

The Decline of the Left in Europe?



A Parliament Street Report

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Much has been made in the media recently about the decline of traditional mainstream left-wing parties across Western Europe. Recent articles in the [Economist](#) and the [New Statesman](#) have outlined how the traditional centre left are under attack from insurgent parties from the extreme left and right alike who are presenting contrasting ideological programmes.

Recent election results across Europe encapsulate the downward trend of leftist parties. In Greece, the extreme left-wing party Syriza emerged from the politics of austerity, amidst a worsening economic situation, becoming the governing party in January 2015, and were recently re-elected in September 2015. Consequently, the mainstream left-wing party, PASOK, nearly suffered an electoral wipeout as a result. Similarly, social democratic parties in Spain have lost ground to the insurgent extreme left-wing party Podemos. The UK Labour Party also suffered a dismal defeat at the hands of the Conservative Party at the 2015 General Election, resulting in the party appointing far left MP Jeremy Corbyn as party leader recently. France further typifies the problem that contemporary left-wing parties face, with François Hollande and the incumbent Socialist Party currently polling at record lows in the polls. The centre right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) Party have sought to [capture](#) the immigration and nationalism issue away from the French National Front (FN), with varying results.

A similar story is portrayed in Central-Eastern Europe, with right-wing politics dominating since the 2010 national parliamentary election in Hungary and the recent shift to the right in the 2015 Polish elections. Although a left-wing alliance was formed in Hungary between leftist parties, the left failed to make significant inroads in the 2014 national parliamentary election. The incumbent governing party Fidesz further consolidated its power at the [2014 national parliamentary election](#), but still faces a credible electoral threat from the extreme right-wing party Jobbik. Scandinavia has also seen a similar picture with the rise of insurgent centre-right parties in Norway and Denmark. Anti-immigrant parties in Finland and Denmark have also made significant inroads into the political system. Outliers remain, of course, with social democratic parties in Sweden consolidating their electoral base and

Matteo Renzi's social democratic party in Italy remaining the largest party in national parliamentary and European elections alike.

As the [Economist](#) article touched upon recently, a number of shortcomings have arguably affected social democratic parties across Europe. Three explanations have largely been given for this in recent months.

- The first explanation has centred on the fact that a large majority of centre left incumbents were in power at the start of the 2007/08 economic crisis and may explain in part why there has seemingly been a decline in social democratic parties across Europe.
- Secondly, it has been argued that centre left parties have lacked credibility in the context of the economic crisis that hit the Eurozone, with voters conceivably favouring policies of austerity over Keynesian economic management. In turn, the policies of austerity have tended to be adopted by centre right parties.
- The third explanation centres around the notion that insurgent extreme left and extreme right-wing parties are presenting a new brand of politics that is winning over the electorate. [The Economist](#) article argued that anti-immigrant sentiment has proved to be dangerous for centre left parties 'caught between the embrace of diversity and the protectionist instincts of workers'. In turn, the nationalist card often used by parties of the extreme right has been adopted by centre right party families in France and Hungary. This has inevitably proved to be an electorally successful party strategy.

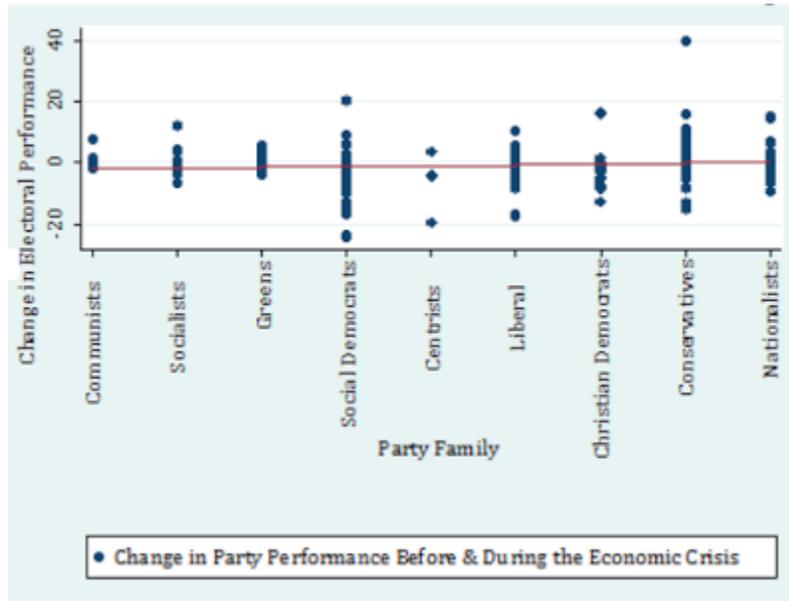
Similar statistical findings for this downward trend in aggregate electoral support for centre left parties are found in Figure 1.1 below. Figure 1.1 depicts the change in party performance for different party families across 24 European countries before and during the economic crisis. Data from national parliamentary elections is taken from the national parliamentary elections prior to the economic crisis to the following election for different party families on the left and right alike. Positive scores on the change in party

performance variable implies that a party has improved its electoral performance in national parliamentary elections from the election prior to the economic crisis to the following election at the start of the crisis. Negative scores on the change in party performance score implies that a party has seen a decrease in its electoral performance from the last election. The scatterplot below goes some way to suggest that parties on the left were punished severely during the economic crisis. Social Democrats appear to have borne the largest brunt in the context of the economic crisis, with a number of parties losing out electorally. Other party families on the left, such as the Greens and Communists increased their electoral vote share, but only marginally.

However, the scatterplot also shows that some Social Democratic parties performed better than others, performing better electorally, than in the previous national parliamentary election. Political parties on the centre right that comprise the Christian Democrats and the Conservatives appear to perform electorally better, achieving a higher percentage change. Varying results are also found for nationalist or parties of the extreme right. Figure 1.2 below depicts the average change in electoral performance for different parties in the context of the economic crisis. The results suggest that Conservative and Nationalist parties performed the best electorally. Nonetheless, the electoral performance of Social Democrats declined considerably again. At first sight, the results seem to suggest that centrists performed the worst, with an average decrease of -6.80 in their aggregate electoral share. However, caution must be applied to this result, with only three political parties being categorized as a centrist party in the national parliamentary elections results dataset. This may have had an effect in skewing this result.

Therefore, the statistical results in this article suggest that traditional mainstream social democratic parties need to go back to the basics and identify a core strategy to reverse the current tide towards insurgent parties on the left and right alike that has swept its way across European shores. Arguably, traditional left-wing parties across Europe are in a state of flux, with contemporary parties of the right on the ascendancy.

Figure 1.1- Change in Party Performance Before and During the Economic Crisis



(Authors' own calculations)

Figure 1.2- Average Change in Electoral Performance by Party Family

Party Family	Number of Parties	Mean (Change in Aggregate Electoral Performance)
Communists	9	0.35
Socialists	14	0.68
Greens	15	-.031
Social Democrats	32	-3.60
Centrist	3	-6.80
Liberal	30	-1.45
Christian Democrats	23	-2.27
Conservatives	37	1.62
Nationalists	25	0.91

(Authors' own calculations)