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Social Democratic Party's Electoral Strategies Amid Social Class (Re)alignment and (Re)mobilisation

Abstract

Social Democratic parties have long been steady pioneers of European democracy, but over the past decade they have suffered a humiliating collapse. It is commonly asserted that European countries have entered a classless society. Subsequently, mainstream left parties adopted broad electoral strategies to appeal widely to the median voter, exemplified by the Blair-Schröder Third Way. Electoral backlash following the British and German social democratic party's 1990s neoliberal shift, their approach to globalization as well as their handling of the financial crisis and refugee crisis have eroded their popularity. Subsequent frustration with the political establishment is exemplified by the cultural backlash thesis. However, a countermovement signified by postmaterialism and social liberalism calls for transformative social and political change. The two convictions clash on binary issues, exacerbating a righteous divide between sociocultural liberals and conservatives, recently popularized as the "anywheres" and the "somewheres". This paper puts forth the necessity for social democratic parties to re-engage with the cleavage politics of today. This is particularly important as today's cleavages are largely ideologically driven. Questions of electoral strategy, ideological positioning and mobilisation tactics are contested intra-party. Attention is paid to Corbyn's Labour, whose move towards traditionalism at first earned electoral support, only to be discredited in 2019. In comparison, the German SPD embraced centrism in 2017 and were penalized for it. They must now respond and offer a strategic alternative following competition from the Greens and Die Linke.

Key words: cleavage politics, electoral socialism, factionalism, political sociology, polarisation.

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Introduction

Social democratic (SD) parties have their origins in class politics and are traditional representatives of the working-class electorate. This is evident in both the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats (SPD). Therefore, a clear mandate and electoral strategy has been in place since conception of these parties, largely based on class emancipation and equality. However, particularly since the 1990s, globalization, technological change and rising education rates have disrupted traditional understanding of class system as a three-tiered format of the lower, middle and higher class. This has largely resulted in an upwards class mobility leading scholars to argue that we are all now in classless society, as individuals largely acquiescence towards the middle class (Evans and Tilley 2017). This is compounded by the rise of postmodern values, facilitated by rising education rates (Inglehart 1981, 1990; de Graaf and Evans 1996). Again, this acts to disrupt traditional conceptions of class and creates many problems for SD parties who have seen their target electorate vastly contract in size (Padgett and Paterson 1991).

Contemporary social and political changes are characterised by a socio-cultural cleavage which delineates between the alternative libertarian voter and the socially conservative authoritarian. However, particularly challenging for SD parties is that their natural voting coalition of the left-libertarian and the traditional working-class votes are increasingly at polarising ends of the spectrum, an electoral dilemma which has been long inferred by SD scholars (see Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Kitschelt 1994). This has cumulated in contrasting party strategization within Labour and the SPD in the party's aspired appeals.

The left-libertarian voter can be generally characterised by their adoption of postmodernism and/or postmaterialism, which is symbolized by a political life that is rooted in a qualitatively better world (Aronowitz 1989; Opp 1990). Social change is rooted around the rejection of social conservatism and gives support to sexual, gender and power equalities, and ecological concerns (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Postmaterialists are expected to find representation on the left (Inglehart 1977). This led to the expansion of what is now termed the "New Left" evident also in SD parties. Contemporarily, this group remains a significant voter group for SD parties but have been increasingly characterized by the adoption of "New Leftism" which is the adaption of New Left issues along with the modification of socialist values which take on an internationalist perspective. But this is in direct conflict with an underbelly of populist right-wing nationalism, which comes into direct conflict with

globalist postmodernism. Unfortunately for SD parties, the traditional working class is considered amongst the socially conservative who have been mobilised of late by the populist right-wing on a platform of anti-immigration and welfare chauvinism.

This leaves SD parties in quite a precarious position. To give way to the “New Leftism” voters would be to compromise on party appeals to the working-class vote and vice versa. Additionally, any movement might isolate the median voter who does not mobilise along New Leftism or socially conservative delineations. In appealing too narrowly, this may fail to attract new voter segments, which are increasingly necessary and decisive for winning elections. SD parties are facing a choice between electoral strategies, with three clear options: they can appeal to the broad church of voters, appeal solely to the growing electorate of youth postmaterialists, or solely the traditional blue-collar voter. This paper will analyse how a changing socio-political environment has impacted SD party strategy and identity. As SD parties experience drastic electoral decline, their reformulation is integral to their revival. The Labour Party and the SPD are chosen for analysis to allow for an approach of dynamic comparison of SD parties contemporarily.

Towards a Broad Electoral Strategy

Questions over party direction and electoral strategy soon accompanied the profound sociopolitical change of the 1990s and the 2000s. In 1997, the middle class dominated numerically, and it was readily proclaimed that “We are all middle class now” (Prescott, as cited by BBC 2007). In a bid to attract the median voter and move away from a reliance on the ever-shrinking working class vote, both Labour under Tony Blair and the SPD under Gerhard Schröder adopted neoliberalism and brought the parties towards “Third Way” politics (Giddens 1994; 2004).

Tony Blair is commonly asserted as a professional politician who was electorally pragmatic above all else. He argued that the left needed to withdraw from its influence on civil society and lessen Labour’s interventionist approach. To do so, he pursued investment in “education, skills, technology, small business entrepreneurship.” (Blair and Schröder 1998, 5). By 2000, Middle England has rallied behind New Labour. In New Labour’s approach, there was no prominent role for unions. It became a common assertion that the only way to get elected in a union was to be anti-New Labour (Haseler and Meyer 2004). “A pale version of social democracy emerged from a decade of Blair” (Kavanagh 2010, 23) and this did not change much under the leadership of Gordon Brown thereafter.

Comparatively, SPD's Gerhard Schröder's adoption of the neoliberal agenda faced backlash from many within his own cabinet. Most significantly from "Red Oskar" Lafontaine, who resigned within 163 days following the SPD's 1998 federal election as SPD chairman and as Schröder's finance minister. Schröder joined forces with Blair in order to develop a social-democratic centre-left European identity with a legitimate political force. This is represented by the Blair-Schröder papers, where the duo outlined their move from a social welfare model to one characterized by social investment (see Blair and Schröder 1998).

Schröder's 2002 government introduced the Agenda 2010 and Hartz reforms, which tied social welfare with unemployment assistance. While these reforms saw unemployment drop in Germany, bitter opposition followed as individuals claim the reforms ultimately left the unemployed with fewer benefits (see Sturm 2003; Paterson and Sloam 2006). Factions within the SPD fought bitterly following these reforms. The left considered the neoliberal reforms as an attack on the German welfare system. This split led to the defection of many supporters on the party's left-labour wing, and to the formation of the Alternative for Work and Social Justice, which has since merged with The Left (*Die Linke*) (Paterson and Sloam 2006).

The centrist movement, while granting the parties favours with the middle class, distorted the parties' identity as that of the working class representatives. The programmatic changes made under Blair and Schröder undermined the parties' own individual identity and saw them programmatically similar to their political counterparts, the Conservatives and the CDU/CSU. The financial crash of 2008 saw a massive upheaval in both the UK and Germany. Gordon Brown's Labour introduced austerity measures to combat the financial crisis, but this further isolated the traditional working-class voter who was hit hardest by austerity. Labour lost their majority in 2010 to the Conservatives. Comparatively, the SPD's entrance in coalition with Angela Merkel's CDU in 2013 meant that over the past decade the SPD has shared responsibility for deeply unpopular decisions on austerity measures and refugee policy (Bremer 2019). Additionally, younger individuals saw their opportunities shrink with the rise of precarious part-time work and an expensive housing market in both the UK and Germany.

While Blair and Schröder realigned their policies and strategies in response to changing cleavage lines, the backlash from their centrist positions is commonly asserted in the growing nationalism that is now most commonly tied in with far-right politics (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). These parties appeal to the "left behind" voter who felt neglected by the SD parties' expansion to the center. This has led to what is commonly referred to as a cultural backlash effect (Norris and Inglehart 2018). Frustrations with the

political elite have come to be represented in the electoral support for the more populist right-wing parties. For instance, it becomes possible to mobilise voters on definite populist policies, such as those aiming at economic redistribution and the nationalization of natural resources, that consist of anti-establishment and anti-system appeals. Generally, in the context of Western Europe, this means tapping into the economically disadvantaged who hold anxieties against a modernising society in Western Europe. This is evident in the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, who are now comfortably sitting in the Bundestag opposition. This is also evident through the rise of UKIP and subsequently, the Brexit Party, particularly in European elections (Chase and Goldenburg 2019).

Given the peculiarities of the British two-party system and the Conservatives clear 'Leave' position on Brexit, many disenfranchised voters aligned with the Conservatives in the 2019 general election. The absence of a populist right-wing party in Westminster does not undermine frustrations with the political elite. In fact, the Conservatives arguably filled this gap by asserting they would 'take back control', in doing so using similar language to a populist strategy and reaffirming an anti-elite basis, directed in this instance towards the EU (see Mudde 2010; Barbar 2019). The 2019 general election, commonly dubbed the Brexit Election, demonstrated and the disenfranchised electorate fed up with the status-quo. This allowed Boris Johnson's Conservatives a victory through the reconfiguration of the political landscape (see Holder et al. 2019).

With every action comes a reaction, and with the advent of Brexit and subsequent right-wing growth, there has also been a corresponding growth on the fringe of left-wing politics. This growth is related to the postmaterialist surge and is occupied by liberal, globalised individuals. The two opposing groups are increasingly cited as the "anywheres" and the "somewheres" (Goodhart 2017). This is based on each of the group's ability to relocate, usually dependent on whether the individual is comfortable with immigration and globalisation. This group of left libertarians are attracted to New Left issues such as egalitarianism and climate change and have been growing steadily in both the UK and Germany since the 1960s (Inglehart 1981; 1990). Age cohort studies (1970–1987) in Britain and West Germany show that between 1970–71 materialists were three or four times as numerous as postmaterialists in Britain and West Germany; by 1986–87 the groups were close to parity, with postmaterialists actually moving ahead in Germany (Inglehart 1990). Today, postmaterialist values are commonly cited as most prominently displayed through non-traditional modes of political participation such as political marches and petitions which are more common in affluent countries (Norris 2002). This is evident in the UK, with large-scale protest marches against Brexit (see Townsend 2019). Similarly, evident in Germany are the protests rallying against climate change (@thelocal.de 2019).

However, notably, there has also been a growth in what is being dubbed “New Leftism”. This is ultimately the accumulation of New Left values which remain postmaterialist in their format, but adopt an internationalist, globalist perspective on their politics. This appeals to younger voters in particular. New Leftism also accommodates more traditional economic socialist values such as the redistribution of wealth towards an emancipation of those less privileged in society. Members of this group are mainly found within urban areas, they are young and consider their views progressive. For example, the issue of climate change is a postmaterialist concern which incorporates a globalist and socialist response, at times through alternative forms of political participation such as marches in a bid to increase egalitarianism. But again, the presence of this voter group is in contrast to the traditional working-class voter and poses stark questions for SD parties. The nature of the shifting cleavage alignment and the subsequent remobilization demonstrates that a growing postmaterialist liberal cleavage in tandem with a socially conservative nationalistic cleavage have become frontrunners in cleavage (re)alignment and political (re)mobilization.

Responding to Realignment

UK:

When Jeremy Corbyn became Labour party leader in 2015 his left-wing stance, combined with a charismatic everyday image, granted him favours with the “anywhere” electorate. Labour had been attempting to shift away from the New Labour image since 2010, most notably in the selection of Ed “Red Ed” Miliband, who saw himself as the face of the New Left, as the party leader (Behr 2015). Miliband attempted to distance himself from the Blairite years, claiming that “Today our danger is to defend traditionalist New Labour solutions on every issue because this will consign us to defeat.” (Miliband 2010). However, leftists felt that Miliband did not go far enough and he came to represent a “gentle but systematic social democracy” (Burnell 2014). Corbyn otherwise propelled himself on a decidedly left-wing platform and was frequently critiqued as “the outsider, the long-shot, the maverick, the fruit-loop leftie, the man who couldn’t tie his shoe-laces.” (Nunns 2018, 408)

All the same, in the 2017 general election Labour experienced a considerable jump in support with a rise of 9.5% from 31.5% in 2015 to 40% (BBC 2017). This has been readily attested to a youthquake (Sloam and Henn 2019) and has suggested that Labour does have the capability to appeal widely to the two burgeoning socio-political cleavages. In an environment of high cleavage mobilization, ideologues are

likely to grow within a political party (Kitschelt 1994). This became evident under Corbyn's leadership through a resurgence of grassroots political activism, at least on the left (Whiteley et al. 2019). Individuals re-joined the party under Corbyn who otherwise departed during the neoliberal years (Whiteley et al. 2019). The 2017 general election saw Labour galvanise New Left issues and New Leftism advocates. This was only encouraged by Corbyn's public appearances at concerts and his endorsements by celebrity figures. Also, location in lower social grades and experiencing relative deprivation was a significant factor that drove people and particularly first-time joiners to Labour. Therefore, Labour's ability to bridge an alliance between the two cleavages began to take form. However, the 2019 election results cut this short and undermined the party's broad appeal from a leftist platform.

Between 2017 and 2019 the party lost much of its momentum under Corbyn, particularly amongst the traditional Labour heartland areas who suffered most acutely from austerity measures and deprivation. Corbyn's brand of socialism resulted in Labour's narrowing appeal towards southern middle-class urban youth and the fraying of long-held partisan ties, notably the swing of Labour areas towards the Conservatives. This can be attributed to various factors, such as the Brexit cleavage which aligns the socially conservative with the Leave vote, which the Conservatives came to represent through their steady adoption of populist rhetoric. Additionally, the party became plagued by intra-party factionalism, notably centrifugal in nature, leading to the defection of many individuals from the party. The party was also accused of anti-Semitism, leading to further defections. Corbyn as a leader proved less popular than many had expected with personal poll ratings the lowest for any opposition figure since 1977. This is combined with additional electoral competition from the Greens and the Liberal Democrats who offered an alternative for many natural Labour voters. Ultimately, Labour's strategy remained to appeal to a broad range of voters, characterised by their wavering position on Brexit. But instead of galvanizing their voter coalition, they dropped from their 40% in 2017 to 32.2% (BBC 2019). The 2019 general election did not see Labour remobilize the traditional working-class vote but instead saw their electoral base shrink.

Germany:

The SPD also had ambitions to move the party leftwards. Kurt Beck's leadership saw the introduction of the 2007 Hamburg Programme. It was short and moved the party significantly to the left. Nevertheless, the SPD had a dismal performance in 2009 (Faas 2010). The Eurozone crisis had overshadowed the development of the SPD's distinct economic profile (Bremer 2019). After an ineffectual programmatic

turn leftwards, the SPD remained on a steadfast moderate platform up until and including the 2017 federal election with Martin Schulz as chancellor candidate. Initially, this seemed to generate support for the party, which experienced a jump, starting in the low twenties and rising to around 30% within weeks (Bräuninger et al. 2019). However, a significant difference between Labour and the SPD in 2017 lies in the fact that while Corbyn was comparatively more successful in gaining unaffiliated voters, unaffiliated voters are significantly more inclined to vote for Merkel over an SPD candidate (Hansen and Olsen 2019). In 2017, the SPD fell to a post-war low with 20.5% of the votes, and this was an indication that the party needed to end its grand coalition and become an opposition party (Bräuninger et al. 2019). Nevertheless, the SPD entered coalition with Angela Merkel's CDU again in 2017.

Jusos, the youth-wing of the SPD, passionately led by Kevin Kühnert commenced an internal revolt against the coalition (Stone 2019). Kühnert drew on the SPD's identity crisis as rubbing shoulders with the Conservatives for too long. In doing so, he advocates a return to socialist politics and grassroots activism, comparable to that of Corbyn. The Jusos have been rebellious and continue to put the leadership in distress (Fielder 2019). They represent the youth voters who are fed up with the establishment. The Jusos believe that if the party remains on its current platform it will jeopardize its future, up to a point when the party will not be capable of mobilizing any voters. The realignment of voters has seen SPD electoral support drop while Die Linke (The Left) and the Greens have electorally gained in popularity (Lehmann 2019). The Greens in particular successfully mobilise along the left-libertarian cleavage with a clear platform and non-traditional forms of political organization such as protests and marches.

Andrea Nahles' 66% in leadership votes in 2017 underscore "how hard it will be for her to revive and unite the demoralised and divided centre-left party." (Schwartz 2018). This is compared to Martin Schulz' 100% win of leadership votes (Connolly 2017). Nahles' result indicates an internal rift within the party. However, this rift was only exacerbated in the 2019 SPD leadership election which saw the selection of Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter Borjans. The duo are decidedly from the left of the party and narrowly defeated established SPD parliamentarian Olaf Scholz and his running partner Klara Geywitz. It was the Jusos who backed the left-wing duo who favour more radical reform and remain skeptical of the coalition. This exacerbates tensions within the SPD as one camp believes that the party can only be saved by a radical swing to the left, while the other wants a renewal of the SPD, but one not so radical. "As it stands, the only glue that still holds the SPD together is the desire to "reinvent" the SPD." (Richer 2018).

Conclusions

The SD parties' electoral dilemma remains. While the Labour party swung leftwards it did not succeed in combining voter cleavages. This is in contrast to the SPD who, on a moderate platform, have also experienced an electoral decline. Therefore, the electoral strategies of the two comparative parties, while diverse, have both failed to appeal to their voter coalitions broadly. This begs questions as to the longevity of social democracy and the electoral viability of SD parties.

Labour

Labour buckled down on its left-wing platform ahead of the 2019 general election as Corbyn promised a platform for real, radical change. But it was the party's ambiguous position on Brexit combined with issues of anti-Semitism, electoral strategy and Corbyn as a leader, which are charted as bruising the party. Labour took a strong stand against big polluters and tax dodgers on what can be called an insurrectionary campaign (Watson 2019). This strategy was to appeal broadly to the left-libertarian voter, but Corbyn's ambiguity on Brexit, which became an emotional divisive topic for voters, damaged links with Labour heartlands. Labour's electoral strategy was compromised by Brexit, which saw a pro-EU remain position from the younger globalized voters in stark contrast to that of Leave voters. Labour responded by appealing broadly to both cleavages, but met with little success.

This begs larger questions on the relationship between Labour and their voters today. The electoral demise of social democracy has been felt acutely, particularly in Western Europe. While the initial success of Corbyn following and including the 2017 general election seemed to indicate an anomaly, the 2019 general election demonstrated otherwise. The response of Labour was not adequate to appeal broadly to their two primary voting cleavages. This presents clear challenges for Labour moving forward.

Germany

The SPD became the third party in the European elections in May 2019, causing disquiet amongst left-wing members who criticised Nahles for staying in a coalition (McGuinness 2019). Nahles subsequently resigned as party leader, but that has not stopped the party's plummet. The SPD continues to poll regularly between 3rd and 4th party in Germany along with the CDU, the Greens and the AfD (see wahlrecht.de 2020).

Following Nahles' resignation, a leadership battle between left-wing duo Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans against Olaf Scholz and Klara Geywitz commenced. This represented a direct contest between a progressive and a conservative representative, with Scholz firmly a member of the establishment and supportive of the coalition (Borshoff 2019). After receiving support from the Jusos along with other progressives in the SPD, Esken and Walter-Borjans became party leaders (Mayr 2019). Walter-Borjans and Esken have their own hashtag #Eskabolation, a play on "escalation" (see jusosdah.de 2019) and were able to appeal along generational divides. This signifies an important break for the SPD and a move away from conservatism. This movement and support for the left-wing duo is important as it signifies a response to the party's external socio-political environment. Amid changing understanding of social cleavages and voter affiliations, the decision to break from establishment in this manner demonstrates a re-strategisation of the party with regard to policy, ideology and party image. This is particularly relevant considering Jusos support for the leadership, while many younger voters have meanwhile flocked to Die Linke and particularly the Greens in search of a more radical and specialised platform. Whether this change in strategy and party image proves fruitful for future federal elections remains to be seen.

In providing a comparative analysis, both the SPD and Labour must respond to a changing socio-political environment. This has important implications for the links between the party and their voter. While both parties are social democratic, this means that they have traditionally attracted the working-class voter and the left-libertarian voter. However, given the changing nature of how we understand class and cleavages today, this leaves Labour and the SPD in an electoral dilemma. How individuals have de-aligned from their political identities has important implications for SD parties. The growth of new societal cleavages intersects on issues of progressiveness and conservatism making it difficult for SD parties to respond without potentially isolating one cleavage over the other. Labour responded by moving leftwards, and in doing so have gained youth support. However, this was not sufficient in the 2019 general election and isolated their other voters. Comparatively, the SPD elected a left-wing leadership but have been relatively muted in their left-wing position. The party continues to fall in the polls as the electorate seeks alternative political representation on the back of an uncertain SPD identity and direction. This poses questions as to what should SD parties do in order to remain electorally viable amidst social class realignment and remobilization or whether it is tenable at all.

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