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2019

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Krouwel, A., & Kutiyski, Y. (2019). *Finding the Way Forward. Positioning of Europe's Progressive Parties and their Voters.* (International Policy Analysis). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
file:///Users/andrekrouwel/Downloads/Strategy_Debates_Paper.pdf

André Krouwel and Yordan Kutiyski

Finding the
Way Forward

Positioning of Europe's Progressive Parties
and their Voters

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André Krouwel and Yordan Kutiyski

Finding the Way Forward

PARTY STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

–   **Four main strategies of social democratic competition** can be distinguished when the official party positions on salient political issues are compared with the positions of core voter groups on the same issues: 1) *Corbynism* (Left-wing economic polarisation); 2) *Macronism* (pro-market economic polarisation coupled with culturally progressive/libertarian stances); 3) *Progressive-libertarian distancing (the adoption of moderate economic stances with culturally progressive policies)* and 4) *Catch-all* (traditional social democratic centrism). The results from the European countries included in the study show that, with regard to the relative positioning of social democratic parties vis-à-vis their core voter groups, the most beneficial strategies, in terms of electoral appeal, are the traditional social-democratic catch-all strategy of moderation along both the economic and cultural dimensions, as well as the Corbynist strategy of polarisation along the economic dimension.

–   The core element of **Corbynism** is the adoption of a strategic position somewhat to the left of Labour's core voter groups – those who intend to vote for the party and potential voters (with a high vote propensity for the party). Emphasising core left-wing policy priorities (social investment, social justice, healthcare, affordable housing and education) resonates well with core voter groups, with these policy proposals being popular far beyond centre left voters.

–   **Macronism** appears to be a successful strategy, at least initially. Moving beyond the ideological centre on the economic left-right dimension and adopting a pro-market economic strategy, including a pledge to reform the economy, allows parties to successfully appeal to a wide range of centre-left and centre-right voters. However, it has to be noted that Macronism is an economically right-wing strategy, which entails libertarian and pro-European stances on the cultural dimension. Such a strategy could prove detrimental in the long run, particularly for traditionally left-wing parties – such shifts to the right (like the Third Way in the 1980s–1990s) could back-fire. Adopting such centre-right policy stances makes parties vulnerable to accusations of voter betrayal, of working for the benefit of wealthy business elites, rather than middle- and working-class citizens.

–   **Progressive libertarian distancing** is a strategy whereby social democratic parties adopt more profound libertarian/progressive positions (versus more conservative, nationalist and authoritarian stances) than the bulk of their voters, as well as strong support for European integration and environmental protection policies. This strategy minimises the distance to main progressive competitors (Green and social-liberal parties) of social democrats. However, such a strategy makes it more difficult for voters to distinguish social democrats from their main competitors and appears to result in an electorally toxic mix of economic moderation combined with radical positions on cultural issues, such as immigration, (sexual) minority rights and multiculturalism. Most social democratic parties traditionally have – at least partly – a socially conservative voter base that do not favour a full embrace of multiculturalism and globalisation. Our evidence shows that social democratic parties that adopt such a strategy risk making the traditional social democratic voter perceive this as an abandonment of conventional centre-left social democratic core values and policies of social protection.

–   In some countries Social Democratic parties have largely stuck to their traditional **catch-all strategy** of moderation and centrism on both the economic and cultural dimensions. These parties were able to hold on to the more culturally conservative (working class) voter groups without alienating progressives. This catch-all strategy is evidenced by the adoption of policy positions on both dimensions that are very close to the ›median‹ voter among broad groups of potential voters. However, to distinguish social democrats from the centre-right (with whom they compete or even coalesce) these ›catch-all‹ parties adopt economic positions slightly to the left of their core electorate.

1

INTRODUCTION

Recent elections in many European countries have resulted in resounding electoral losses for social democratic parties. In the Netherlands, Austria and Italy, social democratic parties have been ousted from government. In France, *Parti Socialiste* obtained the worst result in its history in both the parliamentary and presidential election, with a similar historic low befalling the Dutch *PvdA*. The German and Swedish social democrats were also considerably weakened in recent elections, yet able to return to government. UK's Labour Party, on the contrary, did substantially better than in 2015, gaining nearly 10 percent in the 2017 election.

These recent losses for social democrats across European democracies are part of a long-term decline plaguing traditional centre-left political parties. Over the last decade, European social democratic parties have faced increasing electoral competition from multiple corners of the political spectrum. Studies indicate that in many countries the traditional social democratic voter base is particularly vulnerable to appeals from the radical socialist left, green environmentalist parties as well as radical right-wing populist competitors. In addition, libertarian right-wing parties are also contributing to an erosion of social democratic support, as evidenced in France, where Emmanuel Macron's *République En Marche* (LREM) was able to attract many former *Parti Socialiste* voters, as did the social liberal *Democrats 66* (D66) in the Netherlands. Finally, as social democrats traditionally have a substantial voter base in the political centre, many of their previous voters are eying centre-right competitors. Do these losses indicate a temporary malaise, or is it possible that the political pendulum will swinging

back in favour of the centre-left, as has hapened in the 2017 UK election? How did the different social democratic parties respond to political pressures and how have they attempted to stop the electoral haemorrhaging into several ideological directions?

IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION OF THE CENTRE-LEFT

With a ›Third Way‹ strategy, social democratic parties adopted a more ideologically moderate profile in the late 1980s, embracing elements of the neo-liberal economic agenda. In the eyes of many voters, this shift diluted the parties' traditional left-wing profile, at the heart of which stood the protection of welfare-state arrangements, promotion of trade unionism and collective bargaining for better working conditions and higher wages, attainment of greater social justice by means of redistribution of wealth and knowledge (including accessible education). In the view of many, the centre-left has abandoned much of its original identity associated with the protection of workers' rights, as social democratic support for labour market flexibility has created a more competitive labour market with far lower levels of de-commodification. This has exacerbated social and economic inequalities – a trend accelerated by a rollback of the welfare state pursued by ever more powerful right-wing parties. Although these policy shifts have made social democratic parties credible coalition partners in the eyes of the centre-right, they also provided challengers on the radical left- and right-wing flanks with an oppor-

Table 1
Election results overview (in percentages)

Name/country	Historic high (year)	Historic low (year)	Last election	Recent loss/gain
Labour (UK)	48.8 (1951)	29.0 (2010)	40.0 (2017)	+9.6
SPÖ (AUT)	51.0 (1979)	26.8 (2013)	26.9 (2017)	+0.1
SAP (SWE)	50.1 (1964)	28.3 (2018)	28.3 (2018)	−2.7
PD (ITA)	33.2 (2008)	18.7 (2018)	18.7 (2018)	−6.7
PvdA (NL)	33.8 (1977)	5.7 (2017)	5.7 (2017)	−19.0
PS (FRA)*	37.5 (1981)	7.4 (2017)	7.4 (2017)	−22.0

* 1st round proportion and after 'foundation' of PS around Mitterand

tunity to portray social democrats as ›traitors‹ of the (working) poor, enabling newcomers were able to make inroads on traditional electoral turf of social democrats.

The transformation of the political landscape and the major issue dimensions of political competition also went hand in hand with a change in the electoral fortunes of the centre-left. Since the 1980s, green parties have become a key competitor of the social democrats. As leftist parties with progressive values and a cosmopolitan outlook, environmentalist parties have become one of the main allies and coalition partners of social democrats, yet also one of their main competitors. In contrast to the radical left, the appeal of the Greens poses a challenge to social democrats when it comes to attracting young, progressive middle-class voters, students and intellectuals. Traditionally, green parties have been particularly popular with younger voters, to whom post-materialist values are of greater importance than the economic materialism of their parents' generation. Green voters are more likely to prioritise ecological protection over economic growth and view the environment as an ecosystem that is not a mere commodity to be used for capitalist wealth-creation. Thus, they advocate taking steps to mitigate pollution, depletion of resources and climate change, even if this would have negative economic implications. As many millennials take economic prosperity for granted, the ›low-growth or no-growth‹ scenario of environmentalist parties, coupled with a commitment to economic egalitarianism, is very appealing to younger voters. Greening the economic dimension with issues related to ecological justice has blurred the initial difference between the environmental (green-grey) and the economic left-right dimensions of electoral competition. Moreover, Green parties usually adopt culturally libertarian stances combined with left-wing economic positions, which allows for a successful appeal to social democratic voters with a combination of post-materialism, environmentalism, social justice, emancipation and (gender) equality.

In addition to the challengers competing with social democrats on the left of the political spectrum, the rise of the ›radical right‹ has also posed a new challenge confronting social democratic parties with different obstacles. However, we argue that the ›*radical right*‹ is often misunderstood and the label is misleading. Most parties that are branded ›far‹, ›extreme‹ or ›radical‹ right are actually relatively centrist on welfare state policies – protecting health-care, unemployment and childcare benefits and pensions – yet they are radical and extremist on cultural issues, such as immigration and multiculturalism. Needless to say, they are still pro-market and against redistribution. In that sense, the ›radical right‹ is amplifying the salience of issues traditionally »owned« by the right, while facilitating the construction and formation of right-wing governments. The greatest challenge the radical right poses to social democracy, however, is its appeal to working-class voters – a traditional element of the social democratic voter base. At first glance, it may strike one as surprising that the radical anti-immigration right would appeal to the same voters as the centre-left. The radical right is normally associated with

cultural conservatism, hostility towards immigration, a nationalist stance and authoritarian tendencies when it comes to law-and-order issues. Yet their populist policies of nativist protectionism resonate strongly with working and lower middle-class voters. The anti-immigrant populist right often argue that social benefits should be reserved primarily, if not exclusively, for the ›deserving‹ native population, and withheld from ›con artists‹ and ›undeserving‹ immigrants. This ›welfare chauvinism‹ sets radical right-wing parties apart from more traditional right-wing parties that often advocate purer forms of economic liberalism. In this sense, the radical anti-immigrant right bears some resemblance to the political left in its support for general welfare arrangements (pensions, unemployment benefits, health care, child-care and family support).

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE AND INTERNAL SHIFTS

Despite an overall decline in electoral trends for the left, some successes have been registered by social democratic parties such as, for example, the impressive gain made by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the 2017 UK general election, as well as the formation of left-wing (minority) governments in Portugal and Spain by coalescing with radical left forces (communists and PODEMOS/regional parties respectively).

Many observers point to social democratic parties' estrangement from their historical voter base as the main reason for their electoral demise. If social democratic parties are haemorrhaging support to all corners of the political spectrum, however, this begs an important question: *Where do social democratic parties need to position themselves to bring key groups of voters back into the fold and/or attract new voters?*

To answer this question empirically, we analyse official policy positions of political parties based on the party platforms of six major European social democratic parties, as well as those of their competitors. To clarify the complexity of party competition, we plot political parties in two-dimensional political landscapes comprised of the major economic and cultural dimensions of political rivalry. In addition to these traditional social democratic parties, we include a case of crucial importance – the liberal *République En Marche*, headed by former social democratic minister Emmanuel Macron. Within the space of a few months after its creation, *En Marche* swept presidential and parliamentary elections, in what constituted the implosion of the party system of the Fifth Republic.

As the various case studies below illustrate, social democratic parties across Europe have adopted different strategies in order to maximise their electoral appeal, with varying degrees of success. The strategy of the Labour Party in the UK, for example, is to emphasise economic issues over cultural ones. In Austria and Sweden, social democrats have adopted a traditional »catch-all« strategy, seeking to appeal to a broad section of the electorate, while social

democratic parties in France and the Netherlands have moved towards the progressive pole of the political spectrum on the cultural dimension, and closer to the centre with regard to economic issues.

What lessons can be learned from these various strategies? What policy stances are most beneficial electorally and which policy shifts are best avoided if social democratic parties are to be successful again in upcoming elections? By exploring the ever more complex nature of political challenges faced by social democracy, this paper aims to provide an answer to this pivotal question.

Strategies of political parties are identified by comparing the position in the political landscape of each social democratic party in its national political landscape vis-a-vis two voter groups: (1) **core voters** – those who express an intention to vote for the social democratic party and (2) **potential voters** – those with a high voting propensity for the social democratic party (8, 9 or 10), but with an intention to vote for another party.

Our case selection includes a broad variety of cases in terms of electoral system (UK: First-Past-The-Post, France: 2nd round plurality, Austria, Netherlands and Sweden: proportional systems, in Italy – a mixed system un 2017 combining FPTP and PR). There are differences in terms of the parties' electoral performance as well: some have previously gained majorities nationally (SPÖ and SAP) and others had their peak at around one-third of the vote. In addition, Labour, SAP, PD and PS governed in single party (minority) governments, while PvdA and SPÖ always governed as a coalition partner with the centre right.

In the section below, we describe the methodology used to position political parties and voters in the national political landscapes and provide a summary of how the data was collected. In the sections that follow, different case studies are analysed and four main strategies of social democratic competition are presented.

2

HOW PARTIES AND VOTERS WERE POSITIONED IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

This study offers in-depth analyses of the positions of political parties within national party systems, as well as of the distance between party platforms and parties' (potential) voters. These analyses are based on a party coding methodology in which experts place political parties on a large number of salient political issues that are all related to the main dimensions of political competition – an economic left-right dimension, and a cultural GAL-TAN dimension (see detailed explanation of the dimensions below), following a careful reading and assessment of their election platforms (manifestoes), party websites, campaign documents and media statements of party leaders and officials. Not only party positions were collected, but also voter opinions on the same issues. Both party position and voter data were collected through voting advice application (VAA) websites that were fielded in each of the countries and by which we mapped the opinions of thousands of voters on the same issues on which the political parties were calibrated. Comparing the evidence-based expert placements of parties and the voters' self-placement on issues, allows for carefully matching official party stances with voter preferences. Using both respondents' *vote intention* and *vote propensities*, we distinguish between social democratic ›likely voters‹ and ›potential voters‹ (or ›sympathisers‹).

For the analyses in this paper, two types of graphs are used. First, we plot two core voter groups on the two-dimensional landscape using spatial density heatmaps to assess voters' proximity or distance from the social democratic party. We distinguish between social democratic sympathisers (potential voters) and actual voters in relation to the positions of political parties within the political landscape. Voters' and sympathisers' positions were extrapolated from their answers to the same issues on which parties were also coded. Voters of a given party are identified with the use of a »voting intention« question asking respondents which party they were planning to vote for in upcoming parliamentary elections. Sympathisers of a given party are segmented by using an 11-point »propensity-to-vote« scale on which respondents assess the probability that they will vote for the respective parties, ranging from 0 = »would never vote for the party« to 10 = »would certainly vote for the party«. Those respondents who have a vote propensity of 8, 9 or 10 for a party included in the analyses, yet intended to vote for another party, were classified as sympathisers. The coloured area in the heatmap reveals where most respondents are located after being plotted in the two-di-

mensional political space. The yellow (low-density) and blue (high-density) areas show where respondents are concentrated (spatial density). The darker the blue colour, the greater the concentration of respondents. White areas do not necessarily indicate the absence of respondents – they merely show that the respondent concentration is very low, i. e. very few respondents are located at these positions.

The second type of graphs show all relevant political parties in the political landscape based on aggregated issue positions, with their standard deviation on each of the two political axes, enabling us to assess their ›ideological spread‹ across the landscape. The party position diagrams on the following pages indicate the spatial positions of electorally relevant parties on two-dimensional spatial maps based on expert-calibration of 30 salient issue-statements. The most salient issues in each election were identified by a team of scholars, election experts and journalists following a close examination of the parties' manifestos and the political (media) discourse. Each of the statements pertains to a policy proposal that can be associated with the main economic and cultural issue dimensions, framed into a »left-wing«, »right-wing«, »libertarian« or »authoritarian« vein. The statement answers are 5-point scales ranging from »completely disagree«, »disagree«, »neutral« and »agree« to »completely agree«. Next to coding the positions of parties on the issues in accordance with their official policy proposals, we also asked the political parties to position themselves, while requiring them to also provide evidence for their stances by presenting relevant excerpts from their party manifesto or other formal documentation, as a means of substantiating their self-positioning. This self-placement performed by the parties was then compared with the coding performed by independent political experts. Discrepancies were communicated to parties in several rounds of interaction until there was complete clarity and their final positions on issues were approved.

TWO DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

Parties and voters are plotted on political landscapes comprised of two dimensions. While political competition in the post-war period was largely oriented towards economic issues such as employment, taxation, wages, government spending and the development of the welfare state, non-

material political issues have always remained. During the 1990s, political competition increasingly became more cultural and non-material in nature. Traditionally, this non-material dimension related specifically to the cleavage between orthodox and permissive Christians, as in the Netherlands, or between religious and non-religious voters, as in France, and more broadly to the difference between more conservative-orthodox positions versus more progressive and permissive stances. Recent research has shown that despite of the continuing relevance of the left–right divide – the cultural dimension has become salient, dividing those who favour cultural liberalism from those who favour restrictive immigration policies. The debate on European integration and particularly the immigration-issue has not only rendered this non-material dimension more salient, but also more complex. The complex multi-dimensionality of this non-economic dimension, has been described as GAL-TAN, in which a Green, Alternative and Libertarian (GAL) position faces a Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalistic (TAN) outlook in life. This GAL-TAN dimension is the result of three highly correlated dimensions (Green versus Grey, Alternative-cosmopolitanism versus Traditional nationalism and Libertarian permissiveness versus Authoritarianism).

3

FOUR STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

CORBYNISM: ECONOMIC POLARISATION

The strategy of the Labour Party is identified by means of comparing the position of the party in the British political landscape with the position of two voter groups: (1) **core voters** – those who intend to vote for the party and (2) **sympathisers** – those with high vote propensity for the party (8, 9 or 10), but who intend to vote for another party. The Labour Party is situated to the left of both its voters and potential voters in a strategy we characterise as *economic polarisation*. In the 2017 election, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, Labour adopted a more radical economic agenda which clearly pushed the party to the left on the economic dimension, actually further to the left than both Labours' core voters and sympathisers. At the same time, Labour was very closely aligned to both voter groups on the cultural dimension. Corbyn's Labour Party has succeeded in polarising public opinion on economic matters, attracting numerous voters to cast their ballots for it. In the face of ongoing austerity and deregulation, numerous British citizens had become economically worse off or felt less economically secure as a result of two consecutive Conservative governments, contributing to Labour's gains in the 2017 election. Corbyn successfully polarised the general public on economic issues and moved the Labour Party to the left, as exemplified by the analyses in the graphs below. Many pundits and observers have criticised Corbyn for this development, arguing that such a strategy poses a risk of alienating centrist voters now and in the future. This prophecy did not come into fruition, however, as Labour regained numerous seats under Corbyn in 2017 and is leading in many polls as of January 2019. Nevertheless, in terms of cultural issues, Labour and its voters and sympathisers are all on the same page, as evidenced by their relatively similar positions on the authoritarian-libertarian dimension.

United Kingdom: *Labour Party*

LABOUR IN THE 2017 ELECTION

A particular point of weakness for Labour relates to economic governance. As much as the party has been able to play on popular discontent with the ever more visible effects of the austerity agenda pursued since 2010, this has been balanced by concern that a Labour government would mean a return to Keynesian ›tax-and-spend‹ policies last seen in the 1970s. There is little evidence that the party has moved to adapt and cope with the new economic situation characterized by globalisation and digitalisation, with all the disruption that these trends bring. Again, absence of the modernising Blairite rhetoric among the senior leadership allows Labour to be painted as defenders of an order from a bygone era.
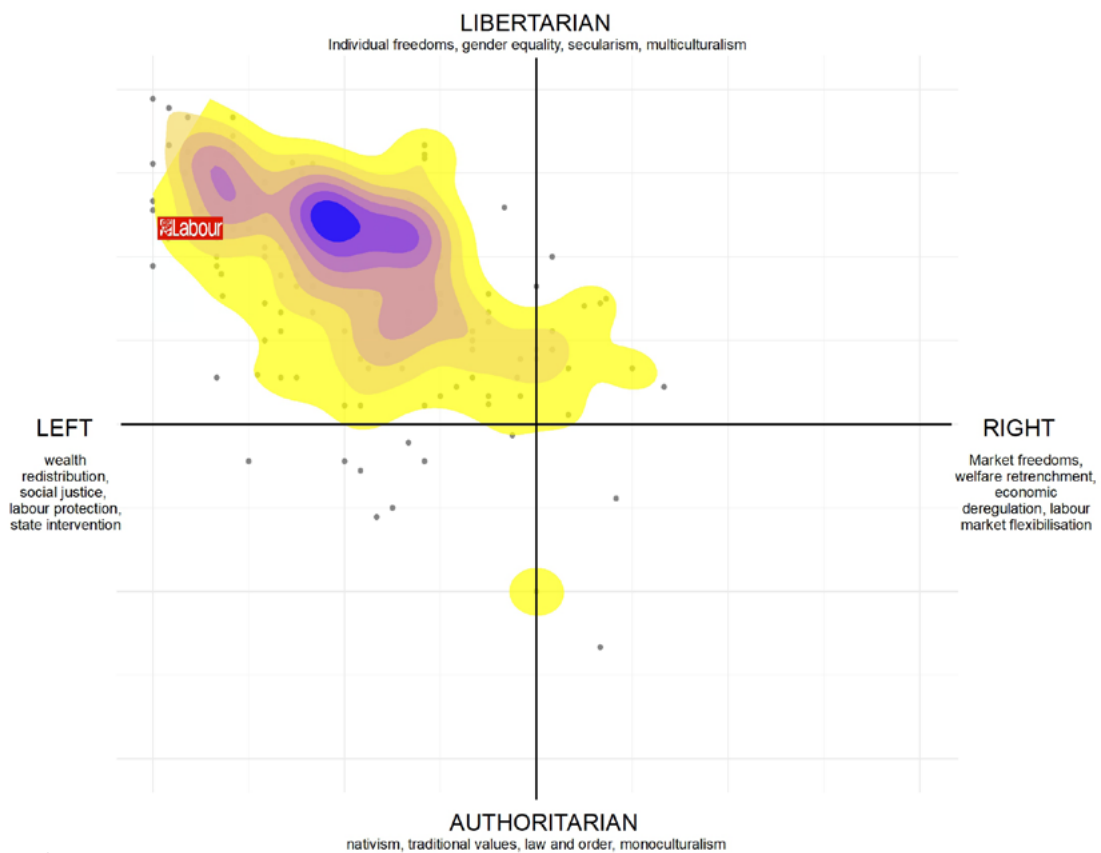
Jeremy Corbyn's focus on economic issues, made apparent not only by his slogan »For the many, not the few«, but by his perceived economically and culturally progressive general strategy, resonated with an austerity-ridden and economically worse-off and less economically-secure British citizenry. He attracted numerous voters to cast their ballot for Labour and surprised everyone by running the Conservatives close. Now the trade union movement has shifted to the left in that respect, which pushed Labour to the left.

Nevertheless, Labour appears to be more radical in terms of rhetoric than actual policy stances. The 2017 manifesto is not as radical as it is projected, showing a gap between rhetoric and actual party policy. For instance, Labour, although it claims to be the party of low-income voting groups, largely focused, in its flagship policy on abolishing university fees, on the educational chances of middle-class children. Indeed, one can see parallels between Corbyn and the 70s, yet they are not primarily about spending but about »control« over the economy.

Labour is also ambiguous about »Brexit«: its manifesto was emphatically not a rejection of Brexit, Corbyn himself says he will honour the outcome of the 2016 referendum which a) aligns with his own sceptical view on the EU and b) will make another referendum difficult to achieve despite the views of Labour members and voters who want one and many would vote »remain«. Overall, the advantage or disadvantage of this »constructive ambiguity« is not entirely clear: given the extreme liberal view of some voters on economic and cultural questions does not align with the official party line in respect to immigration (which argues it should be restricted where jobs are threatened).

Whether Labour gets much credit from this restrictive policy is a moot point since it is reluctant to talk too much about it lest it offend its very liberal membership and because it is in any case drowned out by its left-liberal stance on other issues that has recently allowed it to steal voters from the Greens. In foreign policy, Labour is sometimes perceived as »soft« on defence, too critical towards NATO, »pro-Russian«, and flirting with one-sided nuclear disarmament.

Figure 1
Spatial position and density of *Labour* sympathisers

LIBERTARIAN
Individual freedoms, gender equality, secularism, multiculturalism

LEFT

wealth
redistribution,
social justice,
labour protection,
state intervention

RIGHT

Market freedoms,
welfare retrenchment,
economic
deregulation, labour
market flexibilisation

AUTHORITARIAN
nativism, traditional values, law and order, monoculturalism

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The problem with making out a trend is that Corbyn only fought one election against an incredibly poor Conservative leader and campaign – one which didn't even bother to cost Labour's manifesto and tear it to shreds like the Tories usually (and often very successfully) do. Moreover, Labour piled up votes where it did not need them rather than, say, in marginal seats in the Midlands and small towns it has to win in order to get a majority in parliament. Labour is 60 seats behind – so Corbyn's strategy is not very effective in the UK, although it may work in a country with PR, where 40 per cent of the votes »would be a dream result«.

It is crucial to note, too, that being too economically radical (at least in opposition) makes one a less credible contender for government: perceived competence is still incredibly important to voters, who are much less tribal than they used to be.

Labour was probably helped in 2017 by its huge membership growth, much of which was undeniably down to Corbyn. However, it has brought into the party large swaths of members who are trying to transform the party into a social movement, which they believe will eventually win elections and facilitate a transformative Labour government.

Labour has historically been very strong in Scotland: it used to obtain 60 seats from Scotland, but it doesn't normally need Scottish seats to win since, when it wins, it normally

wins big. The current situation is different: Labour might need to form a coalition or at least get support from the SNP – possibly easier to sell now that the Conservatives have done a deal with the DUP.

In the long term, Labour should benefit from society becoming more multicultural and more liberal. At the moment, it is widely seen as too radical and too incompetent to be elected in government. In any normal electoral cycle, and given the chaos engulfing the Conservative government, Labour could have been 10–20 points ahead in the opinion polls. Instead it is normally running a few points behind or maximally leading with a very slim margin.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN THE LABOUR PARTY

The Labour party has undergone one of the more disruptive periods in its existence in recent years. The long process of managing the legacy (and fall-out) from Tony Blair's period as leader has continued throughout the leadership of his three successors. Under Blair, Labour moved towards the political centre, adopting a moderate Third Way platform in order to distance itself from more traditional conceptions of socialism. While this strategy resulted in unprecedented success for the party in the form of three consecutive election victories and subsequent Labour governments, it also led many observers to assert

Figure 2
Spatial position and density of *Labour* voters

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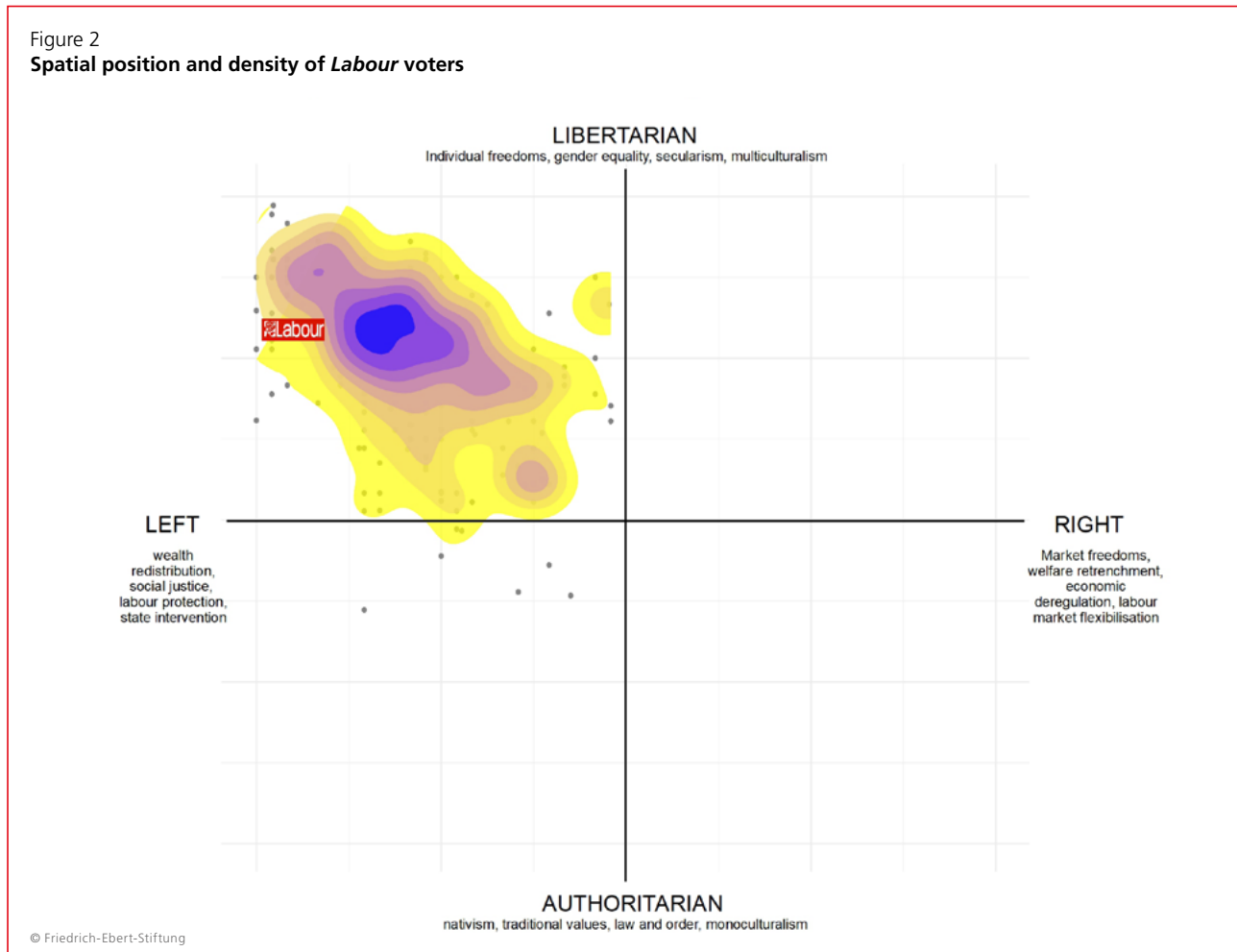
that the Labour party lacked a political identity. In the 2010 election, Labour, led by Gordon Brown, registered its worst result in the post-war period up until then, only to be followed by an even more embarrassing electoral performance in 2015, under the leadership of Ed Miliband. While Gordon Brown had made some relatively minor moves back to a more traditionally socialist policy line, Ed Miliband and especially Jeremy Corbyn have sought a resolute return, with each seeking in his own way to reaffirm the ›old Labour‹ agenda of social justice, wealth redistribution and state intervention. This repositioning has been accompanied by considerable tensions, however. Most obviously, while Corbyn appears to enjoy strong support from his constituency of party members, he remains at odds with most of his party representatives in Parliament (recently resulting in the breakaway of several MP's into a new political movement).

It is important to avoid overstating the extent to which the party platform and policies have shifted under Corbyn. The party's 2017 election manifesto is quite similar to the views held by Miliband; it is the rhetoric that has changed, reflecting Corbyn's political style, grounded in his long experience as a backbench rebel. Thus, although the current party manifesto has taken on some of Corbyn's edgier rhetoric, it is also rather moderate, as calls for nuclear disarmament or full re-nationalisation of various industries were removed, and a door for challenging Brexit has been left open.

The »European question« remains one of the most problematic points of policy for the Labour party, however, as is reflected in its ambivalent stance towards the Brexit negotiations, which in turn echoes the different groupings within the party. Withdrawal from the EU is portrayed as problematic for the UK – in terms of economic decline, job loss and reduced social protection – as well as an opportunity to rebuild social values on a national scale. This confusion has weakened Labour's ability to hold the Conservative government to account thus far on negotiations, and will continue to constitute a significant hindrance in the party's efforts to strengthen its profile as a potential party of government.

THE 2017 UK GENERAL ELECTION

The 2017 General Election has been one of surprises, the biggest of which was that it happened in the first place. While the Conservative government had repeatedly said it did not want to call an election before its planned schedule in May 2020, it saw an opportunity to profit from its strength in the opinion polls, using the issue of Brexit to frame a debate that would be about leadership, in which Theresa May very strongly out-performed Jeremy Corbyn. However, campaigning proved much more volatile, as May appeared very unwilling to debate with either the public or her opponents face-to-face, while Corbyn was very clearly in his element, out-performing the very low expectations that many had of him. The rise of Labour in the opinion

Figure 3
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (General elections 2017)
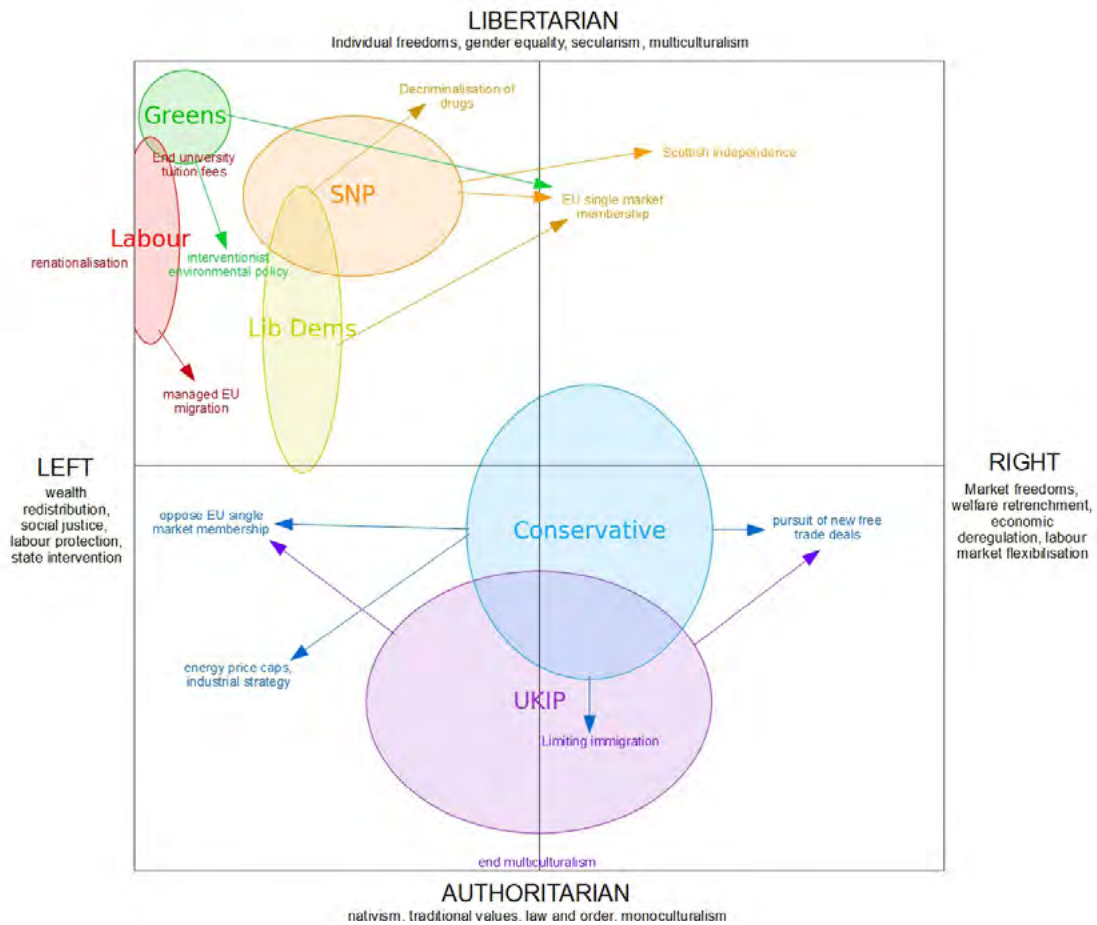
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polls appears to come partly at the expense of the Conservatives, with the former posed to reverse the negative electoral trend they experienced in the last decade. In particular, Labour has managed to lure former Liberal Democratic voters disillusioned by Lib Dems' support for Conservative governments in the past. Moreover, following UKIP's collapse in the polls, some former UKIP voters are now considering voting Labour, although most have gone to the Conservatives.

The second surprise was that the issue of Brexit did not dominate the campaign. Despite Brexit being the nominal justification for the election, this did not have much of a profile as an issue, with social policy and security playing much more of a role than anticipated: the latter was made even more important following the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London. Devolution has continued to fragment debate, with Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales all being caught up in regional issues as much as national ones. This contributed to a range of policy positions that appears to be one of the most diverse seen in the UK for several decades, as both Left and Right focus on their core support more than the centre ground. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2017 UK elections were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 3.

MACRONISM: MARKET-ORIENTED PROGRESSIVISM

Although the focus of this study is on social democratic parties, the unprecedented electoral success of a newly established centrist party – *La République En Marche* (LREM), whose leader was formerly a member of the French social democrats, merits inclusion in this research. Moreover, some social democratic parties (see the case of the Italian *Partito Democratico* below) have themselves adopted a similar strategy of moving to the political centre on the left-right dimension, while maintaining a clear progressive stance on the cultural dimension. Such a strategy involves a party positioning on the centre to the right of centre on the economic dimension, while adopting staunchly progressive and pro-European stances on the cultural dimension. This entails pro-market liberalisation reforms, coupled with permissive stances on immigration, support for multiculturalism and European integration. While the strategy of market-oriented progressivism proved to be very electorally successful at first, in the case of Italy and France, the market-oriented economic reforms tend to not resonate well with the population at large, as citizens feel that the government is prioritizing the interests of big business and the rich at the expense of hardworking people. This has been reflected in France, where Macron's ratings nose-

dived to an all-time low, especially after the widespread protests of the »Yellow Vests« movement in late 2018 and early 2019. A similar fate was bestowed upon the Italian social democratic PD, which lost more than 185 (62.3 per cent) of its seats in 2018.

France: *En Marche*

Macron's new political organisation, LREM was only founded in April 2016, and has crushed the two traditionally dominant parties in the French party system, handsomely winning both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2017. Macron achieved this by adopting a position much to the right of both his core supporters (voters) and sympathisers on the economic dimension. By contrast, on the cultural dimension, the party is also slightly more progressive than many of its voters and sympathisers.

Moving to the right on the economic dimension, the charismatic young former social democrat adopted social-liberal platform combining pro-market economic stances with cultural progressivism and pro-European Union attitudes. In light of France's stagnating economy, Macron promoted labour market flexibilisation and a reduced level of social protection – moving away from universal rights and in the direction of earned rights. This position to the right of both most of his voters and sympathisers did not weaken his ability to attract voters from across the ideological spectrum by tapping into an anti-system sentiment (Macron promised to fight political corruption) and by emphasising labour market reform and a re-calibration of welfare arrangements.

LREM ran in the 2017 legislative elections on Macron's presidential manifesto in which these two issues – the »morality of politics« and labour market reforms – played an important role.

In the wake of corruption scandals embroiling the right-wing candidate Fillion during the presidential campaign, Macron promised that the first bill of his newly appointed government would tackle the issue of transparency, funding and conflict of interest in politics. However, Macron and his party were in trouble almost immediately as Macron first try to appoint his wife into a formal government position and Richard Ferrand early advisor to Macron and Minister of Territorial Cohesion, came under investigation for conflict of interest, and had to step down from government. Some substantive success was achieved on labour market reform because Macron's LREM commanded a strong majority in parliament, but not in the Senate. In his efforts to deregulate the labour market, Macron seems to favour negotiations between employers and workers at the company level rather than at the branch or national level, as is currently stipulated by law. Early on, severe po-

Figure 4
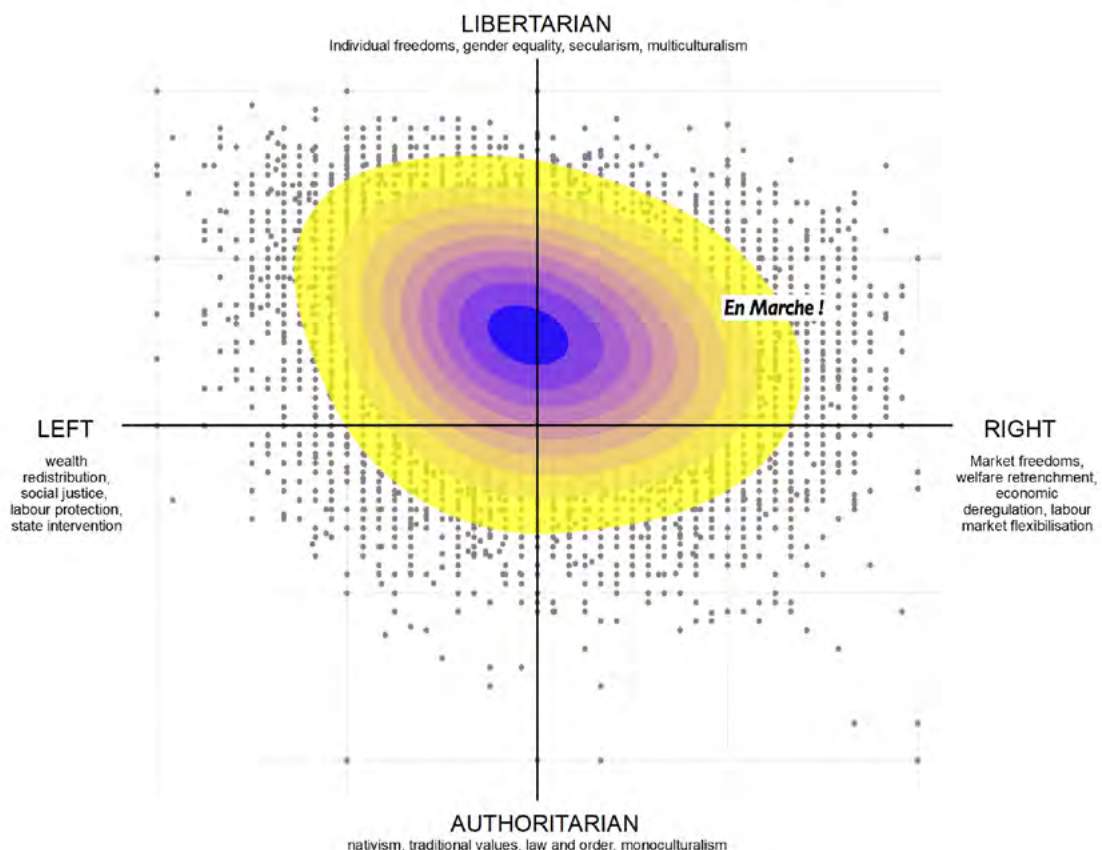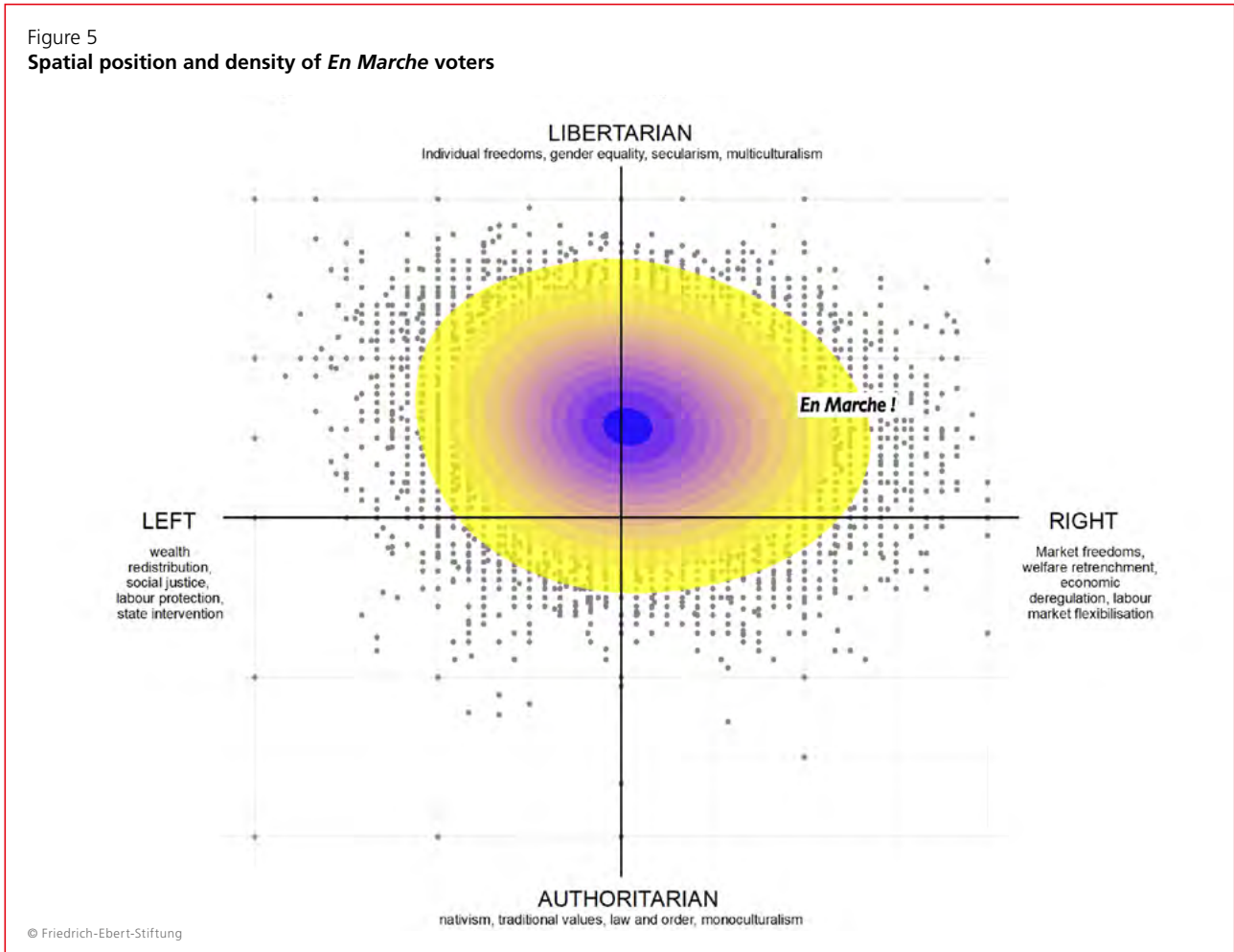**Spatial position and density of *En Marche* sympathisers**

Figure 5
Spatial position and density of *En Marche* voters

litical and social opposition emerged, against which Macron attempts to push this labour-market reform bill through, by means of a presidential order (»ordonnance«). This behaviour results in accusations by the *Parti Socialiste* and *La France Insoumise* of authoritarian rule by the young president.

Macron did deliver on his promise of renewal of the political class: of the 461 LREM candidates almost 50 per cent are civil society organisation representatives, and 214 have never been elected to public office before (although there were 24 former socialist members of parliament among the LREM candidates). It is clear that this elite renewal is insufficient to put Macron's right-wing political economic agenda through parliament: there are widespread anti-government protests in the streets of France by so-called ›gilets jaunes‹ at the time of writing of this paper. Discontent seems to be mostly fuelled by the high cost of living and the perception that Macron's government is putting a disproportionate amount of the costs of the reforms on the working and middle class.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN LREM

As with many social liberal parties, internal division within LREM revolve around those favouring a more pro-market approach to establish economic reforms that result in a

pro-business investment climate and a more interventionist wing, advocating the benefits of governmental regulation in the economy and social investment, as means of ensuring a more egalitarian society. Following his election promises, Macron took steps towards reforming the French economy, characterised with cumbersome labour protection legislation, high debt and exceptionally high tax rates, especially for the wealthiest citizens.

Most proposals by Macron's party did not resonate well with the French population, not only at the political left- and right-wing fringes, but much broader sections of French society that regard Macron as »a president of the rich«. Faced by widespread and publicly popular »Yellow Vests« protests, LREM and Macron opted for a more social democratic approach, partly initiated by former social democrats within the ranks of the president's party. Macron proposed a minimum wage increase, the cancellation of a planned tax increase for low-income pensioners, scrapping the tax on overtime work, and encouraging employers to provide tax-free end of the year bonuses. Nevertheless, these measures proved insufficient in quelling the anger of French citizens – protests of »Yellow Vests« continue with demands to alleviate cost and tax burdens on working- and middle-class citizens. However, Macron, loyal to his pre-election pledges, maintains that reforming the French economy is crucial for economic success of France.

THE 2017 FRENCH LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

In 2017, both presidential and parliamentary elections were held. In two rounds – on June 11 and 18 – French voters elected their members of the National Assembly. In the first round, the newly founded party »République En Marche«, of President Emmanuel Macron, reached over 32 per cent of the vote. Followed by »Les Républicains« (21.5 per cent), the »Front National« (13.2 percent) and »La France Insoumise« (11 percent). The Socialist Party only scored 9.5 percent. Turnout was a mere 48.7 per cent – lower than the parliamentary elections in 2012.

Since 2002, the legislative elections are held six weeks after the Presidential elections, both taking place every five years. This electoral sequence was designed to re-affirm the centrality of the Presidential election in the French political system and to subordinate the legislative branch to the Presidential office, as the party of the winning president often also wins the legislative election due to this temporal proximity. The aim was to avoid deadlock and ensure a Presidential majority in the National Assembly, as French Presidents have experienced three »cohabitations« with unsupportive National Assemblies in the 1980s and 1990s.

The 2017 Presidential election were characterized by three major developments: there were a record-low number of votes for the candidates of traditional parties (the socialist Benoît Hamon and the republican François Fillon), a record-high number of voters chose radical candidates (Marine Le Pen on the extreme-right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the extreme-left), and the victory of the candidate of a newly established political party: Emmanuel Macron and his party LREM. Paradoxically, despite unprecedented electoral volatility and the reshuffling of the political landscape, President Macron emerged with a stable parliamentary majority in the National Assembly. Under the 5th Republic a centrist party such as LREM had never obtained a majority in the National Assembly. However, nowadays two factors play in its favour: the lower turnout in legislative elections and the fragmentation of the party system.

As in 2012, the turnout for the legislative elections was lower than in the Presidential election. This electoral demobilization has had two consequences. On the one hand it has strengthened LREM, since Macron's voters remained mobilized from one election to the other. On the other hand, participation has declined among the youth, which was detrimental to *La France Insoumise* of Mélenchon and to a lesser extent to the *Front National* of Le Pen. Both radical candidates successfully reached out to voters who did

Figure 6
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (French legislative election 2017)

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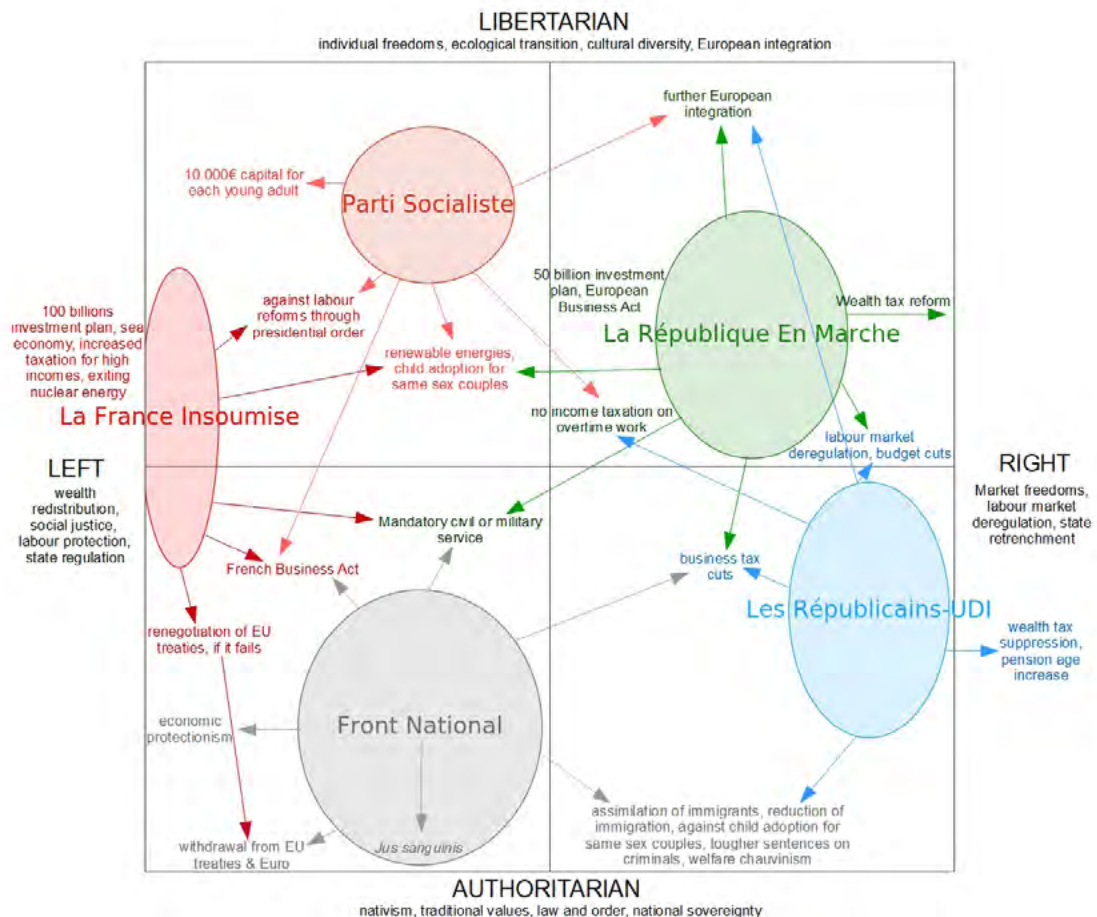
not belong to their core group of supporters during the Presidential election, which is heavily personalized, and media-focused, but have failed to maintain this support during the legislative elections, due to the lower level of interest displayed by voters (and journalists).

With an average of 13.6 candidates per constituency (two more than in 2012), the fragmentation of the party system is obvious, on both the left and the right. Challenger parties (*La République en Marche!*, *La France Insoumise* and the *Front National*) attempted to capitalize on their favourable performance during the presidential elections, while traditional parties (Parti Socialiste, Les Républicains, Parti Communiste and the Greens) were on the defense aiming to retain their share of MPs. As a result of these dynamics, fewer electoral alliances emerged than in previous elections. Contrary to the Presidential election where only the top two contenders move to the second round, in the legislative elections all candidates that obtain a score equal to or higher than 12.5 per cent of registered voters are allowed to move to the second round. Therefore, the withdrawing of some candidates in support of another candidate best ranked in the first round is a key component of French legislative elections. Hence, the lack of willingness to make electoral alliances between the parties on the left or between the parties on the right, and the winner take-all logic have most likely favoured the candidates of *La République en Marche*. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2017 French legislative election were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 6.

Italy: *Partito Democratico*

Partito Democratico (PD) steadily moved to the political centre throughout the 1990s. With Matteo Renzi assuming the party leadership in 2013, the party's policy goals looked very similar to those of *En Marche* in France a few years later. Programmatically, the *PD* favoured implementing labour market reforms to liberalise the heavily indebted Italian economy. The social democrats also adopted staunchly pro-EU positions. At the same time, the party launched culturally progressive reforms, such as the introduction of civil union for same-sex couples, and ensured that the Italian government met its international obligations in terms of admitting asylum seekers. This strategy initially worked in the party's favour, as it obtained the highest proportion of the votes in its history in the 2013 parliamentary election and in the 2014 European election. Nevertheless, with relatively similar policy stances in 2018, the party was not successful in maintaining its electoral support. Many disgruntled Italian citizens deciding to vote for anti-establishment parties instead, in particular M5S. While the *PD* was initially able to use its ideological moderation on the left-right dimension and proposals for reform to appeal to broad sectors of Ital-

Figure 7
Spatial position and density of *Partito Democratico* sympathisers

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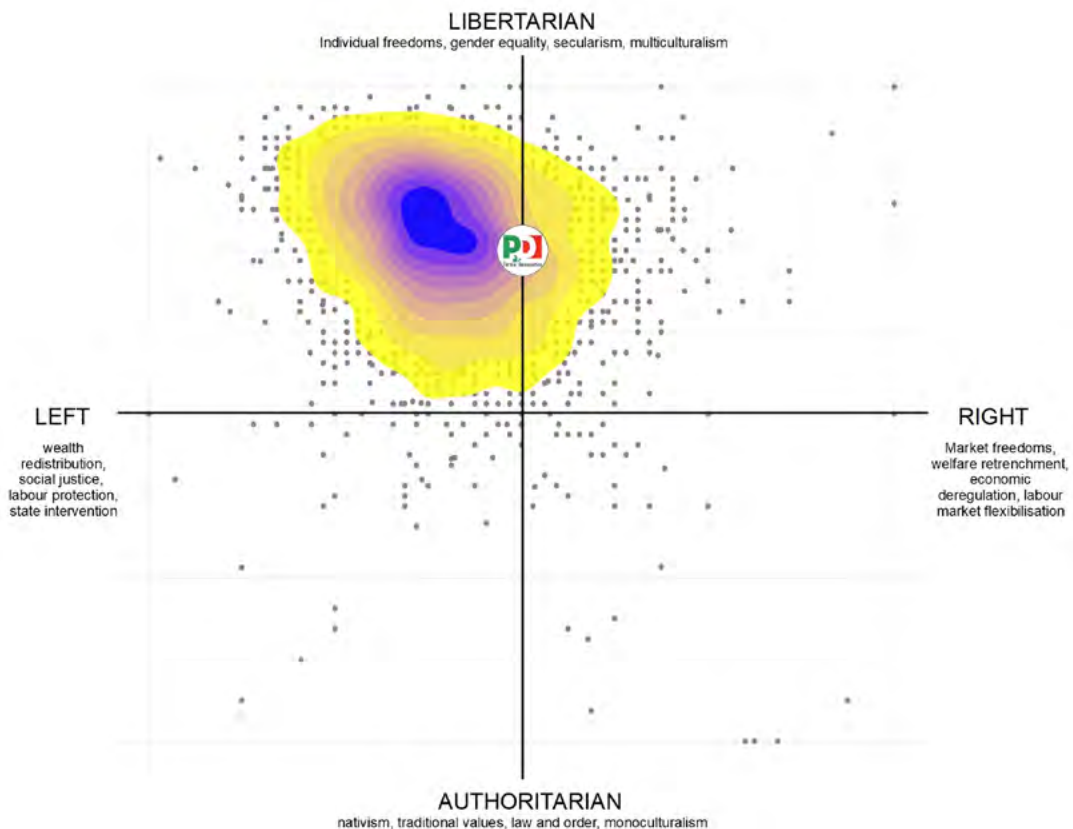
ian society, its positioning to the right of the party's core electorate proved to ultimately alienate many of its (potential) voters, who tend to have a more leftist ideological orientation than what the party was willing to offer.

The PD entered the 2018 election campaign weakened by popular rejection of the Constitutional Reform proposed by party leader Matteo Renzi in a December 2016 referendum. The party was also damaged by a split that took place in February 2017, when former party leader Pierluigi Bersani (under whose leadership the PD won the 2013 elections) and his followers left the party. Although *PD* enjoyed rising levels of popular support after the 2013 elections, reaching a peak in the 2014 European Elections, when the party obtained more than 40 per cent of the popular vote, this popularity proved to be short-lived. The PD seems to have failed in building a left-wing majority from the merger of *Democratici di Sinistra* (Left Democrats) and *Margherita* (the Daisy – left-wing Christian Democrats). While many considered Renzi best equipped to lead the PD, he seemed unwilling to compromise with other wings within the party. Renzi implemented unpopular austerity policies, which did not resonate well with ordinary Italians.

Another factor that may have contributed to the weakening of PD is the personalisation of Italian politics – political battles not only about substance and programmatic differ-

ences, but also about the appeal of political leaders and how they fare in the media. On top of that, the issues dominating the public discourse were owned by the right-wing parties. Immigration was among the crucial and divisive issues prior to the 2018 elections, and remains such until today. Although Paolo Gentiloni, the prime minister who succeeded Renzi after the defeat of the 2016 referendum, took steps in successfully reducing immigrant inflows by more than 70 per cent, PD was continuously blamed for mass immigration and its effects on Italian society. Indeed, many voters blamed PD's mixed messages on immigration for the ceaseless stream of asylum seekers arriving from the Mediterranean even though the party took serious measures in reducing the inflow.

Increasing public animosity towards the European Union has also had a negative impact on PD – one of the most pro-European parties on the Italian political landscape. While the Italian public is not that critical of the EU as a whole, there is widespread antipathy towards the bigger member states that tend to set the political and economic course of the EU, such as Germany and France. In particular, Italians are angry with the stringent public spending rules imposed by the EU which many argue are undermining the member states' economic sovereignty.

Like in other countries, media frames also matter and opinion polls play a crucial role during electoral campaigns in It-

Figure 8
Spatial position and density of *Partito Democratico* voters

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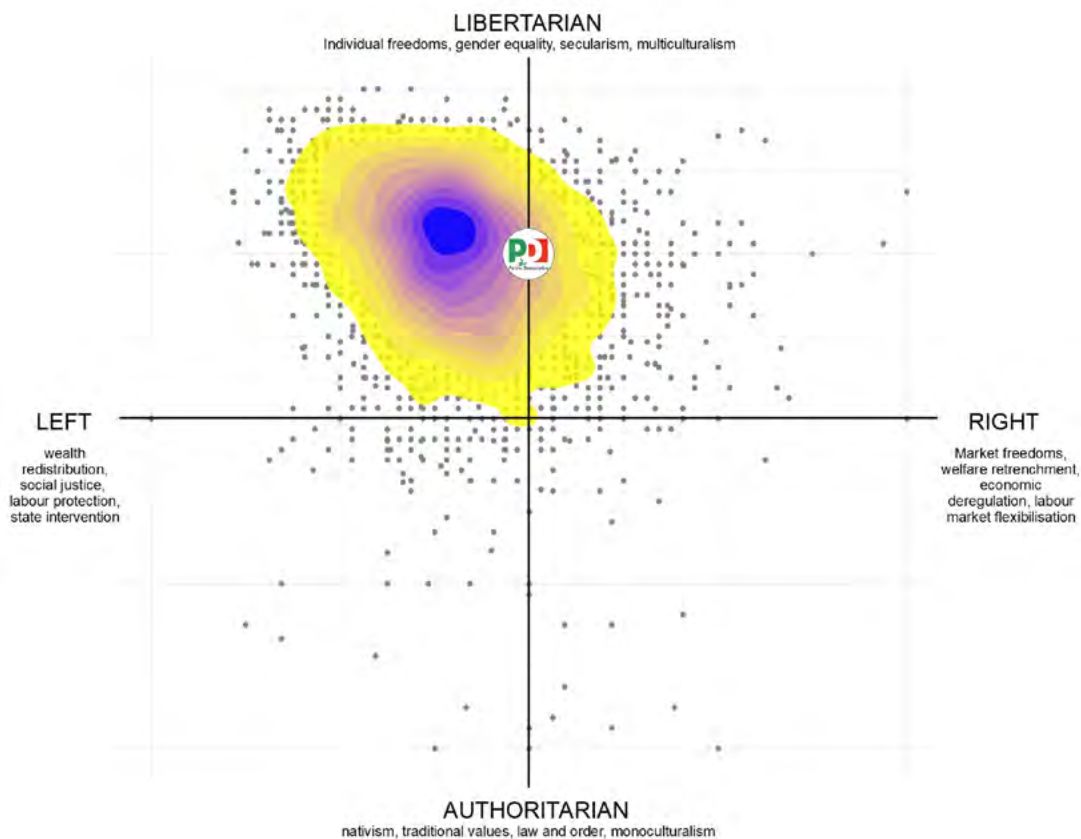
aly. As polls suggested substantial losses for the PD, the negative frame of the *PD* may have swayed voters to support other parties, regardless of ideological proximity.

MODIFICATION OF THE PARTY'S IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONING

Since the merger into a left-wing bloc, the PD had difficulty to present a homogeneous policy-profile, due to persistent ideological divisions between Democratici di Sinistra and Margherita. Under Renzi's leadership – from December 2013 and again from April 2017 – the Democratic Party's profile became more coherent as Renzi was able to staff the party with people loyal to his line. Renzi confronted the previous PD ruling elite with reforms aimed at a generational renovation of the party, which resulted in polarisation between the majority faction supporting Renzi, and a minority opposing the reform, thereby prompting the Bersani-wing and a number of other politicians to leave the party. Secondly, for the 2018 Elections, Renzi only put forward candidates who had fully supported his agenda previously, removing adversaries from the PD's electoral lists. Moreover, Renzi modified the party's ideological position, embedded in the cultural and political traditions of the left, by adopting centre-right economic policies such as tax reduction and labour-market flexibilisation. The economic reforms undertaken by the coalition government led by Renzi from February 2014 to December 2016 are an example of this tendency.

During the electoral campaign of 2018, PD-leaders consistently highlighted the accomplishments of the PD-led coalition governments (2013–2018), with strong affirmation of the liberal economic reforms undertaken by the Renzi Government. A number of culturally progressive issues – such as the defence of immigrants' and homosexuals' rights – was also emphasised in the 2018 manifesto. Additionally, economic policies such as the promotion of improved working conditions and fresh economic support for families were important elements of the 2018 PD Campaign. Notably, the PD's manifesto proposed the introduction of a basic income for all Italian citizens under the poverty line in response to *Movimento 5 Stelle's* (MVS) popular proposal to introduce a ›citizenship wage‹ for all Italians. Finally, despite Renzi's sharp criticism of European governance mechanisms while heading the government, the 2018 PD Manifesto confirmed the party's support for further European integration, with the ultimate aim being the formation of a ›United States of Europe‹.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN THE PD

While many within PD which would prefer to move towards the left, by means of adopting a strategy of economic polarization, this could prove unsuccessful for 2 reasons. First, the policy space to the left of PD is already occupied by two radical left parties: *Potere al Popolo* and *Liberi e Iguali.* These parties already appeal to more radical left voters, and considering PD's recent history of economically centrist policies, it is unlikely that the PD is able to syphon off these voters from the radical left. Secondly, the Italian economic

reality – an enormous public debt coupled with a high budget deficit – implies that any future government would not be able to implement social investment policies, simply because there will be no money to spend. Another possible strategy for the party is to form or take part in an anti-populist coalition aimed at taking down the populist government of *Lega* and M5S. However, this endeavour could prove thoroughly unpopular, if not impossible, as it would require PD to join forces with parties across the political spectrum, including the (centre) right. A third possibility for PD, now that Matteo Renzi is no longer party leader, is forming an alliance with M5S. The left leaning populists have previously ruled out working with Renzi, yet now that this »obstacle« is out of the way, the two parties could collaborate. What could prove problematic here is the nature of the M5S electorate, which has been turning increasingly authoritarian and nativist, according to opinion polls.
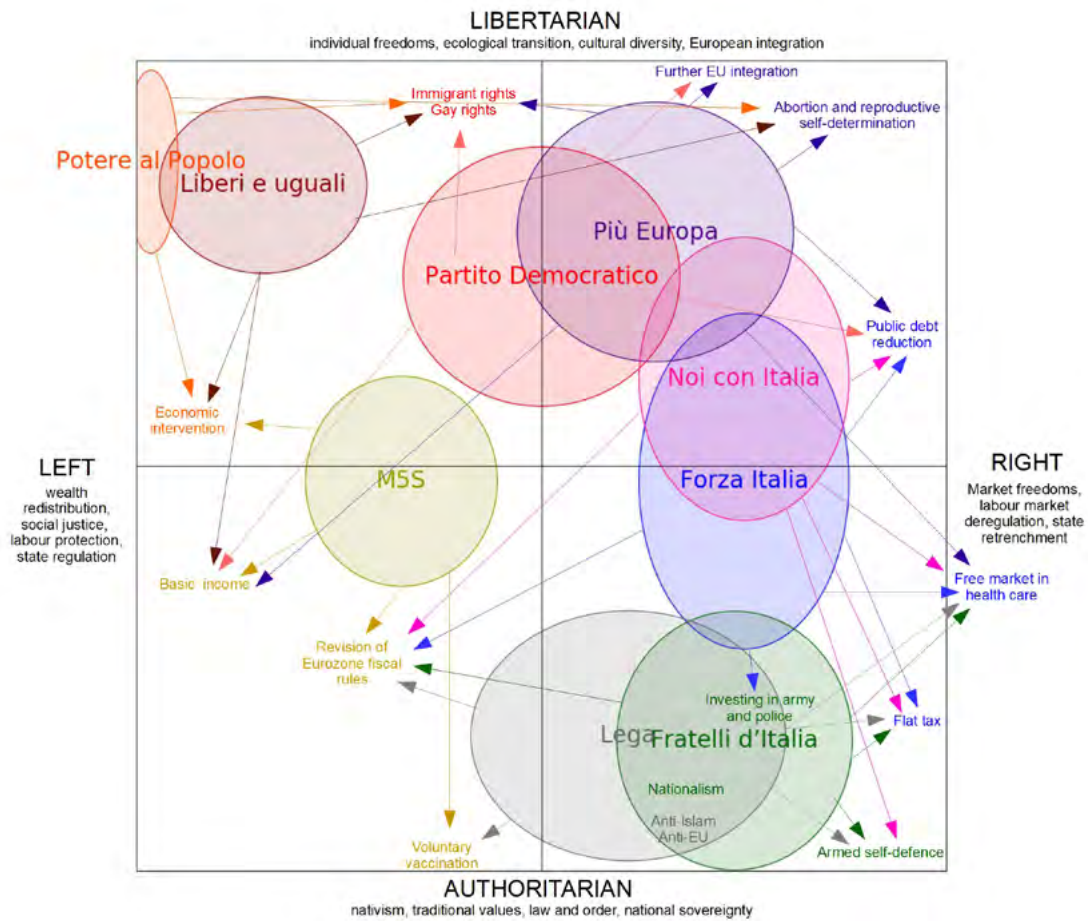
THE 2018 ITALIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Compared to 2013, the 2018 election campaign began in a quieter and calmer economic and social context, since the Italian political and economic crisis was less pronounced. At the start of the campaign, no event or topic dominated the discussion. Parties mainly competed on economic measures that resonate well with voters (such as introducing a flat tax and a basic income). However, one dramatic event unfolded soon after the start of the campaign: on February 3, an extremist linked to the extreme right shot at immigrants in the town of Macerata. This racist attack, and the clashes between left- and right-wing extremists which followed, drew the political and media attention of the campaign to immigration and security issues.

The campaign focus on these issues could have played a crucial role in the success of the right-wing populist parties, and especially of *Lega*. While in the 2013 elections, *Lega* obtained 4.08 per cent of the vote, in 2018 it became the biggest party of the right-wing coalition, winning a vote share of 17.37 per cent. To a lesser extent, *Fratelli d'Italia* also obtained a good result, expanding its vote share from 1.95 per cent in 2013 to 4.35 per cent in 2018. In addition to *Lega*, the other big winner of the 2018 elections is M5S – it became the biggest party, enjoying an increase of support from 25.55 per cent in 2013 to 32.66 per cent in 2018. More than one third of Italian voters –especially those in the country's south – opted for the populist party. Generally, the 2018 elections resulted in an upheaval of populist and anti-European forces.

Contrary to populists, the left coalition experienced significant losses in popular support, with *Partito Democratico* (PD) losing more than two million votes. While in 2013 PD obtained 25.4 per cent of the vote, in 2018 it only won 18.7 per cent. The implications of this result is very serious, considering that in the first elections under the leadership of Renzi (the 2014 European Parliament Elections), PD obtained 40 per cent of the vote. Voters abandoning PD did not vote for other left-wing parties: neither smaller parties of the centre-left coalition, nor the radical left *Potere al Popolo*

Figure 9
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (Italian parliamentary election 2018)

managed to win parliamentary seats, while *Liberi e Uguali* obtained only 3.38 per cent of the popular vote. Acknowledging defeat, Renzi resigned from the position of party leader. *Forza Italia* (FI) also suffered losses in the 2018 elections – the party's vote-share declined from 21.56 per cent to 14.01 per cent. As a result, Berlusconi lost the leadership of the right-wing coalition in favour of *Lega* leader Matteo Salvini. The electoral decline of FI was compensated by Lega's good showing, which allowed the right-wing coalition to obtain the largest vote-share – 37 per cent of the vote.

Given these results, and the fact that no coalition obtained the number of seats necessary to gain a Parliamentary majority, the government formation process took a long and unexpected turn. Matteo Salvini (Lega) and Luigi Di Maio (M5S) both declared that they are ready to form political alliances based on the respect for their parties' manifestos. Ultimately, the two populist parties formed a coalition government. In a nutshell, the 2018 election results produced the image of a divided Italy, unified only by populist anti-establishment sentiments, anti-immigration rhetoric and unrealistic economic promises to a population that is demanding an end to austerity. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2018 Italian elections were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 9.

PROGRESSIVE-LIBERTARIAN DISTANCING

While many observers argue that shifts along the economic dimension matter most for social democratic parties, our analyses clearly show that too much distancing from core voters on the cultural dimension entails a much greater risk of alienating core voter groups. In the Netherlands, the *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) and in France the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) adopted a more progressive stance than both their voters and sympathisers on the cultural dimension, with this distancing being much most pronounced in the Netherlands. Simultaneously, the parties maintained a moderate, centrist position on the economic dimension. This combination of economic moderation with cultural progressivism cost both parties dearly in the respective parliamentary elections during 2017.

An important observation is that economic moderation does not seem to work if polarisation simultaneously takes place on the cultural dimension: PS voters and sympathisers are clustered slightly towards the left of the party's economic position, whereas PvdA's voters and especially its sympathisers are clustered towards the right of the party's position on the economic dimension. The decline of *PvdA* and *PS* in national elections could have been caused either by failure to move sufficiently towards the

left to be recognisable by core voter or an overly extreme movement towards the progressive-libertarian pole, where other progressive challengers are already positioned.

In contrast to the Labour Party in the UK, French and Dutch social democrats adopted a strategy of economic moderation, while polarising on cultural issues instead. In the light of increased competition from anti-immigrant parties along with a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment, this strategy did not prove successful for the two social democratic parties. Both the Dutch *PvdA* and French *PS* were substantially more progressive than their voters on the cultural dimension, which may have caused many of their former voters to abandon these parties. It appears that PvdA and PS moved too far from their core electorate and as a result were not only unable to ›home in the base‹, but were also unable to successfully appeal to potential new voters. This proved futile, as sympathisers were positioned even further away from the parties.

France: *Parti Socialiste*

The PS has positioned itself to the right if their voters and sympathisers on the economic dimension and on top of them in the cultural dimension. The party received the lowest election results in its history, lower than those of

both its radical-left competitor *La France Insoumise* (Unsubmissive France), and the party of progressive newcomer Emmanuel Macron – LREM. The socialists simply had nothing to offer that would strongly distinguish them from the other political parties appealing to traditionally left-wing voters.

After holding the executive office under an unpopular president – Francois Hollande, PS was posed to lose, even though Hollande kept his pre-election promise to hike the tax rate to 75 per cent for the most affluent French citizens. Nevertheless, considering PS's overall moderate economic stances, many of its previous left-leaning voters opted for the radical left. Similarly, many of the more centrist voters who supported the party in 2012 were attracted by the pro-EU progressive messages of charismatic former social democrat Emmanuel Macron. The French socialists simply remained faceless for the general public in the light of the diverse political competition in 2017. Their policy preferences mirrored the ones proposed by Macron on the cultural dimension, while PS remained more moderate than their competitors on the economic dimension.

The *PS* is also in a difficult position in terms of leadership – the party has had a hard time putting forward charismatic candidates, capable of gaining votes with their personal appeal. After the end of the cold war, the tradition-

Figure 10
Spatial position and density of *Parti Socialiste* sympathisers

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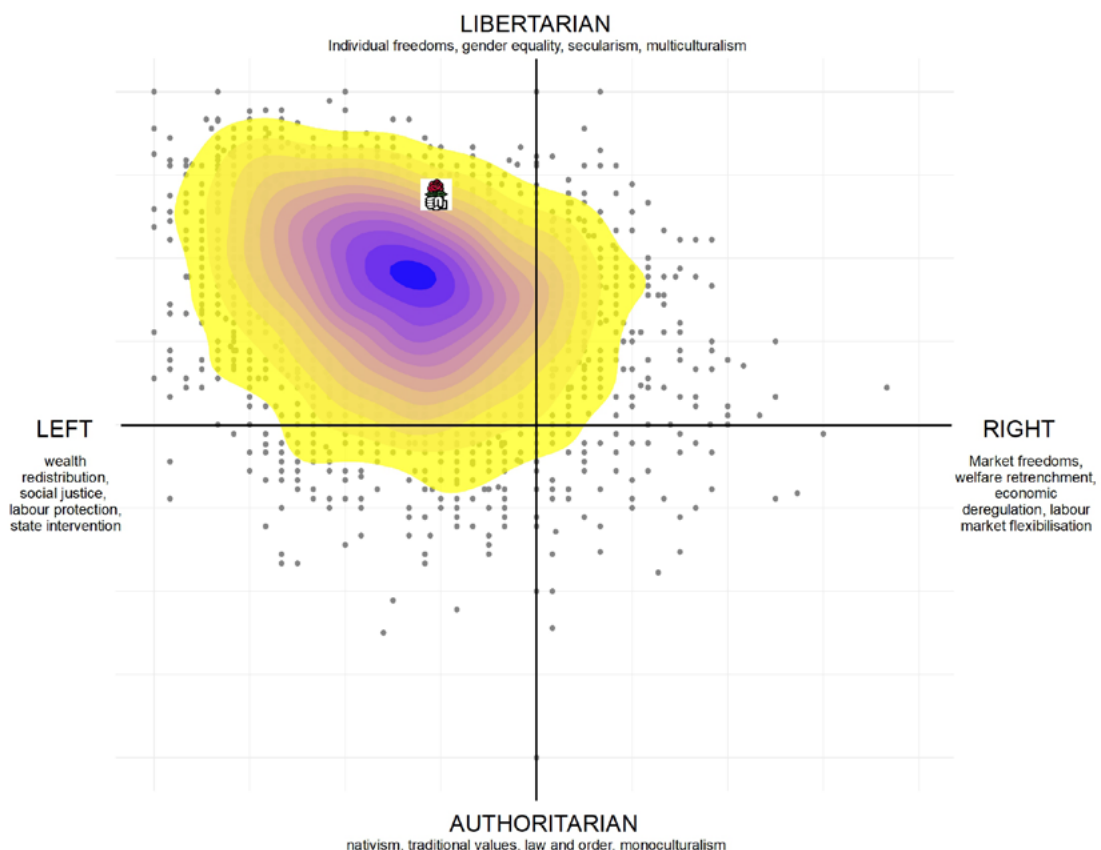
al left in France was undermined. This allowed President *Francois Mitterrand* to steer the social democrats in a more social-liberal direction. However, this synthesis has apparently come to an end, as the living standards of the population stagnated and the prospects for upward social mobility were undermined. These conditions resulted in increasing scepticism towards the liberal model of socio-economic governance, which has benefited radical political fringes on both the left and the right. In the light of the collapse of the synthesis of the social liberal wing and the traditional left wing within the *PS*, many former social democratic voters opted for either *En Marche* or *La France Insoumise*.

The shifts in its policy platform are symptomatic of the ideological challenges the PS has been facing for several years. During the presidential campaign, PS candidate *Hamon* ran on a left-wing platform that overlapped substantially with that of *Mélenchon*, while at the same time attempts by the PS to re-centre itself on the economic dimension were challenged by Macron's *La République En Marche*.

From a strategic perspective, the PS had hoped that Macron's party would fail to obtain a majority in the National Assembly, thereby making the social democrats an indispensable partner for voting in bills in Parliament. However, this best-case scenario for the Socialists failed to materialise, as LREM received a comfortable majority.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN PS

The internal debates of the direction in which the PS should move became evident during the 2017 election campaign, as the party moved to left initially, and later assumed moderate, centrist stances on economic policy. Due to the very poor result by the PS under the leadership of Benoît Hamon in the 2017 presidential election (the party only obtained 6.3 per cent of the vote in the first round), the *Parti Socialiste* moved away from the left-wing political line it had followed during the Presidential election. Hamon had built his manifesto around the issues of a universal income, labour protection, environmental protection, and a political reorientation of the EU from within. In its platform for legislative elections, PS replaced its proposal for a universal income by a one-off EUR 10,000 grant to young adults while measures aimed at protecting labour, such as a robot tax, and recognition of job burnout (for which employees could have been given paid leave) were all dropped. The party also abandoned its plan to phase out nuclear energy, while with regard to EU reform, merely a proposition for European investment plan was made. As a result, the last legislative programme of the PS has been labelled »Macron-compatible« by commentators.

The *PS* is also divided on EU matters: the party still has not recovered fully from the internal split it suffered in 2005, when the campaign to reject the proposed European Un-

Figure 11
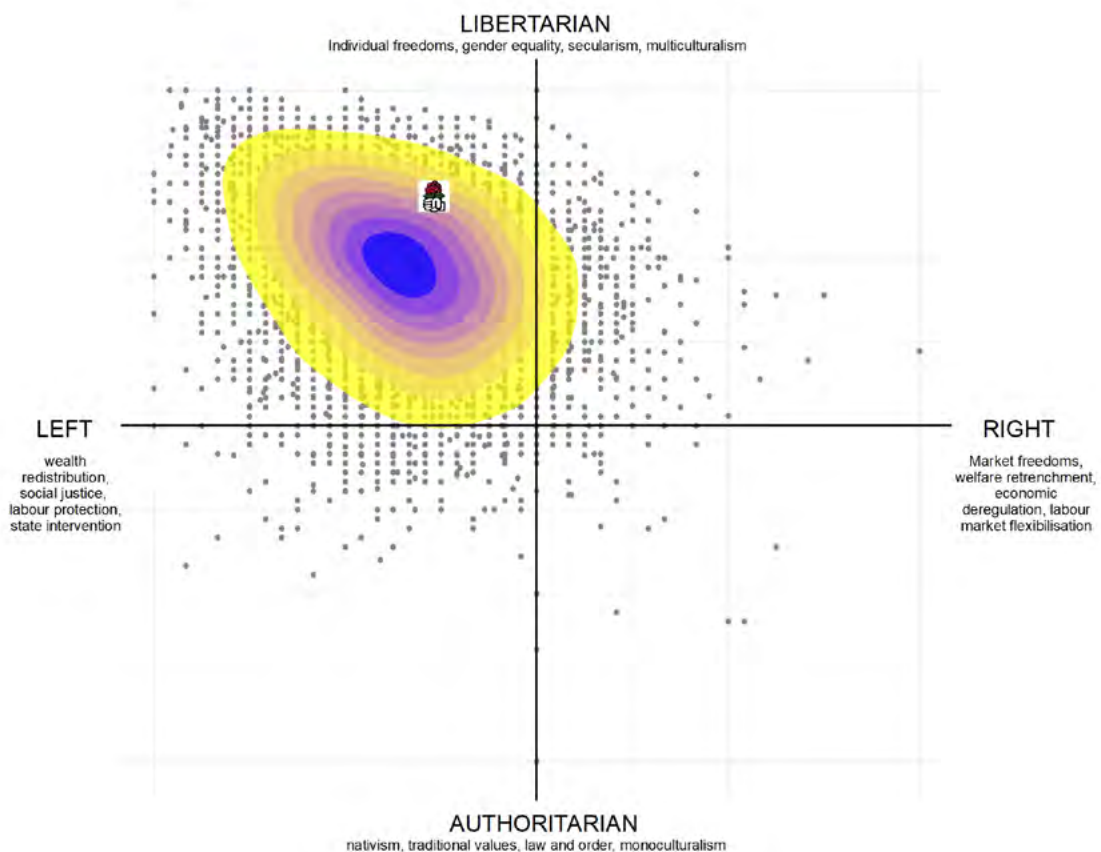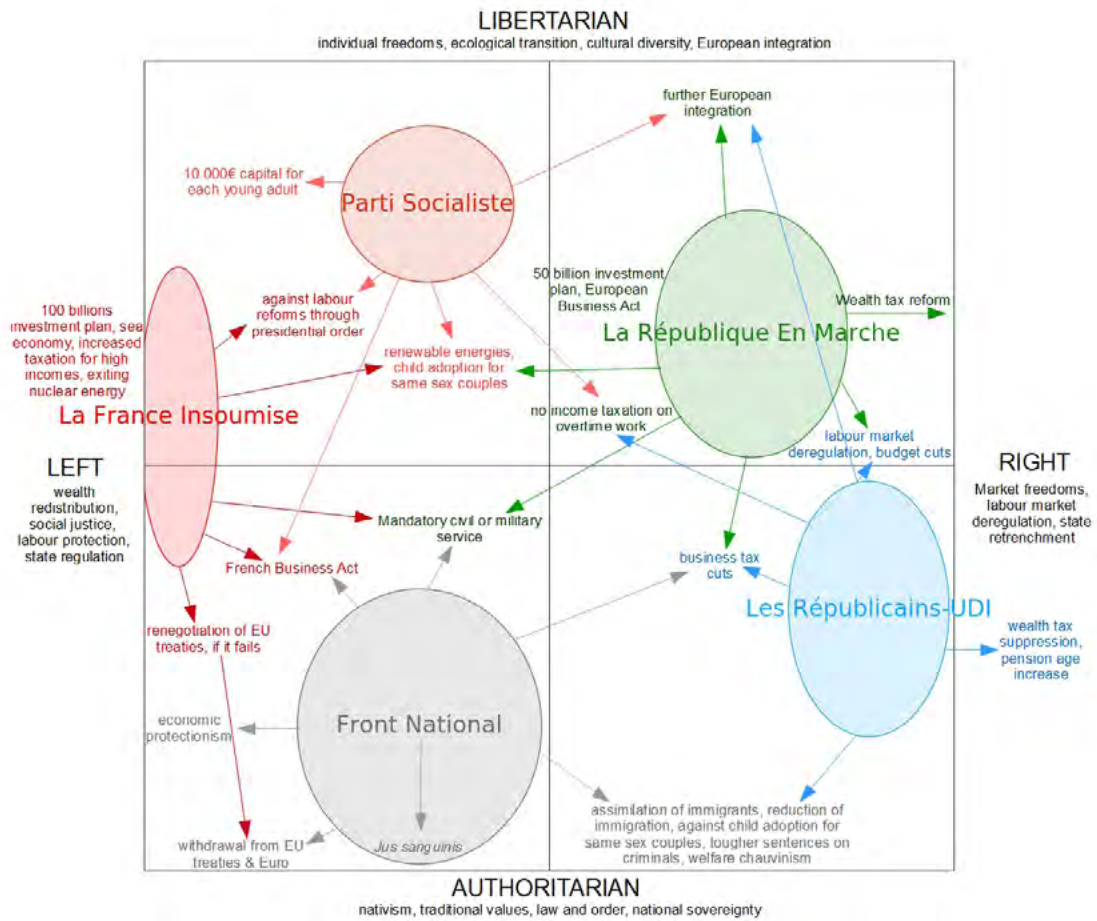**Spatial position and density of *Parti Socialiste* voters**

Figure 12
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (French legislative election 2017)

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ion constitution was spearheaded by *Laurent Fabius* – a former socialist prime minister and a major figure within *PS*. Although the »No camp« was defeated in an internal party vote, *Fabius* continued his campaigning against the treaty that would establish a Constitution for Europe, standing against the official party line. The defeat of the pro-EU camp in the referendum constituted the first time that *PS* was in the camp of losers on a matter of crucial importance for France and Europe as a whole.

Internal debates also revolve around strategies of improving PS's electoral performance by targeting new voter groups. While immigrants are clearly prospective left-wing voters, many in the party argue that regaining the traditional working-class vote is crucial for winning power. However, given its poor electoral performance, the PS will generally have a hard time motivating voter, since the prospects of gaining power are very slim.

Netherlands: *Partij van de Arbeid*

As emphasised above, the Dutch labour party *PvdA* adopted a centre-left stance on the economic dimension in 2017, coupled with a very progressive stance on the cultural dimension. Dutch voters on the (centre) left tend to be elec-

torally volatile, as there are many parties on the left with relatively similar policy positions. Particularly electoral shifts between the *PvdA*, the environmentalist *GroenLinks* (GreenLeft), and the progressive social liberals *Democraten 66* (D66) are common. In 2017, the *PvdA* adopted stances very similar to those of GreenLeft – support for the socially progressive issues, multiculturalism and environmental protection: the social democrats are strongly in favour of reaching the goals of the Paris climate agreement. In addition, *PvdA* has been governing for 4 years in a coalition with the centre-right, while supporting very unpopular economic reforms and cuts in public expenditure. The government had also adopted a new labour law that proved to have many more negative effects than anticipated.

However, what appears most crucial is that both voters and sympathisers of the Dutch social democrats are much more moderate than the party on the cultural dimension. The PvdA basically positioned itself on the fringe of its own voter base with regard to cultural issues. The aim of this strategy may have been to attract more progressive, young voters, the majority of whom also are considering voting for the GreenLeft. Obviously, this strategy of libertarian distancing proved unpopular among core voters, just like it backfired in France. Nevertheless, it is important to note that both PS and PvdA lost voters to much more progres-

sive parties (*La France Insoumise* and *GroenLinks* respectively), so that we cannot conclude that these positions themselves are unpopular. It apparently is the combination of economic moderation with progressivism that then triggers polarised competition on the cultural dimension on which the more radical left is seen as more credible and authentic by voters. In addition, many traditional core supporters of socials democrats are cultural moderates or at least ambivalent about issues regarding immigration.

In the last two decades, *PvdA* has been facing an increasingly hostile right-wing bloc of voters, pulling the party in a more right-wing direction economically due to the popularity of the anti-immigrant political movement. For social democrats, the most important structural factor accounting for their overall weakening has been the process of »individualisation.« The »new« Left that successfully emerged in the 1970s embraced libertarian ideas and, soon enough, many elements of this »liberalisation of the individual« became part and parcel of social democratic party platforms as well. This led to a deep fundamental ideological crisis for Dutch social democrats, as the notion of free, individual choice undermined the traditional drivers of left-wing thinking: solidarity and state interventionism. A mixture of libertarian views of societal relations with a statist view of economics was untenable. This ideological shift empowered right-wing conservatives, who had always preferred individuals assuming responsibility for their own lives to submitting to public

arrangements, and beginning at this point they no longer faced an ideological challenge to that idea. Individualisation not only undermined the ideological thrust of the *PvdA* – coupled with the professionalisation and personalisation of politics it also eroded class identities. The social democrats could no longer politicise the class struggle and economically emancipate the working classes, as the latter had partially dissipated through upward social mobility, while the remnants had fragmented in terms of ethnic background (immigrants), age (pension-less elderly), and labour-market position (the working poor, flex-workers and illegal labourers). *PvdA* had to grapple with the loss of core ideological concepts and core supporters, forcing the party to reorient itself ideologically and electorally in the face of a growing popularity of liberal and conservative ideas. Popular support for social and economic state interventionism was further undermined. The end of the cold war plunged the PvdA even more deeply into an existential crisis. Now that large-scale state interventionism had been discredited, the social democrats reoriented themselves toward liberalism and developed the »Third Way« ideology. While the name does not necessarily acknowledge a hierarchical status below that of conservatism and liberalism, the result was nevertheless a further de-legitimisation of left-wing politics and statist interventionism. This was exemplified in the 2017 election – the Dutch social democrats received their hardest blow to date, with their core electorate shifting on a massive scale towards progressive parties that attach less importance to

Figure 13
Spatial position and density of *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) sympathisers
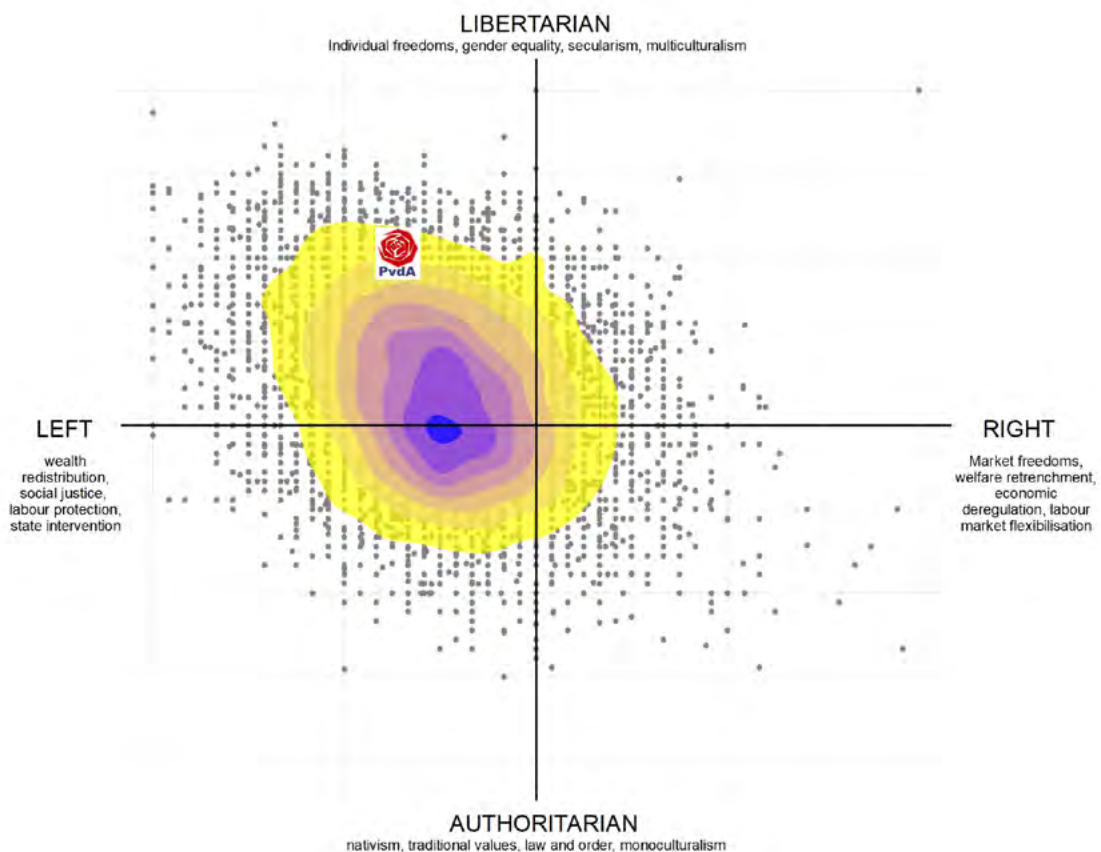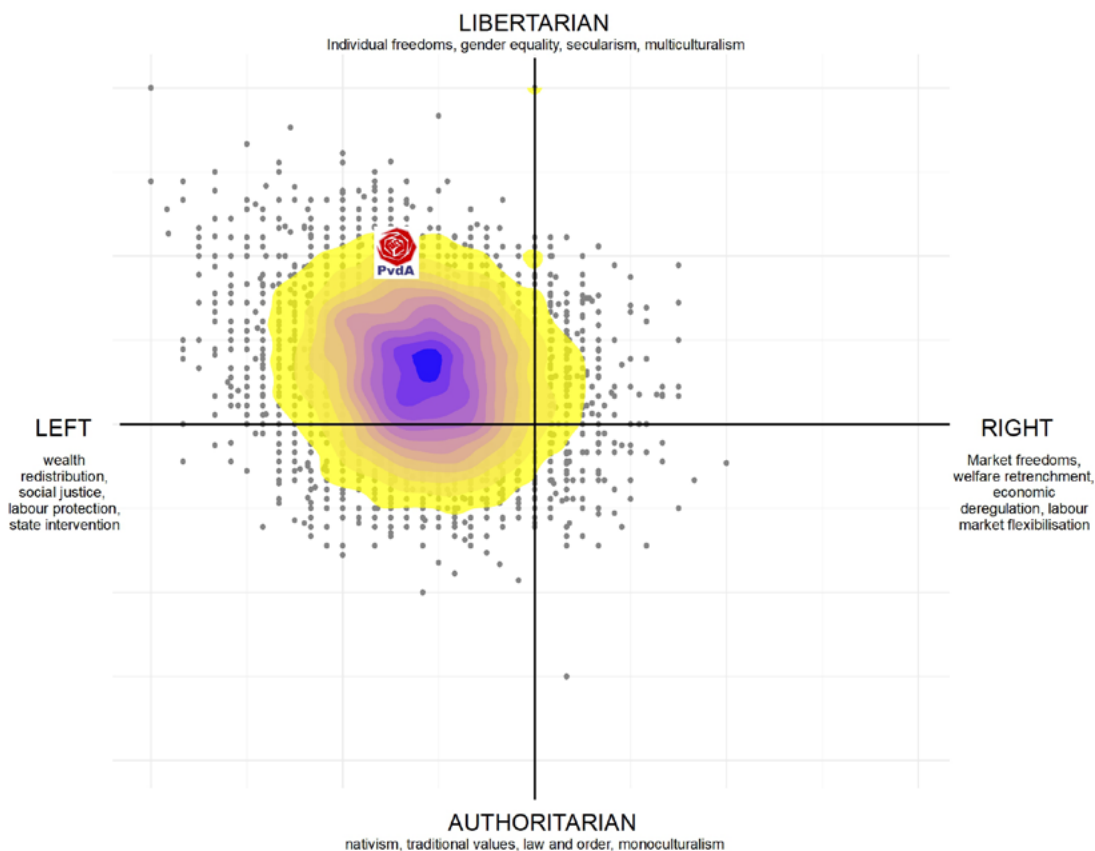

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Figure 14
Spatial position and density of *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) voters

LIBERTARIAN
Individual freedoms, gender equality, secularism, multiculturalism

LEFT
wealth
redistribution,
social justice,
labour protection,
state intervention

RIGHT
Market freedoms,
welfare retrenchment,
economic
deregulation, labour
market flexibilisation

AUTHORITARIAN
nativism, traditional values, law and order, monoculturalism

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economic policy. The *PvdA* has adopted a stance of competition for the left-wing vote, rather than focusing on the exposure of the detrimental effects of austerity brought about by the right. As a viable governing party, the Dutch social democrats actually supported an array of centre-right policies which, in the eyes of many voters, constituted a betrayal of the core tenets of social justice, in the defence of which the party campaigned in 2012. This caused confusion in the eyes of many left-wing voters, who abandoned *PvdA* in 2017 to support other progressive and left-wing parties. Since *PvdA* was a minority coalition partner, it was unable to impress voters with their contribution and their ability to keep their right-wing coalition partner in check. Many centre and left-wing voters could not distinguish what policy issues the social democrats wanted to address and what moderating effect they had – if any – on the economic policies of their senior coalition partner. At the local level PvdA is also part of numerous left-wing municipal coalitions, which makes it more difficult for citizens to distinguish the differences between parties on the left. In 2017, voters arguably no longer had a clear idea of what the party stood for economically, after supporting austerity measures between 2012 and 2017. Moreover, the pro-EU and culturally progressive stance of the PvdA was not unique and similar positions were held by other parties that were untainted by government participation. Another problem facing the PvdA is ageing of its electorate – the social democrats rely predominantly on the older cohorts of the Dutch electorate,

and are most popular among voters over the age of 60. Even though younger, left-leaning voters are supportive of policies proposed and implemented by the PvdA, many are unaware or unable to see the achievements of social democrats (such as consumer, workers' and tenants' rights, welfare arrangements, public transport and other public services). Especially young voters do not attribute these policies to the social democrats.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN PVDA

As is the case for most Western European Social Democratic parties, internal debates revolve mainly around the party profile with regard to economic policy. Some within the *PvdA* favour a more economically polarizing strategy and push for closer collaboration between the social democrats and more left-leaning opposition parties, such as the *Socialistische Partij* (SP). GroenLinks is not always more to the left and sometimes even more in favour of reform than the social democrats, making collaboration far from automatic. However, of all the left-wing parties, only the PvdA has been in government, which is why others in the PvdA fear that to close association with the radical left and progressives would render the party less governmental. Since there is no chance of a left-wing majority in the Netherlands, the more pragmatic wing strongly favours a centrist economic platform.

Despite of PvdA's tremendous electoral loss in 2017, some of its members and leadership representatives were in favour of the party joining the coalition formation talks, after receiving an invitation from previous coalition partner VVD. However, the voters' verdict made a role as opposition more logic. At the same time, the size of the party entails the risk of becoming politically irrelevant and obsolete.

THE 2017 DUTCH GENERAL ELECTION

The Dutch parliamentary election took place on the March 15, 2017. Incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte's party *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy* (VVD) became the largest party, despite dramatic losses, obtaining with 21.2 per cent of the vote. The radical populist right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders won 13 per cent, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) 12.4 per cent, Democrats 66 gained 12.2 per cent, the Socialist party 9.1 per cent and the GreenLeft achieved 9.1 per cent. The social democratic PvdA received 5.7 per cent – the lowest result in the party's history.

The campaign preceding the 2017 election was marked by deep political polarization, particularly on cultural issues that benefitted the traditional right-wing parties. Issues

like immigration and integration dominated the public debate, making it hard for parties on the left to get their message across. A media-fabricated horse-race between the VVD and the anti-immigrant party PVV sucked all media attention towards these two parties, even though no party would govern with Wilders. As a result of PVV's good showing in the polls, several other parties adopted more stringent anti-immigration and EU-critical stances. Particularly the VVD, CDA and SGP (a small religious party) were mimicking Wilders anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric. The VVD even took a page-wide message in all major newspapers to »all Dutch citizens« to »act normal or leave.« Also, on the left, the SP voiced strong opposition to labour migration from newer eastern-EU member-states. The PvdA had stressed that the EU should guarantee that there is »equal pay for equal work« within its borders, or dismantle the common labour market, but this sounded half-hearted compared to all the anti-immigration political fireworks. The PVV did not come even close win the elections and would never govern, but was able to capture and dominate the public debate – even as Wilders hardly campaigned and the party's manifesto was one page long, 7 bullet point piece of paper.

More than four years earlier, the 2012 elections resulted in a coalition between PvdA and VVD. While the liberals man-

Figure 15
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (Dutch general elections 2017)
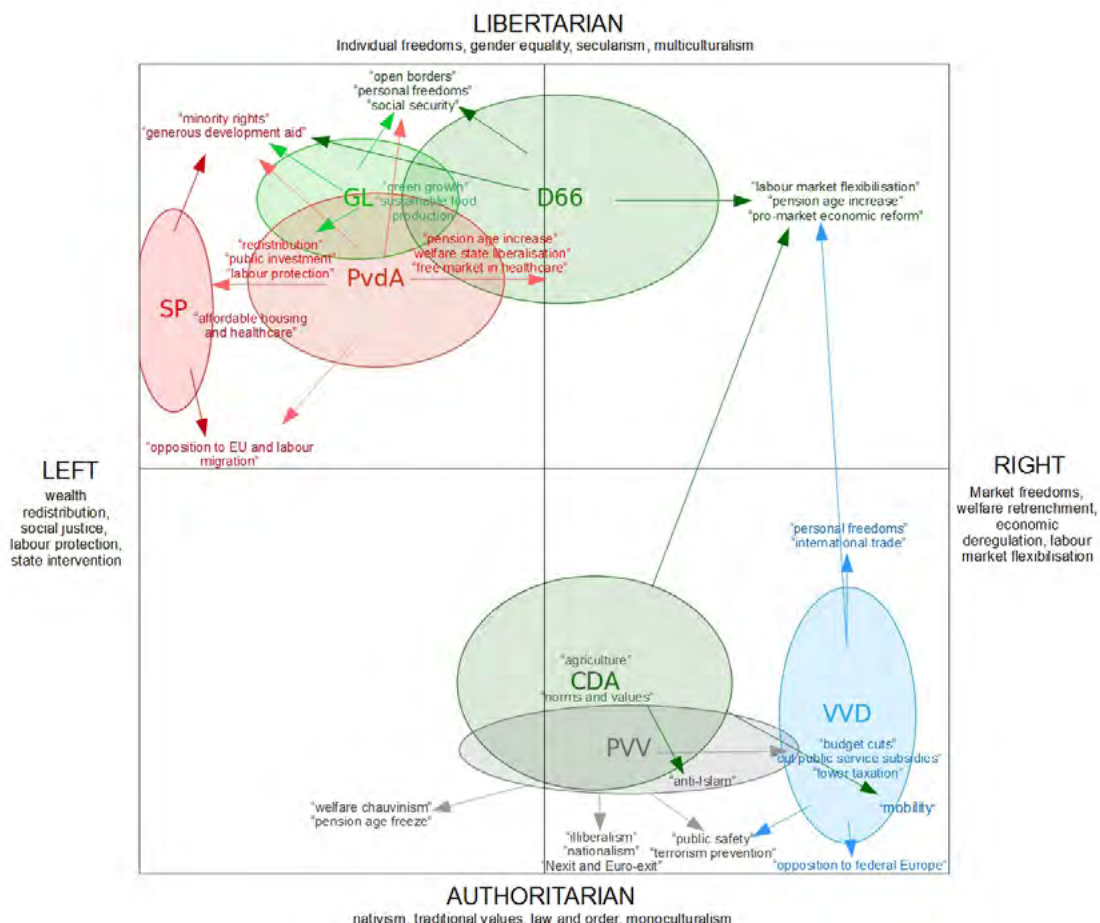
aged to limit its losses and achieve the highest proportion of popular support – holding on to 33 of their 41 seats – the social democrats lost 29 of their 38 seats. The PvdA ended up with less than 6 percent of the vote and only 9 seats, which is by far the lowest proportion the social democrats obtained in the post-war period. Many of its previous supporters became disillusioned with the party's concessions to its right-wing coalition partner. Since 2012 the coalition government introduced cuts to welfare entitlements for the unemployed and the disabled and transformed a long-standing universal student grant into a loan system. In addition, the government relaxed the rules for firing employees, introduced a step-wise pension age increase and reduced state funding for elderly care homes, as well as budget cuts in care and work-experience programs for disabled people. Disillusioned with such policies, many left-wing voters abandoned the *PvdA*, opting for competitors to the left and even the centre-right. Overall, parties on the left received the lowest combined support since 1945. The decline of the social democrats already became evident in 2014, when PvdA suffered heavy losses in municipal elections and was ousted from office in the Amsterdam municipality for the first time in the post-war period.

The withering away of support for the PvdA in 2017 benefitted several other parties, with more progressive voters overwhelmingly migrating to the GL, which gained 10 seats, to a total of 14; traditional leftists migrating to the Socialist Party (SP, but in turn this party also lost one seat) and centrist voters migrating to the social liberal D66 and also CDA. Overall, the combined left (PvdA, SP and GL) lost 20 seats. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2017 Dutch elections were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 15.

CATCH-ALL: TRADITIONAL SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

In Austria and Sweden, social democratic parties have largely stuck to a catch-all strategy of moderation and centrism on both the economic and cultural issue-dimension. Actual voters of the SPÖ *(Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs)* and SAP *(Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti)* appear to be more culturally conservative than sympathisers of these parties. On the economic dimension, both voters and sympathisers are slightly to the right of the respective social democratic parties. Austrian and Swedish social democrats have adopted moderate rather than radical policy proposals enabling them to reach out to both the (authoritarian/conservative) working class and lower middle-class voters. By adopting a position in between that of their core voters and the base of more progressive sympathisers, they appeal to a broad section of the population. In the case of Sweden and Austria, social democratic parties also adopted mild anti-immigrant stances in light of the rise of anti-immigrant parties. Pragmatic stances, in terms of both economic governance and cultural issues, allows social democrats to easily enter coalition negotiations with ideologically dissimilar parties on the political centre.

In these countries, social democratic sympathisers are more culturally progressive than the party stance, and place themselves slightly to the right of the parties on the economic dimension. This indicates that by adopting a traditional catch-all strategy, social democratic parties are able to appeal to both the more conservative sectors of the working class as well as progressive intellectuals, professionals and the middle class.

Austria: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*

Despite failing to increase its vote share in the 2017 elections, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) remains one of the major actors in the Austrian party system. The party managed to successfully attain an appeal across social classes during the 1970s, and despite of the conservative majority in parliament was a dominant coalition partner in alternating government coalitions: the SPÖ-FPÖ governments between 1986 and 1990 and the SPÖ-ÖVP during the 1990s. After spending two terms in the opposition, the party regained the chancellorship in 2006, forming two consecutive coalition governments with ÖVP which lasted until May 2017.

Only one and a half years after heading the Austrian government, the position of SPÖ, with Chancellor Werner Faymann at its helm, was weakened by the substantial electoral gains by the centre-right ÖVP and the radical right FPÖ. Already in 2013, the Austrian election produced all-time lows for both mainstream parties, the SPÖ and ÖVP. Still, they secured a combined majority by a tiny margin and managed to form a coalition government. After a period of favourable mid-year performance in the polls, the SPÖ fell behind the conservative ÖVP in popularity, only obtaining one more seat than the anti-immigrant FPÖ in the 2017 elections. The 2017 elections were marked by the pronounced saliency of the immigration issue: the centre-right ÖVP moved further to the right and put emphasis on criticising immigration, without losing any voters. At the same time, support for the social democrats stagnated, which indicates that cultural issues – in particular immigration – is a real obstacle for left-wing parties if they want to address economic concerns.

The Austrian social democrats ran a traditional campaign focussing on socio-economic issues such as labour protection and tax reductions for lower-income persons. Amongst others, the SPÖ proposed an increase in pensions, introduction of a nation-wide minimum wage, and measures to create jobs. In addition to introducing an inheritance tax, the Austrian social democrats are in favour of introducing a levy on value-added taxes as a means to continue to fund the welfare state. To curb a weakening electoral performance among traditional supporters and to expand the voters base beyond older generations of voters, the SPÖ proposed several policies to help younger generations find employment, housing and affordable education. Christian Kern, when leading the party, proposed a cap on rents to keep (social) housing affordable. With regard to cultural is-

Figure 16
Spatial position and density of SPÖ sympathisers
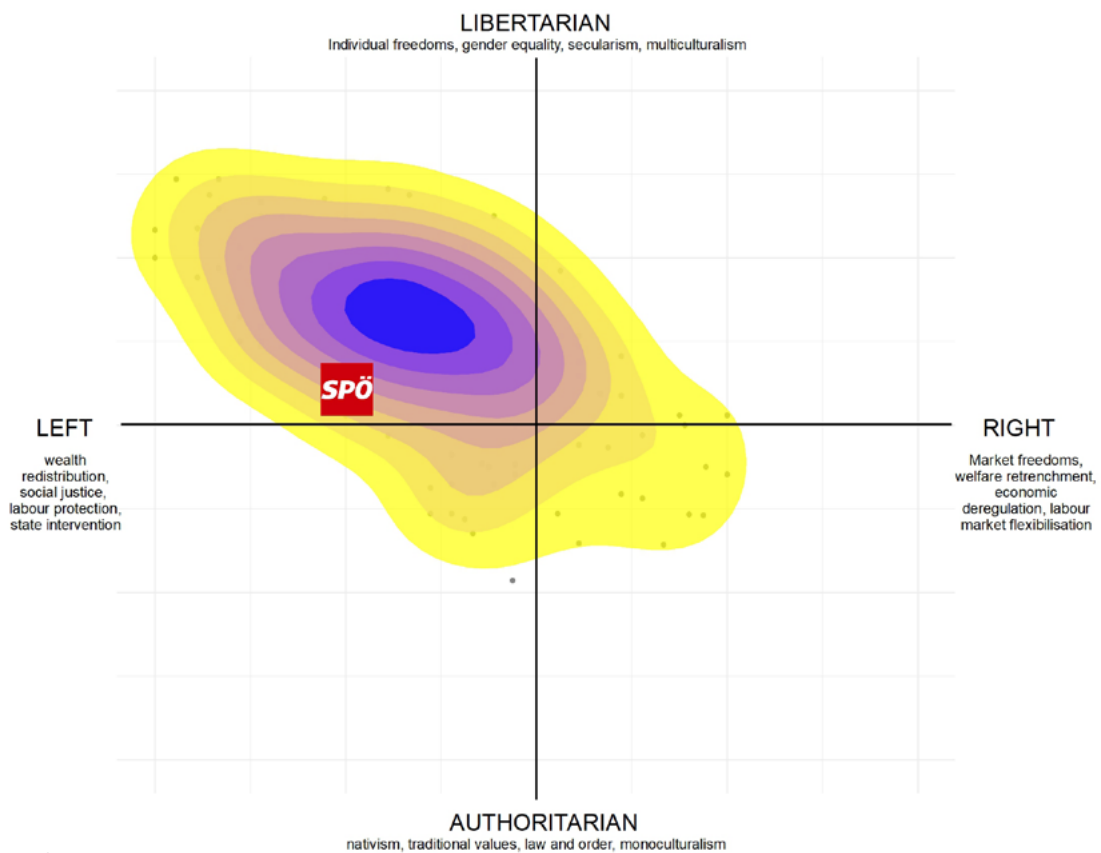
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sues, the Austrian Social Democrats combine progressive and conservative views. They are in favour of same-sex marriage, are in favour of measures to increase social equality and prevent gender discrimination. The party's emphasis on socially progressive issues has managed to attract the support of some former Green voters, while alienating more traditional supporters among the working class, who switched to the radical populist right FPÖ.

One stance that could be considered conservative/traditionalist, however, is the unwillingness of the SPÖ to introduce legislation that would make it possible for immigrants to obtain dual citizenship. This example illustrates the SPÖ's increased focus on domestic issues with a populist tendency, thereby opening the door to the possibility of a government coalition with the right-wing-populist party FPÖ. In June 2017, the Austrian social democrats announced that they would be dropping their 30-year refusal to negotiate with the FPÖ.

STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN SPÖ

The divisions within SPÖ have traditionally revolved around the party's economic policy. After employing a Keynesian strategy throughout the 1970s, SPÖ was posed to change its economic governance in the early 1980, when issues with this strategy became visible (rising national debt and

structural economic problems), while the public budget has dwindled and macro-economic indicators were pointing to serious economic issues. The social democrats were forced to choose between Keynesianism or deregulation. The former involved promoting special economic programmes of employment through nationalised firms, justified by the argument that unemployment is costlier, considering that it brings decreased tax revenue and lower consumption. Conversely, SPÖ could opt for a formula of developing the economy through supply-side entailing the privatisation of previously nationalised firms. In 1986, the party went for the latter, moving away from Keynesianism, to subsidising key economic sectors and private employers, while introducing special employment training programs targeting the youth and women.

By the late 1990s, SPÖ had new employment and economic policies: labour market flexibility, focus on the competitiveness of private enterprises and economic deregulation. Instead of a Keynesian, collectivist approach to employment, supply-side measures which come from an individualistic perspective, where the state aims to create the most efficient conditions for employability.

While the party has maintained more pragmatic and economically centrist positions, there are internal voices willing to set the sail in a more radical direction. However, the current internal debates in SPÖ revolve more around non-eco-

Figure 17
Spatial position and density of SPÖ voters
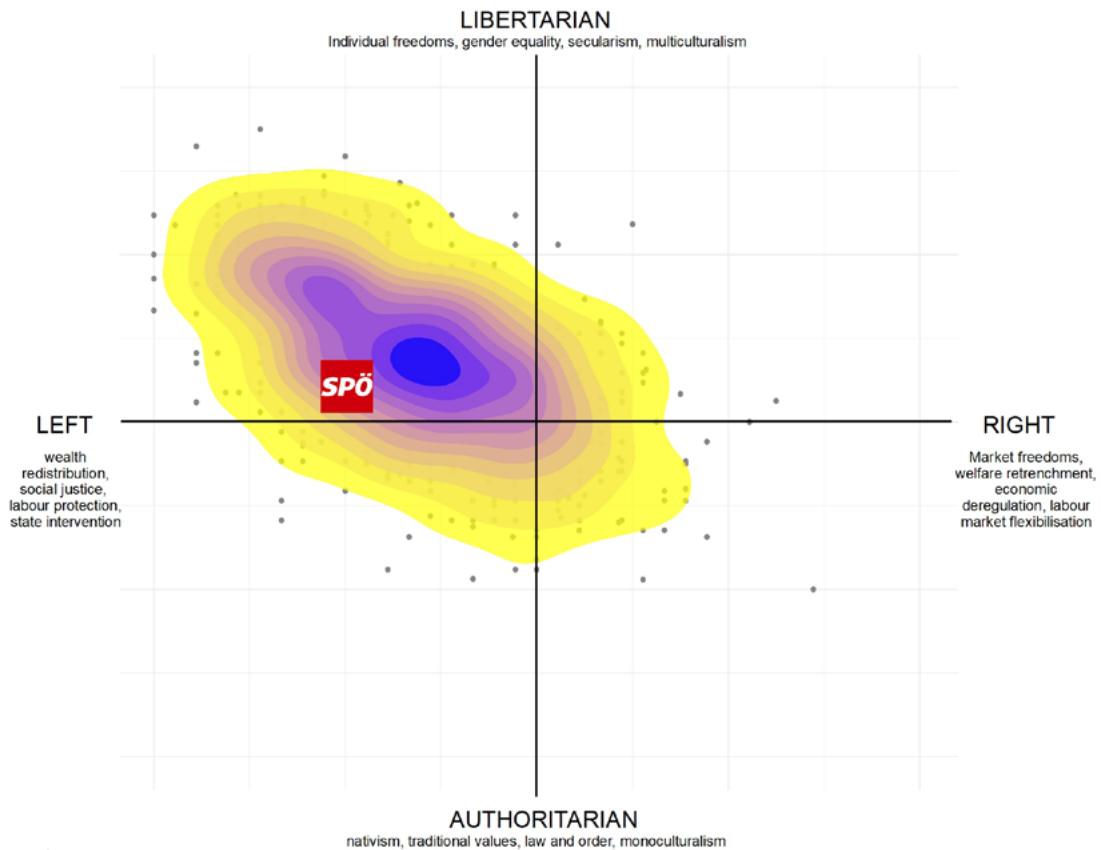
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nomic policy, and mainly on the issue of whether the party should adopt a more reconciliatory approach towards the FPÖ. Considering the rightward shift in public opinion, some argue that this could be the only avenue for the social democrats to come in power again.

THE 2017 AUSTRIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

Austria was characterised by a stable party system dominated by two major parties during the postwar era – the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). Lately, the Social Democrats remained in the opposition for two terms until 2006, when the party regained the chancellorship and formed two consecutive coalition governments with the ÖVP which lasted until May 2017.

As a result of the collapse of the Grand Coalition (of SPÖ-ÖVP), Austrian parliamentary elections took place prematurely on October 15, 2017. While support for the SPÖ remained stable, the ÖVP and the FPÖ each gained substantially in the elections. Considering the collapse of Team Stronach and the Greens, this result is not impressive. It is also worth noting that, not long ago, the left and progressive forces were able to rally behind a presidential candidate from the Greens, while now the left has a combined tally of just over 30 per cent of the votes. Due to the four per cent electoral thresh-

old, (re-)entry into parliament proved impossible for the Greens that split, with the ›personalised‹ *Liste Pilz* – a breakaway from the Greens – entering parliament with 8 seats. Even though the conservative-liberal camp in Austrian politics has seen constant rumble since the 1990s, with several breakaways from the FPÖ gaining, the two right-wing parties easily found common ground after the 2017 elections ousting the social democrats from national power.

Inside the SPÖ there were conflicts right from the beginning of the 2017 election campaign. Due to the premature termination of the Grand Coalition, several social democrats speculated on possible coalition variants in the media before the actual election outcome, making the party look power-hungry rather than interested in bringing their case to the people. Core social democratic socio-economic issues were raised by SPÖ-chancellor Christian Kern but were pushed into the background by early speculations of possible successors and discussions about other regional politicians. While incumbency can be an asset, the sitting chancellor was overshadowed by the media performance of the ÖVP-leader Sebastian Kurz, who completely switched to an anti-immigration rhetoric and did not defend the policies of the previous government in which SPÖ and ÖVP were coalition partners. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2017 Austrian elections were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 15.

Figure 18
Two-dimensional political landscapes based on aggregate party placements (Austrian legislative election 2017)

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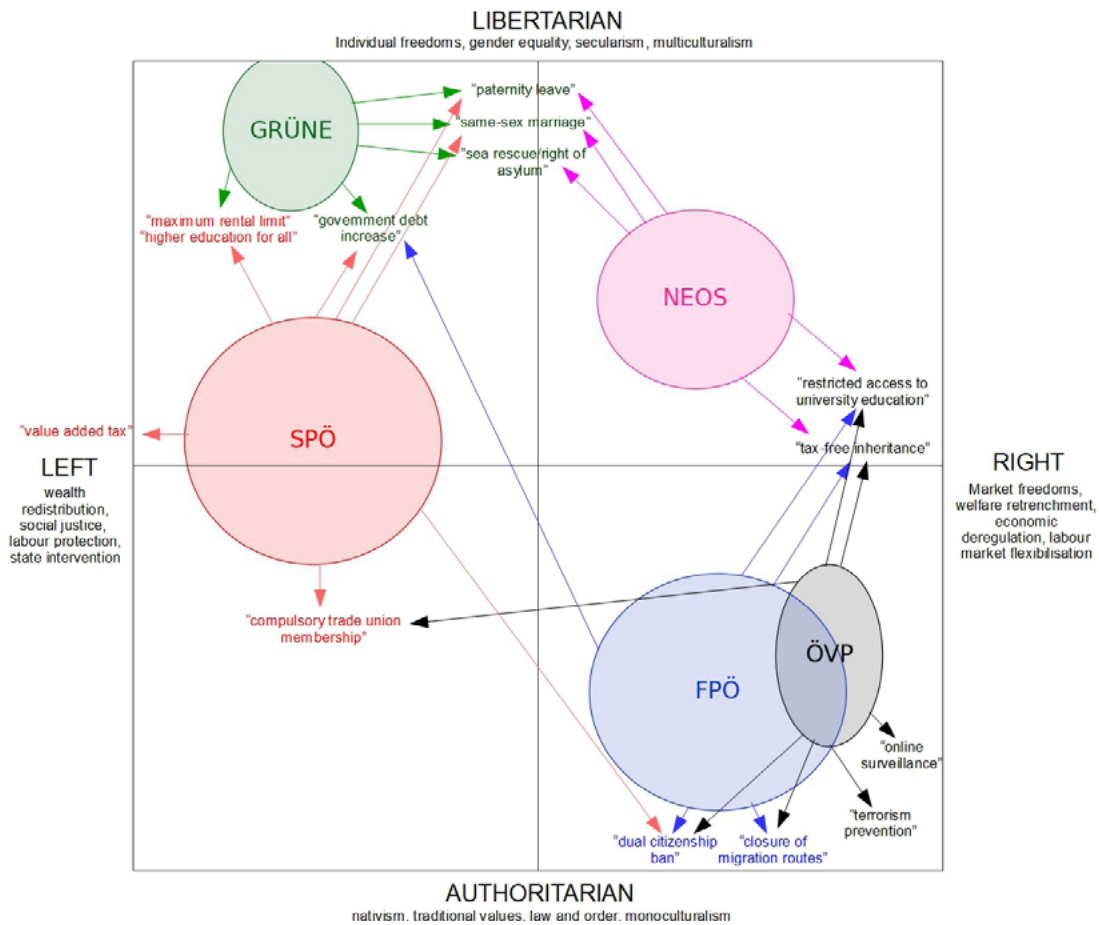
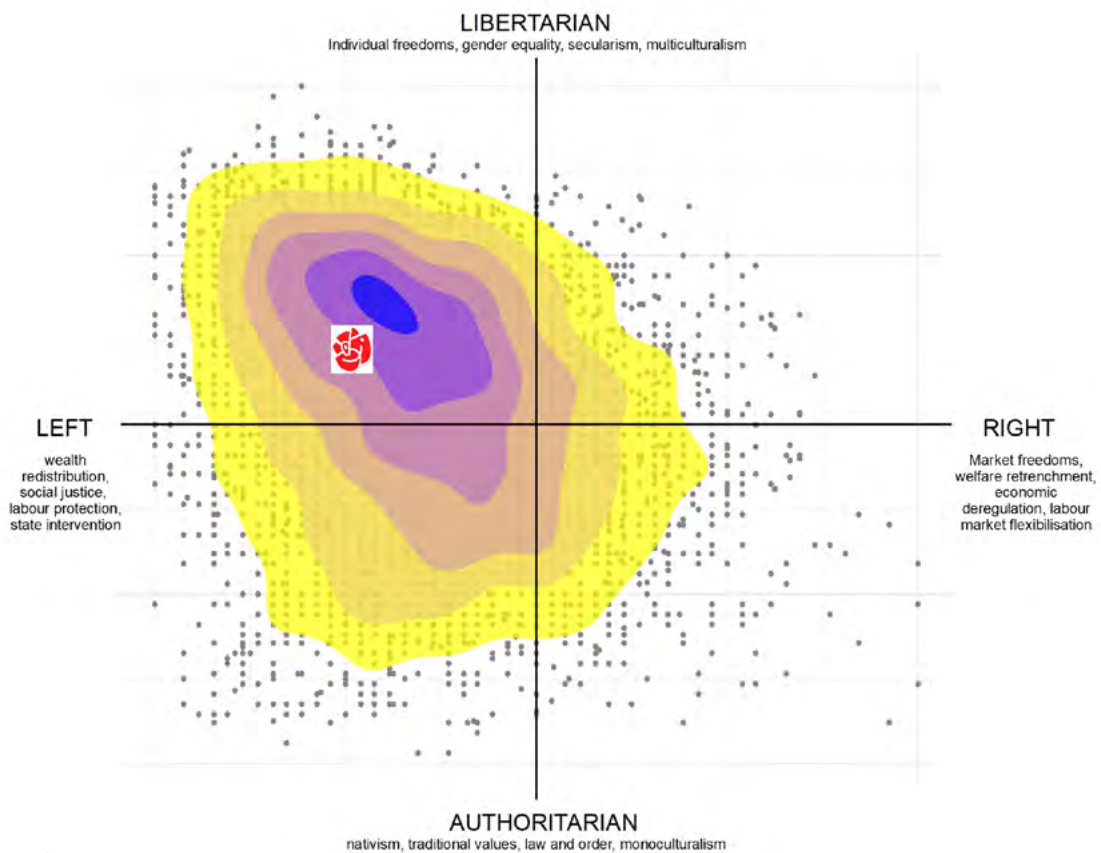## Sweden: *Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti*

For the Swedish Social Democrats (SAP), a strong, regulated labour market and universal access to health-care and education remain important political issues. As an effect of gradual individualisation and globalisation of society since the 1990s, social democracy in Sweden has been suffering from an »identity crisis« and an erosion of the traditionally stable working-class voter base. Nevertheless, remaining the largest party in the last election, Swedish Social Democrats are far from being on their knees. Social democracy is in many ways an entrenched part of the Swedish political infrastructure, as the party ruled without interruption for four decades between the 1930s and the 1970s, to a large extent shaping Swedish political culture in the 20th century.

During the last two decades, the Swedish Social Democrats have been confronted with increasing polarisation of the political landscape and a strong right-wing bloc that is pushing for further tax cuts and increasing privatisation of welfare services. The growth of the nationalist anti-immigration party, Sweden Democrats (SD), has further shifted the political debate away from classical social democratic issues and reinforced the feeling of a social democracy in

crisis. This situation has led to decreasing support for the party in parliamentary elections and a loss of many of its voters. With 31 per cent of the votes in the 2014 election, SAP remained the largest party, an achievement that was repeated in 2018. In fact, now the lead over the second and third largest parties, (*M* and *SD* respectively) actually increased despite the social democrats losing around 3 percent of their support.

The shift in the public debate towards a greater emphasis on migration issues and law and order is not to the advantage of the social democrats. The party is attempting a high-wire act, trying to find a balance between continued focus on welfare and labour issues, in which SAP traditionally enjoys considerable support from voters, while seeking to establish a strong profile on immigration issues as well as law and order, which are of major importance to their constituency and the public debate in general. The social democrats' immigration policy was reversed in 2015, in the wake of the European »refugee crisis«. The government toughened the rules, underscoring the need for domestic order and stability and reintroducing border controls. This policy shift was unprecedented, especially since only a few years ago party leader Stefan Löfven was pushing for a liberal migration policy and »rejection« of the SD's attempt to control the political agenda by whipping up nationalist

Figure 19
Spatial position and density of SAP sympathisers

LIBERTARIAN
Individual freedoms, gender equality, secularism, multiculturalism

LEFT
wealth
redistribution,
social justice,
labour protection,
state intervention

RIGHT
Market freedoms,
welfare retrenchment,
economic
deregulation, labour
market flexibilisation

AUTHORITARIAN
nativism, traditional values, law and order, monoculturalism

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sentiments. Although this new policy has not made the party grow, it has taken root and can be seen as a reaction to the increasing popularity of the SD.

## STRATEGIES AND DEBATES WITHIN SAP

Considering the widespread public approval of the »Swedish model« which entails numerous policies introduced by the social democrats, the internal debates within SAP revolve around economic policy, even though the party has been moving to the political centre since the 1990s. Nevertheless, even the main parties of the centre-right have embraced the Swedish model of relatively high taxation, an active role of the state in the national economy and generous welfare state arrangements. The right wants lower taxation, further privatizations, and to introduce larger salary discrepancies, but are limited by the popularity of the relatively well-functioning welfare state in Sweden. Despite long-term social democratic rule there has been a steady rise of income inequality since the early 2000s, fuelling social discontent.

Debates within the SAP during much of 2017 revolved around the shape and content of political alliances and coalition formation. Witnessing the decline of bloc politics, fuelled by the rise of populism, some within SAP advocate for a cross-ideological cooperation between the centre-left

and the centre-right. Moderate political parties have all refused to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats, and were forced to collaborate across blocks after the 2018 elections. Until September 2018, social democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was co-governing with the *Green Party* (MP) and relied on the parliamentary support of the radical left party *Vänsterpartiet*. The current Swedish cabinet relies on the parliamentary support *Centerpartiet* (C) or *Liberalerna* (L) – a development which signifies the decline of bloc politics.

The issue of immigration has also become central in the era of growing populist sentiments. In early 2018 SAP joined the parties of the right-wing »Alliance« bloc to announce that ›integration‹ is the main issue facing the country. It seemed as if the social democrats and the right-wing political bloc were competing with each other to portray themselves as the political movement best placed to tackle it. This path seemed as if the whole party system was playing on the home turf of the anti-immigrant far right, as all parties seemed to converge on the same issue. Naturally, this benefited the Sweden Democrats. Later in 2018, facing a surge of the Sweden Democrats in the polls, SAP changed its strategy and started arguing that the 2018 elections were essentially about welfare provision and social policy. With the advance of the campaign, SAP embraced more leftist proposals, announcing plans to raise taxes on private companies and to increase various social benefits. This

Figure 20
Spatial position and density of SAP voters

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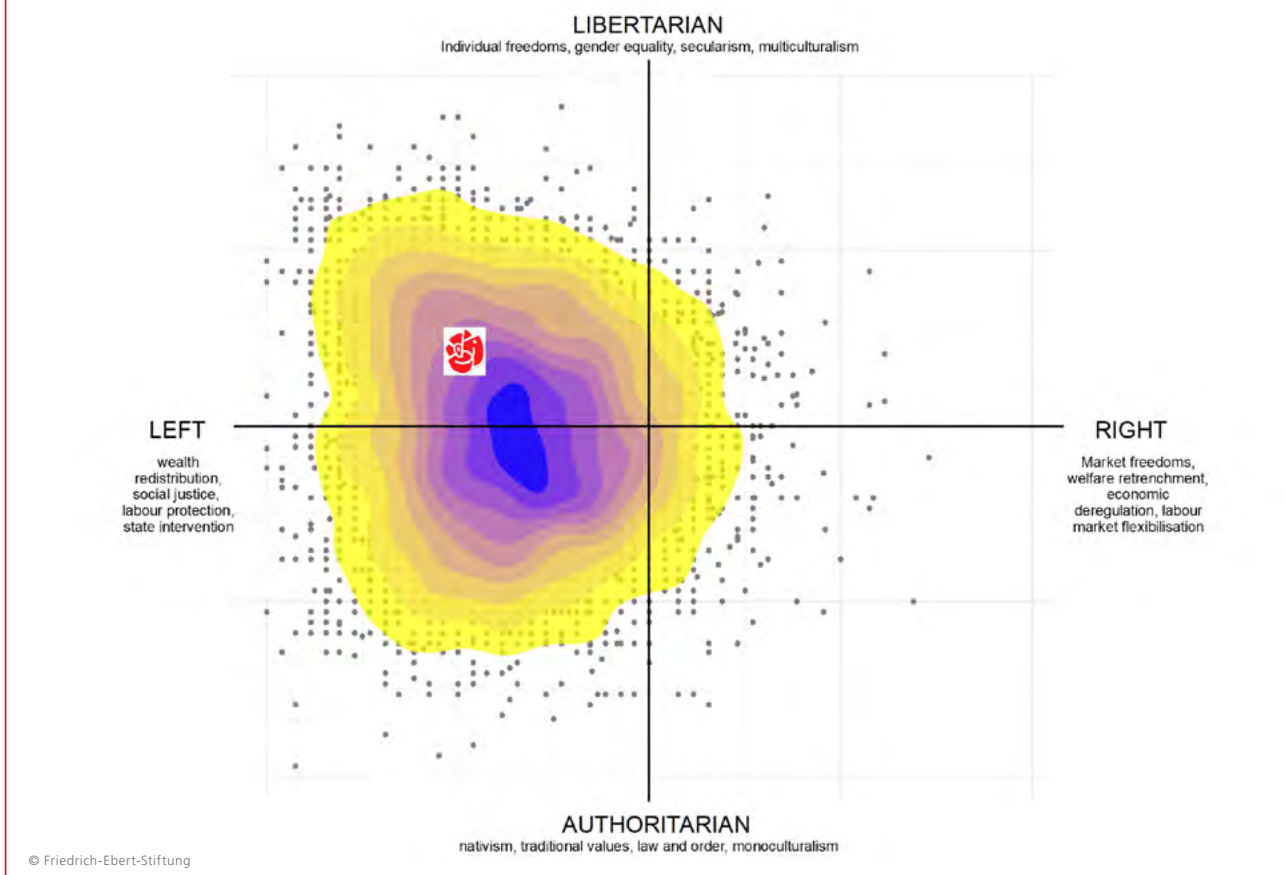
strategy seems to have worked in the party's favour, as it received more votes than opinion polls were predicting. The adoption of different strategies during the electoral campaign suggests that there are multiple currents within SAP, each advocating the adoption of a different vote-maximisation strategy.

THE 2017 SWEDISH GENERAL ELECTION

On September 9, 2018, Swedish citizens cast their vote in a parliamentary election. The 349 seats in the Riksdag – the Swedish parliament – are distributed proportionally. During the previous election in 2014, eight parties passed the four-percent parliamentary threshold. The biggest party, *Socialdemokraterna*, formed a red-green minority government with the Green Party, *Miljöpartiet*, that relies on the support of the Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*. To enable the government to get its budget plans through, and to prevent a crisis after the 2014 election, the ruling parties had to also reach an agreement with the right-wing »Alliance« parties due to the position of *Sverigedemokraterna*.

Opinion polls indicate that the issues considered most important by Swedish citizens in the 2018 elections were healthcare, immigration and law and order. Issues that have received little media coverage are EU cooperation,

economic policy and gender equality. Analysts seem to agree that »softer« issues have now given way to »hard issues« such as law & order, which dominates the political discourse as it does in most other European countries.

Swedish politics is marked by four distinct characteristics. First, it is characterized with high voter turnout (85.8 per cent in the 2014 election and 87.1 percent in 2018) and a relatively stable political culture (for example, there has not been any snap election in Sweden since 1958). Second, the social democratic movement and social democratic party has traditionally been so strong that it governed without interruption for four decades between the 1930s and the 1970s. Third, the political structure is marked by »bloc politics«: parties in parliament have created two relatively stable alliances, recently with three red-red-green parties on the left, pitted against four centre-right parties on the right (M, L, C, KD). In 2004, the right »bloc« formed an official strategic cooperation, »the Alliance«, which later formed a coalition government. Fourth, in 2010, the right-wing populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD) entered parliament and reshaped the political landscape. Their presence added a new dimension to the political landscape and loosened the ties in the left and right blocs. The increased vote and seat share of the Sweden Democrats resulted in an unprecedented political deadlock in 2018: none of the two blocks man-

aged to obtain a parliamentary majority, while both refused to rely on the support of the radical populist right. The government formation process was extremely lengthy and difficult for Swedish standards: after several failed attempts of SAP and M to form a centre-left and centre-right coalition governments respectively, a government was finally formed in January 2019 after the Social Democrats struck an agreement with the Greens, the Liberals, and the Centre Party. For an understanding of what the most important issues in the 2018 Swedish elections were, and what were the stances of parties towards these issues, see Figure 21.

Figure 21

Two-dimensional political landscape based on aggregate party placements (Swedish general election 2018)

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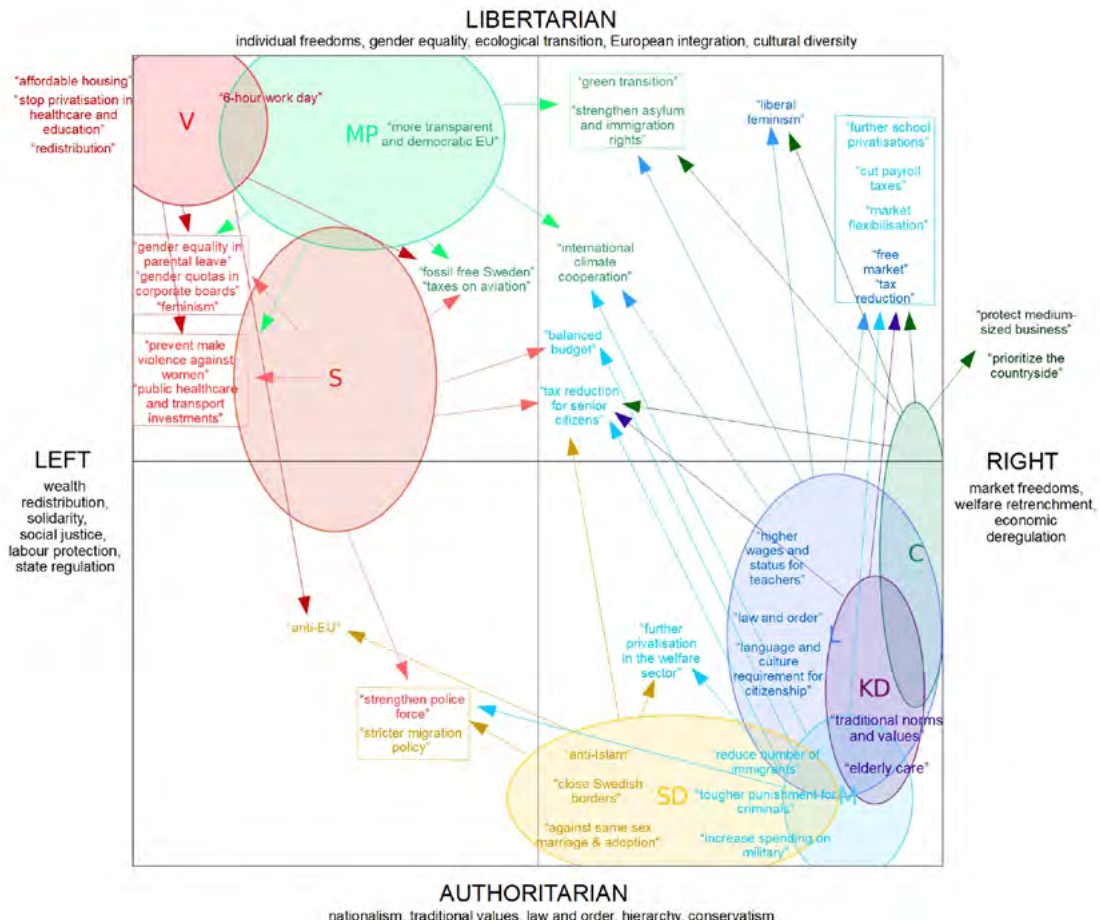
4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE FINDINGS IN A NUTSHELL

The analyses and trends outlined above show that European social democratic parties adopt profoundly different electoral strategies: they employ very different political narratives and adopt distinctive policy stances, as they need to adapt to the national political environment and specific necessities of party competition in their respective countries. However, when we group social democratic parties by electoral strategy, a pattern of similar outcomes in electoral performance emerges: in both France and the Netherlands, the strategy of libertarian distancing was disastrous for the social democratic parties that followed it, while in Austria and Sweden economic centrism and cultural moderation guaranteed that the vote shares for social democracy would remain stable or decline less sharply. In Italy, the strategy of combining pro-market economic policies with cultural progressivism proved very successful at first, but public approval for the party that advocated it quickly dwindled, much like what happened with *En Marche* led by Macron in France. The only strategy that successfully expanded the voter base for social democrats is the one of economic polarisation employed by British Labour, although one has to consider that Labour has previously experienced a sharp electoral decline, and that many voters doubt the party's competence to govern the country, even though Labour's radical rhetoric and public image is not matched by its actual party platform.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIES IN DETAIL

From this assessment of the relative positioning of social democratic parties vis-à-vis their core voter groups, we can conclude that two strategies seem to have been most beneficial in terms of electoral appeal: a traditional social-democratic **catch-all strategy** of moderation along both the economic and cultural dimensions (as used by SPÖ and SAP) as well as a strategy of polarisation along the economic dimension – **Corbynism** – by adopting clear left-wing stances (as the British Labour Party has done). The catch-all strategy appears to be more defensive and has ensured electoral stability, yet with some decline of the social democratic vote share in Sweden and a marginal gain in Austria. The strategy of economic polarisation seems to be best posed to expand electoral support for the social

democrats. As the case of the PS under Hamon shows, however, is that a leftward movement only seems to work when social democrats do not adopt too progressive position on the cultural dimension, compared to core voter groups. The most toxic strategy, in terms of electoral performance, appears to be economic moderation coupled with cultural polarisation by moving the party to the progressive / libertarian pole, as the Dutch *PvdA* did in the 2017 elections (support plummeting from 24.7 per cent in 2012 to 5.7 per cent in 2017).

Corbynism has proven largely successful in expanding UK's Labour party voting share in 2017, yet the party is still to win a general election. Economic polarisation can be potentially successful in situations with prolonged (centre-) right rule, where austerity policies have been so overreaching that they affect the general public at large. In the UK, the healthcare and public transportation system, but also the police and numerous other institutions have been subjected to years of budget cuts. In such a situation, faced with the negative effects of austerity, the general public, as well as government employees and public servants often turn against right-wing parties. Nevertheless, social democrats should be wary that moving too far to the left might make a political party seem incompetent in the eyes of moderate, centrist voters. In the case of Labour, the presumed incompetency of the party leadership is seen as a major barrier preventing the party from leading decisively in the polls. Nevertheless, this is a matter of speculation, since the party could have been in even less advantageous situation with a more moderate leadership.

Macronism also appears to be a successful strategy, at least initially. By moving towards the ideological centre and adopting an orthodox economic strategy, while pledging to reform the Italian economy, *Partito Democratico* managed to successfully appeal to a wide range of voters and win the 2013 election. Similarly, creating *En Marche* prior to the 2017 French elections, Emmanuel Macron gained control of both the presidency and the legislative assembly. Nevertheless, adopting a Macronist strategy could prove detrimental in the long run. After expanding its share of seats in 2013, support for the Italian social democrats declined sharply in 2018 (from 25.4 to 18.7 percent), even though the party maintained its pro-market economic stance. Similarly, after his resounding victory in 2017, Macron's approval rates declined to a record low less than a

year after the start of his presidency, indicating that the success of his political project will be at stake in the next elections. Among the main criticisms (left-leaning) voters have of Macron is that his policies benefit wealthy business elites at the expense of working people. Thus, he is increasingly perceived as a »president of the rich«. Social democratic parties should therefore be wary of adopting a Macronism strategy, which may have short-term electoral benefits, but basically constitutes an abandonment of centre-left social democratic core values and policies.

What appears to be a toxic mix for social democrats is economic moderation combined with a polarisation on the cultural dimension (a strategy adopted by *PvdA* and *PS*). In the eyes of voters, this **progressive libertarian distancing** creates an indistinguishable profile of the parties that adopt such a strategy – their policy proposals become almost identical to those of other progressive competitors. On the economic dimension, moderation only works when the centre-left also remains moderate on the cultural dimension. A combination of economic centrism and cultural distancing towards the progressive pole makes social democrats indistinguishable from the centre-right on economic issues, while blurring their differences with green parties and other progressive competitors. Social democracy seems to have much more room to manoeuvre along the economic dimension (most beneficially to the left), while movement along the cultural dimension – particularly towards the progressive pole – seems to sever links with core groups of voters on a serious scale without enabling social democrats to appeal to new voter groups.

What appears to work best in the long run for social democratic parties, at least with regard to remaining electorally strong, is employing a **catch-all strategy** in an attempt to appeal to as wide sectors of the population as possible. This strategy entails the maintenance of a vision of governability, as catch-all parties are often government incumbents (as is still the case in Sweden and was the case in Austria until 2018). Catch-all parties have traditionally embraced both economic and ideological moderation, appealing to an expanding middle class with a vision of stability and prosperity. Instead of pushing for radical economic changes, these parties remain proponents of maintaining the status quo in terms of welfare provision and oppose the dismantling of social safety nets and further pro-business economic liberalisation. When it comes to identity politics, catch-all parties retain a progressive stance, without jumping on the bandwagon of identity politics by putting too much emphasis on, for instance, ethnic and sexual minority rights.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

In the era of populist mobilisation, there is clearly a reconfiguration of the most salient issue-dimensions that structure European party competition. Traditionally, party competition in European countries is multidimensional, with an economic issue-dimension as the most salient – although the number and saliency of cleavages widely varies across party systems. Particularly during the first decades of reconstruction in the post-war period, party competition was strongly oriented toward economic issues such as employment, taxation, wages, and the development of the welfare state. In addition, moral-religious issues have always remained important in the minds of voters and party leaders, who can broadly be differentiated between more conservative-orthodox-nationalist positions versus more progressive-permissive-cosmopolitan stances. Previous research has found that this cultural dimension also separates those who favour an open and multicultural society from those who favour a more exclusive community by means of curbing immigration. It is this debate on (labour) immigration, refugees and European integration that has transformed the configuration of the dimensional space in European democracies. Since the 1960s, another set of issues related to libertarian and lifestyle issues (regarding sexuality, partnerships and drugs) as well as environmentalism had also gained saliency for voters. All these new issues did not add any fundamentally new dimension or replaced existing ones, but merely transformed the meaning of the two already existing dimensions that make up the political European space. Essentially, the cleavage structure in European countries can be reduced to two dimensions of conflict: an economic conflict over distributional preferences, reflecting a divergence of objective material interests; and a cultural political conflict informed by fundamental value divides (e. g. religiosity vs. secularism). However, a closer examination, based on new evidence, shows otherwise. Both the content and structure of issue dimensions has transformed.

In this re-articulation of the political space on both economic and cultural dimensions, we see that authoritarian nativists are increasingly pitted against progressive universalists. The post-war social pact of the major political parties – promising universalistic welfare arrangements and economic growth with a fair amount of social economic redistribution – is no longer viable. This pact between the lower and middle classes, in which the latter accepted relative high levels of taxation in exchange for a good educational system to achieve upward social mobility for their offspring is undermined by globalised financial capital and a reduced capacity of governments to shield social groups from economic fluctuations and accompanying hardship and crises. Large scale immigration undermined the social contract as the composition of the lower classes was transformed and newcomers are increasingly seen as ›undeserving‹. This sentiment also diminishes the level of solidarity felt by the middle classes, reducing their willingness to pay for universal welfare state arrangements. Social programs subsequently became less generous and were re-organized into more opportunity-centred provisions, aimed at activating the unemployed and preparing them for re-entry into the labour market. This re-commodification means that the lower and middle classes are only given minimal income securities in times of unemployment and ill-health at best, and broad sections of society have become much more precarious. Both the ethno-stratification of the working-class and the fragmentation of the middle classes, combined with a broad sense that economic prosperity is

less secure, has transformed socio-economic and political attitudes. A more ›nativist‹ attitude is visible among large sections of the electorate, who believe that social benefits should be based on contribution and merit, rather than on automatic, universal entitlements.

The increased salience of cultural issues related to immigration and asylum, social and economic integration of migrants, Islam and religion, racism and EU integration transformed party competition in European democracies. Recent academic research shows that, next to the ›old cultural dimension‹ related to religion and moral issues, the opinion structure of voters culminated in a new cultural dimension that pits defenders of the national interest and national identity against cosmopolitans who are more comfortable with multiculturalism and more fluid identities. Combined with this nationalist outlook in life are authoritarian and anti-elite tendencies, including a strong preference for majoritarian direct democracy instruments, strict law-and-order and the de-funding of public cultural institutions (like public broadcasters). This nationalistic worldview is juxtaposed against voters and politicians with a more internationalist, libertarian and pluralistic outlook, which has become closely connected with environmentalism and a tendency to support public funding of cultural institutions.

The economic dimension has fractured as well. Non-economic issues began to blend into this new line of conflict, voter and party positions on economic issues became structured into two separate economic dimensions. In addition to the traditional economic dimension that focuses on redistribution and egalitarianism, a second economic dimension has emerged in the minds of voters that incorporates issues like welfare state reform, dividing those want to have a more limited healthcare and social security system aiming at cost control, long-term sustainability and individual responsibility versus those who reject reform and want to maintain a more generous healthcare system based on current needs, even If this means increased spending. Needless to say, this reconfiguration of the dimensional issue space in European democracies, whereby the two cultural dimensions now override the old and new economic issue dimensions, also means that political competition, as well as party systems have been transformed (see Figure 22).

The graphs clearly show this tilting of party competition, with red lines showing traditional axes of party competition and black lines the mutation of the direction of party competition. If we look at France for example, traditional competition during the Fifth Republic was mainly between a progressive-left (comprised of the PS and various communist and radical parties) and a conservative right, rallying around the ideological heritage of Gaullism. In the 2017 election, however, the main competitors were a right-wing and progressive *En Marche* led by Macron that was opposed by a left-leaning nationalist *Front National*. Similarly, in Italy traditional political competition was between a progressive left (encompassing socialists, communists and social democrats) and a conservative, nationalist right.
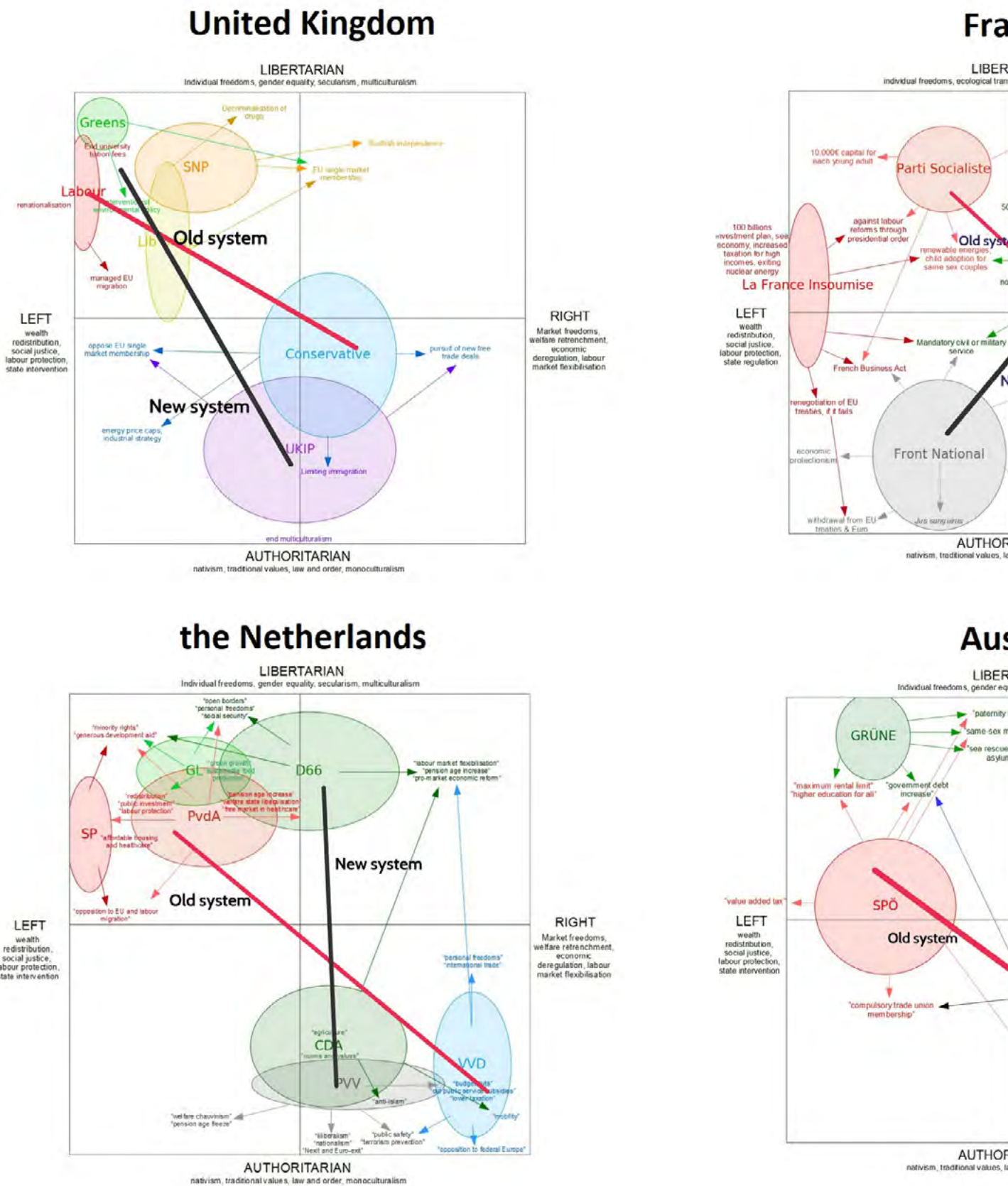
In the 2018 Italian election, however, the main axis shifted as *Movimento 5 Stelle* became a dominant political movement that opposed a progressive-economic centrist PD and a pro-EU party *(Piú Europa)* in the progressive right quadrant of the Italian political landscape. In the Netherlands, the PVV became the second largest party by increasingly adopting an economic agenda of nationalist protectivism, abandoning free market politics. Its main opponent became the right-wing progressive D66, that over time abandoned its economic left-wing positions and now strongly supports open borders, European integration and free market politics. In Austria, Sweden and the UK this dimensional shift has not totally eclipsed, but we can also clearly see this new party constellation emerging.

WHAT CAN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS DO TO REGAIN POPULAR SUPPORT IN THE ERA OF POPULIST MOBILISATION?
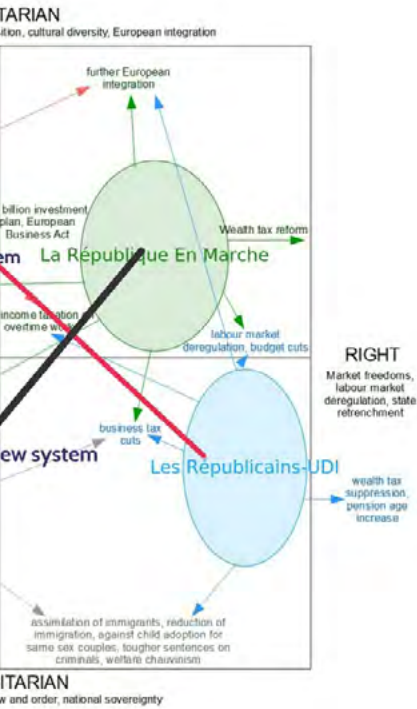
What could prove problematic for social democrats in the contemporary arena of political competition is that, as centrist parties, their rhetoric does not necessarily align with the actual stances the parties stand for. As mentioned above (see section on UK), the current manifesto of the British Labour Party is much less radical than the positions expressed by the party leadership. Naturally, as viable coalition partners (especially in countries with PR electoral systems), social democrats need to be flexible on matters of crucial importance, in order to play a viable role in government formation processes involving ideologically dissimilar political actors. Therefore, it is logical that social democrats moderate their stances when working together with centrist and right-wing parties. Nevertheless, such programmatic shifts can anger voters, especially since in the age of new media, voters can be targeted with certain news, making it difficult for political parties to conceal their support for policies that would not resonate well with their electorate. Therefore, social democrats should be careful not to succumb too much to the demands of their coalition partners, as it clear that the centre-left loses more votes than the centre-right in elections following a coalition government between the two.

It is especially important for social democrats to take a clear stance on immigration. In order to keep citizens together, social democrats need to finds a way to remedy the widespread anti-immigrant sentiment across European populations. A proportion of social democratic voters are uneasy with the influx of low-skilled immigrants, and particularly when they do not integrate socially and do not speak the native language. At the same time, social democratic core voters abhor the stigmatisation and discrimination of immigrants, meaning that social democrats need to balance between rights and responsibilities of newcomers. In line with majority opinion, immigrants are themselves responsible for their social and economic integration. The focus should be on obligations and responsibilities. Most social democratic voters are not against labour immigration (except for in Romania, and to a lesser extent Denmark), but want to avoid free riding, as it is considered un-
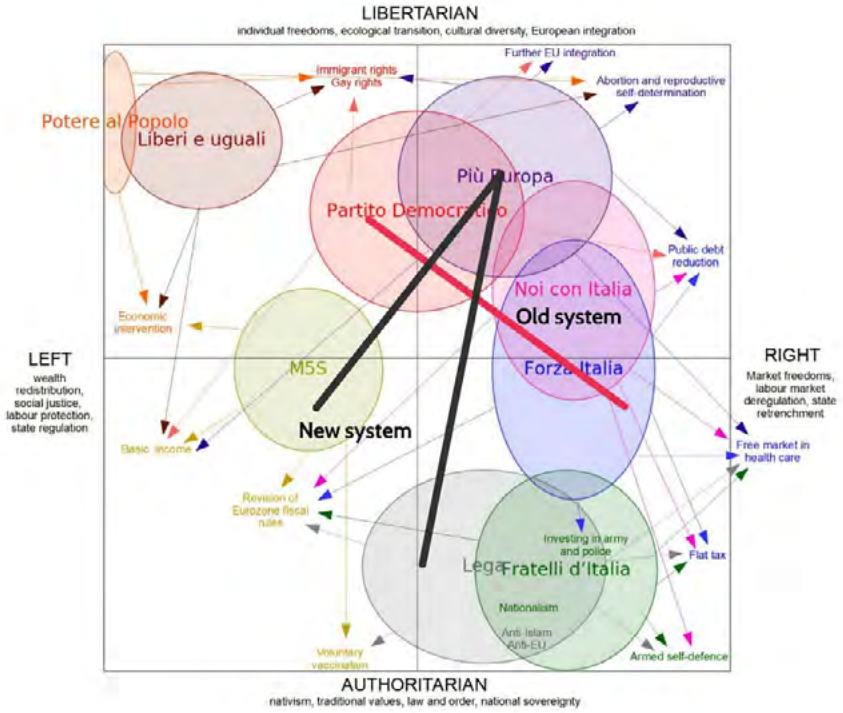
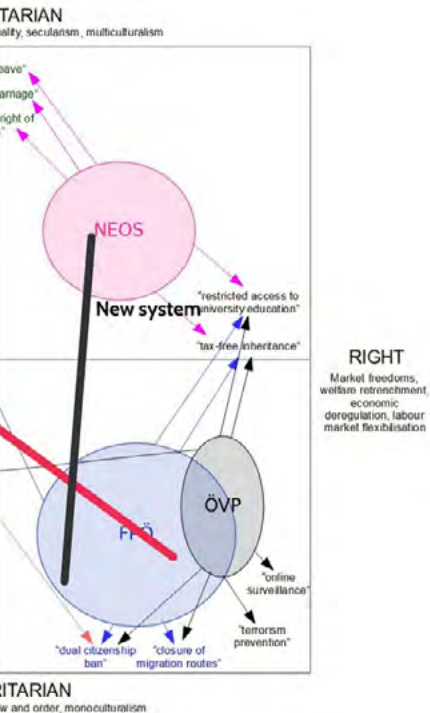Figure 22
Old and new systems of political competition

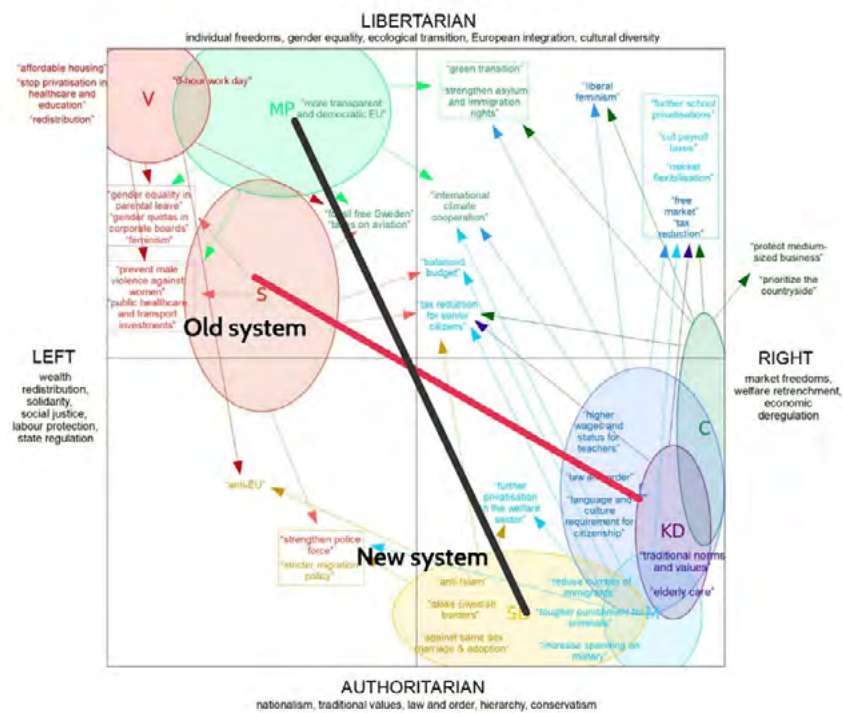## United Kingdom

Fra[nce]

the Netherlands

Aus[tria]

nce

LIBERTARIAN
tion, cultural diversity, European integration

further European integration

billion investment plan, European Business Act

Wealth tax reform

La République En Marche

income taxation overtime wo

labour market deregulation, budget cuts

RIGHT
Market freedoms, labour market deregulation, state retrenchment

business tax cuts

ew system

Les Republicains-UDI

wealth tax suppression, pension age increase

assimilation of immigrants, reduction of immigration, against child adoption for same sex couples, tougher sentences on criminals, welfare chauvinism

ITARIAN
w and order, national sovereignty

Italy

LIBERTARIAN
individual freedoms, ecological transition, cultural diversity, European integration

Further EU integration

Immigrant rights
Gay rights

Abortion and reproductive self-determination

Potere al Popolo
Liberi e uguali

Più Europa

Partito Democratico

Public debt reduction

Noi con Italia
Old system

LEFT
wealth redistribution, social justice, labour protection, state regulation

Economic intervention

Forza Italia

RIGHT
Market freedoms, labour market deregulation, state retrenchment

M5S

New system

Free market in health care

Basic income

Revision of Eurozone fiscal rules

Investing in army and police

Lega Fratelli d'Italia

Flat tax

Nationalism
Anti Islam
Anti-EU

Voluntary vaccination

Armed self-defence

AUTHORITARIAN
nativism, traditional values, law and order, national sovereignty

stria

TARIAN
ality, secularism, multiculturalism

eave
rriage
ght of

NEOS

New system

restricted access to university education

tax-free inheritance

RIGHT
Market freedoms, welfare retrenchment, economic deregulation, labour market flexibilisation

FPÖ

ÖVP

online surveillance

dual citizenship ban

closure of migration routes

terrorism prevention

ITARIAN
w and order, monoculturalism

Sweden

LIBERTARIAN
individual freedoms, gender equality, ecological transition, European integration, cultural diversity

"affordable housing"
"stop privatisation in healthcare and education"
"redistribution"

"8-hour work day"

"green transition"

V

"strengthen asylum and immigration rights"

"liberal feminism"

MP "more transparent and democratic EU"

"further school privatisation"
"cut payroll taxes"
"market flexibilisation"
"free market"
"tax reduction"

"gender equality in parental leave"
"gender quotas in corporate boards"
"feminism"

"fossil free Sweden"
"taxes on aviation"

"international climate cooperation"

"balanced budget"

"prevent male violence against women"
"public healthcare and transport investments"

S

Old system

tax reduction for senior citizens

"protect medium-sized business"

"prioritize the countryside"

LEFT
wealth redistribution, solidarity, social justice, labour protection, state regulation

RIGHT
market freedoms, welfare retrenchment, economic deregulation

"higher wages and status for teachers"

C

"anti-EU"

"further privatisation in the welfare sector"

"law and order"
"language and culture requirement for citizenship"

KD

"strengthen police force"
"stricter migration policy"

New system

"traditional norms and values"
"elderly care"

anti-Islam
"close Sweden's borders"

against same sex marriage & adoption

reduce number of immigrants

"tougher punishments for criminals"
"increase spending on military"

SD

AUTHORITARIAN
nationalism, traditional values, law and order, hierarchy, conservatism

fair to those who do make an effort. There is substantial objection among large sections of the population and also among social democratic voters of immediate financial support of immigrants. To align with voter preferences, social democratic parties should emphasise that responsibilities precede rights, but every responsible citizen should be guaranteed equal rights.

Political parties' stances towards the European Union are also increasing in importance in the eyes of voters. There are many people critical of the EU, without fully rejecting it. In fact, these ›soft Eurosceptic‹ voices are the basis to use for transformative politics and making a Europe that is less market and more a community oriented, in which wealth is fairly distributed. While most voters that form the core of social democratic support are pro-European integration, many of them are deeply dissatisfied with the ›over-bureaucratisation‹ of the EU and also worry about regulations that undermine member-states' economic sovereignty. The single currency and single market have eroded the macro-economic tools of national governments. To deny that is insulting for many of the relatively highly educated centre left voters. Social Democrats should put emphasis on EU-wide policies that can make centre-left voters proud: that the EU establishes environmental regulations, minimal standards for food safety and other consumer protections, the abolition of roaming fees across the EU, and the possibility to trade without many of the barriers previously in place. The EU political system is not ideal either. The disconnect between policy making at the EU level, while political accountability remains largely at the national parliamentary level, leads to feelings of a democratic deficit. Although most social democratic parties have acknowledged this problem for decades, not much has been done to remedy it. And voters notice this.

However, the main interest of centre left voters with the EU is not institutional, but economic. Many left-wing voters strongly support reforms that would curb and end austerity. Social democrats should emphasise how they will make large companies pay their fair share of taxation instead of using the European market as a space to make profit without paying sufficient taxes. For example, voters are overwhelmingly supportive of the introduction of a digital tax, a measure that is overwhelmingly supported by European citizens, even among centre- and far-right voters. Social democrats would benefit from imposing a fair taxation regime on digital giants and multinationals, ban tax havens and combat money laundering.

While centre-left voters do not like polarisation between groups in society, they respond very positively on economic polarisation between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. This narrative of ›for the many, not the few‹ is precisely the sentiment that resonates with voters across the political spectrum, widely into middle-class voter segments. It has also proven a successful strategy in the UK (2017) and Portugal (2015).

Among the left and part of the centre right there is widespread support for social benefits and welfare provision, as means of ensuring economic protection for the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Emphasis should be put on the generational differences in terms of economic well-being: millennials are seriously at risk of ending up poorer than their parents. They are more precarious than previous generations, as the costs of education puts them into a position of debt in most countries, while house prices are rising and banks unwilling to provide mortgage loans. Thus, while we have the highest educated generation ever, they fall behind in-house ownership, security of jobs and pensions, and salary levels. Obtaining a university degree no longer guarantees the youth's economic success, as many young graduates do jobs way below their qualifications. This unfavourable economic situation is certainly contributing to the ever-dropping birth rates and the economic barriers to family creation. Social Democrats can put an emphasis on ending the phenomenon of the »working poor« among the youth, especially among university graduates.

There is a generational gap in prosperity and precarity between baby-boomers and millennials that is highly problematic for social democrats. In many countries, the most loyal voters are from the older generations and they seek – rightly so – protection of their well-earned prosperity from the centre left. At the same time, younger generations are expected to pay the bill of the economic and bank crisis, the environmental damage and the fact that in many countries, governments ran up high debt levels to maintain welfare state provisions. At the same time, the sizeable voter group of pensioners should also not be left behind, as their standards of living are deteriorating or, at best, remain stable over a very long periods of time. In the UK, pensioners (and lower middle-class voters) were the driving force behind the Brexit vote: many observers attributed this development to the widespread public belief that the state is unable to ensure adequate provision of incomes and services, while regularly paying the EU and bailing out banks with public money, without punishing the perpetrators of financial crimes. Efforts should be made by Social Democrats to provide the real picture of why this institutional collapse (of public services) is happening – largely due to right-wing austerity and institutional retreat, caused by budget cuts to government services.

While there is nearly universal support for welfare provision and social benefits (particularly for the neediest), the issue is different with regard to wealth redistribution. Many voters understand wealth redistribution as raising the taxes for the middle and upper classes – while they largely support the heavier taxation of millionaires and billionaires, large national companies, and multinational corporations, voters are more critical to high taxes on middle and upper-middle incomes. These views are also reflected by the »Yellow Vests«, who demand rising the living standard of the poor and middle classes, while lowering taxation for all but the richest. If social democrats want to secure a broad electoral appeal, they cannot rely on improving the lives of the vulnerable by taking away from the middle class – they should rather emphasise the necessity of preventing tax evasion and introducing taxes on new types of profits,

such as digital profits. At the same time, it should be made clear that there will be incentives for those working hard and those doing their jobs better – campaigning on eliminating the taxes for overtime work would resonate well with many working voters.

While policy-related issues and party ideology matter a lot during campaigning, in the digital era of political competition the faces of a political party can be as important, if nor even more important than policy proposals. This process, known as the personalization of politics, where a party leaders' appeal and media performance often outweigh ideological debates, is rapidly accelerated by online political campaigning. Public personalities, such as journalists, TV hosts and celebrities are often more electorally profitable than professional politicians. The clearest example of such development is the success and popularity of Donald Trump in the United States. In Europe, as well, famous media personalities have become successful politicians – in the case of Italy both Matteo Salvini (leader of *Lega*) and Beppe Grillo (former leader of MVS) has well established media careers before thrusting on the political stage.

List of Tables and Figures

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