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The Quiet Rise of the Far-Left

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the past year, the political commentary has focused on the rise of right-wing populism and the success of conservative and alt-right parties. In their fascination with the Right, many in Europe have dismissed the Left as a dying breed, a social movement that once held sway, but has failed to offer an alternative to unfettered capitalism. This paper will examine the electoral successes of Die Linke in Germany, SYRIZA in Greece, and Unidos Podemos in Spain, to push back against this narrative. I will contrast these successes with the poor performances of traditional center left parties, such as the Social Democrats in Germany and the Spanish Socialist Workers Party. Lastly, I will compare certain strategies that have worked well for SYRIZA, Die Linke, and Unidos Podemos and compare these to the reactions of center left parties such as the SPD and the UK Labour Party.

KEYWORDS

leftist, parties, Europe

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past several years, the political commentary has focused on the rise of right-wing populism and the success of conservative and alt-right parties. In their fascination with the Right, many in Europe have dismissed the Left as a dying breed, a social movement that once held sway, but has failed to offer an alternative to unregulated capitalism and globalization. This view is incorrect. The decline of traditional Social Democrats in many of the core states of the EU is undeniable. However, far-left parties, within many of these countries, have continued to hold sway. This paper will examine the electoral successes of Die Linke in Germany, SYRIZA in Greece, and Unidos Podemos in Spain, to push back against the narrative of a declining Left. I will contrast these successes with the poor performances of traditional center-left parties, such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany and the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). Next, I will compare certain strategies that have worked well for SYRIZA, Die Linke, and Unidos Podemos, and use these to analyse how two centrist parties, the UK Labor Party and the SPD, have adapted to a more powerful far-left. I will conclude this paper by making the case that the European Left is still strong and viable, but must be weary of the trap of centrist politics.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE LEFT

Social democracy grounded its roots towards the turn of the century in the late 1800s. At first, the Left emerged with a program of social welfare and greater rights for the working class. During this period, the Left was made up of both socialists and communists with both pushing for greater rights for labour, and at points advocating for overthrowing the capitalist system. In tandem with the workers movements, social democracy advocated for an expansion of citizens rights, including in the 1891 German Social Democratic platform, “universal adult suffrage, the right of referendum, the election of judges, the separation of church and state...” (Sassoon, 2015, p. 20), and other liberal ideals. This advocacy for greater rights associated with the working class and for national parliaments put social democracy clearly on the path to becoming the center-left alternative to conservative governments.

The birth of social democracy traces back to Northern Europe where the first Social Democratic parties took power. The distinction, of social democracy, came into being with the break between those who advocated achieving socialist goals through revolution, and those who advocated for working within democracy in order to achieve socialist goals. Social Democrats, those who argued for a peaceful process of implementing socialist goals, came to the conclusion that so long as capitalism’s negative crises could be averted and full unemployment could be achieved, then capitalism could remain. Their continued support of workers’ unions lead to the first electoral success of Social Democrats, particularly in Northern Europe in the interwar period. However, this electoral success did not always equate to governing. Many Social Democratic parties, especially the SPD in Germany, were tainted by World War I (WWI) and parties on the left (such as Communists and Independent Social Democrats) refused to support an SPD government.

The post World War II (WWII) years saw the increased governing and electoral viability of Social Democratic parties across Europe. In Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway, Social Democratic parties, “hegemonized the left and largely dominated the political spectrum as a whole” (McCrone & Keating, 2015, p. 36). The electoral success of

these parties created the “Middle Way” or “Nordic Model” which was embraced by most Social Democratic parties across Europe. These models comprised free market capitalism, collective bargaining, and state involvement with welfare provisions. These policies proved effective and ushered in prosperity for Europe post WWII. However, the Arab Oil Embargo of the 70s brought to an end the dominance of social democracy in Europe, and ushered in an era of uncertainty for the European center-left.

THE DECLINE OF THE CORE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

Through the late 2000s into the 2010s, center-left Social Democrats have fared poorly in much of Europe, with the exception of Scandinavia. The SPD in Germany and the PSOE in Spain have both seen their share of the vote decline sharply. The SPD has been kept out of power since 2007 while the PSOE, having been in power from 2004–2011, has seen its support evaporate since then.

Since the restoration of democracy in Spain, the PSOE and the Popular Party (PP) have enjoyed the status of being the two largest parties in Spain. The PSOE has led the government on many occasions including most recently from 2008 to 2011. However, due to the onset of the 2008 Great Recession and the PSOE’s poor handling of the government, the PSOE has been on a downward electoral spiral. Following a historic high in 2008 of 43.9% of the vote and 169 seats in Parliament, the PSOE had its worst showing in 2011. The PSOE won only 29% of the vote, and only 110 seats in parliament (Kennedy, 2014, p. 176–177). This result was the outcome of a severe austerity package endorsed by the PSOE in order to cope with the economic catastrophe of the Great Recession, which resulted in a, “5 percent reduction in civil servants’ salaries, the slashing of public sector investment, the freezing of pensions, and the extension of the retirement age from 65 to 67 (Kennedy, 2014, p. 177). The decline in support for the PSOE and its centrist rival the PP has only increased since the 2011 elections. In the 2015 and 2016 elections the PP and PSOE captured only 55.7% of the vote, down from 83.8% in 2008 (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintes-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 989). Following these elections, the PSOE once again has found itself in the midst of succession crisis after leader Pedro Sanchez was forced out due to his opposition to a coalition with the PP, something that was heavily favored by PSOE political heavyweights (Lancaster, 2017, p. 934).

My other example of a center-left party in decline is the SPD in Germany. As an offshoot of one of the first Social Democratic parties in Europe, the SPD has played a large role in Germany’s labor movement, and the implementation of the welfare state post WWII in Germany. The SPD has traditionally been one of the two major parties in German politics; the other being the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Since the founding of the Federal Republic, however, the SPD has led a government only six out of the nineteen elections. In recent years, the SPD’s vote share sharply declined due in large part to the neoliberal Hartz IV reforms, implemented by SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in 2003 (Dostal, 2017). In addition to these reforms, from 2005–2009 and from 2013–2017, the SPD governed as the junior partner in a grand coalition with the CDU. The most recent elections, in September 2017, saw the worst showing yet for the SPD. The SPD won 20.5% of the vote, only 8% higher than the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which gained seats in parliament for the first time. Following these elections, and the failure of the Jamaica Coalition, a proposed coalition between the CDU/CSU, FDP, and Greens, the SPD agreed

to join another grand coalition lead by the CDU. The decline in vote share for the SPD is remarkable when comparing the SPD's electoral percentage from the 2002 elections to their electoral percentage in the 2017 elections. In 2002 the SPD won 38.5% of the vote, while in 2017 it won only 20.5%; a striking decline for one of Europe's standard bearers for social democracy.

WHAT IS THE FAR-LEFT

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, leftist parties across Europe and the world underwent an identity crisis. Communists and leftists redefined what they stood for and the means upon which they wished to achieve these goals. From this reinvention, the far-left became defined as those to the left of social democracy, which they see as insufficiency left-wing (March, 2009). These parties can be in the form of communists, trade-unionists, leftists, anti-capitalists, and more. Within Europe, the popularity of these parties has returned, due in part to disenchantment with traditional social democracy.

ELECTORAL SUCCESS AND THE FAR-LEFT

Despite the tumultuous trajectory of center-left parties in the post 2008 financial collapse, leftist parties have grown in several key countries. This is true in particular in Greece, Germany, and Spain. All three of these countries has seen the rise of far-left parties in post 2008 elections. These electoral upticks are in contrast to the prevailing theory that the Left is in retreat across Europe.

The first such case is that of Greece. Greece was hit hardest by the Eurozone crisis which sent their party system into chaos. The Greek party system, since the restoration of democracy in 1974, has been characterized by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) on the center-left, and New Democracy (ND) on the center-right. These two parties have suffered greatly at the hands of SYRIZA, a far-left anti-austerity party. SYRIZA came to prominence after the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2010 between Greece and its creditors which led to virulent opposition among Greek voters. The result of this first MoU, "would be the complete reshaping of the party system between 2010 and 2015" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 4). The MoU imposed harsh austerity measures in Greece that lead to protests and strikes across the country (Wearden, 2010). This MoU was agreed to by PASOK, which following the agreement has borne the brunt of the electoral consequences. During the lead up to the MoU, SYRIZA campaigned heavily against the agreement and expanded their electoral message to encompass not only their leftist economic policies but also to harness the protest vote. This lead to large electoral gains in the ensuing elections. By 2012, SYRIZA gained 16.8% of the vote, a near four fold increase from its 4.6% of the vote in 2009. Elections were held again in June of 2012 after SYRIZA, now the second largest party, refused to form a coalition government with the ND. In the June election, SYRIZA again increased its proportion to, "26.6 percent, assuming the role of official opposition to the new coalition government of PASOK, ND and DIMAR that resulted from the election" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 6). In the following 2015 elections, SYRIZA saw its' vote share jump to its highest level, 36.3%, which brought SYRIZA into government. SYRIZA's election coincided with the discussion of a third MoU and SYRIZA's fierce opposition to such a move. Though the party fiercely opposed the MoU, after several months of negotiations, Greece's creditors suspended payments and Greece neared financial collapse. This

lead to the signing of the MoU in late 2015 and another election. SYRIZA still carried the election, with 35.5% of the vote, which continued the Tsipras government and SYRIZA's electoral good fortune.

Another leftist party that has seen its vote share increase steadily is Die Linke in Germany. Die Linke is the successor party of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the former East Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it rebranded itself as the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in order to compete in elections. After a decade competing as the PDS, the party merged with the The Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice (WASG), and finally became Die Linke. The WASG was a breakaway party of the SPD that came into being because it, "opposed Schröder's economic and labour market reforms [and was comprised of]...unionists, disaffected SPD members as well as tiny communist groups and radical green leftists with a weak common ideology" (Coffe'/Plassa, 2010, p. 144). Die Linke situated itself as the alternative left wing party to the Schröder lead SPD-Green government in the 2005 elections. The party called for a minimum wage, a shorter work week, an expanded public works sector, a minimum pension of 800 euros a month, free daycare, and more financial support to families with children. Die Linke also opposed university tuition, privatization of public assets, and services and liberalization of markets. It was with these policies that the party was able to distinguish itself as a more left wing alternative to the governing center-left coalition that had been attacking some of these leftist principles. Die Linke's campaign strategy worked well, with the party winning 8.7% of the vote nationally in 2005 and earning 54 seats in parliament, surpassing the best that either the PDS or WASG had ever done. Since then, Die Linke has secured more parliamentary seats in every election, except the 2013 election where it secured 8.2% of the vote, but 64 seats. Though Die Linke owes some of its success to its reputation as an East German protest party, due to its history, its appeal as an alternative to centrist politics can not be ignored. In these most recent elections, though it lost ground to the AfD in eastern German Länder, it was able to maintain and/or grow its voter base in many western Länder (Burn-Murdoch, Ehrenberg-Shannon, Bernard, Maier-Borst, Stabe, 2017).

Lastly, the leftist party Unidos Podemos has challenged the two party system that has long dominated Spain. Unidos Podemos was formed in 2014 as an electoral alliance between Podemos, United Left, Equo, and several other smaller leftist parties. The party also has its roots in the social movement 15-M, which advocated against the austerity measures and economic crisis that struck Spain and many other EU countries (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintes-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 988). From its inception, Unidos Podemos emerged as a protest party on two fronts. Firstly, Unidos Podemos opposed how democracy was working in Spain and the privilege and corruption of traditional political actors within the system (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintes-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 988). The other tennant that Unidos Podemos was founded on was opposition to the, "effects of the international economic crisis on the lives of the majority of Spanish citizens" (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintes-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 988). Unidos Podemos has seen its success explode since its inception in 2014. In the 2014 European elections, Unidos Podemos won 5 seats in the European Parliament, with 1.2 million votes. In the 2015 and 2016 Spanish general elections, Unidos Podemos won over 5 million votes, claiming 21.1% of the total vote (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintes-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 989). This meant that

Unidos Podemos entered the Spanish Parliament as the third largest party. Though Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Unidos Podemos, was disappointed by the 2016 elections showing, Unidos Podemos still managed to maintain its share of the votes and avoided a violent intra-party split like the PSOE.

REACTIONS OF THE CENTER-LEFT

Reactions to the decline of support of center-left parties, and the emergence of leftists challengers, have varied across Europe. Two notable differences are between the SPD and the Labour Party in the UK. Following poor showing for both parties, the two pursued differing strategies in order to win back voters.

The SPD, half-heartedly attempted to move more towards the left in the lead up to the 2017 German elections. Under Martin Shultz, the SPD called for a “correction” to the Hartz IV and Agenda 2010, as well as emphasizing solidarity and a greater focus on “social justice” (Knight, 2017). However, these feints toward the left have not won back many voters to the SPD. The SPD’s pivot left was done in an attempt to rebrand the SPD after many years as the junior partner in the Grand Coalition. Following the SPD’s worst ever showing in an election, Martin Schultz announced that the party would not go back into coalition with the CDU. However, after the collapse of coalition talks between the prospective Jamaica coalition (CDU/CSU, Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the Greens), the SPD returned to the bargaining table and agreed to join another Grand Coalition. This was met with exasperation from the youth wing of the SPD, which actively campaigned against another grand coalition. This latest Grand Coalition has also not been met with enthusiasm from either side of the political aisle, and risks further tarnishing the SPD’s already poor reputation among voters on the left.

To contrast the SPD’s reaction, one must look no further than the Labour party in the UK. Although coalition governments are less relevant in the UK due to their First Past the Post system, which tends to favor the two largest parties, Labour has seen its popularity dramatically rise due to doubling down on soft-Brexit and pro-leftists policies. Following the Tony Blair administration, Labour had not fared well in elections. By 2010 the party, “was down to just 29% of the vote” (McCrone & Keating, 37), from a high of 40.7% in 2001. Since 2015, Labour has positioned itself as the soft-Brexit and pro-leftist party, similar to SYRIZA’s anti-austerity politics following the first MoU. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Labour, has continuously attacked Prime Minister Theresa May over her flirting with a “hard Brexit”, and has used this as a means to attract those worried about Britain’s future outside the EU. Corbyn has been a vocal supporter of a “soft-Brexit” and has even gone so far as to suggest that parliament should have a final vote on if the UK really leaves (Barry, 2018). On the economic front, Labour’s most recent party manifesto has reemphasized its socialist roots and supported leftist economic policies such as renationalizing water and energy companies, and the railways, as well as expanding funding to the NHS, and abolishing university tuition fees, to name a few (BBC, 2017). These policies have paid off well for Labour. Following the snap elections called by Prime Minister May in 2017, the Tories lost their majority in Parliament and were forced to work with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in order to form a government. In contrast, Labor picked up 30 seats, and ended with one of its best election results, acquiring 40% of the vote. However, this does not mean that Labour has no challenges whatsoever. An underlying uncertainty

in this strategy is Scotland. Scotland has traditionally been a Labour safe haven within the UK. However, over the past decade the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has “undermined [Labour] in its heartlands in Scotland” (McCrone & Keating, 2015, p. 36). By taking a more pro-EU, soft-Brexit stance, Labour fared better in Scotland, while the SNP lost 21 seats in the election. By moving more to the left, Labour has been able to reinvigorate its traditional base, “which consists of industrial trade unions and the working class” (McCrone & Keating, 2015, p. 36), while also presenting itself as a protest party against a hard Brexit.

STRATEGIES OF THE FAR-LEFT

The electoral strategies of SYRIZA, Die Linke, and Unidos Podemos, show the effectiveness of embracing leftist ideology despite economic collapse and the need for austerity. For SYRIZA the road to electoral success was expanding its appeal beyond the disaffected leftists, to encompass a broader range of voters, in particular, those looking to cast a protest vote. By situating themselves as the alternative to austerity and the alternative to the “Brussels elite”, SYRIZA was able to exploit the shift of the center-left PASOK towards the political center. The other strategy SYRIZA embraced, was not being drawn into a government coalition too soon. This conception came from the party’s founders, who were, “mindful especially of the experience of the French Communist Party’s participation in both the Mitterrand (1981–84) and Jospin (1997–2002) centre-left coalition governments, which [were] assessed as having been instrumental in the PCF’s electoral decline” (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 8). By refusing to govern with parties that had agreed to the first MoU, SYRIZA set itself apart as a protest party to the deteriorating conditions many Greeks found themselves in. It also staved off early absorption into mainstream politics and thus, losing seats by being bogged down in governing.

Die Linke has fared increasing well since its unification with WASG in 2005. By occupying a position as a leftist and eastern protest party, Die Linke is able to capitalize on the, “losers of modernization” (Doerschler, 2015, p. 382). Die Linke’s platform today is still aligned with the socialist ideology of the PDS and, in parts, its predecessor the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED). Die Linke espouses a myriad of left wing positions including raising of the minimum wage to 12 Euro an hour, anti-fascism, anti-islamophobia, the end of “Minijobs” and Hartz IV, increasing state pensions to 53% of national income, a special tax on fortunes of over 1 million euros in order to fund infrastructure and schools, and health care egalitarianism (Knight, 2017). These positions reflect consistency with the platform of the PDS. These similarities center on an explicitly anti-fascist rhetoric, a condemnation of Neoliberal economics, the use of class struggles as rhetoric, a higher minimum wage, and a rebuke of extreme right parties. Studies of the party platforms of WASG and the PDS found that, “the programme of their successor, Die Linke, is clearly closer to the PDS than to the WASG” (Coffe’/Plassa, 2010, p. 731), emphasising Die Linke’s socialist bonafides. The leftists politics of Die Linke have proven fruitful among voters as well. This is evidenced by the SPD losing an, “estimated net 1,100,000 voters to the Left in 2009, more than to any other party” (Patton, 2011, p. 144). Additionally, the SPD’s refusal to work with Die Linke on a national level has seen that party grow as a challenger on the left in social as well as economic issues. The SPD’s refusal to work with Die Linke on a national level has also allowed for the party to maintain its ideological purity on the national level, disassociating it with any negative policies passed by ruling parties.

Similar to the strategy employed by Die Linke and Syriza, Unidos Podemos has capitalized on the PSOE's centrist shift. Unidos Podemos challenged the PSOE by promoting a, "strong anti-big-business orientation,..[and a] push for socio-economic justice with [an] emphasis on a new and fair model of society" (Lancaster, 2017, p. 921-922). Prior to the formation of Unidos Podemos, both Podemos and United left, the two largest parties that formed Unidos Podemos, capitalized on the decline of the centrists People's Party (PP) and PSOE. In the 2014 European parliament elections, the United Left and Podemos won 10.0% and 7.2% respectively, at the cost of the PSOE and the center-left (Lancaster, 2017, p. 924). This decline in the centrist party support was mirrored in the 2015 and 2016 elections, where the PP and PSOE captured only 55.7% of the vote, down from 83.8% in 2008 (Payne, Gregory, Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, Sintés-Olivella, Marçal, French, 2017, p. 989). Following the 2015 election, Podemos' strategy of refusing to join a coalition government with PP furthered its credentials as an authentic leftists party, and secured its voter base going into the 2016 election, in which the PSOE continued its electoral decline. Following the 2016 elections, the PSOE was fraught with infighting, and ousted its leader Pedro Sanchez. Its party then split on endorsing Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of the PP, and thus allowed him to remain Prime Minister. Unidos Podemos, on the other hand, opposed Rajoy's election due to his support of austerity and neoliberal politics. Though the outcome of these political decisions have not yet been fully felt, the fact that Unidos Podemos has maintained its unity, while the PSOE has descended into infighting, suggests the benefits of a more left of center position.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the Left has been deemed a dying breed. Far-right parties have risen across Europe, and the media frenzy surrounding them has drowned out most of the opposition. This rise in the far-right has been coupled with the decline of center-left parties in the core of Europe. Parties such as the PSOE and the SPD have faced serious electoral crises and infighting that have left them structurally weak. However, this is not the full story of the European Left. SYRIZA, Die Linke, and Unidos Podemos are all examples of parties of the left pursuing leftist strategies in order to increase their electoral share. By positioning themselves as saviors of the European welfare state, and alternatives to the conservative forces sweeping through Europe, all three have enjoyed success. These successes, by and large, have come from winning voters over from the traditional center-left. While center-left politics have increasingly coalesced around the center, far-left parties have been able to win back those who feel left out by globalization, and the traditional working class base of the left. Their model for success is something that will become necessary for other parties on the Left across Europe to take note of. For in order to overcome the extreme right in Europe, the Left must articulate a coherent platform that does not betray its core socialist values in order to win over non-existent voters in the political center.

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