PERSPECTIVE

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

The Resonance of Progressive Programs among the Potential Social Democratic Electorate

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This policy brief argues and shows that the main voter losses of social democratic parties (to rival left-wing and mainstream right parties) occur for contrasting reasons. Hence, there is no single programmatic shift – to the »left« or the »right« – to address voter losses effectively.

Rather, social democratic parties need to carefully consider the extent to which programmatic appeals create trade-offs, gaining some voters, at the expense of losing others.

To study these potential trade-offs, the policy brief suggests four stylized programmatic strategies social democratic parties may pursue: Old Left, New Left, Left National and Centrist programs. The policy brief discusses evidence from Austria and Germany on the relative pay-offs of these strategies.

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DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

Economically and Socially Progressive Programs

INTRODUCTION

Social democratic parties in Western Europe have experienced substantive declines in their vote shares over the past two decades. This aggregate development masks even more massive in- and out-flow movements between social democratic and rival political parties. The first policy brief in our mini-series has shown the destination and socio-demographic profile of voter out-flows on the basis of vote switching data (see the policy brief »The Myth of Voter Losses to the Radical Right«). Using different types of electoral data, the findings of this first policy brief consistently show that losses occurred predominantly to green, left-libertarian and mainstream right parties.

It is equally important, of course, to empirically assess the motivations and reasons for which voters switch away from or towards social democratic parties. This is the focus of the present, second policy brief. We do not study the entire range of reasons for which voters may decide to change their party choice or repeat it (such as candidates, campaign issues, sanctioning economic performance etc.). Rather, we take a specific look at the *programmatic reasons* for vote choice. In other words, we want to study the *policy attitudes* that underlie party choice (regarding issues such as immigration policy, social policy, environmental policy etc.), in order to better understand the programmatic appeals that resonate with certain groups of voters or alienate them. We focus on the following two questions:

1. Which programmatic appeals make voters switch away from social democratic parties?

2. Which programmatic appeals resonate with voters, i. e. might attract voters to social democratic parties?

Assessing these motivations and reasons is empirically much more difficult than studying voter flows. Hence, the goal of this second policy brief is also somewhat different in nature from the first one. While we pursued mainly empirical goals in the presentation of the actual voter flows, our objective with this policy brief is rather to propose a *conceptualization of the different strategic programmatic options* that social democratic parties can pursue in today's electoral landscape. We then present some evidence from ongoing empirical analyses, which provide hints at the likely effects of different programmatic choices.

The policy brief is structured as follows: A first section explains how party competition today is structured along (at least) two programmatic dimensions, one economic and one socio-cultural. We contend and provide evidence to show that social democratic parties lose voters to rival left-wing and mainstream right parties for very different reasons: they lose most substantively to the mainstream right on primarily economic grounds, and to green parties on socio-cultural grounds. The second section of the memo focuses on the extent to which different programmatic choices might attract voters: we propose four possible programmatic strategies for social democratic parties, which combine positions on the economic and socio-cultural dimensions in different ways. Evidence from an ongoing comparative survey analysis (with data from Austria and Germany being available at this point) tentatively supports the interpretation that progressive positions on both economic and socio-cultural issues resonate most strongly with potential social democratic voters. However, while progressive economic positions attract support among the Left without alienating centrist (and even right-wing) voters, progressive positions on socio-cultural issues create more acute trade-offs between voters on the left and in the center.

WHICH PROGRAMMATIC APPEALS MAKE VOTERS SWITCH AWAY FROM SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES?

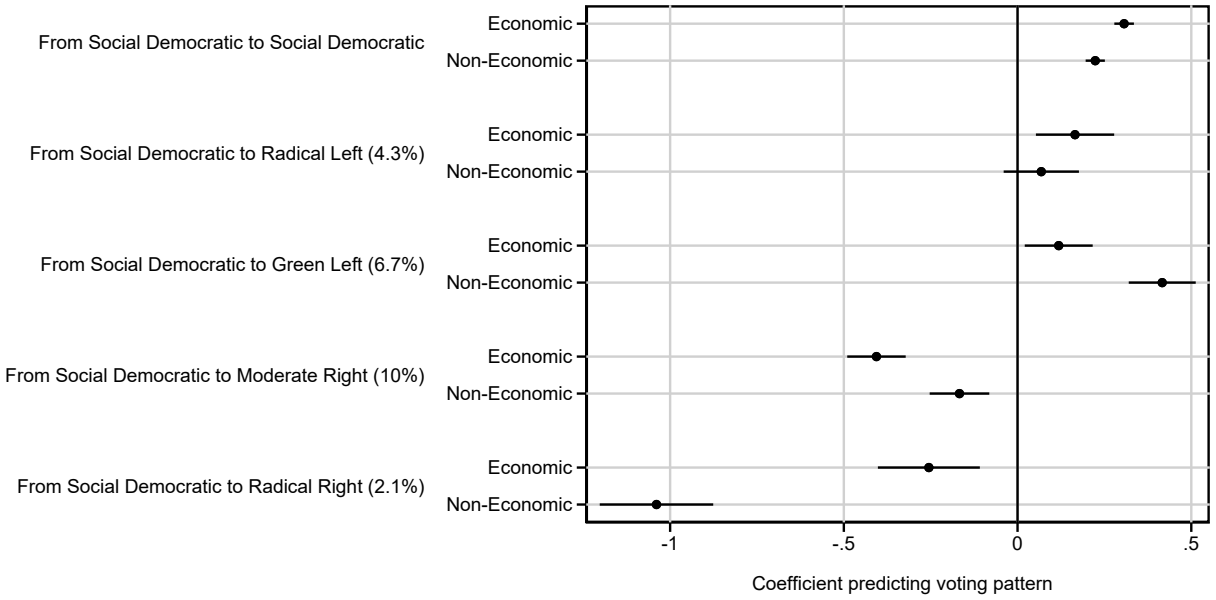
Party competition in Western European democracies does not revolve along a single left-right dimension. As countless political science studies have established over the past decades, at least two separate programmatic dimensions divide voters and parties in distinctive ways: a first, economic dimension of party competition divides proponents of strong state control over the market and redistribution from proponents of market liberalism. A second dimension (which has been variedly called »socio-cultural« or »non-economic«) divides proponents of internationalism, universalism, and minority rights from proponents of more national-protectionist policies, communitarianism, and traditionalism. To understand the attitudinal motivations of voters, as well as the programmatic options political parties have, we need to study both dimensions.

Distinguishing between these dimensions is also relevant, because voters may switch away from social democratic parties for very different reasons.

Figure 1 presents a finding from the study by Kitschelt and Rehm (2020) based on data for 15 West European countries from the European Election Study. The study predicts vote switching based on economic and non-economic policy attitudes. The coefficients show how the voters in a specific group differ from their comparison group. Voters who stick with social democracy between one election and the next, for instance (the group at the top of the figure), are on average more progressive on both economic and non-economic issues than all other voters in the sample (both coefficients positive and significant).

All other groups (the switchers) are then compared to this group of loyal social democratic voters. Figure 1 confirms that social democratic parties lose voters for very different reasons: most importantly, the substantial shares of voters they lose to the green parties (6.7 % overall, 12.6 % in Germany) are decidedly more progressive when it comes to socio-cultural, non-economic reasons than social democratic »remainers«. Voters switching towards moderate right parties, by contrast (about 10 % in both the average sample

Figure 1
Attitudinal correlates of vote switching by party families



and in Germany) differ from »remainers« mainly with regard to economic policy attitudes, i. e. they have more fiscally conservative attitudes than those sticking with the social democrats. Figure 1 also shows that switchers towards the radical right are much more culturally conservative than »remainers«, but this is a very marginal group in terms of size (about 2% both on average and in Germany).

Overall, however, figure 1 also already provides evidence for difficult choices and trade-offs social democrats face. Since they lose voters in very different directions and for very different reasons, any programmatic move to regain these »switchers« are likely to come at a cost in terms of further losses to other parties. For this reason, it is important to take into account the relative size of the groups (on this point, see also policy brief 3 on »Social democratic party strategy«).

WHICH POTENTIAL SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PROGRAMS RESONATE WITH VOTERS?

Beyond the motivations for switching *away* from social democratic parties, it is of course also relevant to understand which policy appeals might *resonate* with voters overall, and with centrist/left-wing voters in particular.

This is particularly important since Figure 2 – taken from Häusermann (2020) and based on pooled EES data, as well – shows that social democratic parties have a *massive unrealized electoral potential*. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that in both 2014 and 2019, social democratic parties had the highest electoral potential (i. e. respondents who indicate that the probability for them to ever vote for the party is 60 % or higher) of all party families. Their unrealized electoral potential exceeds 15 percentage points on average. Hence, knowing which programmatic appeals resonate with actual and potential voters is important.

Studying the extent to which different programmatic strategies resonate with voters is the focus of the ongoing study by Abou-Chadi et al. (2020). In line with the overall book project our policy briefs refer to, we distinguish four strategic appeals, each strategy going after the voters rallied by a different type of partisan competitor.

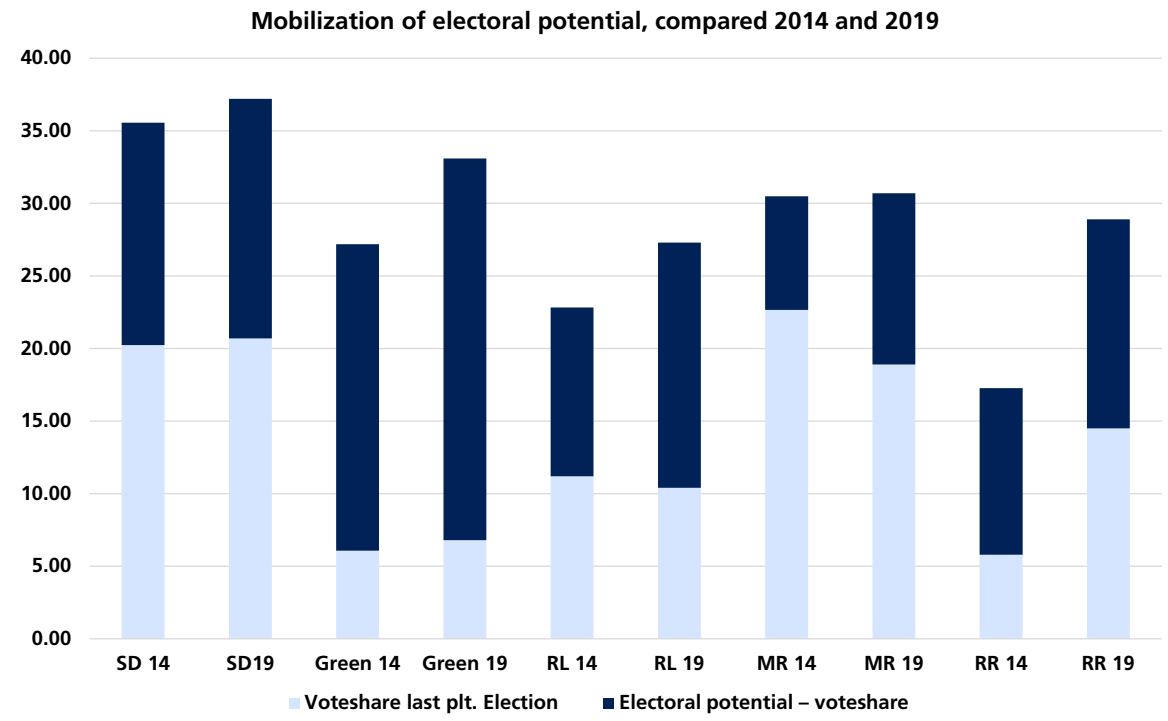
1. *The Old Left Strategy:* It prioritizes policies to defend and extend social equality and redistribution and includes progressive, but not radical positions with regard to socio-cultural issues (immigration, childcare) and environmental protection.

2. *The New Left strategy:* It combines a commitment to extending social equality with fervent support of societal diversity, a liberal immigration policy, gender equality and environmental protection.

3. *The Centrist Strategy:* It provides for a modicum of social equality (rather defending or slightly restricting existing benefit levels than expanding them) and some movement toward a culturally open, universalistic and diverse society, but within definite limits, e. g. regarding immigration and environmental protection.

4. *The Left National Strategy:* It emphasizes social protection and redistribution, while proposing more conservative positions on socio-cultural questions of immigration, gender equality or environmentalism.

Figure 2
Electoral potentials (voting propensity >=6) and mobilization (vote) for different party families in 11 West European countries



The ongoing study by Abou-Chadi et al. (2020) uses so-called »vignettes« of these four strategic profiles to study the support they yield among different groups of voters[1]. For now, the study has collected data from a samples of 2000 respondents each in Austria and Germany – this is what we show in the present draft of this policy brief[2].

The data for Austria and Germany shows that among voters who hold left-wing policy attitudes, or who consider themselves potential social democratic voters, an Old Left programmatic profile – and in Austria also a New Left programmatic profile – attracts the highest level of support.

Figure 3 shows predicted levels of support of the four potential programmatic strategies in Austria, and figure 4 shows the same values for Germany[3]. We see that in Austria, the New Left and the Old Left strategies are most clearly and most strongly supported among all voters who have economically left-wing attitudes, i.e. attitudes that are favorable towards redistribution and state control over markets. This is relevant for social democratic parties, because voters with fiscally very conservative attitudes (to the right of the figure) are highly unlikely to ever vote for any social democratic program anyways. We can see this because figure 3 allows us to compare the distribution of potential social democratic voters in red (voting propensity for the Social Democrats equal or above 50 %) with the overall distribution of voters in grey. The electoral potential of the Austrian social democratic party clearly seems to concentrate over-proportionally among people with comparatively progressive attitudes on redistribution and social equality. Hence, these are the most likely »winnable« voters for the party, and they tend to support both Old and New Left programs most strongly. We also see, however, that among more centrist voters (in the middle of figure 3), all four programmatic options receive very similar levels of support. This is also an important electoral group, since it contains high shares of the electorate overall and also high shares of potential social democratic voters.

This is even more true in Germany, where potential social democratic voters concentrate even more strongly among those with centrist or center-left attitudes. As in Austria, the Old Left programmatic supply receives high levels of support among centrist- and left-wing voters. Programmatic differences are more muted, however, when it comes to the alternative profiles. In particular, the New Left profile does not appear as polarizing as in Austria: support levels for it are generally rather high among centrist and left-wing voters, but not as high as for the Old Left strategy, and this option also does not alienate support among the right as much as in Austria.

1 »Vignettes« consist in information shown to the respondents regarding the positions social democratic parties take with regard to the following policies: early retirement, public childcare, inheritance tax, immigration regulation, headscarves for civil servants, gender quota in executive boards, CO2 emissions taxation, job protection in manufacturing, and rent control in urban areas.

2 Over the coming months, the study will collect the same data (beyond Austria and Germany) also in Denmark, Sweden and Spain.

3 The predicted values result from regression models which predict program support by economic left-right attitude, controlling for education, gender, age and income. The programs are rated (from lowest to highest support) on a scale from 0 to 7, which – for presentational purposes – had to be rescaled to –2 to 5.

Figure 3
Support for 4 social democratic programmatic strategies by attitudes on economic-distributive policies – AUSTRIA

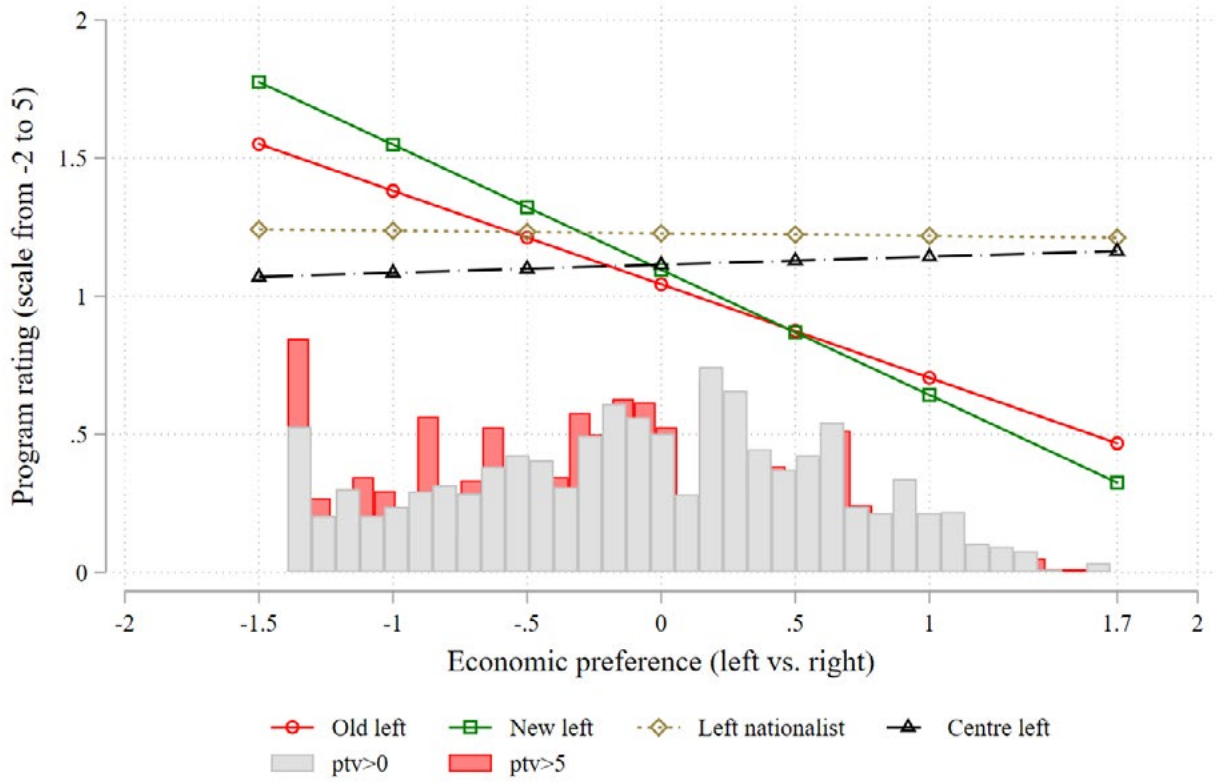
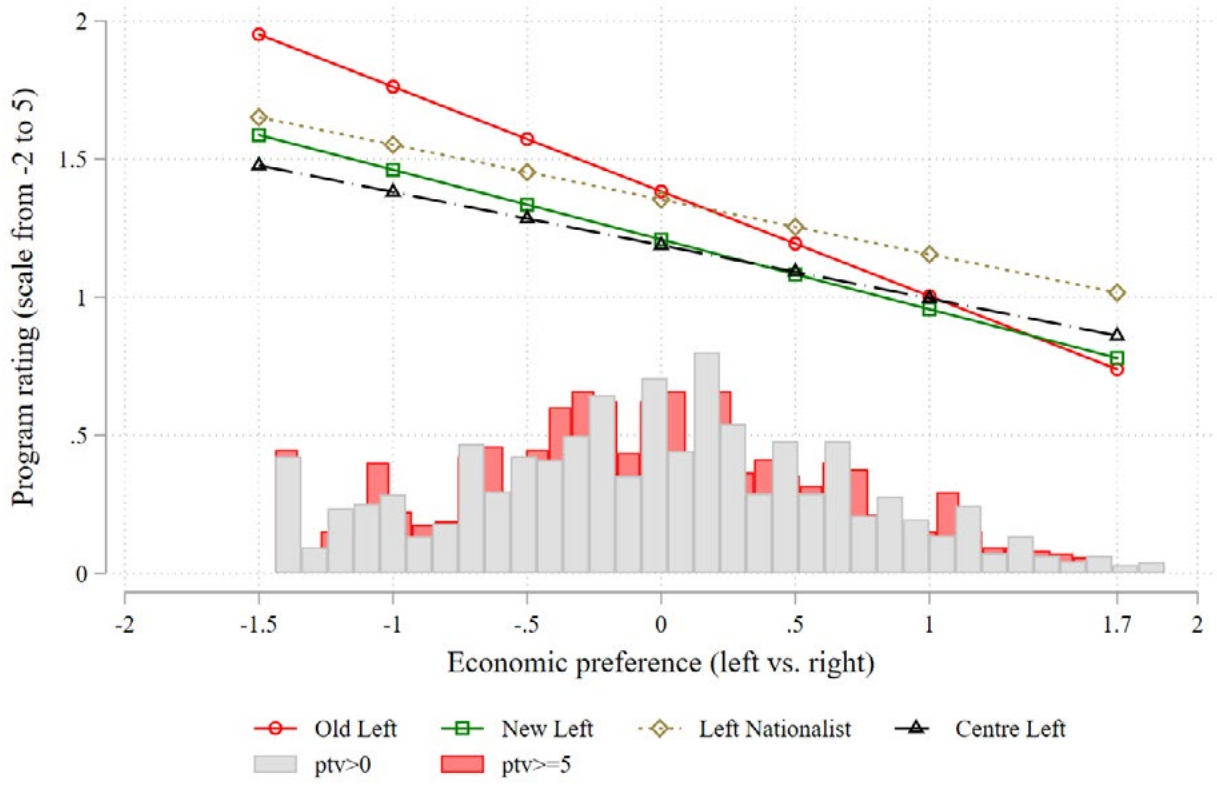


Figure 4
Support for 4 social democratic programmatic strategies by attitudes on economic-distributive policies – GERMANY



One additional important observation from figures 3 and 4 is that even among very economically left-wing voters, the New Left program is strongly supported, even the most supported one in Austria. Hence, contrary to much speculation in the public debate, there does not seem to be a negative effect of culturally decidedly progressive stances on support from economically »old left« pro-redistribution voters in Austria.

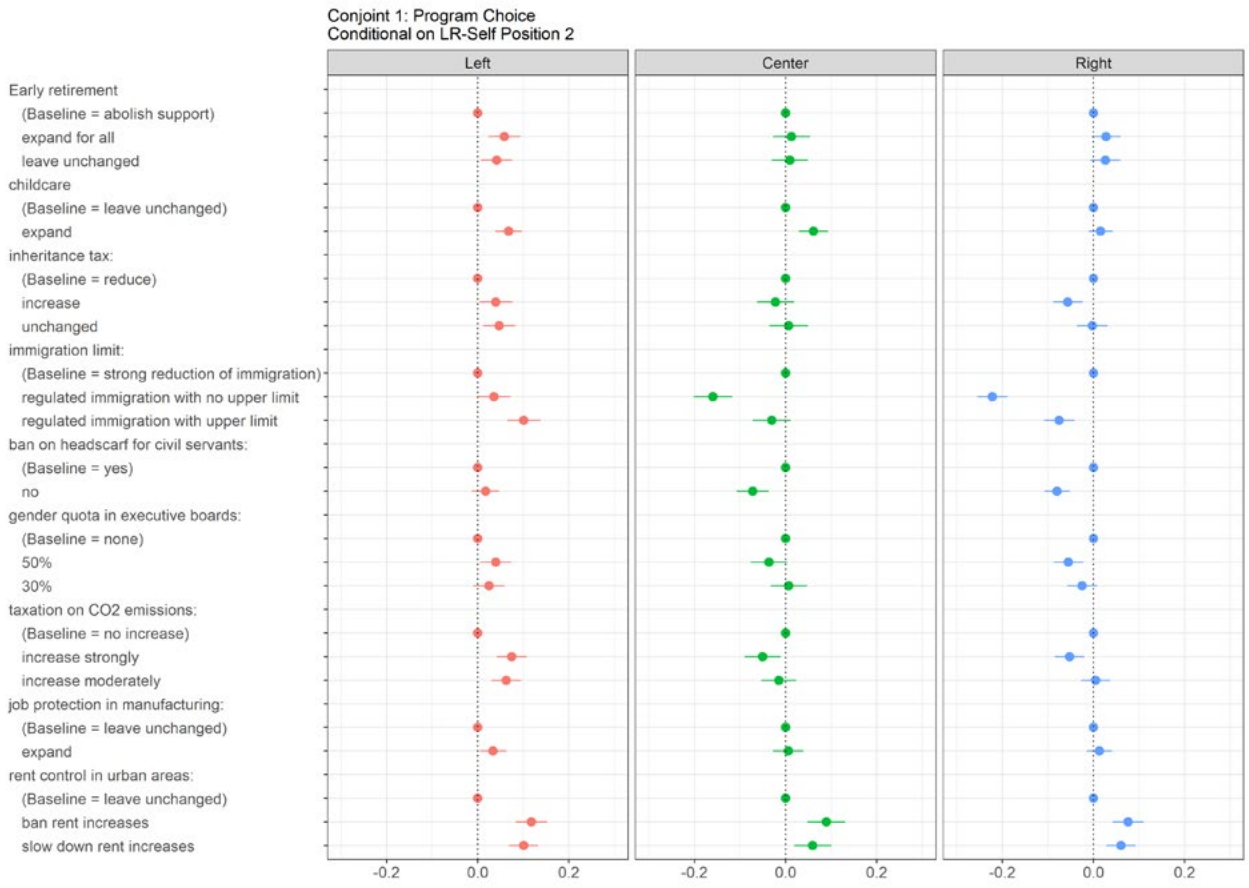
The ongoing study by Abou-Chadi et al. (2020) also contains a survey experiment, where voters are asked to compare various hypothetical programmatic profiles of social democratic parties (randomly composed »vignettes«) and then to indicate which one they prefer. This »conjoint experiment« allows us to evaluate the contribution of individual programmatic policy items on the support (or rejection) of social democratic parties. We present again the findings from Austria and Germany.

Figure 5 shows *which policy positions gather support among voters who self-position as left, centrist or right.* We are interested in seeing which policy positions a) gather support *across the spectrum* (or at least do not alienate certain groups of voters), b) which issues are not decisive in structuring voter choices and c) *which issues create trade-offs*, i. e. yielding support among some voters at the cost of yielding rejection among others.

The findings show that overall, social policy expansion (on early retirement, childcare, or rent control) increases the probability that left-wing voters prefer a social democratic program over one that includes more restrictive positions on social policy (positive and significant coefficients). More importantly, though, we see that these expansive social policy positions also do *not* seem to alienate support among centrist voters (they also have positive or insignificant coefficients). Quite to the contrary, rent control in Austria gathers support for social democratic programs across the entire political spectrum. In Germany, the popularity of fiscally expansive policies even among the centrist and right-wing voters is even clearer: in particular, early retirement, childcare expansion, as well as rent control in urban areas yield massive support even among more centrist voters and do not alienate right-wing voters, either. The only (slightly) divisive economic-distributive issue is an increase in inheritance taxation.

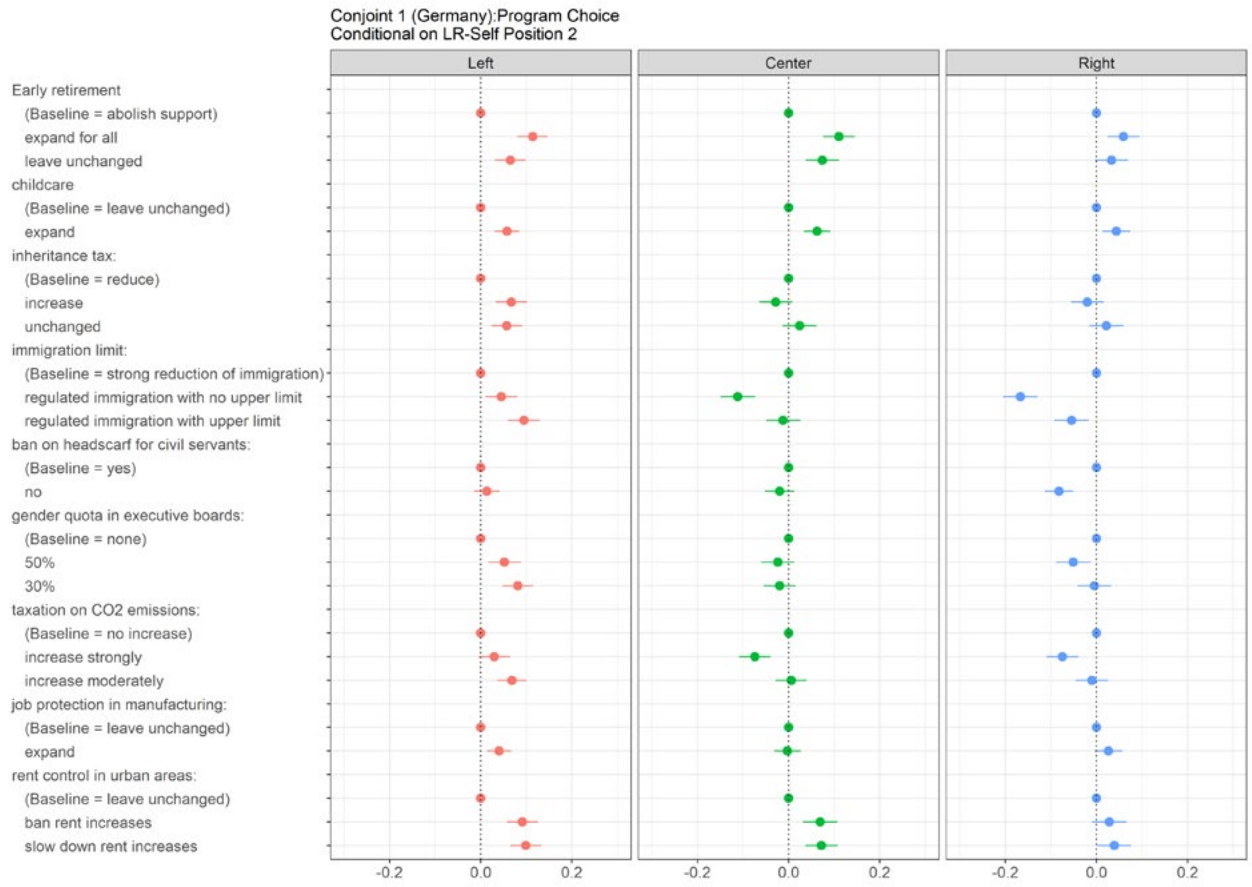
The picture looks very different when it comes to non-economic, socio-cultural issues and environmentalism, in particular immigration regulation, gender quotas, and CO2 emissions taxation. On the one hand, these issues on average resonate even more strongly positively with left-wing voters, increasing the probability of support by at times up to 10 percentage points, which is a large effect. Hence, these policies seem on average more effective in attracting

Figure 5
Effects of policy positions on support for social democratic party programs – AUSTRIA



Estimates shown are changes in the probability of supporting a social democratic program that includes the specific level of a policy, compared with a social democratic program that includes the baseline. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients indicate changes in the predicted probability of supporting the social democratic program.

Figure 6
Effects of policy positions on support for social democratic party programs – GERMANY



Estimates shown are changes in the probability of supporting a social democratic program that includes the specific level of a policy, compared with a social democratic program that includes the baseline. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients indicate changes in the predicted probability of supporting the social democratic program.

voters within the left spectrum towards the social democratic parties. However, these policy positions are much more polarizing and divisive: they alienate not only right-wing, but – more importantly for Social Democratic parties – also centrist voters.

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

To understand both the motivations of voters switching away from and towards social democratic parties, as well as the strategic options social democratic parties can pursue, we need to distinguish between at least two dimensions of political competition, one economic and one non-economic. Social democratic parties loose voters mainly to green and left-libertarian parties for non-economic reasons and to mainstream right-parties for economic (as well as, to a lesser extent, non-economic) reasons. This implies that there is no simple strategic shift (either towards the »left« or the »right«) to address voter losses effectively. Rather, as the second part of our policy brief argues, social democratic parties need to carefully consider which policy appeals resonate with both left-wing and centrist voters (such as childcare expansion and rent control in Austria), and which policy appeals (such as immigration control, gender quotas and CO2 emissions taxation in Austria) may create trade-offs between effectively resonating with left-wing voters, while at the same time alienating more centrist voters.

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This memo builds on the following papers, which will be published in the volume *Beyond Social Democracy: Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies*, edited by Herbert Kitschelt and Silja Häusermann. Full manuscripts of the papers are available from the authors.

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TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

The Resonance of Progressive Programs among the Potential Social Democratic Electorate

A first section argues and shows that social democratic parties lose voters to rival left-wing and mainstream right parties for very different reasons: vote switchers to the radical left have more economically left-wing attitudes, whereas vote switchers to the mainstream right differ predominantly regarding their more fiscally conservative attitudes, and switchers to the green parties tend to have more socio-culturally progressive attitudes.

This implies that there is no simple strategic shift (either towards the »left« or the »right«) to address voter losses effectively. Rather, as the second part of our policy brief argues, social democratic parties need to carefully consider which policy appeals resonate with both left-wing *and* centrist voters, and which policy appeals create trade-offs (gaining some voters on one end of the spectrum, at the expense of losing voters at the other end).

As a conceptual tool to study these potential trade-offs, the policy brief suggests four stylized programmatic strategies social democratic parties may pursue: Old Left, New Left, Left National and Centrist programs. Survey data from Austria and Germany suggests that 1) Old Left (and in Austria also New Left) programs are most strongly supported among the potential social democratic electorate, and that 2) socio-cultural policy positions (on immigration, gender equality or environmentalism) create more acute trade-offs between left-wing and centrist voter gains/losses than economic-distributive policy positions.

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