

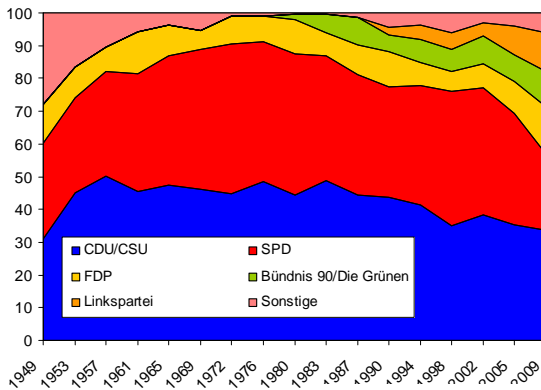


Changing times for European Social Democracy

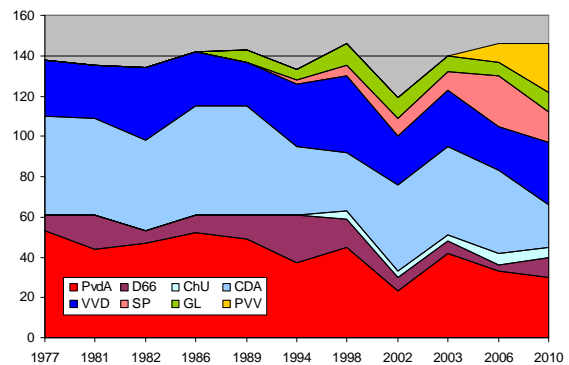
Carmen de Paz, Head of the International Network of IDEAS Foundation, analyzes the present and the future of Social Democracy, with its challenges and expectations.

In light of recent election results in European countries with a long and established tradition of social democracy, there seems to be confirmation of the relative decline of these political movements in the region. Most of the Scandinavian countries are now governed by the center-right, with the exception of Norway, and only four governments in Europe are led by the left. Results of the European Parliament elections in 2009 are especially revealing in this respect, since only in six of the 27 Member States did the social democratic parties achieve a higher representation than the parties of the center-right. In line with this evidence, the last national elections in Germany, Holland, France and the UK have produced the worst results historically speaking for the Netherlands and British Labour parties, the German SPD and the French Socialist Party in recent decades (see graphs below).

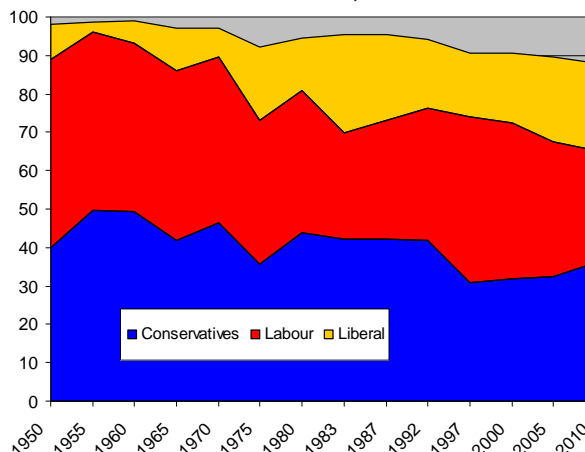
Alemania, resultados elecciones generales
1949-2009, %



Holanda, resultados elecciones generales
1977-2010, escaños



Reino Unido, resultados elecciones generales
1950-2010, %





Many speak of an irreversible crisis European social democracy, which had already had been announced in the 1980s, faced with challenges that do not have solutions and caught in ideological contradictions; others speak of the imminent need for redefinition of the agenda, partnerships and operation of social democratic parties, which have become obsolete and have lost relevance in the current context. What is happening with social democracy in Europe? Are we witnessing the beginning of the disappearance of one of the continent's principal twentieth century ideologies? Or are witnessing the early stages of its conversion and rebirth?

The discussion forums and research projects which have been launched from different areas in response to these trends are helping clarify the diagnosis. It is clear that circumstances today are not those of the 70s and 80s. Increased globalization, the institutionalization of the Welfare State, the consolidation of the free market system as an essential pillar of our welfare model, the overall improvement of average living standards in most countries, and the increasing social heterogeneity "without direction", or the ongoing fragmentation of the political spectrum, are just some of the factors explaining the gap that the platforms, agendas, and alliances of some social democratic parties have experienced with regard to the principal concerns and aspirations of the European population.

With regard to ideology and political agenda, the challenges arising from globalization, as those related to migration, the emergence of new powers on the international stage, the management of new threats to security or the need for more "global governance" before a growing trend of integration and economic and financial liberalization are issues which have been climbing in latter of priorities for a majority of Europeans in recent years, and for which the social democrats do not seem to have found and / or communicated appropriate responses in many countries.

The problems associated with the integration of immigrants into society such as the ones in the Netherlands or France, which have been gaining greater importance and relevance recently, accompanied by a discourse from the "populist" Court with respect to these issues by right-wing parties, demanded that the social democratic parties have a clear, convincing, and consistent position with leftist values which in many cases has been avoided due to the difficulties and potential contradictions that this issue poses to social democracy itself.

The response to other issues whose importance are increasingly sheathed, similar to solutions for the security threats related to international terrorism and participation and / or collaboration in military operations such as the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the emergence of economic powerhouses like China, also pose particularly significant issues for European social movements. Thus, for example, the issue of management support and involvement in the War in Iraq has been particularly difficult for the British Labour Party.

On the other hand, the institutionalization of the Welfare State, these political movements' greatest achievement, has emptied its political agenda of both differing content and conflicting objectives.





The commitment to equality, primarily focusing on economic equality rather than on equal rights, as in Spain's case, has not seemed to bear fruit in countries that have seen an increase in inequality with social democratic governments, as is the case in the United Kingdom; while in countries where income distribution is more uniform and there is a high average income, this commitment has gradually lost importance.

Nevertheless, the primacy of free markets in the past two decades, during which time many European governments were run by social democratic parties, also poses significant challenges. First, the need to provide an alternative model and economic policies from social democracy, and particularly in times of crisis and resource constraints such as we are contemporarily experiencing. In this regard, we must consider the importance of the trust and security that a majority of the electorate grants in times of great uncertainty as central. Progressivism is characterized and has always been characterized by its promotion of change, which in times of insecurity is not as attractive to the populace. It is therefore necessary to find a formula to keep working positively toward a change but from the protection of the economic, humane, and social security of the European citizens.

In accordance with these trends, traditional leftist alliances require a clear renewal. The demands are different today, as are the social groups that the left must target. The groups concerned about the advancement of civil rights, the environment, progressive democratization's achievements of modernization, and new technologies, professional, trained young people with aspirations that differ from those of other preceding generations, or people over retirement age with interest and the capability of staying active, have assumed increasing importance for the left's traditional allies- trade unions, which, like these political forces, need to readjust to changing and changed societies, if they do not want to continue losing representation.

An additional factor related both to the agenda and future partnerships is the increasing fragmentation, heterogeneity, and volatility of the electorate, which has led some experts to warn the end of the "catch-all" parties or mass-based parties. This trend places increasing importance on individual leadership in lieu of the party, and tends to favor the vote based on specific matters rather than an ideological or useful vote.

Some of the solutions to these future challenges or problems discussed at various forums dedicated to the "renewal of ideas and social democratic politics" include:

-Definition of an alternative economic model other than the conservative and liberal ones, valid in times of crisis, based on equity and efficiency, but also on sustainability - Consistent with this objective, it seems clear that it is necessary to redefine the financial sector's role vis-à-vis the industrial and technology sectors, oriented toward green-growth, and the public sector as a whole in terms of productivity, service quality, and public investment. We also need to take a clear position with regard to the use and future of energy.





-Definition of a program and road map to generate confidence in the electorate during difficult times, to promote change, mobility and opportunities in a controlled and managed manner, while ensuring the safety and certainty in the economic, legal, and social spheres.

-In line with the previous goal, improve the understanding of the middle class and its new aspirations and concerns. The previous "working class" is now principally the "middle class" of Europe. So the most widespread traditional social democratic voters self-position themselves more as contributors as opposed to beneficiaries with regard to the Welfare State, and, therefore, are increasingly inclined to fiscal prudence and have a different perception and interest in solidarity¹.

-In accordance to progressivism's transformative vocation, active contribution to the organization of civil society and the representation of new social groups, as well as the creation of new "collective habits" directed at the effective consolidation and generalization of social values such as sustainability, solidarity, and individual and collective responsibility.

-Definition of a clear, consistent, and innovative international agenda, which gives an appropriate response to sensitive issues such as security, both military and economic, and the growing necessity of reconciling various levels of government from different fields, local as well as global.

-Definition of a narrative and development of means of communication that permits connecting with groups that speak the language of change and innovation all the while maintaining the connection with more traditional groups.

-Renewal of social democratic parties in their culture and structure, which are overly conservative, endogamic hardliners; or perceived as such by a large proportion of the electorate, particularly the youngest.

-Facilitate the strengthening of the role of the State in all levels especially on the local and civil society levels paired with individual responsibility in different areas. In this sense, it is necessary to redefine the role of the State in regards to institutions like the market, as a promoter of the general interests as opposed to those of the elites, but also recognizing its limitations.

¹ Wouter Bos, ex Dutch Labour Party leader.





ANALYSIS AND OPINION ARTICLE

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In conclusion, the next few years will be key to the future of the European social democratic parties, simultaneously confronted by a delicate, unprecedented situation at a particularly turbulent moment in the economic scene. Its future and the continued primacy of social democratic values and policies in Europe pass through modernization and renewal of thought, action and institutions of European ideology for excellence. It is worth hoping that the current leaders are able to operate this change, essential to reconnect with a society increasingly skeptical of the political class and the social democrats' ability to offer viable and innovative alternatives which give adequate resolutions to the challenges, problems, and aspirations of today.

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