

THE LABOUR PARTY – PAST AND FUTURE

Social democracy, party of values

Sebastian Jobelius and Konstantin Vössing

In order to reinvigorate their electoral appeal, social-democratic parties should become parties of values. They should abandon the social compromise model, which is based on defining and pleasing a target audience. Value-based social-democratic parties, by contrast, emphasise their values and the policies that promote them.

From class mobilisation to social compromise

To become parties of values, social democrats must leave behind their current strategy of catering to coalitions of social groups and claiming to build a compromise between them (the ‘social compromise model’). This would be a considerable transformation – the social compromise model has defined social-democratic politics since it replaced class mobilisation in the second half of the twentieth century – but social democracy has already proven its capacity for fundamental change. It has shifted gear twice before in its long history on an equally large scale, with positive results each time.

First, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social democracy embraced class mobilisation during a time of intense and confusing competition between many

alternative ideas for left politics. Social-democratic parties decided to mobilise industrial workers through class-based networks and identities, and they did this successfully whenever they managed to tailor the general principle of working-class mobilisation to national circumstances.¹ For instance, the German SPD used revolutionary rhetoric to instil hope for long-term change and motivate activism in a repressive environment, while the British Labour Party made good use of the existing instruments of parliamentary politics to achieve socialism through the legislative route.

Second, after 1945 (and sometimes earlier), economic growth, increasing prosperity, and access to democratic institutions reduced the popularity of class politics and its radical vision of sweeping change. Social-democratic parties adapted by embracing a cross-class appeal to coalitions of workers and other social groups. The SPD codified the social compromise model in 1959 in its Godesberg platform, the same year in which Labour first considered revising Clause 4 of its constitution – although it took until 1995 to formally abandon class mobilisation. However, both parties had already started to act like social compromise parties on many occasions before the model was sanctioned as the official party line. The social compromise model facilitated a long period of electoral success for social-democratic parties in Britain and Germany and many other European countries.² The electoral coalitions established by the social compromise approach also sustained a progressive policy agenda of welfare state extension.

The social compromise model was a success story for social democracy during the post-war era, just like the model of class mobilisation was a success story during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as a result of fundamental political, social and economic changes (explained below), the social compromise model has ceased to be useful. It should therefore be abandoned in favour of a value-based approach, just like class mobilisation was previously abandoned in favour of the social compromise model when circumstances changed.

Social-democratic parties should become parties of values because the value-based approach offers convincing responses to new circumstances. Becoming a party of values means not only to hold values, but to make values the decisive rationale for all aspects of party behaviour. Value-based social-democratic parties would stop fashioning themselves as representatives of merely nominal social groups that exist only in the minds of party strategists. They would derive and justify their policies in reference to universal social democratic values.

Value-based policies

Economic and political change during the last few decades has rendered the national organisation of social compromise materially impossible. Specifically, globalisation, digitalisation and regional integration (even after Brexit) severely

reduce the effectiveness as well as the popularity of measures that traditionally facilitated the legislation of national social compromises and the establishment of so-called welfare state support coalitions. This is why the social-democratic rhetoric of national social compromise (even or maybe especially when it is adorned by vague invocations of ‘Europe’) frequently sounds shallow. The social compromise model is not a viable point of departure for social-democratic policies anymore

By contrast, the party-of-values approach offers a promising foundation for developing social-democratic policies that respond in a convincing way to new challenges. Value-based social-democratic parties design, select, and implement policies based on a realistic appraisal of whether and how different policies advance social-democratic values such as freedom, justice and solidarity. This offers a real opportunity to devise universal and feasible policy agendas. For instance, the best way to establish health care that is comprehensive, high-quality and accessible to all citizens is to scrutinise new policies with a critical eye and judge them based on whether they truly advance social-democratic values of solidarity and social rights. This approach to policy-making is more effective than shallow populist rhetoric and more inspiring than technocratic governance.

Political party

In the current debate, recommendations regarding the electoral appeal of social-democratic parties typically rely on a ‘social-spatial’ approach to put the social compromise model into effect. The social-spatial approach begins by designating certain social groups as partners in an envisioned coalition of social-democratic voters. Then, the interests of these groups are identified based on their presumed locations in a multidimensional political space. And finally, the party is moved to a position in this space that supposedly satisfies the interests of the targeted groups.

For instance, the ‘left turn’ model would move social democracy to the left on both the economic and cultural dimensions of the political space to target progressive urban voters (supposedly interested in left-wing cultural policies) and a traditional communitarian-minded working-class (supposedly interested in left-wing economic policies). The ‘social-liberal’ model suggests combining left cultural policies and an internationalist orientation (catering to liberal middle-class groups) with centrist economic policies (for lower strata of employees and traditional workers interested in economic growth). The ‘traditionalism’ model aims to recuperate support from social democracy’s traditional working-class constituency by combining a centrist (or even left-wing) economic policy position with a rightward move on the cultural dimension of the political space, in particular through demands for restrictive migration policies.

The social-spatial approach has contributed important insights to the debate about the future of social democracy. However, treating social-democratic parties as

vehicles that can be moved around freely in political space to capture an optimal coalition of voters turns social democracy from a political into a tactical party. This explains why voters often claim that they simply do not know what social-democratic parties stand for. To address this problem, parties of values must say *what they want* rather than *which voters they want*. Emphasising values – and policies that can advance these values – would make sure that social-democratic parties develop strong identities as political rather than tactical actors. It would allow them to abandon the formulaic discussion of positions and target audiences in favour of real sustained connections with voters and supporters.

Winning elections

Under the social compromise model, policy agendas are determined based on their presumed appeal to the social groups a social-democratic party wishes to attract. This approach offered a convincing formula to win elections for as long as people made vote choices in accordance with the social groups to which they belonged. But this is no longer the case. Political preferences and voting behaviour are simply not determined by people's group affiliations anymore, irrespective of whether groups are defined by class, income, occupation, religion or social milieu. This is the irrefutable conclusion of decades worth of research on voting behaviour.

For instance, comparative studies show that people's social structural affiliations explain only a small and perpetually shrinking part of their vote choices.³ In Germany, studies of the last federal elections in 2017 find that not a single social milieu features a dominant political party, and that the SPD fails to achieve more than 25 per cent support in any social milieu.⁴ German social milieus are a far cry from being homogenous political entities. The end of group-based vote choices is also a political reality in Britain, the former poster child of class voting. In the 2019 general election, Labour lost support in *all* occupational groups. It no longer has a lead over the Conservatives in any social class.⁵ Importantly, the 2019 elections are no aberration. They are the culmination of a long-term process in which the significance of social structural belonging for politics has perpetually declined.⁶ Even in Britain party preferences are simply not determined by voters' social structural affiliations anymore.⁷

It is clear that neither social classes nor social milieus or other groups defined by social structural variables predict people's political views and vote choices. At the same time, the fundamental values for which social democracy stands – freedom, justice and solidarity – are widespread across different social groups, and they are largely independent of group affiliations.⁸ Values are the product of socialisation, personality, individual life choices and material capital. Located at the narrow end of a funnel of causality leading to political preferences, they are the most critical and

immediate cause of vote choices. Most recently, studies of voting for right-wing populist parties have showed again that values have a much larger effect on vote choices than social structural features.⁹

By appealing to people based on their social class, milieu, or occupation, social-democratic parties frequently fail to take advantage of the prevalence of social-democratic values and the significance of values for vote choices. Appealing to voters based on their values is a more promising strategy for winning elections than the social compromise approach that appeals to voters based on their social structural features.

Becoming a party of values

Embracing a value-based approach and abandoning the social compromise model would be a fitting response to new circumstances resulting from decades of political, social and economic change. Values are clearly not an entirely new notion for social democracy. Quite to the contrary. Social-democratic parties have always had a canon of values – most importantly freedom, justice and solidarity – that united members, activists and supporters. However, in the strategic debates as well as the regular political activities of social-democratic parties, values are commonly overshadowed by other considerations, including not only the definition of target audiences and shallow notions of positioning in political space, but also uninspired technocratic approaches to governing. Becoming a party of values means leaving these motives behind and making values the most important rationale of social-democratic party strategy and practice.

Many social-democratic initiatives, projects and representatives all over the world already embrace the value-based approach. However, the movement towards value-based social democracy still lacks a systematic strategic foundation and a common point of reference. This is why social democrats still frequently embrace the heuristic of the social compromise model as an easily accessible fall-back option. A sustainable transformation toward value-based social democracy requires an inspiring exchange of ideas and best practices.

Embracing a value-based approach does not mean losing sight of the material interests of working men and women. To the contrary. The values that define social democracy clearly include material expectations and needs. More than that, by becoming parties of values, social-democratic parties would recognise the success of their own ground-breaking policies and the ramifications of these policies for party strategy. It is thanks to social-democratic policies of social justice, economic empowerment and access to education during the post-war era that social-democratic values, orientations and behaviour are now widespread across many different social groups. Mobilising adherents of the canon of social-democratic values irrespective

of their social structural location is therefore the most important task of value-based social democracy. The transformation of social-democratic parties into parties of values would entail the creation of deep connections between social-democratic parties and the adherents of social-democratic values.

The five pillars of value-based social democracy

Transforming social-democratic parties into parties of values requires both strategic debate and tangible initiatives. It also needs to combine the transnational exchange of ideas with the ability to adapt a general template to national circumstances. This has served social-democratic parties very well in their long histories. We outline now, as a template designed to invite debate and adaptation, five pillars of the political practice of value-based social democracy.

First, while social-democratic parties need to exude more pride in their values, they should also revive their ability to listen. The erosion of highly institutionalised auxiliary networks of supporters and friendly organisations has removed an important channel of communication between voters and social-democratic parties. It has not been replaced by new digital networks. As a result, voters no longer feed their concerns, ideas and demands into social-democratic parties. Value-based social democracy urgently needs to fix this problem by devising new channels of dialogue with its voters and supporters. This includes the more proficient use of interactive digital tools and the expansion of social scientific analysis as well as rediscovering the virtues of old-fashioned conversation and community engagement.¹⁰ It also entails abandoning simplistic and misguided assumptions about the lives and political expectations of *the* working-class (and other social groups) in favour of a more nuanced, realistic and respectful approach.¹¹

Second, social-democratic parties should create more space for discussion about how to put values into practice. In other words, talk about values should not be relegated to the preambles of party platforms and the occasional heart-warming speech, and it should stay clear of detached reflections about the abstract meaning of freedom, justice and solidarity. Discussion should focus on developing policies that advance social-democratic values in response to ever new challenges and changing circumstances, in areas of major concern to citizens. ‘Third way’ social democracy during the late 1990s was the last instance of the electorally successful application of the social compromise model in Britain and Germany. New Labour and the German SPD managed to merge support from working-class and middle-class voters. However, the ‘third way’ approach failed to provide a sustainable model for the future of social democracy because it was unable to devise a value-based policy agenda. It lacked a clear compass of values and it was not inclined to think about policies with an eye on how they advance social-democratic values. This

is why ‘third way’ social-democratic parties resorted too often to technocratic policy solutions and justifications, and it is also why they failed to offer a successful long-term template for social democracy. Value-based social democracy needs to be as pragmatic as its ‘third way’ predecessors, but it needs to combine that pragmatism with a clear-cut embrace of values as the guiding principle of policy-making.

Third, social-democratic parties should decide about their policies based on whether they truly help to advance social-democratic values. This requires competence as well as an anti-populist mindset with absolute openness toward rational and evidence-based policy-making. Social-democratic parties must avoid the temptation of populism, in both its right-wing and left-wing versions. The populist model simply offers no convincing agenda for solving the problems our societies are facing. Imitating populist approaches will not bring electoral victories for social-democratic parties, clearly evidenced by the failure of ‘Corbynism’ in the UK and the inability of the newly elected two co-leaders of the German SPD to revitalise the party. Instead of adopting shallow populist rhetoric, value-based social democracy needs to be competent and pragmatic, and it needs to use its competence and pragmatism to turn social-democratic values into political reality, one policy at a time.

Fourth, social-democratic parties should always communicate their policies in relation to their values, and their values in relation to their policies. This requires a professional and disciplined communication strategy that highlights not only the desirability of social-democratic values, but also the positive effects of social-democratic policies on advancing these values. For instance, when social democrats talk about Europe, they need to communicate clearly and plausibly what exactly policies of European cooperation and integration will do to enact social-democratic values. Right now, social-democratic representatives frequently fail to communicate with voters in this value-based fashion. They justify a policy in reference to itself (‘we need more European integration because this is good for the European Union’), they communicate policies, even unpopular ones, as if their desirability was self-evident (‘collectivisation now!’, ‘Europe is the answer’), and they have adopted the unfortunate neoliberal habit of using excuses to endorse policies (‘there is no alternative’).

Fifth, to win elections, value-based social-democratic parties should make *strategic* decisions about the issues they emphasise. This stands in stark contrast to their current practice of treating issue emphasis as a *political* (rather than a strategic) question. The current practice becomes most readily apparent when different party factions compete over placing their favoured issues on the agenda. Value-based social-democratic parties, by contrast, should be steadfast and political in their value orientations, but extremely flexible and strategic in their decisions about which issues to emphasise. For instance, value-based social-democratic parties would select campaign issues based on their ability to mobilise existing supporters and attract voters from other political camps. The ability of different issues to achieve

these two goals can be measured using the ‘issue yield’ indicator developed by de Sio and Weber.¹² Right now, health care should offer a high issue yield for social-democratic parties in Britain, Germany and elsewhere. Policies favouring a universal, high-quality and publicly financed health care system advance social-democratic values that are widely shared by voters across existing political divides. Emphasising health care in an election campaign with a value-based approach would allow social-democratic parties to generate a wide appeal to old and potential new voters.

Conclusion

We believe that contemporary social-democratic parties can open a great new chapter of social democracy by becoming parties of values. Embracing a value-based approach would be the third time in its long history that social democracy has redefined its major purpose. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social-democratic parties used class mobilisation to integrate the working class into the political arena. In the later twentieth century, they adopted a social compromise approach which allowed social democrats to establish welfare states and implement a socio-cultural agenda of openness and tolerance. Becoming parties of values is the optimal strategic choice for contemporary social-democratic parties. By embracing a value-based approach, social democracy would not abandon its traditions. Quite to the contrary. It would return to the core of its identity and the earliest roots of its history in the beginning and middle of the nineteenth century, before it became a class party.

Sebastian Jobelius was head of office of the leader of the social-democratic party group in the German parliament, Andrea Nahles. He is a member of the editorial board of the social democratic journal *spw*. Twitter: @Sjobelius. Email: sebastian.jobelius@web.de

Konstantin Vössing is a political scientist at City University of London. Twitter: @K_Vossing. Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/konstantinvossing/>. Email: konstantin.voessing@gmail.com.

We are looking forward to ideas, feedback, and debate! For news and discussion about the ‘party of values’, you can follow @Soz_Dem_Net on twitter or write to info@soziale-demokratie.net.

Notes

- 1 Konstantin Vössing, *How leaders mobilize workers: social democracy, revolution, and moderate syndicalism*, Cambridge University Press 2017.

- 2 Giacomo Benedetto, Simon Hix and Nicola Mastrorocco 'The rise and fall of social democracy, 1918-2017', forthcoming in *American Political Science Review*.
- 3 Mark Franklin, Thomas Mackie and Henry Valen, *Electoral change. Responses to evolving social and attitudinal structures in Western countries*, ECPR Press, Colchester 2009; Geoffrey Evans, *The end of class politics? Class voting in comparative context*, Oxford University Press 1999; Geoffrey Evans and Nan Dirk de Graaf, *Political choice matters. Explaining the strength of class and religious cleavages in cross-national perspective*, Oxford University Press 2013.
- 4 Robert Vehrkamp and Klaudia Wegschaider, *Populäre Wahlen. Mobilisierung und Gegenmobilisierung der sozialen Milieus bei der Bundestagswahl 2017*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh 2017, p33; Rita Müller-Hilmer and Jérémie Gagné, *Was verbindet, was trennt die Deutschen? Werte und Konfliktlinien in der deutschen Wählerschaft im Jahr 2017*, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, Düsseldorf 2018, p19.
- 5 Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon, 'The re-shaping of class voting', 2020: britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/the-re-shaping-of-class-voting-in-the-2019-election-by-geoffrey-evans-and-jonathan-mellon/#.XuOwLtpR2Uk.
- 6 Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The new politics of class: the political exclusion of the British working class*, Oxford University Press 2017.
- 7 In a recent contribution to the *Renewal* blog, Jon Wilson argues very convincingly that the continued insistence on appealing to 'self-conscious sociological groups' makes social-democratic parties seem 'sectional and tribal'. 'Our people', 10 April 2020: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/blog/our-people>.
- 8 See, for example, Müller-Hilmer and Gagné, op cit, p8.
- 9 Heiko Giebler and Sven Regel, *Who votes right-wing populist? Geographical and individual factors in seven German state elections*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2018; Noam Gidron and Peter Hall, 'The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right', *British Journal of Sociology* Vol 68 No 51 2017.
- 10 Using the example of the Labour Party in Lewes, East Sussex, Mark Perryman highlights the importance of community engagement in two articles published on the *Renewal* blog: 'Lockdown Labour', 2 April 2020: <http://renewal.org.uk/blog/lockdown-labour>; and 'Food for thought', 29 May 2020: <http://renewal.org.uk/blog/food-for-thought>.
- 11 Claire Ainsley used this approach successfully in her book, *The new working class: how to win hearts, minds, and votes*, Policy Press 2018. The same approach is also a good guiding principle for everyday political interaction.
- 12 Lorenzo de Sio and Till Weber, 'Issue yield: a model of party strategy in multidimensional space', *American Political Science Review* Vol 108 No 4 2014.