Putting the people back into politics

Germany's social democrats will need to change course if they don't want to end up in political oblivion like their European sister parties

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24 September 2017 was a dark day for Germany's social democrats. The SPD obtained its worst result ever in federal elections on that day, gaining just 20.5 percent of the vote.

Just like that, Germany joined a chorus of countries across Europe that have seen their left-of-centre parties trounced in recent elections. Whether in Italy, Spain, Austria or Belgium, the outlook for parliamentary social democracy in Europe is gloomy today.

Social democratic parties are no longer the only ones vying for the votes of their historic core electorate – the working classes – and their ability to mobilise support in the bottom fifth of the socio-economic scale has dwindled.

Although they still have the vote of skilled industry workers, public servants and the highly-qualified white-collar sector, that's not enough. Without the support of the working class, the parties' traditional task of rallying the lower and middle classes to create left-of-centre majorities becomes an impossible one.

A leftist voting bloc

There ought to be a broad appetite for social democratic policy in Germany, a country in which a majority of the people considers itself to be politically left.

Roughly 20 percent of the country's population lives below the poverty line, while another 30 to 40 percent are worried about their ability to sustain their current socio-economic status. In a survey by Bertelsmann Stiftung, an overwhelming majority of the respondents said that the

benefits of economic growth are being distributed unfairly. Over the last three decades, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority has reached extreme proportions.

So why did Germany's two left-wing parties – Die Linke and the SPD – only capture 30 percent of seats in the Bundestag in the most recent elections?

For a start, swathes of potential left-wing voters didn't go to the polls – and haven't done so in years. A quarter of the German electorate did not vote in the 2017 national elections, with a disproportionate amount of them working class. The neoliberal, hard-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has also won over many in the lower middle class.

Redrawing the political spectrum

A majority at the ballot box will remain out of reach for the SPD unless German's social democrats win this group back. This would mean developing and enacting policies that benefit the bottom 50 percent of society, as well as reaching out to those with misgivings about unchecked globalisation, those who fear that the country's social safety net will be eroded by migration and a supranational EU.

Political positions that respond to these concerns are frequently, but wrongly viewed as right-wing. Adding a second axis to the traditional left-to-right spectrum – one stretching from cosmopolitan to communitarian – can help us better understand these political desires.

People on the cosmopolitan end of this scale value open borders, intergovernmental institutions and transnational mobility, while whose who identify with communitarian ideas emphasise the protection of democratic structures and social security at the national level. They are wary of open borders, military interventions and oppose further strengthening of the EU's supranational elements.

While Germany's hard-left party Die Linke, its Greens party and the SPD can all be situated in the cosmopolitan left-wing space, the country is lacking a communitarian left-wing outfit. Communitarian-inclined voters have no electoral choice other than the AfD, even though they may be uncomfortable with its nationalist, oftentimes racist discourse.

Popular vs. populist

Shifting social democracy towards the left-wing communitarian space – I

call this ‘the popular left-wing option’ – might offer a solution.

Such a popular left-wing platform would espouse classic social democratic values. It should principally aspire to improve conditions for the weakest in society and to promote solidarity within the country’s borders.

Economically, this would mean abandoning an export-driven model and coupling a fairer distribution at home with more consideration for the needs of economies abroad.

The key foreign policy tenets of such a popular left-wing party would be to respect the sovereignty of other states and to prefer compromises over intervention.

A popular left-wing platform is not a left-wing populist approach. It is not jingoistic, xenophobic or racist. It understands politics as a space of plurality rather than viewing it as a simplistic ‘people versus elite’ conflict. Rather than simply being a protest movement, it embraces representative democracy and aims to develop hard-and-fast solutions to policy problems.

Looking ahead

The idea of such a popular left-wing platform has frequently been tossed aside as a nostalgic, backward-looking one.

But such a platform would respond to several key challenges to Germany’s future. The country needs to overhaul its economy to reduce the extreme inequalities it has produced and wean itself off its dependency on exports.

An important task ahead in the face of continued migration is to balance the humanitarian imperative to take in asylum-seekers with German’s true capacity to integrate those newcomers and maintain social cohesion.

The decline of Western hegemony and emergence of multiple world powers in the international arena also makes the development of a foreign policy less focussed on intervention and more interested in reaching compromise an appealing proposition.

An impossible shift?

There’s no denying that changing course towards such a popular left-

wing platform would entail a major shift for the SPD.

At the policy level, it would require a more restrictive approach to immigration. The party would also have to put its bold plans for a United States of Europe back in the filing cabinet.

The party would have to adopt achieving meaningful income increases for a majority of people as its chief goal. This could be achieved by strengthening collective bargaining agreements, improving the country's social safety net and increasing the minimum wage.

In order to rebuild the public sector, a popular left-wing SPD would need to increase taxes and current national borrowing levels. It would also need to experiment with new methods to recruit lawmakers from all walks of life so as to bring more diversity into its university-educated leadership.

All this would mark a major shift in policies and tone for the SPD. But just because this change of course sounds difficult for today's German social democrats doesn't mean it should be dismissed out of hand.



Andreas Nölke
Frankfurt

Andreas Nölke is Professor of Political Science at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany.