

## **Roundtable: How can social democratic parties build a winning electoral coalition?**

**Line Rennwald, Tarik Abou-Chadi, Jane Gingrich**

In an era of fickle and fragmented electorates, social democratic parties in Europe face an increasingly complex challenge when it comes to assembling a winning electoral coalition. In this roundtable, three political scientists offer their perspective on that challenge: Line Rennwald considers what is left of European social democracy's historic working-class base; Tarik Abou-Chadi questions the supposed policy trade-offs between appealing to middle and working-class voters; Jane Gingrich contrasts the relatively stable support for progressive policy with the increasingly fragile electoral position of social democratic parties.

### **The existing electoral support for social democratic parties**

**Line Rennwald**

In the last fifteen years, social democratic parties have experienced a marked electoral decline in many European countries. After the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the average score of social democratic parties in Western Europe fell by more than ten percentage points – sharply accelerating a long downward-sloping trend since the electoral peaks registered in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

In this new context, what does the class profile of social democracy look like at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Western Europe? Using data from a comparative study<sup>2</sup> of elections between 2010 and 2015 in six Western European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), I provide here a panoramic view of the profile of the social democratic party family.

In many Western European countries, it is possible to describe social democratic parties as *cross-class parties* (or, *catch-all parties*, to use the concept advanced by Otto Kirchheimer in 1966).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, social democratic parties do not reach particularly high or particularly low vote shares in specific social classes. Rather, they attain relatively equal vote shares across all social classes (and, for this period, this means relatively poor vote shares across all social classes). When comparing the score obtained by social democratic parties in different social classes to their score in the electorate as a whole, it is striking how little difference there is between the two numbers. In other words, social classes are not polarised in their attitudes towards social democracy.

Nonetheless, the past still leaves an imprint. Historically social democratic sections of the electorate – such as workers in industry, craft trades, construction, and transport ('production workers' according to the Oesch class schema used in this analysis)<sup>4</sup> and workers in the catering, retail and personal care sectors ('service workers') still give above-average support to social democratic parties. But this above-average support is very modest, and, in some countries, almost non-existent. Support is not coming from the new middle classes either. In many countries, professionals and managers do not offer disproportionate electoral support to social democracy.

Overall, the composition of social democratic party electorates tends to mirror that of the electorate as a whole. The broadly-construed working class (production and service workers) represent around one half of the social democratic electorate, while the new middle classes (professionals and managers) represent the other.

This description of social democracy's class profile is subject to variations across and within countries. In a few countries, there is above-average support from professionals in social and cultural services ('socio-cultural professionals'), who are mostly employed in the public sector. This is the case for smaller social democratic parties (for example, the Swiss Social Democratic Party) or for parties which face historical competition from a Communist Party (for example, the French Socialist Party). This suggests that parties that were historically less working-class have turned more explicitly to the new middle classes and have mobilised them more successfully. They seem to have become *new class parties* rather than *cross-class parties*. However, a similar trend can also be observed in recent elections among social democratic parties that were historically more working-class. For example, in the 2017 general election in the UK, socio-cultural professionals became an important part of the support base of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour.

Support for social democratic parties among workers remains modest. What is perhaps especially worrying is that many workers do not vote at all. Abstention is nowadays a fundamental characteristic of working-class voting behaviour. The decision is no longer a choice between different parties, but first and foremost a choice between abstention and participation. I estimate that between 25 and 40 per cent of workers do not vote. Social democracy therefore has an important mobilisation problem amongst the working class.

When it comes to the limited number of workers who do participate, social democrats face increasing competition from other parties. However, not all parties make inroads among this part of the electorate, or, to stick to our benchmark, not all parties receive an above-average support from workers. Only radical right and radical left parties perform better among workers than among the electorate as a whole. However mainstream right parties often receive a sizeable share of workers' votes, even if they perform less strongly with this demographic than in the electorate as a whole. Moreover, in countries such as Austria, Great Britain and especially Germany, working-class support for mainstream right parties is increasing.

Social democracy at its electoral peak drew its strength from its ability to mobilise a significant proportion of the working class, which itself constituted a large proportion of the electorate. This mobilised working class was simultaneously a cause and consequence of the relative power of labour against capital in the period of economic expansion between 1945 and 1975. Conversely, the newly demobilised and fragmented working-class vote is both a manifestation and a cause of the current economic regime in which the balance of power tilts more towards capital. Despite discussions about 'the end of the working class', twenty-first century's social democracy still needs the votes of production and service workers. Taken together, they on average make up 39 per cent of the total electorate in Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> Add in clerical works and this number rises to 50 per cent. However, social democracy also cannot ignore the new middle classes who on average represent on 35 per cent of the electorate. Socio-cultural professionals (with whom, amongst the new middle classes, social democratic parties perform best) make up only 13 per cent of the electorate. The winning formula for social democracy – and there is nothing new under the sun – must combine the mobilisation of working-class voters with winning the support of segments of the new middle classes.

Socio-economic issues (such as wealth redistribution, affordable housing, new and good jobs for the energy transition) constitute the backbone of this coalition. Working-class and parts of middle-class voters share similar views on these issues that are at the core of social democracy's values and history.

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<sup>1</sup>On the evolution of social democracy's vote share, see for example Björn Bremer and Line Rennwald, 'Who Still Likes Social Democracy? The Support Base of Social Democratic Parties Reconsidered', *Party Politics*, Vol 29 No 4, 2023, pp741-754; Line Rennwald and Jonas Pontusson, 'Paper Stones Revisited: Class Voting, Unionization and the Electoral Decline of the Mainstream Left', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol 19 No 1, 2021, pp36-54.

<sup>2</sup> Line Rennwald, *Social Democratic Parties and the Working Class: New Voting Patterns*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Kirchheimer, 'The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems', in J. Lapalombara & M. Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1966, pp177-200.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Oesch, *Redrawing the Class Map: Stratification and Institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Own calculations from the European Social Survey (rounds 9-10), on seventeen Western European countries for the period 2018-2002.