FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 26.10.2026 | Catrina Schläger & Nina Netzer

Vanilla, with a twist

What social democracy has in common with vanilla ice cream — and how it can turn that into a strength

In a focus group discussion, one young guy once compared Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) to vanilla ice cream. It wasn't meant as a compliment — vanilla ice cream is alright; it goes with almost anything, it's inoffensive, but it's also bland and hardly anyone would say it's their favourite. And that's why it was such a cutting metaphor — it describes a party that few are offended by and is universally compatible, but also one that doesn't mean much to anyone.

The question then is: how can the SPD regain a distinct profile? How can it differentiate itself as a democratic, internationalist, leftist party that represents workers, offers solutions to people's everyday problems, bolsters the state's ability to deliver, champions its own values with conviction and brings different social groups together under the banner of a shared political project?

Social democracy's problem is not that it doesn't have the right policies. What it increasingly lacks, however, is the ability to unify material interests, political identity and a credible promise of social change within a single political project.

A new manifesto for social democracy

This is not something that's unique to Germany's Social Democrats — social democratic parties are under pressure around the world. And while the context varies significantly from country to country, the individual pressures they face are similar: the decline in traditional voter loyalties, the erosion of established party systems, the rise of right-wing populist movements and a loss of trust in political institutions. The process of drawing up a new SPD manifesto is thus about more than just updating its policy positions; it's about defining what social democracy stands for in the 21st century.

Looking abroad may not provide a blueprint, but it does provide pointers

as to the areas social democratic parties have been addressing in their search for answers — namely people's everyday material concerns, political identity and belonging, promises of genuine change and potential sources of support for such a project within society.

Responding to people's material concerns is particularly key to regaining political relevance. Internationally, the debate has revolved around affordability. It's not just about the specific issue of whether people can still afford things, though, but about whether politicians can provide credible responses to the rising cost of housing, energy, transport, health and care services, education and groceries. Another key focus has been deliverism — the idea that politicians shouldn't just make promises to the public; they should deliver on them via government action.

Objective delivery doesn't automatically correlate to subjective experience.

Abroad, we've seen various attempts to translate these insights into government policy. In Spain, Pedro Sánchez's PSOE has thus implemented measures such as discounted public transport fares, housing policy reforms and public investment. In Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham's Bee Network showed how deliverism can bring key everyday infrastructure back under public control. And in the Swedish election campaign, Magdalena Andersson called for a temporary bank tax as a way of funding financial relief for private households.

What these approaches have in common is that they tackle the affordability issue not via standalone policies of financial relief but in terms of systemic solutions: state provision of essential services, interventions in rental markets, affordable transport, public infrastructure and wealth taxation.

But an affordability focus and deliverism are no substitute for narratives of freedom, fairness and solidarity. A functioning state is not an overarching vision. Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, which saw massive investment in and subsidies for action on climate change, industrial policy and domestic manufacturing, may have been successful if judged purely in economic policy terms, but it also showed that government action alone is not enough. Objective delivery doesn't automatically correlate to subjective experience. Political communication has to mediate between public investment programmes and people's everyday experiences.

When right-wing parties have enjoyed success, one of the reasons has

been their ability to mobilise negative emotions: anger, resentment, fear of losing out, othering. Centrist parties tend to either respond with technocratic formulas and pragmatic policy packages or by echoing the language of the right.

In Spain, though, Sánchez has taken a very different tone. At the Global Progressive Mobilisation in Barcelona, he went on the offensive, saying we should be proud to be social democrats, proud to be feminists, and proud to be progressives. In Italy, Partito Democratico's Elly Schlein is attempting to reclaim a distinct left-wing voice for her party in opposition. Schlein is tackling the right's scapegoating of specific groups head-on: the problem is not migrants, women or LGBTQ+ people, she argues; instead 'the great adversary is inequality'. She is thus uniting social justice, climate justice, equal rights and the fight against precarity and for decent work within a single political project. Another approach can be seen in the progressive patriotism of Anthony Albanese's 'Australian way', which seeks to show that belonging and identity are not exclusively right-wing concerns.

In Germany, the SPD needs to get back to treating politics as an ideological argument, instead of hiding its values behind bureaucratic language or capitulating when faced with political headwinds. That would allow it to present a clearer left-wing profile and to forge a distinct political identity.

Social democrats would be well served to question existing power structures more, to clearly say who is profiting from the current imbalances in society and whom the status quo benefits.

It also has to recognise, however, that the traditional working class no longer exists. Compared to the 20th century, the working class of today features a higher proportion of women and ethnic minorities and is far less likely to be seen sporting boiler suits. What its members have in common is that they have to work to earn a living. As the party of labour, the SPD needs to retain its core ideological identity when it comes to the divide between labour and capital.

At the same time, social democrats need to offer a leftist identity that's about championing a community based on solidarity and diversity, an identity that can serve as a source of dignity, belonging and cohesion.

But such a leftist offering also has to explain what it wants to see changed. Across many countries, there is a strong desire for radical change, or even to rip everything up. Right-wing and authoritarian forces are harnessing these feelings and promising to break up the democratic order. Social

democrats need to resist that kind of destructive thinking. At the same time, they also need to avoid coming across as stuffy defenders of the status quo. Social democrats would be well served to question existing power structures more, to clearly say who is profiting from the current imbalances in society and whom the status quo benefits.

In the UK, Burnham has put regional delivery and the state control of key public services at the heart of his policy agenda. New York's Zohran Mamdani has combined radical demands with tackling specific real-world issues such as rent levels, transport, childcare and living costs. The strength of his approach is that it's enabled people to once again see politics as something that can visibly impact wealth distribution, public goods and everyday life.

Social democratic parties can thus also harness the desire for change. Signalling a break with the past is only credible, however, if it's more than just posturing. For the SPD, that means any renewal process can't just be reduced to new faces or new forms of communication. A party promising change has to outline what kind of structural change it wishes to implement.

Building progressive alliances

That brings us to the next question: who else would back such a project? In many countries, social democratic parties can no longer rely on their own majorities. The old idea that progressive majorities would automatically coalesce around a broad-based social democratic party no longer applies.

There is therefore a need to proactively form alliances, both with societal actors – such as trade unions, welfare organisations, feminist movements, youth organisations, climate movements and civil society groups – and with other political parties.

In the Netherlands, GroenLinks merged with the social democratic PvdA in June 2026 to form a new Partei Progressief Nederland (PRO), while, in Brazil, Lula's PT managed to regain power as part of a broad pro-democracy, anti-Bolsonaro coalition. Such alliances, however, require time, trust and dialogue, plus a shared strategic language.

The SPD, too, needs to build alliances; in a fragmented society, they are the only way to generate progressive majorities.

So what do all these international comparisons mean for the SPD and its

repositioning? Any new positioning has to make clear whose side the Social Democrats are on, what power structures it wishes to change and how it can still be the party of labour, freedom, solidarity and democratic governance in our 21st-century world. In short: it has to outline how different societal interests can once again come together within a shared leftist political identity.

Vanilla might not be the most exotic variety of ice cream, but it's Germany's most popular and the one with the largest market share. So what makes it special? Its brand essence: that it contains genuine vanilla.

This article was originally published in spw – Zeitschrift für sozialistische Politik und Wirtschaft.



Catrina Schläger
Berlin

Catrina Schläger leads the Political Consulting Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Prior to this, she held various roles within the Foundation's international operations.



Nina Netzer
Berlin

Nina Netzer works as policy officer for international social democracy at

the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Prior to this, she was the office manager of the FES in Cameroon, a desk officer in the Africa Department, she headed the foundation's global climate and energy project and worked in the FES EU Office in Brussels.