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‘EMPTY NETS’

Social Democracy and the ‘Catch-All Party Thesis’ in Germany and Sweden

Christopher S. Allen

ABSTRACT

The Social Democratic parties of Germany and Sweden were part of ‘third way’ movements common to such political parties during the mid-1990s. By continuing to moderate their positions and move away from their traditional bases towards the centre, they seemed to embody – a generation later – a second embracing of Kirchheimer’s ‘catch-all’ party thesis. But unlike its 1960s’ incarnation, each of them in the mid-1990s disregarded their left flanks and saw considerable growth of both Green and Left (former communist) parties fill the policy space that social democracy had relinquished. Both parties no longer lead their governments. This article suggests that the decline of social democracy in Germany and Sweden can be understood by a nuanced interpretation of the Kirchheimer thesis. Ultimately, it is argued that the failure of both parties to maintain electoral dominance results, paradoxically, from their overemphasis on the political centre, which left a lucrative space for left-wing parties to occupy especially in a PR setting. Kirchheimer helps us understand this pattern, because the focus on the centre leaves an ideologically moribund electorate that created space for Left parties to institutionally renew or adapt themselves to address the needs of these forgotten voters. This central hypothesis, along with others that derive from the catch-all thesis, is tested empirically with historical analysis and electoral and opinion data.

KEY WORDS ■ catch-all parties ■ Germany ■ Left–Right classification ■ social democracy ■ Sweden

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s in Western Europe, the parties of the democratic left embraced a movement known as the ‘third way’. Led by Tony Blair and

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Gerhard Schröder (Blair and Schröder, 2000), these democratic left political leaders turned their parties further towards the centre. In taking this ideological step, these parties once again embraced – more than a generation later – the catch-all party thesis of Otto Kirchheimer (1966) that had proved electorally and programmatically successful for such parties in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the mid-1990s, however, these Social Democratic parties embraced centrist tactical and strategic changes that, while initially successful, contributed to their losing power by the early to mid-2000s.

In this article, I examine more fully the German and Swedish Social Democratic parties. Unlike other European centre-left parties, they may challenge the conventional view of the Kirchheimer thesis by suggesting that ‘catching all’ towards the centre may not be the only option for large parties if there are smaller ones to their left.

The volume’s project – and this article specifically – uses Kirchheimer as a template to compare his thesis of four decades ago with the parties and party systems of today. Kirchheimer’s thesis predicted – though he himself viewed this trend with apprehension – that the parties would move towards the centre, de-emphasize ideology, stress leaders over party members and cast a wide net. In looking at the only two mainstream European parties that had choices of moving towards the centre or moving in the other direction (in this case left, given the party configuration in Germany and Sweden), my purpose is to see whether Kirchheimer’s admonition about the fate of centrist catch-all parties was correct, and, if so, whether there were other options.

I advance three propositions. The first is that the two Social Democratic parties since the mid-1990s faithfully followed the catch-all model towards the centre, as they did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but that this time it failed them. The second proposition suggests that as a consequence of these two parties moving towards the centre, they would open up space on their left. The third proposition suggested that there was a numerical possibility that these Social Democratic parties had electoral options other than centrist catch-all.

To be completely clear, I am not predicting, forecasting or normatively laying out a desired outcome. I am empirically and logically suggesting that centrist catch-all tactics have not worked for these two parties.

Kirchheimer and Social Democracy’s Third Way: From Catch-All to Empty Nets

As William Safran has argued, the essence of Kirchheimer’s catch-all thesis entailed the mainstream political parties of the centre-left and centre-right moderating their ideological positions to cast their nets for more floating voters located nearer the centre of the political spectrum (Safran, 2009). The significance of Safran’s argument was to remind us that many people

mistakenly assume that Kirchheimer was in favour of the policy implications of 'his' thesis. In fact, Kirchheimer's work was more a lament than a celebration. While Kirchheimer personally preferred to see an active, vibrant, participatory democracy, he was distressed that voters by the middle of the 20th century had begun to show weaker party identification and membership; that the political parties themselves had developed increasingly vague party platforms and positions; and that the party systems represented centrism and consolidation rather than the full expression of a variety of political views.

In his original formulation, Kirchheimer noted that this development applied to the mainstream parties of both the Left and the Right (Kirchheimer, 1966; Krouwel, 2003). Yet, by the 1990s, the parties of the democratic left in Europe that had already moderated their views in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to move even further towards the centre in the mid-1990s. Powerful forces, such as the neoliberal tenor of the European Union (EU) economic policy (Moss, 2005) and continued globalization, threatened both the traditional welfare state social spending as well as the trade union working-class base that represented its primary support (Blyth, 2003). German social democracy faced additional challenges from the still incomplete German unification.

Numerous democratic left political parties took this path to the centre and won electoral office: Tony Blair's New Labour in 1997, Lionel Jospin's *gauche plurale* socialist-led alliance in 1997, Gerhard Schröder's *Neue Mitte* in 1998 and the Italian Olive Tree coalition in 1996 (Kitschelt, 1999). Even Swedish Social Democrats seemed to adopt a similar position in 1994 (Aylott, 1995) as it finally joined the EU, although the latter party attempted to move back towards the left after a very poor electoral showing in 1998 and almost being voted out of power. By the late 1990s, 12 of the then 15 EU countries were governed by parties or coalitions led by the democratic left, conveying the impression that this second generation catch-all strategy was a roaring success for social democracy.

Most of these moderate democratic left political victories proved short-lived, however. The Olive Tree coalition was voted out of power in Italy in 2001; the French democratic left lost the National Assembly in the 2002 election, Gerhard Schröder's Red-Green (SPD-Green) coalition was forced to call early elections in 2005, resulting in a less than grand coalition in which the Social Democrats are clearly the most junior partner. Even hegemonic Swedish social democracy was not immune from this trend, as it too lost power in the 2006 election for the first time in 12 years.¹

To be sure, the still further expansion of the EU to include an additional 12 countries (now totalling 27), the continued pressures of globalization, as well as widespread immigration to these countries and the uncertainties of a post-9/11 world put all of these political parties under deepening continued pressure. But the specific policies of these nominally democratic left political parties were the antithesis of their earlier left-wing progressive legacy.

In virtually all these countries that had once been governed by the decreasing democratic left, they all shared ‘middle way’ policies that proved to be incapable of reconciling these exogenous shocks with the domestic demands of their Social Democratic constituents (Pierson, 2002). In many of these countries – even electorally successful cases like Blair’s New Labour Party² – their membership numbers and share of the popular vote diminished dramatically, and many of their current and former members viewed them as much less politically effective institutions (Mair and van Biezen, 2001).³

Kirchheimer’s thesis predicted that these moderate views of democratic left political parties would be rewarded by electoral support from the centre of the political spectrum as in the 1960s and 1970s, but by the early 2000s this centrist ‘catch-all’ strategy had failed. Instead, parties to the left of the Social Democrats in Sweden and in Germany increased their electoral support as the mainstream democratic left parties in these countries atrophied. Green parties⁴ in both countries in the 1980s began to exceed the electoral threshold in each of the two countries and became permanent political fixtures within their party systems (Müller-Rommel, 2002). Left (former communist) parties in each of the two countries have now found a niche and regularly take their place on the political party spectrum in the two countries also to the left of the Social Democrats.

Evaluating Propositions for Social Democracy’s Empty Nets in Sweden and Germany

This section evaluates more systematically two propositions for the ineffectiveness of the catch-all party approach by the SAP and SPD since the mid-1990s and suggests one modification to Kirchheimer’s catch-all party thesis. The propositions are:

- (1) The Social Democratic Parties of Sweden and Germany pursued ‘catch-all’ policies by gravitating towards the centre and were unsuccessful electorally and programmatically. Furthermore, this failure of centrist positioning was systematic and persistent, rather than conjunctural or temporary. For this proposition to be supported, we would have to find evidence that these parties did emulate Kirchheimer’s thesis, but their following towards the centre led directly to the poor electoral and policy performance by social democracy in Sweden and Germany. This proposition would only fail to be supported if the parties eschewed or misused the catch-all model.
- (2) ‘Catch-all’ policies are no longer relevant in developed democracies due to the proliferation of smaller parties in states with proportional representation (PR) voting systems. The heart of Kirchheimer’s thesis is that larger parties blur their ideological distinctiveness in favour of reaching out to a wider variety of voters and increase their support at the expense

of a clear and specific programmatic profile. One would thus expect to see effective catch-all parties in such a system obtain between 85 and 95 percent of the votes in such a country, or else the term 'catch-all' is meaningless. If they were, this proposition would be refuted. If, however, we see larger, purportedly 'catch-all' parties losing electoral strength to smaller parties and their total share of a country's electorate dropping to 60 or 70 percent of the electorate, then we would see this proposition supported.

The proposed modification to Kirchheimer's thesis is that:

- (3) The 'catch-all' thesis still might be relevant for Social Democratic parties, but only if they include their left and not just focus on their centre. For this proposition to be refuted, we would expect to see the left side of the political spectrum dry up, which would suggest that the Social Democratic move to the centre is the only direction in which they could logically go. If, however, there is solid support – if not sharp growth – for parties to the left of the Social Democrats, it is likely Social Democrats may have moved away from their own rank and file and allowed them to be recruited by Green and Left parties.⁵ If we were to see the total share of the vote by all parties of the left (Social Democrats, Greens, Left) approach or surpass 50 percent, we would have to conclude that the Social Democrats in pursuing centrist catch-all policies were 'fishing in all the wrong places' and coming up with empty nets.

A Centrist 'Catch-All' Thesis No Longer Works for Social Democracy

If the Social Democratic parties of Germany and Sweden had failed to follow the centre-leaning tendency articulated by Kirchheimer, we would expect to see a strong defence of traditional social democratic positions, essentially the antithesis of the principles that embody the heart of the catch-all thesis. If, on the other hand, their ideological positioning and policy practices followed the catch-all thesis closely, then their electoral failure could not be the result of improper application of this moderating political position. It would suggest that the centrist interpretation of the model itself might be flawed.

What we find is the essence of Kirchheimer's concerns about catch-all policies. From the late 1970s to the present, we have seen both Social Democratic parties downplay or minimize traditional social democratic policies such as: worker participation, extending the public provision of social welfare and pressing for increased democratic governance and regulation of market activity (Paterson and Sloam, 2006). Both parties held office during parts of this period, but they also lost considerable membership as their traditional blue-collar supporters have seen traditional manufacturing sectors diminish in strength.⁶

Both of these parties believed that the growth of service sector employment required social democracy to appeal to more professional workers, downplaying their working class in favour of appealing to a wider electorate (Anderson, 2006). They therefore developed a more modern professional organizational structure that saw its adherents and voters more as consumers and thus minimized the role of active, participating organizational members. It also saw the party leader more as a directly elected executive rather than the leader of a political organization who was just the first among equals.

Swedish and German Social Democratic party leaders for three decades have believed that embracing catch-all policies was their best path.⁷ In Sweden, the simultaneous failure of the wage-earner funds investment package and the loss of political power in 1976 for the first time in 34 years caused serious internal re-examination. Loss of confidence accompanied electoral defeat and increased tension between the SAP and the LO, its trade union partner that wanted to use these wage-earner funds to keep capital investment from leaving Sweden. When the Social Democrats regained power again in 1982 the fissure between it and the trade unions had not been fully repaired and the party was only successful in passing a much watered-down version of these wage-earner funds (Pontusson, 1992). The party also worried about the country's relationship to the EU, especially with the arrival of the Single European Act (1987), which eventually culminated in the EU (1992). The Social Democrats remained concerned about whether their special form of social democracy could withstand a wider market-oriented world. Losing power again from 1991 to 1994 also undermined faith in Swedish social democracy. Thus, when the party regained power in 1994, it was much more susceptible to moderating social democracy, as had its sister European democratic left partners.⁸

In the 1994–98 period, Swedish social democracy most fully embraced a catch-all position, but it was an electoral disaster (Mahon, 2000). The Swedish Left Party pressured the SAP from the left, especially when the SAP was most enamoured with centrism (Arter, 2003). The Left was rewarded in 1998, winning 12 percent of the vote, while the SAP dropped to 36.4 percent, its lowest vote-share since 1922! This pressure on the SAP from the Left pulled it back from the Blair (and eventually Schröder) line, recovering some of its electoral share in 2002. But the SAP took a more moderate job creation strategy than its core members expected and it was voted out of power once again in 2006 (Aylott and Bolin, 2007).⁹

German social democracy's first post-war high point was leading a coalition government with the centrist FDP beginning in 1969 and lasting through the early 1970s (Braunthal, 1994) until the oil crisis-induced recession of 1974–75 saw the employment rise in Germany for the first time since the Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961. Then, when Chancellor Willy Brandt was replaced by the moderate Helmut Schmidt, party policy emphasized safeguarding and rebuilding the strength of the German economy even if it meant alienating rank-and-file Social Democrats and their trade union allies.

Schmidt was an effective executive and took much credit for the overall health of the German economy in the late 1970s, but he did so at the expense of traditional Social Democratic party concerns. After winning a close re-election in 1980 by giving in to the free market demands of its increasingly conservative Free Democratic Party coalition partner, Schmidt further alienated his rank-and-file base within the Social Democratic Party (Schmidt, 1987). When the Free Democrats finally jumped ship in the fall of 1982 and joined Helmut Kohl and the Christian Democrats in an alliance that lasted until 1998 the Social Democrats found themselves in the political wilderness. For four consecutive elections (1983, 1987, 1990 and 1994), the Social Democrats put forward as chancellor candidates individuals from the mainstream democratic left of the political party but were unable to approach the 40 percent of the vote that they exceeded from 1966–80. It was in this context that it was interested in taking an even more aggressive catch-all position in the mid-1990s than it had in the 1970s.

After a brief flirtation with left-leaning policies after the formation of the Red–Green (SPD–Green) coalition, Schröder induced the resignation of leftist Oskar Lafontaine as finance minister, as he pulled policy more towards the centre than the left as he joined Tony Blair in articulating their manifesto (Blair and Schröder, 2000; Buerkle, 1999; Morrison, 1999). In his first term, however, Schröder was not particularly aggressive in achieving this centrist position because rank-and-file SPD members protested vehemently. Yet, early in his second term (2003), his government instituted a series of major proposals under the broad term Agenda 2010, but specifically implemented under the name Hartz Reforms, named after the former Volkswagen human resources manager, during Schröder's second term (Beck and Scherrer, 2005; Braunthal, 2003; Camerra-Rowe, 2004). The primary goal of these reforms – and specifically Hartz IV, the last and most far-reaching one – was to make German labour market institutions more 'flexible' along mostly free market and deregulatory lines. The most significant of these policies merged the unemployment and welfare systems and caused the reduction in both the amount of unemployment benefits and the duration that the unemployed could receive them. These policies were a major turning point for German social democracy as the centrist ideas that were articulated in the Blair–Schröder manifesto in 1999 saw their institutional fruition with Hartz IV and enraged the core elements of the SPD's rank and file, not to mention the trade unions. The SPD's members saw these policies as a significant departure from democratic left principles and ultimately denied Schröder the political support he would need to win re-election.¹⁰

Thus, the pragmatic desire to regain political power, concerns about the ever-expanding, market-oriented EU, deepening globalization that continued to erode their working-class base, and – for Germany – the strain of unification all caused Social Democratic parties in both countries to seek their fortunes with an even deeper commitment to a new round of catch-all policies. In comparing these policies with Kirchheimer's core definition

of the phenomenon, it appears that the second iteration of catch-all policies extended the policies of the first:

(a) drastic reduction in the party's ideological baggage; (b) strengthening of top leadership groups; (c) downgrading of the role of the individual party member; (d) de-emphasis of class or denominational clienteles in favor of recruitment at large; and (e) securing of access to a variety of groups. (Kirchheimer, 1966: 190–1)

Thus, with respect to this first proposition for the failure of German and Swedish Social Democrats to find durable political success, it was not that they failed to embrace the catch-all thesis properly. Rather, they embraced it fully by leaning towards the centre, and it failed them.

Proliferation of Small Parties Undercuts the 'Catch-All' Thesis

The catch-all thesis holds that larger parties blur their ideological distinctiveness in favour of reaching out to a wider variety of voters in order to increase their support and crowd out smaller parties. In other words, the catch-all parties (if the term actually means what it says) would likely have to obtain at or near 90 percent of the votes in order thereby to create a catch-all system. What the catch-all thesis does not expect to occur is the proliferation of smaller parties. Yet this has been present in Sweden since the beginning of its modern universal suffrage democracy after World War I and in Germany since the 1980s. In the process, the presence of such small parties has undercut the strength of the catch-all parties and brought into question the catch-all system.

From its modern democratic origins at the turn of the 20th century, the Swedish party system comprised four political parties. The first two were the Conservatives (now called the Moderates), representing the aristocracy, and the Liberals, representing the nascent business community. A third political force, the Agrarians (now the Centre), represented independent farmers, a social force that thrived due to the relatively weak feudal system in Sweden. The country's late industrialization in the latter part of the 19th century produced a rapidly expanding trade union movement and its political companion the Social Democratic Party (Pontusson, 1984). The presence of four political parties representing four distinct social forces caused Swedish politicians to change a single-member district to an electoral system with PR shortly after the end of World War I. Thus, the presence of these well-defined cleavages and a PR electoral system did not provide the foundation for the development of catch-all parties. The Russian Revolution caused the formation of a Communist Party in Sweden (now called the Left), ecological social forces produced a Green Party in the 1980s, and a small Christian Democratic Party also has emerged within the past 20 years.

With a seven-party political system, it is not surprising that most of the parties attempted to fill a specific ideological or positional location on the

political spectrum rather than embrace a catch-all position. The two largest of the seven parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, may have developed catch-all tendencies à la Kirchheimer's thesis in the latter part of the 20th century, but the party system itself was hardly a catch-all one.

The post-war Federal Republic of Germany, on the other hand, exhibited many more of Kirchheimer's catch-all party indicators. First, the legacy of the Nazi period combined with the presence of a Communist East Germany made it politically impossible for parties of the extreme Right or extreme Left to thrive in this political environment. Second, the fragmented dysfunctional political party system of the Weimar Republic induced the leaders of the post-war political parties to create much more encompassing organizational structures. The Christian Democrats specifically embraced both Catholics and Protestants, and the Social Democrats reached out to all workers, a task made easier by the marginalization and eventual banning of the West German Communist Party. Third, the creation of a 5 percent electoral hurdle (compared to 4 percent in Sweden) also made it difficult for smaller parties to gain a foothold in this political system. Thus, after the political party shakeout during the 1949, 1953 and 1957 elections, the Federal Republic had a three-party system (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Free Democrats) for over 20 years, with the first two reflecting classical catch-all tendencies and the Free Democrats acting as a centrist stabilizing coalition partner of one or the other large parties for this 22-year period until the emergence of the Greens in 1983. For most of this period, the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats together captured more than 85 percent of the votes as two large catch-all parties in a catch-all party system.

If the catch-all thesis were universally robust, we would not have seen five functional political parties winning seats in Sweden since the 1920s and up to eight political parties winning seats within the past 20 years. Since the essence of Kirchheimer's thesis is that major parties broaden their appeal to catch voters from smaller parties, the prevalence of numerous additional parties would logically suggest that the larger parties were no longer 'catching all'. Especially given the encompassing tendencies of the Social Democrats and Moderates for much of the past two decades, we would have expected to see these two larger parties taking a greater share of recent elections. Taking the five most recent elections in Sweden, it was only in 1994 that the Moderates and Social Democrats were able to retain as much as 67 percent of the votes between them. In all of the other four elections these two parties were either just above 60 percent or substantially below this figure. Clearly, Sweden has never been a catch-all system, and even the two largest political parties have not been very effective in using this approach to 'catch' even two-thirds of the electorate let alone 'all' of it. Kirchheimer himself recognized this 40 years ago (1966: 188). Thus, what is surprising is the Social Democrats' turn towards the centre in 1994.

Likewise in Germany, the hegemony of the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats as catch-all parties has come to an end. After regularly

winning 85 percent of the total votes in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s and then dropping to between 75 and 80 percent during the 1990s, the two parties descended to an all-time low of 69.4 percent of the votes in the 2005 election. Further exacerbating their collective share of the vote was their ill-fated decision to enter into the so-called Grand Coalition following this inconclusive election. As was the case in the late 1960s, when the two large parties were briefly in coalition with each other, they painfully discovered that the only opposition to such a coalition can be the smaller parties. They successfully dodged this bullet in the mid-1960s, but when they entered into their second grand coalition in 2005 the political landscape had changed completely. In 1966, they shared 88 percent of the total German vote; in 2005 they shared less than 70 percent. The conventional wisdom regarding 'grand' or major party coalitions is that the two large parties will negotiate in good faith and find positions agreeable to both. But in a volatile, highly contested election in which significant issues divided the major parties, consensual solutions became very difficult. At such moments, political accountability becomes a significant issue, since each of the two large parties blame the other for failure to pass needed legislation. With the only opposition being the three other political parties (Left, Green and Free Democratic), it should come as no surprise that from their total share of the vote in the 2005 election (26.5 percent), the three opposition parties amassed a total of 35 percent in a March 2008 opinion poll (see Table 2).

Something unexpected is going on that this catch-all thesis cannot explain very well, and not just in Germany and Sweden. Obviously, the presence of PR electoral systems makes it easier for new parties to form when new cleavages develop within societies. The growth of regional, separatist, nationalist and religious parties in many countries suggests that supposedly catch-all parties are decreasingly capable of catching a significant share of the electorate in these countries. It also challenges the premise held by those who believe that a catch-all party orientation is able to perform the primary function of representing the interests of the population within democratic societies. And, more germane to this article, when Social Democratic parties assume that they can retain their core constituency by undercutting their core values and using broader, less focused appeals to unattached voters, it appears that they do so at their peril.

Catching All of the Left?

While the Kirchheimer thesis first surfaced in the 1960s, it was given considerable reinforcement a decade or more later by post-materialism (Inglehart, 1990), literature that first surfaced in the late 1970s and early 1980s when social democracy in all developed democracies faced its first serious post-war challenges. The essence of this school of thought, as it applies in this article, is that the erosion of traditional blue-collar employment and the political parties and trade unions associated with it required Social Democratic

parties to look elsewhere for their core support. If manufacturing was declining as a relative share of the developed economies in favour of more service sector employment; if union membership was dropping precipitously; and if values such as individualism and privatization were replacing arguments in favour of collective and public goods, then Social Democratic parties needed to reorient themselves to this new post-materialist reality (Kitschelt, 1993).

Such arguments would be perfectly appropriate if developed democracies truly were moving to cleaner, egalitarian and less oppressive organizational forms of 21st-century political economy. Unfortunately for their adherents, this post-material vision of society applied to at most the top 30 or 40 percent of the populations of developed democracies. The remainder of these societies comprised those individuals most adversely affected by: the downside of globalization that produced job loss in declining industries; neoliberal EU economic policies that saw the erosion of traditional post-war welfare state benefits; and, in Germany, the regional dislocation produced in the country's eastern *Länder* by the still incomplete process of unification. But how can we evaluate whether this post-material vision – the *de facto* philosophical foundation of modern catch-all policies – is a more accurate description of 21st-century developed democracies as opposed to the argument that the material deprivation of significant subsections of the population of these developing democracies was a more pressing concern?

One way to measure these competing visions of 21st-century Western Europe is to examine the electoral results of the political parties most closely associated with the two respective positions. From the Swedish and German electoral returns in Tables 1 and 2, we can see that the two Social Democratic parties have suffered stagnation if not decline in their electoral fortunes. If post-materialism was a robust explanation for the nature of the transformation of these two societies, we would expect to see either a maintenance or an increase in support of the Social Democratic parties that had embraced the centrist catch-all party thesis of Kirchheimer. Likewise, we would not have expected to see an increase in support for those political parties to the left of social democracy; rather, we might also have found a decrease in support for these leftist parties as the entire ideological spectrum

Table 1. Swedish election results and governments – 1994–2006

	<i>Left</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>SAP</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>CD</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>National</i>
1991	4.5	3.4	37.7	<u>8.5</u>	<u>9.1</u>	<u>7.1</u>	<u>21.9</u>	6.7
1994	6.2	5.0	<u>45.3</u>	7.7	7.2	4.1	22.4	1.2
1998	12.0	4.5	<u>36.4</u>	5.1	4.7	11.8	22.7	–
2002	8.4	4.6	<u>39.9</u>	6.2	13.3	6.2	15.1	–
2006	5.8	5.2	35.0	<u>7.9</u>	<u>7.5</u>	<u>6.6</u>	<u>26.1</u>	–

Left and/or Green Parties supported SAP minority governments in 1994, 1998 and 2002. Parties in government underlined.

Source: http://www.scb.se/templates/subHeading___32070.asp.

Table 2. German election results and governments – 1998–2005

	<i>PDS/Left</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>SPD</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>CDU/CSU</i>	<i>Others</i>
1994	4.4	7.3	36.4	<u>6.9</u>	<u>41.5</u>	3.6
1998	5.1	<u>6.7</u>	<u>40.9</u>	6.2	35.2	5.9
2002	4.0	<u>8.6</u>	<u>38.5</u>	7.4	38.5	3.0
2005	8.7	8.1	<u>34.2</u>	9.8	<u>35.2</u>	4.0
2008*	14	11	23	10	38	7

Source: <http://www.spiegel.de/flash/0,5532,11723,00.html>.

*2008 data are from the RTL Opinion Poll for Stern, 11 March.

Parties in government underlined.

shifted to the right. However, what we have found is an increase in support for these parties of the left as social democracy has moved towards the centre.¹¹ This suggests that there is an electorate that is still concerned with material issues – as well as post-material issues – that represents about half the population of both of these countries.

In Sweden, three of the five elections listed in Table 1 show the three Left parties getting more than 50 percent of the votes. In Germany, the three most recent elections all show the three Left parties also getting more than 50 percent of the votes. The question is, why have the Social Democrats, as the hegemonic party of the left in both of these countries, not realized that they could ‘catch-all’ of a potential majority on the left side of the political spectrum without tearing apart the core of their political organization?

This question is ultimately a bit unfair. Simply adding the electoral totals of political parties adjacent to one another on the ideological spectrum assumes that they can find profitable alliances with one another, as *Der Spiegel* (2008) reports.¹² The voluminous literature on coalition formation in developed democracies suggests (Budge, 2002; Golder, 2005, 2006; Mattila and Raunio, 2004; Richter, 2002; Strøm et al., 1994; Volden and Carrubba, 2004; Warwick, 2005) that durable coalitions must be purposely and carefully put together if they are to survive an electoral cycle in a multi-party democracy. In other words, ‘catching all’ of a European country’s Left parties in a governing coalition would entail dealing with the pressures of globalization, the EU and, in Germany, the tremendous costs of unification in a way that found support among all coalition parties and their members.¹³ What globalization and especially the EU have done to restrict the capacity of sovereign states to manage their fiscal and monetary policy is significant. Countries in the ‘eurozone’ (including Germany but not Sweden) cannot control their own money supply and not all 27 EU countries can run deficits higher than 3 percent of their GDP. Understandably, no single country would feel comfortable with a left-wing coalition government challenging the kind of power that international market forces and an EU bureaucracy could mobilize. Perhaps it might have been more possible when 12 of the then 15 EU countries were governed by left-leaning coalitions, as was the case

between 1998 and 2001. But all of the democratic left parties in power at the time made ideological and political decisions that faced towards the centre and not the left.

There are also domestic constraints on the Left in both Sweden and Germany that would make the formation of left-wing coalitions in either country difficult to achieve, notwithstanding the global and European pressures. The first objection that Social Democratic parties in Germany and Sweden would have in leading coalitions comprised of two other political parties to their left would be that they were no longer unilaterally calling the shots. Dealing with diminished power and autonomy is very difficult for any organization that has been used to having both for a considerable period of time. Likewise, the construction and maintenance of such a coalition is not trivial, as Richter (2002) laboriously detailed in her analysis of the 1998 Red–Green coalition in Germany. And when former communist parties are added to this mix, such a coalition might be even more difficult.

The antagonisms still run deep between the Left Party (the successor party to the former East German Communists) and the SPD, since there are officials from both parties who are still members. On what basis could they join a coalition together? The SPD never used an institutional inexperience argument against the newly merged Left Party as a criterion for rejecting it as a potential coalition partner (it rejected it out of hand). It was the Left Party that stated during the tortuous coalition negotiations in 2005 – lasting more than two months, eventually producing the CDU/CSU–SPD ‘Grand Coalition’ – that it did not have the institutional experience to enter into a coalition with anyone. However, the Left Party did say that it wanted to do what all new parties do, namely to go into the opposition and develop a party profile, strategy and tactics that would enable it to participate in a left-wing coalition in the future.

Conclusions

The Social Democratic parties of Sweden and Germany are clearly in decline. Further movement towards the centre and a continuing embrace of the traditional catch-all policies that Kirchheimer lamented will likely only serve to weaken them irreparably as parties and functional political organizations. For those who understand the century-and-a-half tradition of this democratic left political movement, it is not surprising that there are still serious material/class issues that affect the party’s core constituencies. The issues that created social democracy over a century ago – persistent unemployment, the struggle for publicly provided welfare benefits and social fragmentation – have all developed new 21st-century incarnations. Some might see this as a propitious opportunity to reinvigorate participatory democratic left traditions of universalism and solidarity, but looking towards the political centre in these European countries is unlikely to be helpful in realizing any of these goals.

It is for this reason that the opportunity to revisit the concerns of Otto Kirchheimer with respect to the evolution of political parties is so important. What he feared as he saw democratic left political parties drifting towards the centre was that the basic needs of functioning democracies, i.e. genuine representation of interests, political accountability and successful implementation of policy that arises from such a system, would be increasingly unlikely with such a focus:

[T]he catch-all party . . . suffers from an infirmity. Steering clear of sectarianism enhances its recruiting chances in electoral terms but inevitably limits the intensity of commitment it may expect. The party's transformation from an organization combining the defense of social position, the quality of spiritual shelter, and the vision of things to come into that of a vehicle for short-range and interstitial political choice exposes the party to the hazards of all purveyors of nondurable consumer goods: competition with a more attractively packaged brand of nearly identical merchandise. (Kirchheimer, 1966: 195)

What this article has suggested is that despite the move of social democracy towards the centre in these two countries, there is space to the left of social democracy occupied by more natural potential allies than exist to social democracy's right. The major question is can they cast their nets where their most likely potential supporters are? The cost of not doing so would likely diminish this democratic left option that Kirchheimer believed was necessary for a vibrant democracy and possibly prevent more unpleasant outcomes on the far-right side of the political spectrum.

There is a much more serious problem that democracies face when there are numerical possibilities of certain coalitions, but some parties rule out any such coalition a priori. Sweden may be closer to having a civilized discussion on this subject, since the Swedish Left Party has been a stable democratic left force, regularly contending in elections for 90 years. The issue is much more difficult in Germany. In fact, the reason why there is a Grand Coalition in now is because the once-preferred coalitions of SPD–Greens and CDU/CSU–FDP do not have sufficient seats to form a majority. As a solidly embedded minor party in Germany, the Left is well-established in both east and west and is a party that will have to be dealt with. But the longer that the two large parties are unable to fundamentally agree on major issues, the more criticism they will receive and the larger the three smaller parties will become, as has been the case since the 2005 election.

One of the article's concerns about modifying Kirchheimer's thesis is under what conditions a former 'pariah' party becomes potentially *salonfähig* (coalitionable). This issue is not a new one for the post-war FRG; when the Greens surpassed the 5 percent electoral threshold for the first time in 1983 none of the other three parties would have anything to do with it. Yet, over the course of 15 years the Greens became *salonfähig* as the *fundi* (fundamentalist) wing of the party lost strength to the more pragmatic *realo* (realist) wing, and in 1998 became the SPD's junior partner in government. If such a transition

was possible for the Greens, what about the Left Party? There is now an 18-year track record of the Left Party acting as a responsible political party, and the official merger in 2007 with dissident left-wing western Social Democrats has given it significant political clout. It reached the support by 14 percent of the population in a recent opinion poll (see Table 2) and has won seats in 10 of the 16 German *Länder* legislatures, including 5 in the West. The Left Party has evolved from its Stalinist roots to a party that functions much like other political parties and plays by the democratic rules of the game (Hough et al., 2007).

Is it possible for the SPD to consider the Left Party as a 'catch-all' possibility to its left? The article is not suggesting at all that the Left Party is *salonfähig* at the national level now. That may come in time, but only if the parliamentary institutional structure can 'domesticate' the party and – equally important – if the major parties come to see the Left Party not as an enemy of the state. Rather, if it becomes a party that respects electoral outcomes and represents a significant constituency that believes in the party's positions and bargains in good faith; then this is an outcome that Kirchheimer might find salutary.

Notes

- 1 In 2006 the SAP failed to be re-elected, as the Social Democrats lost votes, as did the Left, while the Greens had only a slight increase. The big winner in that election was the Moderate (Conservative) Party, which won numerous mid-spectrum voters by shifting its positions radically to the left. One interpretation of this outcome would suggest that the Moderates were a more effective catch-all party than were the Social Democrats. However, a different interpretation would suggest that the Swedish centre of 'political gravity' is still further to the left than it is in many countries. Together, the SAP, the Left and Greens still won over 46 percent of the vote in 2006. The SAP's failure to capture the 'radical left' Conservative voters may suggest that in another election some of those voters may vote for the SAP again. The larger point is that there appears to be a potential durable majority among the three parties of the democratic left that has not yet been constructed. Evidence in support of this proposition can be seen in a recent poll (February 2008) in Stockholm's *Dagens Nyheter*; the SAP, Greens and Left had 55.3 percent support.
- 2 Labour's three victories in a row is a considerable achievement, but this is in a majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral system that has only two major parties and no history of non-wartime coalition governments since 1929. In a basically two-party system such as in the UK, the parties are *ipso facto* catch-all parties and the electoral system is much more forgiving of such policies than in a five-party system as in Germany or a seven-party system in Sweden.
- 3 In their article, Mair and van Biezen (2001) show that party membership dropped dramatically in all western European democracies between 1980 and 2000: France –64.59 percent; Italy –51.54 percent; UK –50.39 percent; Sweden –28.05 percent; and Germany –8.95 percent.

- 4 Some might argue that the Swedish Green Party is not a left-wing party, since Green positions can sometimes be contrary to left-wing politics, such as job creation, and might be the cause of a rift between Greens and Social Democrats. That is true, as far as it goes, but somehow both the Swedish Greens and the SAP found the arrangement to tolerate the SAP government acceptable. While the Greens were opposed to weapons exports, and opposed to EU policies (largely due to the fear of its impact on the Swedish welfare state), it was in favour of shorter working hours, a demand common to virtually all left-wing parties for more than a century. But because the SAP did not have a majority, it needed to do what all parties in (formal or informal) coalitions must do, namely compromise. As Burchell (2001) and Elander (2000) argue, the Swedish Greens found their informal relationship with the SAP tolerable. And to the extent that the SAP did not call for new elections, apparently it found them tolerable as well.
- 5 Some scholars argue that the catch-all strategy is about capturing volatile marginal voters, and one cannot know how many voters SAP would have lost if they had moved to the left. But, in 1998, we do know how many they lost when they moved towards the centre, namely the spike in support for the Left and the drop in support for the SAP. As Kirchheimer himself argued, catch-all is much more than a tactical decision to capture marginal voters. Becoming a party with a less clear set of beliefs carries additional consequences (1966: 195).
- 6 From 1974 to 1998, SAP membership dropped from 214,179 to 162,578 and from 1980 to 1999, SPD membership dropped from 986,872 to 755,244 (Mair and van Biezen, 2001: 18–19).
- 7 There is some disagreement about when the SAP began to embrace the catch-all phenomenon. This article dates the phenomenon from the mid-1970s, but others would argue that the SAP was a catch-all party as early as the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, electoral data for the period show the near hegemonic position from relying on its own voters, not having to reach out to other parties. Kirchheimer himself argued that the catch-all phenomenon had not begun in Sweden during his lifetime: ‘Nor is the catch-all performance in vogue or even sought among the majority of the larger parties in small democracies. Securely entrenched, often enjoying majority status for decades – as the Norwegian and Swedish Social Democratic parties – and accustomed to a large amount of interparty cooperation, such parties have no incentive to change their form of recruitment or their appeal to well-defined social groups . . . it seems easier to stabilize political relations on the basis of strictly circumscribed competition . . . than to change over to the more aleatory form of catch-all competition’ (1966: 188).
- 8 The Comparative Political Parties Manifesto data coded the SAP as ‘drifting’ during this period: ‘Started left, moving a little further left in 60s, jumped to center–left in early 70s, drifted back left, only to move to center in 90s’ (McDonald et al., 2007).
- 9 The authors found a telling quotation from the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter* on 4 October 2006 that seems to reinforce the perception that the SAP was more comfortable with a more centrist position during the 2006 campaign: ‘After their party’s defeat, some experienced and senior Social Democrats had little doubt where the lion’s share of the blame lay.’ ‘For me’, wrote a former finance minister, ‘it is incomprehensible and a grave mistake that Social Democracy, of its own volition, without being forced to do so, abdicated from being the champion of work [arbetslinjen] and presented this trump card to its political opponents’ (p. 630).

- 10 If one compares the 1989 SPD *Grundsatzprogramm* just prior to unification (SPD, 1989) with the language in the *Neue Mitte*, Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV documents, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that one might think these were different political parties.
- 11 There may be similar examples of far-right parties similarly challenging centre-right parties in the past decade or two, such as in Austria, The Netherlands, France and Denmark, but almost all of these movements seem much more mercurial, and often short-lived, than the cases of the Left parties in Sweden and Germany. However, examining Kirchheimer's thesis in the context of right-of-centre parties requires a different research project.
- 12 In February 2008, the increasing strength of *Die Linke* saw SPD party leader Kurt Beck backtrack on his pledge not to allow minority Red–Green governments to rule in *Länder* if they depended upon toleration of *Die Linke* to survive. After Left Party gains in regional elections in Hesse and Hamburg early in the year, there was serious discussion about whether minority SPD–Green governments could be 'tolerated' by the Left. In March, Beck came under withering attack from moderate SPD leaders (including Schröder, who remains a party member), while some of Beck's supporters continue to support such a tactical opening to the Left. This issue is far from settled, and it is a long distance from Left 'toleration' at the *Land* level to coalition partners at the national level, but this is the path that the Greens began taking 25 years ago. This is only possible via the civilizing function that parliaments can have when parties, once seen as beyond the pale, act as responsible opposition parties and then find themselves *salonfähig*.
- 13 For an excellent example of a successful, but laborious, Italian coalition formation see Forestiere (2009). In the most recent elections, all parties were aligned with either the centre–right or centre–left blocs that were trying to catch all. The coalitions were totally determined in advance.

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