

2019

PASOKification: Fall of the European Center Left or a Transformation of the System

Jacob S. Cox
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/governance-unlv>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cox, Jacob S. (2019) "PASOKification: Fall of the European Center Left or a Transformation of the System," *Governance: The Political Science Journal at UNLV*: Vol. 6 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/governance-unlv/vol6/iss2/5>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in *Governance: The Political Science Journal at UNLV* by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Introduction

One of the noticeable trends in European politics in the past decade has been the decline of the traditional center-left parties. This is described by the popular term "PASOKification," named after the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) of Greece and its epic fall from power in the 2010s. However, despite the popular commentary about such decline, is there any objective evidence for this supposed decline? Or is it a transformation of the party system to be expected in any democracy? We will attempt to answer these questions in our survey. First, the article defines key concepts to clarify our analysis. Then, our theoretical framework will be established to guide and structure our study. Next, we will establish a hypothesis and then test it via a qualitative case study method. Finally, we shall conclude the analysis and explore future research opportunities and possible extensions.

Center-left parties in Europe have traditionally been major players in European politics and remain so today. However, what exactly is a center-left party? This can be a vague and broad term that covers various political groupings. Center-left is understood to be more moderate than and not as radical as others on the left are. For example, the French Socialist Party, "a deeply ambivalent relationship between the French Socialist Party and political radicalism" (Cole, 2011). Center-left parties want to hold power and play the role of reformer. The position of center-left parties is both to hold power and wield it. "The party's line in favor of participation in office," revolutionary actions outside the system is not the goal (Cole, 2011). Thus a center-left party sits on the left of the political spectrum but seeks change from within the system. For example, the Swedish Social Democratic Party in the 1930s used its control of parliament to bring about significant reforms (Berman, 2019). This staved off more radical parties on the left and cemented their political power. Center-left parties also tend to put on a more explicit appeal to national identity, unlike others on the left who feel national identity is less important. "The national 'project' of the center-left" (Pearce and Kenny, 2015) thus is to reform a country and make it more equitable, but not to overthrow the system or transform the state in a revolutionary manner.

The center-left is defined as a political party on the left that is reformist rather than revolutionary. However, the above definition is more ideological and includes a broad range of political parties. Thus to narrow the scope of parties we discuss in this inquiry, we must look at the parties that are not just the center-left but are traditional parties of power. That is parties that have won and held elective office. They have formed the government on the national level. For example, it is agreed that France's main center-left party is the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste in French or PS). Also, in the United Kingdom (hereafter Britain), the Labour Party is the main center-left party there. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD)

is usually the traditional center-left party. However, a better way to narrow the scope is to look at the membership of the Socialist and Democrats group. The S&D group is the largest center-left party in Europe and is currently the second-largest group in the European Parliament. In the most recent election, they won 153 seats to the parliament, just behind the conservative European People's Party (EPP, 2019). This article will examine the membership of this group as the criteria for which center-left parties. Since the group contains over 30 plus members (S&D, 2020), a sample of the specific members will be taken. For the inquiry, we will look at four parties from prominent European countries. The four parties to be selected are the Socialist Party of France, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Democratic Party of Italy, and the Labour Party of Britain.

What distinguishes these four parties is the decline in popular support that all four have suffered in recent years. For example, the Socialist Party of France has lost considerable support in recent elections and is now in opposition. The Labour Party has been in opposition since 2010 and has lost four general elections in a row. The Democratic Party has remained the second-largest party and is in government but has not seen its support increase from its height in the earlier part of the 2010s. The Social Democrats have remained in government since 2013, but their popular support has declined significantly in recent years. This article aims to try to find out what has caused this decline in support. Why have these four parties have seen declines? What does this tell us about the state of European politics at large?

Theory

Politics is often influenced by people's values and the culture of the country that is relevant. It is easy to see that recent events have influenced people's values, translating to their electoral preferences. All of the parties mentioned earlier have roots dating back to the late 19th century or reflect political traditions dating back to that era. The Democratic Party of Italy is the youngest of the group (founded in 2007) but reflects older political traditions in Italy. This includes Catholic leftists who have long been influential in Italian politics, with "in particular the formation of a new 'progressive Catholic' elite was strongly influenced by the experience of Lega democratica" (Biondi, 2016). Lega democratica was a Catholic leftist party that worked with elements of the fallen Communist Party to oppose the new Italian right of the 1990s (Biondi, 2016). What is important to understand is that these groups represent an older, more class-based type of politics. Labour was founded because working-class individuals could find representation. The Social Democrats and Socialists both reflect this working-class orientation. Most center-left parties reflect the tradition of working-class representation and looking out for the interests of the working class. Business traditionally aligned with the center-right to protect

its interests, with the Conservative Party of Britain serving as "its political representative for a century" (McMenamin, 2019). However, this class-based type of politics has not been the same since the end of the 20th century. For example, when Labour was founded in 1901, most working-class Britons likely worked in factories or resource extraction (i.e., coal mining). However, today, deindustrialization has hit, and the coal mines have all but closed in Britain. The tertiary sector (aka service sector) now dominates in Europe. With this economic shift, a shift in values has occurred, and thus one can say people's values have changed with it. Also, when values start to shift, so do the issues that people care about.

Robert Inglehart and Pippa Norris propose a "silent revolution" that has occurred in societal values. They point out that Western societies after World War II, "experienced peace, unprecedented prosperity, and the emergence of advanced welfare states, making survival more secure than ever before" (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Now suddenly, the working classes who once faced abject poverty and excessive mortality no longer necessarily had to fear for their survival. Thus new values began to sweep in to fill the void, what the authors called "post-materialist values." In other words, one's material survival was now a given, and thus other issues became more important. However, post-material values "were most prevalent among the younger and more secure strata of high-income countries" (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). They were not the necessary positions of the less secure. When the post-war boom came to an end in the 1970s and 1980s, working classes who skewed lower-income and older began to react to post-material values. "This triggered a cultural backlash among older and less-secure people who were disoriented by the erosion of familiar values (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Focused more on traditional materialist values, they began to react in a backlash towards the perceived erosion of the societies they once knew. In other words, this silent revolution in values, which center-left parties adopted, resulted in a backlash that may have helped feed their declining support.

This hypothesis of the so-called silent revolution is rooted in the literature on new social movements. "The new social movements are environmental, anti-nuclear, peace, feminist, and gay and lesbian" (Handler, 1992). According to Handler, these new social movements were less concerned with socioeconomic concerns than with cultural ones. "The Materialist/Postmaterialist dimension has become the basis of a major new axis of political polarization in Western Europe" (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). With the significant cultural changes, now these new social movements began to bring the center-left with them. All of this centers on the idea of post-modernism. According to Handler, "The major theme in post-modernism that I emphasize is subversion, the commitment to undermine dominant discourse" (Handler, 1992). In Europe, "political protest in Europe since 2000 with the emergence of the global justice movement" (Peterson et al., 2015).

Post-modernism does not accept broad themes or universal truths. Instead, it sees truth from the specific context in which that truth exists. It is not inaccurate to say that post-modernism is a type of cultural relativism. New social movements such as human rights, peace, anti-nuclear, LGBT, challenged the traditional social narratives and demanded change. "Though recruited from the more secure strata that traditionally supported conservative parties, they have gravitated toward parties of the Left, supporting political and cultural change" (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). There have been some challenges to this framework, such as the recent anti-austerity protests motivated by opposition to cuts to public services. Peterson et al. have noted that these protests are motivated by a sense of economic survival and injustice. This may well indicate that the new social movements have continued to exist with the older labor movements. Material concerns do not disappear but now appear to flare up when economic crises occur rather more consistently. This theoretical framework explains why electoral preferences have changed so much in recent decades. Center-left parties have been influenced by these new values and have begun to shift away from their traditional class-based approaches towards a more culturally oriented approach. As culture has changed over the last forty years, political preferences would inevitably change as well. The framework of the silent revolution and post-modernism also gives us a window into how nothing is static and things do change over time. Post-modernism is premised on challenging traditional narratives and challenging them. It also makes sense that this framework would include a backlash from those who see it as a challenge to their world.

"The Postmaterialist Left appeals primarily to a middle-class constituency and is only faintly interested in the classic program of the Left" (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Inglehart and Norris refer to the idea that traditional left-wing parties are interested in redistribution and economic security for their constituents. Thus the support for the welfare state, income redistribution, and limits on business. As an example, the French Socialist Party in the 2017 presidential election. The two leading candidates had quite different visions of what the party should emphasize. Manuel Valls emphasized a platform that was "business-friendly, pro-European (including full acceptance of the Eurozone and its constraints) and socially liberal" (Hanley, 2017). While Benoit Hamon emphasized a more traditional platform, "argued against austerity in favor of a universal income, talked about how to tackle unemployment in a future where high-tech robots would change the nature of productivity and called for a greening of the economy" (Hanley, 2017). This is only one case, but it demonstrates the changes within the center-left in recent years. Once center-left parties were defined usually by concern for economic issues contrasted by a more post-materialist-oriented approach. Hamon ultimately won the Socialist Party's nomination for president but failed to make it to the second round. Emmanuel Macron, the eventual winner, took on a platform with eerie similarities to Valls. His platform was to "be built on increased economic and cultural

liberalism, but with some redistribution" (Hanley, 2017). This example demonstrates that the theoretical framework presented by Inglehart and Norris along with the post-modernism and new social movement literature can present us with a picture that can help explain the decline of center-left parties and their recent struggles at the polls.

Hypothesis

The decline of center-left parties is an observable phenomenon across Europe in recent years. "Once-strong center-left parties...are also near historic lows in terms of their most recent legislative election results" (Taylor, 2018). The four parties that we have selected for this article all have seen their support decline in recent years, and they are struggling in recent years. "The French Socialist Party, German Social Democratic Party and Dutch Labor Party – three other major left-of-center parties – recorded their worst-ever results in the postwar era" (Taylor, 2018). Using the theoretical framework above, we will work out whether this decline results from changing politics or voters seeking out new options. Instead, we can say that it is likely changing cultural values as exemplified by the rise of post-materialist values and their adoption by the center-left parties that have caused their electoral base of the working class to disappear. As the traditional causes that the center-left supported have become less important, the working class feel threatened in their economic security and social position. The new importance of immigration and culture indicates that new political cleavages are appearing and that center-left parties are in an impossible position. Either embrace social liberalism and risk the loss of working-class support that comes with it or have a more traditional program and step away from socially liberal values, but in the process lose the support of progressives. Center-left parties have always been alliances between the working class and social liberals/progressives. Now it seems that as voters polarize along lines concerning culture and identity, center-left parties cannot please all and have seen their support sap away in the meantime.

Methodology

The methodology for this study shall be a qualitative case study of each case and then identifying common patterns. These common patterns will be used to draw conclusions that will either confirm or reject our hypothesis. Case studies are narratives that tell a story about a situation and make observations about it. Here we examine each case and try to tell why these parties have ended up in the situation that they have ended up in. Quantitative methods will not be effective here since we are dealing with cultural values and the actions of individuals and institutions. These are not necessarily things that can be quantified or explained by

mathematical means. Qualitative methods include: "case study methods, small N analysis, comparative methods, concept analysis, the logic of inquiry, comparative historical methods, the ethnographic tradition of field research, constructivist methods, interpretive methods" (Bevir and Kedar, 2008). A case study is defined by Joe Feagin, "an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon" (Feagin, 1991 (2)). Thus, it is the best method to use here.

The case study method is necessary for our study of the phenomena. The case study looks at one phenomenon: here the decline of support of European center-left parties. We can look at various factors to help explain this situation. The case study will use election results and data and polling data to help us fill out the narrative. This will use popular sources to examine how the media and the public at large see the parties. Again, these are to gauge how the public at large views the parties and what is going with them. Commentary provides another valuable source of what other factors may be at work as well. It is important to note that while we are looking at what issues matter today and why that is important, it is also essential to look at other factors. Parties can struggle due to scandal, poor leadership, the popularity of the incumbent government, and other factors. The case study allows us to go in-depth with each situation and find the answers to explain each one. Qualitative methods allow us to get a better sense of what is going on. While quantitative methods can do many things and give a great deal of information, they can leave us with an incomplete picture. There are gaps stemming from culture, which is hard to quantify. Looking at cultural values often requires an understanding of the history and characteristics of a society. The case study method here can help us begin to tell the story of the decline of these parties and why it is occurring.

Analysis

The analysis of each case will be done individually, and then what common patterns emerge will be made in the conclusions. First will be Britain's Labour Party, then the French Socialist Party, then the Social Democratic Party of Germany, and finally the Democratic Party of Italy.

I-Labour Party of Britain

The Labour Party, founded in 1901, has been the main center-left party in the United Kingdom since the 1920s. The party is currently the Official Opposition and the second-largest party in the House of Commons, the elected and most important chamber of the British Parliament. Labour was previously in government from 1997 to 2010 under Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown. Since then, Labour has lost four general elections in a row and in 2019 suffered its worst defeat in terms

of seats in 84 years. The party seemed just two years earlier to be a comeback path but now is back in the political wilderness.

Labour was founded in 1901 with the express intent to represent the working class and has long been tied with Britain's trade unions. It has always sought to work within the political system and has never keen on more radical action. This "shows all the hallmarks of Labour's historic attempt to establish itself as a respectable part of the British political tradition" (Pearce and Kenny, 2015). Labour has always attempted to have a form of "social patriotism" emphasized throughout the party's history (Pearce and Kenny, 2015). This leaves the party in a position where it seeks to implement socialism and advances Britain's interests. Labour has been challenged recently by the rise of regionalist parties, especially the Scottish National Party. Many have accused it of not addressing the concerns of Scotland and other regions of Britain. Pearce and Kenny argue that two key pillars of Labour's values have been undermined in recent years: "the primal values of unitary sovereignty and parliamentary government – all of which have been intrinsic to Labour's constitutional and national thinking – are facing serious threat" (Pearce and Kenny, 2015). Labour's focus on material issues like opposition to government austerity may not be necessarily problematic but appears to be causing the party to suffer at the polls.

The party at the latest election in 2019 dropped from 40% of the popular vote at the previous election to 32% of the popular vote and losing over 60 seats in parliament. The main issue of that election was Brexit. Britain's decision to leave the European Union was completed on January 31, 2020. Labour has been deeply divided by the issue since the referendum in 2016. "The Labour Party has its most left-wing leader since at least 1983, and the radical left is increasingly prominent at all levels of the party" (McMenamin, 2019). Since the left in Britain has been divided on the issue of Europe, this left of the party with an incoherent position on the subject. The leader referred to above was Jeremy Corbyn, who has since resigned. Corbyn supported the Remain side in the referendum, despite his Euroscepticism. Labour has primarily embraced left-wing politics and wanted to focus on issues like wages, public services, and nationalization. It has even attracted some support from businesses concerned over the Conservatives' Brexit positions (McMenamin, 2019). However, Labour has continued to be plagued by internal division, incoherent messaging, and poor leadership. This points to a party that is lacking an effective plan to address new issues facing these states.

II-French Socialist Party:

The Socialist Party of France was founded in 1970 and remains France's main center-left party. They are the direct successors to the French Section of the Socialist International (SFIO) that collapsed in the late 1960s (Cole, 2011). The party has sat firmly on the center-left for decades and is easily distinguished from

the more radical sections of the French left, including the Communist Party and France Insoumise (FI). The Socialist Party last held the Presidency of France from 2012 to 2017 with Francois Hollande. Hollande proved a highly unpopular president and is widely believed to have caused his party's massive decline in support. The party is currently the third-largest in the French National Assembly but is no longer a significant force in French politics. The party even has speculated that it may not put a candidate for the next presidential election. However, whether the unpopularity of Hollande enough to explain the fall of the Socialists is unknown.

The Socialist Party is slightly unusual because ideological preferences have traditionally been fundamental to the party. "The Socialists' structural difficulty in accepting the exercise of power as a persistent feature of its identity" (Cole, 2011). The Socialists are the original SFIO and have always been more motivated by ideological priorities than any desire to exercise power. When François Mitterrand united various leftist parties into the modern Socialists, he promised an electoral alliance with the other major force on the French left, the Communists (Cole, 2011). The Socialist tradition in France has favored unity of the left and maintaining ideological integrity. This means that holding elective office and maintaining power has rarely been the main priorities for the French left. Also, the French Communist Party was a significant force for much of the 20th century before fading out in the 1980s and 1990s. This left the lane where the Socialists could compete relatively narrow.

What can explain the recent electoral collapse of the Socialist Party and its inability to recover? Many would attribute it to the deep unpopularity of the previous president Francois Hollande who left office in 2017. Hollande proved incredibly unpopular with him leaving office with just a 4% approval rating. His attempts to reform the French economy and society ultimately failed. Hollande's administration was rocked by economic upheaval and multiple terrorist attacks, such as the November 2015 attacks in Paris. Hollande's position as party leader had always been fairly weak since he seized back the party leadership after initially losing it (Hanley, 2017). This left the party divided and constantly trying to fight challengers from the left. One prominent challenger was Jean-Luc Melenchon, who finished fourth in the 2017 presidential election. He emphasized a more left-wing platform than the Socialists were willing to back, even with the leftist Benoit Hamon as their candidate. On economic reform, "Hollande had tried to shift the PS, furtively, to a more liberal line, he could only go so far" (Hanley, 2017). This likely disgruntled many traditional supporters of the Socialists who also became concerned by the rise of terrorism and migration into France. The Socialists never adopted a coherent strategy to address this. Hamon wanted a softer line towards Islam in France, but others favored a more conservative approach. With multiple

internal divisions and a highly unpopular administration, the party could not withstand the electoral tidal wave that was Emmanuel Macron.

The Socialist Party is a product of decades of political evolution on the left. The SFIO was reformed under the leadership of Francois Mitterrand into the Socialist Party (Cole, 2011). The Socialist Party attempted to maintain its traditional alliances on the left last doing under Lionel Jospin in the Plural Left cabinet of the 1990s (Cole, 2011). However, the party has proven unable to cope with the challenges presented to them in recent years. Francois Hollande likely alienated the left with his attempts to push a more economically liberal line. Then the party could not decide whether to maintain the reforms or not. Also, the wave of terror attacks, increased migration, and concerns about Islam only further fueled its decline. The party did not have a coherent position and was divided amongst its members about what to do. It serves as an example that if a party fails to make up its mind on issues relating to culture and immigration can lead to disastrous consequences.

III-Social Democratic Party of Germany

The oldest of our four parties, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), was founded in 1885. The Social Democrats have been Germany's main center-left party since the foundation of West Germany in 1949 and the reunification in 1990. The party has been in government since 2013 as the junior partner in the coalition government led by its traditional rival, the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union. However, the party's support has collapsed in recent years, and now polling indicates that if an election were to be held, they would collapse to only about 16% and possibly behind the Greens (POLITICO, 2020). What caused the SPD to sink to such low heights? If the party were to achieve only 16% at the polls, it would be its worst result in the years since World War II. The SPD's current situation indicates a party that saw its base disappear and its support from the general electorate.

The Social Democratic Party of Germany has been considered a prime example of a modern center-left party. This has some historical roots dating back to the late 19th century. The SPD began life as a fairly typical Marxist party dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. Nevertheless, within a few years, it evolved into a more reformist party dedicated to parliamentary action rather than the revolution. The party had adopted the Gothenburg program in 1884 that effectively abandoned the idea of a socialist revolution in Germany. "Tribute was paid to Marxism, it was not fully understood or incorporated in the program" (Marks, 1939), but the party lost its appetite for going to violent and likely illegal means to achieve its goals. The party by 1914, "with its million members the largest political party in the country and the largest socialist party in the world" (Marks, 1939). The party was driven by practical necessity to adopt a reformist rather than

revolutionary line. Despite its loyalty to the traditions of Marxism, it ultimately decided that competing legitimately within the political system was a better alternative to being repressed by the state. Germany was a rapidly industrializing country, and a party was needed to address the needs of the working class. The party ultimately emerged as one of the leading parties in the Weimar Republic period but was brutally repressed during the rule of the Nazi Party. Following World War II, the party returned to compete in the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany. Even after reunification, the party remained the major center-left party and maintained its reformist platform.

This historical background gives insight into the mindset of the SPD and why it believes in what it believes. The party has long relied on working-class support to maintain itself electorally. However, the party has lost much of that support and support from the electorate at large. "The SPD has, for many years (or at least since the demise of the so-called 'Third Way'), lacked a social democratic, voter-friendly vision for the future that convincingly addresses the key issues of globalization, migration, and technological change" (Jun, 2018). The SPD has now been government with its traditional rival, the CDU/CSU (a coalition of two conservative parties), since 2013. The SPD has been perceived by many as being little more than a slightly more left-wing version of CDU/CSU. The party has also failed to provide much of a message that motivates voters to vote for it. Internal dissension has also not helped matters much either. The party suffers from internal division about how to best combat the issues facing Germany today. "Balancing of individual responsibility and state solidarity has generated major controversies within the SPD, which stem from Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 social reforms" (Jun, 2018). Thus, the party has seen its inability to clearly define what it stands for hurt it at the polls.

With its incoherent messaging and the dominance of the CDU/CSU, the SPD continues to find itself in decline. In the most recent parliamentary election, the party dropped to just 20.5% of the vote, its lowest share of the vote since 1949 (IFES, 2019). The rise of the Greens in the interim is hardly a surprise to anyone watching. The party has taken a strongly pro-migrant stance and harshly opposes the far-right Alternative for Germany (commonly AfD). The SPD more confused and confounding positions on these issues left many voters wanting something else. It is important to note that the Left Party, which is a direct descendant of the former ruling communist party of East Germany, has also hamstrung the SPD's support in recent years. Germany's electoral system has allowed SPD to avoid losing its position entirely, but it has made life more complex. "It is a defect of proportional rules that voters cannot hold politicians or parties accountable for policy choices made in multiparty coalition governments" (Rosenbluth and Shapiro, 2018). The SPD has lost much of its working-class support, who no longer trusts the party and

now relies more on middle-class support to maintain its position within the government.

The SPD is widely considered the first modern center-left party in Europe. It gave up more revolutionary leanings in the 19th century to become a more reformist and more electable party. However, it struggles with internal division and lacks a coherent platform. The SPD also faces new challenges from the left (the Greens and the Left) and the right (the AfD), which remove some of its electoral support. Compared to a few years ago, where it was a party of the urban middle class, the Greens now seem on the cusp of potentially joining a government led by the CDU/CSU. The SPD has been hit by issues that are sometimes beyond its control, like the popularity of CDU/CSU and a migrant crisis in 2015. Now, its working-class base no longer seems to trust the party to look out for its interests. The "centre-left party's room for maneuver has become even more limited" (Jun, 2018). They have angered many voters who see it as either too conservative on migration and culture or too liberal on migration and culture. Either, the SPD finds itself in a challenging position with a lack of trust from the public and likely having to remain in government at least until whenever the current pandemic ends. The SPD can serve as an example of when public trust is lost, as voters have a tough time forgiving.

IV-Democratic Party of Italy

The Democratic Party of Italy is the youngest of the parties, only being founded in 2007. The party formed out of a coalition of various left-wing parties that eventually coalesced into the Democratic Party. This included former elements of the Italian Communist Party that collapsed in the early 1990s and Catholic leftists formerly part of the Lega Democratica (Biondi, 2016). As Biondi points out, the roots of the Democratic Party date back to the opposition to Silvio Berlusconi and his conservative coalition. "In 1996 the heirs of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) together with a segment of the former Christian Democratic Party (DC) formed an electoral alliance and ran against Silvio Berlusconi" (Biondi, 2016). The Democratic Party leads a coalition of leftist parties known commonly as the center-left coalition. The Democratic Party is currently the second-largest party in Italy's parliament and forms the government with the Five Star Movement. However, its current support is at 21%, while its coalition partner has fallen even further to only about 12% (Politico, 2020).

One cannot talk of the Democratic Party without mentioning its most recent leader, Matteo Renzi. Renzi took over the party in 2013 and eventually became Prime Minister. He resigned as Prime Minister in 2016 but remains an influential figure today. "Looking more closely at Renzi's impact on the internal organization of the PD, the most relevant novelty is his "presidential" style of leadership" (Guidi, 2014). Renzi took a very centralized approach to the job of the leader of the party.

He usually had decisions approved by the party's board without consulting other factions within the party (Guidi, 2014). Renzi never usually considered the views of the minority in his decision-making. This caused the party to have a broad and sometimes incoherent ideology. "At the "boundaries" of party ideology are rather blurred and can be continuously redefined by the party leadership" (Guidi, 2014). Renzi appears to have taken this approach to his approach as Prime Minister. He already overhauled the electoral system in 2014 and then in 2016 attempted to overhaul Italy's political system with a constitutional referendum completely. The referendum was a failure and forced Renzi out as Prime Minister. "Mr. Renzi staked his political future on his attempt to change Italy's cumbersome political system. He wanted to strengthen the central government and weaken the Senate, the upper house of parliament" (Alder, 2016). It appears that Renzi's attempts to further solidify his control over the Italian political system only backfired and led to public resentment against him and the party at large, leading to his downfall.

Nevertheless, this alone cannot be the only explanation for the party's recent struggles. Indeed, Italians were not happy about the government's attempts to centralize power within the central government in Rome, but it seems that the party is being punished quite harshly for one thing alone. Consider in 2013, the party won the most votes and nearly tied with the center-right for seats, yet five years later, in 2018, the party dropped to just 21% of the vote and remained there in 2020 (IFES, 2020).

The issues that matter to Italian voters have shifted in recent years. During the European migrant crisis, Italy was one of the major entry points for immigrants. Immigration has dropped in Italy since its peak in 2014, yet it remains a significant issue for Italian voters. The Lega Nord, the main right-wing party in Italy, took a hardline stance on the subject in 2018. "The fight against illegal immigration was the hallmark of the League's 2018 electoral campaign: (Di Maio, 2019). Any casual observer could see that Italians were concerned with it. Even when the government adopted harsher policies towards migrants, the concerns have not gone away (De Maio, 2019). The Lega Nord continues to maintain a lead in polls despite the decline in migration and them being forced out of the government last year. Renzi, who is well known for pro-immigration positions, kept the Democratic Party on a strictly pro-immigration platform, undermining its attempts to be a more catch-all party. The Democratic Party expanded in the middle of the 2010s to appeal to a much broader swath of the electorate. However, membership has been cut down by voter concerns not seemingly being properly addressed by the party.

The Democratic Party has appeared to be the victim of its success. It attempted to unite the left, which was largely successful. It has also managed to keep the various faction of the Italian left ranging from former Communist Party members to leftist Catholics within its coalition (Biondi, 2016). However, as it expanded its appeal, the party also centralized to encourage stricter control. Italy's

political system is notorious for parties tearing themselves apart and splintering into various factions. The Democratic Party is not a traditional working-class party as it is more of a broad coalition of left-wing groups. However, it does rely on working-class support, and it is not hard to see why immigration seen as a threat by the working class would help cause the party's decline in support. While the party has seen some recovery in the polls due to its handling of the current pandemic, it remains behind. The Italian left had always been divided amongst themselves but united to take on a resurgent right in the 1990s. For example, "Progressive Catholic elites started to perceive themselves as closer to Italy's non-Catholic left-wing" (Biondi, 2016). This union of various factions can be undermined when a leader like Renzi attempts to centralize power too much in his position. This and the party's maintenance of pro-immigrant positions likely explains why so many of the party's more centrist and conservative supporters ended up abandoning them. The Democratic Party, however, again does not fit neatly with the other cases. This is because it is not a traditional working-class party but rather a broad coalition of the left concerned with serving that class's interests. Thus, the Democratic Party does serve as an interesting example of what could happen to any center-left party, even if it is not a traditional working-class party.

Conclusions and Future Research

Ultimately what are the common patterns we see through all of our cases? The main answer is significant changes in the issues that matter the most to voters. While certainly economic issues remain important, there are increasing concerns over immigration, national identity, and nationalism. This fits with our silent revolution framework proposed by Inglehart and Norris. Originating with a series of events in recent years, including the migrant crisis, Brexit, and the increasing presence of Islam in Europe, what voters' value and care about has changed. This factor, the changing in voter concerns, however, does not tell us the story entirely. All of these parties have suffered from internal divisions and a lack of coherent messaging. All four parties have faced fierce internal debates over their futures and have yet to develop clear plans to respond to the changing political environment.

Party leaders also have not helped the situation, most prominently Francois Hollande and his deeply unpopular presidency, which effectively crippled his Socialist Party. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership was also considered incredibly poor. So it appears that it is not only the increasing polarization of voters about issues regarding post-material versus material values but also that party's internal issues can also be highly influential. The working class may not be voting for these center-left parties anymore, but it does not mean this will continue. Future research should focus on the rise of new political parties on the left and right. It should also seek to understand the relationship between the economy and the cultural changes.

Whatever the case of the decline of the center-left in the four countries is the result of new issues becoming relevant or the decline of class politics and the internal issues of the parties themselves. Things may change if the parties can overcome these issues and make a better effort to address their traditional bases' concerns over the last several decades. However, the choice to embrace a more post-materialist vision might drive the party away from the working class. Alternatively, parties may return to a more traditional, materialist approach while losing their progressive supporters.

References

- Alder, K. (2016, Dec. 5). Matteo Renzi's referendum defeat risks Italy political crisis. BBC. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38204189>.
- Berman, S. (2019). Populism is a Symptom Rather than a Cause: Democratic Disconnect, the Decline of the Center-Left, and the Rise of Populism in Western Europe. *Polity*, 51(4), 654–667. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1086/705378>
- Bevir, M., & Kedar, A. (2008). Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology. *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(3), 503-517. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from www.jstor.org/stable/20446758.
- Biondi, L. (2016). Lega democratica and the making of Italy's center-left. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21(3), 426–444. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2016.1169886>
- Cole, A. (2011). The French Socialist Party and Its Radical Ambiguity. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 29(3), 29–48. Retrieved from April 22, 2020 <https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2011.290303>
- Cruddas, J., & Byrne, L. (2013). The condition of Britain: A new politics of society for the centre-left. *Public Policy Research*, 19(4), 217–225. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-540X.2013.00712.x>
- De Maio, Giovanna (2019, January 14). Italy and Immigration: Europe's Achilles' Heel. Brookings Institution. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/14/italy-and-immigration-europes-achilles-heel/>.
- Feagin, J. (1992). *A Case for the Case Study*. University of North Carolina Press. (Date accessed April 22, 2020)
- Gramlich, J. and Simmons, K. (2018, July 12). 5 key takeaways about populism and the political landscape in Western Europe. Pew Research. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/12/5-key-takeaways-about-populism-and-the-political-landscape-in-western-europe/>
- Guidi, M. (2014). The Democratic Party of Matteo Renzi. *Italian Politics*, 30, 51-66. Retrieved from April 22, 2020 www.jstor.org/stable/44254761.
- Handler, J. (1992). Post-modernism, Protest, and the New Social Movements. *Law & Society Review*, 26(4), 697-731. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from doi:10.2307/3053811.
- Hanley, D. (2018). Left and Centre-Left in France--Endgame or Renewal? *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(3), 521–537. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsx042>

- Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2017). Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 443-454. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000111>
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) (2019, May 23). Election for the European Parliament. IFES. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3156/>.
- Jun, U. (2018). Germany: Little hope in times of crisis. In Manwaring R. & Kennedy P. (Eds.), *Why the left loses: The Decline of the Centre-Left in Comparative Perspective* (pp. 103-122). Bristol: Bristol University Press. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from doi:10.2307/j.ctt22p7khr.13.
- Marks, H. (1939). The Sources of Reformism in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, 1890-1914. *The Journal of Modern History*, 11(3), 334-356. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from www.jstor.org/stable/1899445.
- McMenamin, I. (2020). Party Identification, the Policy Space and Business Donations to Political Parties. *Political Studies*, 68(2), 293–310. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719841243>.
- Pearce, N., & Kenny, M. (2015). What national story does the centre-left need to tell? *Juncture*, 22(1), 4–10. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-5876.2015.00830.x>
- Peterson, A., Wahlström, M., & Wennerhag, M. (2015). European Anti-Austerity Protests – Beyond "old" and "new" social movements? *Acta Sociologica*, 58(4), 293-310. Retrieved May 14, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24569586>
- Politico (2020, Apr. 20). Germany-National parliamentary voting intention. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>.
- Politico (2020, Apr. 20). Italy-National parliamentary voting intention. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/>.
- Rosenbluth, F., & Shapiro, I. (2018). Of Labradoodles and Poodledors: Germany. In *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself* (pp. 161-177). New Haven; London: Yale University Press. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6hp3bf.11
- Socialists and Democrats (S&D) (2020). National parties. Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/who-we-are/our-members/national-parties>.
- Taylor, K. (2018, Sept. 12). Swedish election highlights decline of center-left parties across Western Europe. Pew Research. Retrieved April 22, 2020 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/12/swedish-election-highlights-decline-of-center-left-parties-across-western-europe/>