

Language, Party Leadership, and the Construction of Greenlandic Identity

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A Greenlandic Gap

Greenland serves as a useful case study of the importance of language politics in the formation of national identity and the development of democratic politics. Votes in 1979 and 2008 asserted Greenlandic autonomy from the Danish state.¹ These votes entail the creation of a Greenlandic government and the unraveling of the Danish “unity of the realm.” Greenlandic national identity began as an anti-colonial social movement. Since 1979, the promotion of Greenlandic identity has accompanied local political development.²

Denmark still looms large in Greenlandic politics. The findings of this study describe the symbolic importance of language in Greenlandic identity today. While Danish remains widespread,³ Greenlandic has been Greenland’s sole official language since 2009.⁴ Greenland’s *de facto* bilingualism does not mean that both languages enjoy equal legal status; the country’s linguistic division is a result of the island’s colonial past.

Colonial History in Greenland

Greenlandic history provides critical context for home rule, including the Danish presence on Greenland and the economic status of Greenland. The change in context has fueled a crisis in identity that later underpinned the Greenlandic movement for home rule.

Greenlandic Inuit, including Kalaallit, Tunumiit, and Inughuit, are part of a broader group that spans the North American Arctic. However, much of Greenland’s history has been specific to its interactions with Denmark; this context has created conditions for political mobilization beyond those in other parts of the Arctic. Starting in the 1720s, Denmark gradually asserted control over Greenland.⁵ Trading posts were key features of early Danish influence.⁶

The changes in settlement during this period set the stage for later cultural change. Significant evangelization also occurred and the printing press took root in Greenland.

Greenlandic was widely used in print at a time when this was uncommon for most languages indigenous to the Americas. The development of a local press and the expansion of the Royal Greenland Trading Department encouraged the development of national identity in Greenland.

Second World War and Danish Direct Rule

During the Second World War, Greenland was occupied by the United States. This occupation marked the end of a period dominated by the Royal Greenland Trading Department and the beginning of modern political administration in Greenland. This disruption in the status of Greenland led to direct Danish rule and rapid societal change, setting the stage for Danicization. After the war, Denmark faced calls for decolonization at the newly-formed United Nations.⁷ Instead, Denmark incorporated Greenland as a municipality.

The 1970s and the vote for Home Rule

With the 1953 incorporation as a Danish municipality, direct government from Copenhagen was established.⁸ Schools and hospitals were built by the Danish government. While health and education did improve, Greenlandic life became tied to the Danish state.⁹ The incorporation as a municipality gave Greenlanders legal equality to Danes, but it also brought Greenland closer to Copenhagen's direct rule.¹⁰ Popular mobilization against this direct administration led to the referendum on home rule.

The use of Danish as a medium of instruction contributed to a shared discontent with the Greenlandic municipal administration. Historical trends such as urbanization and increased Greenlandic-Danish interaction sparked social and political organization in Greenland. Greenlandic identity emerged to counter the perceived Danicization of Greenlandic society.¹¹ Greenlandic identity, in emphasizing symbols such as the ulu and traditional dress, challenged norms promoted by the municipal administration.

The 1979 referendum marked the culmination of a decade of political organization in Greenland. The Parliament, or *Inatsisartut*, was created, and control over domestic policy was devolved to the Greenlandic government.¹² Under home rule, party leadership plays a significant role in Greenlandic politics.¹³ With the vote for home rule in 1979, the Greenlandic Government, or *Naalakkersuisut*, began to promote the use of the Greenlandic language in place of Danish. The Greenlandic Government plays an active role in Greenland's commercial sector, where subsidies are critical in industries such as consumer goods, transportation, and fuel. The block grant retains its significance for the Greenlandic government and economy. The Home Rule Act sparked changes in the economy, language policy, communal politics apropos the Danish-speaking community, and the status of Greenland as part of the Danish realm.

A Party System

Greenland's first political parties predated the adoption of parliamentary democracy. Major groupings of parties include the social-democratic left and the liberal right. Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit both criticized the municipal administration from the left, while Atassut was founded as a unionist alternative to Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit. In 1979, these pressure groups became the dominant political parties in the new Greenlandic parliament.

Although Siumut has remained the largest political party since independence, Inuit Ataqatigiit has won key victories in 2009 and 2021. The gradual convergence of Inuit Ataqatigiit, Siumut, and Atassut around support for economic subsidies and state-run companies has created conditions for differentiation among cultural issues, and the new equilibrium has allowed for new parties to exert pressure from the outside.

Newer political parties have splintered off of these parties. Demokraatit emerged as a reaction to Atassut's economic alignment with Siumut. Naleraq and Nunatta Qitornai are both

associated with former members of Siumut.¹⁴ Suleqatigiissitsisut was founded by former members of Demokraatit. The use of a national proportional representation system allows for these splinter parties to achieve representation; parties such as the staunchly pro-independence Naleraq exert electoral pressure on their larger counterparts. While Atassut, Siumut, and Inuit Ataqtigiit have sought closer cooperation, smaller parties challenge this reconciliation.

Today, Siumut and Inuit Ataqtigiit most clearly continue Greenland's separatist tradition. Atassut has gradually moderated its economic policies, so as to form coalitions with Siumut and Inuit Ataqtigiit. New parties such as Demokraatit and Naleraq exert pressure on Siumut and Atassut, respectively. Table A compares Greenlandic parties.

Table A

Party Name	Creation	Language Policy	Governing Coalition (Dates in Coalition)	Status of Greenland	Left/Right Affiliation
Inuit Ataqtigiit	1976	Formerly: Greenlandic as an official language Today: Bilingualism	Yes 2009-2013, 2021 - present	Independence	Left - NGLA
Siumut	1977	Promote Greenlandic as an official language	No (1979 - 2009, 2013 - 2021)	Independence	Left- Social Democratic Group
Atassut	1978	Bilingualism (No English)	No (2018 - 2019)	Union, with greater autonomy	Right - Venstre
Demokraatit	2002	Bilingualism	No (2020 - 2021)	Union	Right - Venstre
Naleraq	2014	Greenlandic as an official language	Yes May - Sep 2018, 2021 - present	Independence (Quickly!)	No affiliation (Populist)
Nunatta Qitormai	2017	Unclear	No (2018 - 2021)	Independence (Quickly!)	No affiliation (Populist)
Suleqatigiissitsisut	2018	Bilingualism (and English)	No	Union	No affiliation (Social-liberal)

Summary of Findings

This study identifies an increased prominence of cultural politics since 1979. Although Greenlandic political parties still describe Greenlandic identity in contrast to a Danish identity, Greenlandic political debates have widened in scope to include issues such as education, resource use, and the status of Greenlandic and Danish. These changes in political orientation coincided with a change in the status of Greenland, which now forms part of a common realm with Denmark and the Faroe Islands. Danicization is no longer present in publications of political parties. Greenlandic identity, originally promoted by Inuit Ataqatigiit and Siumut as a remedy for Danicization, has been altered by the maturation of Greenlandic home rule into a stable political system, albeit a system with a strong focus on sociocultural concerns.¹⁵ Because Greenland's two largest parties began as social movements, language and independence remain contentious issues, even as positions on economic issues have converged.

The Political Value of Greenlandic Identity

Greenlandic identity is as much a result of the Danish presence as it is a product of Greenlandic culture. The development of Greenlandic identity has given Greenland new prominence in international affairs, as exemplified by the American consular presence in Nuuk. In the remainder of the North American Arctic, local identity has not been expressed as fervently as in Greenland. Inuit dialogue has only recently crossed national borders, in forums such as the Arctic Council. Debates over language, governance, and space have fostered a social identity in Greenland well beyond the scope of other Inuit groups. The development of national identity allows for diplomatic and economic engagement with foreign governments and the articulation of political demands in a familiar parliamentary format.

Politics of Ethnicity supplanted by Language Politics

Early Greenlandic national identity took root independently from the local political leadership which had coalesced during Greenland's incorporation as a municipality. Activist groups such as Inuit Ataqatigiit emphasized a variety of cultural aspects of Greenlandic tradition, such as subsistence hunting and social solidarity, in apparent contrast to Denmark's integration efforts.¹⁶ Early Greenlandic identity thus emphasized the Inuit lifestyle. This continued focus on protecting or restoring a lifestyle corrupted by modernizing influence may reflect a Greenlandic "counter-identity."

Forty years later, it is no longer feasible to conflate office work with the destruction of Greenlandic culture. The shift has disrupted the Greenlandic movement for self-determination, as it has become more difficult to articulate differences in lifestyle and culture between Greenlanders and Danes living in Greenland. Because Greenlandic Inuit and Danish Greenlanders share more of their material culture, contrasts in lifestyle are no longer salient.

Although Greenlandic separatism still relies on signifiers of Greenlandic identity, symbols have changed.¹⁷ In light of the increasingly mixed ethnicity and culture of the Greenlandic populace, as well as the practical difficulty of stridently opposing the chiefly Danish technical class in areas including education, health, engineering, and transportation, the explicitly anti-Danish element of Greenlandic separatism declined. Although Greenlandic political organizations continue to demarcate Greenlandic identity against a Danish backdrop, the ethnic distinction between Danish and Greenlanders of 1979 was supplanted by a political debate over economic self-sufficiency and cultural positions on issues including language and education.

Party Politics

Although Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit were staunchly anti-colonial in affiliation, the appeal of Greenlandic identity was not limited to a traditional left-right divide.¹⁸ Over time, new political organizations have emerged to articulate different visions, particularly on the issue of economic liberalism. Greenlandic-led economic modernization is taken as a given today, in contrast to the skeptical view of modernization that gained prominence during the 1979 campaign.

Symbols such as language foster the development of national identity. National identity sometimes corresponds with political boundaries. Themes such as self-determination, linguistic reform, and economic self-sufficiency have helped parties differentiate themselves. Because the adoption of Danish in education disrupted the use of Greenlandic under the municipal government before 1979, the protection of Greenlandic was prioritized under home rule.^{19, 20}

Language in the Political Ideation of Greenlandic Parties

The development of Greenlandic identity from a “counter-identity” into a national identity is incomplete. A conscious distinction from Danish norms remains important, even as the role of the Danish government in Greenlandic society has waned. The corresponding shift in political parties—from outside pressure to a governing majority—has already entailed significant changes in bilateral relations with Denmark and the management of the Greenlandic language. Parties retain a rhetorical opposition to Denmark, though they now cooperate closely with the Danish government.

The Danish language saw its protections stripped away to the minimum permitted under the Home Rule Act, but the adoption of Greenlandic has taken decades to implement.

Greenlandic knowledge of Danish was already high at the beginning of the integration process. Because Greenlandic speakers have viewed Danish fluency as a path to social advancement, Danish has retained its higher status.²¹

Party Platforms Compared

Parties now describe policy priorities in freely-available documents.²² Although Inuit Ataqatigiit does describe Danish and English as educational priorities, it also emphasizes “developing and protecting our language”²³ as well as the importance of educational attainment.²⁴

These policy declarations share several key themes. They focus on the need for educational reform as a vehicle for societal change. In this light, policy reform is symbolic of wider Greenlandic aspirations. Although salient concerns such as Danicization have been addressed by the move to home rule, Greenland remains in close association with Denmark. In Parliament, this arrangement is as necessary as it is uncomfortable.

The Home Rule Act of 1979 includes provisions guaranteeing the teaching of Danish, without an equivalent provision for instruction in Greenlandic.²⁵ The act establishes Greenlandic as the primary language and calls for the adoption of Greenlandic in education.²⁶ A language board has curated the Greenlandic language.²⁷ However, the slow progress in language education has allowed parties to repeatedly debate educational reform and language education as an avenue to political success.

Although the fervent adoption of Greenlandic in most aspects of public life does not fully resolve the societal challenges that have made Greenlandic a marginal language, Greenlandic speakers now enjoy a degree of stability thanks to government support.²⁸ However, Greenlandic speakers are underrepresented in universities and the Greenlandic bureaucracy. This difficulty is a continuation of imbalances in education, capital, and mobility that existed during the municipal

period. It is precisely in the government and education, however, where the promotion of the Greenlandic language is at its most intense. Language policy thus serves as a continued focus of political mobilization.

Language Debates Today

Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit now share many policy goals, but the parties' disagreements become prominent during Greenland's parliamentary elections. These two parties share a common goal of political independence, but Siumut Prime Minister Kim Kielsen's tenure from 2018 to 2020 was dominated by economic and cultural debate rather than separatist mobilization.

Prime Minister Kielsen's Greenlandic-language education requirement demonstrated Siumut's commitment to Greenlandic culture.²⁹ By protecting the Greenlandic language, Kielsen attempted to assuage broader discomfort with the decline of Inuit culture. Kielsen's push for the greater adoption of Greenlandic reflects many policy issues common to the 1979 referendum.

Ms. Chemnitz Larsen, Folketing representative of Inuit Ataqatigiit, argued that the focus on linguistic homogeneity as a sign of Greenlandic identity caused inadvertent harm to Greenland's economic and social prospects.³⁰ Kielsen's policy of linking visa approval to language class attendance, though not itself relevant to the economy, identity, or culture of Greenland, served as a provocative wedge issue for political parties.

The value of language as the keystone of Greenlandic identity is balanced against the value of Danish technical aid. Both Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit can thus support Greenlandic identity while demarcating opposite stances on an issue not directly relevant to Greenlandic independence. During Kim Kielsen's tenure, Siumut promoted the Greenlandic language as a symbol of Greenlandic identity. By encouraging the use of Greenlandic, Kielsen protected Greenlandic identity while differentiating Greenland from Denmark.

Inuit Ataqatigiit emphasized Greenlandic self-sufficiency as a path to independence. By promoting immigration as an economic strength, Chemnitz was able to promote Greenlandic identity even while opposing Kielsen's cultural-protectionist measures. Because of this differentiation in the policy priorities of Greenland, both Kielsen and Chemnitz Larsen are able to promote the growth and independence of Greenland, despite their differences in rhetoric.

Leadership Debates in Siumut

In October and November 2020, identity and language politics also served to differentiate candidates in the Siumut leadership election.³¹ Parliament discussed a new definition of Greenlandic status, which was ultimately rejected.³² During the campaign, Siumut also attempted to restrict the voting rights of arriving Danes, although this measure was blocked by courts.³³ Kielsen was defeated by Erik Jensen in a leadership election. This campaign highlighted issues of Greenlandic identity, including separatism and language.

The Greenlandic-Danish relationship is still an important factor in Greenlandic identity today. For this reason, cultural policy such as language protection competes with staffing the Greenlandic government on the stage of Greenlandic identity.³⁴ Jensen, promoting both tolerance and the rapid independence of Greenland, was able to win the leadership vote.

Kielsen's rise involved Siumut regaining the majority from Inuit Ataqatigiit. His promotion of cultural distinction helped distinguish his government from previous administrations. Like previous Prime Ministers, Kielsen's inability to translate cultural separation into political separation undermined his platform.

Conclusion

Greenland serves as a useful case study of the development of political identity. Policies that promote Greenlandic in education and governance serve as symbols of national unity, even

while symbols such as lifestyle no longer bind political leadership to the Greenlandic populace. The shift away from identitarian politics in lifestyle has been accompanied by an increase in identitarian politics in language and education. This reflects a cultural modernization in Greenland which vindicates the campaigns of the 1970s. Development continues to threaten the Greenlandic lifestyle championed in the 1970s. Danish is still the language of the very university where the Language Board regulates the Greenlandic language. Greenland has achieved real progress in self-governance, the introduction of legal protections for Greenlandic, and the expression of local culture.

The Greenlandic language remains an important symbol of Greenlandic identity, hence its new status as Greenland's sole official language. Although Danish is still necessary for the Greenlandic government, its association with the destruction of Greenlandic culture taints the discussion of language policy today. Even under home rule, Greenland's culture is increasingly mixed with that of Denmark. Despite the complete reinvention of Greenlandic society in the past hundred years, the Greenlandic language now holds a special status as a symbol of Greenlandic culture.

Greenland continues to modernize, even as separation from Denmark remains elusive.³⁵ Cultural and economic issues are increasingly tied to political independence. Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit have campaigned for independence since the vote for home rule, yet Greenland remains an autonomous territory of Denmark regardless of the electoral victor. The active debate between political parties foretells Greenlandic debates which will become more prominent over time: the role of the Danish language in Greenland, the logistical challenges of constructing a Greenlandic society, and the symbolic value of the Greenlandic language. These questions reflect

on the historical circumstances that gave rise to Greenlandic identity, as well as the current political status of Greenland.

Policy Recommendations

For Siumut and Inuit Ataqatigiit, the cultural debate that began during the 1970s has continued to the present. These issues loom large, even as independence has become attainable. Greenlandic parties must articulate a version of Greenlandic identity that exists in its own right, rather than wielding Greenlandic identity as a critique of political policy.

Resolving the socio-economic factors that endanger the Greenlandic language will reduce the salience of a threatened Greenlandic language as a stand-in for a threatened Greenlandic identity. By creating new educational resources in Greenlandic and expanding the reach of secondary education in smaller settlements, Greenland's government can educate more Greenlandic students while reducing the need for these students to rely on Danish. The creation of a Greenlandic-language constitution is an important step in the use of Greenlandic in government and law. These measures will help Greenlanders use Greenlandic in their professional life. Putting Danish and Greenlandic on even ground will reduce the perception that Greenland is under threat, alleviating some of the social pressure that makes language a contentious political topic in Greenland. Resolving the cultural unease that has haunted Greenland since the 1970s is a prerequisite for establishing the functional Greenlandic society that was first imagined more than fifty years ago.

Footnotes

1. Moller, Aquigssiaq. "Language policy and language planning after the establishment of the home rule in Greenland." 177.
2. Emmerson, Charles. "The Future History of the Arctic." 263 and Dahl, "Identity, Urbanization and Political Demography in Greenland," 129. Greenlandic autonomy in policing and education was increased in 2009, pursuant to the vote for Home Rule in 2008. Greenlandic was declared the sole official language.
3. Gad, "The Islands of the Danish Realm," 111.
4. Lov om Grønlands Selvstyre, § 20.
5. Lund Jensen, Einar, Raahauge, Kristine, and Gulløv, Hans Christian. "Cultural Encounters at Cape Farewell," 123 and 133.
6. *ibid.*, 122 and 128.
7. Sjúrdur Skaale, *The Right to National Self-Determination*, 110-20.
8. Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*, 441.
9. Ulrik Pram Gad. *Greenland: a post-Danish sovereign nation state in the making*, 6.
10. Ulrik Pram Gad, *Greenland: a post-Danish sovereign nation state in the making*, 6, 9 and 10. Prior to the incorporation as a municipality, the KGH, or Royal Greenland Trading Department, was tasked with the administration of Greenland. This enterprise prioritized exports of sealskin and whale oil. Although trade did increase, economic development did not occur. Minimal economic infrastructure was constructed during this time. The KGH's Greenlandic-owned successor, KNI, still plays a substantial role in the Greenlandic economy today. A subsequent referendum in 2008 increased the autonomy of the Greenlandic government, as discussed in the sections on language status and education.
11. Peterson, *On ethnic identity in Greenland*, 322.
12. Lov om Grønlands Hjemmestyre, 1979.
13. Gad, "National Identity Politics and Postcolonial Sovereignty Games: Greenland, Denmark, and the European Union." 47.
14. Qujaukitsoq and Hammond (NQ) are both former members of Siumut. Hans Enoksen (PN) formerly served as prime minister, as a member of Siumut. For publicly available documents relevant to this table, please see https://oqaasileriffik.gl/category/annual_reports/, <https://sulesam.gl/valgprogram/sprog/>, <https://demokraatit.gl/partiprogram-2018/>, <https://ia.gl/google426c9ea506fcddea.html/gl/politik/deklaration-fra-landsmode-2017/>, <https://naleraq.gl/da/seneste-nyheder/tiden-er-inde/>
15. Greenlandic Independence remains an important priority of the largest Greenlandic political parties, but this goal is not universally-shared. See Table A.
16. Cf. the adoption of the ulu as a symbol of Inuit Ataqtigiit. The 2014 film Sume: Mumisitsinerup Nipaa provides a telling but non-academic account of the 1970s, when Greenlandic university students began to study- and gain a Greenlandic consciousness- in Denmark, rather than in Greenland.
17. Petersen, "On ethnic identity in Greenland." 320.
18. Ulrik Pram Gad, "National Identity Politics and Postcolonial Sovereignty Games." 24. Today, both of these parties are more amenable to economic development, by any means necessary. Militant posturing has been supplemented with or subsumed by center-left development policy.

19. Smith, *Texts and Materials on International Human Rights*, 250. This text was submitted by the Danish government to the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Committee of the UN Office of the High Commissioner.
20. Gad, *The Islands of the Danish Realm*, 111.
21. Sjúrdur Skaale, *The Right to National Self-Determination*, 116.
22. See Deklarationer fra Landsmøde 2017. Note that while these references seem to imply a preference for the use of Greenlandic, IA has also criticized Siumut for cases of intolerance in language policy.
23. Language Board, 2017 Annual Report.
24. "Sprog." Samarbejdspartiet/Suleqatigiissitsisut, 2020.
25. Lov om Grønlands hjemmestyre, 1979.
26. Oqaasileriffik 2017 Yearly Report (Ukiumoortumik nalunaarut 2017-imoortoq).
27. Terpstra, "Methods and Reflection," 54 and 107.
28. Gad, "Post-Colonial Identity in Greenland?" 138.
29. Veirum, Thomas Munk. "Kielsen-forslag: Lær Grønlandsk Eller Mist Jobbet."
30. IA criticism piece
31. Veirum, Thomas Munk. "Kielsen-forslag: Lær Grønlandsk Eller Mist Jobbet."
32. Veirum, Thomas Munk. "Naalakkersuisut: Definition Af "grønlænder" Bør Være Rummelig." Pele Broberg of Partii Naleraq proposed a narrow definition of Greenlandic people, though this definition did not pass through Parliament.
33. Veirum, Thomas Munk. "Udvalg: Begrænset Valgret Er I Strid Med Konvention." Sermitsiaq.AG. November 05, 2020. Accessed December 01, 2020. Note that the subsequent leadership election was an election of Siumut delegates, rather than the general public.
34. Veirum, Thomas Munk. "Kielsen-forslag: Lær Grønlandsk Eller Mist Jobbet." Sermitsiaq.AG. October 30, 2020.
35. Petersen, Robert. "On ethnic identity in Greenland." 320, and Søren, "Colonialism in Greenland: Tradition, Governance and Legacy." 123.

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