies under pressure

Democracies worldwide have come under pressure. Liberal-democratic achievements are in decline, with autocratisation becoming the prevailing pattern in contemporary political developments – a phenomenon summed up in democracy research as the "third wave of autocratisation" (Bermeo 2016; Waldner/Lust 2018). This trend is measured using a wide range of policy indicators and dimensions (Boese et al. 2021; Lührmann/Lindberg 2019). Two aspects are particularly striking: First, although this trend began in the early 2000s, it has intensified in recent years, exacerbated by multiple crises; second, this wave is typically characterised by a decline in the objectively measurable levels of democracy in countries that are, or were, considered to be consolidated democracies. These include European Union (EU) member states such as Poland, Italy and Hungary, as well as India and the United States. Rights that were believed to be firmly enshrined in liberal democracy – especially equality, the separation of powers, a system of checks and balances, and the rule of law – are coming under pressure and being actively undermined. This trend jeopardises the democratic gains of recent decades. From an empirical perspective, the quality of liberal democracy is declining, in some cases towards electoral autocracy. From a socio-political perspective, the premise of classical modernisation theory – that liberal-democratic rights achieved through social development are irreversible and that democratic quality generally improves – is no longer tenable (Lipset 1959; Fukuyama 1989). Two key drivers can be identified here: One lies within the states themselves, while the other stems from changes in the global context.

The enemy within

In Europe and North America, the greatest threat to democracy comes from within. Empirical democracy research shows that most democracies end because of erosion from within. In this sense, the Weimar Reichstag's self-disempowerment through the passage of the Enabling Act in the wake of the National Socialists' seizure of power in 1933 is a prime example of the internal erosion of a democracy.

Thus, this is by no means a new phenomenon but is nonetheless key to understanding the current challenges to liberal democracy. In their 2019 book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argued that this form of internal erosion is once again taking place within democracies today.

Their book covers internal democratic backsliding in countries such as Venezuela, Russia, Turkey and, until recently, Hungary[1] (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2019). Current developments in the United States are also particularly dramatic. Here, too, signs of institutional self-disempowerment can be observed, as both chambers of Congress have largely relinquished their constitutional powers and are thus contributing to an executive that is seizing power, although resistance from the judiciary and civil society has not yet been extinguished.

As described by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019), it is now less common for power-hungry military generals or communist cadres to abolish democracies by force of arms or through a revolution. Instead, new authoritarian and populist actors establish themselves within the democratic system, deliberately intensifying affective polarisation, undermining trust in the system and its established actors, and gradually gaining power. As soon as they gain political power, they undermine democratic norms such as the acceptance of electoral defeat. They attack political institutions, for example by playing what is known as "constitutional hardball". In doing so, they are testing the legal limits of what is permissible under the law. Formally speaking, they do not always clearly breach the rules of the constitution. Instead, they undermine its democratic spirit by, for example, weakening the independence of the judiciary or hollowing out political control mechanisms. Authoritarian forces within democracies undermine the independence of public service and independent media, as well as the rule of law, and curtail civil liberties in order to systematically distort political competition in their favour. The policies of the new authoritarians within established democracies are characterised by executive self-empowerment, the informal erosion of norms and targeted attacks on independent institutions.

Compounding this is the fact that militant democracies sometimes have difficulties defending their institutions. This is particularly the case when key positions, for example in parliamentary leadership positions, constitutional courts or state oversight bodies, are occupied by supporters of the autocrats (Bermeo 2016). The institutions often continue to exist formally but no longer exercise their rights effectively and may even help to secure executive power.

1 The Hungarian parliamentary election held on 12 April 2026 shows that these developments are by no means irreversible. Following Péter Magyar's election victory, there is now an opportunity to restore democracy and the rule of law in the country.

The enemy outside

The dismantling of liberal democracies does not take place in a vacuum. That is, it is not driven purely by domestic forces. It is also shaped by external factors: on the one hand, by the global climate in the wake of the wave of authoritarianism and, on the other hand, by the targeted actions of other states. When the foreign policy of autocratic third countries deliberately erodes the political norms and institutions of liberal democracies, this can undermine their stability and ability to function. These foreign policy measures include both traditional power politics and so-called hybrid attacks. Anti-democratic action takes the form of the deliberate manipulation of media and social discourse by means of disinformation and propaganda, as well as through covert or overt support for authoritarian actors.

These developments are underpinned by a shift in foreign policy: Established democracies are increasingly being explicitly declared as enemies or systemic rivals by autocracies and autocratic actors in backsliding democracies. The notion of democracy as a political enemy (rather than a systemic competitor), which was at times thought to have been overcome, has regained a foothold in international authoritarian politics. As a result, in the 21st century, anti-democratic actors in other countries are taking a much more assertive foreign policy stance towards liberal-democratic systems. In particular, developments in the foreign policies of three major powers – Russia, China and the United States – are presenting liberal democracies with new challenges.

Russia. By launching a war against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has destroyed the European peace order. In the context of this conflict, Russia's threshold for hostile action against Germany has fallen since 2022 (BfV 2025), while hybrid attacks on European democracies are also on the rise. Examples include acts of sabotage against critical infrastructure, including a bomb attack on a railway line in Poland, border provocations such as armed border crossings into Estonia and systematic disinformation. Furthermore, Russian operations are increasingly targeting democratic institutions themselves through deliberate election interference. According to a US intelligence report from 2022, Putin's regime has spent around $300 million on election interference since 2014; however, as it is difficult to obtain accurate figures, the actual sum is likely to be even higher (The Washington Post 2022).

China. From a global perspective, communist China – as a de facto one-party state with an authoritarian regime structure – has adopted an increasingly assertive stance towards regional and international competitors. In response to the escalating trade war with the United States, reflecting growing self-confidence, the regime in Beijing has secured access to key supply chains, from batteries and electronic control units to rare earth elements, and uses this leverage as an instrument of power against Germany and other European democracies (Reuters 2025a).

United States. Under Donald Trump's second administration, the United States is also displaying significantly stronger authoritarian tendencies in its foreign policy. The ideological and administrative framework for this is "Project 2025", developed by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation (Dans/Groves 2023), which envisages extensive centralisation of executive power, political control over independent authorities and a systematic restructuring of the federal republic (The Atlantic 2025). This logic is already reflected in domestic policy under President Trump and his administration, but it is not confined to domestic policy. For example, at the Munich Security Conference in 2025, Vice President JD Vance openly questioned the democratic legitimacy of European states and criticised the alleged censorship and suppression of far-right voices (The Guardian 2025a). This is compounded by threats in the field of foreign policy, as the US government and actors close to it cast doubt on Danish as well as Canadian sovereignty, interfere in European elections and actively support anti-democratic and anti-European forces. It is precisely this case – in which a previously well-established liberal democracy has not only been significantly eroded internally (Nord et al. 2026) but is also acting openly aggressively towards democratic allies – that is putting pressure on established democracies in Europe.

New challenges for the centre-left

This twofold development – the electoral success of anti-democratic forces at home and extensive external pressure – is fundamentally altering political competition within democracies. While political competition in stable, established democracies essentially takes place between pro-democratic parties and their candidates, this competition within the democratic spectrum is now being supplemented by a second dimension: Pro-democratic forces must now compete with anti-democratic forces over the democratic order itself.

Competition within the democratic party landscape, coupled with pro-democratic unity in the struggle against anti-democratic forces, is fundamentally altering the nature of political competition. It presents all democratic parties with a shared, existential challenge: At a time marked by potential social divisions, aggressive anti-establishment mobilisation and ethno-nationalist identity politics, democratic parties have to hold their ground while combining competition among themselves with a united front against opponents of the system. They must do so at a time when, among other things, stagnant economic growth and the need to reform social security systems, coupled with job insecurity caused by the next wave of the digital revolution, alongside wealth inequality and the rising cost of living, are undermining confidence in democracy's ability to deliver meaningful results for large sections of society.

Although all established parties are feeling the pressure of democratic erosion and competition from authoritarian and populist forces, the strategic situations facing centre-left and centre-right parties differ considerably. Established centre-left parties, particularly social democratic parties, are losing some of their former voters to right-wing and far-right parties. The centre-left and the (far) right are each other's principal ideological opponents, particularly in terms of policy, worldview and identity politics. The (far) right and the centre-right are, to some extent, vying for the same electorate; they are each other's principal electoral rivals. However, established centre-right parties are bearing the brunt of the growing electoral success of right-wing populist parties.

While the battle for voters is primarily being fought between the centre-right and the right, centre-left parties – given their policy focus and progressive socio-political profile – tend to be the main ideological opponents of right-wing authoritarian parties. This also means that substantive points of conflict with the established conservatives are becoming more relevant again, as the centre-right adopts issues from the far right, thereby coming into conflict with the centre-left.

Furthermore, the centre-left often has to operate under very different competitive conditions at the national and local urban levels, as competition in urban centres often develops between the centre-left and the far left, whereas at the national level it tends to develop between the centre-left and the centre-right.

This study focuses explicitly on the strategic positioning of centre-left actors that has led to electoral success.[2] Conceptually, this study uses the term "centre-left" to encompass various political currents in European and North American countries: The spectrum ranges from socialist and social-democratic parties to the Greens, as well as social-liberal and left-liberal forces. In general, in relation to the two central axes of political competition – economic versus distributional policy and social liberalism versus traditional-authoritarian nationalism – these forces are generally more welfare-state-oriented and socially progressive.

This is a deliberately simplified approach to the wider debate on the axes of conflict in political competition. As such, it accepts that not all characteristics are equally influential in every political context, for example the importance of progressive policies in the sense of socio-political modernisation.

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2 This approach reflects political practice and the widely accepted tendency to understand political competition along a left–right spectrum. It therefore corresponds closely to how voters perceive electoral choices. At the same time, the focus on centre-left forces deliberately distinguishes them from other established democratic camps, including conservatives and market liberals. These pro-democracy actors must also respond to the new challenges posed by the erosion of democracy. However, due to their differing political preferences, they are not the subject of this analysis.

The centre-left candidates discussed below face several specific strategic challenges: they must combine their promise to preserve welfare-state security and equity with social change and an ecological and economic transformation. This is taking place in a context in which authoritarian forces portray this modernisation as a threat to identity and way of life and exploit people's fears of social decline. Against this background, centre-left actors are competing for political majorities within an increasingly complex landscape. On the one hand, they continue to compete with conservative and market-liberal parties within the democratic spectrum; on the other hand, they must also join forces with them to defend democracy and its integrity against authoritarian challengers.

2 Research question and study design

With these challenges in view, this study focuses on a phase of democratic competition that is as crucial as it is difficult: election campaigns conducted by centre-left parties and candidates in times of polarisation and authoritarian tendencies. The frequently observable strengthening of fringe parties, and right-wing parties in particular, makes electoral successes for the centre-left appear more difficult, but they are not impossible. The guiding research question of this study is therefore: How can parties in the centre-left spectrum win elections under conditions of affective polarisation and autocratisation?

The aim of the study is to identify patterns of successful strategies by drawing on seven recent case studies across the national, state and local levels. It focuses on the campaign, the candidates and the moment of electoral success. This temporal focus is important, as the study examines centre-left parties winning democratic majorities, but it does not address subsequent issues such as coalition-building or performance in office. The study considers only the candidates standing for election, the political context and any key strategic factors that made victory possible. The study focuses on the democratic foundations of centre-left politics, namely how an electoral majority was achieved in competition with other democratic and anti-democratic forces.

To this end, seven cases in Europe and North America are examined in which centre-left candidates have recently secured majorities in democratic elections. Using case studies at the national, state and local levels, the paper examines which candidates and issues gained the upper hand in increasingly polarised election campaigns. At the national level, the study analyses the electoral successes of the Labour Party under Keir Starmer in the UK general election, of the social-liberal party D66 under Rob Jetten in the Dutch general election and of the Liberals under Mark Carney in Canada. At the state level, the study analyses the electoral successes of the Democrats in Virginia under Abigail Spanberger and of the Greens in Baden-Württemberg under Cem Özdemir. The local level is illustrated by the electoral successes of Sisse Marie Welling of the green-left Socialist People's Party in Copenhagen's mayoral elections and of the Democrat Zohran Mamdani in New York City.

In order to derive generalisable insights from these different political contexts and arenas, the comparative analysis is carried out on the basis of predefined criteria.

The aim is to go beyond a mere case-by-case analysis and identify common patterns as well as key strategic differences linked to the election victory. Depending on the case, the election victory under scrutiny was achieved either

against right-wing populist and authoritarian opponents or against established democratic rivals from the conservative or social-democratic political spectrum.

Each case study follows a set structure: First, the individuals and issues are analysed, focusing on candidate profiles and their key political messages. Their main political rivals are then examined in order to understand the political contest at the heart of the election. The next section examines the social climate and political context to put the specific local issues and challenges into perspective. Finally, the election result is analysed: The main focus is on changes in voter turnout, patterns of mobilisation and the composition of the political and social coalition that made the victory possible. The study concludes with a comprehensive comparative summary that brings the cases together and draws key strategic conclusions.

3 Centre-left electoral successes: Case studies



United Kingdom

General election held on 4 July 2024

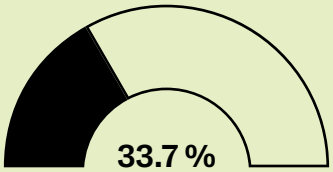
Voter turnout

59.7 %

–7.6 percentage points
(for 2019)

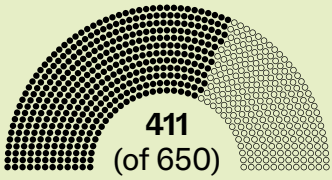
Election winner: Keir Starmer, Labour Party

Percentage of the vote



+1.6 percentage points

Seats in parliament



+209 seats

9,708,716 votes

–560,335 votes

Incumbent: no

Governing party: no

After 14 years in opposition, Labour won on a platform of “change” and dependability. The main topics were the economy, healthcare and the cost of living. Because of the electoral system, there is a large discrepancy between the share of the vote and the share of seats.

Electoral system

First-past-the-post in 650 single-member constituencies. Whoever receives the most votes in the constituency wins the seat. Even small shifts in the share of the vote can lead to significant changes in the number of seats.

2024 UK general election: *“It's time to change Britain”*

Individuals and issues

Keir Starmer stood as the lead candidate for the social-democratic Labour Party in the 2024 UK general election. He had taken over the party leadership from Jeremy Corbyn in 2020 and had since visibly shifted the party towards the political centre, both in terms of policy and rhetoric. This centrist approach was underpinned biographically by his career as a barrister and former head of the Crown Prosecution Service. This lent him an air of professionalism and competence during the election campaign but also reinforced his image as a rather staid technocrat. However, this effect was also part of a calculated strategy: After years of internal conflict and severe polarisation within the party under his predecessor, Starmer relied on the sharp contrast between professionalism and chaos. He criticised the incumbent Conservative government in a speech that was deliberately matter-of-fact and statesmanlike (POLITICO 2022).

In terms of substance, Labour brought its offer together under the simple guiding concept of “change”, which referred not only to the party itself but to the country as a whole. The election was consistently framed as a necessary change after 14 years of Conservative rule. Starmer avoided staging a grand ideological narrative, opting instead for a range of concrete, everyday promises: Above all, Starmer emphasised the importance of economic stability, making economic growth the central guiding principle of the campaign. In doing so, he sought to re-establish Labour's image – after the more radical Corbyn years – as a party that stood for economic security with slogans such as “safe for business” and “safe for families”. Another key focus was reforming the ailing state healthcare system, the National Health Service (NHS), with a particular promise to reduce excessively long waiting times for doctors' appointments. These initiatives were part of Labour's concept of “mission-driven government”. Starmer thus pledged to align the government's

actions with clear and measurable priorities in order to restore the effectiveness and capacity of the state to act.

One of Starmer's key policy proposals was a stronger state-led industrial policy in sectors that had been particularly hard hit by previous privatisations. The launch of “Great British Energy”, a publicly owned company dedicated to clean and affordable energy, was designed to counteract rising energy prices. This policy was accompanied by the aim of returning rail transport to public ownership

under the umbrella of the "Great British Railways", through which Labour sought rhetorically to evoke a period of British prosperity before the Thatcher era. Other planned projects included improved working standards and the expansion of free breakfast provision in primary schools. Starmer's key message was to put Labour back "in the service of working people", which was specifically aimed at addressing the material hardships faced by working- and middle-class households. This also included a tougher stance on migration, such as stricter border management and the creation of a new border protection unit.

It is also worth noting which topics Starmer deliberately avoided: He steered clear of his predecessor's radical socialist agenda, as well as a renewed debate on Brexit. Instead, Labour sought a pragmatic fresh start in relations with the EU, without calling for a full return to the single market or the Customs Union. He also acted cautiously on topics with the potential to cause division. For example, he promised that the originally planned £28 billion investment in environmental projects would be significantly reduced.

Political rivals

The main political opponent of the Labour Party and Keir Starmer were Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the Conservative Party, which, after 14 years in power, had clearly adopted a defensive stance. Sunak's campaign relied heavily on traditional Conservative priorities such as lower taxes and reduced immigration. By heavily personalising the "Sunak versus Starmer" contest, the Conservative government sought to portray Starmer as a risky experiment and present Sunak himself as a guarantor of stability. This strategy was accompanied by Sunak's election pledges, which specifically focused on taking a hard line on political issues and providing economic relief in order to retain the support of right-wing voters, who were increasingly turning to the nationalist party Reform UK. However, given the Tories' long period in government, these promises of change seemed rather implausible.

It was striking that the election campaign had turned into something of an "unpopularity contest". Polls showed that both Sunak and Starmer received poor ratings on personal attributes, with some ratings even lower than those of their respective parties (The Economist 2024b). The emphasis on the unpopularity of their respective opponents gave both campaigns a highly personalised character. For Labour, this situation proved to be manageable: Starmer did not necessarily have to generate enthusiasm; it was enough simply to be less unpopular than Sunak. This enabled Labour to consistently frame the election as a referendum on the Conservatives' widely criticised record on the economy, healthcare and the cost of living.

In addition, the Conservative incumbent, Sunak, was coming under pressure from the right from Reform UK. As a result of this competition, the

Conservatives often felt compelled to focus their campaign more heavily on cultural issues and to adopt an even harsher stance on migration. Labour, on the other hand, made a conscious effort not to be drawn into this arena. Labour's emphasis on political reliability provided a crucial counterbalance to the seemingly unstable governance of the Tories.

Social climate and context

The social climate in the run-up to the 2024 UK general election was largely characterised by widespread fatigue after 14 years of Conservative government. When Prime Minister Rishi Sunak unexpectedly called early elections for 4 July on 22 May 2024, the Conservative Party – following a series of turbulent leadership changes from Boris Johnson to Liz Truss and then Sunak himself – had reached the end of a long period of government, in both personnel and policy terms. In this context, the election was less about granting a new policy mandate and more about settling the score for years of economic stagnation following Brexit and the pandemic, as well as repeated U-turns by Conservative governments. The fact that the election was held under new constituency boundaries reinforced the impression of a historic turning point and forced the parties to realign their strategies within a highly competitive first-past-the-post system.

In people's everyday lives, existential concerns dominated. According to surveys carried out by YouGov (YouGov 2024a), rising living costs, the severe pressures on the NHS and the broader economic downturn were the key factors influencing voters' decisions. While issues such as migration and asylum primarily mobilised broader right-leaning parts of the electorate, environmental issues played a significant role only among left-wing voter groups. A key strategic advantage for Keir Starmer was that, after their long period in government, the Conservatives were considered to have largely lost the competence attributed to them in their core policy areas, particularly in the field of economic policy.

The change compared with the 2019 election was particularly notable in the context of Brexit, which was no longer a decisive issue in any of the political camps. This defusing of the conflict over British identity gave the Labour Party the necessary leeway to consistently frame the election campaign as a choice about public services and economic security. By framing the election as one about public services and prosperity rather than a conflict over identity politics, Starmer was able to appeal to large sections of the economically disaffected centrist voters, who traditionally tend to support the Conservatives.

Election results

The general election held on 4 July 2024 marked a historic turning point in the British political landscape but was also characterised by a strikingly low turnout. At just 59.7 per cent, voter turnout reached its lowest level since 2001, representing a decline of 7.6 percentage points compared with 2019. This decline in voter turnout was not solely due to the personal unpopularity of the two leading candidates. It also stemmed from the widespread expectation that Labour was certain to win after 14 years of Conservative rule, which meant that the mobilising effect of a close race failed to materialise. A notable feature of this election was the tremendous surge in support for Nigel Farage's national-populist party, Reform UK, which increased its share of the vote by 12.3 percentage points to a total of 14.3 per cent. This upward trend for Reform UK has continued, highlighting that electoral victories and centre-left governments do not automatically resolve long-standing challenges such as polarisation and radicalisation.

The British first-past-the-post electoral system produced an extreme mismatch between voters' preferences and the distribution of seats in parliament. In this election, the discrepancy between the parties' share of the vote and their share of parliamentary seats was the greatest since the late 19th century (The Economist 2024a). Despite a modest increase of 1.6 percentage points in its share of votes, Keir Starmer's Labour Party more than doubled its number of seats, thereby securing a comfortable majority in the House of Commons. In absolute terms, however, Labour mobilised fewer voters than in previous elections. Whereas the Conservatives saw their seat count plummet to 121, the Liberal Democrats achieved their best result since 1923, winning 72 seats. Reform UK entered parliament for the first time as the party with the largest increase in vote share, but won only five seats due to the electoral system.

A detailed analysis of voter shifts highlights the decline of the Conservative Party, which retained just over half of its 2019 voter base, with as many as 25 per cent of its former voters switching to Reform UK. Labour, on the other hand, retained around 71 per cent of its 2019 voter base, but it lost a significant share of its voters to the Greens and the Liberal Democrats (YouGov 2024b). Owing to the discrepancy between Labour's loss of votes and its parliamentary dominance, Starmer's success was widely interpreted by the media as a “hollow victory” – that is, an election win without broad support.

Canada

General election held on 28 April 2025

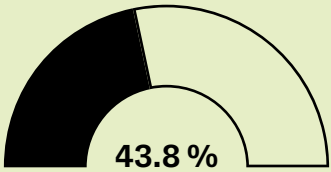
Voter turnout

69.0 %

+6.4 percentage points
(for 2021)

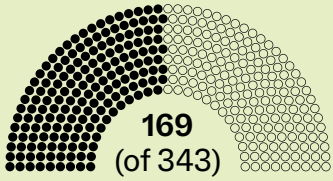
Election winner: Mark Carney, Liberal Party

Percentage of the vote



+11.2 percentage points

Seats in parliament



+9 seats

8,595,488 votes

+3,038,859 votes

Incumbent: no

Governing party: yes

As the ruling party with a new lead candidate, the Liberal Party succeeded in combining renewal with a change of direction. The election campaign was initially dominated by domestic issues and later by the threats to the country posed by the US government.

Electoral system

First-past-the-post voting in 343 single-member constituencies. The candidate who receives the most votes in the constituency wins the seat. Regional concentrations of votes can therefore have a significant impact on the distribution of seats.

2025 Canadian general election: *"Time for experience, not experiments"*

Individuals and issues

In the Canadian general election held on 28 April 2025, the Liberal Party, led by Mark Carney, won with around 44 per cent of the vote, ahead of its main rival, the Conservative Party – led by Pierre Poilievre – which secured around 41 per cent. Within Canada's party system, the Liberal Party is regarded as a centre-left political force and shares common ground with social-liberal, environmental and social-democratic movements. Carney himself was regarded as a level-headed technocrat and political newcomer with a strong background in economic policy. Following the resignation of Justin Trudeau, the long-time leader of the Liberal Party, Carney succeeded him and quickly assumed a leading role in the election campaign.

In general, the Liberals' strategy was characterised by pragmatism and a desire to stay in power. When it became clear that the increasingly unpopular incumbent, Trudeau, stood little chance against his populist challenger from the Conservative Party, Pierre Poilievre, a change of personnel was initiated. In the years leading up to the election, Trudeau had become unpopular largely because substantial sections of the public associated his government with rising living costs and the housing crisis, an unpopular migration policy, strict pandemic measures and a general sense of fatigue after almost a decade in power (BBC 2025). As a strategic move, the Liberals succeeded in credibly replacing their unpopular incumbent, Trudeau, with a more popular candidate before the election, while maintaining party unity and readiness for government. By contrast, the examples of the incumbents Joe Biden in the United States in 2024 and Olaf Scholz in Germany in 2025 illustrate just how detrimental the consequences can be if a party delays a personnel change for too long or fails to make one at all.

In the case of the Canadian Liberals, the change in leadership provided a much-needed signal of renewal and encouraged disillusioned swing voters to give the party another chance. Mark Carney, an economist and former Governor of the Bank of Canada and, subsequently, the Bank of England, was widely regarded as a pragmatist (The Economist 2025b). His ability to convincingly convey that he was not closely associated with the incumbent government was also

important. In fact, prior to his appointment as prime minister, he had never held elected political office.

As a candidate, Carney focused his message squarely on his economic expertise: He portrayed himself as a rational crisis manager capable of responding to the escalating threat of US tariffs and paired this with a deliberately hard-line stance towards Trump (POLITICO 2025c). At the same time, he repeatedly emphasised during the campaign that Canada now needed experience and professionalism, not political experiments, thereby linking his personal profile directly to the central election narrative of stability and the ability to take action (The New York Times 2025a).

In an effort to win back swing voters from the centre, the Liberals' campaign focused on making major shifts in policy direction, deliberately leaving out what had previously been its core issues. A prime example of this attempt to deny the Conservatives an effective line of attack was its defensive stance on climate and energy policy. Although Carney was regarded as a staunch advocate of green investment during his tenure as Governor of the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, he made some painful compromises early on in the election campaign. He avoided making clear commitments on climate policy and instead promised to increase subsidies for fossil fuels in order to boost the economy – a direct concession to Poilievre, who had called for lower energy prices. Carney succeeded, however, in presenting the abandonment of his own green profile as a necessary contribution to national sovereignty and economic independence from the United States (The New York Times 2025a). Similarly, the campaign avoided an aggressive defence of Trudeau's previous, strongly liberal migration policy, which the general public increasingly associated with the housing crisis. By deliberately omitting these highly polarising policy areas, Carney deprived the Conservatives of key sources of voter mobilisation without completely alienating his left-wing base.

Political rivals

The main rival to the ruling Liberal Party was the Conservative Party, which, under Pierre Poilievre's leadership since September 2022, had pursued a significantly tougher and more populist course. In contrast to Trudeau, Poilievre presented himself as an outsider candidate challenging the political establishment, focusing on the housing crisis and cost-of-living pressures, and promising tax cuts, reduced state intervention and the harnessing of Canada's natural resources, such as land, oil and forests, to drive growth. This was accompanied by attacks on public service broadcasting and the announcement of cuts to foreign aid (The New York Times 2025a). For a long time, this agenda made him the clear favourite in the polls against the incumbent, Trudeau.

However, the situation changed after Trump took office on 20 January 2025. The subsequent escalation of the trade dispute and Trump's aggressive challenges to Canadian sovereignty triggered a strong backlash among the Canadian public. Whereas Mark Carney consistently made Trump's threats the focal point of his campaign and aggressively criticised the US president, Poilievre's ideological and stylistic similarities to Trump increasingly became a political liability in the public eye. Poilievre himself was reluctant to distance himself from the Trump administration (The New York Times 2025a).

Social climate and context

The 2025 Canadian election campaign featured at least two clearly distinct phases. In the first phase, while the extremely unpopular incumbent, Trudeau, was still in office, traditional "bread and butter" domestic policy issues dominated: rising living costs, particularly in the areas of housing and energy; a widespread sense of overregulation and loss of control; as well as immigration and public safety (The New York Times 2025a). In this context, the Conservatives, led by Pierre Poilievre, appeared for a long time to be the clear favourites by using populist rhetoric to exploit public discontent and framing the election as a referendum on the status quo.

The second phase began with Trump taking office on 20 January 2025 and the ensuing debates on tariffs, economic vulnerability and national sovereignty. Suddenly, the focus was no longer solely on prices, housing and immigration, but on the question of how Canada should confront Washington. This was precisely where Carney's moderate and pragmatic anti-Trump stance came into its own: He made the threat posed by Trump the central theme of his campaign, thereby combining a message of competence with promises of protection, while Poilievre's perceived closeness to Trump increasingly became a problem (BBC 2025). Scandals played no major role in either phase of the campaign. The decisive factor was the shift in the agenda from domestic political frustration to a kind of "referendum on sovereignty" brought about by external pressure (The Economist 2025b).

Election results

Canada's institutional framework – a first-past-the-post electoral system based on the Westminster model – tends to favour competition between two dominant parties. In this context, the Liberals, led by Mark Carney, emerged as the largest party. They won the largest share of the vote and secured the most seats, but fell short of an absolute majority and therefore had to govern as a minority government. Given that the Conservatives also made significant gains in seats, the result can be interpreted as reflecting strong voter mobilisation on both sides of the political spectrum.

This intensification was reflected in voter turnout that was exceptionally high by Canadian standards. The extreme polarisation and the neck-and-neck race that lasted for weeks led to 69 per cent of eligible voters casting their ballots – the highest level since 1993. Carney benefited enormously from this shift in public opinion. After Trudeau withdrew, the mood changed: The desire for a reckoning with the government gave way to a demand for stability and the protection of national sovereignty vis-à-vis the new US administration (BBC 2025).

However, an analysis of voter demographics reveals a profound shift in the electorate. Mark Carney was particularly successful in constituencies with a high proportion of graduates and among voters born in Canada. However, the Liberals lost support among some migrant communities: In regions with lower levels of education and high proportions of migrants, the Conservatives made gains despite their hard line on immigration (The Economist 2025a). The fact that these groups voted in favour of a restrictive approach to immigration is not a contradiction, but rather confirms the findings of comparative election research. According to recent studies, some established immigrant groups tend to vote conservative when – at a time of politicised migration debates – they want to safeguard their own integration achievements and social status against new competition. This is eroding traditional support for the Canadian Liberals in migrant milieus – a pattern that can be observed among the US Democratic Party and Germany's Social Democratic Party.

In addition to the social structure, religious affiliation and global political issues played a significant role in the political polarisation. According to analyses by the *Economist* (2025a), the debate surrounding the Middle East conflict and the Conservative Party's perceived pro-Israel stance led to further shifts in voter support. Whereas the Liberals performed exceptionally well in secular and predominantly Muslim regions, the Conservatives made significant gains in constituencies with large Jewish populations.

Netherlands

Early general election held on 29 October 2025

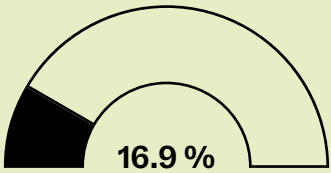
Voter turnout

78.3 %

+0.6 percentage points
(for 2023)

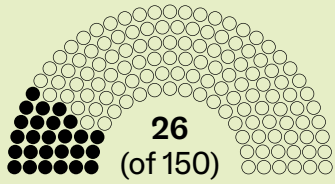
Election winner: Rob Jetten, Democrats 66 (D66)

Percentage of the vote



+10.7 percentage points

Seats in parliament



+17 seats

1,790,634 votes

+1,134,342 votes

Incumbent: no

Governing party: no

With a strong lead candidate, D66 achieved a surprise election victory, propelling the opposition party to the helm of a minority government for the first time. Rather than cultural divisions, Jetten focused on optimism, dependability and pragmatism, combined with a renewal of personnel.

Electoral system

Proportional representation in a nation-wide electoral area. The 150 seats are allocated proportionally according to the share of the vote.

2025 Dutch general election: *“Het kan wél”**

Individuals and issues

In the snap general election on 29 October 2025, Rob Jetten, the 38-year-old lead candidate of the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66), achieved a surprisingly strong result. After the party had trailed in the polls for a long time, Jetten's election campaign relied on optimistic narratives as a counterpoint to the prevailing political cynicism. Under the slogan *“Het kan wél”* (“It can be done”), he presented himself and D66 as pragmatic problem-solvers at a time of institutional stagnation. This message resonated with large sections of the electorate, which, after the failure of the previous government, longed for a state capable of acting and for a positive vision (The Guardian 2025b).

In terms of policy, Jetten made a strategic shift towards the centre. Instead of emphasising traditional identity politics, he shifted the focus to “tough” issues such as the housing crisis and economic security. On migration in particular, D66 chose a more pragmatic course, seeking to combine humanitarian principles with stricter limits and more effective migration management. This also made the party more appealing to some of the disappointed former voters of the previous right-wing coalition government (The Guardian 2025b). The party acknowledged concerns about society being overburdened and called for more controlled immigration, but it drew a sharp distinction between its views and the populist rhetoric of elements within the incumbent right-wing coalition. This strategy enabled Jetten to present himself as a sensible alternative and as someone who solves problems rather than merely managing them. This approach particularly appealed to disillusioned Labour voters and unaffiliated conservative voters.

To build a broad coalition of disillusioned centre-left voters and moderate conservatives, the D66 campaign deliberately avoided issues that had fuelled polarisation in the past. This was most evident in the party's avoidance of left-wing identity politics, with which it had often been associated. Rather than emphasising cultural divisions, the campaign pushed these topics into the background. On migration, for example, Jetten avoided advocating an expansive, European-oriented asylum policy. The party also adopted a more moderate

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* “It can be done”

position on agricultural and environmental policy. Regarding the planned nitrogen-emission targets for farmers – a highly polarising issue among the rural population in the Netherlands – the party advocated greater flexibility, thereby deliberately defusing the issue. By setting aside such potentially divisive positions in favour of a pragmatic agenda, Jetten deliberately sought to deny his political competitors' clear lines of attack and successfully presented D66 as a reliable alternative to the chaos of the previous right-wing government.

Political rivals

D66's main opponent in this election campaign was Geert Wilders and his right-wing populist Party for Freedom (PVV), which had emerged as the strongest party in the 2023 election. In June 2025, however, Wilders had deliberately brought down the PVV-dominated right-wing coalition led by the independent technocrat Dick Schoof as prime minister by making unrealistic demands on asylum policy that the other conservative parties in government did not support. However, Wilders' strategy of once again portraying himself as a principled outsider standing up to the establishment did not pay off this time. Having joined the government, the PVV had lost its outsider status and was now perceived by large sections of the public as a contributor to the growing political instability (Reuters 2025d). To make matters worse, there was a scandal involving AI-generated images, circulated anonymously by two PVV MPs, which defamed their social democratic rival, Frans Timmermans. Another of D66's opponents was the alliance between the Greens and the Social Democrats, consisting of GroenLinks (GL) and the Labour Party (PvdA), led by Frans Timmermans. The alliance attempted to frame the election as a choice between the far-right PVV and the left, but it was unable to capitalise on the public appetite for change. Many voters saw Timmermans as a figure from a bygone era, and he struggled to make an impact on the issues, while D66 took a more modern, pragmatic and less ideologically driven stance on many issues across the centre-left spectrum. Even the party that had once been seen as the centre's great hope – Pieter Omtzigt's "New Social Contract" (NSC) party – had effectively ceased to play any role: Its involvement in the failed Schoof government had left the party marginalised.

Social climate and context

The election took place against a backdrop of deep political disillusionment and institutional uncertainty. The Schoof government's experiment – which lasted just one year and consisted of a government that was led by technocrats and tolerated by the right-wing populists – had undermined confidence in the ability of

parliamentarism to find solutions. The mood in the country was shaped less by ideological fervour than by a desire for "normality" and a functioning administration. Alongside migration, the severe housing shortage was a dominant issue, which affected large sections of the middle class and young people and threatened social cohesion (The Guardian 2025e).

In this context, Wilders' polarising approach tended to put many voters off. Although the anger towards the incumbent "Rutte system" was still prevalent in 2023, it was the fear of ungovernable conditions that dominated in 2025. These concerns were reinforced by a structural feature of the Dutch electoral system: the low electoral threshold encourages a highly fragmented party system, which makes the formation of stable governments challenging (The Guardian 2025e).

Following the disappointing coalition between the major centre-right parties and the radical PVV, the electorate sought political competence within the democratic centre-left spectrum. Parties that promised pragmatic, non-ideologically-driven positions – for example, on the issue of migration – coupled with rhetorical restraint and an emphasis on stability were able to hold their own in that situation.

Election results

The election result on 29 October 2025 led to a significant change in the political landscape in the Netherlands, even though it resulted in a tie for first place. D66 won 26 seats, nearly three times its previous total. It finished level with the right-wing populist PVV, which lost eleven seats and also secured 26 seats. Given the clearly positive trend for D66 and a narrow lead in the popular vote, the result was generally interpreted as a victory for Rob Jetten's party (Reuters 2025c). Voter turnout remained consistently high, underlining continuing interest in the direction of national policy and the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the election. The shifts within the fragmented centre-right camp were also noteworthy. The new centrist party, NSC, founded only in 2023, suffered a dramatic reversal following its electoral success in 2023 and lost all 20 seats it had held. Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), which was established in the 1970s, made a surprisingly strong gain of 13 seats (POLITICO 2025a).

The post-election period confirmed the complexity – typical of the Netherlands – of forming a government in a highly fragmented parliament. After attempts to form a majority coalition failed because the third-largest party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) – long the dominant governing party under Mark Rutte – and the left-wing GL-PvdA alliance blocked each other, D66, the VVD and the CDA did not reach an agreement on a minority government until January 2026. In February 2026, the coalition agreement, "Aan de slag" (Let's get to work), was presented, and D66 leader Rob Jetten was

appointed *"formateur"* – the Dutch term for the future head of government tasked with forming a cabinet. The Netherlands has thus entered a period of minority government at the national level, with the government dependent on shifting parliamentary majorities to pass legislation. It remains to be seen to what extent this centrist government, led by the social-liberal D66, will need to make concessions to actors on the right and left fringes in order to govern effectively.

Virginia

Gubernatorial election held on 4 November 2025

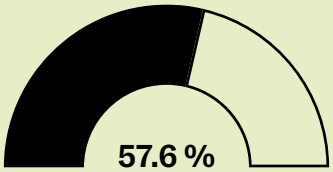
Voter turnout

54.3 %

−0.6 percentage points
(for 2021)

Election winner: Abigail Spanberger, Democratic Party

Percentage of the vote



+8.9 percentage points

Governor



1,976,857 votes

+376,741 votes (compared with Terry McAuliffe in 2021 for the Democrats)

Incumbent: no

Governing party: no

Virginia has been governed predominantly by the Democrats over the past 20 years; with the 2025 election, Spanberger won back the governorship for the Democrats. The campaign's key issues were the cost of living, healthcare and economic stability, coupled with criticism of US federal policy under President Trump.

Electoral system

Direct election of the governor across the entire state. The person who receives the most votes is elected.

2025 Virginia gubernatorial election: *"Affordable Virginia"*

Individuals and issues

Abigail Spanberger, a former CIA officer who represented Virginia as a Democratic member of Congress from 2018 to 2024, ran as a moderate Democratic candidate in Virginia's 2025 gubernatorial election. Raised in Virginia by a federal police officer and a nurse, she developed a reputation in Washington as a member of Congress for working across party lines. In Congress, she championed, among other policies, immigration reform, the protection of reproductive rights, as well as the expansion of healthcare access and clean energy (The New York Times 2025b).

As a pragmatist, she focused her campaign on solutions to the financial burdens faced by citizens. During campaign appearances in rural areas, she highlighted the rising costs of healthcare and energy, warned against the closure of local hospitals resulting from the Trump administration's nationwide Medicaid cuts, and promised to mitigate the negative consequences of further federal policy measures at the state level. She shunned ideological culture-war battles and instead emphasised the need for realistic solutions. One of her guiding political principles was: "Don't promise things you know you can't deliver" (PBS News 2025).

Central to Spanberger's campaign was a comprehensive relief programme aimed at reducing the cost of living. The key issues discussed were the sharp rise in electricity prices, as well as the costs of housing and healthcare (NPR 2025). In particular, she promised to safeguard healthcare provision in rural areas despite possible hospital closures. She also established a reputation as a guarantor of economic stability: She criticised the impacts of Trump's tariff policies and job cuts in the federal civil service, which had a severe impact on Virginia's labour market and the more than 150,000 federal employees living there (POLITICO 2025b).

So as not to jeopardise her broad support among urban and rural voters, Spanberger deliberately steered clear of the ideological culture wars of the democratic-socialist wing of the national Democratic Party. Rather than completely ignoring socio-political conflicts, she focused on identity-related issues on which she could rely on broad public support. One example is her criticism of the radical views held by her Republican opponent, Winsome Earle-Sears, who claimed that dismissing gay employees was not discriminatory. Although the

Republican campaign sought to portray Spanberger as holding extreme left-wing views in the politicised gender debate, the Democrat set out her own convictions in a matter-of-fact manner and refused to become embroiled in a polarising debate. Instead, she consistently focused on rising living costs, which affected voters across society, and on the concrete effects of Donald Trump's federal policies on the economy, energy prices and job cuts in the public sector. By deliberately defusing controversial issues relating to identity politics, she deprived the Republican campaign – which had focused heavily on such issues – of a key line of attack while remaining an option for swing voters.

Political rivals

Republican candidate Winsome Earle-Sears was Abigail Spanberger's main rival and represented the socially conservative, culture-war wing of her party. The Jamaica-born Marine Corps veteran and serving lieutenant governor made history as the first black woman to hold statewide office in Virginia and positioned herself clearly as a social conservative. She opposed same-sex marriage, was a staunch advocate of gun rights, and presented herself during the campaign as a defender of traditional values against social change. Despite occasionally distancing herself from Donald Trump, she positioned herself as a loyal supporter during the election year and was praised by him as an "excellent candidate" (The New York Times 2025b).

In stark contrast to Spanberger's focus on the cost of living, Earle-Sears consistently prioritised identity politics. Her campaign focused on attacks against LGBTQI* rights and education policies labelled as "woke". Earle-Sears also found herself at a strategic impasse: As her own party was in power in Washington, she had limited scope to openly criticise the economic situation and proposed job cuts within federal agencies. While Spanberger was able to proactively highlight the negative impacts of Trump's federal policies on Virginia, Earle-Sears was effectively left with no choice but to resort to divisive identity-politics issues in order to distinguish her campaign.

Social climate and context

The Democrats' election campaign in Virginia was characterised by a two-pronged strategy of opposition. At the state level, Abigail Spanberger's campaign was clearly directed against the incumbent Republicans. Although Winsome Earle-Sears, as lieutenant governor, had limited executive powers, she was closely associated in the public eye with the record of incumbent Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin. At the same time, federal politics had a significant impact on the campaign: Especially in Northern Virginia, the densely

populated area surrounding Washington, DC, many households were affected by the Trump administration's large-scale job cuts and restructuring of federal agencies (POLITICO 2025b). These measures, implemented under the banner of "government efficiency", exacerbated economic uncertainty and public discontent in the region.

Against this backdrop, Spanberger succeeded in linking criticism of federal policy in Washington with the public's desire for change at the state level. In doing so, she avoided turning the campaign into a culture-war contest and instead focused on economic stability, job security and the cost of living.

Election results

Abigail Spanberger won the 2025 Virginia gubernatorial election by a historic margin. With a margin of more than 15 percentage points, she secured the most decisive victory in a Virginia gubernatorial election since 2009. The media described it as a "landslide victory". With just under two million votes, Spanberger achieved more votes than any candidate in Virginia's election history. On 17 January 2026, she became the first woman to serve as governor of Virginia.

According to CNN's exit polls (2025b), Spanberger owed her success primarily to the effective mobilisation of core Democratic voter groups, particularly women and Black and Latino voters. She won around two-thirds of the Latino vote and secured a clear majority of the female vote. African-American voters also supported Spanberger by an overwhelming margin. Meanwhile, Earle-Sears performed particularly well among traditional Republican voter groups, such as white voters without a university degree, evangelical Christians and white men.

These results show that the Democrats were able to successfully mobilise their grassroots supporters with a cost-of-living campaign, while the Republicans failed to mobilise enough potential supporters with their identity-politics issues. Earle-Sears failed to re-engage former Trump swing voters – a factor that could also be attributed to Donald Trump's declining popularity in Virginia. This centre-left electoral success was also reinforced by structural factors: In gubernatorial elections, Virginia has traditionally tended to favour the party that is not in power at the federal level. This trend benefited the Democrats in 2025, while Republican control of the state government did not prove advantageous, but instead contributed to a broader desire for change.

Baden-Württemberg

State election held on 8 March 2026

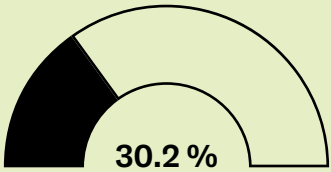
Voter turnout

69.6 %

+5.8 percentage points
(for 2021)

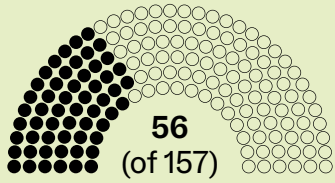
Election winner: Cem Özdemir, Alliance 90/The Greens

Percentage of the vote



–2.4 percentage points

Seats in parliament



–2 seats

1,623,208 second votes

+36,964 votes

Incumbent: no

Governing party: yes

A renewal of leadership, combined with the lead candidate's profile, popularity and experience, enabled the Greens to defend the office of head of government. The key to this success was a highly personalised campaign and a cross-party, presidential style of politics.

Electoral system

Personalised proportional system with first and second votes. The second vote determines the proportional allocation of seats.

2026 Baden-Württemberg state election: *“Erfahrung war nie wichtiger als jetzt”**

Individuals and issues

Cem Özdemir stood as the lead candidate for Alliance 90/The Greens in the 2026 state election, an election that was as unusual as it was significant for the Greens: The party faced the task of succeeding the Greens' only head of government at the state level to date, after 15 years in office. Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann did not seek re-election due to his age.

Özdemir was ideally placed to take on the role of lead candidate. With name recognition and popularity comparable to the incumbent, he brought with him experience in parliamentary politics, party leadership and government, including as a Member of the European Parliament and the Bundestag, as a lead candidate at the federal level, as federal party chair and as a federal minister. Although he was a federal politician with strong roots in his Swabian home state and often emphasised this connection in public, he had never held a position of responsibility at the state level. This enabled him to combine political experience with a credible promise of renewal and – drawing on his background as a leading politician and the son of Turkish immigrants – to build a compelling narrative as the lead candidate. He opted for a cross-party, presidential yet approachable style. He conveyed experience in office without appearing tired of it. He also had name recognition as a minister despite serving in an unpopular federal government and, as a self-proclaimed “Anatolian Swabian”, he also symbolised a diverse republic. He therefore embodied the very essence of centre-left politics and renewal while maintaining continuity, and he knew how to capitalise on this narrative during the campaign.

The candidate, not the party, was the logic that shaped the campaign, which was presented as a contest for the political centre and intended to decide the outcome between the Greens and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). It was special because it was an election campaign in which, from the outset, it was highly likely that the coalition between the Greens and the Christian Democrats, which had been in power for 10 years, would continue. The only question was

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* “Experience has never been more important than it is now”

which of the two parties would be stronger and which lead candidate would become minister-president. It was therefore clear that the election outcome would primarily be about the candidate. The starting point, however, suggested the opposite: Although the Greens clearly trailed the CDU in the polls, their lead candidate, Özdemir, was clearly more popular and better known than his rival as a prospective minister-president.

The decision to run a highly personalised campaign was empirically supported: Özdemir was well known and respected; it was equally well known that he was standing for the Greens and his personal ratings in the polls were far stronger than those of the party. The campaign sought to convert individual support into party votes. It consequently kept the party in the background, both visually and in terms of content (die tageszeitung 2026a), and resembled an incumbent's campaign (Staatsanzeiger 2026). The focus was on his experience and name recognition. The campaign used slogans such as "Experience has never been more important than it is now" and "He can do it". It also emphasised themes such as trust and stability and borrowed a phrase from Angela Merkel – "You know me" – while Cem Özdemir courted potential voters in his personal foreword to the election manifesto.

Open confrontations were barely discernible in the election campaign, especially as the Greens and the CDU – as current and likely future coalition partners – shied away from conflict with each other. In the industrial state of Baden-Württemberg, the future of the automotive industry and economic conditions were at the forefront. Özdemir presented himself as a pragmatic minister-president candidate who could appeal to the centre: Departing from the party line, for example, he advocated greater flexibility regarding the combustion engine ban (Tagesschau/SWR 2026b) and sharply distanced himself from the Greens in the European Parliament after they blocked the Mercosur free trade agreement (SWR 2026).

Cem Özdemir's political style is similar to that of his predecessor, Winfried Kretschmann, and that of his successor as party leader and later ministerial colleague, Robert Habeck. It is a cross-partisan style that emphasises social responsibility and the connection between dependability and change (die tageszeitung 2026b). In doing so, he managed the balancing act of distancing himself from the federal-level leadership of the party – to the point of causing discomfort for some segments of the party – by presenting himself to centrist voters as a candidate for minister-president (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2026). He managed this while maintaining party unity across its ideological spectrum and aligned it to the shared goal of electoral success. This was evident, for example, in campaign appearances by Ricarda Lang, the former party leader who continues to exert a strong influence. She made joint appearances with Boris Palmer, the Lord Mayor of Tübingen, who officiated her wedding and is a controversial figure among voters of the Greens.

Political rivals

Manuel Hagel is also from Swabia and, as the lead candidate, likewise emphasises his deep roots in the state (Tagesschau/SWR 2026a). However, that is where the similarities end, and the differences outweigh them. The significantly younger Hagel, born in 1988 – compared with Özdemir in 1965 – is also politically experienced, including as the youngest parliamentary group leader and youngest party chair of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg. However, he had not previously held government office and consequently lacked an essential qualification for the election: high name recognition (Staatsanzeiger 2025). Consequently, the CDU, which had long been leading in the polls, initially focused more on the party than on its candidate: It formulated its message in terms of "we" rather than "I" and relied heavily on party branding. Behind this strategy was the assumption that the Greens and their lead candidate, Özdemir, would no longer be the main contenders in the election, and that the gap in the polls could no longer be closed. Instead, mirroring the situation at the federal level, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was identified as the CDU's main rival. At the CDU state party conference in December 2025, Hagel asked: "Us or them?" Later on, it proved impossible to shift the campaign focus sufficiently towards a direct contest between Hagel and Özdemir. This would have been both necessary and possible. As a long-standing state politician, Hagel could have emphasised this role; as parliamentary group and party leader, he could have highlighted the distinction between his party and the government. This could have helped him turn his electoral disadvantage – his younger age and lack of government experience – into an advantage in the contest for the top office by combining experience, renewal and independence.

Social climate and context

On the one hand, state elections in Germany are personality-driven contests in which voters choose the state's leader. At the same time, however, they are also influenced by trends and sentiments in national politics. In this case, two aspects are worth highlighting: Faced with a choice between centre-left (Özdemir) and centre (Hagel), voters in Baden-Württemberg could look back on a 10-year coalition between the Greens and the CDU, with no discernible desire for change or any realistic alternative coalition on offer. As a party situated far to the right of centre, the AfD had no potential coalition partner. The Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Die Linke were relevant, at most, as potential junior coalition partners for either the CDU or the Greens. At the same time, the majority of the population were satisfied with the Greens-CDU state government (Infratest dimap 2026), but dissatisfied with the CDU-led federal

government. Added to this were strategic and communication errors by the CDU that ultimately cost them the election (Bukow 2026).

The closer the election drew, the more important public sentiment became regarding who the future minister-president would be. Özdemir was able to make his mark in this contest as the Greens' new lead candidate. He linked his promise of personnel renewal with the image of an experienced politician with a proven track record in government, and he presented himself as a de facto incumbent, even though he was still seeking the office. With a low-error campaign that kept the party in the background, he led the Greens, who had been in government for 15 years, to another electoral success. The party's strategic achievement lay in choosing a candidate whose core brand attributes were name recognition, public support and cross-party appeal. They then consistently and unitedly supported this course, placing him at the centre of the campaign as a candidate for minister-president who was cross-party but politically distinctive. The special feature of this strategy is that he was able to win the election both despite his party and with its support. Behind this lies a party decision that should not be underestimated: to focus on the individual rather than the party – and, above all, on a presidential style of centre-left politics. This was by no means a given, and it was a key element of the election victory.

Election results

On the surface, the state election brought little change in terms of the composition of the government, but it did mark a clear turning point. The Greens managed to replace the incumbent and transfer the government's popularity to their new lead candidate, who was already well-known even before the election. Despite the significantly higher voter turnout – which had recently benefited the fringe parties in Germany – they remained the strongest force. In this context, too, the high turnout can be attributed to the close race for the top office, which served as a further motivating factor for voters to participate.

Due to changes to the electoral system, a direct comparison of the absolute number of votes is possible only to a limited extent, but one thing is clear: Despite an absolute increase in the number of votes, the relative gap between the centre-left Green Party and the centre-right CDU narrowed significantly. This shifted the balance of power: The two parties now hold the same number of seats in parliament, even though Özdemir won the election. Overall, the centre-left position in parliament has essentially deteriorated, as the SPD – the last remaining democratic opposition party – has been marginalised, receiving just 5.5 per cent of the vote, whereas the AfD, a party on the far right, has gained parliamentary strength.

It is also worth noting that the Greens lost support among several sections of the population. This applies particularly to voters with lower levels of formal

education and to those who are economically dissatisfied, among whom the party's support remained well below average for the state. In addition – partly as a result of the new electoral law – a large number of direct constituencies were lost in favour of the newly introduced regional list. As a result, the Greens had to contend with a narrowing of their electoral base in both geographical and socio-structural terms (Bukow 2026).

Nevertheless, the election – and, above all, the campaign strategy – was a success for the Greens as the leading centre-left party. What had seemed unlikely in the year before the election, given the poll figures, was nonetheless achieved: the party retained its ability to govern as the strongest force in parliament, despite – and indeed partly because of – the change in personnel. The decisive factor here was the choice of a candidate who, through name recognition, popularity and an ability to connect with people, could project an appeal that extended far beyond the party's ranks into the heart of society. This was in addition to a campaign that included the party but kept it barely visible. The focus, itself a strategic decision, was on the lead candidate rather than the party.

New York City

Mayoral election held on 4 November 2025

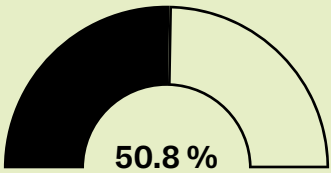
Voter turnout

45.1 %

+21.7 percentage points
(for 2021)

Election winner: Zohran Mamdani, Democratic Party

Percentage of the vote



–16.2 percentage points

Mayor



1,114,184 votes

+360,383 votes (compared with Eric Adams in 2021 for the Democrats)

Incumbent: no

Governing party: yes

Mamdani, an elected member of the New York State Assembly and a clear anti-establishment candidate, ran as the Democrats' mayoral candidate following a successful primary election. His main rivals were also Democrats. The campaign focused, on the one hand, on clear anti-establishment messages and, on the other, on specific demands relating to the cost of living and transport, as well as free childcare.

Electoral system

In a city-wide direct election, the candidate who receives the most votes is elected.

2025 New York City mayoral election: *"Make New York safe and affordable for all"*

Individuals and issues

Zohran Mamdani served as a member of the New York State Assembly for the 36th District, representing Astoria, Queens. In the New York City mayoral election held on 4 November 2025, Mamdani won an absolute majority, receiving 50.8 per cent of the vote. In doing so, he prevailed over former Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo – a representative of New York's Democratic-dominated political establishment who ran as an independent – and the Republican outsider Curtis Sliwa. When he was sworn in on 1 January 2026, Mamdani became New York's first Muslim mayor and, at the age of 34, the city's youngest mayor in more than a century.

Mamdani consistently stood out in debates on the cost of living in New York City, combining this with messages of social justice (The Guardian 2025f). One decisive factor in his success was his focus on concrete and implementable policy proposals. Although his proposals cannot, on their own, solve New York's structural problems, they largely fall within the mayor's executive remit. His campaign was built around three pillars. On housing, Mamdani called for a rent cap on more than one million rent-regulated apartments, accompanied by an ambitious programme to build 200,000 new affordable housing units. On mobility, he made free municipal bus transport a central element of his programme, in order to reduce everyday mobility costs and enable social participation regardless of income. The third pillar was the expansion of the popular pre-school programme "Pre-K for All", launched by former Mayor Bill de Blasio. Mamdani called for free childcare for all children aged between six weeks and five years – a universal non-means-tested scheme designed specifically to ease the financial burden on lower-income families (CNN 2025a).

One distinctive feature of the campaign was transparent communication on how the additional costs would be funded. This was to be achieved primarily through tax increases on large companies and high earners in the city. Further plans envisaged a gradual increase in the city's minimum wage to $30 an hour by 2030. Mamdani also announced a pilot scheme for council-run food shops

in every borough of New York, aimed at cushioning the impact of sharply rising food prices (CNN 2025a).

Although Mamdani clearly belongs to the left wing of the Democratic Party, he deliberately refrained from distinguishing himself from his competitors mainly through cultural identity issues during the election campaign. He openly emphasised his Muslim faith as part of his identity, without making it a central issue of political mobilisation. At the same time, he actively sought dialogue with Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other religious communities, emphasising religious and cultural diversity as an essential part of New York's identity.

Particularly when Mamdani was competing directly against the centrist establishment candidate, Andrew Cuomo, he refused to be drawn into traditional culture wars or abstract ideological debates. This was reflected very concretely in policy terms: Mamdani completely avoided activist slogans such as "Defund the Police", which are often associated with the left wing of the Democratic Party, and instead spoke of increasing public safety by providing additional funding and easing pressure on the police. Nor did he allow Cuomo's repeated attempts to draw him into foreign policy debates on the Middle East conflict or to accuse him of sharing the radical positions of pro-Palestinian protest movements. Rather than allowing the election campaign to turn into a referendum on left-wing identity politics, Mamdani instead tended to sideline these debates. By maintaining this strict discipline regarding the issues at hand, he prevented his rivals from branding him as a radical ideologue and steered the debate towards his concrete plans to reduce the cost of living in New York City.

Political rivals

In the Democratic Party primaries, Mamdani stood as a clear underdog against the establishment favourite, former Governor Andrew Cuomo. There, he presented himself as a credible alternative to a discredited political establishment, and his campaign epitomised a new, movement-oriented style of politics in major left-leaning US cities.

The incumbent, Eric Adams, also entered the election year as an independent candidate with considerable political baggage. Following federal charges brought in September 2024 over allegations of corruption, the perception of a scandal-ridden term in office persisted, even though the Department of Justice under the Trump administration later dropped the charges. This severely damaged his standing within his own Democratic Party. Adams finally withdrew from the election campaign in September 2025. However, because he withdrew so late, his name still appeared on the ballot.

In the decisive phase of the election, former Governor Andrew Cuomo, a member of New York's Democratic establishment, emerged as Mamdani's main rival. After losing the Democratic primary by a surprisingly large margin to

Mamdani, Cuomo ran as an independent candidate. He explicitly positioned himself at the centre of the political spectrum. He focused on combating crime and maintaining public order. Furthermore, Cuomo made the fight against anti-Semitism and support for the Jewish community central themes of his campaign, and he sharply criticised Mamdani's stance on the Middle East conflict. Cuomo's strategy also involved portraying Mamdani's democratic-socialist agenda as too radical and a major economic risk for crisis-hit New York City.

Alongside this duel between these two, another candidate entered the race: the Republican candidate, Curtis Sliwa. However, given that the Democrats held the balance of power in New York City, Sliwa had no real chance of winning. Cuomo supporters accused him of merely using his candidacy to split the conservative vote that Cuomo would need to defeat Mamdani.

A key feature of Mamdani's strategy was his consistent campaigning against the political establishment. He criticised his established Democratic rivals, Adams and Cuomo, in a rhetorically scathing manner reminiscent of Donald Trump, branding them as emblematic of corruption, pandemic-era scandals and political malfeasance. This enabled him to position himself as a force for renewal and moral integrity, seeking a genuine break with the political class – including within his own party – which large parts of the electorate regarded as discredited.

Social climate and context

In 2025, the political climate in New York City was, much as in the Virginia gubernatorial elections, heavily influenced by national politics. In liberal New York City, conflicts with the Trump administration initially played out on a highly ideological level. Under the pretext of wanting to combat anti-Semitism, the federal government took harsh action against academic institutions, which were portrayed as symbols of a supposedly “woke” elite. This was particularly true of the prestigious Columbia University, which, following earlier occupations by pro-Palestinian students, became a primary target of political pressure. The Trump administration employed measures such as freezing or cutting funding, as well as exerting intense political pressure, while portraying Columbia and other universities as symbols of a morally corrupt educational elite. This triggered strong defensive reactions and mobilisation against Washington among the city's academically minded population.

Alongside the conflicts at universities, the Trump administration's immigration policy became the second major source of conflict. In New York City, this was seen as an attack on the city's identity as a “sanctuary city”, that is, a city that does not actively cooperate with federal immigration authorities and thus offers greater protection to undocumented migrants. The federal government pursued an extensive deportation drive led by ICE, using large-scale operations

targeting migrant communities in everyday urban settings, which often took place without prior notice or clear identification of ICE agents, who frequently operated in plain clothes. This deployment of federal authorities in pursuit of an aggressive deportation policy was perceived by a majority of citizens as an authoritarian encroachment on civil rights and local democratic institutions. This reinforced the public perception of New York as a city under siege, where, at the direction of the Trump administration, the city's cultural diversity and institutional independence were to be deliberately undermined.

Despite the media coverage of these ideological conflicts, however, it was the soaring cost of living and structural economic inequality that had the greatest impact on the daily lives of most New Yorkers. Following the pandemic years, large sections of the population suffered from sharp increases in rents and food prices, causing real wages to fall. To make matters worse, unpopular measures introduced at the level of the Democratic-controlled state government – such as the introduction of congestion charging – placed an additional burden on many middle-income commuters. This climate of economic frustration provided crucial conditions for Mamdani's success. He was able to demonstrate that, although opposition to Trump was necessary, the real challenge facing the city lay in tackling a deep social crisis that had not been adequately addressed by the political establishment of either party.

Election results

The election result on 4 November 2025 marked a historic turning point in New York City. Mamdani won the mayoral election with 50.8 per cent of the vote, securing a clear victory over his challengers. Former Governor Cuomo secured 41 per cent of the vote as an independent candidate, while the Republican candidate, Sliwa, trailed far behind with around 7 per cent. A key factor in this success was the exceptionally high turnout of more than 45 per cent by New York standards. This represented a dramatic increase of 21.7 percentage points compared to the 2021 mayoral election, indicating a massive political mobilisation of the city's population.

The dynamics of the election were largely driven by an unprecedented mobilisation of younger voter groups. Exit polls show that Mamdani won the support of 77 per cent of voters aged 18 to 29. Turnout among eligible young voters was exceptionally high and estimated at 28 per cent. Mamdani thus succeeded in building support across a broad age range, from 18 to 65, and in bridging generational divides among centre-left voters (The New York Times 2025c).

From a geographical and social perspective, Mamdani assembled an electorate that encompassed virtually every part of the city. He won in four of New York's five boroughs. Only Staten Island, with its more conservative, suburban profile, went to Cuomo. Mamdani's ability to bridge social and cultural divides was

particularly notable. He received support from New York's older, politically moderate Black voters as well as from younger, white left-wing voters. He also won a majority of the vote in most income groups, with the exception of a few affluent enclaves, such as Manhattan's Upper East Side (The New York Times 2025c).

Strategically, this success was based on intensive grassroots campaigning – that is, a large-scale campaign supported by a large number of volunteers, involving systematic door-to-door canvassing, local discussion forums in the city's neighbourhoods and the presence of campaign teams in local districts. This was supplemented by a modern social media campaign that specifically appealed to multicultural and working-class groups. Mamdani successfully positioned himself as a credible alternative to a discredited political establishment comprising Democrats and Republicans (The Guardian 2025c). While Andrew Cuomo warned against Mamdani's radicalism and lack of experience, the latter stuck to his clear and accessible core messages on affordability. Ultimately, the election became a referendum on whether the political establishment was still capable of solving New York's pressing social problems, with Mamdani emerging as the clear winner thanks to his new, movement-oriented style of politics.

Copenhagen

Local election held on 18 November 2025

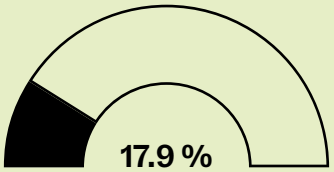
Voter turnout

65.5 %

+5.6 percentage points
(for 2021)

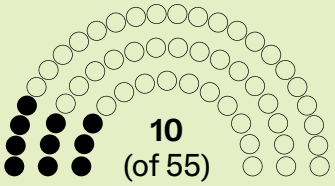
Election winner: Sisse Marie Welling, Socialist People's Party

Percentage of the vote



+6.9 percentage points

Seats on city council



+4 seats

62,453 votes

+28,629 votes

Incumbent: no

Governing party: yes

Welling put an end to the Social Democrats' dominance by forming a broad coalition and, despite not holding the top post, organised a centre-left alliance. In her campaign, she focused on change, administrative experience, affordability, infrastructure and the environment.

Electoral system

Proportional representation election for Copenhagen City Council. The office of Lord Mayor is subsequently filled through a political appointment.

2025 Copenhagen local election: *“Det er tid til forandring”**

Individuals and issues

In 2025, Sisse Marie Welling of the Socialist People's Party (SF) emerged as a central figure in a historic turning point in Copenhagen. For the first time since 1938, she ended the Social Democrats' dominance in the Danish capital and formed a new left-wing, green majority on the city council. Welling, who had already gained extensive executive experience as city councillor for health and care since 2018, embodied a rare combination of expertise and a desire for radical policy reform.

The SF's success was largely attributed to its role as a pragmatic bridge-builder within the left-wing camp. Although the democratic-socialist Enhedslisten party received the most votes, it was unable to secure a broad majority. Welling, meanwhile, built an alliance that deliberately isolated the established Social Democrats. Welling capitalised on the growing political vacuum left by the Social Democrats, who had merely maintained the status quo. She positioned the SF as a modern force for improving quality of life, one that safeguards social cohesion and defends environmental principles against the logic of large-scale urban development projects.

In terms of policy, Welling focused on an urban agenda centred on affordability and social justice in Copenhagen, an already strongly left-leaning city. A key pillar of her policy was tackling the housing cost crisis through stricter rent controls and halting further gentrification to ensure that young families and people on low incomes could afford to live in Copenhagen. This was accompanied by investment in basic social infrastructure. For example, class sizes have been reduced in schools, and there has been a proposed reform of elder care that puts people's needs before economic efficiency targets.

The most striking contrast to the old city order was her vision of “a green metropolis for people”. Welling distinguished herself as a staunch critic of environmentally contentious mega-projects such as the artificial peninsula “Lynetteholm”, instead calling for a more equitable transport policy, prioritising cycling and public transport. In contrast to the national government's restrictive stance, she also emphasised a narrative of inclusivity and openness to the world,

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* “It's time for change”

positioning Copenhagen as a left-wing counterpoint to the Social Democrats' migration policy at the national level (The Guardian 2025d).

In Copenhagen's already strongly left-wing and progressive political climate, the SF distanced itself not only from the more centrist Social Democrats but also from more radical left-wing forces. In order to forge as broad an alliance as possible within the centre-left camp, Welling deliberately avoided potentially divisive rhetoric and more extreme positions. Thus, despite its ambitious environmental policy goals, SF distanced itself from radical activism, including confrontational forms of protest. Furthermore, Welling was largely unwilling to engage in abstract critiques of capitalism and the political system. Although the democratic-socialist Enhedslisten party also employed anti-capitalist rhetoric, Welling refrained from making such polarising demands associated with the extreme left wing. By deliberately avoiding rigid ideological commitments, she denied her rivals any grounds for attack and successfully established the SF as a coalition-ready force to the left of centre.

Political rivals

The strongest rival candidate was the Social Democrat Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil. Her nomination was widely seen as closely linked to the national government. As a personal friend of Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of the Social Democrats, she was regarded as the ideal candidate for the post in Copenhagen. This close link meant that the election was seen as more than just a local contest and regarded as a vote on Prime Minister Frederiksen's political line. The loss in 2025 marked a historic turning point for the Social Democrats: Their mayors had governed the Danish capital without interruption since 1938 (Bloomberg 2025).

Above all, processes of alienation from national policy played a decisive role in the Social Democrats' poor performance. Critics on the left-wing and green spectrum argued that the Social Democrats had shifted significantly to the right on key issues such as migration policy, social policy and environmental protection.

The Social Democrats' campaign was further hampered by past scandals and the resulting mistrust. The political climate in the capital was still shaped by the resignation in 2020 of Frank Jensen, the long-serving Social Democratic mayor, who was forced to step down following allegations of sexual harassment.

Social climate and context

The 2025 Copenhagen election campaign was largely shaped by issues of economic security and the effectiveness of the welfare state. According to Reuters, it was particularly rapidly rising housing costs – alongside concerns about the

quality of elder care and a noticeable decline in the quality of public services – that were driving urban voters further to the left (Reuters 2025b). The fact that housing was the overriding issue was highlighted by the "Housing Alliance", which was launched shortly before the election: A coalition of 17 Danish mayors, trade unions and tenants' associations called for more subsidised social housing and new regulatory measures to curb excessive rents.

In addition to the local situation, the election was hampered by a strong national backlash against the ruling Social Democrats. The dissatisfaction stemmed from the course taken by the centrist coalition government since 2022 and from a series of highly unpopular decisions. For example, a public holiday was abolished to help fund defence spending. In Copenhagen, Prime Minister Frederiksen's hardline approach to integration and migration policy also led to further upheaval. Progressive voters accused the party of weakening its own environmental and social commitments. This change of course prompted urban and left-leaning voters in Copenhagen to switch to other parties.

In policy terms, the campaign conducted by Sisse Marie Welling of the SF offered a confident alternative to that of the Social Democratic candidate, Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil. Whereas the Social Democrats were perceived as representatives of the Copenhagen political establishment and emissaries of the unpopular national government, Welling positioned the SF as an urban reformist force focused on housing, integration, family policy and socio-ecological policy. A key pledge was that the city needed to "regain control over its own future", coupled with a call for greater public intervention. Even before election day, the general mood suggested that the progressive bloc comprising SF, Enhedslisten and the green party Alternativet was, both in terms of numbers and policy, in a position to form a majority without the Social Democrats.

Election results

Sisse Marie Welling's election victory marked a turning point in Danish politics: For the first time since 1938, the Social Democrats no longer hold the office of Lord Mayor in the capital. Although the democratic-socialist party Enhedslisten emerged as the strongest single party with 22.1 per cent, the SF, with 17.9 per cent, took a central position in the new coalition. By forming an alliance, Welling succeeded in securing the leading mayoral position for the second-strongest party and forming a coalition that deliberately isolated the Social Democrats.

The Social Democrats' decline from 17.2 per cent to 12.7 per cent was seen as a clear rejection of Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's national political agenda. Analysts explained that the national government's tough integration and migration policies had alienated voters. The election was therefore also seen as a personal defeat for Frederiksen, whose rightward shift had proven successful nationally but led to major losses in the left-leaning capital.

From an analytical perspective, the SF's success was primarily due to a reshaping of the left-wing political landscape. Voters moved primarily from the established Social Democrats to the more progressive parties SF, Enhedslisten and the green party Alternativet. The decisive factors were everyday economic issues, such as the provision of affordable housing, supported through state investment and regulation, combined with a clear contrast to the technocratic style of the incumbent city administration and the national government's anti-immigration agenda.

4 How elections are won: A review

The analysis of the electoral successes examined here has focused exclusively on how elections are won. The study does not examine whether electoral victories have led to stable governance or the successful implementation of centre-left policies. However, this focus on campaigns and electoral successes is deliberate: In democracies, winning elections is a fundamental prerequisite for political power and the ability to shape policy.

In light of the case studies, it is evident that centre-left actors can win elections despite growing affective polarisation, economic uncertainty and mobilisation by authoritarian forces. However, this success was rarely based on a narrow focus on traditional core issues. Instead, what proved decisive was a combination of personal credibility and renewal, a clear political distinction from authoritarian and right-wing populist forces, strategic and thematic discipline focused on voters' practical, everyday problems, and, in many cases, the ability to forge broad coalitions and alliances.

Taken as a whole, a recurring pattern emerges: Successful centre-left campaigns did not present themselves as mere ideological protest movements, nor did they defend a politically exhausted status quo. Instead, they successfully combined signs of renewal with governing competence and dependability. Their strength lay in precisely this combination. They picked up on the public's desire for change without being perceived as likely to bring further economic stagnation or political instability.

It all depends on the candidates: Renewal, capability, and personality

One initial pattern relates to the candidate's broader role: None of the successful protagonists were officeholders or representatives of the incumbent political establishment in the narrow sense. This enabled them to present themselves as credible agents of renewal. Although Keir Starmer was Labour's party leader, he clearly distanced himself from the Corbyn era and presented Labour as a professional, centrist party capable of governing. Rob Jetten made a name for himself in the Netherlands as a representative of a younger political generation and as a counterpoint – both in terms of changes in personnel and policy – to the failed right-wing government that preceded him. Mark Carney presented himself as a pragmatic, experienced crisis manager when he took over the leadership of the governing Liberal Party in Canada. However, he was able to present himself as

a political newcomer who distanced himself strongly from the policies and personal style of the unpopular incumbent, Justin Trudeau. Abigail Spanberger ran against a Republican incumbent in Virginia, drawing on her expertise in security policy and public administration. In Baden-Württemberg, Cem Özdemir's move into state politics combined his national recognition and connection to his home state with signals of political stability as well as personnel renewal. Zohran Mamdani gained support in New York City precisely because of his position as an outsider to the Democratic establishment, while in Copenhagen, Sisse Marie Welling combined her own executive experience with a promise of change on the political left, which won broad support following decades of successive Social Democratic mayors.

Although the candidates all had different political profiles and biographical backgrounds, they fulfilled a similar strategic role: Their credibility represented moderate to substantial renewal within the centre-left spectrum, without appearing unpredictable or politically radical to large parts of the electorate. Starmer stood for political integrity after 14 years of Conservative government. Carney embodied economic competence during a crisis over Canadian sovereignty vis-à-vis the United States. Spanberger combined moderate rhetoric with a clear focus on the cost of living, while Özdemir merged political competence and reliability with a promise of renewal. Jetten's D66 represented a new direction within the Dutch centre-left spectrum. He was seen as an alternative to the failed right but also to the traditional Social Democrats, who were perceived as outdated. Mamdani and Welling campaigned more strongly for renewal within the left bloc in highly progressive urban constituencies but nevertheless focused on solving concrete local issues.

Issues matter: Concrete policy offers and political narratives instead of ideological camp mentality

It is striking that the elections covered in this study were not won on the basis of abstract grand narratives. Instead, the focus was on issues of affordability, economic security, public infrastructure and general state capacity, which were then translated into clear and comprehensible political demands and policy measures. Labour framed the 2024 election as decisive for restoring economic growth, saving the overstretched National Health Service, and addressing rising energy prices and stagnating public services. The Canadian Liberals, led by Carney, emphasised economic stability, national sovereignty in the face of the Trump administration and administrative experience as a counterpoint to the political experiments of their populist opponent. Under Rob Jetten, D66 adopted an optimistic, solution-oriented approach focused on the housing market, economic stability and a pragmatic governing capability following the collapse of the previous government. In Virginia, Spanberger made healthcare costs,

energy prices and job security for federal civil servants central to her campaign. Özdemir focused on economic transformation, support for the automotive sector and industry more broadly, climate protection and education to ensure a future-proof industrial state. Mamdani advocated a rent freeze, fare-free buses, expanded childcare and lower food prices, while outlining how to fund these measures through higher taxes on high earners and large corporations. In Copenhagen, the SF, led by Welling, brought together the issues of rising housing costs, childcare, local care services and socio-ecological urban development into an urban agenda aimed at improving the quality of life.

This shifts the strategic core of successful centre-left politics: The focus was not on abstract demands or strongly moralising signals to the party's own core electorate, but on concrete, visible improvements in the everyday lives of all citizens. Concrete, clear and achievable policy proposals proved particularly effective in campaign communication. Free bus services in New York, specific housing measures in Copenhagen, the reduction of NHS waiting times in the United Kingdom and affordable energy through "Great British Energy" are examples of measures that were not only politically appealing to broad sections of society but also proved effective during the election campaign. They made politics visible and their implementation concretely verifiable.

At the same time, a second pattern emerges: Successful centre-left politicians avoided focusing the election campaign primarily on cultural and identity-based conflicts. That did not mean they abandoned their own values and positions. However, they set clear priorities in their communication. Starmer avoided reigniting the Brexit debate, which would have divided not only his own electorate but also the nation as a whole. He also distanced himself from the significantly more left-wing positions and controversies over anti-Semitism associated with his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn. In Canada, Carney toned down some of the Liberal Party's unpopular climate and migration policies by advocating greater use of domestic oil and gas reserves and a more restrictive immigration policy. Jetten adopted a more restrictive stance on migration and called for the Netherlands to implement a national framework for controlled immigration. In Virginia, Spanberger refused to be drawn into the culture-war debates over gender and education waged by her Republican opponent. Özdemir skilfully drew on his own life story and, at the same time, demonstrated his ability to connect with the political centre in the areas of economic policy and, above all, migration policy – not least through the involvement of Boris Palmer and targeted interventions. Mamdani, too, steered clear of activist slogans such as "Defund the Police" and focused his campaign on the high cost of living faced by many New Yorkers.

The central pattern in terms of the policy agendas is therefore that successful centre-left campaigns clearly distanced themselves from authoritarian and far-right positions, but did not make this distinction the sole focus of their campaigns. They developed their own policy proposals that were generally concrete,

actionable and focused on economic security and affordability. These resonated with a broad cross-section of the electorate. At the same time, they adapted to the respective political contexts, which differed markedly across the various levels of government.

Political competition: Challenging incumbents, the establishment and the authoritarian right

Another common feature concerns the structure of political competition. Many of the successful campaigns covered in this study were directed against jaded incumbents and a discredited political establishment, both within their own ranks and in the opposition. In many liberal democracies, the traditional incumbency advantage has become an incumbency disadvantage (Financial Times 2024). In times of inflation, economic stagnation, a housing crisis and declining trust in state institutions, those in power are increasingly seen as responsible for political and social stagnation.

This pattern was most evident in the United Kingdom. After 14 years of Conservative Party rule, several changes of prime minister, and economic strain following Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, the election turned into a referendum on the unpopular Conservative Party. Labour did not need to generate a lot of enthusiasm; it simply needed to come across as a reliable political alternative. The situation was similar in the Dutch case. Following the collapse of the Schoof government, which was composed of parties on the political right, the right-wing populist PVV was no longer credible as a force for protest. Its attempt to portray itself once again as an opponent of the political establishment backfired because the party itself had become a source of political instability. In Canada, the situation was more complex. The Liberals were themselves the ruling party and were suffering from political fatigue after the Trudeau era. Their success was therefore based precisely on offsetting the disadvantages of incumbency by bringing in new leadership. Carney's status as a political newcomer to government enabled the party to combine political experience with a fresh approach. The situation in Baden-Württemberg was similar, although satisfaction with the incumbent Green Party government remained high. Here, too, there was initially a noticeable desire for change regarding the dominant ruling party, but this was offset by the popularity of the candidate. These two cases show that centre-left parties do not necessarily have to lose because of voter fatigue while in office. Instead, retaining incumbency status can succeed if significant and popular changes in personnel and policy are made at the right time.

In the two major cities examined at the local level, the division within the establishment did not run between the centre-left and centre-right, but within the centre-left camp itself. This was due to the different composition of urban electorates, which tend to favour centre-left parties. Mamdani did not win against

a dominant force on the right, but against Democrats Andrew Cuomo and Eric Adams, who symbolised a discredited New York political establishment. In Copenhagen, too, there was no traditional shift in power from the right to the left. Instead, power shifted within the left-wing spectrum. Under Sisse Marie Welling, the SF replaced the Social Democrats as the leading force. In the capital, the Social Democrats were perceived as too rigid, too focused on national politics and too far to the right.

At the same time, clearly distinguishing themselves from authoritarian and right-wing populist forces played a key role in several cases of centre-left success. Mark Carney made the defence of Canadian sovereignty against Donald Trump the centrepiece of his campaign. Spanberger linked her criticism of the Republicans at the national level to criticism of the specific detrimental consequences of Trump's federal policies for Virginia. Mamdani ran for office in New York City in a political context heavily shaped by conflicts with the Trump administration over university funding, migration and local political autonomy. In the European cases, conflict with the populist right was also prominent. D66 established itself as an alternative to the instability of the PVV, Labour benefited from the division on the political right between the traditional Conservatives and Nigel Farage's populist Reform UK party, and in Baden-Württemberg both candidates for minister-president clearly distanced themselves from the AfD, which nevertheless almost doubled its share of the vote.

Importantly, however, whenever centre-left actors distanced themselves from the far right, they did not do so by broadly denigrating right-wing voters. Successful candidates drew a distinction between authoritarian and populist elites, whom they treated as legitimate targets of criticism, and the material concerns of many of those voters. Jetten acknowledged public discontent about migration and the strain on the state without adopting Wilders' populist rhetoric. Özdemir, too, sent similar signals. Carney criticised the Canadian Conservatives' closeness to Trump, but at the same time appealed to economically insecure swing voters by placing a strong emphasis on economic growth. Spanberger did not attack the cultural identity of conservative voters in rural Virginia. She instead focused her criticism on the consequences of Republican policies for Virginian jobs, healthcare and energy costs. This pattern is central: The successful centre-left actors opposed right-wing parties on policy grounds without attacking their voters.

Societal climate and context: Political fatigue, economic stagnation and a desire for greater state capacity

A third common pattern can be identified based on similarities in the societal climate. All of the cases examined in this study took place in contexts marked by economic uncertainty, institutional fatigue and mistrust of political systems'

ability to solve problems. Although the specific circumstances varied from case to case, the underlying dynamic was similar: Many citizens felt that politicians were no longer reliably addressing their most pressing everyday concerns.

In the United Kingdom, the focus was on economic stagnation, the crisis facing the NHS, the cost of living and public fatigue after 14 years of Conservative government. In Canada, the dominant political issues were housing prices, immigration and the loss of confidence in the Trudeau government. Trump's tariff threats and challenges to Canadian national sovereignty reframed the election around stability and resilience. In the Netherlands, a housing crisis, migration concerns and institutional fatigue following the collapse of the right-wing Schoof government combined to create a demand for political stability and effective government. In Virginia, key issues included rising healthcare and energy costs, as well as fears about job losses in the public sector. In Baden-Württemberg, concerns about the future of the industrial economy played a prominent role in shaping voters' decisions, alongside issues relating to social security and public safety, and to a lesser degree the environment. In New York City, rents, childcare and the cost of food and transport were the most pressing concerns. In Copenhagen, the focus was on housing costs, the quality of care, childcare services, urban development and public services.

An examination of the issues that shaped election outcomes reveals striking commonalities. Centre-left actors win when they address concerns about economic stagnation and social security and translate them into a concrete agenda for action. As a rule, it was not enough simply to call for “greater social justice” or “social cohesion” in abstract terms. Campaigns that were able to demonstrate how government or community action, in a liberal-republican sense, could tangibly improve people's lives were successful. In doing so, campaigns often linked two debates that are central to the current centre-left political strategy: an affordability agenda centred on reducing the cost of living, and an abundance agenda – that is, a policy of active, state-led development – focused on the state's capacity to deliver tangible outcomes, particularly in the areas of housing, infrastructure and energy supply (Klein/Thompson 2025; Dunkelmann 2025).

The cases covered in the study show that this agenda does not necessarily have to be technocratic or defensive. It can resonate with people on an emotional level if it identifies concrete problems and offers practical solutions. Mamdani's proposal for fare-free buses was not an abstract plan to solve New York's complex public transport problems, but a clear and straightforward measure designed to provide immediate relief. Welling's housing and family agenda in Copenhagen combined green urban policies with the social challenge of affording life in a major city. Starmer's pledge to reduce NHS waiting times highlighted a specific failure of the incumbent government and offered the prospect of visible improvements.

Particularly in times of growing affective polarisation, it was not the loudest or most ideologically extreme candidates who won, but often those who came

across as pragmatic, competent and unifying. This does not mean that successful candidates are ideologically centrist in policy terms. As outlined above, particularly in urban areas, centre-left and left actors compete for the electoral majorities that determine election outcomes. Mamdani and Welling are significantly further to the left than Starmer or Spanberger, but they ran in the generally left-leaning urban political environments of Copenhagen and New York, where they could distinguish themselves from other promising centre-left contenders. These campaigns also did not rely solely on abstract criticism of the system. Instead, they focused on concrete material improvements. The key was not merely to promise generic change, but to make change appear achievable. Again, the focus of this study is on campaign messaging and mobilisation during the campaign. Whether, and to what extent, these promises can be – or have been – delivered, or whether they will falter due to governmental, legal or financial obstacles, was beyond the scope of this study and remains to be seen. However, crucial to the campaigns' success was the fact that political demands were presented as achievable and could also be "translated" in terms that voters could readily understand.

This logic is consistent with recent findings in political science regarding the importance of public goods and service provision for democratic stability. If citizens believe that the state is no longer providing essential services, they may become more willing to support anti-democratic and right-wing populist parties (Gold/Lehr 2024; Dickson et al. 2026). Conversely, visible improvements in housing, healthcare, transport, energy or childcare can demonstrate greater state capacity. The "delivery deficit" evident in many democracies – that is, the failure to carry out core state functions – is therefore not merely an economic or administrative problem but also a key risk for democracy.

Election results and mobilisation: Electoral gains, vote shifts and limited mandates

A fourth pattern concerns the election results themselves. The case studies show that, depending on their institutional and social contexts, centre-left successes rest on very different electoral foundations. Not every victory was built on the same patterns of mobilisation. In some cases, this led to a broad mobilisation of new voters; in other cases, electoral shifts occurred within the left political camp; and in other cases, success resulted from opponents' weakness and fragmentation.

The British case shows that electoral success does not necessarily depend on the centre-left generating widespread enthusiasm. In 2024, Labour won a large parliamentary majority, even though the party received fewer votes in absolute terms than in previous elections, and its vote share increased only modestly. The key factors were the weakness of the Conservative Party, the fragmentation

of the centre-right caused by the populist Reform UK party, and the mechanics of the first-past-the-post electoral system. In Canada, by contrast, the success depended more directly on mobilising centrist voters. The Liberals saw significant increases in voter turnout, vote share and the number of parliamentary seats. Although Carney also benefited from his opponents' weakness amid the Trump administration's pressure on Canada, he was also able to win back parts of the political centre. Institutionally, however, this success remained limited. The Liberals emerged as the largest party, but fell short of an absolute majority in parliament. In the Netherlands, D66 combined gains within the centre-left camp with a move towards the political centre while reaching out to disillusioned voters who had previously supported the unsuccessful right-wing government.

Further variations can be seen at the state and local levels. Spanberger won by a clear margin in Virginia, despite a slight decline in overall voter turnout compared with 2021. Her success was therefore due more to shifts in support among swing voters, combined with effective grassroots mobilisation by the Democrats. The situation in Baden-Württemberg was quite different. Amid a significant rise in turnout, Özdemir and the Greens gained more votes in absolute terms (under a revised electoral system). In terms of mandates, however, the party lost its lead over the CDU, with both parties now holding the same number of parliamentary seats. New York City, by contrast, offers a clear example of new voter mobilisation. Mamdani benefited from an exceptionally high turnout, particularly among younger voters, and was therefore able to turn an anti-establishment campaign within his own party into a citywide victory. Finally, Copenhagen illustrates a realignment within the left-wing camp: The SF gained votes, seats and the mayoral position, while the incumbent Social Democrats lost their historic position as the leading force on the political left.

Overall, the case studies identify four types of mobilisation. First, victories driven by a shift in public sentiment and the unpopularity of the main rival, as in the United Kingdom. Second, victories achieved by mobilising new and centrist voters, as in Canada and New York City. Third, victories resulting from realignment within the centre-left or left-wing camp, as in Copenhagen and, to some extent, in the Netherlands. Fourth, victories driven by a candidate-centred comeback, which enabled a weaker centre-left party to make significant gains against its main centre-right rival, as in Baden-Württemberg.

These differences are important because they caution against overly far-reaching conclusions. Centre-left politicians have not won everywhere because of a new, uniform electoral formula. In some cases, centre-left actors won by placing strong emphasis on the political centre. In others, distinctly left-wing outsiders prevailed. In still others, a social-liberal or green-left party won.

What these successes had in common was not an identical ideology, but a similar strategic foundation and, in many cases, a popular candidate. This foundation rested primarily on credible renewal; concrete, practical policy proposals; restraint in polarised identity politics; a clear distinction from authoritarian

competitors; the ability to capitalise on a broader desire for political change; and a candidate capable of credibly uniting and embodying these elements.

The most important lesson of the case studies is that successful centre-left election campaigns in polarised democracies must, above all, be solution-oriented. Violations of norms by authoritarian forces, radicalisation on the far right and attacks on democratic institutions must not be downplayed. At the same time, the centre-left must not define itself primarily in terms of moral distinctions or partisan thinking either. Elections were won by centre-left candidates when they combined pragmatic policies, credibility, competence and signals of renewal with a focus on voters' demands for security, affordability and the state's capacity to address their most pressing problems. It is worth noting that many successful candidates shared one prominent feature. At least within their respective electoral arenas, they were not seen as part of the established political system. This pattern can be read as a warning sign for established centre-left actors. It is also by no means certain that electoral victories by outsiders will lead to successful government. The success of challengers may also shape future elections and work against the winners of today. The evidence remains tentative, but non-incumbent candidates appear to have had an electoral advantage. This could become especially relevant when today's successful centre-left candidates seek re-election and have themselves become the disadvantaged incumbents.

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Can the centre-left still win elections in an age of populism, affective polarisation and authoritarian tendencies? This study examines seven recent electoral successes in Europe and North America and asks: What do Cem Özdemir in Baden-Württemberg, Mark Carney in Canada and Abigail Spanberger in Virginia have in common? How did Zohran Mamdani in New York City, Sisse Marie Welling in Copenhagen, Rob Jetten in the Netherlands and Keir Starmer in the United Kingdom manage to win majorities?

Every election is different; every context has its own logic. But patterns can be identified, and these offer explanations as to how these elections were won.