14 Conclusion

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14.1 Introduction

Our conclusion serves several purposes. Let us first provide a brief summary of the main findings reported in the multiple complementary investigations on which this book reports. But consider it only a warm-up to address some issues beyond this study and hopefully inspiring, but surely requiring, future research. Up to this point, the book has largely avoided to take up and engage rival perspectives on the change in party systems of Western knowledge capitalism, and particularly of the varying fortunes of mainstream center-left social democratic parties. Hence the second task of the conclusion to this volume is to address influential alternative accounts that have attracted considerable scholarly attention and to discuss them considering the cumulative empirical evidence we have presented throughout this book. On the one hand, rival accounts challenge that there is any durable structure of voter-party alignments left in contemporary party systems and democratic polities have entered a world of fluidity, in which the tactical moves of – (social) media enabled – political entrepreneurs are what really counts when tracking parties' rapidly changing electoral fortunes. On the other hand, a different tier of rival accounts – and one resonating quite strongly beyond scholarly debates, also within the deliberations among leftist political activists – sees not partisan dealignment and the fluidity of media democracy as the problem of traditional left-wing parties, but the failure of social democratic parties to act on the disempowerment of wage earners by capitalist business interests whose leverage has been magnified through globalization of the movement of goods, services, people, and capital.

This second section of our conclusion thereby addresses current debates about arguments and claims that are, in principle, tractable with empirical evidence. But in the very brief third and final section of this book, we move on to a more speculative discussion that may inspire future investigations, albeit only once the time may come for such speculations to play out in observable politics. We posit that the partisan

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realignments of the past generation on which we report in this volume may not generate a durable equilibrium of party competition, comparable to the stability of "frozen" party systems diagnosed by Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) for much of the second and third quarters of the twentieth century in many West European countries. In the twenty-first century, party politicians may be able to map still a subset of novel upcoming emerging policy issues on the existing dimensions of partisan alignment. But there may be profound political challenges in the offing that could disorganize existing party systems fundamentally and put in question even how to conceive of programmatic fields identifiable by familiar dimensions of competition.

14.2 Summary of Findings: Why Social Democratic Voters Turned Away and What the Strategic Options for Social Democratic Parties Are

In summarizing the key findings of the analyses presented in the chapters of this book, we will refrain from going through them sequentially but rather propose a transversal and integrated reading of the insights they deliver. From all the analyses presented and discussed in much more detail in this book, we want to derive what we have learnt in terms of responses to the two key questions that drive scholarly and political debates about the fate of social democratic parties: First, why did voters turn away from social democratic parties over the past decades? And second, what are their strategic options in the current context?

The next few pages recount the "narrative" of what happened to social democratic parties in the left field based on these empirical findings. The upshot is that the sociostructural, the attitudinal, and the partisan space of left-wing electoral competition have become fragmented and differentiated to an extent that it has become virtually impossible for social democratic parties to hold together a large electoral coalition of 40% or more percentage of voters under one and the same umbrella program, especially in the countries of Northern and Continental Europe characterized by large and differentiated middle classes, mature welfare states, and PR multiparty competition. Hence, the electoral decline of social democratic parties clearly appears as the result of transformative and irreversible structural changes, rather than of short-term choices or "mistakes" by party leaders. Stabilizing current vote shares, limiting further losses, and trying to mobilize new cohorts of progressive voters among younger generational cohorts are the best-case scenario in terms of electoral strengths of social democratic parties in a left-progressive political field that overall remains strong and large, also among younger generations of

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voters. According to our findings, programmatic strategies that combine progressive left-wing positions on sociocultural issues with left-wing or moderate positions on economic issues seem the most promising strategy to approximate such a best-case scenario, depending on the configuration of party competition: In systems where social democratic parties compete for the median voter, pairing progressive sociocultural positions with left-of center but moderate economic positions seems most promising, while parties have incentives to take more radical positions on both economic and sociocultural issues in more fragmented and centrifugal party systems. However, adopting culturally conservative-authoritarian appeals appears as the most risky electoral strategy for social democratic parties, irrespective of the economic appeals they pair these positions with.

Let us go through the findings in somewhat more detail, starting with the first question: Why have all social democratic parties lost smaller or larger shares of their electoral vote shares over the past decades? *More specifically, we ask: why have voters turned away from social democratic parties?* To answer this question, we focus on empirical analyses of voter behavior, voter flows, and attitudinal motivations. The contributions to this volume have approached the question based on individual micro-level, as well as regional data. We have studied data on reported voting behavior and vote switching, panel data on intragenerational electoral shifts over time, as well as intergenerational electoral shifts across parents and children, and individual-level data on reported attitudes and motivations for electoral choice. The analyses combine into a strikingly consistent and robust set of insights on both voter in- and out-flows, as well as gains and retention.

In terms of *losses*, the empirical analyses demonstrate that social democratic parties lost voters in all ideological directions, but most strongly and most consistently towards alternative radical left or green and left-libertarian parties on the one hand and towards centrist parties on the other hand (see in particular the chapters by Abou-Chadi and Wagner, Bischof and Kurer, as well as Kitschelt and Rehm in the first two parts of this volume). More detailed analyses in the chapter by Abou-Chadi and Wagner show that losses were strongest among voters with middle and upper education levels. Besides losing voters to rival political parties, social democratic parties have also lost voters over time due to mortality (Bischof and Kurer) and to intergenerational shifts with children of social democratic parents over-proportionally voting for alternative green and radical left parties. Importantly, these findings disconfirm the widespread claim of social democratic parties having lost vote shares first and foremost because working-class voters allegedly shifted

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towards national-conservative parties. Several chapters in this volume provide evidence against this claim both on the basis of vote switching and voting propensity data (the chapters by Abou-Chadi and Wagner, by Häusermann and by Kitschelt and Rehm), as well as on the basis of panel data (Bischof and Kurer, as well as Ares and van Ditmars). Shifts of (working class) voters from social democratic towards right-wing nationalist parties have remained absolutely marginal. They do not represent a substantive share of voter flows, neither directly nor via spells of voting abstention, as shown with panel data by Bischof and Kurer.

These findings imply that social democratic parties cannot grow by "winning back" working-class voters from the radical right, as they were never left-wing voters in the first place. They also imply that social democratic parties need to face the challenge of losing voters – especially younger and more highly skilled voters – to other left-wing and to centrist parties. Analyzing these shifts and the attitudes of vote switchers confirms that the losses social democratic parties have faced are the result of different motivations, with losses to green and left-libertarian parties coinciding with more culturally progressive attitudes and losses to centrist parties with more moderate attitudes on both economic and cultural issues (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, Kitschelt and Rehm). Overall, there is little evidence that social democratic parties could have retained vote shares with decidedly and exclusively left-wing economic positions: While it is true that out-switchers to radical left parties on average had more left-wing attitudes on economic distribution than voters who continue to vote social democratic (Kitschelt and Rehm), losses to the radical left represent only a very minor share of the voter outflows social democratic parties experienced. Also, out-switchers on average do not have more economically left-wing attitudes than loyal voters (Kitschelt and Rehm, Häusermann). Rather, the losses in different directions seem to relate most clearly and most significantly to the changing saliency of competitive dimensions in different contexts, in particular with the emergence and strengthening of green parties in more urban contexts (Gingrich).

So who are the voters of left-wing parties in general and social democratic parties in particular today? Why do they support social democratic parties? The overall left-wing electoral potential remains quite stable, strong, and high, around 40–45% across Western European countries (Häusermann). Despite deindustrialization, this potential remains rather stable, because progressive parties mobilize large shares of middle-class voters. This also applies to social democratic parties across Western Europe. The intergenerational panel data analyses by Ares and van Ditmars, for example, show that social democratic parties have a clear and loyal stronghold among the middle-class children

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of working-class parents. Similarly, even trade unions today mobilize clearly more strongly within the middle than the working classes (see the chapter by Häusermann, Kitschelt, Mosimann, and Rehm). When studying the attitudinal profile of these contemporary core social democratic voters, it appears clearly that they defend left-of center positions on both economic-distributive and sociocultural issues, that is, they support generous welfare policies with regard to both consumption and investment, as well as culturally liberal positions on gender, immigration and minority rights. Several observations confirm this attitudinal profile and motivation: Very large shares – up to 70% – of social democratic voters can equally well imagine voting for green or left-libertarian parties than for the Social Democrats (Häusermann); the children of middle-class social democratic voters may not necessarily continue to vote social democratic but are consistently more likely to remain within the left-progressive field and to vote for radical left or green parties (Ares and van Ditmars); finally, even trade union members – irrespective of whether they vote for Social Democrats, green or radical left parties – are decidedly progressive on sociocultural issues, even more progressive than social democratic voters who are not union members. All these observations underline the fact that on balance, progressive positions on both economic and sociocultural issues and left-of-center positions on economic distribution have stabilized and strengthened social democratic electoral vote shares – by appealing to new segments of progressive voters via progressive sociocultural positions – rather than weakening them. However, since alternative left-progressive parties have emerged and established in most contexts, with green and left-libertarian parties acting as the spearheads of socioculturally progressive positions, of course, social democratic parties have lost parts of the left electorate. And with the attitudinal space differentiating – along two dimensions – and polarizing, they are increasingly unable to address all potential voter segments with a unified yet clearly profiled programmatic orientation.

The patterns summarized above in terms of voter shifts and attitudinal profiles are strikingly consistent across even highly different countries. The only very marginal shifts from social democratic to radical right parties, for instance, hold across institutionally and structurally very different contexts in Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, and Continental and Southern Europe (Bischof and Kurer, Häusermann). However, the patterns we identify, in particular with regard to the differentiation of the voting patterns in the left field, are most clear and most consistent in the countries of Northern and Continental Western Europe. Intergenerational shifts are strongest (Ares and van Ditmars) and so is the competitive pressure on social democratic parties, because high and increasing shares of their

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voters also sympathize with other left-wing parties while the "inward overlaps" are consistently smaller (Häusermann). The patterns are very similar, but more mitigated in the countries of Southern Europe, where both the party systems and the social structure are relatively less fragmented and differentiated in programmatic terms.

Having established the multifaceted challenges that social democratic parties face in terms of attitudinal differentiation and party competition, *what have we learnt about their strategic options in the current context*? To discuss the relative expected payoffs of different potential programmatic strategies – we distinguish left-national, centrist, old left, and new left programmatic appeals in this volume – it is important to first highlight the *segmentation* of electoral spaces that emerges from several of the contributions in this book, confirming recent accounts of emerging cleavage formation in Western Europe (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2018; Bornschier et al. 2021a; Hall et al. 2022). Indeed it appears from several analyses that – despite the persistence of a numerically important share of voters in the center of the ideological spectrum – electorates in Western European countries also exhibit sharply contoured segments of voters on the Left and on the Right, with important implications for the strategic potential of left-national appeals. We see this segmentation, for example, in the fact that there are hardly any "transitions" of voters across the ideological spectrum from any left-wing parties to the radical right, not even over an observation period of several decades, admitting for spells of abstention in between (Bischof and Kurer). Another indication of segmented electorates is that we see massive overlaps between party electorates (high shared voting propensities) within the left field, but absolutely marginal overlaps only with parties at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, in particular with the radical right (Häusermann). Finally, Abou-Chadi, Häusermann, Mitteregger, Mosimann, and Wagner show that voters who position themselves clearly on the right are unlikely to support a social democratic party program, even if this social democratic program appeals directly to them through left national appeals. The chapter by Gingrich highlights how this segmentation of electoral blocs or fields has been amplified and exacerbated over the past decades by the emergence of the knowledge economy and social sorting along the urban–rural divide. The upshot of these observations is that there is a considerable share of voters at the nationalist and conservative-authoritarian ends of the partisan-electoral spectrum who are "out of reach" for social democratic parties. Consistent with this evidence, the vignette survey analyses by Abou-Chadi, Häusermann, Mitteregger, Mosimann, and Wagner find very little resonance of left-national programmatic appeals among centrist and left-of-center voters.

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On the basis of both voter transitions, attitudinal profiles, as well as the survey experimental data, it appears that a left-national programmatic strategy would be very risky for social democratic parties, as it is unlikely to attract substantial voter flows from the right and very likely to deter large segments of their current electorate.

The discussion is more complex when it comes to centrist programmatic appeals, because there are large numbers of voters in the center, and because the individual-level analyses show extensive volatility and switching between moderate left and moderate right parties, which means that even small strategic modifications may make substantive differences in absolute vote shares. The chapters by Polk and Karreth, and by Kitschelt and Rehm (Chapters 10 and 11 in Part III) relate centrist programmatic profiles to electoral outcomes, and the study by Bremer analyzes the consequences of economically centrist policies when social democratic parties are in office. All three chapters' findings suggest that centrist strategies, from the vantage point of social democratic parties alone, without considering the left field in its entirety, may be successful in the short run, but entail massive risks in the longer run. Indeed, programmatic (economic) moderation seems to have led to short-term electoral success in terms of office-winning in the 1990s, most likely via mechanisms of competence/valence voting, leadership, and other contingent factors (Kitschelt and Rehm). However, Polk and Karreth show that voters at the left margin of the social democratic parties started sanctioning moderation in the second election after their parties moved to the center on economic issues, notably by switching to alternative left-wing parties. Kitschelt and Rehm equally highlight the risk of longer-term costs in terms of losses at the left end of the electoral constituency that seem to be the prize social democratic parties pay for short-term gains in the center. Bremer's findings are consistent with these observations, as he shows that austerity policies by social democratic parties in power correlate with voter losses, especially after spending cuts and public sector wage cuts. In sum, it seems that centrist economic policies can indeed generate short-term electoral gains to the social democratic parties, but as voters in the center are rather volatile and voters at the left margin of the party may sanction economic centrism, the risk of aggregate longer-term losses for social democratic parties appears high.

However, the conclusions regarding the payoff of a centrist social democratic program are further complicated by the fact that we need to distinguish between the payoff for the party itself and the payoff for the electoral field of left parties overall, and between different competitive configurations. As Polk and Karreth show, social democratic parties may lose voters to green, left-libertarian, or radical left parties in the wake of economic

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moderation, but given the volatility of voters in the center, the net effect on the overall vote share of the left field may still be positive, especially in systems where the social democratic parties compete with an equally large moderate right competitor for the median voter. Indeed, Kitschelt and Rehm (Chapter 11) most explicitly study the vote shares of social democratic parties on the one hand and the left field on the other hand, which are associated with different competitive configurations. They show that in countries where social democratic parties historically were large mainstream parties (think of the Nordic countries, the UK or Germany), more moderate economic positions closer to the center align with higher aggregate vote shares for the left partisan field than if the social democratic parties take more radical economic positions, and they even result in roughly similar vote shares for the party itself. It is only in countries where the social democratic parties have historically been smaller (think of the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Italy, or Belgium) that more pronouncedly left-wing positions of social democratic parties are on average associated with higher vote shares of social democratic parties. But even there, a trade-off between maximizing the party and the field vote share remains, because the configuration of a radical social democratic party and a moderate center right party results in an overall reduced left field.

Economic centrism, however, involves walking a fine line for social democratic parties. While refraining from radical "old left" stances in terms of regulation, state ownership or investment control can be interpreted as economic moderation and even be rewarded by centrist voters, actual austerity, and retrenchment policies seem highly risky for social democratic parties. Bremer shows that spending cuts in social consumption and cutting public sector wages in particular correlate not only with lower vote shares for social democratic parties, but even with lower aggregate vote shares for the left field overall.

While the economic positioning of social democratic parties is associated with difficult trade-offs and certain ambiguities, the analyses in this volume point to the fact that progressive programmatic appeals on sociocultural *and* economic-distributive issues (new left strategies with an emphasis on sociocultural progressivity and old-left strategies with an emphasis on economic-distributive progressivity regarding welfare policies and taxation) appear as the most promising in terms of voter reactions. This question is studied most explicitly at the level of individual voter reactions in the chapter by Abou-Chadi, Häusermann, Mitteregger, Mosimann, and Wagner, which presents voters in six countries with vignettes of stylized party programs. Within the social democratic electoral potential, old and new left strategies clearly receive the strongest support. Importantly, the findings show hardly any evidence

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of an economic-cultural trade-off, as new left programmatic appeals are strongly supported also by left-wing voters with lower education or income levels, as well as by voters with strong redistributive attitudes. Equally, old left programmatic appeals for generous social policies and progressive taxation receive clear support also from voters who emphasize strongly progressive sociocultural positions. These experimental findings are consistent with the observational evidence on extremely large overlaps between voting propensities for social democratic, green, and radical left parties, as well as the findings on equally culturally and economically progressive attitudes among trade union members and left voters (see the chapters by Häusermann, by Kitschelt and Rehm [Chapter 7], and by Häusermann, Kitschelt, Mosimann, and Rehm).

However, the evidence that new left and old left programmatic appeals resonate in the large and strong broader left-wing electoral potential does not imply that social democratic parties can easily *realize* such electoral gains. In the PR electoral systems of Northern and Continental Europe, alternative green, left-libertarian, and radical left parties with more targeted and narrower profiles have firmly established as organizations and brands credibly providing these programmatic alternatives. Among younger voters, they have oftentimes become the "core vote" over several elections. Hence, it is unlikely that very large segments of green and radical left voters would flock towards social democratic parties only on the basis of old and now left programmatic orientations. Nevertheless, such orientations can stabilize social democratic parties as viable alternatives for these voters. In majoritarian systems, where electoral laws "cage" politicians and voters across the left field into the same party label through plurality single-member district electoral systems that impose heavy penalties of nonrepresentation on small upstart parties – such as in Australia, Britain, Canada, the UK, and the United States – Social Democracy experiences tremendous internal factionalization that often undermines the parties' competitiveness, when radical "progressive" or socialist currents capture the entire party.

Again, our findings on electoral consequences of programmatic shifts and appeals are strikingly consistent across different country contexts, suggesting structural roots to the observed shifts. Adding evidence to such a structuralist interpretation, Somer-Topcu and Weitzel show that leadership changes do not correlate with electoral outcomes of social democratic parties, neither positively nor negatively, neither in the short nor in the long run.

On the basis of all this evidence, it appears clearly that there seems to be hardly any way back to the heydays of 40% and more vote share for social democratic parties. The best scenario in the long run is to try

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to stabilize vote shares through old or new left programmatic strategies, in order to remain a viable electoral alternative for progressive (younger) voters. Providing an "umbrella program" that would simultaneously appeal to the entire left and centrist spectrum seems unlikely, especially in the countries of Northern and Continental Europe, where the middle classes are large and internally differentiated, where programmatic debates are multidimensional and party systems fragmented. Given the relatively smaller size and differentiation of middle classes in Southern Europe, the relative underdevelopment of their welfare states, as well as the less programmatically differentiated and segmented partisan supply, we see somewhat larger chances for an encompassing, broad, economically oriented left-wing party in the countries of Southern Europe. However, at the same time, the lower level of economic development of the knowledge economy and the welfare state impose structural limits on the potential size of such an encompassing coalition.

14.3 Rival Accounts of the Fortunes of the Left in Knowledge Capitalism

We are taking up two different accounts of the predicament of the twenty-first century Left. One of them emphasizes the increasing fluidity of political alignments and voting behavior, with a more moderate version focusing on the increasing role of political entrepreneur in an environment of social and mass communication media that induces voters' attention and preferences to evolve in a continuous state of change, and a more radical version challenging the capacity of the overwhelming share of voters to process any political information that could create meaningful links between voters' preferences and politicians' policy commitments, deliberations, and performances. The other account of the left claims that existing left parties have not understood how globalization of all factors of production has undermined the policy achievements of the Left in the post–World War II era, as well the very organizational base of leftist political mobilization for a more egalitarian and just socioeconomic order that can be created only on the foundations of national rather than international political-economic orders. It is impossible to construct meaningful relationships of democratic political accountability beyond the level of nation states. The decline of the Left, then, is that it has not reckoned with the new challenges and thereby has disappointed and abandoned many voters who experience new grievances in the emerging globalized political-economic environment. The Left has given up its intellectual moorings and unconditionally conceded the validity of market-liberal thinking.

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14.3.1 *Decrease of Mainstream Left Parties as a Process of Dealignment, Volatility, and Agency-Driven Destructuration*

A large part of the research on party system fragmentation, party competition, and political polarization has come to focus on the weakening or even loss of social structuration of electoral behavior. Starting from the observation of weakening class and religious voting (Dalton 2004), many studies argued that party politics in advanced democracies was undergoing a process of individualization, dealignment, and increasing volatility of electoral behavior. Accordingly, social groups – structural sociodemographic groups in particular – were argued to be ever less relevant to explain electoral preferences and electoral choice, at the benefit of more short-term, fluid and issue-based voting (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984; Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992; Thomassen 2005). Building on this early literature on issues and dealignment, many recent studies have emphasized the agency that political actors and policy entrepreneurs have in strategically politicizing issues, raising or mitigating issue saliency and even shaping attitudinal patterns among increasingly volatile voters (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2019; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). This strand of research identifies the decline of center left parties as a result of the inability of traditional party elites – constrained and captured by organizational, issue-based, and historic legacies – to adapt to changing competitive challenges, and the fragmentation of party systems as an outcome of increasingly individualistic, short-term considerations of voters who respond to a proliferating set of appeals by opportunistic issue entrepreneurs.

We can distinguish two versions of this theoretical "destructuration" argument, a stronger one and a weaker one. The stronger version argues that there are basically no structurally patterned and/or stable party or policy preferences of voters left, at all. Political preferences are almost entirely malleable to the strategies of political elites. Voter attitudes are seen as endogenous in political (group) identities (rather than policy preferences or rational-material, spatial considerations), which – in turn – are created and fostered by political elites, or brought into focus by short-term political events (Achen and Bartels 2016; Mason 2018; Hobolt et al. 2021). Achen and Bartel's "Democracy for Realists" (2016) is probably the most resolute account of cognitively myopic and overwhelmed voters whose policy preferences are entirely endogenous in the political identities elites envelop them in.

The more mitigated version of this supply-side and agency-driven account of party-voter destructuration emphasizes – loosely based on Riker's theory of heresthetics (1980s) – the role of political entrepreneurs

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who actively, rationally, and opportunistically form and exploit the issue space. Political parties are (more or less savvy, but always rational and opportunistic) political entrepreneurs who strategically politicize issues to attract votes and divide their opponents' constituencies. Such strategies require fragmented electoral spaces and dealigned voters with no stable party attachment, willing to switch between ideological programs based on short-term issue saliency (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). In this perspective, mainstream centrist parties' attachment to particular constituencies and topics has become a burden, rather than an asset, impeding them from flexibly seizing novel opportunities in terms of issue saliency and issue framing, while challenger party elites have more entrepreneurial leeway and opportunity.

Our theoretical framework in this book does share quite some common ground with the more moderate version of agency-driven electoral change, as we equally emphasize the relevance of agency in terms of supply-side programmatic strategies and their effects. We also argue that political choice is important, and that parties are rational actors, seeking to emphasize programmatic positions and issues strategically. However, while entrepreneurship is indispensable in politics, it is ubiquitous and mostly electorally unsuccessful. The presence of entrepreneurs is thus not informative to predict party system change. The outliers of successful entrepreneurship, then, cannot be explained without an understanding of the sociostructural realignments that have created opportunities and constraints for a particular subset of entrepreneurs and their strategies. Over the last several decades, it is no coincidence that those who did not fail – green, left-libertarian, and radical right parties in particular – have been thriving on highly similar, consistent appeals to clearly identifiable sociostructural electoral potentials. Entrepreneurs launch appeals, but these appeals need a fertile sociostructural soil to resonate. This sociostructural terrain has become more fragmented, making it harder – or even impossible – for even the most able and well-informed political entrepreneur to appeal to 40% or more of the electorate at the same time. In DeSio and Weber's terms (2014), sociostructural fragmentation has made "bridge issues" rarer and politicians are stuck in situations in which the "issue yield" of repositioning themselves is nowhere as large as in their heyday. In other words, we do not contest the prevalence and relevance of political entrepreneurs, but social structure constrains their leeway and conditions their success. Hence, the heavy explanatory lifting of party success in our perspective is in the strongly constrained demand-side, rather than in the abundant, versatile, and diverse supply side. This is our main theoretical counterargument against an overtly supply-side–driven perspective on challenger parties as political entrepreneurs.

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However, our book also provides manifold specific empirical insights that contradict the answers the issue entrepreneur perspective would give to our two key questions. To the question of which voters center left parties lost, to whom and why, these studies would reply that challenger party elites attracted former mainstream party voters by opportunistically raising "wedge issues" centrist parties were ill disposed to address properly (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). The implication is that we would expect to see losses from mainstream left parties to all challenger parties, both on the Left and on the Right, and to different extents across countries, as party leaders are unlikely to be equally able at strategically devising new issues. We would also expect to see considerable variation in the substantive content of the challenger party agendas, depending on the national opportunity structure and context. However, our findings are at odds with these observable implications: What we indeed see throughout the analyses in this book is that voter flows remain overwhelmingly and narrowly contained *within* the ideological left field, and both flows and stability concentrate in consistent, identifiable sociodemographic groups of occupational class, education, and age in particular. When voter flows leave the left field, they overproportionally go to mainstream right parties, rather than to new challenger parties on the right (for the evidence on structured voter flows, see the chapters by Abou-Chadi and Wagner, by Häusermann, Bischof and Kurer, and by Ares and van Ditmars). We also see that voters who switch parties do so in spatially very consistent ways, along encompassing ideological dimensions: We indeed observe robust relationships between the programmatic preferences of these voters along broad ideological dimensions, and the directions in which they switch across countries and over time (see Chapter 7 by Kitschelt and Rehm). Moreover, we see striking similarities between countries, which are incompatible with the contingent and context-specific perspective on opportunistic issue entrepreneurs: In particular, we see cross-national consistency in the directions and extents of voter flows, in the programmatic preferences of left voters over policies and consistent policy bundles (Abou-Chadi, Häusermann, Mitteregger, Mosimann and Wagner), and even in the programmatic supply of (challenger) parties across countries. In short, we see structure and order where the issue-entrepreneur perspective expects volatility and variance, and we see voter flows and voter preferences rooted in sociostructural categories, where purely supply-driven accounts of political transformation would expect heterogeneity and dealignment. Our observations are also in line with the by now massive body of empirical evidence demonstrating realignment along programmatic dimensions (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2008; Häusermann and Kriesi

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2015; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015; Dalton 2018; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Hagevi et al. 2022; Hall et al. 2022).

The more radical version of the dealignment argument would contest the strong role we ascribe to sociostructural groups and their preferences as constraining actor strategies by arguing that group belonging and policy preferences are endogenous in elite appeals. Hence, the assumption here is that political parties at least potentially have the ability to form idiosyncratic group identities, to raise the saliency of particular issues and then propose programmatic options along these issues. Endogenizing demand-side attitudes and preferences obviously theoretically expands the scope for strategic agency for all parties. For social democratic parties, in particular, this would mostly likely imply that they could in principle by themselves revive the saliency of economic class conflict above new(er) sociocultural issues, by appealing to vertical class conflict and by emphasizing traditional interests and policies associated with this class conflict.

However, as we have shown in this volume, there is ample evidence that the overall saliency of issues and issue dimensions, as well as the programmatic preferences of voter groups and the importance they attach to particular questions are to a large extent beyond the control of parties – and even more so beyond the control of individual parties. If attitudes and saliency were so dependent on supply-side strategies and appeals, we would witness much more variance in voter attitudes and dimension saliency across time and space. However, the left-wing electoral potential today holds consistently progressive attitudes on both economic-distributive and sociocultural issues, irrespective of the fact that electoral realignment and the rise of challenger parties has emerged in different configurations and at different levels of speed across countries. Furthermore, the changing substance and relevance of politicized group identities, the development of broad attitudinal patterns among these social groups and electoral constituencies, as well as the development of programmatic party profiles have developed in strikingly similar ways across countries (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015; Bornschier et al. 2021a; Hall et al. 2022). All green parties equally advocate cultural liberalism and liberal immigration policies; all right-wing nationalist parties share not only restrictive immigration stances but also more authoritarian, punitive views of law and order and civil liberties. Also, we have not yet seen the successful uptake of a relevant left-authoritarian political party or movement in any West European country over the past years, even though purely opportunistic models of party competition would predict the emergence of parties with such appeals. The high degree of structuration and consistency of

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these changes conveys the insight that the voter preferences underlying programmatic politics are rooted in people's social experiences and that spatial party competition reflects inherent links across ideological-programmatic policy claims, which do not resonate if opportunistically combined. Beyond these consistent attitudinal patterns that contradict an overtly supply-side–driven and constructivist perspective on voter behavior, the continued and consistent structural sorting of voters into different parties – by socioeconomic background and by sociocultural markers of milieus and habits – contradicts a radical dealignment argument. Using outdated categories of structuration (such as old class schemes or income) may obscure how strong the structuration of voting behavior has actually remained, but once we use categories that allow us to adequately capture voters' economic and social circumstances in the knowledge economy, we understand that despite the "sea of variance and randomness," which naturally constitutes social reality, party system change reflects a limited set of clearly identifiable sociostructural shifts and central tendencies. This observation does not imply an overly rationalistic understanding of programmatic spatial voting. It is entirely consistent with the idea that voters identify with social and political groups, that these groups are politicized and perpetuated through the interplay of elites and voters, that voters form preferences based not only on material interests but also on identities and group belonging (an idea central to the literature on structural social cleavages and party systems), and that parties can appeal to groups via both policy claims and cues, heuristics and symbols (e.g., Mendelberg 2018). Acknowledging the relevance of social groups does not imply subscribing to a purely supply-side–driven understanding of preferences and policy demand, as group identities are rooted in social structure.

14.3.2 Decline of Social Democracy as a Failure to Choose Electorally Superior Party Strategies: The Class-Analytical Framework to Study Social Democratic Decline

This book's investigation explains the predicaments of Social Democrats' strategic choices in the context of the changing educational and occupational structures, technological innovation, demographics, and family/gender relations that shape people's preference distributions on the demand side and the different configurations of party competitors within different institutional settings on the supply side. Capitalism prevails, but social class and the traditional class conflict – understood as the politicized divide between capital owners and wage earners – is not dominant in patterning the competitive partisan dynamics. There is, however,

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a powerful counter-perspective in the political science literature that challenges our analysis of the left field and provides a rival explanatory account. Politically, this rival perspective has politically energized and enchanted countless radical activists within social democratic parties and the left field. Let us call it the "*industrial capitalism*" *class-centered analysis* identifying economic globalization as the main culprit causing social democratic electoral decline when party strategists promote rather than fight it with a muscular agenda of national control and economic redistribution in favor of wage earners.

In examining this alternative explanatory account, we start by stating the positive, empirically testable claims of the class analytical perspective, before appraisal how the empirical findings presented in this book for the most part contradict them. We will then briefly work back to a critical appraisal of the theoretical assumptions about party competition and the underlying political economic framework in which the class analytical perspective is grounded. Let us present the key claims of the class analytical perspective in four propositions.

First proposition, the globalization hypothesis: In light of increasing economic globalization of the flow of all factors of production – and especially capital – labor in affluent capitalist democracies has lost leverage over capital to accept lower profit rates and redistribution necessary to sustain comprehensive welfare states. Capital may invest abroad and reduce domestic employment (offshoring of labor), import goods and services from abroad where it has invested, and shift cheap labor into an economy to depress wages and residual union bargaining power. Globalization threatens to abolish the foundations of the post–World War II democratic class compromise by weakening union power. Globalization also decreases the domestic political "room to maneuver" in macroeconomic fiscal policy that national domestic governments may have enjoyed in a previous era, a claim indeed empirically corroborated by a number of studies (cf. Boix 1998; Garrett 1998; Hellwig 2015; Jahn 2006).

Second proposition, the social democratic acquiescence hypothesis: On the political field, Social Democrats have caved in to the demands of capital, accepted (or even promoted) liberalized trade and capital markets, and stood by idly when the share of GDP accruing to profits rather than wages went up, and cut back welfare state social programs benefiting the working class (e.g., Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Blyth and Katz 2005; Haupt 2010; Hopkin and Blyth 2019). Social Democrats have moved away from leftist socioeconomic policies of social protection and income redistribution and become engines of economically right-wing "Third Way" politics that systematically ignores the demands of lower wage earners for redistribution and economic security in favor of

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market mechanisms of allocation and emphasis on individual incentives and competition. This trajectory has been assisted and reinforced by the organizational assimilation of economic ideas originating among liberal pro-market professional economists and seeping inside social democratic parties. These ideas prime economic efficiency and macroeconomic stability of growth (Mudge 2018), while sidelining working-class claims for a dignified social existence with a modicum of economic equality and social recognition of all.

Third proposition, the party system cartelization hypothesis: In order to defend their own political survival and bargaining leverage, social democratic center-left parties have closed ranks with center-right mainstream parties. In light of the external constraints of globalization, they agree on broad lines of economic and social policy and engage merely in valence competition about which party most competently enacts such policies. In order to prevent new political entrepreneurs from attracting dissenters from the status quo in general elections, all of the mainstream parties agree on arrangements – particularly through public party finance benefiting the existing parties or access to mass media – to raise the thresholds of expenses and effort new partisan challengers must overcome to appeal to voters effectively. Mainstream parties constitute "cartels" that close off competition, but thereby exacerbating popular dissent and dissatisfaction with the "mainstream" political alternatives (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009, 2018; Blyth and Katz 2005; Mair 2013).

Fourth proposition, social democratic parties' acquiescence to a capitalist liberal market status quo has alienated a disaffected working class: Disappointment with the centrist strategy of the organized political Left buying into the market liberalization of capitalist economies has led core working-class constituencies either to abstain massively, or to support radical leftist competitors to Social Democracy (Arndt 2013). Alternatively, the alienated working-class voters even abandoned the Left altogether, switching toward anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and nationalist populist parties of the extreme Right. The social democratic Left reneging on its traditional promises has thereby opened the door to a fundamental right-wing populist threat to democracy in general (Berman and Snegovaya 2019). High electoral volatility, decline of electoral participation, and collapsing party membership, especially among the younger age cohorts, are seen as signals of a widespread disaffection with current democratic politics.

We can now evaluate these hypotheses in light of the evidence our volume has examined by working backwards, starting with the behavioral implications regarding voter behavior and voter flows. Over the course of the past generation, if the class theoretic perspective were

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correct, the voter flow out of social democratic party constituencies should have overwhelmingly benefited radical leftist parties, particularly among workers and especially when these social democratic parties adopted moderate strategies. Social Democrats should perform electorally better by reasserting their leftist stance, and the leftist field would have had more leverage to influence the political economy with such a leftist stance.

With regard to voter flows, however, the chapters of the first part of our study document that Social Democrats have lost voters in all directions of programmatic-ideological alternatives. First, a great deal of vote switching took place among old-fashioned mainstream parties, with voters switching to moderate right parties, which is entirely at odds with the fourth proposition of the class-analytical framework. Second, the numerically most severe losses Social Democrats suffered went to green and left-libertarian parties that compete less on redistributive economic and social politics, where they sometimes tend to take more moderate stances than even centrist Social Democracy. Instead, these parties emphasize second dimension issue positions on libertarian political and social governance (civil liberties, participation, and gender relations) and multiculturalism (immigration, affirmative action, and cultural representation). Also, it is only a small share of social democratic electoral losses that benefit the electoral fortunes of far left competitors. Moreover, the losses of social democratic parties did by no means concentrate predominantly among working-class voters. Rather losses occurred most strongly among more highly educated strata of voters. Some working-class voters indeed defect to radical left parties, but even those parties attract stronger influx from sociocultural professionals. The class-theoretical perspective has nothing to say about the rise of these green left parties that have eaten into social democratic support.

Finally, few voters of the Left, including working-class voters, abandon Social Democracy in favor of radical right parties. Radical right voters are mostly recruited from center-right parties and from the pool of nonvoters. This also includes mostly workers who have never voted for parties of the Left in the first place. Radical right parties do attract greater proportions of working class and other lower income, less educated voters, when compared to the proportion of educated and more affluent voters within their electorates. But this does not imply that these working-class and lower-income voters originated from or ever were available to left parties. Many are low-income, less educated voters who never got a chance to obtain working-class jobs, particularly among the younger cohorts, and more specifically here among men who constitute an increasing share of low-education adults.

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The main problem of Social Democracy with working-class voters, then, is different from what the class analytic narrative asserts. For one thing, the proportion of working-class voters – or more generally voters with low education and low income – is numerically and proportionally shrinking, particularly so among younger voters. In a very long-run structural perspective, there is only a subdued electoral future, therefore, in a Social Democracy primarily pinning its hopes on such voters. For another thing, many of these younger poorer voters have never been socialized into "typical" working-class occupations. They contribute to the new and – depending on political economic institutions – numerically substantial category of outsiders on the periphery of labor markets, often only intermittently employed mostly in low-skill personal service sector jobs (Emmenegger et al. 2012). They are an electorally underrepresented category of citizens (if they have voting rights at all), and they reveal the increasing economic inequality characteristic of many advanced knowledge societies, but they are hard to mobilize with conventional social democratic templates, as their needs and demands are not shared by broad social strata, and as new issues have come to dominate the political agendas. In short, there is not a vast mass of precarious, "poor" citizens out there to which Social Democrats could appeal. There is a highly stratified and segmented occupational structure in which the poorest groups are a minority. There is a broad group of middle-income, intermediate-skill citizens in society, working in private enterprise or in nonprofit institutions and civil service administrations, who are captured neither by categorization as the declining working class nor by that of academically higher-grade certified professionals. In terms of the Oesch occupational class scheme (2006), they would qualify as members of the strongly expanding classes of sociocultural semiprofessionals, associate managers, or technicians. They overall share the preference profile of the professional/managerial classes, but somewhat more moderately: They support social protection and economic redistribution, as well as moderate dosages of many of the objectives left green parties advocate. But they cannot be persuaded by politicians who appeal to outlier groups and activists. As the analysis of several chapters has shown, an appeal to these groups will not make Social Democracy spectacularly successful in electoral terms again. But these voters most likely cannot be wooed to join a radical left or radical green left strategy either.

Based on the observable voter flows surrounding Social Democracy, it is not surprising that a radical left strategy has paid off not particularly well for social democratic parties, although movements to the left have not always electorally hurt them, particularly if social democratic parties are comparatively small already in the 1980s and can successfully

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contain the rise of parties of the Green Left and Radical Left by drawing close to these competitors' positions. It is also unsurprising that distinctive radical left parties, competing with reformist, centrist Third Way Social Democrats, have not rallied a great deal of electoral support, and certainly not among the working class, particularly in the most advanced knowledge societies of Northwestern Europe with formerly powerful social democratic parties. Let us briefly review that record.

In electoral systems of proportional representation, where new party entry is associated with rather low costs and thresholds of legislative representation, radical left parties have achieved respectable rates of electoral success in Scandinavia (running under labels such as *Left Socialists, Socialist People's, Left, or Left Alliance* parties since the early 1960s), the Netherlands (*Socialist Party*), and Germany (*The Left*). They and their likes have sometimes benefited from Social Democrats' turn to the center, but they have never managed to exceed a modest ceiling of electoral support well under one-sixth of the total vote. In other countries, such as Austria, Belgium, and Switzerland, radical left parties could never even evolve beyond the status of small splinter parties. So, while there is a substantial hard leftist constituency for a more radical socialist economic agenda, it clearly resonates with only a limited, specialized audience unlikely to dominate the entire left political field. And even then, starting already in the 1970s, most of these radical left parties "modernized" their appeal by emphasizing libertarian positions on second dimension issues of political and cultural governance and social identities, clearly going beyond their staple economic leftism and eventually appealing mostly to nonworking-class constituencies, particularly voters of the educated middle class in middle- or high-skilled cognitive and interpersonal nonroutine jobs.

If the class theoretic argument were correct, radical left parties should substantially gain votes by denouncing Social Democrats' centrism, particularly after left coalition governments from which the far left parties then walked away in protest against social democratic neoliberal moderation. But there seems to be no single empirical observation to confirm that pattern. In Denmark, for example, the *Socialist People's Party* lost heavily in 2011, after denouncing the centrism of its previous social democratic partner. And in Sweden, in the 1998 election, the *Left Party* won votes from its then centrist social democratic coalition partner, but while sticking to the alliance and thereby tacitly tolerating the coalition's centrism.[1]

[1] The Social Democrats declined that year from 45% to 36% in 1998, while the *Left Party* went up from 6% to 12%. Second dimension politics may have actually been more important for the success of the *Left Party* than its class politics: The party dropped its

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In Greece, finally, it was a new radical leftist party government, *Syriza*, elected in 2015 that eventually caved in to Northern European demands to solve Greece's economic crisis through financial austerity policies. But the effort to field a new leftist alternative to displace Syriza in the 2019 legislative election, spearheaded by the party's former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, got electorally nowhere (3.4% of the vote), and *Syriza* actually lot most support to its moderate right-wing competitor.[2]

Next, let us consider how radical leftism plays out in party systems operating within first-past-the-post single-member district systems with plurality ballot. Here left activists face extremely unfavorable odds in overcoming thresholds of representation for a new party. Given low probabilities of new party success, radical activists can hope to impact left strategy by working through the organization of the hegemonic moderate left party, such as the British *Labour Party*. Radicals constitute distinctive intraparty factions in order to capture their entire party eventually and impose a radical socialist strategy. This is what the left socialist factions inside the British *Labour Party* successfully practiced in the early 1980s, making Michael Foote their party leader and prime ministerial candidate (1980–83), and again in the 2010s catapulting Jeremy Corbyn (2015–20) into the leadership position. In both instances, in national legislative elections, the radical strategy and leadership ultimately yielded defeats in which actually both working-class and nonworking-class voters abandoned the party, albeit at differential rates.[3]

former Communist Party name in the run-up to the election, thereby sending a signal of repositioning itself in a more moderate direction, while also declaring itself a feminist party which gave it improved credibility as a libertarian stalwart in second-dimension party competition.

[2] The class-analytical approach is also wrong in the Greek case, when examining the micro-logic of voter support. Following World Values Survey 7, Syriza attracted little support among the self-identified working class, but more among those who consider themselves nonworking-class poor and the self-employed. It also attracts younger highly educated people, the party's knowledge society face. Elsewhere, unemployed or underemployed young college graduates in Southern Europe flock to radical left parties such as *Podemos* in Spain or the ideologically more amorphous and fleeting *Five Star Movement* in Italy. Nowhere is the working class – or even those broadly identified as low-income and low-education – overrepresented in the electorates of Mediterranean radical left parties.

[3] The often invoked and sometimes empirically diagnosed trade-off between working-class and nonworking-class voters of Social Democracy contingent upon the radicalism of its strategy (Evans and Tilley 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Karreth et al. 2013) may usually be a relative one, not an absolute trade-off: In times of radicalizing social democratic strategy, both vote categories lose confidence in the party and deliver defeats of the parties in subsequent elections, but the working-class ratio in the overall left party support goes up, as the rates of absolute defection from the radicalized party are higher among nonworkers than among workers.

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Finally, there is France with an electoral system that induces mixed incentives for radical left-party differentiation or pooling of left voters under a single-party umbrella. On the one hand, its single-member electoral districts encourage consolidation around single parties in a left and a right camp. On the other, its two-round run-off majoritarian electoral formula facilitates party system fragmentation in the first round and loose coalitions of parties in the run-off round. Here mainstream Socialists can afford to make more radical appeals in the first round, while simultaneously more radical left and more centrist parties within the left field advance their own distinctive pitches. Until 2012, this configuration of electoral system enabled Socialists to furnish one of two candidates in the second-round run-off presidential elections, except in the 2002 election, or the run-offs in individual districts in legislative elections. Since then, however, the postindustrial societal differentiation of political preferences within both left and right partisan fields has enabled new political entrepreneurs to change the electoral game such that that the conventionally dominant two center-left and center-right mainstream parties have been displaced by a much more complicated and polarized landscape of competitors. But this does not imply that a powerful radical Left would substitute for an exhausted, fragmented, and demobilized center Left. In the legislative election of 2022, the coalition of radical left and green left parties, augmented by fragments of the old socialist party, NUPES (*Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale*), garnered a touch over 25% of the vote in the first electoral round. Public commentators perceived this as a great success of the French Left, but the electoral alliance's performance produced only a minor improvement over the combined electoral tally of its constituent parties in the preceding 2017 election. More importantly, it delivered worse results than the old mainstream Socialist Party and its left field allies achieved in every single legislative election between 1981 and 2012.

To summarize, the empirical implications of the industrial capitalism class-centered theory for social democratic electoral success in the twenty-first century, stated earlier in postulate 4, namely, a strategy of left radicalism appealing to a working class – or generically poor, less educated – vote constituency, are not borne out by data on voter movements and relative party strengths. As indicated in this volume, green and left-libertarian or moderate strategies appear to be electorally more promising. Social democratic strategy has to recognize the complexity of socioeconomic challenges in knowledge society and consequently the divisions among voter groups broadly sympathetic to the social democratic idea. Moreover, electoral success depends on the configuration of competitors within and beyond the social democratic field. Social

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democratic strategies that may be best for the individual parties' electoral success do not always turn out also to advance the social democratic field, when there is a differentiation of the partisan options with the field.

If the class analytical approach fails to characterize the landscape of political competition in knowledge society, this generates the suspicion that there may be flaws in the empirical validity of the underlying fundamental propositions that generate the factually inaccurate claims about voter movements in and out of social democracy and conditions of social democratic electoral success. These underlying political-economic and institutional arguments are not the direct object of investigation in our volume. But let us briefly identify where we suspect some problems are buried with the class-centered framework.

The class-theoretic perspective suggests that social democratic parties have joined a "cartel" of the mainstream parties (proposition 3) in order to ensure electoral support, despite abandoning the interests of their working-class core constituencies (proposition 2). As discussed a generation ago (Koole 1996; Kitschelt 2000), there is no theory of how such cartel could provide incentives for politicians not to defect and no evidence of a cartel among parties, understood in the technical sense of preventing entry of competition, regulation of supply, and price fixing. The mechanism is supposed to be public party financing, rendering entry of new parties more difficult. In practice, however, public party financing has encouraged entry in the countries with most generous funding. Realizing the proliferation of electorally attractive new "challenger" parties in systems said to be cartelized by public party finance, cartel theorists (Katz and Mair 2009, 2018; Mair 2013) then argued that it was precisely such cartels that incited enough voter outrage to promote the electoral fortunes of radical left and right-wing populist alternatives. But the theory cannot have it both ways. Either it predicts that cartels restrict competition, and that politicians achieve it with cartelization. Or the theory predicts that cartelization produces more fragmentation, but why didn't politicians in mainstream parties then stay away from it or quickly corrected their error? The cartel theory appears to assume an extreme myopia among mainstream politicians that is hard to fathom.

Discrepancies between salient voter preferences on an issue and available party positions can be explained more consistently and straightforwardly than by cartel party theory. To adopt a new position, parties need to calculate their electoral trade-offs and issue yields (DeSio and Weber 2014). Established parties might find that responding to an issue position may boost their short-run support, but with negative longer-run electoral consequences. Or parties may find that serving a new issue position will yield a negative electoral issue yield, as the party's attractiveness to new

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voters embracing that position will be more than offset by internal divisions among existing supporters and defection of previous loyalists. Both considerations can lead to apparent gaps in responsiveness but do not require any reference to a cartelization claim.

Beyond the theoretical difficulties of the cartel theory, the existing empirical evidence quite consistently shows that whichever direction party competition has taken, the programmatic appeals of political parties are still broadly congruent with those of their voters. If anything, it is the radical parties of the Left and Right whose appeals appear to diverge from their more moderate electoral followings (see Hagevi et al. 2022: 146). Likewise, it is not true that mainstream politicians can conjure up this programmatic congruence of preferences simply because public opinion is endogenous to elite appeals. There is a complex intertemporal back and forth between elite position taking and mass public opinion change (Hagevi et al. 2022: 151–8) and there is considerable evidence that often public opinion is in the lead of party appeals (Barbera et al. 2019). It is not, as suggested by Achen and Bartels (2016), that parties announce their programmatic position, and voters, then, simply adopt whatever their elites tell them to do, blindly following their affective partisan identification. At least on salient issues voters may consciously abandon a party, when it announces certain positions that diverge from voters' preferences (Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren and Chapp 2017; Evans and Neundorf 2020).

These dynamic accountability mechanisms are also in full display in evidence reported in this volume. Voters switch in substantively consistent ways to parties that are close to their personal preference schedules. Social Democrats have difficulties keeping their voters, as they depart in different ideological-programmatic directions: Pleasing one group of dissatisfied supporters may only further antagonize another.

Empirical evidence also defies the claim that social democratic parties have simply converged with the moderate right, thereby abandoning their electoral constituency's preferences (proposition 2). In some countries, on some dimensions, a modicum of convergence has taken place. In others, on some policy dimensions, greater divergence, if not polarization, has prevailed in the configuration of parties (see most recently: Hagevi et al. 2022: chapters 4–7). Even if, by some measures (cf. Boix 2019: 145), Social Democrats on average shifted slightly toward the center in social and economic policies in the 1990s and 2000s, the appearance of convergence often resulted from a shift of both center-left and center-right mainstream party camps toward that center, not simply just Social Democrats moving (Boix 2019; Gingrich and Häusermann

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2015). Hence, the observation of a mild right-shift of social democratic parties in the 1990s needs to be complemented by the observation of a relative left-shift of center-right parties, rather than an overall neoliberal reversal on both sides.

Finally, there is little evidence that governing parties, and particularly Social Democrats, abandon their programmatic pledges, once in office and thereby ignore their voters' preferences. Parties actually do realize many, and often most, of their preelection pledges.[4] The best placed pledges are those catering to preferences of large blocks of voters in the middle of the electoral preference distributions whose support is needed to capture the median voter area and enable parties to sustain government majorities. As a consequence, a "middle class" will always be better represented and exercise greater leverage over policy than extremely poor voters (Elkjaer and Iversen 2020, 2023).

To provide a stark example of Social Democracy's electoral responsiveness to lower and middle strata voters, let us take the posterchild of the class analytical critique, the British Labour Party under Tony Blair charting a "Third Way" political strategy. Ironically, that party and that leader did more to expand the British welfare state than any other UK government since World War II. In real inflation-adjusted terms, upon ascent to office in 1997, this party increased public budget expenditure on pensions, health care, and education from about 280 billion GBP in 1997–98 to more than 480 billion GBP in the last fiscal year of the Labour administration 2010–11 (UK Government. HM Treasury 2022). This expansion amounts to an annual real increase of more than 4% in each and every year of Labour in office, a faster expansion than in any previous Labour governing spell in Britain, including the 1946–51 period, and a record rarely matched by social democratic governments anywhere in the Golden Era of postwar economic growth. This does not mean, however, that the Labour Party served Britain's poorest and most marginalized constituents, as demonstrated by its workfare policy, its aversion to increasing unemployment benefits, means-tested income support and income tax progressivity, as well as its resistance to undoing many of the preceding Conservative governments' benefits reductions. The party also liberalized the public sector by infusing elements of competition into government services and by contracting out tasks to private business. Thus,

[4] As a comprehensive, systematic study of pledge fulfillment, see Naurin et al. 2019 or Grossmann and Guinaudeau 2021. On partisan impact on policymaking, of course, constraints of political-economic conditions play a role, as the entire literature on constrained partisanship argues (Beramendi et al. 2015). Nevertheless, see as examples for gauging the role of partisanship Bandau and Ahrens (2020), Protrafke (2017), and Schmitt and Zohlnhöfer (2019).

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Labour's Third Way strategy can also be accounted for by a blunt calculus of electoral accountability, catering to the vast mass from lower to upper middle-income voters much more so than to the very poor, as objectionable as this strategy might appear from a perspective of radical social equalization.

To explain why social democratic parties' agenda of social and economic policies have changed over time, we also need to focus on the entirely new twenty-first century knowledge capitalism challenges that interact and conflict with one another and compete for resources and attention among political constituencies broadly sympathetic to the basic social democratic idea. We have repeatedly shown throughout this study how different old and new socioeconomic groups populate the broadly social democratic field. They are heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, skill type, and employment sector (public or private, export-oriented or domestic) to mention only the most important ones, and they react differently to the challenges of skill-biased technological progress, the demographic transition, the changing role of family units, and the exigencies of ecology and climate threats. These groups have different needs and different relative priorities when it comes to public pensions, health care, family support, education and professional training, gender equality, equalization and recognition of ethnocultural claims, and environmental protection. That is a key reason why the social democratic field yields a proliferation of multiple parties, whenever electoral institutions permit it, and the complexity of these programmatic trade-offs for the left cannot be reduced to Social Democrats acquiescing to the globalization of capital markets and letting the democratic class compromise of the post–World War II era fall by the wayside. Social Democrats never walked away from that compromise, but the compromise has been tested and rendered incomplete and insufficient by these new challenges. Welfare states have not meaningfully shrunk anywhere in advanced capitalist economies. The reality of the situation is that in most countries, social expenditures are hovering near historically high ceilings, but that demand is expanding and differentiating – for pensions, health care, education, family support, eldercare, or retraining.[5] Even when party governments, including Social Democratic governments, have

[5] Comparing total public social expenditures, according to the OECD's definition, in 2000 with the latest available data, in almost all countries, these expenditures are higher as a share of GDP recently than ever before, with marginal declines registered only in Australia, the Netherlands, and Sweden. See https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=SOCX_AGG

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cut back individual entitlements, gross expenditures – particularly for pensions and health care – have continued to increase. In this context, social democratic parties are coping to deal with new challenges and old commitments, and there are different agendas within the social democratic field.

In sum, the class-theoretic perspective largely ignores the multidimensional and complex societal challenges that are experienced by the vast mass of twenty-first century inhabitants of knowledge capitalist society, and which cannot be captured by simple wage earner/business class divisions alone or even primarily. In the welfare state literature, the emergence of new dimensions of social risk and demand, which deviate from the traditional redistributive logic, have been theorized under the label of "new social risks" (e.g., Bonoli 2005; Bonoli and Natali 2012; see related Rehm 2016; Iversen and Rehm 2022). Building on and expanding this idea, the new risks and challenges that weigh on citizens in the early twenty-first century are multifaceted and multidimensional in ways that transcend the realm of social policy. Relevant issues for wide shares of the society – well beyond the lower income strata – encompass questions such as: Can I afford to enable my children to acquire the skills that will ensure them to earn a decent living throughout their adulthood? Will I myself continue to have skills that provide me with predictable market income? What does addressing these challenges mean for my social and my family life, my gender, and intergenerational relations? Will I be able to afford to retire with a decent pension when I will approach old age, despite spells of atypical employment or employment interruptions for care or education? Beyond social welfare, people ask: Will I be able to extend my life expectancy by relying on all the critical improvements in health care that are becoming technologically available but that are extremely costly because of high labor and capital inputs? Will I and my children be safe and accepted socially despite deviating from majority social norms? Will my quality of life deteriorate due to global warming and the loss of biodiversity under way, and what sacrifices are in order to prevent these consequences?

These are all questions that generate high levels of anxiety and stress across much of the electorate in knowledge societies. Political parties and politicians – social democratic parties and all others – are grappling with responses to these novel questions, and they come up with different answers, contingent upon the constituencies they are dealing with, or have not found any answers at all. This situation contributes to a fragmentation and reconfiguration of the partisan electorate not satisfactorily captured by the class theoretic perspective.

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14.4 Outlook: The Future Will Be Different Than the Recent Past Analyzed in This Study

Going back over fifty years, when Lipset and Rokkan (1967) were postulating that party system cleavages had been frozen in Western Europe since the advent of World War I, they did not assert that this state of affairs would continue over the subsequent fifty-plus years. But many contemporary readers interpreted their marginal comment about frozenness at the end of a long comparative historical introduction to party cleavages in an important volume in such fashion. Subsequently, a whole cottage industry of scholarship sprung up that explored the frozenness of party divides and/or their thawing under new conditions, thereby claiming to prove Lipset and Rokkan wrong. But Lipset and Rokkan never implied that history ended in the 1920s. Their own deep historical knowledge spoke against expecting a stasis that would be impossible to upset and they never made predictions about the ensuing development of party systems. Likewise, the analysis presented in our volume, completed in 2023, captures developments over the past twenty to fifty years. There is no pretense that the coming fifty years will be just a continuation of trends seen in the past and arguments examined in this volume.

In fact, there are reasons to believe that the coming fifty years may involve political issues and divides that will pose new challenges to politicians across all programmatic fields, which may alter the policy content of the fields, as well as the electoral constituency groups that gravitate toward these fields, but beyond that may even challenge or redefine the basic coordinates of what constitutes these fields, namely, contentions about the distribution of material economic resources and the discretion of individual human agents over their social and cultural exploration of preferred ways of life.

Part of the normal process of democratic innovation and reconfiguration will be the mapping of new issues on the underlying foundational divisions of political principles. It is already in the offing that questions of global warming and ecological depletion are no longer political problems that can be addressed with benevolent regulations that create mostly winners but few losers. Instead, these issues will pose harsh distributive conflicts, as the imperative to cut back on the generation of greenhouse cases and the extermination of genetic variety in plant and animal life become more intense, visible, and critical for the survival of the human species. It is unclear how parties in the left and right fields will handle these issues, as diverging positions run directly through these partisan fields, internally dividing them.

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For this reason, it would be wrong to conclude from this study that given the relative stability of the left field in terms of aggregate vote shares, all is well for the electoral future and political leverage of "the Left," that is, the set of political organizations broadly subscribing to the social democratic idea. The future for the coherence and leverage of the left field is uncertain. On the one hand, the ongoing polarization along the universalist-particularist cleavage sustains the formation and demarcation of the "left field" in opposition to the particularist right (Bornschier et al. 2024). On the other hand, however, as illustrated by our itemization in Table 1.1, there are indeed severe and lasting divisions within the left political field, which may even become intensified by the infusion of newly salient policy issues and the configuration of distinct socioeconomic groups around opposing views on how to address those policy challenges. In certain contexts, these divisions may hamper or even paralyze leftist coalitions spanning the entire field, and – if deepening – also lead voters to abandon the field eventually and look for new alternatives. An observation to suggest such a potential for an unravelling process on the Left may have been delivered by France with the rise of Emmanuel Macron's novel centrist party formation. In France, admittedly, this happened against the backdrop of an ideologically deeply fissured Left, and hastened by strictures of the electoral system that require a higher level of cooperation than in run-of-the-mill parliamentary systems with proportional representation in the legislature. However, the risk of deep divides and even a breaking up of the left field overall appears also in other countries.

Future societal change may upset what we now define as the left field in even more profound ways than our itemization of internal divisions in the introduction suggests, and there are sources of change that may disorganize the "right" field as well. Such more existential challenges of contemporary established coordinates of left and right ideological fields will involve decisions concerning the governance of technologies that redefine the very essence of the human species itself. Artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and broadly the spread of information technology facilitating an increasing "legibility" and manipulability of humans' actions, thoughts, and expectations by political rulers and corporate business may well disorganize and reshuffle the entire map of political preference formation and partisan mobilization, if not put in question the continuing feasibility of electoral partisan democracy as a viable form of binding collective decision-making. Political divisions and competitive configurations within early to mid-twenty-first century Western democracies mapped in this book therefore reflect historical episodes that may constitute preludes to much deeper conflicts and

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seismic shifts in social and political organization we cannot fathom at this time. Investigations concerning political divides and partisan camps written from the vantage point of 2050 may therefore report a greater change from the state of affairs in 2020 than our study registered when comparing the 1990s to the 2010s or 2020s.

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