

Talk of a revived European centre-left is premature

*Recent election results have led some commentators to suggest a successful ‘repurposing’ of social democracy is underway in post-pandemic Western Europe. **André Krouwel** and **Nick Martin** argue that despite this optimism on the left, the patchy recovery of social democratic parties has been driven by the tactical considerations of voters. Meanwhile, to the left of social democracy, Europe’s radical left is facing its biggest electoral crisis in a generation.*

The victory of the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS) in January’s general election [has been lauded](#) by many on the left. The PS won an absolute majority, making it the only social democratic party in Western Europe that is able to govern without coalition partners and to have won support as an incumbent party. The PS obtained 41.7%, a share of the popular vote that very few other social democratic parties have managed in the last three decades. Some commentators have suggested that social democracy has now repurposed around an agenda of improvements to housing and combating low pay and precarious working conditions, allied to competence in government.

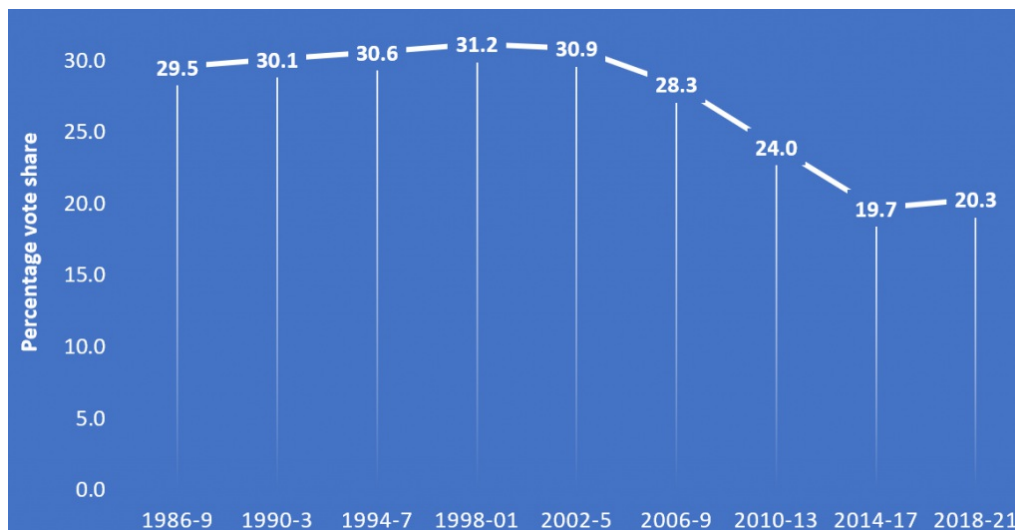
Since the emergence of Covid-19, 65 million West Europeans in five countries have given their electoral verdict on the handling of the pandemic and the proposals for ‘post-pandemic’ governance. We do not yet have any evidence to support theories of a comeback by a repurposed social democracy. Rather, there is evidence of continued stagnation and the failure of competitors from the radical left to gain traction for an alternative vision of a post-capitalist future. However, where voting for social democrats has high utility for progressive voters seeking alternatives to governments of the centre-right, the prospects for social democrats may indeed be brighter.

A patchy recovery

The electoral decline of social democracy in Western Europe has been extensively documented and has spawned a burgeoning literature on alternative strategies for its recovery. Our own analysis (see Figure 1) of the unweighted average vote share of social democratic parties across nine four-year electoral cycles from 1986-2021 confirms this decline.

Figure 1 shows that after flatlining for five electoral cycles between 1986 and 2005, support for social democratic parties fell away strongly, falling by nearly 9 percentage points between 2006 and 2017. This decline seems to have bottomed-out in the most recent electoral cycle – in many countries (the Netherlands and France for example) there is simply not much further the social democratic vote share can fall.

Figure 1: Average vote share for social democratic parties (1986-2021)

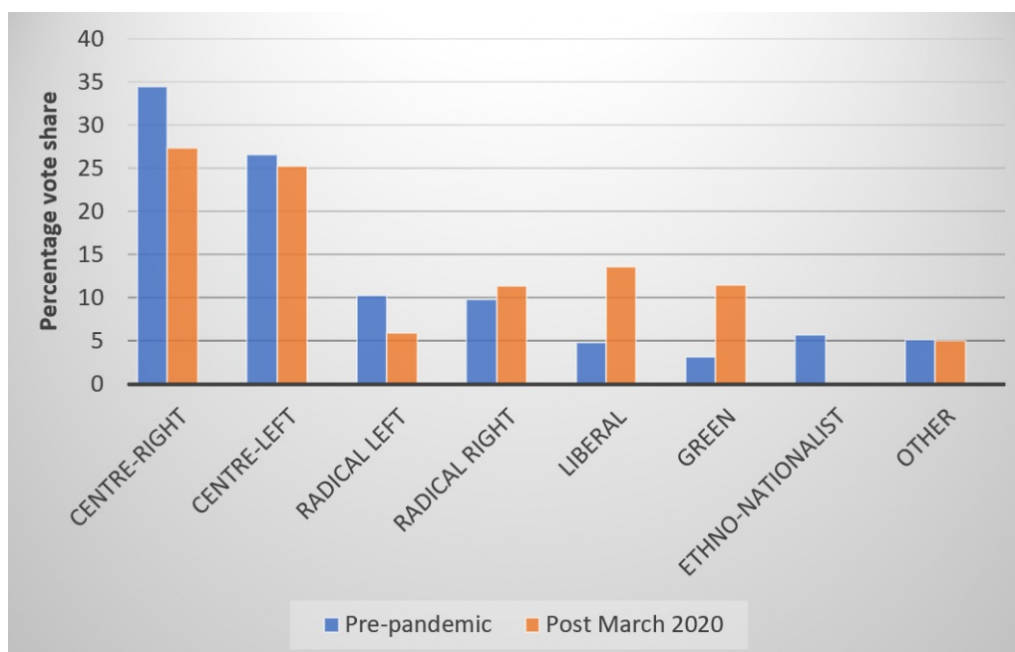


Note: The figure shows vote shares across four-year electoral cycles from 1986-2021.

To detect the reasons for the very modest recovery – or the stagnation of decline – of social democratic support, we compare electoral support by party family in two more recent waves of elections – those held in the 12 months prior to the start of the pandemic, and those held since (Figure 2). A total of 117 million West Europeans voted in 11 elections in the year prior to the pandemic and 65 million have voted in five elections since March 2020.

Figure 2 shows that the vote share of social democratic parties is actually some 1.4 percentage points lower in the latter period than in the period immediately prior to the pandemic. The centre-right and radical left party families both experienced significant declines between the two periods while the radical right, Green and liberal party families all performed significantly better.

Figure 2: Average vote share for party families immediately before and after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic



Note: The figure shows average vote shares in the twelve months prior to March 2020 and in the period between March 2020 and March 2022.

The possibility that this reflects the country composition of the elections that took place is certainly a real one – German electors account for 71% of all electors in the ‘post-pandemic’ period, for example, likely accounting for much of the improved performance by the liberals and Greens. However, for the two left-wing party families, we think the two sets of elections allow for a meaningful comparison of performance.

In the pre-pandemic period, social democratic vote shares were boosted by strong results in Portugal and Spain, and in the ‘post-pandemic’ period by gains of five percentage points in Germany and Portugal alike. And while the radical left share pre-pandemic was boosted by the performance of Podemos at two Spanish elections in 2019 and the resilience of Syriza at the Greek election in 2019, the absence of any radical left party at the UK election (accounting for 27% of all electors in the eleven elections) suggests that the radical left vote share pre-pandemic is not a compositional effect.

Future prospects

What do these recent patterns tell us about the prospects of Western Europe’s two main left-wing party families? For social democrats, they point to two key influences. First, where social democratic parties had a strong possibility of forming or joining the government, voting for them had high utility for voters, and the party performed reasonably well, albeit still below their performance in previous decades.

In the pre-pandemic period this held for social democratic parties in Finland, Portugal and Spain. In the 'post-pandemic' period this held again for the PS in Portugal but also in Germany and Norway. By contrast, where social democrats had poor prospects of holding office, such as in Greece, the Netherlands, and Ireland, the vote share of social democratic parties remained stubbornly at historically low levels. In France, the loss of the strategic position of the PS as the largest party on the left has left the socialists in an electoral wasteland.

Second, some social democrats have also benefitted from favourable patterns of realignment amongst voters of parties on the centre and radical right, as well as the departure of strong leaders from competitors. In Portugal and Spain, for example, the radical right *Chega* and *Vox* were able to advance at the expense of the main centre-right party without denting social democratic support much.

In Denmark and Finland, where support for social democrats flatlined in the most recent elections, reallocation of voters between the centre and radical right enabled the social democrats to emerge as the largest single party, securing the position of Prime Minister in both countries. And in Germany, Angela Merkel's departure after 16 years as the country's Chancellor opened a path to the Chancellorship for the German Social Democrats. Basically, while in most European democracies a right-wing majority is clearly on the table, the siphoning of voters from the centre-right by extreme right and populist competitors gave some social democrats a small window to carve out a lead in national elections.

However, for Western Europe's radical left, the electoral landscape is much bleaker. Any hopes they may have had that Western Europeans would be attracted to a radically different vision of a 'post-pandemic' society appear to have been dashed, prompting [deep existential deliberation](#) about their future. At the most recent elections, *Die Linke* in Germany and *Bloco de Esquerda* in Portugal obtained their worst results in almost two decades, whilst the Portuguese Communist Party slumped to its worst result since the country returned to democracy in 1974. In the Netherlands, the Green Left (GroenLinks) took over as the largest party on the left in 2017, yet it has failed to present itself as a viable governing option.

Considerations of utility seem likely to be central for voters in the next two elections in Western Europe – in France and Sweden. In France, those social democrats who defected to Emmanuel Macron in 2017 face the real prospect of triggering a presidential run-off between two extreme-right candidates if they vote for one of a plethora of left-wing candidates in the first round of the presidential elections in April. In Sweden, in contrast, voting for the social democrats offers progressive voters the strong likelihood of returning a government led by the left. In the Netherlands, many voters that are leaning to the left opted for the centre-right but progressive D66 instead of the social democratic PvdA or Green Left in March 2021. These voters saw no place for the centre-left or radical left in the next government.

While West Europeans retain [strong support](#) for a progressive agenda, they seem highly pragmatic in choosing those parties across the political spectrum that have the best chance of articulating their hopes and protecting the gains of social democracy from right-wing governments. Any sustained recovery of social democracy will depend, therefore, on convincing more voters that they are serious contenders for government office after increasingly long periods of absence from the corridors of power.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
