

Europe: Adopting rightwing policies ‘does not help centre-left win votes’

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Study of European electoral data suggests social democratic parties alienate supporters by moving towards the political centre

Adopting rightwing policies on issues such as immigration and the economy does not help centre-left parties win votes, according to new analysis of European electoral and polling data.

Faced with a [20-year decline in their vote share](#), accompanied by rising support for the right, far right and sometimes the far left, social democratic parties across Europe have increasingly sought salvation by moving towards the political centre.

However, the analysis, published on Wednesday, shows that centre-left parties promising, for example, to be tough on immigration or public spending are unlikely to attract potential voters on the right, and risk alienating existing progressive supporters.

“Voters tend to prefer the original to the copy,” said Tarik Abou-Chadi, an associate professor of European politics at the University of Oxford and the co-founder of the [Progressive Politics Research Network \(PPRNet\)](#), which launched on Wednesday.

Abou-Chadi said the team of political scientists, from universities including Barcelona, Lausanne, Vienna, Zurich and Berlin, was not “aiming to advise or act as political consultants” but to present “careful, empirical, data-based” research.

“We’re looking to provide a more solid, accurate foundation for an open political debate about progressive politics, who votes for progressive parties and why, and the strategies available to them,” he said. “That involves a bit of myth-busting.”

One of the most significant misperceptions the team’s work had revealed, he said, concerned the nature of support for centre-left parties in Europe. “Social structures have been utterly transformed since the heyday of social democracy,” Abou-Chadi said.

“The average social democratic voter today is very, very different from 50, even 20 years ago - and unlikely to be an industrial worker. The data also shows much of this new constituency is actually both culturally progressive and economically leftwing.”

Analysis showed little real voter competition between the centre left and the radical right, as some social democratic politicians argue. Progressive parties “need to understand and represent the social structures of the 21st century”, Abou-Chadi said.

One of the key lessons was that “trying to imitate rightwing positions is just not a successful strategy for the left”, he said. Two studies in particular, looking at so-called welfare chauvinism and fiscal policy, illustrated the point, the researchers said.

Björn Bremer of the Central European University in Vienna said a survey in Spain, Italy, the UK and Germany and larger datasets from 12 EU countries showed that since the financial crisis of 2008, “fiscal orthodoxy” had been a vote loser for the centre left.

“Social democratic parties that have backed austerity fail to win the support of voters worried about public debt, and lose the backing of those who oppose austerity,” Bremer said. “Centre-left parties that actually impose austerity lose votes.”

As an example, Bremer cited the UK Labour party’s [losing 2015 election campaign](#), which focused on fiscal responsibility. “[When] voters really care about fiscal policy, they’ll go for the ‘issue owner’ - in this instance, the Conservatives, who they’ll always believe are more credible on that question,” he said.

Fiscal orthodoxy - cutting taxes, capping spending, limiting public debt - worked for social democratic parties such as Tony Blair’s New Labour and Gerhard Schröder’s SPD in Germany, but that was “a period of relative stability and growth”, he said.

“We’re now in a different era. The data strongly suggests centre-left parties can build a coalition of voters who believe a strong welfare state, effective public services and real investment, for example in the green transition, are essential,” Bremer said.

“But doing the opposite - offering a contradictory programme that promotes austerity but promises to protect public services and the welfare state, and hoping voters will swallow such fairytales - failed in the 2010s, and is likely to fail again.”

Similarly, said Matthias Enggist of the University of Lausanne, analysis of data from eight European countries showed no evidence that welfare chauvinism - broadly, restricting immigrants’ access to welfare - was a successful strategy for the left.

“There’s little support for it among actual leftwing voters - Green, social democrat or radical left - or potential leftwing voters on the right,” Enggist said. “And leftwing voters mostly really dislike discrimination between immigrants and nationals.”

Voters who do support welfare chauvinism, meanwhile, are likely to not even consider voting for a left-leaning party, he said, adding there was no evidence that this was a strategy to win back enough traditional working-class votes to significantly boost the electoral fortunes of left parties.

Even in Denmark, where a Social Democrat-led government has [introduced](#) one of Europe’s toughest anti-immigration regimes, electoral data suggested that restricting immigrants’ rights is not popular with a significant number of the party’s voters.

Politicians on the left who argue the case for welfare chauvinism “overestimate its potential to win new voters”, Enggist said.

“The evidence clearly shows they overestimate the electoral relevance of traditional, white working-class voters - and underestimate how strongly their current middle-class voters care about immigrants being treated decently and equally.”

Jon Henley

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