

Gerassimos Moschonas, Department of Political Science and History - Panteion University of Athens,
Institute of European Studies - Free University of Brussels (gmoschon@otenet.gr and
gmoschon@panteion.gr)

Gerassimos Moschonas

The Electoral Crisis of Social Democracy: The great Retreat of the European Social Democratic Parties (1950-2009)

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“I wish it was the sixties”.

“The Bends” Radiohead

Introduction

The question of the electoral development of social democracy will be the principal subject of this essay, which charts the electoral condition of European socialism, decade by decade, from the 1950s to 2009. As for the structure of the paper, my main and central ambition is to document and *specify* the extent and true scale of social-democratic electoral influence. 1950 is chosen as the starting-point for observation because an analysis of electoral trends can only usefully be done from that moment. The immediate post-war period was certainly a critical moment, but the lack of electoral crystallization and consolidation render it highly anomalous and hence inappropriate as a point of departure.

The performance of socialist and social-democratic parties – two labels I will use synonymously - will be observed in sixteen west European states (including, since the 1970s, Greece, Portugal and Spain). Italy will be excluded from the statistics even though it is a country where the Left has been (and remains) influential, and not only electorally. The bankruptcy of the Italian Socialist Party in the 1990s (a unique case of the actual disappearance of a socialist party), and its ‘replacement’ by a communist party putatively transformed into a “fully fledged social-democratic party” (Favretto 2006: 163) - today’s Democratic Party – make diachronic comparison inappropriate. All the more so in that the electoral base of these two parties, which were rivals for many years, was historically very different in respect of electoral sociology. Including the Italian case would complete the general picture, but would lead to distortions of the ‘dynamic’ picture that is our main focus¹.

The central question is of course whether something important is happening to social democracy as an electoral force? The answer is an unequivocal yes. Social democracy is in electoral crisis. Not in all countries, not to the same degree, and not in the same way. Despite national variations, the qualifications suggested by the specialist literature have now been overtaken by the steady march of the electoral indicators. The trend is neither cyclical nor random. This crisis is not ‘historic’; and there is probably nothing inexorable about it, but it is serious. The solidity of the ‘old house’ (to borrow a phrase from Léon Blum) is shaken and the decline is profound and firm. Social democracy is experiencing a new electoral era, even if the dynamics of electoral change proceed in zigzags. The medium-term prospects for social-democrats look bleak, and the recovery will not be easy.

I. THE THREE PHASES OF ELECTORAL SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Over the long term (1950–2009), socialists, considered as a political family, have become weaker electorally. In the case of the thirteen countries where diachronic comparison is possible (Table 1), electoral contraction was marked and reached a peak in the years after 2000. Social democracy declined from an average of 33.2 per cent in the 1950s and 60s to 26.6 per cent in the period 2000–09, a fall in absolute terms of 6.6 per cent (see Table 1). In relative terms, social-democrats on average lost 19.8 per cent of the electoral strength they had achieved during the 1950s and 60s; and 11 out of 13 parties registered scores inferior to those of the 1950s. Only two parties, in France and Germany, improved their performance, and these particular two parties had been decidedly weak in the 1950s – a decade which for them, against the general trend, was the worst of the post-war period.

From another perspective, if one compares the period 2000-09 with the *best* decade of each party, the universality of the decline is still more impressive (Data non included here). All parties, without exception, are in the 1990s and 2000s electorally less better off than they were in the past.

Table 1**Electoral performances (%) of the Socialist Parties by decade 1950-2009 (October): Legislative Elections**

	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	2000-09
Austria	43,3	43,3	50,0	45,4	37,3	33,7
Belgium	35,9	31,0	26,6	28,0	23,3	24,6
Denmark	40,2	39,1	33,6	30,9	36,0	26,8
Finland	25,3	23,4	24,5	25,4	24,4	23,0
France	15,2	15,9	21,0	34,5	20,6	24,4
Germany	30,3	39,4	44,2	39,4	36,9	31,9
Ireland	10,9	14,7	12,7	8,9	14,9	10,5
Luxembourg	34,1	33,5	24,8	29,0	23,9	22,5
Netherlands	30,7	25,8	28,6	31,0	26,5	21,2
Norway	47,5	45,5	38,8	37,4	36,0	30,8
Sweden	45,6	48,4	43,7	44,5	39,8	37,5
Switzerland	26,5	25,1	24,1	20,6	20,9	21,4
United Kingdom	46,3	46,1	39,1	29,2	38,8	38,0
Total Average (13 countries)	33,2	33,2	31,7	31,1	29,2	26,6
Greece			19,5	43,4	42,3	41,6
Portugal			33,4	26,4	39,0	39,9
Spain			29,9	43,9	38,2	40,2
Total Average (16 countries)	33,2	33,2	30,9	32,4	31,2	29,2

Data base: Moschonas. Averages calculated by the author

Social-democratic parties obtained their best results in the 1950s and 1960s (33.2% on average), fell back moderately in the 1970s (an average of 31.7%), stabilized at a somewhat lower level in the 1980s (31.1%), and then returned to the path of decline in the 1990s (29.2%) and 2000–09 (26.6%). The decline had been steady, with each decade being less good electorally than the previous one (-1.5% in the 1970s; -0.6% in the 1980s; -1.9% in the 1990s; and -2.6% in the 2000s). Thus, the decline tended to become more marked in the 1990s and 2000s, despite the fact that social democracy was already weaker in these years.

The data in Table 1 indicate that the performance of social democracy can be meaningfully broken up into *three* phases of approximately 20 years each.

(1) The first involved an electoral bright spell (the 1950s and 60s). While not quite a ‘golden age’ (other than in a small number of countries, social democracy’s performance was not extraordinary), it was unquestionably the European center-left’s best.² Equally important was the remarkable electoral stability of the social-democratic parties (Spyropoulou 2008: 51-52). The 1950s and 60s represent an

electoral summit in two respects – high electoral scores and low volatility – that has not been attained again since.

(2) This positive period was followed by a generally *moderate* process of erosion during the 1970s and 80s. This was also a phase marked by electoral *disorder* and significant national fluctuations. This was apparently a *transitional* phase distinguished by sharp and contradictory movements. Thus social democracy became significantly weaker in fully half of the 13 countries included in Table 1 (Denmark, Britain, Norway, Luxemburg, Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland). Secondly, in a number of these countries (Denmark, Britain and Norway), spectacular defeats were suffered. In the 1980s, some of the parties in retreat (e.g. the SAP, the Belgian PS and the LSAP) recovered some of the lost ground while others continued on their downwards slope (Danish SD, Swiss SP) or dramatically accelerated it (British Labour Party). By contrast, four social-democratic parties registered considerable success (the SPD in the FRG, the PvdA in Holland, the SDP in Finland, and most notably the SPO in Austria).³ Spectacular defeats coexisted with dazzling successes, contraction with progress, violent decline with rapid recovery of influence, volatility with stability. Thus throughout these 20 years the electoral facts seem to lack any consistent pattern. Nevertheless, if the overall picture is mixed, three *new* trends are evident:

- A moderate electoral decline which, though not general, affected a majority of center-left parties. Since the electoral losses were modest in the aggregate, and since national developments were decidedly mixed, this was probably not the most important trend.
- A small number of ‘catastrophic’ electoral results (Denmark and Norway in 1973, the United Kingdom in 1983). These indicate that something unprecedented was occurring at the core of social-democracy’s electoral support – something beyond conjunctural oscillations. But this ‘something’ concerns only a very limited number of elections and parties.
- The increased volatility of social-democratic performance is the third and arguably the most important development. Instability strongly increases after the 1960s. The behaviour of social-democratic voters has become more volatile and anarchic during the 1970s, and this pattern has persisted (see Table 2 in Moschonas, 2010).

In sum, the contrast with the past was neither consistent nor systematic in the years 1970–89. But it did exist. Mixed signals predominated and increased weakness involved only a small number of countries. Moreover, the impressive performance of the Greek, Spanish and French socialists in the 1980s, together with quite good results in Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland and Luxemburg, constituted reasons for optimism (see also Delwit, 2005: 63). Whether from the standpoint of electoral arithmetic or that of the psychology of actors and voters, this was not tantamount to electoral crisis. No retrospective reading of the period can alter this fundamental reality. On the other hand, if there was no electoral crisis, there were clear indications of partial or *selective* retreat - and of great instability. In 1970s and 1980s European socialism entered a new era.

(3) The third period – the 1990s and 2000s – was marked by a new process of electoral retreat. Throughout these 19 years, social democracy’s earlier losses were confirmed. Worse, it lost further ground and lost it more rapidly. Relative to the high point of the 1950s and 60s, more than two-thirds of the losses (to be precise, -4.5 points, or 68.2 per cent of the total decline) occurred in this period. Individual parties, with the notable exception of the British Labour, *all* turned in average performances in the 2000s that were decidedly inferior to those of the 1970s and 80s. Certainly, the simultaneous victories of the social-democrats in the second half of the 1990s – an event rare in the annals of electoral history – created the impression of a strong resurgence and a change in trends. In fact, the recovery of influence in the late 1990s was modest and certainly very brief (Data not included here). Moreover, since 2000 the process of decline has once again intensified and deepened.

During this third phase (1990s and 2000s), signs of weakening abounded; instability was strongly on the increase; and electoral earthquakes multiplied demonstrating the extent to which socialist parties had become vulnerable⁴. The electoral base of social democracy became less broad and far less solid.

The picture of declining strength of social-democratic parties changes considerably when one looks to the south. (Table 1). In fact, the southern European parties, which turned in excellent electoral performances during the 1980s (with the exception of the Portuguese socialists), consolidated their strong positions and improved their average in the 1990s and 2000s. The improvement was above all due to the strong resurgence of the Portuguese PS, which obtained its best historical result (45.1%) in the 2005 elections – the best score of any socialist party anywhere in Europe for 2000–09. The PSOE achieved its best results in the 1980s but has also consolidated its position in the 2000s, after a significant drop in the 1990s. By contrast, PASOK, although performing very solidly overall, appears to have entered a phase of soft electoral decline (see Voulgaris 2008), despite its triumphal return to power in 2009⁵. The southern pole is by far the strongest in European socialism today -- a *major novelty* in the electoral history of socialism.

Overall, the current influence of social democracy oscillates at around 80% (Spain, Greece and Portugal not included) of its level in the 1950s and 60s. The drop is strong, although it is not cataclysmic. Thus, it is not the “end” or the “death” of electoral social democracy. Nevertheless, the paths of retreat show that the electoral ebbing and greater instability of social-democratic parties is a genuinely *firm* trend, a *tendance lourde*. The electoral retreat appears as a slow, *steady*, almost without interruption, slide that is still operative. Moreover, these data show fairly convincingly that the parties which have fared worse electorally are those that have been at the very center of the historic social-democratic project.

II. A DIFFICULT RECOVERY

So, how much serious and consequential is the electoral crisis of social democracy? And how temporary or enduring could it be? The answer is that there is no easy recovery, no easy and rapid exit. The medium-term prospects for social-democrats look bleak.

They look bleak, first of all, because of the “rationale of numbers”, which are clear. The tendency has nothing of a circular play or a trendless fluctuation. The electoral erosion is present in all but the three southern countries in Europe; it is similar everywhere and without any reversions to the *status quo ante*. The scope, the phases, the highs and lows may differ, but the trend is universal and well structured. There has occurred a non-conjunctural attenuation of the bond between socialist parties and the electorate.

Prospects are also bleak because the electoral erosion does have sociological underpinnings in the process of class de-alignment. The tendency to a gradual distancing between working-class voters and social-democratic parties has lasted for nearly forty years (Merkel Moschonas 2002 and 2008, cf. Merkel 1992b: 27). It is a sociological tidal wave (less pronounced in some countries, such as Sweden, unmistakable and aggressive in some others, such as Denmark) that reduces social democracy’s *natural* level of support and renders a recovery more difficult. In addition, social democracy’s restructured base has become the locus of a profound tension between two economically and culturally distinct groups, the working class and salaried middle strata. The ‘fragmented’ social composition of social-democratic electorates may add numbers on occasion, but it is also a constraining factor reducing the freedom of manoeuvre of socialist leaderships: it is an *internal* constraint in a period when the “external” constraints are all but rare.

Thirdly, and much more importantly, the electoral weakening of social-democratic parties is bound up with a parallel crisis of political project and imaginary. A host of economic and institutional factors, national and international - rather than some lack of imagination on the part of social-democratic headquarters – explains social-democracy’s incapacity to provide “new clues” for perceiving economic and social reality. In particular, the combined forces of globalization and Europeanization (in great part put in place by social-democrats themselves) not only have changed the balance between politics and markets but created a redoubtable problem of collective action and coordination for all those aspiring to a left-wing reform strategy (Moschonas 2009). The extraordinary strengthening of the EU from 1985 until the end of the 1990s has functioned as a “conservative” institutional trap for the future, by locking in a neo-liberal policy logic both at the EU level and, in part, at the national level (see also: McGowan 2001; Bailey 2009; Ross, 2010). Moreover, the ‘*nationalism paradox*’ of European unification (Cuperus 2007) reinforces cultural voting and becomes an additional factor of electoral weakness for parties of the social-democratic type as well as a factor favouring the consolidation of new populist parties.

Could this situation change easily? The answer is an unqualified “no”, because these “internal” and “external” factors represent sizeable and not short-term obstacles to any policy reorientation. In a sense, today, the “old” difficulty of effective political management of complex *class* dynamics is largely aggravated by the “new” difficulty of effective political management of even more complex *economic* and *institutional* dynamics. Thus, the lack of a winning ideological-programmatic formula, of a ‘single synthetic political strategy’ (see Merkel 1992b: 17), already at the source of the recent electoral crisis, risks being a relatively *lasting phenomenon*. With respect to the social-democratic electoral prospects, globalisation and the EU are obstacles to a sustained electoral recovery of social democracy.

III. CONCLUSIONS: A SMALLER SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

1. The process of social-democratic decline is highly systematic: it is relatively strong; it encompasses all countries (with the exception of southern Europe); it is confirmed from one decade to the next; it becomes deeper as it progresses; even when the electoral pendulum swings back, it systematically yields 'smaller' victories than in the past; and it provokes occasionally "catastrophic" results and temporary 'minor' collapses. The dynamic of decline is nevertheless complex, with the crisis proceeding in zigzag fashion. It is evidenced in marginal defeats, serious defeats, narrow victories, and landslides; it does not progress in a linear fashion, but largely takes the form of volatile performances (supported by volatile voters). A gradual, slow decline at aggregate level is however frequently violent at a national level. While it is conjuncturally discontinuous, it is persistent over the long term.

2. However our data are interpreted, the available electoral evidence fully justifies a division of the electoral time span of social democracy into three phases (each lasting approximately 20 years: 1950s and 60s, 1970s and 80s, 1990s and 2000s). This kind of division underscores better the specificity of the intervening phase (1970s and 80s: a period full of contradictory trends), as well as the scale of the electoral crisis of the 1990s and 2000s, and refines approaches, such as Merkel's, distinguishing as they do between the period prior to 1973 and subsequent years. Developments in Australia and New Zealand also confirm, but even more emphatically, that the period of weakening is *par excellence* the last 20 years (Data non included here). Broad economic and ideological cycles hold an important independent power in influencing electoral performances, but have no direct, self-evident and immediate influence on electoral results. In any case, within the small sphere of numbers and symbols, one can consider 1973, the year of the two dramatic defeats in Denmark and Norway, as the defining moment of a change of electoral era.

3. A particularly troubling finding is that those parties closest to the "classical" social-democratic model (whatever its definition) have been affected more than others and are to this extent more than others in the eye of the storm. It is the epicentre of historical social-democratic forces, the *hard core* of the socialist family, which is under the most intense pressure (with the partial exception of Sweden). On the other hand, it is surely noteworthy to find that parties belonging to liberal (United Kingdom, Ireland, but also New Zealand and Australia) or non social-democratic environments (Spain, Portugal, Greece: the *fourth* world of welfare capitalism, see Leibfried 2000: 193) have been doing better than those in more social-democratic environments (Data non included here). The tendency in question opens *new research agendas* and suggests new topics of inquiry (For a first explanation see Moschonas 2010).

4. The domination of economic liberalism has destabilized social democracy. The "political power of economic ideas" (to borrow Peter Hall's apt expression), which was an asset in the past, has become a liability for today's social-democratic parties. To some extent, social democracy was able to integrate the neoliberal register into its own political rhetoric and governmental output. But this "grafting" – the left's absorption of the right's economic agenda (Duncan 2006: 483) - while electorally

successful when first tried in the 1990s has undermined its capacity “to achieve electoral success over the long term” (Curtice 2007: 52; also, Bailey 2009: 32).

5. It is too soon to determine the economic crisis’ influence on the electoral cycle. Nonetheless, early post-economic crisis electoral results don’t bring promise of much better times. Moreover, recent social-democratic moves to the left, evident at the level of discourse, risk being without important policy consequences because of European constraints (in part put in place by social democrats themselves). Current developments in Europe offer fresh evidence of this. Despite the exceptional emergency circumstances, social-democratic leaders, always trapped amid European institutional constraints and poor cooperation, had a great difficulty in inventing new policy solutions attuned to the needs both of the scale of the crisis and of the European stage. In reality, they were seeking Keynesian type solutions to the crisis while at the same time striving to maintain a neo-liberal status quo – and to preserve the Stability and Growth Pact. In this sense, social democracy’s moves to the left are institutionally ‘rootless’. For now social democracy is still lacking a winning ideological-programmatic formula in the domain of economic and social policy.

6. The EU is not the ideal place for socialist ideologies, moderate or radical. It is not supportive of more economic regulation, a more encompassing welfare state, or Keynesian deficit spending. Thus, it has contributed to the electoral weakening of social democratic parties, in the process producing a significant political vacuum to their Left. The European Union and neo-liberalism may be a clue to why, despite the moral disaster of communism, the radical Left has survived the most catastrophic period of its history. Radical left parties have capitalized on deep frustrations within the mainstream-left electorate over issues such as Union itself, or social policy.

7. Overall, social-democratic parties have come down a notch in the political market. This change of scale describes a new condition. But this “new” condition does not imply that the downwards trend (at the aggregate level) will expand and deepen. It does imply, however, that there is no easy return to the electoral *status quo ante*. Being “smaller”, whether in the South or the North, will not prevent socialists from governing or from winning elections; but it could prevent them from being consistently successful over a long period. Social democracy is thus not “a threatened species” (Hinnfors 2006: 32), at least not yet. Furthermore, it is not the first time in history that social democracy is perceived (to borrow Stathis Kalyvas’s expression regarding Catholicism) as “a declining and spent force, retreating in front of modernization” (Kalyvas 2003: 303). This does not alter the fact that social-democratic parties are in the process of changing stature and dimension. They have become smaller, less imposing; and also less stable and robust.

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Notes

¹ The option of Merkel (2001) and Delwit (2005), who have included the Italian Centre-Left in their calculations, is no doubt intellectually legitimate, in as much as the space of the Italian Centre-Left, with or without the PSI, has always been occupied by an organized political force. In my view, my preference has the merit of greater consistency. In any event, with or without Italy the aggregate trend does not change significantly.

² The designation (Golden Age) produces “a false impression of social democratic potency in the years of the ‘long boom’” (Callaghan 2000: 436).

³ For the Austrians and the Germans, the 1970s was their best decade of the entire post-war period (with an average score that was impressive in the case of the SPO – 50 per cent – and excellent for the SPD – 44.2 per cent). For the Dutch (31 per cent) and the Finnish (25.4 per cent), the 1980s were their best years.

⁴ Some examples illustrate the new situation with perfect clarity: -17.1 per cent for the French socialists in 1993 (1988: 34.7%; 1993: 17.6%); -10.8 for the Norwegians in 2001; -7.9 for the Dutch in 1994 and another -13.9 in 2002; -8.9 for the Swedes in 1998; -7.9 for the Austrians in 1994; -6.8 for the Danish in 2001; -6.7 for the Belgians in 2007. Notwithstanding its small size, even the Irish Labour Party experienced great instability. It more than doubled its electoral strength in 1992 and then lost 8.9 per cent in the subsequent election (1989: 9.5%; 1992: 19.3%; 1997: 10.4%).

⁵ In the 2007 elections, PASOK posted its worst electoral performance (38.1%) since the late 1970s. However, we should note the excellent performance of the Greek socialists in 2009 (43.92%).