



## OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY  
Ignacio Lago,  
Pompeu Fabra University, Spain

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Vincenzo Emanuele  
vemanuele@luiss.it

SPECIALTY SECTION  
This article was submitted to  
Elections and Representation,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Political Science

RECEIVED 24 June 2022

ACCEPTED 29 June 2022

PUBLISHED 26 July 2022

## CITATION

Emanuele V, Angelucci D and Vittori D  
(2022) Editorial: The left behind: Crisis  
and challenges of the left in  
contemporary democracies.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 4:977647.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2022.977647

## COPYRIGHT

© 2022 Emanuele, Angelucci and  
Vittori. This is an open-access article  
distributed under the terms of the  
[Creative Commons Attribution License  
\(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or  
reproduction in other forums is  
permitted, provided the original  
author(s) and the copyright owner(s)  
are credited and that the original  
publication in this journal is cited, in  
accordance with accepted academic  
practice. No use, distribution or  
reproduction is permitted which does  
not comply with these terms.

# Editorial: The left behind: Crisis and challenges of the left in contemporary democracies

Vincenzo Emanuele<sup>1\*</sup>, Davide Angelucci<sup>1</sup> and Davide Vittori<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Guido Carli Free International University for Social Studies, Rome, Italy, <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

## KEYWORDS

left parties, social democratic parties, class cleavage, class voting, election, democracy, Europe

## Editorial on the Research Topic

The left behind: Crisis and challenges of the left in contemporary democracies

Left-wing parties have been in decline almost everywhere in the western world in the last decade (Benedetto et al., 2020; Polacko, 2022). Although the ebbs and tide of the electoral fortunes of left-wing parties have often been at the center of the stage in the academic debate, it seems now that the Left is facing a deep and structural crisis (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Delwit, 2021). The debate has thus revamped, spurring a renovated interest of political scientists who have been addressing the issue from a wide variety of viewpoints. Some scholars focused on demand-side explanations of the decline of the Left, pointing out how socio-economic transformations induced by de-industrialization and globalization have redefined both traditional social structures and voters' identities in modern societies (Franklin et al., 1992; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018; Goldberg, 2020). Others have paid greater attention to the mutating strategies of political parties and their shifting from class-appealing positions toward issue positions that cross-cut the traditional class structure (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Bremer, 2018; Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019). Others instead have addressed the problem from the perspective of cleavage politics, investigating whether the left electoral mobilization still depends upon its old class cleavage roots (Emanuele, 2021) or focusing on the emergence of new societal and political cleavages displacing the traditional ones and redefining the space of political competition (Inglehart, 1990; Kriesi et al., 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Although these perspectives offer rich insights into the dynamics of the Left's decline, they rarely communicate with one another.

From a content viewpoint, the four articles of this Research Topic aim at investigating such alleged "crises" of the left, focusing on the organizational structures, the programmatic positions, and the dynamics of electoral support and voting behavior.

Moreover, the Research Topic has the purpose of investigating the transformation of left-wing parties, both from a theoretical and an empirical perspective and, focusing on the latter, using both a demand-side and a supply-side approach.

Starting from Downsian perspective, yet extending the scope of his analysis, [Huijzer](#) shows to what extent the political trajectory of left-wing parties should be understood not merely in electoral terms but also by taking into account the ideological position of left-wing parties. A declining left-wing party, in this theoretical perspective, is not just a party that loses consensus among citizens but also a party that loses the struggle of ideas and leaves the hegemony of the narrative to other political parties: left-wing parties might not be left-wing anymore either if they move to the right ideologically or when they lose consensus on left-wing policies they want to promote.

This theoretical framework resonates with the contribution by [Trastulli](#), who investigates the patterns of continuity and change in the emphasis put by social democratic parties on traditional economic left issues. Through a comparative longitudinal analysis based on Manifesto project data and covering 20 Western European countries from the end of World War II to date, [Trastulli](#) shows that, contrary to the general wisdom but consistently with recent analyses on the topic (e.g., [Jansen et al., 2013](#); [Adam and Ftergioti, 2019](#); [Emanuele, 2021](#)), social democratic parties have increased their emphasis on economic left issues over time. A more careful look at the data reveals, interestingly, that almost all the increase in the emphasis on economic left issues is driven by the last years (2010–2021). Indeed, following the so-called “Great Recession,” social democratic parties have clearly shifted to the left from the economic viewpoint compared to all previous periods, even including the period 1945–1967, the “Golden Age” of mass parties, and the years of Lipset and Rokkan’s formulation of the “freezing hypothesis” and the class cleavage theory. Of course, we have to acknowledge that the political supply of parties that fall under the umbrella of the ‘class bloc’ ([Bartolini and Mair, 1990](#)) in contemporary Western Europe is rather diversified and, besides parties belonging to traditional party families like social democratic and communist ones, we may find unusual left-wing political formations that have developed original programmatic and organizational features and have become increasingly relevant from the electoral viewpoint. A striking example is represented by the Labor Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA), analyzed in the article by [Delwit](#). Founded in the 1970s by Ludo Martens as a Maoist party, the PTB-PVDA experienced decades of electoral irrelevance at the fringe of the Belgian party system, up to the electoral breakthrough of the 2010s and the challenge to the Belgian consociational cartel of traditional parties. This success was achieved, as the author explains, thanks to an original combination of old and new elements, namely an old organizational model typical of communist parties with a

new emphasis put on personalization and a populist style of political communication.

The results concerning the supply side (in particular those related to the evolution of left-wing parties’ positions on the economy) leave us with some intriguing questions about the electoral support for left-wing parties. Existing literature has by now established that the traditional connection between the working class and the Left has been in decline for a while ([Franklin et al., 1992](#); [Evans, 1999](#); for a more recent contribution, see e.g., [Angelucci and Vittori, 2021](#)). Accordingly, other scholars have shown that the class base of the Left has considerably changed, being now mostly grounded on the support of socio-cultural professionals ([Oesch and Rennwald, 2018](#)). While the transformations of the class base electorate of the Left have been usually imputed to the changing position of left-wing parties toward less economically friendly positions for the working class (e.g., [Evans and Tilley, 2012, 2017](#); [Rennwald and Evans, 2014](#)), empirical evidence now suggests that the Left has lost part of the original working-class support, although it has adopted more left-wing positions over time. If it is true that left-wing positions on the economy reinforce class voting (see [Angelucci and Vittori, 2021](#)), the decline of class voting cannot be explained by the simple fact that left-wing parties moved toward the center on the economic dimension because they radicalized their economic positions, especially in the last decade. These findings call for a new perspective on the study of class support for left-wing parties. In this vein, the article by [Marchesi](#) introduces a new promising approach to understand the evolution of class voting and the changing class base of the electorate of the Left. Aside from parties’ positions, [Marchesi](#) looks at the role of values as a powerful mobilizing tool that party families can use to appeal to different social classes. In his multivariate analysis, he shows that while left-wing parties are more likely to capitalize on social and economic liberal values, right-wing parties are more likely to get electorally rewarded by mobilizing conservative values. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he demonstrates that a considerable share of the variability in voting choices across different classes is accounted for by value predispositions.

While this last contribution shed some new light on the changing composition of the Left’s electorate, still some questions remain open. In particular, it is not completely clear why class voting continues to decline, notwithstanding the increased emphasis that left-wing parties devote on left-wing economic issues. Additionally, the failure to remobilize (so far) the working class, cast serious doubt about the capacity of left-wing parties to craft a programmatic platform bridging together socio-cultural professionals (the new reference class for these parties as underlined by [Oesch and Rennwald, 2018](#)) and the “old” working-class. From a certain point of view, however, this may not necessarily be a bad scenario for the Left. Left-wing parties could try to appeal to a larger electorate among

socio-cultural professionals and more progressive sectors of the middle class (thus definitely renouncing the numerically shrinking working class). At the same time, however, this may require the adoption of more moderate positions to appeal to the middle-class sectors of society (something that, so far, is far from the horizon, as [Trastulli](#) pointed out).

More generally, left-wing parties historically stemmed from the class cleavage, and it is now conventional wisdom that this story inevitably goes toward an end. At the same time, left-wing parties have not taken clear positions on the new allegedly dominant dimension of party competition represented by globalization and the division between demarcationist and integrationist parties ([Kriesi et al., 2006](#); [Kriesi et al., 2008](#); [Hooghe and Marks, 2018](#)). Left-wing parties are, therefore, half-way between the old disappearing world of class cleavage politics and the new context marked by the challenges of globalization, supranational integration, and the transition to cosmopolitan societies. In a nutshell, and this is perhaps the main take-home point of this special issue, the Left is going to experience a phase of deep uncertainty concerning not only its electoral perspectives in the short run but also the rethinking of its long-term identitarian foundations.

## References

- Abou-Chadi, T., Mitteregger, R., Mudde, C., and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, F. E. (2021). *Left Behind by the Working Class? Social Democracy's Electoral Crisis and the Rise of the Radical Right*. Planung und Beratung: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Abteilung Analyse.
- Abou-Chadi, T., and Wagner, M. (2019). The electoral appeal of party strategies in postindustrial societies: when can the mainstream left succeed? *J. Polit.* 81, 1405–1419. doi: 10.1086/704436
- Adam, A., and Ftergioti, S. (2019). Neighbors and friends: how do European political parties respond to globalization?. *Eur. J. Polit. Econ.* 59, 369–384. doi: 10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2019.05.002
- Angelucci, D., and Vittori, D. (2021). Look where you're going: the cultural and economic explanations of class voting decline. *West Eur. Polit.* 2021, 291–226. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2021.1987108
- Bartolini, S., and Mair, P. (1990). Policy competition, spatial distance and electoral instability. *West Eur. Polit.* 13, 1–16.
- Benedetto, G., Hix, S., and Mastrorocco, N. (2020). The rise and fall of social democracy, 1918–2017. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 114, 928–939. doi: 10.1017/S0003055420000234
- Bremer, B. (2018). The missing left? Economic crisis and the programmatic response of social democratic parties in Europe. *Party Politics*. 24, 23–38. doi: 10.1177/1354068817740745
- Delwit, P. (2021). "This is the Final Fall". *An Electoral History of European Social Democracy (1870–2019)*. CEVIPOL Working Papers a-58.
- Emanuele, V. (2021). Lost in translation? Class cleavage roots and left electoral mobilization in Western Europe. *Perspect. Polit.* 3, 1–9. doi: 10.1017/S1537592721000943
- Evans, G., and Tilley, J. (2012). How parties shape class politics: explaining the decline of the class basis of party support. *Br. J. Polit. Sci.* 42, 137–161. doi: 10.1017/S0007123411000202
- Evans, G., and Tilley, J. (2017). *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198755753.001.0001
- Evans, J. (1999). *The End of Class Politics? Class Voting in Comparative Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Franklin, M. N., Mackie, T. T., and Valen, H. (1992). *Responses to Evolving Social and Attitudinal Structures in Western Countries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldberg, A. C. (2020). The evolution of cleavage voting in four Western countries: structural, behavioural or political dealignment? *Eur. J. Polit. Res.* 59, 68–90. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12336
- Hooghe, L., and Marks, G. (2018). Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *J. Eur. Public Policy*. 25, 109–135. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279
- Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jansen, G., Evans, G., and De Graaf, N. D. (2013). Class voting and left-right party positions: a comparative study of 15 western democracies, 1960–2005. *Soc. Sci. Res.* 42, 376–400. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.09.007
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschieer, S., and Frey, T. (2006). Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared. *Eur. J. Polit. Res.* 45, 921–956. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00644.x
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschieer, S., Frey, T., et al. (2008). *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511796270
- Oesch, D., and Rennwald, L. (2018). Electoral competition in Europe's new tripolar political space: Class voting for the left, centre-right and radical right. *Eur. J. Polit. Res.* 57, 783–807. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12259
- Polacko, M. (2022). The rightward shift and electoral decline of social democratic parties under increasing inequality. *West Eur. Polit.* 45, 665–692. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2021.1916294
- Rennwald, L., and Evans, G. (2014). When supply creates demand: Social democratic party strategies and the evolution of class voting. *West Eur. Polit.* 37, 1108–1135. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2014.920981

## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.