



André Krouwel, Yordan Kutiyski, Oliver Philipp
and Arne Schildberg

Macronism, Corbynism, ... huh?

Electoral Strategies of Progressive
Political Parties in Europe – Short Study

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HIGHLIGHTS

- **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 of the analysis for 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.

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 the Dutch PvdA hitting a similar historic low. The Swedish social democrats were also considerably weakened in recent elections, yet able to return to government. The 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 *La 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 eyeing centre-right competitors. Do these losses indicate a temporary malaise, or is it possible that the political pendulum will swing back in favour of the centre-left, as happened 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 in several ideological directions?

In this study, we identify strategies of social democratic parties by comparing the position 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

propensity to vote for the social democratic party, but who intend to vote for another party. For a detailed explanation of how party and voter positions were estimated, and how the voter groups were distinguished, see the full version of this paper.

FOUR STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

UNITED KINGDOM (THE *LABOUR PARTY*): CORBYNISM – ECONOMIC POLARISATION

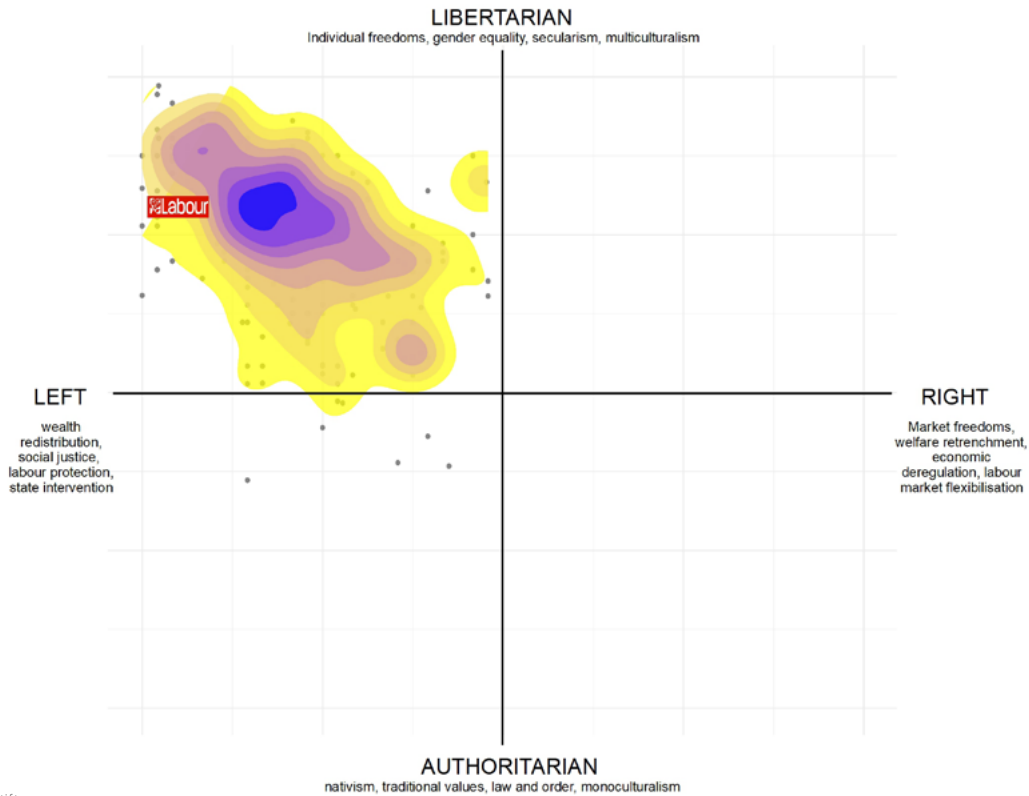
The strategy of the *Labour Party* is identified by means of comparing the position of the party in the British political landscape with the position of two voter groups: (1) **core voters** – those who intend to vote for the party and (2) **sympathisers** – those with a high voting propensity for the party, 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 *Labour's* 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 figure 1. 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.

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.

Figure 1
Spatial position and density of *Labour* voters



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FRANCE (*LA RÉPUBLIQUE EN MARCHÉ!*) AND ITALY (*PARTITO DEMOCRATICO*): MACRONISM – MARKET-ORIENTED PROGRESSIVISM

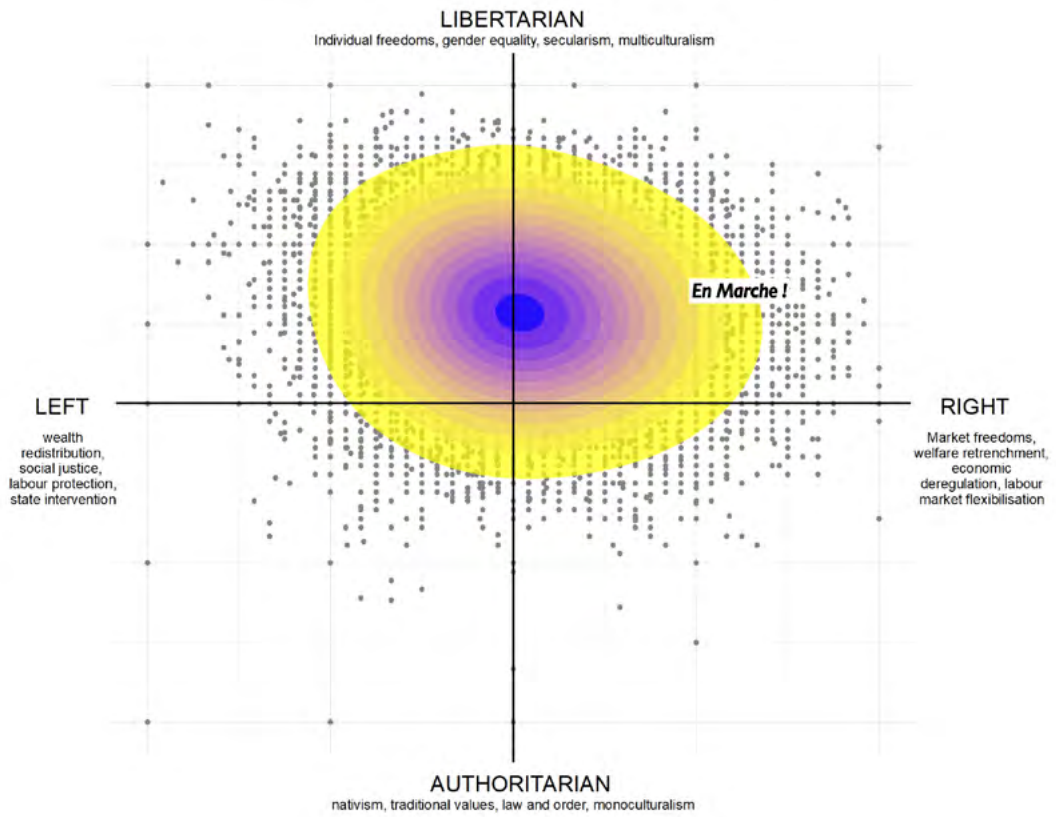
Although the focus of this study is on social democratic parties, the unprecedented electoral success of a newly established centrist party – *La République En Marche* (LREM), whose leader was formerly a member of the French social democrats, merits inclusion in this study. Moreover, some social democratic parties, such as the Italian *Partito Democratico*, 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 prioritising the interests of big business and the rich at the expense of hardworking people. This has been reflected in France, where Macron's ratings nosedived 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 of its seats in 2018.

THE NETHERLANDS (PvdA) AND FRANCE (*PARTI SOCIALISTE*): 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 by far most pronounced in the Netherlands. Simultaneously, the parties retained 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 in 2017.

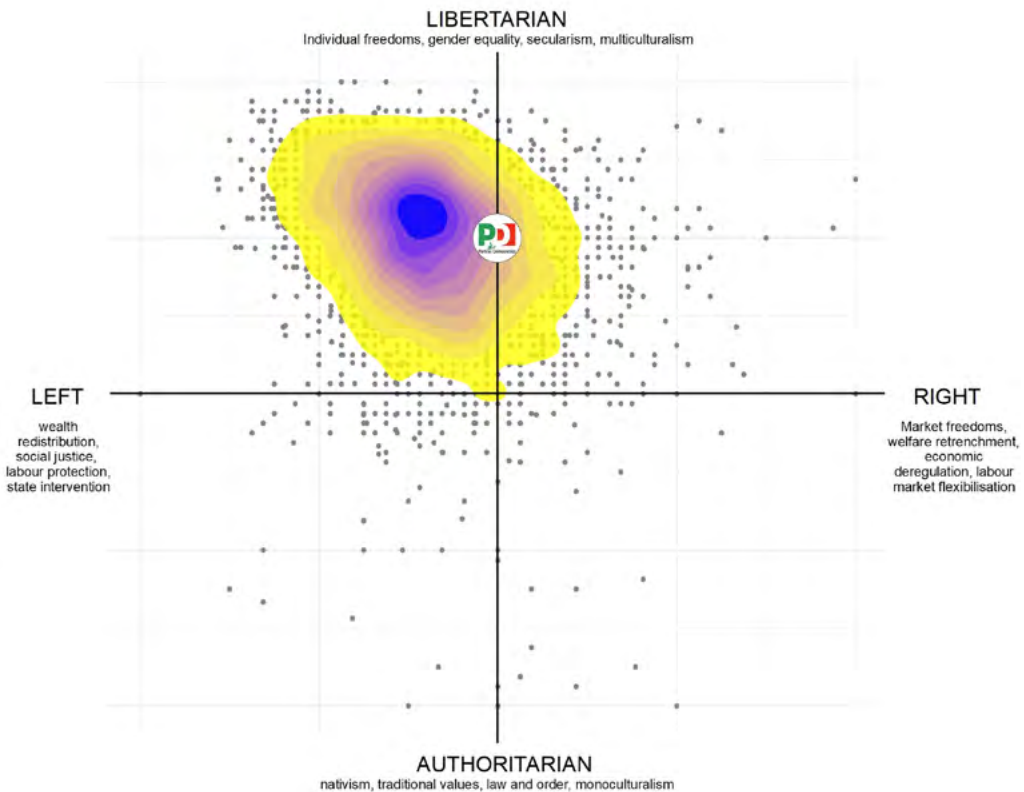
An important observation is that economic moderation does not seem to work if polarisation takes place simultaneously on the cultural dimension: PS voters and sympathisers are clustered slightly towards the left of the party's economic position, whereas the PvdA's voters and especially its sympathisers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

Figure 2
Spatial position and density of *En Marche* voters



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Figure 3
Spatial position and density of *Partito Democratico* voters



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cial 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 the PvdA and PS moved too far from their core electorates 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.

AUSTRIA (SPÖ) AND SWEDEN (SAP) 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.

CONCLUSIONS

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 employed by the SPÖ and SAP) as well as a strategy of polarisation along the economic dimen-

Figure 4
Spatial position and density of *Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)* voters

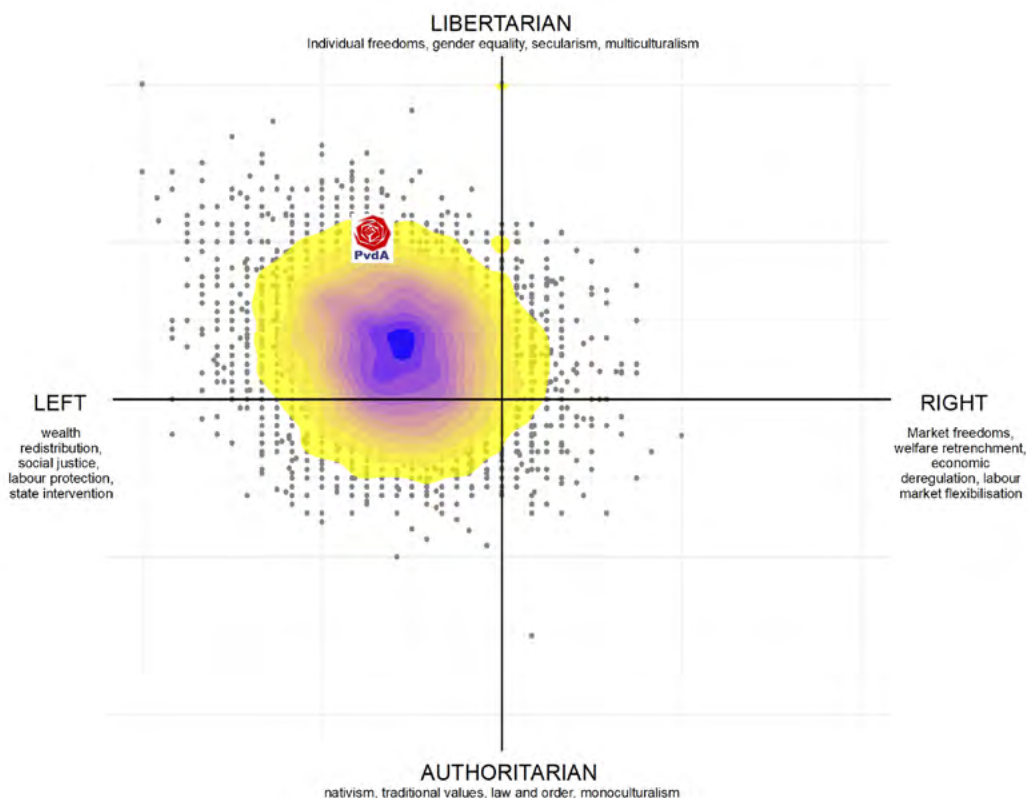
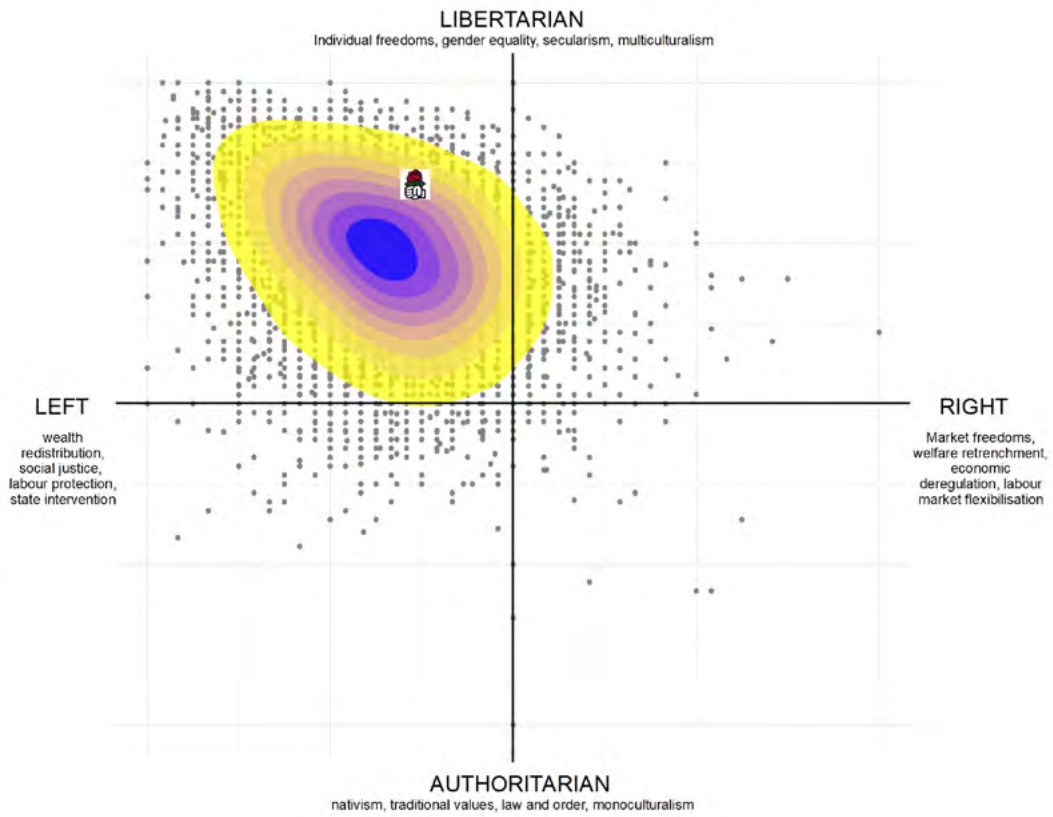
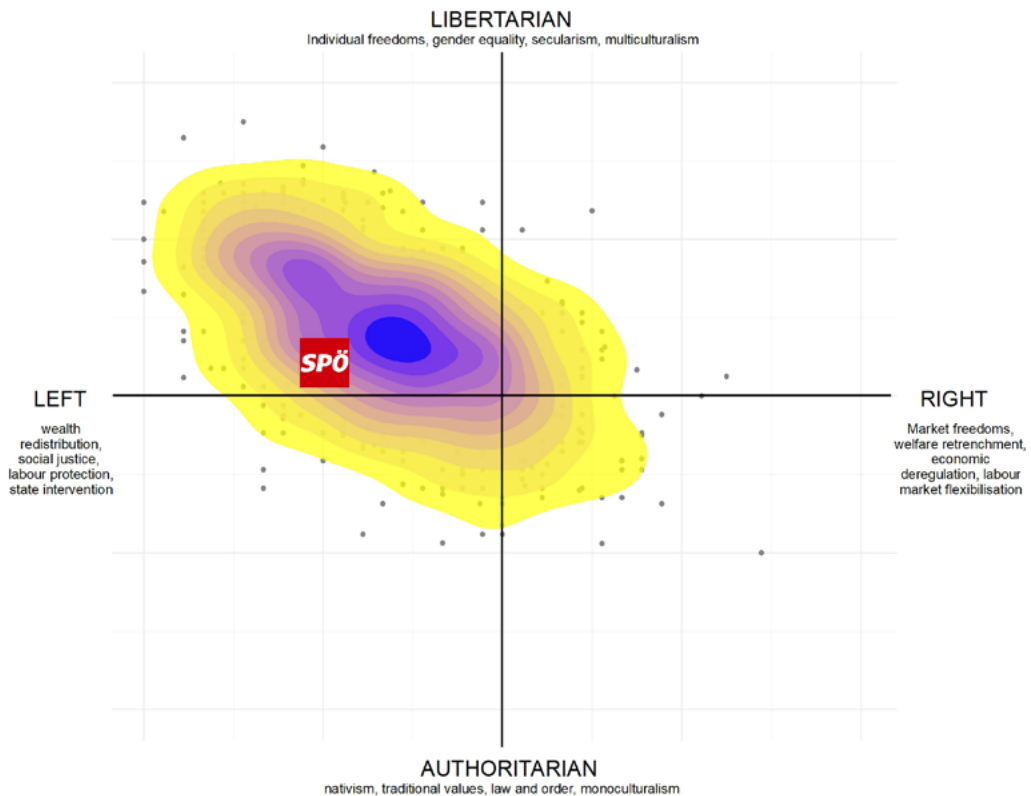


Figure 5
Spatial position and density of *Parti Socialiste* voters



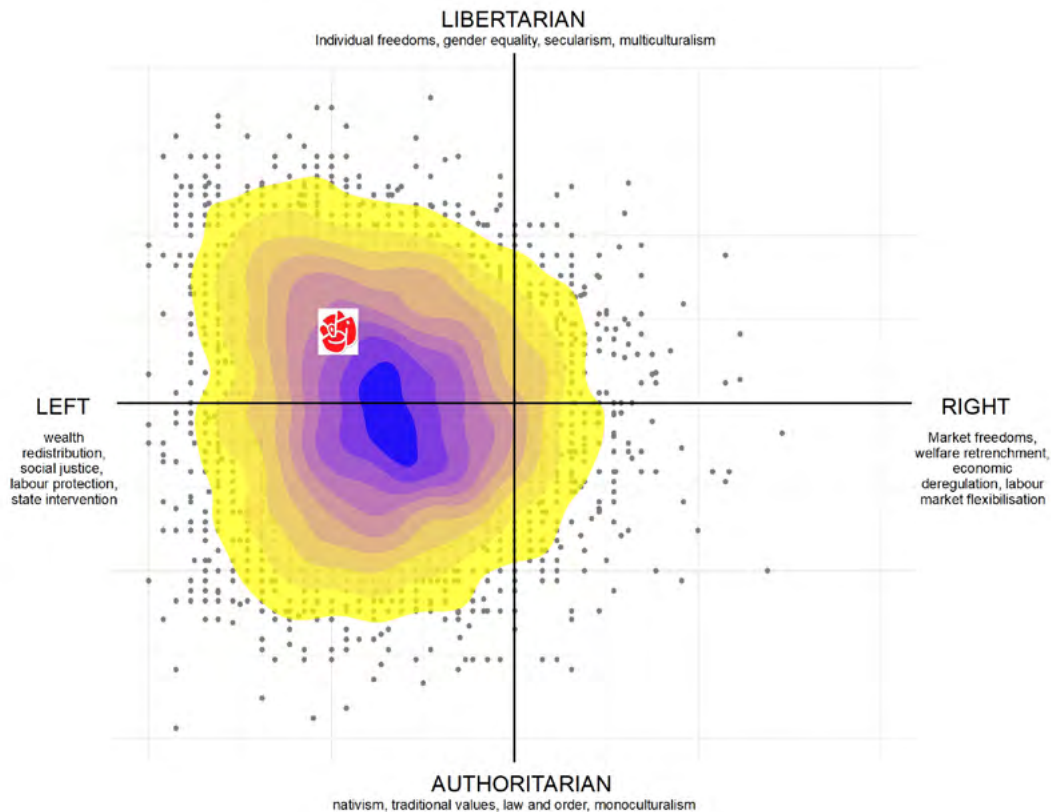
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Figure 6
Spatial position and density of SPÖ voters



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Figure 7
Spatial position and density of SAP voters



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sion – **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 share of the vote in Sweden and a marginal gain in Austria. The strategy of economic polarisation seems to be best suited to expand electoral support for the social democrats. 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 proved largely successful in expanding the UK's *Labour Party* share of the vote in 2017, yet the party has yet to win a general election. Economic polarisation can be potentially successful in situations with prolonged (centre-) right rule, where austerity policies have been so far-reaching that they affect the general public at large. In the UK, the health-care 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 about moving too far to the left, which might make a political party appear 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 assuming a decisive lead in the polls. Nevertheless, this is a matter of speculation, since the party could have been in even less fortuitous 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, suggesting 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 for 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 significant 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 benefits 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.

AUTHORS

André Krouwel teaches comparative political science and communication science at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and is founder of Kieskompas (Election Compass).

Yordan Kutiyski is an MSc graduate of political science from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and holds a MA degree in Latin American studies from the Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Arne Schildberg is senior policy analyst for European Politics in the Department International Policy Analysis of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Oliver Philipp is policy analyst in the Department International Policy Analysis of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

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Responsible in the FES for this publication:
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