



Look to Denmark or not? An experimental study of the Social Democrats' strategic choices

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ABSTRACT

Social Democratic parties struggle to maintain their strong electoral position, as political competition has shifted from the traditional left-right dimension to the cultural dimension. This has led to a debate on what would be the most viable electoral strategy for these parties in terms of adjusting their policies. Some propose a “New Left” policy platform that combines social investment and progressive cultural policies; others an “Old Left” policy platform that combines traditional redistribution policies and social-conservative cultural policies. We conducted a survey experiment to test the effects of these two platforms on support for the Norwegian Labour party. Our results show that the New Left platform is more popular among current Labour voters and voters from competing left-wing parties, and the two policy platforms are equally popular among the total electorate.

1. Introduction

Across Europe, the position of Social Democratic parties has weakened over the last decades (Benedetto et al., 2020). Changes in the social class and political cleavage structures are slow-moving factors driving this development (Kitschelt 1994; Benedetto et al., 2020; Ford and Jennings 2020; Borschier et al., 2021). These trends have forced the Social Democrats to adjust their policies, so as to obtain support from other classes or social groups, but they struggle to find a new, stable, coalition of voters. The weakening of the mainstream left has taken place at the same time as the immigration debate has become more prominent, which has led many to link these two developments together (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Will Social Democratic parties benefit from appealing more strongly to the socio-economic stratum of voters they have traditionally mobilised, as the Danish Social Democrats appear to have done successfully, or should they instead appeal more strongly to progressive voters, as in Switzerland? While all parties need to make strategic decisions when cleavage structures change, the mainstream left is in a particularly difficult position, as they are unlikely to enter a coalition with the populist right, and therefore must weigh office-seeking ambitions against policy goals to a stronger degree than the mainstream right (Bale et al., 2010).

The existing literature is divided concerning the best strategy for the Social Democrats. Some build on traditional or extended spatial theory

(Meguid 2005) to argue that the best strategy for dominant parties is to crowd out “niche” parties by reducing the distance between their policy platforms (accommodation), for instance by moving to the right on cultural issues. Others, studying radical right parties, use top-down, constructivist approaches to argue that accommodation on the cultural dimension will increase the salience of the immigration issue and legitimise the discourse used by anti-immigration parties, which they believe will benefit the radical right (e.g. Krause et al., 2023). Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019, 2020) combine the latter type of reasoning with modern cleavage theory to argue that a specific combination of policies on the two main axes of political competition will be successful. More specifically, they argue that Social Democrats should cater to middle class, rather than working class, voters by combining social investment policies (education, childcare, parental leave) with progressive cultural and immigration policies. This policy combination avoids accommodation on the cultural dimension, but implies accommodation on the left-right (economic) dimension, by de-emphasising redistribution policies in favour of social investment policies (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019).

How voters consider and trade-off accommodations along the two dimensions is largely unknown, as experimental work tends to study the immigration issue in isolation (Hjort and Larsen 2022). This paper presents the results of a vignette survey experiment from Norway where voters were asked to consider a policy platform put forward by the

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Labour Party and to state how likely they were to vote for the party, if they ran on that platform. The respondents were randomised to a platform consisting of either six policies randomly drawn from a list of social investment and progressive issues (a “New Left” policy platform), or six policies randomly drawn from a list of redistributive policies and social conservative policies (an “Old Left” policy platform). The list of policies did not include policies that the Labour Party might be highly unlikely to promote. We explore the overall electoral appeal of these two platforms, which social groups the respective platforms appeal to, how they attract voters from other parties and social groups, and whether accommodation on the immigration issue stands out in terms of electoral effects.

We find that the two platforms are equally popular in the total electorate, but that the New Left platform is more popular among voters already voting Labour or voting for other left-wing parties. Moreover, the New Left platform is more popular among those in the professional social class, while the Old Left platform is more popular among working class respondents. Our results suggests that the choice is more relevant for what voters they want to attract and represent, and less relevant for their overall electoral strength.

2. Strategic choices facing the mainstream left

In line with the European trend, the Norwegian Labour Party (Ap) has been losing ground since the late 1980s (see [Figure A1](#)). How could Labour adjust its policies to face its challengers in this situation? Previous research has proposed two broad strategies on what may attract voters (and government power) to the mainstream European left. These two strategies are plausible ways forward for Labour, as they broadly represent two competing factions within these parties.

The first position, presented by [Abou-Chadi and Wagner \(2019, 2020\)](#), proposes what we label a “New Left”-oriented policy platform. According to this position, the Social Democrats will gain electorally from appealing to progressive voters, rather than to their traditional working-class constituency. Based on recent political-sociological research on cleavages among voters and in the labour market ([Gingrich and Häuserman 2015](#); [Bornschier et al., 2021](#)), they argue that a combination of progressive policies on the cultural conflict dimension – such as liberal immigration policy, emphasis on gender equality policies, and a cosmopolitan orientation – and stronger prioritisation of social investment policies – such as subsidised childcare, education and generous parental leave – at the expense of traditional social insurance policies, will be successful. This is because this will secure support from highly educated, urban (female) middle-class voters, who are a key group to capture because they are growing in number and turn out to vote. There is no free lunch, however, as a social investment profile will be met with hostility from working class voters and trade unions ([Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019](#)), because their main interest is social insurance policies that redistribute income across social classes ([Häusermann et al., 2013](#)). Since the New Left platform is less redistributive than the traditional Social Democratic platform, this move represents accommodation on the traditional left-right dimension, to some extent transforming Labour into a social-liberal party.

Following from this tension, the “New Left” combination of policies has a competitor in a possible “Old Left” policy platform that will appeal more to traditional Social Democratic voters. [Rueda \(2005\)](#) argues that Social Democrats have historically benefitted from pursuing labour market policies that favour those with secure employment (insiders), such as social insurance schemes and employment protection, rather than the interests of those with a less secure position (outsiders) in the labour market. The Old Left platform is the combination of such insider policies and more restrictive policies along the cultural axis – such as more restrictive immigration policies, harsher crime policies and a national orientation. There is high demand for this combination of policies from the electorate ([Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009](#); [Lefkofridi et al., 2014](#)), but the supply has been restricted. This demand-supply mismatch has been used as an explanation for the success of anti-immigration

parties that have decided to move policies in that direction ([De Lange, 2007](#)). We label this second combination of policies an “Old Left” platform, since it combines traditional Social Democratic welfare state and labour market policies with an appeal to its traditional voter group, which favours restrictive policies on the cultural dimension. Since the old platform is less progressive on the cultural dimension, this move represents accommodation on the “second dimension”.

To test these claims, we propose an experimental research design that combines the strengths of [Abou-Chadi and Wagner \(2019\)](#) and [Hjort and Larsen \(2022\)](#) work on this topic: We randomise Norwegian voters to consider a policy platform that represents either a New or Old Left policy combination. This allows us to explore the popularity of these platforms among different voter groups, for instance whether they polarise voters in terms of social class ([Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2020](#)). The research design also allows us to study the effect of the immigration issue in isolation (as in [Hjort and Larsen, 2022](#)).

We approach the empirical analysis with the following main hypothesis.

H1. Voters will be more likely to vote for the Labour Party if randomised to the New Left platform.

This would be the case if the majority of potential Social Democratic voters preferred accommodation on the redistributive rather than the cultural dimension ([Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2020](#)).

Next, we study the effects for various subgroups.

H2. *Social class:* The New Left platform will be more (less) appealing to voters in professional occupations (working class).

H3. *Partisanship:* The policies in the New Left platform will be more appealing to voters supporting Labour or other left-wing parties.

H4. *Party sympathy:* The policies in the New Left platform will be more appealing to voters that like the Labour party.

Hypothesis **H2** follows [Abou-Chadi and Wagner’s \(2019, 2020\)](#) arguments on which social groups the platforms will appeal to. Hypotheses **H3** and **H4** are true if progressive cultural policies are more important for left-wing voters than traditional redistribution policies, since the New Left platform is less redistributive.¹ The analyses of **H3** and **H4** will furthermore allow us to see which platform appeals most to swing voters, i.e. voters without strong positive or negative views on Labour.

3. Research design

3.1. The survey experiment

We conducted a pre-registered survey experiment whereby the respondents were randomised into two groups.² Both groups were asked to evaluate a policy platform consisting of six policies, with the preamble “Consider a situation where a Labour Party candidate proposes a new direction or stronger emphasis on the following set of policies”. Next, the respondent was shown a list of policies. In *Group A*, the six policies were drawn randomly from a list of policies that would appeal to the traditional constituency of the Social Democrats. The list consisted of a combination of restrictive policies on the cultural axis, as well as traditional left-wing policies concerning the welfare state and regulation of the labour market (the Old Left platform). In *Group B*, the six policies

¹ We thank the anonymous reviewers for pushing us in the direction of focusing more on effects in subgroups than we did in the pre-analysis plan. We did not pre-register the analysis in which we subset by how much they liked or disliked the Labour Party.

² See the online appendix for information about data collection. [Table A2](#) shows that the two groups are similar for a set of pre-registered background variables.

were drawn randomly from a list of policies that would appeal to highly educated, urban, middle-class voters, consisting of a combination of progressive policies on the cultural axis and more spending on social investment policies (the New Left platform). We picked relevant policies in Norwegian politics that we believe represent the two ideological positions. The lists of policies are included in the appendix (Table A1, see also Figure A2).³

The design feature of randomly picking policies from a longer list of either Old or New Left policies achieves two goals. First, it avoids the problem of having to define one specific, fixed platform as the most representative of the two types of platforms. This reduces the risk that we pick up idiosyncrasies of the specific policies that we select, which would damage the internal validity if, say, the New Left platform is more representative of the unobserved, latent ideological perspective than the Old Left platform. In the terminology of Fong and Grimmer (2023), we are interested in the effects of latent treatments (Old and New Left), and not the effects of specific policy proposals (with the exception of immigration). Secondly, by averaging a set of realistic policies we believe that external validity is improved, not only for the Norwegian case, but also outside the Norwegian case. We picked a set of policies that have been topics in recent political debates, and which represent positions on the left-right or progressive-conservative dimensions. In the appendix, Figure A2, we present estimates of support for Labour for each policy issue.

We had two outcomes. Respondents were first asked “How likely is it that you will vote for the Labour Party if this candidate is the top candidate?”. The respondents were asked to pick one of five categories ranging from “Not likely at all” (1) to “Very likely” (5). We recoded the outcome so that it varied from 0 to 1.

Next, after giving their response, respondents were asked to compare two policy platforms. The first platform is the one they have already evaluated, while the second platform is a list of policies drawn randomly from the group they were *not* randomised to. Respondents were thus now asked to compare an Old Left and a New Left platform. After the preamble “Now, we ask you to compare two hypothetical top candidates for the Labour Party, who propose new directions or stronger emphasis on the following set of policies”, the respondents were asked “If you had to choose between these two, which one would you prefer?” The respondents were asked to choose between “Candidate A” (which is the platform they viewed first) and “Candidate B” (which is the new platform). This outcome allows us to measure the relative appeal of the two platforms among voters when the platforms are explicitly pitted against each other. For respondents, the choice appears similar to that of a conjoint choice experiment. The looks are deceiving, though. Since our interest does not lie in estimating the appeal of single policy stances, but rather the appeal of the two competing policy bundles, for our particular purpose a conjoint design is inefficient: While it is possible in principle to construct New and Old Left policy bundles out of a conjoint design, in practice this comes with an unnecessary high cost in terms of the number of observations needed in a setup where we are only interested in a specific interaction of policy stances (i.e. ‘attribute values’ in the conjoint jargon). Theoretically, we conceive the Labour Party as being internally split between two competing factions that will propose cohesive ideological platforms, if they gain the majority. A conjoint design implicitly assumes a party elite without ideological beliefs that can combine whatever policy positions they like, which we find less interesting for our purpose. We code the outcome so that it is 1 if the respondent picks the New Left candidate, and 0 if not.

We test treatment effects using OLS, where the binary variable New Left is the treatment indicator.⁴ The New Left variable is coded 1 if the respondent is randomised to the New Left platform.

³ The two lists of policies were piloted before fielding the survey. See also the note to Table A1.

⁴ We do not apply survey weights (see Miratrix et al., 2018).

4. Empirical results

We first examine whether there is an average treatment effect in the full sample (H1). The first estimate in Fig. 1 shows that this is clearly not the case (see Table A3 for regression estimates). Fig. A3 and Table A4 show the results for similar models using the vote New Left variable as the outcome. The New Left indicator is small in size and statistically insignificant for both outcomes. Thus, if the platforms have important electoral effects, this has to polarise voters and change the composition of Labour voters.

To examine the appeal of the New Left platform among various groups of voters, we first subset the sample as various types of voters (H3); Those who voted for Labour in the previous election, those who voted for a party to the left of Labour⁵ in the previous election, and those who voted for a party to the right of the Labour Party.⁶

The New Left platform is slightly more popular among the Labour voters than the Old Left platform (second estimate from left to right). Hence, Labour voters either oppose the right-wing shift on the cultural dimension, or prefer the New Left social investment profile to the redistribution profile. The effect is not large, illustrating the split on these issues within the party (Bjørklund and Bergh 2019). Moving to the next estimates, we find that the New Left platform is very popular among voters from parties to the left of Labour, while it is less popular among right-wing voters. The negative effect among right-wing voters is much smaller, however, than the effect among left-wing voters (but its group size is larger), implying that the choice of strategy will mainly affect shares of votes across parties within the left bloc, rather than across the left-right bloc line. The low support for the Old Left platform among left-wing voters suggests that turning to traditional left-wing economic policies of social insurance, income redistribution and employment protection is not particularly popular on the left if it is combined with a right-wing shift on the cultural dimension. Thus, the Danish strategy of moving to this type of policy platform does not seem to appeal to Norwegian voters.

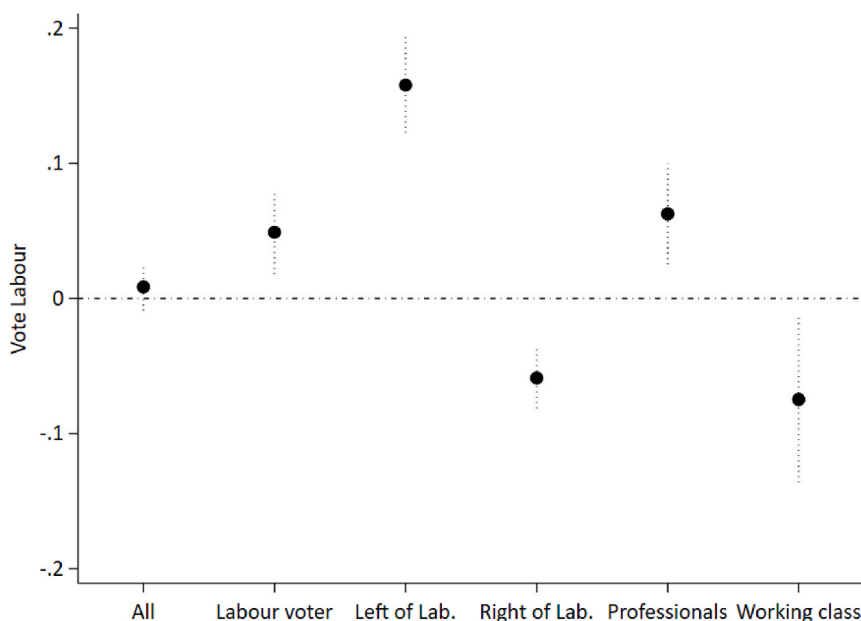
Next, we follow Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019), see also Bornschieer and Kriesi (2012) and Bornschieer et al. (2021), to examine whether the New Left platform appeals particularly to those in the professional social class (H2).⁷ The estimates show that the New Left platform increases the probability of voting Labour among those in the professional social class, but that Labour will lose further standing in the working class if it caters to the preferences of the professional class by proposing this platform. Thus, the choice of strategy is also a choice of which social groups Labour wants to represent. The results are in many ways in line with the literature on the new cultural divides among voters that Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019, 2020) build on, and square well with the literature that sees the level of education as an increasingly important structuring factor when it comes to both attitudes and behavior (Hooghe and Marks 2018).

Finally, to test H4 we used information from a previous round of the Norwegian Citizen Panel (Ivarsflaten et al., 2021), where respondents were asked how much they liked or disliked Labour. This variable allows for a more finely-tuned examination of the potential of the two platforms to attract voters that vary in their sympathy with Labour. It is

⁵ This includes the Socialist Left Party, the Red Party and the Green Party. We include the Green Party as their voting record in parliament is clearly to the left of Ap.

⁶ This includes the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian People’s Party, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party.

⁷ Our analysis of the effects for different social classes deviates somewhat from the pre-analysis plan, as we decided to follow suggestions from the reviewers. The pre-registered results are reported in the analysis. The main difference is that the pre-registered analysis suggests that the heterogeneity of social class appears to be driven by correlated variables, rather than social class itself.



Note: All respondents; Voted Labour in the previous election; Voted for a party left of Labour in the previous election; Voted for a party right of Labour in the previous election; Occupation in the professional social class; Working class occupation.

Fig. 1. Treatment effects on Vote Labour in the full sample and in different subgroups. Treatment is assignment to New Left platform.

particularly interesting to see whether any of the platforms are popular among voters that have a middling sympathy with Labour, since voters that strongly like Labour probably vote for them in any case, while voters that strongly dislike Labour will not consider them, even if they make accommodations on either the economic or cultural dimension. Voters in the middle, however, are potential swing voters.

Fig. 2 presents two graphs of the relationship (see also Table A5). The figure to the left shows the correlations between liking Labour and propensity to vote Labour for the two treatment conditions. If treatment has a strong effect on the propensity to vote Labour, these lines should be seen to differ, of which we perform a formal test in the figure to the right. What the figures show is that the Old Left platform is clearly more popular among those who strongly dislike Labour, while the New Left platform is clearly more popular among those who strongly like Labour. In the middle of the scale, where more of the swing voters are located, the differences are smaller and generally insignificant. They are positive, however, suggesting that the New Left platform has greater potential to attract new voters. But as we have seen in Fig. 1, these are for the most part voters who support the other left-wing parties, so any growth in Labour's share of the vote would be at their expense.

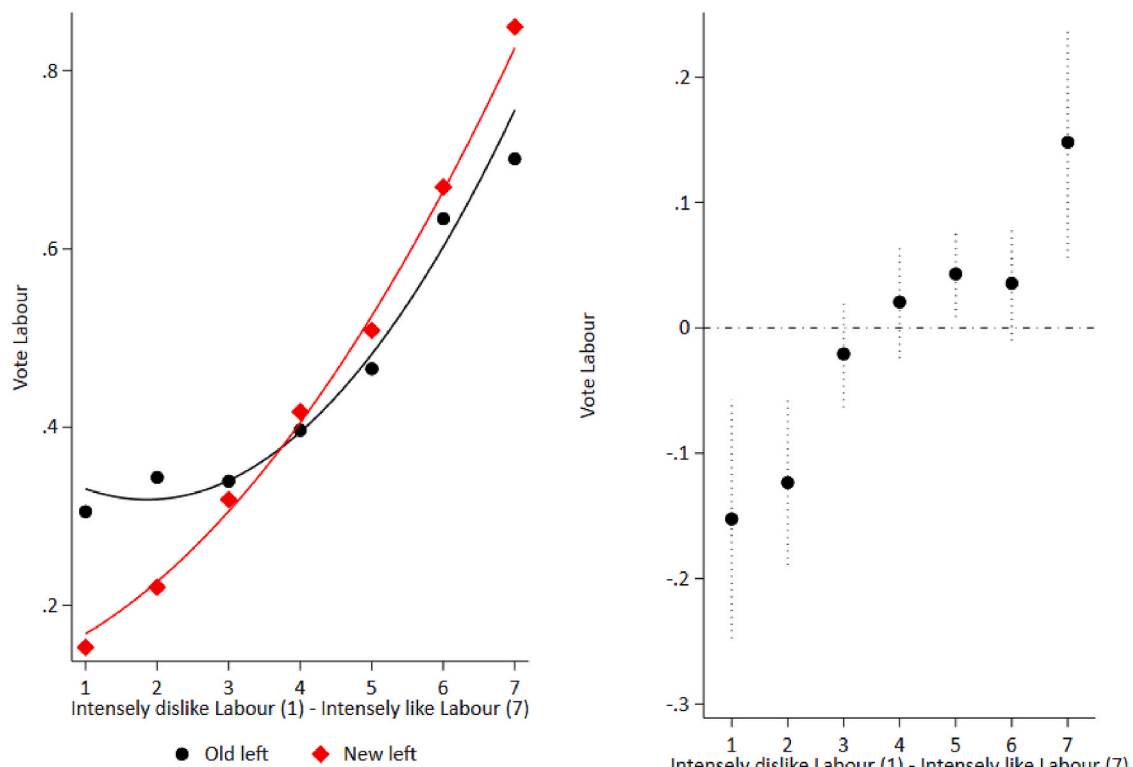
In the appendix, we present one final analysis. Following Hjort and Larsen, 2022, we examine the impact of the presence or absence of the immigration issue for the two platforms, which allows an analysis of whether left- or right-wing movements on the immigration issue represent clear electoral gains. We do not find any support for this. The results indicate that avoiding this issue is the best strategy, as any movement seems to provoke a segment of voters who voted Labour in the previous election. This clearly indicates the struggle that Labour faces when the immigration issue is salient.⁸

⁸ The Norwegian Labour Party has always been internally split on immigration policy, at least labour immigration. For instance, already in 1975, a Labour government introduced the "immigration stop" (Bale et al., 2010: 417) to curtail growing labour immigration from Pakistan.

5. Conclusion

Will Social Democratic parties gain votes by adjusting to a policy platform that combines social investment and progressive cultural policies (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2020)? Or is a policy platform that combines traditional redistribution policy and social-conservative cultural policies the way forward? We fielded a survey experiment to test which of the two types of policy platforms – which we label New Left versus Old Left policies – appeal to Norwegian voters. The results show that the platforms are equally popular, and solely change the characteristics of Labour voters. The New Left platform is attractive to Labour voters, voters for parties to the left of Labour, voters that strongly like Labour, and voters in professional occupations. This is consistent with the stronger electoral salience of the culturally progressive policies on the Left, as the New Left platform is less redistributive than the Old Left platform. Working class voters prefer the Old Left platform, illustrating that the choice of platform is also a choice of which social groups Labour wants to represent.

We can only speculate on the extent to which the results also apply to Social Democratic parties in other countries. The Norwegian party structure is not that different from those in many other multi-party systems, as Labour competes with a large mainstream conservative party and an anti-immigration party on the right, and with a new left-socialist party and a radical left party on its left. Labour also faces the problem of adjusting to a new situation in which non-economic issues are more prominent across Europe. However, our results do not show the same benefit from a move to the right on cultural issues, as in the Danish case (Hjort and Larsen 2022), which suggests that external validity is limited, as there are many similarities between Norway and Denmark. Moreover, if Labour proposes a policy shift, other parties and the media will respond to such strategic choices, which creates a dynamic that is missing in a static study like ours. The effects will presumably be smaller in the real world, as respondents are allowed counter-arguments in political debates, which will limit the persuasiveness of policy messages. Finally, Abou-Chadi and Wagner. (2019) argue that the unions play an important role in how effective the New Left strategy will be, as the



Note: The figure to the left shows the relationship between whether the respondent likes Labour and propensity to vote Labour in the two treatment conditions. Dots and squares represent the mean at each level. The quadratic regression lines are estimated based on all observations. The figure to the right shows the difference between support in the New Left and Old Left groups.

Fig. 2. Treatment effects on Vote Labour at different levels of Labour sympathy.

unions will fight for labour market insiders and against the social investment profile, if these issues become salient. A comparative study with variation in union strength will give a better sense of how various voter groups make these trade-offs in different contexts.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102629>.

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