

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

Strategic Options for Social Democratic Parties

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This policy brief draws implications from voter movements and voter policy motivations for social party strategy options. These implications ignore a host of short-term factors that affect electoral outcomes.



If social democrats wish to recover the largest feasible vote share, they may commit to policies that woo back voters from green or left-socialist parties.



If social democrats wish to maximize their influence over policy, however, they may prefer to adopt programmatic appeals that decrease support for center-right and radical right parties, even if social democrats are not the main beneficiaries of such losses.

Policy brief 1¹ has documented that social democratic vote losses are mostly benefiting green and left-socialist as well as center-right parties, but not so much parties of the radical right. Policy brief 2² evidences the different political preferences that inspire defection from social democracy. The diversity of defections suggests the plausibility of a trade-off in party strategy: Appealing more to the preferences of the left-wing defectors is likely to alienate more social democrats who may then move to center-right parties and vice versa.

If this electoral trade-off exists, social democrats may act differently upon it, depending on whether their strategic objective is to boost the parties' electoral vote share or whether they strive to maximize influence over policy. This brief 3 sketches how different programmatic appeals cope with this trade-off between party objectives that seek out different electoral and policy bargaining leverage.

Party strategy matters only if it is geared to an at least intermediate time horizon: Not years and election terms, but decades. Sociologists and economists identify long-term forces that shape people's basic values and preferences. Political psychologists and marketing specialists can tell us how people can be excited about short-term issues, political personalities, and novel ways to communicate them. If there is a temporal realm for political science to chart alternatives for political parties—but only in a highly tentative, probabilistic fashion—it is for the temporally intermediate range of party strategy. Strategies involve the *sustained programmatic partisan appeal to a set of general normative political principles over a sequence of elections*. It takes time to create a modicum of commitment within the dominant coalition of party activists and leaders to rally a party around a strategy. And it takes time to communicate the content of strategy to voters most of whom spend preciously little time processing political information and to persuade them to attribute credibility to such programmatic signals.

Devising a party's programmatic strategy, then requires parties to address the following questions:

- What kind of electoral and bargaining leverage objectives should a particular programmatic strategy deliver?
- Given the *fundamental distribution of voter preferences and the observable and likely stances of a party's competitors*, which kind of programmatic appeal makes it more likely to attain what kind of political leverage?

1 Silja Häusermann et al. (2021): *Transformation of the Left. The Myth of Voter Losses to the Radical Right*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Perspektive, Berlin.

2 Silja Häusermann et al. (2021): *Transformation of the Left: Economically and Socially Progressive Programs*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Perspektive, Berlin.

We will address these questions sequentially. But let us state some provisos upfront:

- The choice of strategic objective (»leverage over vote share vs. leverage over policy influence«) is entirely one of political values, not positive science, and therefore not up to decide by social scientists, but by politicians themselves.
- Social scientists can only develop positive theory and probabilistic empirical evidence about the relationship between parties' strategies and the resulting electoral support in a general fashion, by analyzing large numbers of electoral events.
- *Such theories and empirical facts are surrounded by high uncertainty and cannot yield point predictions in space and time:* Theories will never predict whether a party's choice of programmatic strategy will result in obtaining a particular political objective in this or that specific election.

The main contribution of social science for partisan debate is therefore not to recommend a particular programmatic strategy in the false belief that it will surely deliver results satisfying a party's chosen objective to gain political leverage. It is rather to highlight critical choices and »moving parts« politicians should take into consideration, when making judgments and deciding between programmatic strategies in light of objectives to win political leverage.

OBJECTIVES OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY STRATEGY

Politicians are in for more than just getting the perks of office, but winning legislative representation is a necessary condition for the pursuit of bargaining leverage over policy. Let us distinguish two ways in which social democratic parties may want to devise and prioritize objectives to gain strategic leverage in a democracy:

1. *Vote seeking: Pursuit of social democratic policy requires maximizing a party's vote and seat share in legislatures.*
 - Regardless of how other parties fare, it is important that social democrats maintain and recover vote shares they have failed to reach or lost in the past.
2. *Policy Seeking: Social democracy can pursue its policies best, when it prevents the »right«—conceived as moderate conservatives, liberals and radical right populists—from winning legislative majorities and thereby control policy-making as well as filling executive offices, such as foremost the cabinet.*
 - In a multiparty system, the policy-seeking objective is not necessarily identical with social democratic vote maximization. Maybe a social democratic strategy may

hurt the electoral support of the right, but at the same time benefit other non-rightist »progressive« parties more clearly than social democracy itself.

THE CONTENT OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY

We will rely here on the four programmatic strategies already outlined in the second policy brief. Each strategy goes after the voters rallied by a different type of partisan competitor in order to increase social democratic parties' vote share.

1. *The Old Left Strategy*: It prioritizes to defend and extend social equality under the novel conditions of labor markets in knowledge society and the demographic transition. This strategy seeks to win voters in whose consideration set are communist successor parties, new left socialist parties, or pensioners' parties.
2. *The New Left strategy*: It combines a commitment to extending social equality with fervent support of societal diversity, tolerance for cultural difference and openness to an inclusive conception of citizenship. This strategy goes mostly after voters who are attracted by the agenda of other progressive parties, particularly Green/ecology parties, socialist people's parties, and radical parties.
3. *The Centre Left Strategy*: It provides for a modicum of social equality and some movement toward a culturally open, universalistic and diverse society, but within definite limits, e. g. immigration. This strategy homes in on voters wavering between center-right moderately conservative and social democratic parties.
4. *The Left National Strategy*: It emphasizes social protection and equality, while focusing on the native population of the country and proposing more conservative positions on socio-cultural questions of immigration, gender equality or environmentalism. This strategy aims to appeal to voters who consider populist right-wing or center-right parties as alternatives to social democracy.

LINKING SOCIAL DEMOCRATS' OBJECTIVES TO GAIN POLITICAL LEVERAGE TO PROGRAMMATIC PARTISAN APPEALS

VOTE MAXIMIZING AS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY OBJECTIVE TO GAIN LEVERAGE: WHAT KIND OF PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGY?

In multiparty systems, the successful realization of social democratic objectives to gain political leverage depends not only on the party's own choices, but also on the strategic choices of its competitors. The empirical benchmark for social democracy to maximize its vote share is to select programmatic appeals that resonate with voters of com-

peting parties, while at the same time preserving social democracy's core electorate

What is clear from the start, however, is that social democrats cannot go after all those diverse and often new competitors with one and the same singular strategy. A reconstitution of the »old« social democratic hegemony on the left, monopolizing the entire progressive partisan sector, therefore appears to be elusive or outright impossible. Social democrats will never be catch-all »people's« parties again, but need to focus on more specialized audiences.

First, there are *left socialist competitors whose voters social democrats could pursue with an Old Left strategy*, maybe programmatically proximate to social democrats' older expansionist social policies and fiscal policy strategies. But social democrats' electoral vote losses to left socialist parties have been rather limited, at least in Northwestern Europe (about 20 % of overall vote losses, see policy brief 1). Among them, about twice as many voters have switched to radical left parties as switched in the opposite direction to social democrats.

Second, social democrats tend to *lose a substantial volume of voters to ecology and Green parties* located in a rather densely populated area of the political issue space (over 30 % of overall vote losses more recently, see policy brief 1). Like social democracy, both parties programmatically appeal to economic fairness and redistribution as well as respect of individual civil liberties, rule of law, environmental sustainability and openness to immigration. The social democrats' losses to the programmatically more radical Greens and left-socialists, however, tend to be one-way. In European Election Studies 2009–2019, more than twice as many respondents indicate to have abandoned social democracy for such parties than declare to switchback from them to social democracy.

Nevertheless, (1) the large numbers of voters with preferences in the programmatic sector where ecology and social democratic parties compete and overlap, (2) the relative proximity of social democratic and Green parties on fundamental principles and values of policy-making, as well as (3) the strong manifest flows of voters between the parties suggest that social democrats might be able to recover substantial vote shares from the Greens and left-libertarian parties with appropriate strategic adjustments.

Moreover, as demonstrated in Abou-Chadi et al.'s survey findings for Austria and Germany (see policy brief 2), given the widespread acceptance of redistributive policies by voters who embrace New Left strategies and consider social democrats as an alternative to their existing party preference, social democrats could probably blend New and Old Left strategies in order to regain Green and socialist party vote shares at once. *This gain may well outweigh losses to center-right and radical right parties.*

Third, nevertheless, *social democrats have exchanged a great deal of voters with center-right parties and there are*

clearly plenty of voters in the center space considering both center-left and center-right parties as potential choices (see Häusermann (2020), as well as Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2020)). The strong flow of voters in both directions—from social democrats to center right parties and in reverse—reveals a potential for *substantial elasticity of social democrats' electoral support depending on such parties' centrist party appeals*. The strong flow of voters in both directions—from social democrats to center right parties and in reverse—reveals a potential for *substantial elasticity of social democrats' electoral support depending on such parties' centrist party appeals*. Nevertheless, a centrist strategy is likely to cost social democrats voters defecting toward the socialist or ecological left. As Polk and Karreth's (2020) empirical analysis highlights, social democrats may win centrist votes through a centrist strategy in the election following the shift toward strategic moderation. But they are then likely to lose votes to left socialist and ecologist parties in a subsequent electoral round.

Social democrats' pursuit of centrist strategy thus promises substantial payoffs, but also high risks. In terms of programmatic considerations alone, the trade-off between attracting (potential) left-socialist and Green party voters with a more radical program or (potential) voters of center-right parties with a moderate program may be somewhat more favorable for the radical strategy. Beyond programmatic content, voters' treatment of competence and leadership personality issues increases electoral payoff uncertainty primarily with a centrist strategy. Centrists with weak party and programmatic priors probably appraise party competence and leadership qualities as independent of programmatic stances. By contrast, supporters of more radical programs simply attribute competence and personal leader likeability to whichever party also supports their programmatic bidding.

Fourth, there is the Left Nationalist strategy in order to win back particularly working class voters from the radical right. But empirical data show few social democratic voters, albeit an in the 2010s slightly rising quantity, defecting to the radical right (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020, Bischof and Kurer 2020). Conversely, few of those already on the radical right appear persuadable to return to social democrats (see Abou-Chadi et al.). Radical right recruitment occurs primarily from the center right, young voters and previous non-voters. To date, it is empirically largely undocumented, however, whether social democrats could compete for support from these pools with a left nationalist appeal.

Overall, then, if vote maximizing social democratic support is the objective, a programmatic strategy appealing to ecology party and left party voters may appear less risky than a centrist or a left nationalist strategy: *It amounts to moving programmatically toward the parties that inflicted the greatest net losses on social democracy.* Each strategy, however, generates trade-offs that will result in some further defections of dissatisfied voters. There is no conceiva-

ble »yield« strategy that will generate only extra voter arrivals and no departures. Moreover, there are non-programmatic consideration in people's vote choice that complicate the calculations even with a programmatically superior strategy.

POLICY MAXIMIZING AS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC OBJECTIVE. STRATEGIES TO MINIMIZE THE CHANCE OF RIGHT-WING LEGISLATIVE OR EXECUTIVE MAJORITIES

What if social democrats chose not to prioritize their own party family's vote maximization, but instead to prevent center right and radical right parties from winning majorities and dictating policy? Vote-loss of the right does not necessarily imply electoral victory of social democracy. Depending on social democratic strategy, third parties loosely situated within a »progressive sector,« such as left socialists/post-communists and ecology parties, may reap much of the electoral benefits of the losses suffered by parties of the right at least indirectly. The social democratic objective of weakening the right would then accept a trade-off involving the following chain reaction: Social democrats would attract voters from the center-right, but shed more of their voters, disgruntled by their party's moderation, to other left parties. Social democrats would thereby sacrifice their own (potential) vote gains for the sake of weakening their right-wing competitors with a move that strengthens the joint left political sector consisting of several parties.

First, *Old Left and New Left strategies are unlikely to prevent rightist majorities*, as they tend to shed some more moderate social democratic voters to the rightist parties. As Abou-Chadi et al.'s (2020) fine-grained analysis for Austria shows, voters with centrist opinions are more inclined to vote for social democracy, if the party takes centrist positions than if the party takes old/new left positions. But a Left Nationalist strategy may not prevent a rightist majority. The Austrian data suggests that national-conservative voters would choose the Radical Right option over *any* programmatic strategy of social democrats.

Second, *as a social democratic strategy to deprive the right of a majority, this leaves, then, the centrist appeal.* But also that is uncertain to deliver the desired result. As Polk and Karreth (2020) find, and in agreement with spatial theory of party competition, a moderate social democratic strategy does deliver centrist voters to social democracy, but it also costs social democrats voters that wander off to the ecologists and left socialist. Whether this realignment delivers a majority of the left, or at least prevents a majority of the right depends on specific circumstances.

What is pretty empirically transparent, however, is that a centrist strategy—even if successful—*will come for social democracy either with a mild or a very harsh trade-off.* First, in the *mild trade-off scenario*, social democracy will poach from the right parties, but it will shed voters to left-socialist and/or ecology parties in sufficient numbers

that most of net the electoral gains, but not all, will accrue to the latter two party types rather than to social democracy. Second, in the *harsh trade-off scenario*, the rightist party sector shrinks electorally, but so does social democracy at whose expense the more radical left and ecology parties will attract vote switchers. These left parties will thereby more than offset whatever voter gains social democracy made from center-right parties. In other words, for each center-right voter that a centrist strategy might deliver to social democracy, social democrats will lose more than one voter to the socialist left and the ecologists. Social democratic parties will effectively shrink.

Social democrats, then, need to face the following question before embarking on a centrist strategy:

- Would they consider it a strategic success to deprive the right-wing parties of a majority, and thereby shift agenda setting and policy decision-making power to the left, but (1) see their own vote share shrink while (2) left socialist and ecology parties expand vigorously?
- Would they accept that—as a consequence—they might even lose the status of being the largest party in the non-rightist sector and cede this status to the ecologists?
- In the formation of government executives, would they tolerate other non-rightist parties to play the decisive role of kingmaker and/or to enjoy the right of first refusal in coalition bargaining?

As a numerical exercise with plenty of methodological caveats, consider the following calculations in Kitschelt and Rehm's (2020) paper on social democratic party strategy. The data are re-estimated just for the seven Northwest European countries with similar political partisan landscapes that include moderate conservative, liberal, and radical populist parties and social democrats, ecologists and/or left socialists on the opposite side (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden) and operationalize strategies with Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. For simplicity, we focus on the parties' economic positions only. Without repeating details of the empirical measurement strategy that can be found in the paper, the table below shows the average electoral payoffs that result from social democrats (SD) and moderate right parties (MR) choosing particular configurations of strategies and the number of observations for each configuration. The results are robust to changing the cutpoint between radical (rad) and moderate (mod) strategies up or down the scale. The table reports three magnitudes of payoffs: In the first panel, the numbers provide the vote share of social democrats and moderate right parties only. The second panel includes the small left and small right parties on each side to indicate the combined vote share for the entire left or right party sectors. The final panel computes the share of voters received by social democrats and moderate right within their overall party sectors.

Absolute vote shares (SD,MR)			
MR			
		rad	mod
SD	rad	(29.7, 26.3) N=14	(17.3, 20.9) N=17
	mod	(27.9, 23.1) N=6	(29.0, 25.0) N=9
Absolute bloc size (L,R)			
MR			
		rad	mod
SD	rad	(43.8, 54.9)	(37.8, 59.7)
	mod	(43.6, 55.5)	(45.2, 52.4)
⇒ No Nash equilibrium			
Relative vote shares (SD/L,MR/R)			
MR			
		rad	mod
SD	rad	(68.4, 47.9)	(45.8, 35.0)
	mod	(64.0, 41.6)	(64.2, 47.7)

The following patterns deserve highlighting:

- Social democrats receive their absolute worst electoral results, if they choose radical strategies, while the centrist right chooses a moderate strategy (top panel, upper right corner). The most centrist moderate right party is actually also doing poorly in this configuration, but still better than social democracy, and the whole right sector of parties performs better than in any other strategy configuration (59.7%: upper right quadrant, middle panel).
- But social democrats would thrive more, if they switch to a moderate strategy, yielding the pair of outcomes in the lower right corner of the upper panel. *The mod/mod strategy pair delivers a good result for social democracy alone, but the very best result for the entire left sector of parties, as revealed in the lower right quadrant of the middle panel.*
- If social democrats individually wish to maximize their vote, however, and are not already trapped in the mod/mod equilibrium, a different equilibrium would be even better for them: *when both they and their center right-wing competitors choose radical strategies (rad/rad: top panel, upper left quadrant).* In that case, both center-left and center-right still divide the centrist voters equally, although such voters now have to bite the bullet and choose parties further away from their program preferences. Moreover, they maximize their electoral support by attracting voters from more radical competitors within their own programmatic sector. Thus they also reach their greatest dom-

inance over other parties in their own sector in this strategy equilibrium (bottom panel, upper left quadrant).

- *But the trade-off again rears its ugly head:* While social democrats here do well with radical strategies in absolute terms (top panel) and relative to other left parties in their bloc (bottom panel), when the centrist right joins it with a radical, polarizing strategy as well, their average left bloc total (middle panel, upper left quadrant: 43.8 %) falls short of what it would be in the average MOD/MOD strategy equilibrium with social democrats pursuing a more leftist strategy (middle panel, lower right quadrant: 45.2 %).

What this mapping of actual election result shows is that *social democrats may well face a real dilemma in pursuing objectives and strategies*. As argued in the previous section, when maximizing their vote alone—and their dominance in the left sector—social democrats should probably choose a New-Left-plus-Old-Left strategy. When social democrats, however, pursue the objective to diminish the electoral footprint of the right, while promoting the strength of the left party sector, they may well find it worth considering a moderate strategy, albeit one that may involve a »hard« trade-off: Social democrats—considered alone—may lose votes with the moderate strategy, when compared to their electoral payoffs from the radical strategy. And can social democrats sell a loss of votes as a victory over the right-wing parties, justifying it with something as nebulous as benefiting the »sector« of parties with progressive programmatic convictions? Using an extreme formulation, maximizing the bargaining leverage of the left political sector over policy—based on the maximum number of seats mobilized against a right-wing majority—may require social democrats to offer themselves as the »sacrificial lamb« that chooses a doggedly centrist strategy to scrape off some voters from center-right parties, while hemorrhaging a large number of voters to parties of the socialist left and the ecology parties.

REFERENCES

This memo builds on the following papers, which will be published in the volume *Beyond Social Democracy: Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies*, edited by Herbert Kitschelt and Silja Häusermann. Full manuscripts of the papers are available from the authors.

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TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

Strategic Options for Social Democratic Parties



Social democratic parties experience declines in vote shares, while their electoral potential remains very high overall. In such a context, it is important to empirically assess the motivations and reasons for which voters switch away from or towards social democratic parties. What are the implications of voter movements and vote switchers' policy motivations for social democratic parties' strategic choices? And how have party strategies fared, when adopted in actual elections over the past several decades? It may all depend on what social democratic politicians identify as their key strategic objective: Is it to regain as large a vote share for their parties as possible? Or is it to maximize their influence over public policy by depriving right-wing parties (conservatives, Christian Democrats, liberals, radical right populists) of a majority of legislative seats?



If social democrats pursue vote maximization, they may want to appeal to issues that resonate with the electorates of the parties to which they lost the most votes: green and left-socialist parties. But if they intend to maximize their policy influence, they may consider strategies that win votes from the center parties, yet shed further votes to green and left-libertarian parties. In worst case scenarios, a boost of social democratic power over policy-making may even result in a loss of electoral vote share.



The brief reports tentative empirical investigations focused on the interaction between social democratic strategy, the strategy of competitors, and social democrats' electoral outcomes. These results suggest that there may be indeed a trade-off, or goal conflict, between social democrats maximizing vote shares and policy influence.