

# Political Participation of Women in Norway

**-Strong Involvement by both Politicians and the Public-**

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## ノルウェーの女性による政治参加

—政治家、民衆による参画—

竹 澤 由記子

### Abstract

It is often said that in Nordic countries gender equality has been achieved to a great extent than in other countries. In Norway, gender equality especially in a political sphere is highly achieved and more women have been successful as politicians than other industrialized nations. In the latest national election of 2009, 42 percent of all the candidates were female, and half of the ministers in the current Cabinet are women. This paper firstly points out the statistics showing of women's participation in politics from the past to the latest elections, and then it will point out both historical and political backgrounds which led Norwegian women highly involved in politics.

**Key words :** Norway, political participation, gender equality law

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### 抄 録

北欧諸国における民衆の政治参加率は比較的高いといわれているが、その中でもノルウェーの女性による政治参加は先進国の中でも特に目覚ましいものがある。2009年の国政選挙においては、女性の議員立候補者は全体の42パーセントを占め、現在の閣僚も半数が女性である。このようなノルウェーの政治分野における女性の進出の背景には何があるのか。本稿では、過去から最近の選挙における女性の投票率、立候補率など、ノルウェーの女性の政治進出の高さを表す統計を示したうえで、その背景にある歴史的、政治的要因について考察する。

**キーワード :** ノルウェー、女性による政治参画、男女機会均等法

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## 1. Introduction

It is clear that the level of women's participation in the political arena is still low in most industrialized nations. It is historically true that women have been excluded from full and equal citizenship compared to men, and challenging arguments over women's status both in public and private venues still continue. Regarding women's status in democracy theory, even today after the introduction of universal suffrage, there are still ongoing arguments from feminists who claim that women have never been and still are not admitted as full and equal members in any country known as a 'democracy', even though there are, as liberal democrats claims, the formal (or legal) equal civic status of women, as Carol Pateman (1989) states as below.

-it is hardly possible to demolish the assumption of two thousand years that there is no incompatibility between 'democracy' and the subjection of women or their exclusion of full and equal participation in political life. (p. 210)

Although feminist analyses of the state have mostly been negative, more liberal arguments represented by 'participatory democracy' theory indicates the possibilities that exist for women (as well as men) to participate in public life (Held, 2006, pp.209-215).

Thus, said, it is often said that in Nordic countries gender equality has been achieved to a greater extent than in other countries, and more women work in and contribute to the public sector. This can be said about the political arena as well. One of the countries which best represents this is Norway.

In Norway, ten out of twenty ministers are female in the current Stortingberg's II government (Regjeringen, 2010b). Moreover, in the last Norwegian national election in 2009, four out of every ten candidates were female, and 40 percent of the female candidates were elected as representatives (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2010c). It seems there is almost no obstacle to gender equality in political area in Norway.

How has Norway achieved such impressive numbers in the political field? This paper will review statistics in the Norwegian elections related to the breakthrough of women's political participation in Norway in order to show the strong involvement in politics by Norwegian women. Then it will continue to describe both the historical and political background related to these statistics suggesting that there has been a strong political consciousness among Norwegian women since earlier times due to universal suffrage instituted in 1910, the Gender Equality Act from 1979, and the achievements of famous female politicians.

This paper also tries to indicate the possibilities available for society when women are able to participate in the democratic process.

## **2. Recent Numbers Indicating Women's Participation in Politics – Figures from the Past to the Latest National Election in 2009-**

### **2. 1 Voter Turnout**

The voter turnout in Norwegian elections has always been around 70 to 80 percent which is a little higher than the average turnout in EU nations (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2010b). As for women's voter turnout, it was already as high as 74 percent in the 1930s in the national election (Kinoshita, p.168). The numbers have been around 70 to 80 percent since then, and the highest voter turnout was 84.1 percent in 1965 and the second highest was 83.7 percent in 1985 (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2005). We can see how Norwegian women are greatly concerned about the politics of their nation. The figure in the 2009 election was 77.1 percent, according to SSB (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2009). Because the gender gap in recent figures has not been significant, they do not calculate the number by gender any longer (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2009).

### **2. 2 Female Candidates**

The percentages of female candidates in both the local and the national elections have also been high. Table 1 shows the percentages of the female representatives in Norwegian parties in the elections. In the latest national election, 42 percent of all the candidates were women, which was 3 percent higher than the previous national election in 2005 (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2009). When we look at the figures according to parties (Table 1) we see that the first leading party called Det Norske Arbeidsparti (the Labor Party) had 49.5 percent of the total number of female candidates (279). In the other parties except for the conservative parties (Høyre as the Conservative Party and Fremskrittspartiet, FrP as the Progressive Party) 48 to 52 percent of candidates were females (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2009).

The percentages of female candidates in the beginning were not so high as today. The numbers have increased as the feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960s to 1970s (see below). In 1945 the percentage was only about 4 percent, went up to about 15 percent in the 1970s, and reached more than 34 percent already in 1985. After the 1990s the numbers have always been over 30 percent (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2009). The figures obviously show the fact that Norwegian women are eager to become representatives and actively contribute to the political arena.

**Table 1: Numbers and Percentages of Female Representatives in National Elections 1945-2009<sup>1</sup>**

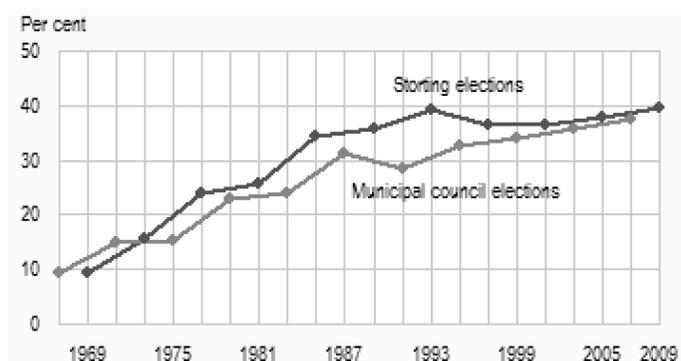
Year	Party All (%)	Ap women/all	Sp women/all	SV women/all	V women/all	H women/all
1945	4.67	4/76	0/10	0	1/20	1/25
1973	15.48	12/62	3/21	3/16	0/2	5/29
1985	34.40	30/71	2/12	3/6	0	15/50
1993	39.39	33/67	14/32	4/13	0/1	8/28
2001	36.36	20/43	6/10	11/23	0/2	12/38
2005	37.87	32/61	5/11	7/15	4/10	5/23
2009	42.2	49.5%	49.1%	51.1%	49.6%	44.3%

Name of the parties: Ap=Arbeidsparti as the Labor Party Sp=Sentraleparti as Center Party, SV=Sosialist Venstre as Social Democratic Party, V=Venstre as Democratic Party, H=Høyre as Conservative Party  
(Compiled from the homepage of Statistisk Sentralbyrå,  
<http://www.ssb.no/emner/00/01/10/stortingvalg/arkiv/tab-2005-10-27-06.html>,  
and <http://www.ssb.no/stvalgkand/tab-2009-06-26-02.html>)

### 2. 3 Female Representatives

It is only natural that there have been good results in these elections for the female candidates in Norway. Many female candidates have continuously been elected as representatives. The graph below shows the growth in the percentage of female representatives both in Parliament and the local government (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2010a), after the 1980s the percentages have always been around 30 to 40 percent.

Even after 2001, the percentages were always as high as 35 percent in total. Moreover, the percentages have been higher especially among the leading parties. In 2006 the Ap, the strongest leading party, gained 50 percent of female representatives out of 59 female



**Figure 1: The percentages of female representatives in the Storting (parliament) and municipal council elections from the 1960s to 2009**

(From the homepage of Statistisk Sentralbyrå  
[http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/minifakta\\_en/en/main\\_01.html#fig0104](http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/minifakta_en/en/main_01.html#fig0104))

<sup>1</sup> The data for 2009 only shows percentage of women; it does not show the total numbers of representatives.

candidates in the local election in 2005 (Frølandshagen, 2007). In that election, all the other parties got more than 37 percent of female representatives. This election was also remarkable because the three largest Norwegian parties (Ap, FrP and Høyre) had elected their female candidates to top positions, and other parties had their female candidates elected to more higher positions on the lists than ever before (Frølandshagen, 2007). The national election system in Norway has been a proportional representative system, and this is also said to have been one of the reasons why many women can be elected as representatives (Kinoshita, p.175).

In the latest election (2009) as many as 40 percent of female candidates were successfully elected, especially in the three leading parties (Ap, SV and Sp) (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2010c).

## 2. 4 Female Ministers

As already mentioned in the introduction, among Norwegian Ministers, we can find ten female ministers out of 20 in Jens Stoltenberg's second government (see Table 2). These female ministers are relatively young (having an average of 52.6 years of age), and most of them have families and children (Regjeringen, 2010b). The numbers of ministers have been almost as high today as in the end of the 1980s (Regjeringen, 2010c).

**Table 2: List of Female Ministers of Stoltenberg's Second Government (since October 2009 until today)**

Name of the department	Name	Party	Age
Minister of Labor	Hanne Bjurstrøm	Ap	50
Minister of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs	Lisbeth Berg-Hansen	Ap	47
Minister of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs	Rigmor Aasrud	Ap	50
Minister of Defense	Grete Faremo	Ap	55
Minister of Health and Care Services	Anne-Grete StrømErichsen	Ap	51
Minister of Local Government and Regional Development	Liv Signe Navarsete	Sp	52
Minister of Culture	Anniken Huitfeldt	Ap	41
Minister of Research and Higher Education	Tora Aasland	SV	68
Minister of Education	Kristin Halvorsen	SV	50
Minister of Transport and Communications	Magnhild Meltveit Kleppa	Sp	62

(Compiled from the homepage of the Norwegian Government <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep.html?id=933>)

### 3. Historical and Political Background of Norwegian Women's Participation in Politics

#### 3. 1 Universal Suffrage and Female Politicians from Earlier Time

As we can see in the Table 3, Norwegian women had already gained the right to vote in 1910 in local elections. Three years later in 1913, they got suffrage in the national election (Kinoshita, p.169). Norwegian women attained suffrage much earlier than in other western countries. For example, it was 1920 when women gained suffrage in the USA; 1928 in England, and not until after 1945 in both Japan and France when all women gained the equal right to vote equal to men (IPU). Norway had already elected the first female politician to the Parliament by 1921, and 21 years later in 1945, just after WWII ended, Norway welcomed its first female minister. Afterwards, two women became ministers in 1965 (Kinoshita, pp.171-172). The positive participation of women in politics was seen from quite early on.

**Table3: Historical Incidents regarding Women's Participation in Politics in Norway**  
(Milestones, 2003)

Year	Incidents
1910	Women got suffrage in local (municipal) election
1913	Women got suffrage in national election
1921	The first female politician in Parliament
1945	The first female minister elected
1965	Two female ministers elected
1971	Percentage of female representatives in the local government increased
1978	"Likestillingsloven" (The Gender Equality Act) was passed
1981	Gro Harlem Brundtland became the first female prime minister
1986	Share of women in the local government became 40%
1993	Share of women in Parliament became more than 40%

#### 3. 2 The Growth and the Effects of the New Women's Movement from the 1960s to the 1970s

Like other industrialized nations, Norway experienced a huge feminist movement from the 1960s to the 1970s (Sejersted, 2005), and the movement itself and activities affected by the movement had a strong influence on the Norwegian political systems as well. It is considered that feminist ideas had a major impact on public opinion and on political parties.

These feminism-related movements were said to be the most critical movements of that period, but another important movement took place in 1971 during the local election which made the percentages of the female candidates increase (Kinoshita, p.172). By that period, it was becoming more and more important for the political parties to increase the percentages of female candidates (as it was important to raise the status of women themselves in Norwegian society). In the 1970s many parties tried to increase the percentages of female candidates and representatives in the elections by making strong efforts to meet a gender

quota. For example, the Liberal Party (Venstre) introduced a quota in 1973, and the Social Democratic Party (Sosialist Venstre) introduced one in 1975 (the Labor Party introduced one later in 1983) (Ogawa, p.60). According to these efforts, for example, the percentage of women in local elections increased from 9.3 percent (in 1969) to 25.8 percent in 1981 (Ogawa, p.60).

Along with the women's movement and the increase in the percentage of female candidates, there had also been a revitalization of traditional women's organizations. There were protests and demonstrations, and the objectives of the movement spread to include demands for accessibility to and counseling on contraception and abortion, the right to education and to a job as well as rights for women working in the home (The Gender Equality Ombud, 2002).

These social demands and strong initiatives by women's organizations to achieve these demands enabled more women to participate in decision making positions in the political field, and female political representation matched both the social and political demands as they affected each other in the rapid growth of female candidates and representatives during this period.

### **3. 3 The Gender Equality Act**

In 1979, one of the most important laws regarding gender equality in Norway was passed. It is called "Likestillingsloven" (The Gender Equality Act) and has not only contributed to increasing the numbers of female politicians in Norway, but has become the basic principle of gender equality in Norwegian society.

The Act consists of 22 sections and its purpose is "to prevent discrimination of women in working life with respect to equal employment systems" (The Gender Equality Ombud, 2003). It generally aims to improve the position of women, but the most sensational section with political ramifications is the Section 21, which defines that

When a public body appoints or elects committees, governing boards, councils, boards, etc. with four or more members, each sex shall be represented by at least 40 percent of the members. Both sexes shall be represented in committees with two or three members. These provisions shall also apply to deputy members. (Regjeringen, 1981)

Although there are exceptions when applying the Act itself and the Section<sup>2</sup>, the Section in fact worked effectively or almost directly to influence public boards and councils to choose women as 40 percent of their members.

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2 The provisions of the section shall not apply to committees, etc. which pursuant to statute shall consist only of members from directly elected assemblies. There is also an exception in religious communities including the Church of Norway (the Lutheran State Church) and all other religious communities in the reason of freedom of religion of the country (The Gender Equality Ombud 2003).

### **3. 4 Gro Harlem Brundtland and her Strong Initiatives with the Gender Equality Act**

The Act was strictly acted upon or almost reinforced by a woman who came to the government in 1981. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the first female prime minister, chose women as half of all her ministers. Brundtland herself was a physician, but it was 1974 when her life as a politician started as she became the first Minister for Environment (Brundtland, p.79). In 1981 when she was 42, she became the first and youngest female prime minister in Norway. Although her first tenure ended after eight months, she was re-elected as prime minister in 1986. During her second government (1986 to 1989), she restructured both her own party (Ap, the Labour Party) and the government by reinforcing the gender quota. In her party, she required both genders be represented by at least 40 percent of the candidates. In her government she never had fewer than seven women (mostly eight women) in her 17 to 19-member cabinet during both the second and the third administrations which lasted from 1990 to 1996 (Regjeringen, 2010a; Regjeringen, 2010c). These policies by Brundtland influenced almost all Norwegian elections, and a top-down political system spread. After that, the percentages of female candidates in elections grew to 40 percent (in 1986), and in 1993 the percentages of female politicians became more than 40 (Aftenposten). We can say that the highly stable percentages of representatives and ministers in Norway through today have been strongly influenced by Brundtland's strong initiatives with the Gender Equality Act.

### **3. 5 The Multiplier Effects of these Factors to the Norwegian Politics**

Finally, the combinations of these factors worked as a multiplier effect to elevate women's status in Norwegian politics.

It is assumed that universal suffrage from early on made Norwegian women more politically conscious and led to higher voter turnouts in the elections. As a result, more women vote in elections and many female candidates have been elected as representatives in both national and local Norwegian governments.

Moreover, thanks to the increase of female politicians in the Parliament and the practices of these policies, there have been big changes in the major agenda items considered by the Parliament. Before Parliament had primarily been concerned with industry, energy, foreign policy or defence as often is the case in most nations, but now they have come to focus on social welfare, environment, gender equality, and working conditions (Kinoshita, p.176). Therefore Parliament has become more focused on issues important to lay people (including women), and this has enabled and urged more women to participate and become more involved in politics.

#### 4. Conclusion and Implications

As mentioned in this paper, in Norway women's political participation is and has been highly stable when looking at voter turnout, the number of candidates and representatives, and the number of ministers. The major historical and political causes were universal suffrage from earlier times, the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s, the important gender equality law from 1979, and the strong initiatives by Brundtland. These combinations of these factors affected each other, and due to them women's participation in elections remain much higher than other industrialized countries through today.

This paper only focused on the historical and political background, but it is also said that one of the big reason for the high rate of gender equality in Norway is that Norwegian society itself is more equal regardless of age, gender, or even social status, as they often claim their country is a socialist democracy (Kinoshita, p.175). This also indicates the possibilities of a relationship between social democratic states or welfare states and gender equality, following the arguments by Scandinavian authors that welfare states have a positive effect on gender relations (Mottier, 2004).

Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, Pateman points out the inefficiencies of arguments between political equality and liberal democratic claims, and argues there must be an examination of the "significance of sexual inequality and the patriarchal order of the liberal state for a democratic transformation of liberalism" (Pateman, 1989, p.211).

Moreover, these days there seems to be a tendency that "more" democratic governments elected in major industrialized nations are having trouble reading both international and domestic public opinions. This tendency can be seen in the U.S., Britain and Japan, which all have welcomed "more" democratic governments in the last two years.

It will be interesting to see whether these "more" democratic governments will accept or elect more women in the near future since, at least, they do not seem to keep women from becoming involved in politics.

In any case, it is still worth researching women's contribution to politics in democratic countries, and we must reevaluate the importance of women's contribution to politics especially in Japan, where women's political involvement is still weak compared to other industrialized democratic nations. Japan and other industrialized nations can learn a lot from Norway's example. This paper helps focus attention on a context where women's participation in politics is encouraged and has had and is having a huge impact.

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