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'The working class is incredibly pluralist now'

Simon Hix on the rise and fall of social democracy in the last 100 years — and how social-democratic parties can still win

In your recent paper "The Rise and Fall of Social Democracy", you analysed all democratic elections in Europe from 1918 to 2017 – trying to find out what makes and breaks the support of social-democratic parties. What are the three waves of social democracy you're referring to in the paper?

The first wave are the parties that were based on a parliamentary road to socialism; these are the parties that broke from communism. They assumed they were going to win electoral majorities because in an industrial society, workers would be a majority, and if all the workers voted for the social democrats, they would win an electoral majority. Of course that never happened because not all workers voted for social democrats, some voted for communists, some didn't vote, some voted for Christian democrats, some voted for conservatives.

Social democrats then had to expand, so you then have what we call second wave parties. These were catch-all parties, like the post-Bad Godesberg programme SPD in Germany. These parties were then appealing across the class divide. They appealed to some of the more middle class professional workers, particularly in the public sector: doctors, teachers, academics, lawyers, and so on. The parties also become more moderate.

Then came the third wave. The parties were saying that, after the liberalisation of the economy that's happened after globalisation, after the rise of new social values in society, that they needed to think about a new type of coalition to build.

And what are some of the central findings for each of those periods?

We wanted to go back and look at the correlates of variations in support, across country and across time, for social democratic parties.

There's been quite a lot of research about the post-war period, mainly in Western Europe. We wanted to back all the way to 1918, so we could look at the story of the rise of social democracy in that period, and to then see if we could say anything general about patterns in support across country and across time across a whole century of elections.

The data tell a story of the formation and erosion of a particular political and social coalition. It tells a story of the inter-war period, up to the Second World War, which suggests that support for the social democrats was very much reliant on manufacturing and manufacturing labour.

Across country and across time, the indicators show how that as the manufacturing sector grew, support for social-democratic parties grew. Those countries that had larger manufacturing sectors had bigger support for social-democratic parties than countries that had smaller manufacturing sectors. What's interesting is that almost nothing else in that period correlates with support for social-democratic parties.

This suggests that the rise of social democracy came alongside the rise of industrial society.

Did this trend continue in the post-war period after 1945?

What we find, amazingly, is that the relationship with the size of the manufacturing sector was still very strong in the post-war period, but now we that another variable really stands out: the amount of public spending. This tells us that the coalition had indeed expanded. The coalition had originally started as based on labour in the manufacturing sector, and was now expanded to include public sector workers.

So, this was a very powerful political coalition, of organised labour in manufacturing and the new public sector workers that came from a mass expansion of the public sector in the 1950s and 60s – when you think about the huge expansion of education, healthcare, local government and public transport. This created lots of public employees. This was then the political bloc that was the core social-democratic coalition for several decades.

This reached a peak in the 60s and 70s, with a peak in manufacturing and public spending. Then, from the 1970s onwards, there was a decline in manufacturing as a result of two things: globalisation and technological change. Of course, with fewer people employed in this sector, one of the pillars of the social democratic coalition eroded very fast. But, the social democrats were still doing okay because they relied

very much on public sector workers. You have a situation where, for example, the Socialist Party in France becomes known as the "teachers' party". In Germany, in contrast, there was still a big manufacturing sector, so the two pillars remained strong in some countries.

Before 2008, you had social democrats winning elections on Third Way political programmes. Why did this project collapse so quickly?

The *Neue Mitte* or Third Way was an effort to try to build a new coalition. This was initially really successful in some of the larger countries in that period in the late 1990s. There was a window of opportunity. The new coalition was what was left of manufacturing labour, large parts of the public sector, plus some of the new professions in the private sector, the socio-cultural professions, the creative industries and so on. There, the emphasis was less on providing public spending and more on providing regulation of the economy. Public spending was used as a safety net rather than for redistribution of wealth, and there was an emphasis on some of the social values that were popular amongst those new groups: gender equality, gay rights, women's rights and so on.

What happened after this period was that the mainstream centre-right also started to move in this direction; so across Europe, for example, most mainstream centre-right parties said: "we're not racist, we're in favour of gay rights, we support gay marriage, we're in favour of women's equality", and so on. There's no inherent reason why a centre-right party should be opposed to these things. So, in a sense, a lot of the liberal private sector that had started voting for the social democrats then quickly disappeared, as they did not need to vote for socialists, when they could vote for liberals, or conservatives, or greens, or someone else. They didn't have to vote for the social democrats to get the things that they cared about. Hence, the new social democratic coalition was very fragile, and it eroded very quickly after the initial success.

What role did the financial crisis in 2008 play in this regard?

With the financial crisis 2008, we got cuts in public spending, and austerity. We also had privatisations, and erosions of large sections of the public sector. You had a lot of people who had indirectly worked for the public sector who were now in the private sector. There was a whole change in the structure of employment in the public sector. So, first, there had been a decline of the manufacturing pillar and now there was a decline of the public sector workers pillar. So, in a sense, there was now almost nobody left who voted for social democrats! So,

in short, our analysis is a story of the rise and erosion of a particular political coalition.

One of the strategies to save social democracy is the idea that parties should move economically to the left, but culturally and socially become more conservative – what some call the "Danish model". Your research shows a more nuanced picture. Can you elaborate on that?

I don't think we have a really clear answer to that from our data. The argument, here, is that the socialists have lost a lot of their voters, who are traditional socialist voters, because the socialist parties are too socially liberal, and that if they move in a more socially conservative direction they will get those voters back. But, these particular voters don't really exist anymore. The idea that there is this whole cohort of "lumpen proletariat" that socialists could win back, is simply wrong, as this group of voters is now very small, as our research has shown.

Manufacturing is much smaller in many countries, and the "working class" is incredibly pluralist now. There is an enormous variation between workers who are working part-time, or temporary workers, or service sector workers, or small manufacturing, or in small businesses, or in very low-skilled jobs in different parts of the economy – cleaners, baristas, working in shops and retail. Lower income groups are far more pluralist than they ever was. What are those groups that the socialists are hoping to win back with an more socially-conservative strategy? They may win back some older voters who live in rural areas or suburban areas. Some of these voters may be ex-socialist voters, but this strategy does not do anything to win back a lot of the younger voters in the new working class, many of whom are women and minorities.

So, I'm sceptical that this is a winning strategy for the long run. In a very particular context, for example in the recent election in Denmark, this strategy may have worked given that there perhaps was a particular group of voters who had left the Social Democrats and were now voting for the Danish People's Party. But I don't think that pattern is as clear in any other country. Most other countries, for example in Germany, the formerly social-democratic voters have gone all over the place rather than just to a populist right socially-conservative party.

So how would a winning strategy look like in your opinion?

I would not put a winning strategy on just one party. It is a mistake inherent in social democratic parties to say, well, "we, the social democrats, have to build this new coalition". I would see the challenge as how to build a new progressive or new redistributive coalition.

Piketty in his recent book "Capital and Ideology" claims that the redistributive coalition has gone and that a new redistributive coalition should be rebuilt. He places the emphasis very much on socialist parties, and the policies they should adopt. But, for me, I don't think of it like that. I see the challenge as more about building a coalition of different groups in society that will come together, some voting liberal, some voting for the greens, some voting for socialists.

In some countries that might be under the roof of one party. But, in many countries that new coalition is more likely to be a pre-electoral pact between different parties, who appeal to different groups in society. This would then involve thinking about what are the groups in society that are in favour of a new economic model, a new type of welfare state, as well as expanding social rights, and putting together a broad programme to appeal to this diverse new social coalition.

When I talk to social-democratic parties in Brussels and in different countries in Europe, they instinctively think of a middle-aged white man who used to work in a car factory, and the need to "win back his vote". I just think that's not a good reflection of the working class today. We have lower income employees, in a very pluralist sense, and the question should be what is the policy package that can appeal to all the various different interests that exist across that very broad and pluralist group. I don't think one party can do that.

You emphasised the role of attracting young voters. That's what Corbyn or Bernie Sanders tried to do, which had some successes but ultimately failed to bring them to power. What is your take on this?

Some elements of the Corbyn, Sanders, Podemos or Syriza agenda that appeal to younger voters makes a lot of sense. But some elements of the agenda turned-off a lot of the other voters who progressive parties need to keep on board.

I do think there has been an intergenerational redistribution of wealth. Younger voters are facing much more competitive job markets, much larger housing costs, often much larger educational debt and so on, a much higher social risk. So, what are the policies we need to put in place for that new intergenerational contract? There's no reason why that has to go hand in hand with nationalising large parts of the economy or a very interventionist socialist foreign policy. It doesn't inherently follow that to appeal to younger voters that you have to have all this other (1970s) policy stuff.

It may be a good way to mobilise younger voters. But these figures and movements have also tended to bring along all the other baggage of radical left politics, which turn off a lot of the middle class professionals who are in favour of redistribution, and who are in

favour of a just society, but look at some of this policy agenda and feel that it isn't right for them.

What would be a successful social-democratic party in your sense?

The Scottish National Party is in a sense a modern social-democratic party. It is very interesting to look at the coalition that they've created. Big investment in education, no fees for higher education, trying to address issues like housing debt, trying to expand public house building, expansion of healthcare spending, slightly raising taxes on higher income groups but not by crazy amounts, environment policy, gender equality, rights for minorities, and so on. In a sense, the SNP are a new social democratic party. It's not rocket science!

These days it's impossible to get around asking a question related to the corona crisis. So to conclude I want to know what challenges and chances this may provide for social-democratic parties.

The opportunities are in a sense for a new social compact. I think of this in terms of historical lessons. The lessons from the two World Wars and the Great Depression are that after these great crises there was then a fundamental change in taxation and we will probably see the same after COVID-19. Part of the reason for this change is a perception that lower income groups, or people at the frontline, have been hit most by this crisis, while higher income groups have largely been protected or isolated.

A new sense of solidarity could mean that higher income groups need to take more responsibility for covering of costs of an expanded welfare state. Those costs will be greater public spending on healthcare, probably higher minimum wages, more support for workers on insecure contracts, and growing public spending in many areas. There is an opportunity there for a new social contract, similar to the ones that were built after the Second World War and after the Great Depression.

The real worry, or the real challenge, though, is on the individual liberties and freedoms side. Where we're heading in terms of collection of individual data, tracking people's movements, monitoring people's behaviour, telling some people and some groups that they have to stay home, when other groups are allowed to be out. Right now, everybody is talking about public health, public interest, collective responsibility, but at a certain point people are going to say, "wait a minute, what about my rights, what are you doing with my data, how are you tracking me?". These are going to be real challenges for liberal democracies in general. The centre-right have less qualms about those types of issues than the centre-left, and think this is going

to be a new battle ground in democratic politics in the coming months and years.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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