



Iceland 1971: A year of Political Change

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The 1971 election was preceded by the longest unbroken coalition period in Icelandic politics. The IP-SDP government had obtained a unique position.* Not only was it the first coalition in four decades to survive the whole electoral term, it had twice maintained its majority in the Althing, in the 1963 and 1967 elections. When for the third time it faced an election, the IP-SDP coalition had served for twelve years, nearly half of Iceland's years as a republic.

Table I. The Electoral and Parliamentary Strength of the IP-SDP Coalition

		1959	1963	1967
Votes	IP	39.7	41.4	37.5
	SDP	15.2	14.2	15.7
	Total	54.9	55.6	53.2
Althing seats	IP	24	24	23
	SDP	9	8	9
	Total	33	32	32

Although the electoral strength of the coalition parties changed consecutively, their joint position and the total number of Althing seats remained quite stable. A similar stability characterized the opposition, who improved their position a little, both in electoral and parliamentary terms.

Table II. The Electoral and Parliamentary Strength of the Opposition Parties

		1959	1963	1967
Votes	PP	25.7	28.2	28.1
	PA	16.0	16.0	17.6
	Total	41.7	44.2	45.7
Althing seats	PP	17	19	18
	PA	10	9	10
	Total	27	28	28

The pattern of stability which the 1967 election seemed to reinforce soon began to show signs of breaking. These signs became an established fact before the 1971 parliamentary election with the emergence of two new parties whose purpose was to challenge the existing party system in Iceland.

* For a description of the Icelandic political parties during this period, see *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 6, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971, p. 195. IP = Independence Party, SDP = Social Democratic Party, PP = Progressive Party, PA = People's Alliance.

1. The Union of Liberals and Leftists

Following the 1967 election the chairman of the People's Alliance, Hannibal Valdimarsson, together with a group of his followers broke away from the party. Valdimarsson has a unique record in Icelandic politics. After he lost the chairmanship of the SDP (1952–1954) he split that party and established the PA, which in the beginning was an election coalition consisting of the United Socialist Party and the SDP splinter group. In the end the continuing dominance of the communist-oriented leadership circle so frustrated the chairman that he declared his attempt to make the PA a democratic socialist party a failure and decided to leave the alliance. Together with other radical elements which were dissatisfied with the existing Icelandic party system, the disillusioned part of the PA decided to form a new party under the leadership of Hannibal Valdimarsson: the Union of Liberals and Leftists (ULL).

The manifesto of this new party defines its chief purpose as the unification of all those who support social democratic and cooperative ideologies. Such a unification should, however, take place not only in the ULL, but also in yet another new party to be formed as soon as possible by amalgamating the ULL, the SDP, and the PP. Thus there would be established in Iceland a large social democratic party with close links with the trade unions and the cooperative movements, a party similar in nature to the labor parties in Scandinavia and Britain. The ULL consequently declared itself to be only a temporary phenomenon, a forerunner to a future party that would embrace the whole of the democratic left in Iceland.

2. The Candidature Party

The other new party that participated in the 1971 election was created spontaneously by a group of students from the University of Iceland, mainly from the Social Sciences and the Arts Departments. This 'party's' intention was to satirize the existing party system, especially the increasing similarity of all the parties and their prevailing propaganda practices. A mock organization and a manifesto were concocted which parodied the ideologies of all the established parties. The Candidature Party (CaP) put up lists of candidates in three constituencies; it took part in radio and TV debates; and it made itself felt in many other ways, always trying, often successfully, to make the 'serious' candidates look ridiculous. The Candidature Party provided a means for young radical people to express their protests against the barrenness of the political debate.

3. The Results

The results of the 1971 election confirmed the general dissatisfaction that the appearance of the new parties had indicated. Furthermore, Iceland experienced its most drastic

Table III. The 1971 Election: General Results

	Parties					
	IP	PP	SDP	PA	ULL	CaP
Votes						
Total	38 170	26 645	11 020	18 055	9 395	2 110
Percent	36.2	25.3	10.5	17.1	8.9	2.0
Althing seats						
Constituencies	20	17	2	7	3	
Total	22	17	6	10	5	

election changes in many decades. These changes are especially noteworthy because they amount to the single most marked move to the left in recent Icelandic history.

The losers of the 1971 election were the coalition partners and the Progressive Party, which fluctuated between center and left positions on the most prominent issues.

The SDP suffered the greatest setback of the election. The proportion of its defeat was remarkable, equaling the total changes for *all* the parties in the 1963 election. There are three probable reasons for the SDP's loss: 1) the unpopularity of the IPP-SDP coalition was borne chiefly by the SDP this time, whereas in the previous election it had been the IP's lot; 2) a great number of the party's traditional followers had become so frustrated by its long partnership with a right-wing party that they decided to express their feelings in a strong way (the ULL and the PA undoubtedly both benefited from this sentiment); 3) the reluctance of the SDP leadership to support the chief theme of the ULL campaign, the unification issue, which called for unification of all those who support the social democratic and the cooperative ideologies into a new party.

The PP was subjected to the second largest defeat in the election and was brought down to its 1959 level. The long period of opposition thus came to an end without any electoral or parliamentary benefits. Although the PP had been the chief opposition party, the wind of change that characterized the election moved past it and farther on to the left. It is interesting to note that the PP lost proportionally most in Iceland's rural constituencies, which is where the party's electoral strength has traditionally lain.

The IP also experienced some of the unpopularity of the coalition, although its share was considerably less than the SDP's. The coalition's election pattern since 1959 was thus broken. Now both partners moved in the same direction, whereas before they had each in turn been subjected to losses. All the same, the 1971 result was a great disappointment to the IP. It had never in its entire history received such a low proportion of votes cast. The losses in the 1971 election occurred almost exclusively in those constituencies outside the southwest Reykjavik urban area. Thus the two parties, the IP and the PP, which in the past have been the strongest contenders in the Icelandic rural regions, seem to be losing ground.

The winners of the 1971 election were the two most left-wing parties in Icelandic politics and the exercise in political satire conducted by the students, the Candidature Party.

The ULL. It is very rare in Icelandic politics that a new party gains such a large proportion of the total votes cast and obtains so many seats in the Althing. The ULL's result has been exceeded only by those parties created by an amalgamation including at least one previously existing party. The ULL's victory indicated a vote of support for its unification policies, a protest against the long-lasting partnership of the SDP and the IP, and a strong personal following enjoyed by the party's leaders. In his constituencies Hannibal Valdimarsson gained a quarter of the total votes cast, a unique personal victory.

The PA. Despite the split which preceeded the establishment of the ULL, the PA maintained its former electoral and parliamentary strength. In terms of Icelandic politics this was an impressive performance. The main reasons for this victory are most likely twofold: first the general movement to the left, especially among the new voters, and, second, the widely shared belief that the most productive way to defeat the government was to vote for those opposition parties which could utilize all their votes to obtain some of the additional seats which, in order to achieve greater proportionality, are distributed after the counting of the constituency seats. This aspect of the Icelandic electoral system undoubtedly also benefited the ULL.

The CaP. Although the electioneering of the students who created the humorous CaP was in every respect of a highly flippant nature and the 'party's' lists of candidates put up in only three constituencies, the CaP received 2.0 percent of the total votes cast in

Table IV. The 1971 Election: Results in Constituencies

	Reykjavik	West	Western Peninsula	Northwest	Northeast	East	South	Southwest
IP								
Votes	18 884	1 930	1 499	1 679	2 939	1 146	3 601	6 492
Percent	42.6	29.9	30.1	32.6	25.9	19.8	38.9	36.4
PP								
Votes	6 766	2 483	1 510	2 006	4 677	2 564	3 052	3 587
Percent	15.2	37.2	30.3	39.0	41.1	44.4	32.9	20.1
SDP								
Votes	4 468	723	464	566	1 147	293	739	2 620
Percent	10.1	10.9	9.3	11.0	10.1	5.1	8.0	14.7
PA								
Votes	8 851	932	277	897	1 215	1 435	1 392	3 056
Percent	20.0	14.0	5.6	17.4	10.7	24.9	15.0	17.1
ULL								
Votes	4 017	602	1 229		1 389	336	305	1 517
Percent	9.1	9.0	24.7		12.2	5.8	3.3	8.5
CaP								
Votes	1 353						178	579
Percent	3.0						1.9	3.2

the election, its share in the capital being one third of the votes obtained by the ULL. Even the authors of this political satire were embarrassed by their success. Their parody of the party politics in Iceland had proved too good. The Candidature Party, needless to say, ceased to exist on the night of the election; there remained only the myth: how the Icelandic parties had successfully been satirized.

The defeat of the IP-SDP coalition led to the formation of a new left-wing government headed by the PP and including the PA and the ULL. In the detailed program issued by the new government, the extension of the fisheries limits and the termination of the defense treaty with the USA aroused the greatest interest.

The 1971 election not only produced a left-wing government, it also gave the unification issue a new impetus. The ULL instituted formal discussions with the SDP and the PP on the possibility of a reconstruction of the social democratic and cooperative forces: the creation of a new party to replace the other three. The outcome of these discussions is, however, two years after the election, still highly uncertain. Whatever their final result, the very existence of these discussions has brought to the forefront a fundamental challenge to the Icelandic party system.

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