

Pathways to Power: How Green Parties Join Governments

Article by Simon Otjes

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As some Green parties gain ground in Europe they must rethink their relationship to power. Taking steps towards entering executive government, it becomes increasingly important to consider what different routes to government mean for their strategy and identity. From the question of electoral pacts with other forces to where Greens sit on the left-right spectrum, there are many aspects to consider. Political scientist Simon Otjes analyses common dilemmas and sketches out two well-trodden paths to power from Finland and Sweden, asking what Dutch Green party GroenLinks has to learn.

Today Sweden and Finland are among a handful of European countries where Green parties are in government, though the routes taken to power in these two countries are quite different. The Finnish Green Alliance was the first Green party to enter in office in a Western country, joining the “rainbow coalition” of left and right-wing parties in 1995. On 6 June 2019, they again entered government as part of a broad coalition of Social Democrats, the agrarian Centre Party, the Left Alliance, and the party for the Swedish-language minority. As part of this new formation, the Greens now run the foreign, home, and environment ministries.

In 2014 the Swedish Green party went into coalition with the Social Democrats. The parties have shared productive relations for years, ever since Greens began providing support to social democratic minority cabinets in the 1990s. In recent years the two parties have run as partners in elections, presenting themselves as a red-green alternative to the centre-right alliance of Christian Democrats, Farmers, Liberals, and Conservatives. These two power blocs dominate Swedish politics. When the left-wing bloc won in 2015, the Greens joined the cabinet. After the 2018 election the red-green bloc struck a deal with the Liberals and Farmers, and once again the Greens were part of the government. This time four ministerial posts were given to the Greens: environment and climate, development cooperation, housing, and gender equality.

Two paths to power

To date, Green parties in Europe have achieved power by following these two distinct paths. The Swedish path is based on a pre-election pact, made between a Green party and another (often a social democratic party) to govern jointly. As well as in Sweden, Greens in France, Italy, Denmark, and, recently, New Zealand have joined cabinets by taking this route. Since the 1970s Green parties have been part of coalition governments on 20 occasions, and in 11 of which they had a pre-election pact. Blocs are fundamental to how politics is done in countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. But political mavericks like Alexis Tsipras in Greece and Emmanuel Macron in France have also used pre-election pacts to gain power elsewhere.

The Finnish path to power sees Green parties run independently. A precondition for government power in this case is that the Greens have a moderate manifesto that allows them to work with both the Left and the Right. Green parties have entered parliaments at general elections 120 times since the 1970s. Of these, the Greens ran 100 times without an electoral pact with other left-of-centre parties, joining cabinets nine times after having operated as free

players. The Finnish Greens have participated in government five times but always with parties of the Right. Within the Green political family, the Finnish Greens are more moderate, certainly on taxes and welfare policies, and thus can accept broad coalition governments, which have always included at least one right-wing party. Only the German Greens have managed to enter government that did not include right-wing participation without first having a pre-electoral agreement, joining the Social Democrat-led Gerhard Schröder government in 1998.

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The Belgian Green parties, Agalev (now Groen) and Ecolo, entered government in 1999 with Social Democrats and Liberals. In 1999, they also joined purple coalitions in Flanders, Wallonia, and in the French-speaking community. After Belgian elections in May 2019, the Greens have entered government in Brussels, and in Wallonia and the French-speaking community. In each case, the coalition included either Christian Democrats or Liberals. The Luxembourgish Greens have also joined purple coalitions and the Irish Greens even went as far as to form a coalition with two right-wing parties.

The pattern of broad cooperation is similar in subnational governments: the German Greens are in power in half of the federal states and rule in a wide variety of constellations. Today they govern just as often with the liberal Free Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Union, and the Social Democrats, a fact that requires considerable flexibility on their part. In the Netherlands, GroenLinks often governs at the municipal and provincial level in coalitions featuring both left and right-wing parties. Only in a few municipalities are the Dutch Greens able to govern with left-wing partners. In Amsterdam GroenLinks governs with social-liberal D66 and the social-democratic Labour Party, but in Rotterdam, it sits alongside the Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Labour. Wider coalitions are more common in more sparsely populated areas. In the small town of Oostzaan, just north of Amsterdam, GroenLinks governs with the conservative-liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). This year, the GroenLinks entered in 8 out of 12 provincial governments, each time in coalitions including at least one right-wing party. All in all, if a left-wing party wants to be part of the cabinet as a free actor, it must be willing to compromise with right-wing parties.

GroenLinks's attempts at national coalitions

Both the Swedish and Finnish perspectives on coalition building can illuminate the history of GroenLinks's alliances in the Netherlands. The party has been on the threshold of government participation three times: in 2006, 2010, and 2017. On each of these occasions, it had to enter talks with either the Christian Democrats or the conservative-liberal VVD. The ideological distance between GroenLinks and these parties is large. To be able to pursue the Finnish route, where a Green party positions itself in the centre ground, open to right-leaning coalitions, these distinctions were too big. In 2017, GroenLinks abandoned talks because of disagreements over migration policy. In 2010, GroenLinks's ties with liberal d66 were positive and its manifesto did have some points in common with right-wing parties. But vvd broke off negotiations to make room for larger cuts to public spending, eventually seeking parliamentary support from the extreme-right populist Party for Freedom. In 2006 large differences on environmental and economic issues were reason enough for GroenLinks not to enter into coalition talks. In short, GroenLinks has always found it difficult to reach substantive deals with right-wing parties. It is not surprising therefore, that the Christian Union, a small Dutch party much more moderate than the Greens on social and economic issues, replaced GroenLinks in government both in 2006 and 2017. The Christian Union is much

more pragmatic than GroenLinks. Even for issues that really matter to the party in the field of family law and medical ethics, Christian Union accepts the status quo. On climate change, the most fundamental concern for GroenLinks, the status-quo is simply unacceptable.

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From the Swedish electoral coalition perspective there is another explanation for GroenLinks not joining the government. Before the 2017 general election VVD, the Christian Democrats, and D66 agreed to form the core of a new coalition, known as the “engine bloc”. GroenLinks was left with the choice of joining them or not. Had GroenLinks joined forces with one of the other parties at the table (an agreement with D66 was conceivable at the time), it would have entered the grouping with additional weight and the migration issue would not have become the stumbling block it turned out to be. A lack of left-of-centre cooperation also explains why the Greens did not enter cabinet after the 2006 general election, relations between GroenLinks and Labour being poor at the time.

The only time a precursor of GroenLinks joined a coalition government, relations with d66 and Labour were much better. In 1971 and 1972 the Political Party of Radicals (which in time merged into the Greens) entered into a ‘progressive agreement’ with the two parties, presenting a joint manifesto and a shadow cabinet and bringing about the Den Uyl cabinet after the 1972 election.

It’s not all about size

There is a much heard misconception that a party with a large vote share always ends up in the cabinet and that for GroenLinks what matters is to become the largest party. Obviously, a party with only a small number of seats is not going to lead government. But in Dutch politics the whole point is to count to 76 (out of 150 seats in parliament), and government participation with fewer seats is not impossible. Christian Union now sits in cabinet for the second time in 15 years, even though it has never held more than six parliamentary seats. Even a handful of seats can be important to a majority: Green parties in France and Italy entered coalition governments several times with less than 2 per cent of seats. In Austria, Luxembourg, and Denmark, Green parties with well over 10 per cent of seats have been excluded from government participation. In 2017 in New Zealand, despite losing almost half of their seats, the Greens supplied ministers for the very first time.

Even winning the largest number of seats does not guarantee government participation. In 1971, 1977, and 1982 the largest party in the Dutch Parliament, Labour, did not end up in power. In fact, one of the two largest parties has not been in government after most elections since 1967. Politics being all about majorities, the fundamental question is always whether parties can work together on the basis of a common program and mutual trust.

Political clout

What does this mean for the strategic positioning of GroenLinks? Analysis indicates three possibilities: one, the party may want to join the cabinet; two, it steers a clear left-wing course; or three, it operates independently. Based on the experiences of Green parties in Western Europe, these three strategies are hard to combine. Without left-wing allies a Green party with an outspoken leftist profile stands little chance of joining a cabinet. Only if a Green party is part of a pre-election pact – the Swedish route – is there room for a far more left-wing course. The Finnish route of operating independently requires programmatic overlap with centre or right-wing parties. A party ambitious enough to want to govern cannot both position itself on the Left and simultaneously operate on its own.

Two options are therefore open to GroenLinks. On the one hand there is a Finnish strategy, where a party chooses a more moderate course. Fundamental to this strategy would be a manifesto that is compatible with the right-leaning parties' commitment to small government, austerity, and market solutions. Around 2010, the GroenLinks manifesto indeed had such points of connection with the liberal VVD. Back then the party endorsed liberalising dismissal regulations, raising the pension age, implementing a student loan scheme, shorter unemployment benefits, increasing patient fees in healthcare, and merging provincial governments. Since then the party has moved away from these positions as VVD-led governments implemented many of these reforms.

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If returning to a more centrist course is unattractive and yet the aim is still to enter government, the other option requires strengthening ties with other left-wing parties. Such pre-electoral coalitions do not occur often in the Netherlands. If it is to be tried, such a left-wing alliance should present a common manifesto that would form the basis of their coalition agreement and perhaps indicate who would become minister. Constructing a left-wing alliance that could achieve government power is not easy. A coalition of Labour and Greens would not be large enough (these parties are both polling at 20 per cent combined). To have a shot at a majority it would be necessary to include both parties to the left of these two, the Socialist Party and the Party for the Animals, and to the right, D66 and Christian Union.

In spring 2019, GroenLinks leader Jesse Klaver called for his “left-wing brothers and sisters to form a common front against the Right.” If GroenLinks is to enter government, we can only hope that such left-wing cooperation does not just remain rhetoric but becomes reality.

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