

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

The Myth of Voter Losses to the Radical Right

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Across Western Europe, social democratic parties have on average experienced a decline of their vote share in parliamentary elections of more than 10 percentage points over the past 15 years. A prominent thesis in the debates about the reasons for these losses is that social democratic parties have lost working class voters to right-wing populist and radical right parties.



In this policy brief, we provide evidence which shows that this interpretation is at odds with the best empirical data we have on vote switching. The policy brief focuses on *voter outflows* away from social democratic parties.



Both past and potential future losses are predominantly to green and left-libertarian parties, followed by mainstream right parties.



## INTRODUCTION

Social Democratic parties are currently facing a fundamental electoral crisis. Across Western Europe, they have on average experienced a decline of their vote share in parliamentary elections of more than 10 percentage points over the past 15 years. In some countries, such as France and the Netherlands, their score even sank below 10 percent.

This development has stirred major debates in both academia and politics regarding the reasons for these electoral losses. A prominent thesis in these debates is that social democratic parties have lost working class voters to right-wing populist or radical right parties – because of fiscally too conservative or socio-culturally too progressive positions. However, this thesis is at odds with the available empirical data, which indicates that social democratic parties have predominantly lost to green, left-libertarian, and mainstream right parties. We think that it is crucial to root the debates on the causes of electoral losses in empirical analyses of voter flows, i. e. in »vote switching« data.

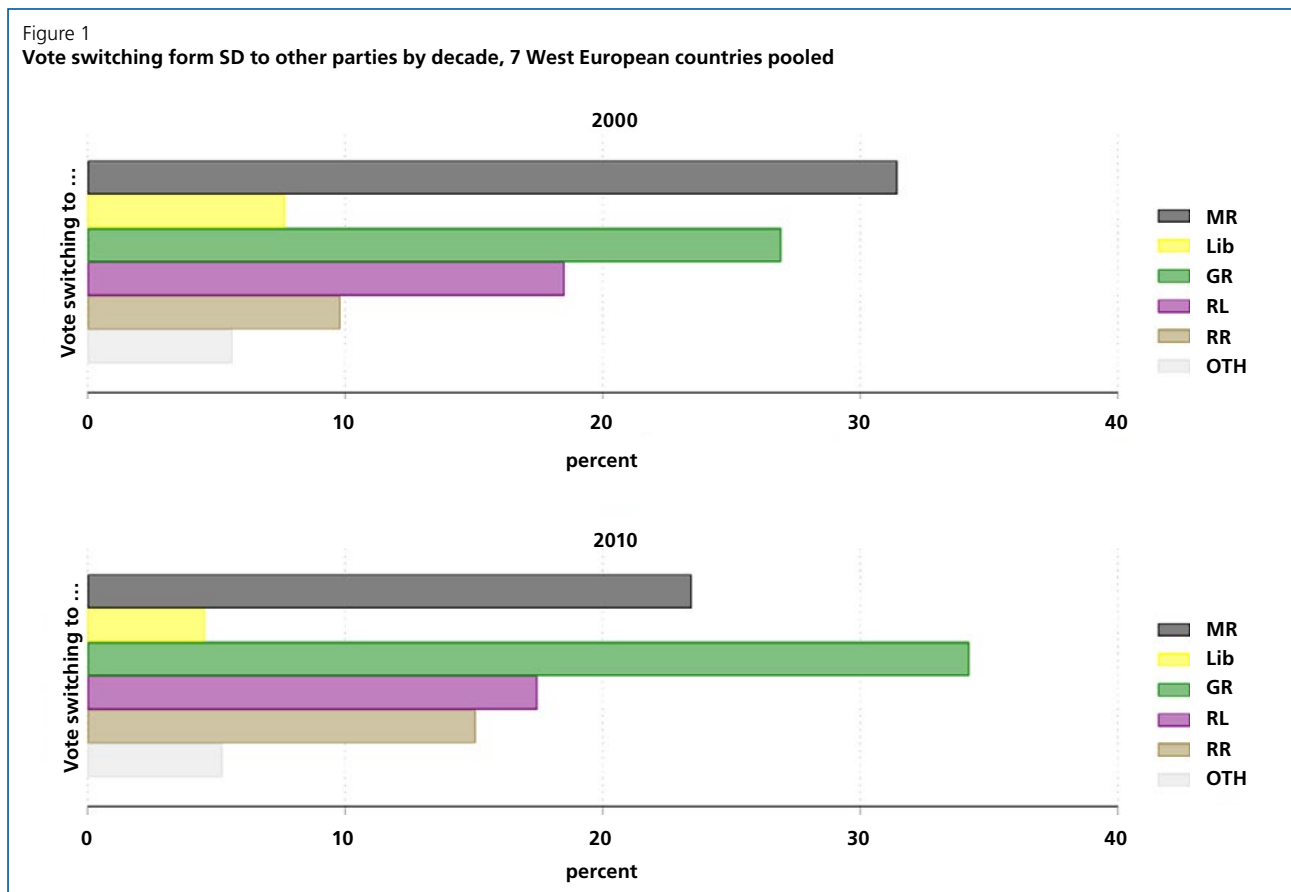
Hence, in this policy brief, we provide a selection of results from an ongoing collective book project on the electoral transformation of social democratic parties and the left in general. This policy brief focuses on *voter outflows* from the social democratic parties, on which we have very good and robust data from most Western European countries. The goal of the policy brief is thus primarily an empirical one: to provide solid empirical answers to the following questions:

1. To which parties are social democratic parties losing voters?
2. Are social democratic parties losing mostly working-class voters, or middle- and upper class voters?

The policy brief is structured as follows: A first section shows vote switching from the social democratic parties to competing parties for Western Europe generally and for Germany in particular. It also uses panel-data to verify where vote switchers »end up« over the course of several elections. The second section studies the patterns of further potential losses: how likely are current social democratic voters to switch away from social democracy and where to? How likely is it that social democratic parties will be able to construct a new, loyal core constituency? The conclusions then add more speculative reflections on how the empirical patterns we see relate to existing hypotheses on the causes of social democratic electoral decline.

### 1. TO WHICH PARTIES ARE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES LOSING VOTERS? WHAT IS THE CLASS PROFILE OF VOTER LOSSES?

Figure 1 is based on the analysis by Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2020). It shows the patterns of vote switching away from social democratic parties in the 2000s and 2010s based on data from national election studies (the best electoral data available) in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the



Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, i.e. the multi-party systems of Western and Northern Europe, which are most comparable in terms of party systems and democratic context.

What both figures clearly show is that the lion's share of vote losses over the past two decades has been to mainstream right parties (black bars), and to rival parties of the left party spectrum. Losses to green and radical left parties combined sum up to almost 50% of all vote losses, followed by mainstream right parties. The picture is similar for Germany alone, even if losses to the CDU/CSU are relatively more important than losses to the mainstream right in other countries.

A key insight from Figures 1 and 2, however, is that voter losses to right-wing populist or radical right parties are much more marginal<sup>1</sup>. There is no substantive voter flow from social democratic parties to parties of the far right.

Social democratic parties are also not primarily losing voters among lower social classes. On the contrary, the most substantive vote losses incur in the middle and upper mid-

dle classes, i.e. in intermediate and upper education levels, as Figure 3 shows for North Western European democracies.

The social stratification of voter losses is, however, where the pattern in Germany deviates to some extent from the general pattern of vote switching in Europe: voter losses are indeed most substantive among voters with lower education-levels in Germany. But even here, we do not see a substantive stream of voters switching from social democratic parties to the far right. The bulk of losses goes to the mainstream right.

The evidence so far is clearly at odds with the idea of major voter flows from social democratic towards far right parties. However, one may suspect that (working class) voters »transition« to the far right in several steps – e.g. by switching first to the mainstream right and then to the radical right, or through a period of abstention.

To investigate this hypothesis, Figure 5 shows voter transition data from the analysis by Bischof and Kurer (2020), who have used the best available long-term panel data (available only for Germany, Switzerland and the UK, altogether more than 500'000 individuals) to observe vote switching over the entire observed lifetime. What you see in Figure 5 are voter transition pattern between the first and the last reported vote choice. One important difference in the data between the countries is that German voters are asked about »which party respondents support«,

1 The following parties are included in the group of right-wing populist and/or radical right parties: FPÖ, BZÖ in Austria, DPP in Denmark, True Finns, Change 2011 and Freedom Party in Finland, AfD and NPD in Germany, LPF, PVV, and FvD in the Netherlands, Progress Party in Norway, Sweden Democrats in Sweden, SD, EDU, FPS, Lega and SVP in Switzerland.

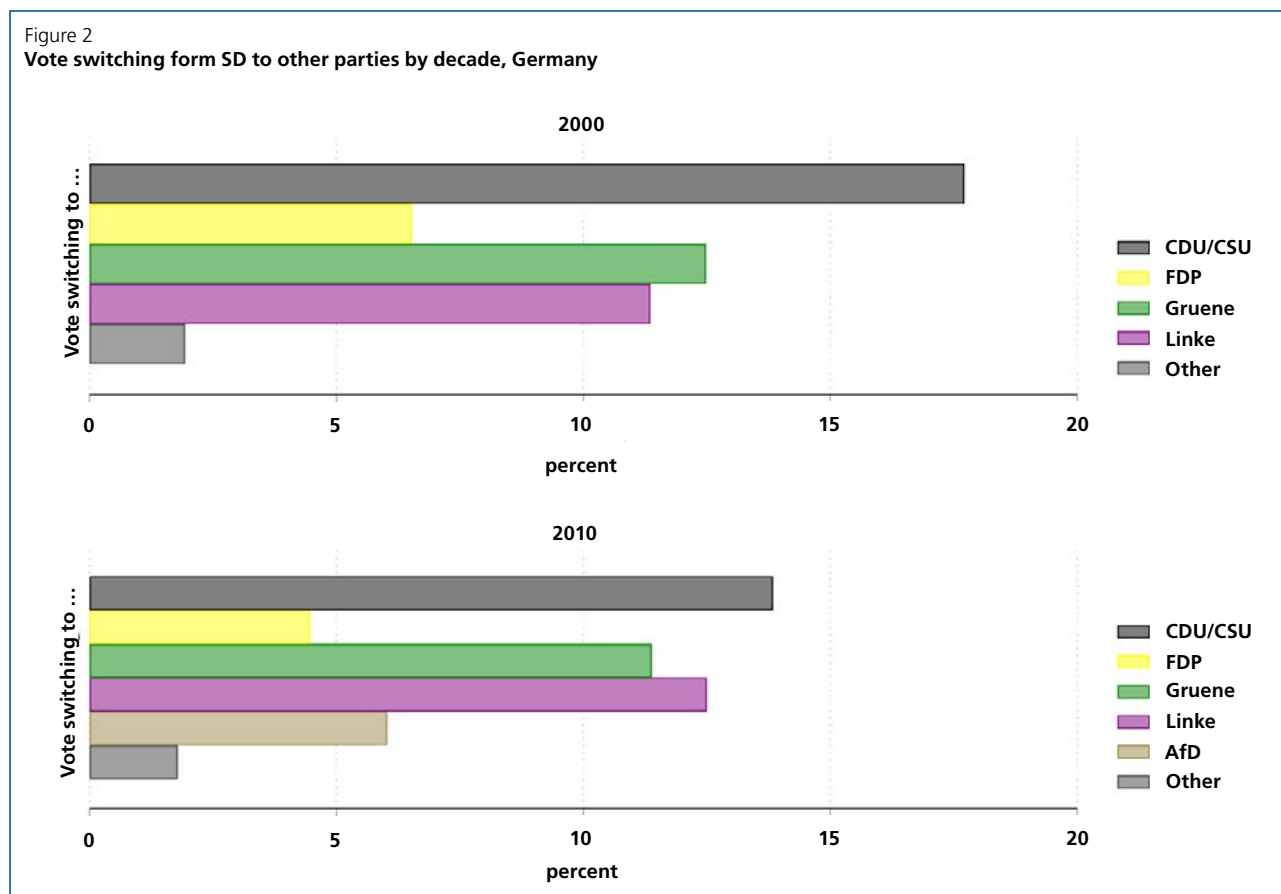


Figure 3

Vote switching form SD to other parties by decade and education, 7 West European countries pooled

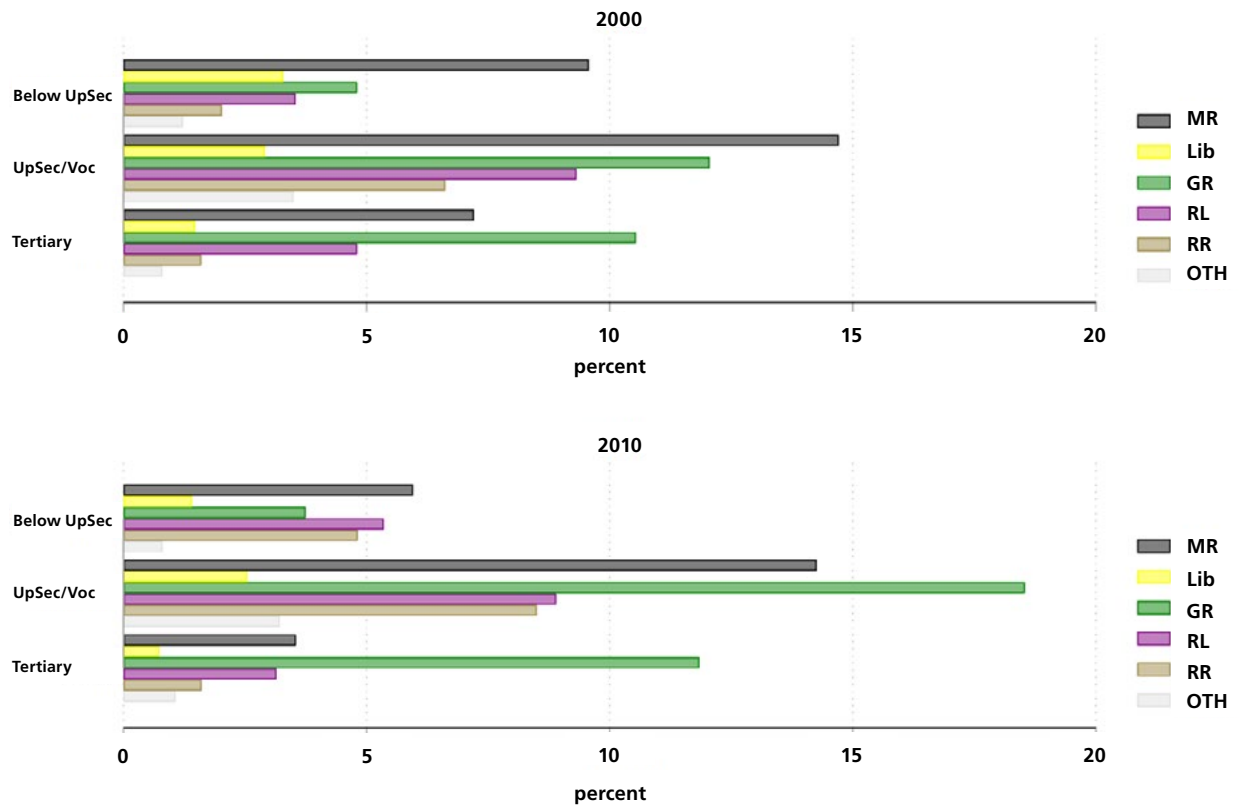


Figure 4

Vote switching form SD to other parties by education, Germany

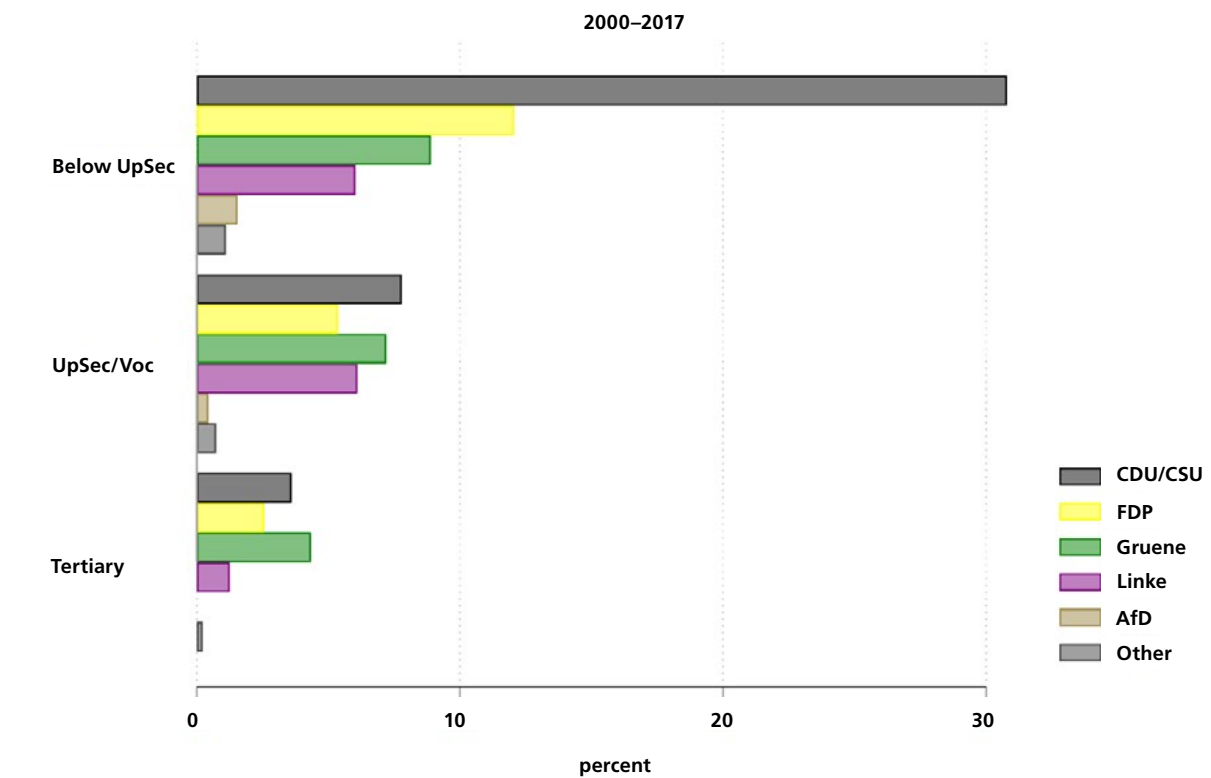
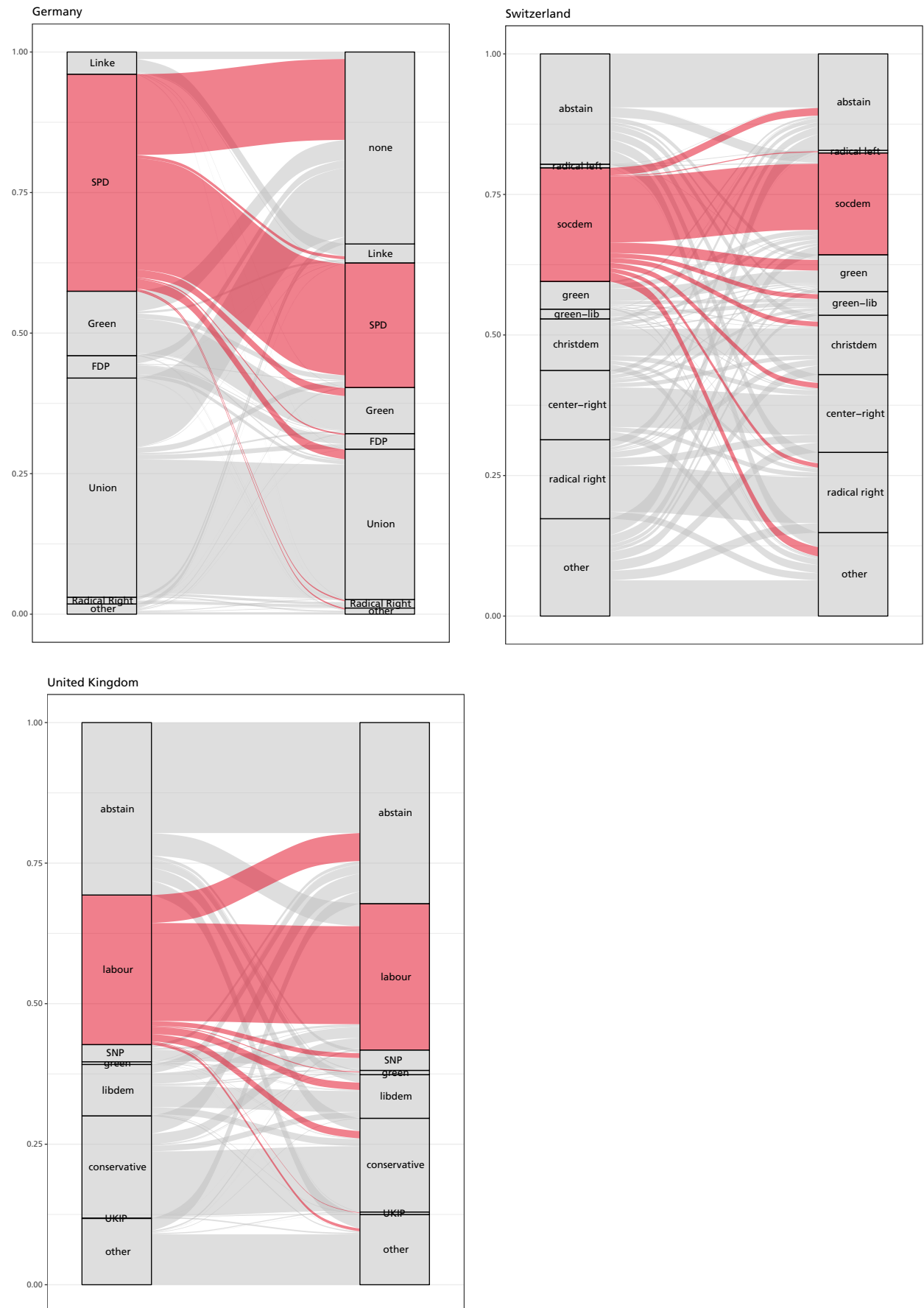


Figure 5  
**Transition away from Social Democrats, across entire lifespan (Germany, UK, Switzerland)**



whereas in the UK and Switzerland, they were asked about actual »vote choice«. Hence, for Germany, transitions into »none« are higher than what we find regarding transitions into »abstention« in Switzerland and Germany.

However, the key finding in Figure 5 is – again – that even over the entire observed lifespan, the share of social democratic voters transitioning towards the far right is marginal. Additional analyses by Bischof and Kurer (not shown for reasons of space, available upon request) show that this also holds when we look at working class voters only: among voters in lower social classes, rates of political demobilization are high, but an extremely small share of them »ends up« supporting far right parties over their lifespan. Social democratic voter losses to the radical right turn out to be a myth.

## 2. WHERE TO ARE (FURTHER) POTENTIAL LOSSES MOST LIKELY?

The current dynamics are unlikely to stabilize in the near future, as European party systems are in transition. Hence, we end this policy brief by taking a look at voters who actually do vote for social democratic parties and try to gauge the direction of (further) potential losses. To do so, the analysis by Häusermann (2020) uses data from the European Election survey 2019 to study »voting propensities«, i. e. the self-reported likelihood of supporting a rival party.

Consistent with the findings shown above, we see that on average and across the different European countries, very large shares of social democratic voters are most likely to simultaneously be sympathetic with green and radical left

parties. Smaller shares can see themselves voting for mainstream right parties, and the group of voters tempted by the idea of voting for the far right is – again – smallest on average.

The fact that social democratic parties risk the heaviest voter losses to the left – and not to the right – also resonates with a finding from the analysis by Ares and van Ditmars (2020), who use data from the European Social Survey to study the intergenerational patterns of voter transition. They show that social democratic parties have been able to attract many voters whose parents were working class, but who themselves have (high)-skilled middle class occupations. However, the panel data also indicates that these newly won middle class voters are difficult to retain, as they might transition further especially towards rival left-libertarian and green parties.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

The data shown in this policy brief cannot prove or disprove a particular explanation for social democratic voter losses. However, it does prove that the idea of massive voter flows from social democratic parties to right-wing populist or radical right parties is a myth, even when we take long potential transition periods into account. Social democratic parties have only marginally lost to the far right parties, and today's far right voters are not former supporters of Social democracy. Our data consistently shows that past and (future) potential outflows occur most importantly towards green and left-libertarian parties, followed by mainstream right parties.

Table 1

**Potential losses – share of social democratic voters who indicate a probability of  $\geq 50\%$  that they might also vote for party X in the future**

		Greens	Radical Left	Moderate Right	Radical Right
<b>% of SD voters who are potential »X« voters</b>	all countries (weighted average)	28.5	22.0	12.9	9.2
	Austria	45		14	4
	Denmark		46	6	11
	Finland	47	37	20	24
	France	53	23	9	17
	Germany	55	33	23	7
	Italy	23		4	14
	Netherlands	48	34	10	15
	Portugal	24	10	15	
	Spain		43	9	5
	Sweden	23	34	12	14
	United Kingdom	40		17	8

## REFERENCES

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.

Abou-Chadi, Tarik / Markus Wagner (2020). »Losing the Middle Ground: The Electoral decline of Social Democratic parties since 2000«

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Silja Häusermann** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Zurich. She has been a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in 2018/2019, and has also held positions and fellowships at the Universities of Konstanz, Harvard University and the European University Institute. She holds a PhD from the University of Zurich.

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## IMPRINT

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## TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEFT

### The Myth of Voter Losses to the Radical Right



Our data shows that the lion's share of social democratic vote losses over the past two decades has been to rival parties of the left party spectrum (green and left-libertarian parties), and to parties of the mainstream right. Voter losses to right-wing populist or radical right parties are much more marginal. There is no substantive voter flow from social democratic parties to parties of the far right.



Long-term panel data analysis shows that even when studying voter transitions over the longer life course, the share of social democratic voters transitioning towards the far right is marginal. There is also no specific »working class exodus« to the far right: among voters in lower social classes, rates of political demobilization are high, but an extremely small share of them »ends up« supporting far right parties. Social democratic voter losses to the radical right turn out to be largely a myth.



Finally, we show that also among those voters who indicate that they have voted for social democratic parties, potential – future – losses (in terms of voting propensities for rival parties) are highest towards green and left-libertarian parties, followed by mainstream right parties.