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Did the Working Class Abandon the Social Democrats? Or Was It the Other Way Around?

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ABSTRACT:

This essay seeks to understand the strategic reorientation of social democratic parties in the 1990s and the reasons why these parties have lost support among working-class voters while failing to expand their electoral base among other voters. Focusing on the Swedish experience, the essay explores three topics: (1) what Social Democrats have done in government; (2) how the social background and practices of social democratic politicians have changed; and (3) how the decline of trade unions and changing trade-union practices have undermined working-class support for social democratic parties.

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Inspired by Kitschelt (1994), a large body of literature addresses the transformation of the electorate of social democratic parties in Western Europe. More recent literature also tackles the reasons for the electoral setbacks that these parties have experienced in recent years. Much of this literature, most notably Häusermann and Kitschelt (2024), focuses on the multidimensional policy preferences of different occupational classes and conceives of successful social democracy in terms of party platforms (policy packages) that strike the right balance between competing preferences of different social democratic constituencies while emphasizing shared concerns and values. In this essay, I will make the case for an alternative approach to the current state of European social democracy, focusing instead on what social democratic parties have done in power and on the quotidian practices and rhetoric of these parties and their trade-union allies.

It is commonplace to observe that most social democratic parties moved away from their traditional emphasis on welfare universalism and redistribution in the 1990s to feature new "post-materialist" themes (gender equality, environmentalism and multiculturalism) and "social investment" as key priorities. Commonly referred to as "the Third Way," this strategic reorientation was conceived as a way to appeal to new middle strata—in particular, university-educated "socio-cultural professionals"—and thus offset the consequences of the decline of the working class as a share of the electorate.[1] In retrospect, it seems clear to

[1] The idea of "the Third Way" was promoted by the Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder in the late 1990s, but the term was already used by the Swedish Social Democrats in the 1980s to distinguish their approach to macro-economic management from the neo-liberalism of Thatcher and the Keynesianism of the first Mitterrand government.

me, and I think that most observers would agree, that the Third Way opened up space for right-wing populist parties to appeal to working-class voters based on welfare-chauvinism and protectionism, and ultimately resulted greater losses of working-class support than gains of new-middle-class support. Possibly in recognition of the populist threat, social democratic parties featured working-class concerns—job insecurity and income inequality—more prominently in their electoral appeals in the 2010s. Yet this correction of the "excesses" of the Third Way does not seem to have brought working-class defectors back into the fold.

This stylized account of the electoral (mis)fortunes of European social democracy over the last 20-30 years raises two puzzles that are not satisfactorily addressed by the literature on party platforms and electoral behaviour. The first question concerns social democratic policy choices in the 1990s and early 2000s. The literature on multi-dimensional policy preferences tells us that socio-cultural professionals favour redistribution of income and wealth as well as gender equality, environmentalism and multiculturalism. Why then did social democratic parties retreat from redistribution as part of their efforts to expand their electoral base? The second question concerns workers in the 2010s. Why have they not responded to the recalibration of the programmatic appeals of social democratic parties?

I will try to shed light on these questions by exploring three topics: (1) what Social Democrats have done in government since the early 1990s; (2) how the social background and practices of social democratic politicians have changed; and (3) how the decline of trade

unions and changing trade-union practices have affected working-class support for social democratic parties. My discussion will focus on the Swedish case, but I will present some empirical evidence for Germany and the UK as well. The Swedish Social Democratic Party (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti*; SAP for short) is commonly cited as the social democratic party with the best historical record of policy achievements as well as electoral mobilization. The Swedish case is also emblematic of the challenges confronting Social Democrats in Western Europe and the mistakes that they have made in seeking to meet these challenges (mistakes that are neither random not innocent).

The rest of my discussion is organized as follows. To set the stage, I will briefly articulate what I mean by "the working class" and discuss the electoral decline of social democratic parties as well as the evolution of their electoral programs. I will then turn to a more sustained discussion of the three topics mentioned above.

The Working Class

In my thinking (cf. Rennwald and Pontusson 2022), there are two basic characteristics that distinguish workers from members of other social classes. First, they lack income-generating assets and, as a result, they are more dependent on employment (or public provision) to meet their daily needs. Second, workers are only paid for time they spend at work (they are "hourly paid" rather than "salaried") and their work is closely supervised. Individuals who satisfy one but not the other condition are partly in the working class and partly not. Income and education are correlated with the two conditions that define the

working class, but many workers have completed upper-secondary school, and many are in the middle of the earnings distribution. Importantly, the working class, as I conceive it, encompasses workers in services as well as production and includes people in jobs that are conventionally described as "white-collar."

As commonly noted, the working-class share of the labour force has declined in all OECD countries as a result the shift in employment from manufacturing to services. Immigration has further reduced the working-class share of the electorate. As shown in Table 1, however, the working class still represents a very large segment of the electorate in Germany, Sweden and the UK. Indeed, the working class is a considerably larger larger class than the socio-cultural professionals that are commonly conceived as the new, core electorate of social democratic parties.

[Table 1]

The Electoral Decline of Social Democracy

The strategic reorientation referred to as "the Third Way" boosted electoral support for social democratic parties in the 10-15 years preceding the financial crisis of 2007-08. Having suffered a major setback in 1991, the Swedish Social Democrats returned to power in 1994 and apparently restored their claim to be Sweden's "natural party of government" by winning the elections of 1998 and 2002 as well. The British Labour Party, presenting itself as "New Labour," scored the first of three consecutive election victories in 1997 and the

German election of 1998 ushered in the first Left-parties-only government of the Federal Republic, re-elected in 2002.

In retrospect, it seems clear that these successes constituted a temporary reversal in a long and slow process of electoral decline for social democratic parties. As documented by Rennwald and Pontusson (2021: 39), the vote share of social democratic parties peaked prior to 1985 in all but four West European countries. And in every single West European country, the social democratic vote share in elections in the 2010s was significantly lower than the social democratic vote share in elections in the 1990s (see also Menz 2023: 5). The Swedish Social Democrats returned to power in 2014, but the SAP-led governments of 2014-22 were minority governments made possible by the refusal of the Centre Party and the Liberals to participate in a "bourgeois" government reliant on right-wing populist support (a position they abandoned in 2022). With 28.3% of the vote, the Swedish Social Democrats did worse in the 2018 election than in any previous election since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919.

Green and radical Left parties have attracted some disaffected social democratic voters, but electoral support for the Left has a whole has declined in most West European countries since the 1990s. Crucially, the working class has not only shrunk as a percentage of the electorate, but it is first and foremost working-class voters that have become significantly less likely to vote for the social democratic parties, as documented by Vestin (2019) for Sweden and by Rennwald (2020) for Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. While the decline of working-class support for social democratic parties predates the emergence of right-wing populist parties, it has accelerated with the

emergence of these new competitors and, in particular, by the welfare-chauvinist turn of right-wing populist parties in the 2010s (cf. Oesch and Rennwald 2018).[2]

Following Inglehart and Norris (2019), the disaffection of working-class voters might be seen as a reaction against the embrace of post-materialist values, multiculturalism and "globalism" by social democratic parties. An alternative line of argument, which I find more compelling, is that working-class disaffection is a response to the retreat from redistribution by social democratic parties, especially their failure to deliver policies to compensate for sharply rising income inequality in the 10-15 years preceding the financial and economic crisis of the late 2000s. There is no reason to think that workers are any more "traditional" in their values today than they were twenty years ago, but they did not use to base their vote choice on immigration, crime or multiculturalism. More provocatively, I want to suggest rational working-class voters might well be attracted to parties that propose to restrict immigration and immigrants' access to welfare benefits if they are told by Social Democrats and other mainstream politicians that redistributive measures must be curtailed (or postponed) because of budgetary constraints and the requirements of competitiveness in a world characterized by free capital mobility.

[2] Analysing vote switching in eight countries between 2001 and 2019, Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2024) find that social democratic parties primarily lost centrist middle-class voters to Centre-Right parties and socio-cultural professionals to Green parties. Three limitations of their analysis deserve to be noted: (1) it does not consider voters lost to abstention; (2) it pertains exclusively to the first switch (does not address the possibility that voters migrated to the radical Right via Centre-Right parties); and (3) it ignores vote choice by first-time voters.

Party Platforms

The strategic reorientation of social democratic parties in the 1990s entailed three distinct shifts in policy positions and priorities. To begin with, the Third Way entailed the aforementioned shift in emphasis from "materialist" issues on the traditional Left-Right dimension to new, "post-materialist" or "cultural" issues. In addition, social democratic parties repositioned themselves on traditional Left-Right issues. Retreating from interventionist industrial policies as well as Keynesian demand stimulus, they embraced "managed liberalization" of financial and product markets and, in many cases, labour markets as well (at least some labour-market segments). Emblematic of this new, more market-orientated approach to managing the economy, the Swedish Social Democrats opted for a profit-led growth strategy in 1980s, holding back public expenditures and relying on unions to deliver the wage restraint seen as necessary to sustain competitiveness and stimulate private investment (Pontusson 1992). In marked contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, social democratic discourse from the 1980s onwards effectively accepted the idea of a trade-off between equality and economic growth.

Related to materialist issues but less obviously to the Left-Right dimension as traditionally conceived, the third shift associated with the notion of "third-way social democracy" pertains to the modalities whereby government would (should) create a more equal society. Simply put, this was the shift from redistribution through income transfers (in the first instance, social insurance benefits financed by more or less progressive taxation) to "social investment," i.e., policy measures that equalize educational opportunities to

promote upward mobility for working-class children and compress the distribution of market earnings by boosting the skills and employability of low-wage workers (Huo 2009). Social democratic advocates of social investment in the 1990s and 2000s acknowledged social insurance as a core pillar of the welfare state, but their rhetoric clearly prioritized social investment policies, presented as "active," "forward-looking" and "empowering," as opposed to "passive," "postdoc" and "compensatory" income transfers.

As noted at the outset, many social democratic parties rolled back programmatic shifts associated with the Third Way during the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-08 and its immediate aftermath. Manwaring and Holloway's (2022) analysis of the election manifestos of social democratic parties in twenty-two West European and Anglophone countries forcefully illustrates this point (cf. Gingrich 2024). These authors present average scores by decade for the conventional Right-Left (RILE) index, with positive values representing Right-leaning programs, and for a "Third-Way index" that captures the salience of internationalism, decentralization, administrative efficiency, technology, investment, environmental protection, multi-culturalism and negative views of traditional morality in party manifestos. According to Manwaring and Holloway, the emphasis on the third-way themes peaked in the 1990s or 2000s in seventeen out of twenty-two cases and it peaked before the 1990s in four of the remaining cases. Averaging across the twenty-two cases, the Third-Way index score for the the 2010s (22.5) is only slightly higher than for the 1970s (21.7) and significantly lower than for the 1990s (28.7) and the 2000s (27.5).

The RILE scores presented by Manwaring and Holloway indicate that most social democratic parties moved to the Right in the 1980s and/or the 1990s and moved to the Left

in the 2000s and/or 2010s. The average RILE score for the 2010s was -20.9, as compared to -25.5 for the 1960s (the leftist peak) and -12.4 for the 1990s (the leftist trough). Manwaring and Holloway also show that social democratic election manifestos in the 2010s featured more positive mentions of "labour groups" than election manifestos in preceding decades (see also Gingrich 2024).

In short, social democratic parties responded to the crisis of the late 2000s and growing signs of working-class disaffection with the priorities and rhetoric of the Third Way by recalibrating their election programs and, at least to some extent, reintroducing more traditional social democratic themes. However, the post-crisis recalibration does not seem to have translated into a reversal of the electoral decline of these parties. In particular, it does not appear to be the case that working-class defectors began to return to the social democratic fold in the 2010s.

The Retreat from Redistribution

For Germany and the UK as well as Sweden, Table 1 reports on the evolution of income inequality and redistribution over time periods that roughly correspond with periods when social democratic parties held the office of prime minister. Based on LIS and EU-SILC micro data, the table displays annualized percentage changes in the Gini coefficient for working-age households before and after taxes and income transfers.[3] The final column

[3] "Working-age households" are defined as households with members between the ages of 25 and 60. For lack of data on the age of household members, the German figures for 1973-83 are based on the Gini coefficient for all households.

shows the difference between changes in the Gini for market income (MI) and changes in the Gini for disposable income (DI). Higher (more positive) values in this column signify more redistribution through taxes and transfers (i.e., DI inequality increasing more slowly or declining more rapidly than MI inequality). Averaging data for the same three countries, Table 2 in turn compares inequality trends and redistribution under social democratic and Centre-Right governments from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, from the mid-1990s to 2010, and from 2010 to 2018.

[Table 1 and Table 2]

In the Swedish case, the MI Gini coefficient fell at an annual rate of 1.13% and the DI Gini coefficient fell more than twice as fast from 1967 to 1975. Redistribution in the context of falling MI inequality also characterizes the British experience of Labour government in the 1970s even though Wilson-Callaghan governments of 1974-79 redistributed less than Swedish social democratic governments in 1976-75. In the German case, taxes and transfers more than offset rising MI inequality under SDP-led governments in 1970s and early 1980s, with the MI Gini rising quite sharply from 1973 to 1983, but the DI falling over the same period. In other words, taxes and transfers more than offset rising MI inequality under SDP-led governments in 1970s and early 1980s.

The Swedish experience of social democratic government in the 1980s stands in marked contrast to the prior experience of social democratic government not only in Sweden but in Germany and the UK as well. From 1981 to 1992, the MI Gini rose at an annual rate of 1.64% and the DI Gini rose at an even faster rate (1.74%). The Swedish tax-transfer system not only failed to offset MI inequality in this period of social democratic government; changes

in the tax-transfer systems actually contributed to rising DI inequality, albeit moderately so. Similar to the Swedish experience of the 1980s, the Schröder governments of 1998-2006 presided over a sharp rise in MI inequality, and a still higher increase in DI inequality. As measured by the Gini coefficient, MI inequality declined significantly under the Carlsson-Persson governments of 1994-2006, but DI inequality declined much less. While taxes and transfers failed to offset rising MI inequality in the German case, they offset falling inequality in the Swedish case. With MI inequality rising less sharply than in Germany, the UK stands out as the only case of third-way social democracy redistributing income to an extent comparable to the 1970s, but it also deserves to be noted that British Labour redistributed significantly less than German as well as Swedish Social Democrats in the 1970s.

My final observation based on Table 1 pertains to the return of the Swedish Social Democrats to power in the 2010s. In the first four years of social democratic government in the post-third-way era, MI inequality rose less sharply than in the 1995-2006 period and DI inequality held constant. From the dynamic perspective adopted here, the combined effect of taxes and transfers was again regressive, but less so than in the previous period of social democratic government.

Turning to the comparison with Centre-Right governments, the data summarized in Table 2 suggests that Centre-Right governments have retreated from redistribution to a greater extent than social democratic governments, and that DI inequality has risen more Centre-Right governments than under social democratic governments t since 1995. It does not seem to be the case that social democratic governments have converged on Centre-Right governments in this regard. If low- and middle-income citizens use contemporary

Centre-Right governments as the benchmark, they ought to be quite satisfied with the performance of social democratic governments in the 1990s and 2000s as well as the 2010s. But if they use social democratic governments in the 1970s as the benchmark, they have reasons to be disappointed.

To shed some further light on the data presented in Table 1, let me briefly elaborate on the policy choices that account for the retreat from redistribution by the Swedish Social Democrats since the 1980s. As noted already, the first step in this retreat was the profit-led growth strategy adopted by the Social Democrats when they returned to power in 1982, followed by an extensive deregulation of financial markets in the late 1980s. While these initiatives boosted top-end inequality, unemployment remained low (below 4%) throughout the 1980s and, as a result, rising inequality did not activate compensatory equalization via the tax-transfer system. In a second step, the Social Democrats agreed on a comprehensive tax reform with the Centre-Right parties in 1991, reducing the top personal income tax rate as well as the corporate tax rate while abolishing a variety of tax deductions. And in a third step, arguably the most important one in terms of the redistributive impact of taxes and transfers, Centre-Right and social democratic government alike undertook a series of reforms in the 1990s and 2000s that reduced the coverage and generosity of social insurance programs, first and foremost unemployment insurance but also sick-pay insurance and public pensions.

The Centre-Right government of 1991 reduced the replacement rate of unemployment insurance from 90% to 80% and the Social Democrats upheld this decision when they returned to power in 1994. With the maximum amount of unemployment benefit

no longer being indexed to wage growth, the effective replacement rate for someone earning the average wage fell steadily from the early 1990s onwards, to reach an all-time low of less than 50% in the early 2010s. In the same spirit as the German Hartz reforms of the early 2000s (Huo 2009: 225-229), reforms introduced by the Swedish Social Democrats in 1998-2002 increased the prior work history required to qualify for benefits, made benefits more strictly conditional on seeking work, and reduced the duration of benefits. In combination with the expansion of fixed-term employment, itself promoted by deregulatory measures initiated by the Centre-Right parties in the 1991-94 and adopted by the Social Democrats, the increase in qualification requirements drastically reduced the percentage of the unemployed who qualify for insurance benefits even before the bourgeois triggered an exodus from union-administered unemployment funds by raising insurance premia (and eliminating their deductibility for tax purposes) in 2007.[4] According to Lindellee and Berglund (2022:8), the recipiency rate for unemployment insurance fell from 90% in the late 1990s to 40% in 2007 and has since hovered between 30% and 40%. (Individuals who do not qualify for insurance benefits are entitled to a basic flat-rate benefit, corresponding to 32% of the average wage in 2002 and 21% in 2016).

Strongly committed to the idea that government should run a budget surplus, and reluctant to increase taxes, the social democratic governments of 1994-2006 reduced

[4] Enacted shortly after the bourgeois parties came to power, the 2007 reform linked insurance premia to the unemployment rate for different categories of wage-earners. This feature was abolished before the Social Democrats returned to power in 2014. The social democratic government of 2014 raised the maximum unemployment benefit amount by 33% but did not reintroduce benefits indexation nor tax deductibility of insurance premia.

spending on unemployment insurance and other forms of income support in order to increase spending on childcare, education and health services. Rather than a complement, social investment effectively became a substitute for traditional welfare provisions. Furthermore, tertiary education received more than half of the increase in education spending from 1990 to 2000 (Thelen 2019: 306) while spending on active labour-market measures (reskilling programs administered by the state) was drastically reduced between 1994 and 2006 (Lindvall 2011). Other than increased/ sustained spending on childhood education, these policies favoured middle- and upper-middle-class households more than working-class households. Moreover, any payoffs from social investment for working-class households would be long-term whereas they were required to bear the more pressing burden of unemployment with lower levels of state support.[5]

Although the third-way reforms of the 1990s and 2000s catered to the interests of middle-class voters in general and socio-cultural professionals in particular, they did not boost electoral support for social democratic parties among these strata over extended periods of time (Gingrich 2024). Social democratic parties were simply not able to establish ownership of issues such as environmental protection, minority rights or parental school choice. And while the new voters that the Third-Way Social Democrats sought to mobilize expressed support for redistribution of income in public opinion polls, social democratic politicians seem to have believed, perhaps correctly, that redistribution was not a high

[5] Peaking at 9.9% in 1997, the Swedish rate of unemployment had dropped to 6.3% by 2007, increased to 8.8% during the recession of 2008-09 and remained above the 2007 level through the 2010s (6.9% in 2019). See Häusermann *et al* (2022) for a cross-national analysis of class differences in support for social investment.

priority for them. On the other hand, Third-Way Social Democrats seem to have taken their working-class base for granted, seriously underestimating the potential appeal of right-wing populism for these voters.

Social Democratic Politicians

Many recent studies indicate that policymaking is biased in favour of the preferences of affluent citizens in most liberal democracies. Contributors to this literature commonly invoke the social/professional background of elected officials—in the first instance, members of national parliaments—to explain unequal policy responsiveness (e.g., Hemingway 2022, Carnes and Lupu 2023). Drawn disproportionately from upper-middle-class professions, MPs are more likely be university-educated and typically have higher earnings and more assets prior to assuming public office than the average citizen. Recognizing that party discipline constrains the ability of MPs to act on their personal preferences, these studies suggest that personal preferences still matter to legislative agenda-setting and, to a lesser extent, to rollcall voting as well.

For the purposes of this discussion, the question is whether social democratic politicians have become less "working-class" over time, more like other mainstream politicians in terms of their social/professional background and career trajectories. This could explain the priorities of the Third Way and, in particular, the retreat from redistribution documented above. It could also explain why social democratic parties have lost working-class support even when they have changed course to feature redistributive policies in their electoral programs. In support of the latter hypothesis, Heath (2013) mobilizes data from 13

British election studies to show that the propensity of working-class citizens to vote for the Labour Party rises as the proportion of Labour MPs from working-class backgrounds increases relative to the proportion of Tory MPs from working-class backgrounds.

Good historical data on the occupational background of elected representatives by political party are remarkably sparse. In Table 3, I present estimates of the share of German MPs with prior experience as manual workers in the parliament elected in 1969 and averages for parliaments elected in the 1980s and 2010s, along with similar estimates for the British parliaments elected in 1964 and 2010. For Sweden, the only estimates based on coding biographical information that I have been able to identify pertain to MPs elected in 2014. To capture change over time, Table 3 also includes estimates of occupational background and educational attainment based on a regular survey MPs between 1985 and 2014. (The survey asked MPs to identify their prior occupation as that of "worker" (*arbetare*), "white-collar employee" (*tjänsteman*), "farmer" or "businessman").

[Table 3]

The percentage of British Labour MPs with prior experience as manual workers declined sharply from the 1960s to the 2010s. By this specific measure of descriptive representation, the Labour party has become indistinguishable from other parties represented in the House of Commons. Beginning in the 1960s or 1970s, this process of "de-proletarianization" accelerated in the 1990s, when Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair implemented procedural reforms that restricted the role of unions in the selection of Labour candidates for public office (Heath 2013). Individuals with prior experience as manual workers accounted for a quarter of SPD MPs in the 1980s as well as the 1960, but their

numbers also shrunk sharply between 1990 and 2010. As the number of Christian Democratic (CDU) MPs from working-class backgrounds also shrank, however, the decline of descriptive working-class representation is less obviously a specific feature of social democracy in the German case.

The share of Swedish social democratic MPs who reported that they had been "workers" prior to their election to parliament actually increased from the 1980s to the 2010s. However, it is difficult to know what to make of this observation in light of the concomitant (self-reported) increase in the number of social democratic MPs with tertiary education and the big discrepancy between self-reported working-class background and the coding of "manual worker" as previous occupation based on biographical information. Aspiring politicians belonging to a party whose official name is "the Social-Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden" may well want to project working-class origins.

Analysing floor speeches and rollcall votes by British Labour MPs over the period 1987-2007, O'Grady (2019) focuses our attention on the rise of "careerists," as distinct from the focus on "working-class versus middle-class professionals" in much of the literature on descriptive (mis)representation. Defining "careerists" as individuals who worked for the Labour Party or for some interest group or think tank close to the Labour Party immediately before running for parliament (and having no more than five years' experience in any other occupation), O'Grady estimates that the share of careerists among Labour MPs increased from 10% in 1987-92 to 30% in 2010-15 and that they almost entirely displaced MPs with working-class occupational backgrounds. He proceeds to show that careerists were consistently more supportive of third-way social policy initiatives and more likely comply

with party whips than Labour MPs from working-class occupational backgrounds. Defining "careerists" in a similar fashion, Elsässer (2024) shows that careerists increased from 15% of SPD MPs in the parliament elected in 1990 to 41% in the parliament elected in 2021. (For comparison, the share of careerists among CDU MPs increased from 22% to 34% over the same period).[6]

The social democratic elite should not be conflated with the parliamentary group, and internal hierarchies within this elite deserve further attention. Based on an 18-country dataset compiled by Alexiadou (2016), the top panel of Figure 1 shows a steady decline in the percentage of social democratic ministers from blue-collar backgrounds since the end of the Second World War. The decline of descriptive working-class representation at this level appears to be more pronounced and more uniform, across countries, than the decline of working-class representation at the level of parliamentary party groups, let alone municipal politics. The other two panels of Figure 1 underscore the key role that trade-union officials have historically played in representing the working class, symbolically as well as substantively, within the power structure of social democratic parties at the national level. The percentage of social democratic ministers from a trade-union background has declined in parallel with the percentage from working-class backgrounds and, most strikingly, so has

[6] Working for a trade union and other interest group as well as subnational government entities were included among the response options in early surveys of Swedish MPs, but these options were subsequently dropped. (They were never chosen by more than 5% of respondents). We simply do not know how career politicians identify their occupational background in these surveys.

the percentage of social democratic ministers from a working-class background who entered politics via a position as trade-union leader.[7]

[Figure 1]

The role of experts and what Garsten, Rothstein and Svallfors (2015) refer to as "policy professionals" also deserve to be noted in this context. Mudge's ambitious (2018) account of the reinvention of European social democracy and American progressivism in the 1980s and 1990s posits that public-service-oriented Keynesian economists provided the intellectual backbone of postwar social democracy. As noted by other scholars as well, notably Blyth (2002), the evolution of mainstream economics from the 1970s onwards undermined the legitimacy of selective government policy interventions to stimulate and/or steer economic growth is a familiar one. The more innovative feature of Mudge's account is her emphasis on the changing "professional ethics" of economists and their retreat, in their professional capacity, from engagement with domestic politics and the political constraints (pressures) that government officials must negotiate. As economists withdrew, according to Mudge, social democratic politicians increasingly came to rely on pollsters, political strategists and "spin doctors" to guide their decisions in government as well as their electoral campaigns.

[7] Consistent with the picture conveyed by Figure 1.A, Bukodi *et al*. (2024) find that British Labour cabinets (and shadow cabinets) have increasingly come to resemble Conservative cabinets in terms of educational and occupational backgrounds, but they add two important qualifications: first, Labour ministers are still more likely to have grown up in working-class families; and, second, Labour ministers are more likely have held managerial or professional positions in not-for-profit sectors (including public administration) rather private firms.

Focusing on the Swedish case, Garsten *et al*. (2015) point to policy professionals as a new class of political actors in liberal democracies, increasingly pivotal and influential as corporatist bargaining among organized interests has become a less important feature of the politics of policy choice. Invariably university-educated, but not necessarily from upper-middle-class backgrounds, these professionals make careers as lobbyists, policy advisors, PR consultants and political strategists, and rarely seek elected office. (The Swedish interviews reported by Garsten *et al*. strongly suggest that they look down on members of parliament). Like the rise of career politicians, the rise of policy professionals is not a phenomenon specific to social democratic parties, but it represents a greater departure from their traditional practices. In the Swedish case, prominent ministers in recent social democratic governments—in particular, ministers of finance—have surrounded themselves with a tight team of loyal advisors, a practice pioneered by Kjell-Olof Feldt as minister of finance from 1982 to 1991 (Lindvall 2004; Mudge 2018). It is striking that many prominent social democratic ministers and their close advisors have taken up lucrative positions in the business world at the end of their tenure in government.

As we have seen, quite a few Swedish social democratic MPs still come from the working class, but it is far from obvious that their background had a big impact on the policy choices of recent social democratic governments. New Labour did more to redistribute in favour of low-income households than the Swedish Social Democrats in the 1990s and 2000s. There is more to class biases in political representation than the occupational background of MPs and class biases in political representation alone do not account for variation in policy outputs across countries and over time. It seems equally evident that

many working-class citizens no longer recognize social democratic politicians as their representatives.

Trade Unions

Any adequate explanation of the electoral difficulties experienced by social democratic parties in recent decades, especially their loss of working-class support, must surely take into account the dramatic decline of union density across the advanced capitalist world since the 1980s. In eleven out twenty-two long-standing OECD member states, union density in the early 2010s was less than half of its all-time peak (Pontusson 2013). In the Swedish case, overall union density peaked in 1993, at 85%, and stood at 70% in 2021 (Kjellberg 2022: 141).

In their classic 1986 book, *Paper Stones*, Przeworski and Sprague argue that workers do not naturally identify as "working class" and vote for socialist parties. To maintain their appeal to working-class voters, socialist parties must promote the class identity of these voters through quotidian practices and rhetoric, symbolic appeals, as well as policy platforms that address economic insecurity and class-based inequalities. As the manual working class never became the electoral majority that Marx and other nineteenth-century socialists anticipated, socialist parties committed to the parliamentary path have long faced an "electoral dilemma:" these parties need the support of middle-class voters to implement their reform project, but in appealing to middle-class voters based on universalistic interests or norms, they weaken the propensity of working-class voters to favour them over other parties. Przeworski and Sprague suggest that encompassing unions mitigate this dilemma

by sustaining the class identity of workers, attenuating the link between party appeals and class voting. Specifically, they claim that unionization explains why Scandinavia Social Democrats have historically been able to mobilize higher levels of electoral support than their continental European and Anglophone counterparts.

Revisiting *Paper Stones*, Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) analyse post-election surveys in Australia, New Zealand and fourteen West European countries over the period 2001-15. We find that working-class voters are particularly sensitive to the class profile of new voters mobilized by social democratic parties. When the intake of middle-class voters increases, working-class voters become significantly more likely to abandon these parties than middle-class voters who voted for them in the previous election. However, this effect is much weaker—no longer statistically significant—for unionized working-class voters. Furthermore, unionized working-class voters who abandon the Social Democrats are less likely to abstain and more likely to vote for radical Left parties than non-unionized working-class voters who abandon the Social Democrats.

The argument about unionization in *Paper Stones* is about working-class loyalty to social democratic parties. A complementary argument posits that unionization bolsters the fortunes of social democratic parties because people who belong to unions tend to be more favourable to leftist policy priorities, notably redistribution through progressive taxation and generous social benefits. "Solidaristic wage policy" has featured prominently in the practices and rhetoric of Swedish trade unions since the 1960s, but the principle behind this policy—that wage differentials among workers should be determined by collective bargaining rather than employer discretion or "market forces"—is arguably a foundational

principle of all trade unions (at least all unions that organize on an industrial basis). It seems reasonable that individuals who belong to organizations with such an orientation will, over time, become more favourable to redistribution of income through taxes and transfers or, conversely, less prone to believe that income inequality serves the common good (as "trickle-down economics" would have it).

Pooling survey data from twenty-one OECD countries over the period 2002-14, Mosimann and Pontusson (2017) show that unionized respondents are indeed more likely to agree that "the government should take measures to reduce income differences" than non-unionized respondents. Importantly, the effect of belonging to a union is most pronounced for individuals with relatively high earnings and increases with the share of union members with relatively low earnings (see also Mosimann and Pontusson 2022). While low-wage workers strongly support redistribution whether or not they are union members, doctors who belong to a union that also organizes nurses are more likely to support redistribution than doctors who belong to a doctors-only union, let alone doctors who do not belong to any union.

From this perspective, what distinguishes Sweden and other cases of long-term social democratic dominance is first and foremost the unionization of white-collar employees (salaried white-collar employees as well as white-collar workers). High levels of white-collar unionization in the Scandinavian countries are related to the size of the public sector, but also to the existence of separate white-collar unions. As the Swedish Social Democrats switched from a "worker-farmer strategy" to a "wage-earner strategy" during the struggle over pension reform in the second half of the 1950s, the main confederation of

white-collar unions, the TCO, became a key ally—and power base—of the Social Democrats (Svensson 1994). In contrast to the LO, the blue-collar union confederation created and run by Social Democrats, the TCO remained formally non-partisan, but Social Democrats assumed leadership positions in many TCO unions as well as the confederation itself in this period. The LO and TCO increasingly coordinated their efforts to shape government policies as well as their wage-bargaining stances. By the late 1980s, the effect of belonging to a TCO union on the propensity of less educated white-collar employees to prefer the Social Democrats over other parties was indistinguishable from the effect of belonging to an LO union on the propensity of blue-collar workers to prefer the Social Democrats (Ray and Pontusson 2024).

The overall decline of overall union density conceals a sharp contrast between blue-collar workers and white-collar employees in the Swedish case: union membership among the former dropped from 86.5% in 1993 to 61.8% in 2019 while union membership among the latter dropped from 83.5% to 74.0% (Kjellberg 2022: 140). Moreover, de-unionization has been most pronounced among the less skilled and more precarious segments of the blue-collar working class, as seems to be the case across advanced capitalist countries. It is noteworthy that the unionization rate for workers born abroad has dropped more sharply than the unionization of workers born in Sweden. At 77%, the unionization rate of these two categories of blue-collar workers was the same in 2006. By 2019, unionization of foreign-born workers had dropped to 51% while unionization of "Sweden-born" workers had dropped to 64% (Kjellberg and Nergaard 2022: 67). The LO unions have become less of a venue (vehicle) of class-wide socialization (solidarity) than they used to be.

On the white-collar side of the fence, union membership has shifted dramatically from sectoral unions affiliated with the TCO to occupational (professional) unions affiliated with the other white-collar confederation, the SACO. While the number of active (non-retired) members of TCO unions declined slightly from 1986 to 202, from 1.22 million to 1.14 million, the number of active members of SACO unions increased from 228,000 to 565,000 over the same period (Kjellberg 2022:947-948). With membership restricted to individuals with university degrees, SACO unions primarily organized public-sector employees until the 1980s. Through a series of strikes in the 1960s, they established a reputation for militancy in opposition to the solidaristic wage policies pursued by LO and TCO as well as social democratic reform projects. As membership in SACO unions has expanded, SACO members have become more politically diverse, and SACO unions are no longer so obviously the "bourgeois alternative" to TCO unions. In the late 2010s, university-educated employees who belong to SACO unions were less supportive of redistribution as their TCO counterparts (Mosimann and Pontusson 2022), but just as likely to support one of the Left parties (Ray and Pontusson 2024).

Increasingly competing with SACO unions for university-educated members, TCO unions have become less solidaristic in their approach to wage bargaining and have followed SACO unions in developing supplementary unemployment and sick-pay insurance schemes as membership incentives, featuring these and other private benefits in their efforts to recruit and retain workers (Lindellee 2021, Jansson 2022). With technological changes blurring the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar work in some domains, membership competition between TCO and LO unions has also increased, putting pressure on LO unions to focus on providing private benefits to their members as well. As suggested by Ray and

Pontusson (2024), changing union practices have had important consequences for the partisan preferences of blue-collar workers and less educated white-collar employees. Among these strata, union members are still more likely to identify with the Social Democrats or other Left parties, but the association between union membership and identification with Left parties has diminished significantly since the early 1990s. Most strikingly, LO members are today just as likely as unorganized blue-collar workers to identify the Sweden Democrats as their preferred party (see Salo *et al* 2024).[8]

The discussion so far pertains to the (waning) influence that trade unions have on the policy and partisan preferences of their members. On the other side of the coin, there is the influence of trade unions within social democratic parties. In the Swedish case, the wage-earner funds debate initiated by LO in the 1970s and the macroeconomic policy reorientation initiated by the "technocratic" wing of the SAP in the early 1980s both generated policy disputes between LO and the SAP leadership, commonly referred to by news media as "the war of the roses." Informed by this experience and worried that the Left Party might vote with the Centre-Right parties to outlaw collective affiliation, the Social Democrats decided in 1990 to discontinue the practice whereby LO union locals collectively affiliated to the party (while allowing individuals to opt out of party membership). This decision

[8] See Salo, Rydgren and Odmalm (2024) for a fascinating analysis of how the social democratic leadership has responded to right-wing populist sentiments among rank-and-file members of LO unions. Pooling survey data for twelve countries, Häusermann *et al*. (2024) find that "the share of unionists [*sic*] voting for the Radical Right is extremely low and stably so across Europe" (224). Their finding ignores occupational distinctions. Still, it may well be that social conformity and incentives linked to unemployment insurance render workers with right-wing populist sympathies more likely to remain (or become) union members in Sweden than elsewhere.

resulted in a huge drop in party membership and arguably rendered local party organizations less responsive to trade-union interests (Östberg 2024: 254-255). At the same time, many informal, elite-level ties between SAP and LO have persisted and relations between the two wings of the "social democratic movement" improved greatly when the head of the Metalworkers' Union (*IF Metall*), Stefan Löfven, became party leader in 2012 and then Prime Minister in 2014. Still, the LO unions have clearly lost the policy-initiating role that they played in the 1960s and 1970s.[9]

It is important to recognize that policy choices made by social democratic as well as Centre-Right governments are very much implicated in de-unionization and changing in union practices. As indicated above, reforms of the unemployment insurance system—not just the reform adopted by the Centre-Right government of 2006—have made membership in union-administered insurance funds less attractive than it used to be and most people who have dropped out of insurance funds (or opted not to join) have also dropped out of unions (or opted not to join). Facilitated by measures undertaken by the Social Democrats in 1994-2006, the expansion of temporary employment and the sub-contracting of public services to private firms have also contributed to de-unionization of less skilled workers.

To some extent, the growth of SACO unions is a consequence of the expansion of higher education that the Social Democrats featured as one of their key policy objectives in the 1990s. As investing in higher education made good sense on many grounds, a more

[9] See Jansson (2017) and Oskarson (2022) for more detailed discussions of how the SAP-LO partnership has changed as well as some discussion of current relations between the Social Democratic elite and TCO unions. Space does not allow me to elaborate on the experiences of other Western European countries, but the parallels with respect party-union relations (Allern and Bale 2017) as well as the electoral consequences of union decline (Gingrich 2024) seem quite evident. The role of inter-union competition in the Swedish story is less obviously generalizable.

damning criticism of the policy priorities of social democratic governments over the last 30 years is that welfare-state retrenchment has encouraged unions to focus on the provision of private benefits to their members rather than mobilization in favour societal reforms.

Conclusion

Starting with the struggle for universal suffrage, social democratic parties have championed a wide range of progressive causes. In the postwar period, they played a key role in the expansion of universalist welfare programs, comprehensive schooling and gender equality. More recently, they have championed environmental protection as well as the rights of immigrants and other cultural minorities. Other political parties have also fought for progressive reforms in these domains. The key to the pivotal role that social democratic parties came to play in Sweden and some other European countries—also in Australia and New Zealand—in the postwar period was their ability to mobilize workers as part of broader reformist coalitions. To a large extent, this distinctive characteristic of social democracy was lost over the last three decades.

Judging by their election manifestos, social democratic parties have recently recognized the need to reconnect with the working class by emphasizing distributive issues. The point I have tried to make in this essay is that the challenge confronting social democratic parties (and other Left parties as well) is not simply to come up with a coherent program that appeals to a broad coalition of voters. These parties must also seek to build (or maintain) trade unions and other intermediary organizations that promote their policy priorities and mobilize

voters—in the first instance, working-class voters—on their behalf. Governments cannot require people to join unions, let alone require them to join specific unions, but there are at least two things that forward-looking governments with progressive ambitions can and should do to reverse the dynamics illustrated by the Swedish case: first, they should restrict the ability of employers to rely on fixed-term employment contracts and, secondly, they should curtail inter-union competition centred on the provision of private benefits by extending the coverage and generosity of publicly funded unemployment and sick-pay provisions.

Another obvious domain for rethinking how social democratic parties operate pertains to the recruitment of candidates for elected office and the participation of working-class representatives in internal party politics. We should not succumb to the populist temptation of assuming that only people from working-class backgrounds can speak for the working class, but some effort to reverse the tendency for careerists and policy professionals to take over these parties would seem to be necessary if they are to reconnect with the working class.

Given the pressing political issue of our time, social democratic renewal for the 21st century certainly needs to go beyond a return to the good old days of welfare-state expansion. Meeting the challenge of climate change entails slower economic growth and a retreat from e damaging features of mass consumption. The political viability of policies to promote such a shift will depend on government measures that distribute the burdens associated with slower growth in a more equitable manner, alongside investment in new skills. The key error of third-way social democracy must be avoided this time around: social investment should be financed by taxing the affluent, not by cutting social benefits to precarious workers and their families.

The rise in territorial inequalities in the last 10-15 years represents another challenge that requires innovative solutions. In the Swedish case, the Gini coefficient for disposable household income was essentially stable from 2010 to 2020. By contrast, this period saw the emergence of a big gap in the economic conditions of metropolitan areas compared with smaller towns and rural areas. According to official estimates, the percentage of adults "at risk of poverty" was 14.2% in metropolitan areas and 14.3% in small towns and rural areas in 2010. By 2020, the figure for metropolitan areas had dropped to 11.8% while the figure for smaller towns and rural areas had increased to 20.3% (Schraff and Pontusson 2023: 24). It is hardly a coincidence that the Sweden Democrats have performed much better in the latter areas than in the former. (Their vote share in Stockholm, the country's largest city and the electoral district with the fastest economic growth since the previous election, was barely half of their national vote share in 2022). To meet the right-wing populist challenge, social democratic parties must develop policies that not only compensate households in regions have fallen behind, but also promote more territorially equitable economic growth in the long-term. Like the green transition, this implies a more interventionist approach to economic policy than that which social democratic parties have traditionally pursued.

Finally, social democratic renewal needs to address issues pertaining to "workplace democracy." The absence of this topic from the electoral programs of social democratic parties since the 1980's, let alone the absence of any new policy initiatives by social democratic governments, is truly striking, especially since it offers obvious opportunities to bridge the apparent divide "materialist" and "post-materialist" concerns.

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Table 1: Workers and socio-cultural professionals in percent of the British, German and Swedish electorates in 2001-15.

	production and service workers	socio-cultural professionals
Germany	37	16
Sweden	41	25
UK	38	14

Note: Averaging across post-election surveys from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, these estimate are based on the occupational coding schema developed by Oesch (2006). Similar estimates for another thirteen countries are presented in the supplementary materials for Rennwald and Pontusson (2021).

Table 2: Annualized percentage change in income inequality and the effects of redistribution among working-age households under social democratic governments in Sweden, Germany and the UK.

	MI_Gini_%change	DI_Gini_%change	redistribution
Sweden			
1967-75	-1.13	-2.54	1.41
1981-92	1.64	1.74	-0.10
1995-2006	-1.57	-0.30	-1.27
2014-18	-0.33	0.00	-0.33
Germany			
1973-83	1.25	-0.41	0.84
1998-2005	1.58	1.64	-0.06
United Kingdom			
1974-79	-0.12	-0.47	0.35
1997-2010	0.22	-0.07	0.29

Source: Own calculations based on microdata from the Luxembourg Income Study and the EU's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions. For lack of more fine-grained data, the German figures for 1973-83 pertain to all households.

Table 3: Inequality trends and redistribution under different government constellations (averages for Germany, Sweden and the UK).

	SD government			Cetre-Right government		
	MI%ch	DI%ch	redistr	MI%ch	DI%ch	redistr
before 1995	.85	-.56	1.29	.99	.65	.34
1995-2010	.23	.42	-.19	1.41	2.72	-1.31
after 2010	-.33	.00	-.33	.09	.85	-.75

Source: Own calculations based on microdata from the Luxembourg Income Study and the EU's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions. Country-years coded as Centre-Right government: Germany 1981-98 and 2009-13; Sweden, 1975-81, 1992-95 and 2006-14; the UK 1979-1997 and 2010-18.

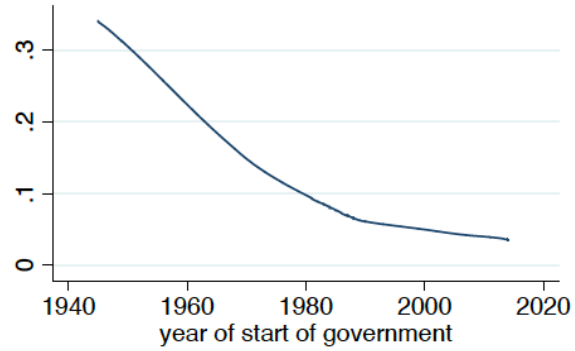
Table 4: Occupational and educational backgrounds of MPs.

	1960s		1980s		2010s	
	Social Dems	Centre-Right	Social Dems	Centre-Right	Social Dems	Centre-Right
% working-class:						
Germany	23.5	11.0	24.0	8.6	14.5	1.7
Sweden (self-reported)			31.1	2.6	38.2	3.3
Sweden					23.6	9.1
UK	37	4	28		10	2
% university-educated:						
Sweden (self-reported)			32.4	49.0	49.5	83.3

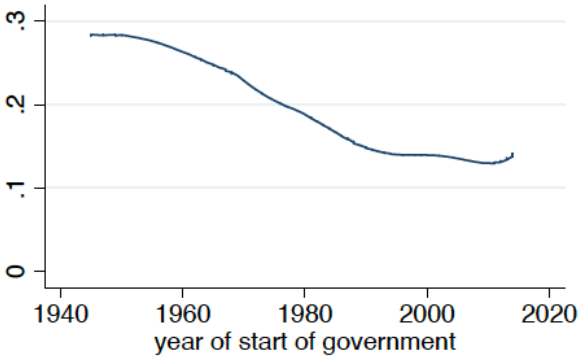
Sources and notes: German data for 1969, 1980, 1983 1987, 2013, 2017 and 2021 provided by Lea Elsässer (University of Mainz); self-reported Swedish figures are averages for 1985-88 and 2010-14, based on survey data provided by David Karlsson (University of Gothenburg); Swedish figures for MPs elected in 2014 based on coding biographical information provided by Noam Lupu (Vanderbilt University); UK data for parliaments elected in 1964 and 2010 from Heath (2013:82) and for the parliament elected in 1987 from O'Grady (2019:548). For Germany, "Centre-Right" refers to Christian Democratic MPs; for Sweden, it refers to the mainstream Centre-Right MPs (i.e., does not include the Sweden Democrats); and for the UK it refers to all non-Labour MPs.

Figure 1: The background of Social Democratic cabinet ministers, 1945-2015 (18 countries).

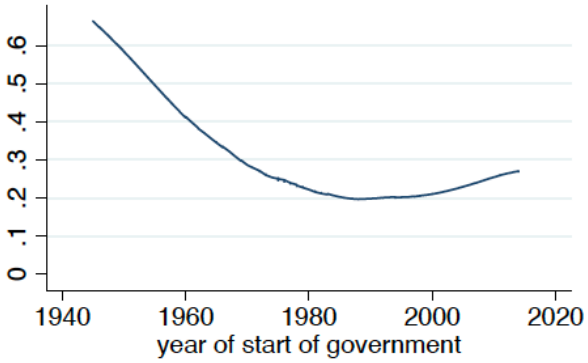
A. Percentage of cabinet ministers with a blue-collar occupational backgrounds:



B. Percentage of cabinet ministers who were previously trade-union officials:



C. Percentage of cabinet ministers with blue-collar background who were previously trade-union officials:



Source: Graphs generously provided by Despina Alexiadou, based on her dataset, available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LPCEXG. Note: The data encompasses eight cabinet portfolios (prime minister, deputy prime minister, foreign affairs, economics, finance, health, employment and social affairs) in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK.