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**Europhile against all odds: social democrats converge on a pro-integration position in times of politicisation**

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# Europeophile against all odds: social democrats converge on a pro-integration position in times of politicisation

Mario Gavenda

*How do pro-European parties of the centre-left react to growing citizen dissatisfaction with the EU? In this research note, Mario Gavenda argues that the social-democratic party family in Western Europe remains persistently in favour of European integration. A content analysis of party congress debates of the German SPD and the French PS suggests that social democrats take a position of critical Euroenthusiasm, criticising the status quo but demanding ‘more Europe’ as solution.*

In recent years, the crisis-ridden European Union has lost considerably in citizens’ trust and became the object of fierce political debate in a number of member states. For pro-European forces on the centre-left, the constraints of a sceptical popular opinion are complemented by the way the Euro crisis and its management has belied many of the social promises of European integration. It is thus fair to expect that social-democratic parties tone down their pro-integration position in line with the scepticism of a considerable portion of their core electorate.

The empirical data in Table I, summarizing the EU party positions of 15 major Western European centre-left parties, clearly contradicts this expectation. Not only has the mean EU position of the centre-left remained strongly favourable to integration (hovering around a value of 6 out of 7), but the differences between the parties have diminished as well. The numbers highlighted in

bold show the standard deviation dropping from 0.64 in 1999 to below 0.44 in 2014.

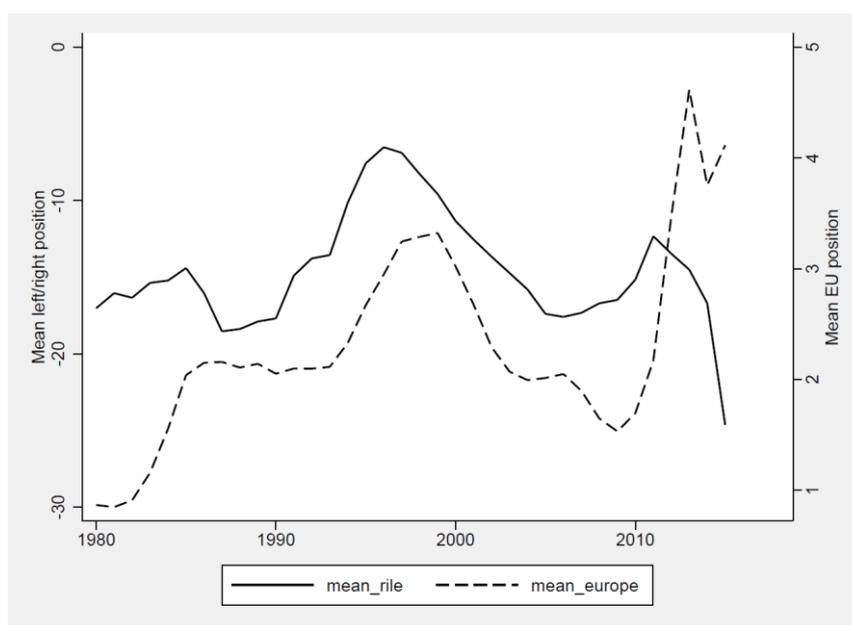
Further, consider Figure I which shows the left-right positions and attitudes towards Europe found in social-democratic election manifestoes from 1980 to 2015. We see that the left-right and EU positions of the parties develop almost synchronously from the 1980s to the late 2000s, reflecting the [growing acceptance of European market integration in the context of a general dilution of left-wing economic attitudes](#) since the 1970s. Since the onset of the global and European economic crises, we detect a curious break in this pattern. Now, the two lines develop in opposite directions. The parties move decisively to the left – perhaps in reaction to the perceived failure of economic liberalisation – to reach levels below -20 for the first time since the 1970s. The positions on European integration however reach unprecedentedly high levels in the positive.

**Table I.** Summary statistics of EU positions of West European social-democratic parties

Year	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
1999	15	6.3101	<b>.6425514</b>	5.142857	7
2002	15	6.053333	.5638473	5.13	6.86
2006	15	6.0004	.6270563	5	7
2010	15	5.980993	.5634423	4.8	7
2014	15	6.01066	<b>.4342814</b>	5.272727	6.7

Source: [1999-2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File](#).

**Figure 1.** Mean left/right and EU position of West European social-democratic parties, 1980-2015



Source: [Manifest Project Dataset \(version 2016a\)](#).



**Social democrats want more Europe to overcome perceived failures of the EU**



What drives this novel development? To answer this question, I conducted a detailed content analysis of party congress documents of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) and the French Socialist Party (PS). In contrast to most studies of EU party position, the data distinguishes between evaluations of the current state of EU affairs and demands as to the further course of integration.

Table 2 presents a cross tabulation of the various political demands and the evaluations that were made in motions submitted to the party congresses of the PS and the SPD between 2005 and 2015 by a wide array of party actors (such as party executives, ideological factions, or local party groups). It shows that social-democratic EU debates are dominated by calls for *more Europe*, which make up over 50% of all claims at party congresses in both countries, while over 20% of statements call for a *reform* of the current system. The motions voice outright opposition to the transfer of powers to the EU level or to individual European projects only in isolated cases.

**Table 2.** Co-occurrences of integration demands and EU evaluations in party congress motions

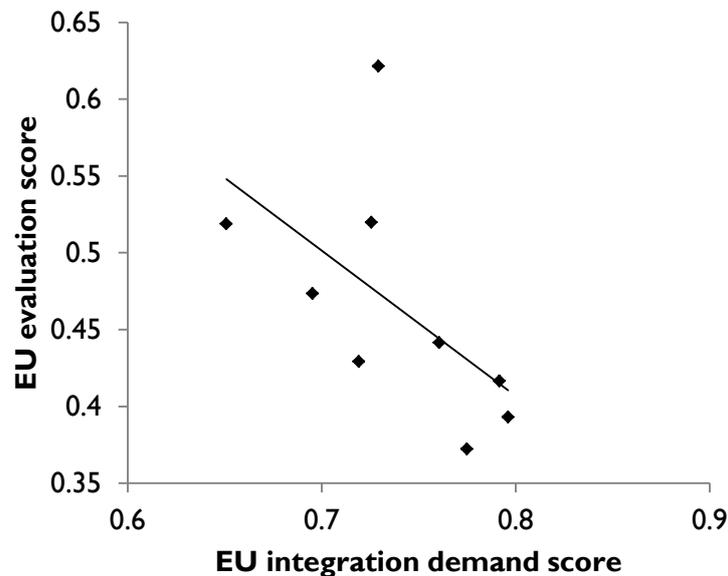
PS	of which...			SPD	of which...				
		<u>negative</u>	<u>neutral</u>		<u>positive</u>	<u>negative</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>positive</u>	
More EU	57,0	30,8	54,1	15,1	More EU	50,3	23,0	61,9	15,1
Reform EU	19,4	67,5	23,4	9,1	Reform EU	20,2	51,8	40,7	7,5
Less EU	1,3	92,3	7,7	0,0	Less EU	4,3	68,5	25,9	5,6

Note: The percentages in the table together with claims coded 'no demand' (not displayed) add up to 100%. PS: 2005-2015; SPD: 2005-2013. N = 2266. Source: Author's own data.

To make sense of the motivations behind the demands, consider further the percent shares of the different evaluations that are made in conjunction with the demands. In both parties, claims for more integration are often made alongside a negative evaluation of the current state of affairs (30% and 23% respectively, while the positive integrationist statements make up 15%). This suggests that social democrats do not necessarily want to give the EU more powers because they are satisfied with its current performance, but on the contrary because they perceive the limited

competences of the European level as a cause of the current problems. Moving from single statements to the level of party congresses, Figure 2 shows a clear correlation between critical EU evaluations and integrationist demands, with the 2007 SPD party congress as a sole outlier (it is important to note that this congress followed [Germany's presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2007](#), in which the SPD participated as junior government coalition partner). The higher the EU integration demand score, the lower the EU evaluation score.

**Figure 2.** EU evaluation and EU integration demand scores per party congress



*Note:* EU integration demand score scale: 1 = all coded claims call for more integration; 0 = all coded claims call for less integration. EU evaluation score: 1 = all coded claims put forward a positive evaluation; 0 = all coded claims put forward a negative evaluation. *Source:* Author's own data.



**A critical pro-integration message is good news for EU democracy**



This overall picture allows us to conclude that social democrats become more enthusiastic about EU-level solutions the more dissatisfied

they are with the status quo in the current era of crisis and politicisation. This suggests that the parties recognise – at least in their internal debates – that the current shape of the EU is often at odds with their core objectives, but have given up on the idea to pursue their goals within the framework of nation states alone and rather see more integration as the solution. This attitude can

be best described as *critical Euroenthusiasm*.

While this finding may disappoint observers who consider an [integrationist centre-left strategy a dead-end](#), it should please those who see [politicisation as an opportunity to democratise the EU](#). A more coherent left project that puts forward alternative EU policies could offer dissatisfied citizens

something to vote for, and thereby alleviate [opposition to the EU polity as a whole](#). For the time being, only little of this materialises in public discourse and the policy-making practices of the EU. It is up to social democrats to take serious their own programmes and membership preferences to deliver a more viable politicisation of the EU.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on parts of Mario Gavenda's doctoral dissertation.*



[Mario Gavenda](#) is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna. His current research deals with the politicisation of European integration and its impact on party positions and intra-party politics.