

The electoral decline of social democratic parties and the rise of the radical right in Europe during the refugee crisis

*Social democratic parties have experienced a significant electoral decline across Europe in recent years. **James F. Downes** and **Edward Chan** draw on the latest election data in demonstrating that social democratic parties have lost out considerably in the ongoing refugee crisis period, with populist radical right parties gaining considerably from this decline and achieving a high degree of electoral success at the ballot box. These results have important implications for the future of social democratic parties and for liberal democracy across Europe.*



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The electoral decline of social democratic parties?

While the argument that social democrats have been [running out of ideas](#) is [up for debate](#), their electoral performance has been significantly [below par](#) in recent years. The once-prominent Socialist Party (PS) in France was decimated with only thirty seats in the National Assembly. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) had their worst electoral result since the post-war period. Furthermore, twelve out of fifteen EU governments were led by centre-left parties in the late 1990s. Yet, this number [dwindled to five](#) by 2006.

The refugee crisis context

The refugee crisis that began in 2015 has had a [profound impact](#) on party politics and competition across European Union (EU) member states. The ongoing refugee crisis has created distinct electoral opportunities for right-wing parties, particularly for the populist radical right to ramp up the immigration issue and capture disaffected voters. The [salience](#) of the immigration issue has also increased amongst voters in a [number of EU countries](#) and has created a fertile climate in which the radical right has been able to prosper.

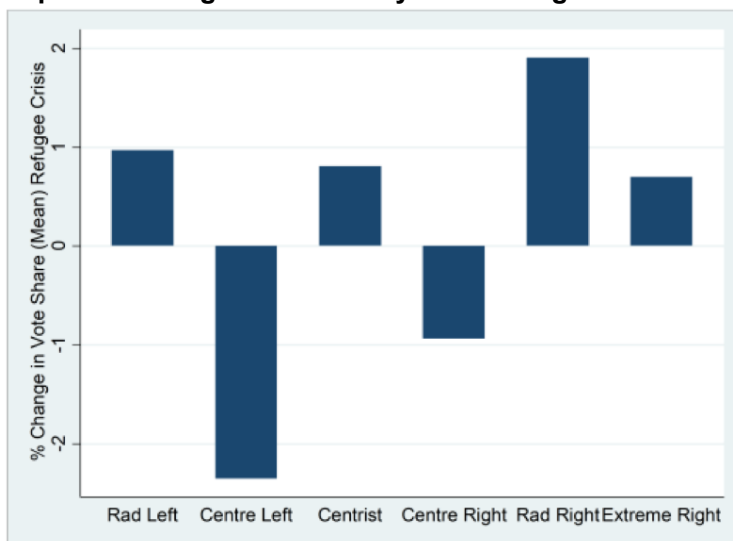
The radical right have also been able to play up their 'hard' Euroscepticism card, with the EU currently besieged by both Brexit and the refugee crisis. The recent EU summit on the refugee crisis and handling of asylum seekers has further highlighted [internal party splits](#) between mainstream centre-right (Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU-CSU Coalition) and centre-left parties on how to tackle this important policy issue. This is likely to have played into the hands of radical right parties across Europe.

Social democratic parties have tended to appear hesitant on the immigration issue and this has likely benefited the radical right. A number of centre-left governing parties at the start of this century were in favour of the EU's freedom of movement principle. The case can be made that this strategy is likely to have alienated traditional working class voters, leading once strong centre-left partisans to join the ranks of the radical right in recent years.

The electoral story: volatility

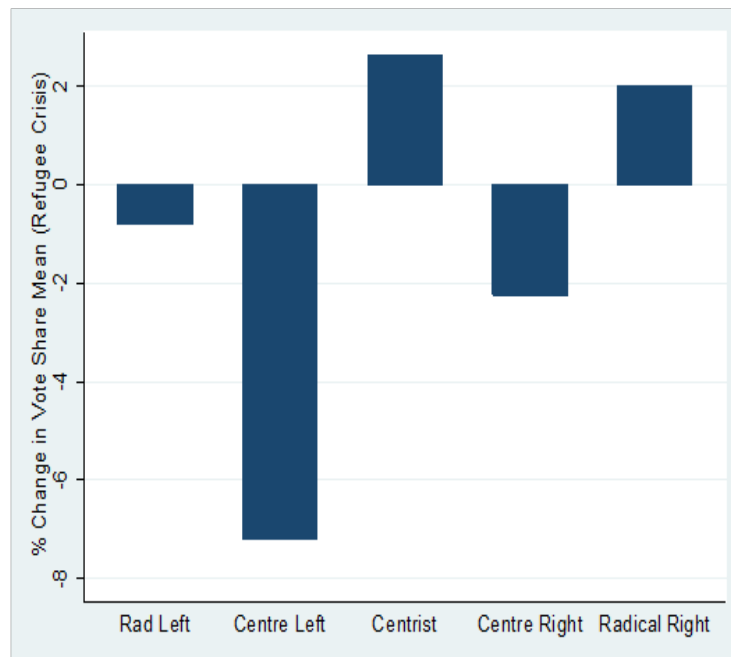
Figures 1 and 2 depict the overall percentage change in vote share for different types of political parties alongside incumbent parties (Figure 2) in the last two national parliamentary (legislative) elections that cover the electoral periods between 2011 and 2018 in 28 EU member states, and which coincide with the ongoing refugee crisis. Both figures show how centre-left parties have lost out considerably in this electoral period. Particularly striking is the fact that radical right parties have been the main 'winners' electorally speaking from the ongoing refugee crisis period.

Figure 1: Social democratic parties losing out electorally in the refugee crisis context



Source: Authors' own data

Figure 2: Social democratic incumbents (governing parties) losing out electorally



Source: Authors' own data

Figure 3 below further depicts this strong relationship and draws on recent national parliamentary elections data from 2017–18 that took place in EU member states, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria and Hungary. A number of important patterns emerge from these elections. There appears to be a strong link between the electoral decline of social democratic parties and an increase in the percentage vote share for a number of radical right parties.

Social democratic parties performed considerably worse in France (PS), the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), Germany (SPD) and Italy (PD). In the Netherlands, the voter base for PvdA has completely collapsed since 2012. Most significantly, radical right parties in Germany (AfD) and Italy (League) gained landmark electoral results in the respective legislative elections.

The recent 2018 Hungarian legislative election also provides an additional important case, whereby the centre-left (MSZP) saw a substantial reduction in their overall vote share. At the same time, the incumbent centre-right Fidesz party under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán scored a decisive electoral victory and the radical right opposition party Jobbik also performed well electorally, albeit on a much smaller scale.

However, it is important to note the dominance of right-wing politics in [Hungary](#) and how the incumbent centre-right party Fidesz at times now bears more resemblance to a radical right party than a governing centre-right party. This is also important as [recent research](#) by James Downes and Matthew Loveless have argued that 'challenger' (non-incumbent) centre-right parties may be best placed ideologically to exploit key issues such as immigration in times of crisis, compared to [centre-left parties](#).

Evidently, choosing to sweep the immigration issue under the carpet and even downplaying this issue has not helped their cause electorally. Therefore, the centre-left electoral decline appears to be more pronounced in the refugee crisis and at the same time marks a continuation of electoral patterns witnessed in the [recent](#) economic crisis period.

Figure 3: The 2017–18 social democratic electoral decline

Country & election years	Social democratic party	% Vote share change (social democratic parties)	Seat share change (+/-)	Incumbent pre-election (Yes/ No)	Incumbent post-election (Yes/ No)	Radical right party electoral success (Yes/No)	Centre right party electoral success	Radical right entered into coalition government (Yes/No)
Germany (2013–17)	Social Democratic Party (SPD) [1]	-5.2	-40	Yes	Yes	Yes (AfD)	No	No
France (2012–17)	Socialist Party (PS) [2]	-32.4	-286	Yes	No	Yes (FN)	No	No
Netherlands (2012–17)	Labour Party (PvdA) [3]	-19.1	-29	Yes	No	Yes (PVV)	No	No
Italy (2013–18)	Democratic Party (PD) [4]	N/A	-180	Yes	No	Yes (LEAGUE)	No	Yes
Austria (2013–17)	Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)	0.1	0	Yes	No	Yes (FPÖ)	Yes	Yes
Hungary (2014–18)	Hungarian Socialist Party & Dialogue for Hungary Party (MSZP-Dialogue)	-13.7	-10	No	No	Yes (JOBBIK)	Yes	Yes (The traditional centre-right party has arguably become a radical right party under Orbán.)

Source: Authors' own data

Notes: Electoral success is defined as a party increasing its vote share from the last national parliamentary election. [1] CDU/CSU suffered a decline in vote share but still remained as incumbents after the election. [2] All the data is taken from the second round of the French legislative election. The vote and seat share change counts towards the centre-left alliance was comprised of PS, Left Party (Gauche), the Greens, the Radical Party of the Left (PRG). [3] VVD Party saw a reduction in their overall vote share but managed to hold onto power and enter into a coalition government after the election. [4] Figures for Italy's centre-left coalition are presented here.

The decline of the left and the 'rise' of the radical right?

The electoral decline of traditional social democratic parties has [continued](#) in the refugee crisis period and has coincided with sharp electoral increases for a number of populist radical right parties across Europe. Notable patterns here can be observed in [France](#), [Germany](#), the [Netherlands](#), [Austria](#) and [Italy](#) where the radical right have benefited considerably from the electoral slide of social democratic parties. The failure of the centre-left to confront the immigration issue is arguably key in explaining their electoral slide in recent years. However, there are shortcomings to the electoral success for the radical right. In the cases of France and the Netherlands, both the radical right Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders and the Front National (FN) under Marine Le Pen did not do as well as initially expected by political commentators. The case of Marine Le Pen demonstrated how a 'populist' centrist candidate in the form of Emmanuel Macron was able to defeat her in the 2017 French Presidential Election. The case of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) at the 2017 UK General Election provides a [case](#) where the radical right vote collapsed.

Nonetheless, the radical right have continuously played up the immigration issue and adopted hard-line stances on the issue that have resonated well with [disaffected working class voters](#). In contrast, social democratic parties have tended to [downplay](#) the immigration issue in this electoral period and this has played into the hands of the radical right. This pattern is likely to continue in the coming future and means that the very future of social democratic parties is under threat.

Of the recent national parliamentary elections that have taken place in 2017 and 2018, it is striking that in five countries where social democratic parties were incumbents, only one party (the much weakened SPD) in Germany has remained in coalition government with Merkel's centre-right CDU-CSU coalition.

Therefore, these preliminary findings point to widespread anti-incumbency effects for the centre-left. In Italy and Austria, radical right parties have also now entered into coalition government. The electoral 'rise' of radical right parties should be seen as a significant threat to mainstream social democratic parties across Europe.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is part of an ongoing working paper titled: 'Centre Right and Radical Right Party Competition on Immigration in the 2015–2018 European Refugee Crisis'.

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