

## **Past the Point of No Return? The Future of Social Democracy in Europe**

**Article by Tarik Abou-Chadi**

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In France, the Socialist Party has turned from being the dominant left-wing bloc into a small and insignificant grouping and it is not the only European country that has witnessed a proliferation of competing parties on the left of the political spectrum. Elsewhere in Europe, however, social democrats have recently celebrated election victories. Yet political scientist Tarik Abou-Chadi argues that an overarching trend towards political fragmentation and demographic changes among the voting population also raise questions about their long-term viability.

**Green European Journal: Some years ago, social democracy was being broadly diagnosed as in a state of crisis. Yet today we see social democrats leading governments around Europe, for example in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, and Sweden. How do you see this evolution?**

**Tarik Abou-Chadi:** It depends on what your comparison point is and also what your currency of success is. These parties still have much smaller vote shares than they had 20 years ago. But of course, they won these elections and are now leading governments.

An important backdrop to evaluate this comparison is increasing fragmentation. European party-systems in western Europe have fragmented strongly. Because of this, winning 25 per cent of the vote might be enough to lead a coalition government.

Much of the crisis isn't necessarily a crisis of the Left but a crisis of social democratic parties that have lost voters while other parties, such as the Greens, have gained larger vote shares. Moreover, there is something like a political business cycle. One party family governs for, say, 10 to 12 years, but then the probability increases that people will vote that party out.

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**This fragmentation is very apparent on the Left in France, where the once dominant left-wing bloc, the Socialist Party, has splintered and now appears insignificant in the coming election. Is France an outlier in this regard?**

The fragmentation in France is somewhat ironic, given that the French electoral system creates strong incentives for coordination. I think we won't see a comeback of the Socialist

Party – at least not in its previous form. At the same time, the parties on the Left could bind together, but the question is how.

When combined, the points of the various candidates on the Left add up to around 15 per cent, a position where the second round of the election is within reach. That is important because a large part of Emmanuel Macron's success in 2017 was based on winning over former Socialist Party voters. He won more of their voters than [Socialist Party candidate] Benoît Hamon and [far-left candidate] Jean-Luc Mélenchon combined in that election. But there is no longer an illusion that Macron is, in any way, centre-left. He is a right-wing politician with a progressive liberal outlook on some issues.

So, what would make these voters come back to the Left? Only a personality who is able to coordinate a significant share of the Left, otherwise, it's not going to happen. The electoral system would not allow them to make it to the second round otherwise. At the same time, they also need to work on their appeal. Many of the goals of social democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have become established policy and political institutions. Just based on their programmatic appeal, social democratic parties will not win over 30 per cent of voters because some of the voters might care more about climate change or animal rights, for example. What social democratic parties still live off is their role in government.

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### **Is the Left in France weak because it's divided or divided because it's weak?**

Both statements are true at the same time. On the one hand, the Left is weak because it's divided while the institutional set up, as described earlier, would require coordination. You cannot win seats or the presidency if you're that divided. At the same time, due to this perceived weakness, many political personalities think that they may as well try their luck on their own, outside of established parties.

The lack of effective leadership increases the fragmentation. Parties have a certain power to say: you do something for us and in return we can offer resources – political power but also funding, activist support, and so on. When these resources are no longer there, what is the benefit of the party label? Someone like [popular primary candidate and former French justice minister] Christiane Taubira has a personal brand that might actually be worth more than the Socialist Party brand at the moment.

### **How have these transformations affected the support base of social democratic parties?**

The socio-economic support base of social democratic parties has changed quite a lot. There is less working-class support and there is more support from the educated middle class. But the share of working-class voters has decreased a lot in the electorate as a whole. We have seen a massive transformation of the socio-economic structure in western

Europe. We are now in what people call the “knowledge economy”. Going to university does not make you part of the elite anymore – more than 50 per cent of youth go to university in many western European countries.

The industrial working class used to be institutionalised around social democratic values but it is disappearing. These are structural changes. It is not the case, as many have argued, that social democratic parties tried to appeal to the new, educated voters too much, and therefore lost the working class. Appealing to an educated middle class is a necessity for social democratic parties to be electorally viable. It brings problems, trade-offs, and dilemmas but there is no way around it – the reality is that social and structural change cannot be turned back.

Another relevant change in relation to the working class has been the rise of service workers. These people are not in industry, they are much less organised than workers in the past, and they often don’t have strong unions. As such, they are much less structurally tied to social democratic parties. This workforce is also more female and less white – and many members of this group just don’t vote.

**Do you see the cleavage between the highly and not-so highly educated as a relevant one for parties today?**

There are still divergences between these two groups. We know that educated, middle-class voters are more progressive generally – on gender equality, racism, environmental issues, and immigration – so when these issues are salient, significant divisions along these lines can emerge. However, much of our research finds that we might overestimate this division. First, because there are many working-class voters who are progressive. Contrary to the popular belief that the working class is made up of white, male production workers, today’s working class includes more fast-food workers than miners, and a significant share of them are women and people of colour.

In contrast, we found a less prominent, but much stronger cleavage in age: the difference between older and younger voters. Here, the cultural issues really bite. Older voters are more conservative and enough of them are willing to vote against social democratic parties when they become more progressive, whereas younger voters are more supportive of new progressive parties.

In most western European countries – the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and Portugal – social democratic parties now have an older voter base. This means that, even if they can still win elections in the short run, the overall generational replacement and cohort change mean that in the long run social democrats must contend with the problem of a party base that is in decline.

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**In some parts of Europe, social democrats seem to have withstood the emergence of new political forces on the Left and Right, while in others they have declined significantly. What determines this?**

The radical right and Green Parties have become established actors in nearly all the western European party systems, the old EU-15. It is very unlikely that we will get back to a two- or three-party system in lots of these countries. The variation depends on whether these parties have managed to challenge social democracy for the first spot in the left-wing camp – whether social democratic parties managed to remain the leading force that competes with one other party on the Right to lead the country, or whether they have become one of many parties. The reasons why are not yet fully known. What I think is clear is that as soon as a party loses its spot and becomes one of many, as in the case of the Dutch Labour Party and French Socialist Party, it is very difficult to see a way back for them.

**How do you assess the impact of the emergence of strong Green Parties on the strategies and messages of social democratic parties?**

Research shows, maybe counterintuitively, that where Green parties are successful, other parties tend to talk less about the environment. They feel there's really no competing with Greens on the environment. What has changed is that in recent years – perhaps the 2019 European Parliamentary elections was a watershed moment in this respect – social democratic parties have realised Green Parties are making an appeal to their core constituency – who by now are voters with a high-school diploma, higher education, and a typical middle class job.

This is now a counter-narrative to the dominant idea that social democratic parties have mainly lost out because they lost the working classes to the radical right. Now, social democratic parties have realised who their main competitor is, and where the greatest threat to their position as the leading force on the Left lies. In the elections in the Netherlands and France, they lost the most voters by far to parties that are more progressive on cultural issues. This is shown in the rise of D66 in the Netherlands, and the way Macron ran as a progressive in 2017, talking about more European integration, for instance, and economic incentives.

Interestingly, where Green parties are more successful, the left block as a whole has also grown. Germany is a good example: the Greens managed to attract quite a sizeable share of mainstream right voters for whom climate change is a crucial issue.

**Is it a misconception that today the far right enjoys the support of the working classes?**

It is true that radical right parties have increasingly appealed to the working class. The working class makes up a more important share of their votes today. But they are still not the most successful parties among workers in most countries. Moreover, if you look at their voters, they are not former social democrats. Most likely these are people who have never voted before and didn't have strong party attachments in the past.

If we consider demographic shifts over time, many of the voters who supported social

democracy in the early 1990s or late 1980s are simply no longer around. It is not that they have moved to the radical right. So, this grand narrative of the loss to the radical right is empirically wrong. Instead, the question should be: what is the new social structural group? There is a working class or a new precariat that has not supported social democrats the way that the traditional working class did – but these people are often not supportive of the radical right either. Radical right voters are, on average, quite well-off. They're not precarious or not the economically "left behind" – they might be part of what you could call a "left behind region" – but, by and large, they are part of the petit-bourgeoisie or they are workers who are experiencing status loss more than they are experiencing economic hardship.

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**We often see the far-right deploying cultural issues and they often seem to be the ones who define the terrain on which the debate happens. Have social democrats failed to mobilise those kinds of issues effectively?**

No. The reason these issues are on the far-right agenda is not because social democrats started, all of a sudden, to be the party of gender equality, immigration or fighting institutional racism. Social democratic parties now talk as much about bread-and-butter issues as they did 10 years ago. They care mainly about economic issues, health, and education. There's very little change in that. If you compare the situation to the 1980s, the main topic that is more prominent on parties' agendas today is immigration. But it is not at all the case that social democratic parties today just focus on so-called cultural issues.

At the same time, it's important to see that these are fundamental questions of social justice. People expect progressive or left-wing parties to provide an answer to the questions of LGBT rights, gender equality, and environmental issues. These aren't going to go away. The idea that there is somehow a way of getting back to a world where social democratic parties can win elections by just focusing on the economy is long gone.

**Do you think that soon we might see a stabilisation of the fragmented political landscapes, or could there be further shifts?**

Fragmentation is certainly the big trend of today. As such, the question is: have we reached the peak yet? The example of the Netherlands shows where the future lies for many countries in this regard – unless the institutions provide a strong incentive to stop this process, such as a 5 per cent or 4 per cent threshold to get into parliament, as in Germany or Austria. In western Europe, there are only a few parties left who poll over 30 per cent and this is a radical change – excluding the UK and the Portuguese Socialists.

Fragmentation is a big development and parties – as well as we, as commentators, perhaps – have not yet fully understood all the implications that this has for the way our politics works. We should expect a dramatic change. The question is then: do political actors adjust to the fragmentation? I think, strategically, mergers would make the most sense because

parties need to produce a figure that has a claim to leadership. But they can only do this by standing out on this big, fragmented landscape.

The French example shows that mergers or coordination between parties, are complicated by egos and political histories. I and many other political scientists could hardly believe there was not going to be any coordination with the Greens from the side of the French Socialists. Just because they could not agree on it. Both parties blame each other.

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