

A Revival of the Left?

This article brings together the key points from a presentation by Chloé Morin on the current state of the political left in France. With a comparative study of electoral trends in Canada, the UK, Italy, Sweden, Germany and Spain, it identifies the strengths and weaknesses of parties on the left and changing voter profiles. It goes on to identify strategies for political renewal.

French citizens feel strongly about equality and social justice, which matters to them significantly more than individual liberty. Yet, socialism is currently not very popular in France (see figures 1&2). For the time being, the left in France is very fragmented and the main left-wing party – the *Parti Socialiste* – still hasn't recovered from Macron's hold on most of its electorate. As the left is trying to reinvent itself in France, it is looking beyond its borders for winning strategies and new ideas.

We have conducted an analysis of what is happening with the left-wing parties in several other countries, specifically in Canada, Spain, Italy, the UK, and the US

The left, defined as the main centre-left government party, has had very different trajectories over the past decades. But overall in most countries, its share of the electorate has tended to decline – though nowhere more dramatically than France (see figure 3).

Figure 1: Individual freedom is more important than social justice, % agree



Figure 2: At present, socialist ideals are of great value for societal progress, % agree

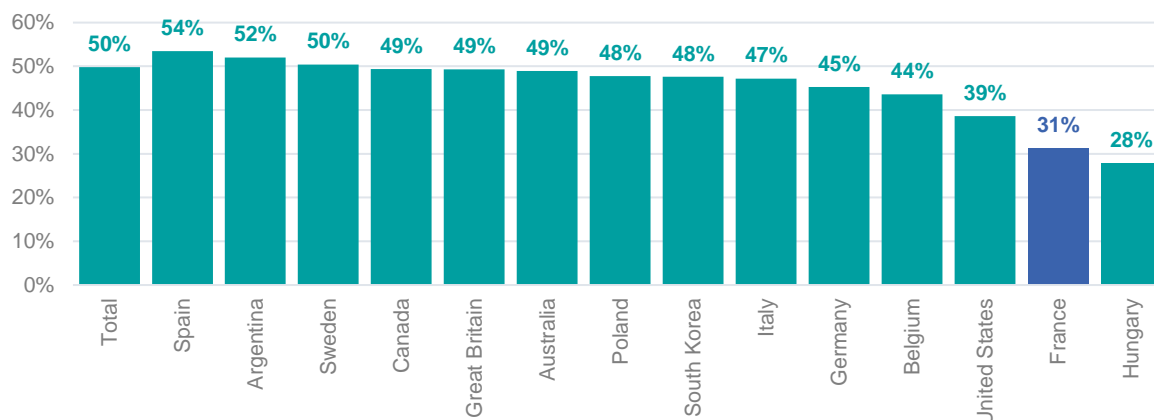
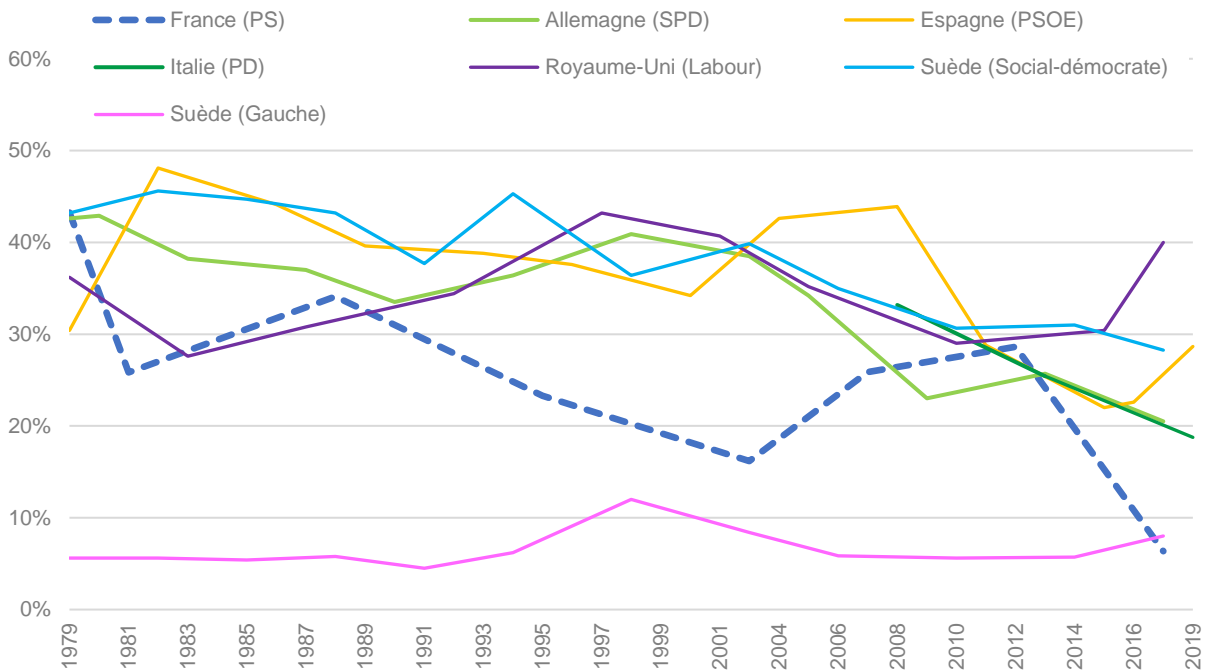


Figure 3: Electoral scores of the Left, 1979 to 2019



France

In 2017, the socialists reached their electoral rock-bottom due to ideological splits in the party. Many members deserted the *Parti Socialiste* in favour of the centrist LREM (Emmanuel Macron’s party) while some voters joined the radical left of LFI. The socialists have lost many of its left-leaning core constituents to “embourgeoisement” and has struggled to attract new ones: it has belatedly taken up the environmentalist cause and has therefore been shunned by younger voters in favour of Europe-Ecologie Les Verts, the main Green party.

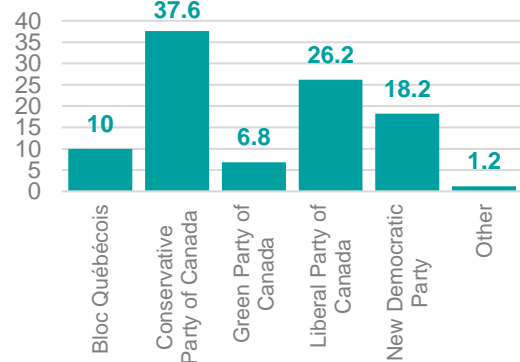
Overall, this is quite damning: in a country which values equality the most, the socialists are struggling.

Canada

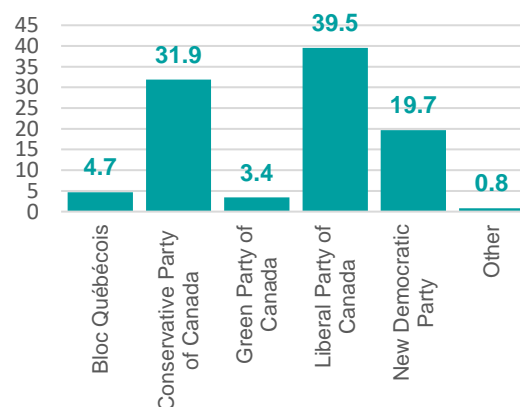
The New Democratic Party (NDP) embodies the social-democratic left in Canada but lacks any experience of national government. It has no clear competitive advantage on important topics such as the economy and the environment and only manages to outshine its rivals on issues that are seen by voters to be non-essential, such as poverty and social inequality (which ranks 9th amongst

Canadian’s top priorities). Most damningly, the NDP is not credible as party which can “exercise power”.

Canadian vote share 2008



Canadian vote share 2015



Italy

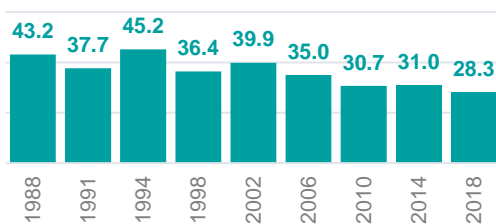
In Italy, the *Partito Democratico* (PD) is the only pro-European party, but this is not an asset in the eyes of most Italian voters. The party is also ambiguous on globalisation and strong on “weak” subjects such as the environment, which is not considered a priority in Italy. With Zingaretti, the PD refocusing on a more “traditionally socialist” ideology (jobs, social policies, inequality and openness to immigration). Its voters are generally older voters loyal to the left or university-educated graduates.

Sweden

Like most other European socialist parties, the Social Democrats of Sweden have been on long-term decline. They have dropped from holding 40-45% of votes in the 1990s to 26-28%. Their vote share in the 2018 general election results was the lowest since 1911. Yet, they remain one of the strongest parties both in Sweden and amongst the European left. They are also perceived as a credible and competent party in government.

Currently, the party is at a critical juncture: should it veer further left or to the centre?

Social Democrats electoral history (%)

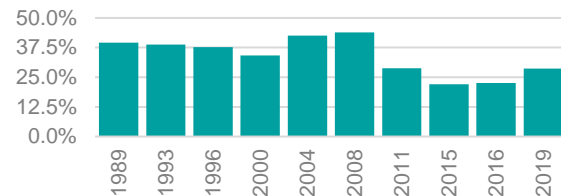


Spain

Spain's PSOE is the only socialist party to come back with the winning ways of times gone by, owing to its longstanding proximity with Spain's working classes. Pedro Sanchez renewed the party's commitment to policies that were genuinely left-wing, as opposed to 3rd-way ones, and this has propelled him to Prime Minister's seat. The campaign strategy emphasized PSOE's track record on social issues, such as parental leave, taxes for high

earners, increases in minimum wage, increasing university grants, and creating 30,000 civil service jobs.

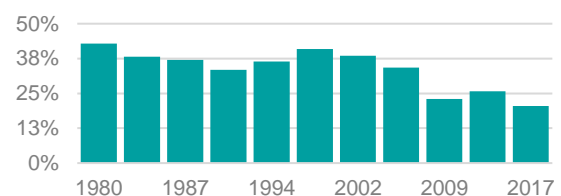
PSOE score (%)



Germany

A left that veered towards the centre in the 2000s with the Hartz reforms has lost many voters. The SPD's stature has further declined after years of participation as coalition partners to the CDU/CSU. The party has been slow on the uptake regarding environmentalist policies. There are divisions between those who lean staunchly to the left and others who do stand by economic “seriousness”. However, leaders have proved adept at managing towns and cities - its policies could serve as a blueprint for the national level.

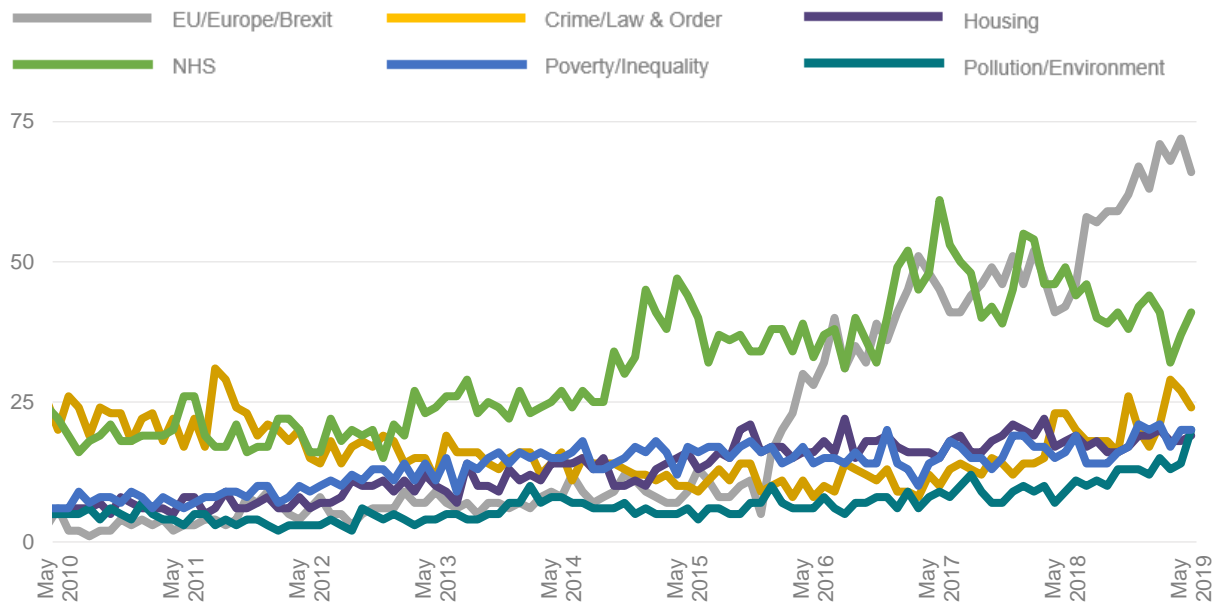
SPD scores (%)



UK

Political debates are now completely framed by Brexit, which has cut across the left/right divide and the Labour Party. Its voters broadly fall into 2 groups: older, working class Leave voters (most often in the North of England) and young, university-educated Remain voters (most often in large metropolitan areas). This second category look to be Labour's most loyal voters for today and the future. However, what does not help is that Jeremy Corbyn – a polarising and controversial party leader – has not come out to back Remain wholeheartedly.

What do you see as the most/other important issues facing Britain today?



Interestingly, our research shows that British opinion is not as “right” as one may think. Public opinion leans to the left on topics including; belonging to the EU; public expenditures; nationalisation of certain utilities; environmental protection; hostility to military intervention; openness to the world/globalisation; regulation of the private sector.

The left: strengths and weaknesses

Evaluating the left in these countries, it seems that the weaknesses common to all parties of the left are mainly structural and global, while strengths are often local, linked to a specific cultural, political context, and history.

Social democracy has declined globally over the past years – except for Spain. While each country has its own specificities, a few common trends can explain this:

The loss of some left-leaning constituent voters owing to the implementation of centrist policies (Hartz reforms in Germany, Blair’s 3rd-way policies in Britain, French labour reforms of 2016).

Voter fatigue because the parties have been in power or in coalition governments for a long time (such as in Germany and Sweden).

The parties have not attracted new voters due to the slow uptake of environmental causes which appeal so much to young voters everywhere.

Social-democrats and socialists ideological offer does not match voter’s expectations or aspirations: They are either not enough to the left, the right, or environmentalist to appeal to voters, except for the older, loyal voters.

Common factors found across various countries that contribute to the weakening of the left also include:

- Defiance towards elites, political systems and political parties.
- Emergence of new issues on which the left/right divide is less clear (globalisation, identity, immigration).
- Citizen disenfranchisement, voting volatility and loss of party loyalty.

On the other hand, the factors of resilience for the left are mostly linked to the historical, sociological, political and economic national context.

The rise of radicalism

Is the left a victim of the disappearance of the “centre” – the traditional centre right and centre left parties, which tended to alternate in power?

Party disaffiliation is a trend seen in many countries. Either because of electoral scores or the inability to recognise oneself in the existing political supply, more radical parties are emerging at the expense of older ones.

Our 2018 survey on populism finds that, globally, only one in five think it would be best to stick with parties and leaders who have been in power before.

The current political game is less and less structured by parties, increasingly volatile and open to new entrants or political entrepreneurs, embodied in different styles by Trump and Macron.

A basis for renewal

So, how can the left renew itself? From our research, we have identified three possibilities for the renewal of the left today:

Success at the municipal level: With competence and good management, striking a chord with progressive yet pro-globalisation urban voters

Environmental issues: Provided it manages to be credible enough, such as by matching the Greens in terms of environmentalist propositions.

Embodying genuine political renewal: Take the example of Pedro Sanchez in Spain who was for a long time a party outsider, or Zuzana Caputova in Slovenia who campaigned as an independent, anti-corruption and anti-system outsider.

Summary

Everywhere in Europe – bar Spain and the UK – the left has an ageing voter base. This is a symptom of historical loyalty, but this reality is increasingly rare and is on the verge of disappearing.

In the UK, the political system and the ultra-specific context of Brexit and chaos within the Conservative party has protected Labour, as has the loyalty of BME votes. The frustration of young people in the UK over Brexit and social injustice contribute to Labour’s popularity.

In Spain, the PSOE’s agenda has remained loyal to its core constituents of workers and lower-income groups and reaps the electoral rewards of this policy.

The French Left’s “embourgeoisement” has come at the expense of the working classes. Nor has the left been able to attract young people because they have taken and latecomers regarding environmental issues.

A final thought: Does the future lie with female voters? Data suggests they are more progressive and environmentalist than male voters.

For more information on this work, or to see the full presentation, please contact:

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