

## **European Social Democracy and the world of members. The end of the Community Party Concept?**

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"Paradise lost?". These were the words used by Gerrit Voerman in 1996 to consider the issue of membership in Social Democratic political parties. It is true that in world of make-believe, the *universe* of Social Democratic members is an integral part of the Social Democratic identity and one of the key features of the Social Democratic *pattern of organisation* as exposed nearly a century ago by Roberto Michels<sup>1</sup>. Two years before Voerman's observation, Gerassimos Moschonas spoke of "basic and near general decline" referring to Social Democratic membership<sup>2</sup>.

The object of this contribution is to examine this notion of "decline" in the present-day membership of socialist parties. To analyse this issue, we examine the countries of *Western Europe*. In this domain, the situation is broken down into sixteen national cases: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden. For Spain, Greece and Portugal, our commentary shall be brief due to their recent entry into representative democracy.

The contribution is divided into two phases. Firstly, we shall reappraise the status and role of members in political parties and more specifically in Social Democratic parties.

Then, we analyse evolutions in terms of membership for Western European Social Democratic parties over the six decades since the end of the Second World War. The developments are studied from three standard indicators.

- a) The evolution of the number of members in each of the parties reviewed from 1945 to the present day. To do this, we calculated the average number of members for each decade and underlined the changes in this average number in terms of party members. Three territorial sub-sets are examined: Northern Europe with its declension from Labour-style Social Democracy and the Scandinavian model,

- Central Europe broken down into German-style Social Democracy and that of the Benelux states, and Southern Europe.
- b) Then comes the relation of the number of members of researched parties and their electoral results (number of votes). Through this approach, we calculated the development of *membership ratios*. The main advantage of the membership ratio is that it evidences parallelism (or absence thereof) between the curve of actual member numbers and that of votes won by the party.
  - c) Finally, we also show the relationship between the number of members and that of registered voters. In so doing, we calculated the *electoral penetration rate*. The relevance of this indicator is that it refines the total number of members into demographic subsets. It offers a more refined presentation of the *actual evolution* of membership numbers for each party.

## 1. Social Democracy and Membership: the Law of Numbers

In collective thinking as well as in scientific analysis, the Social Democratic parties are impressive groups in terms of the size of their memberships. They cover a model analysed as early as 1913 by Roberto Michels in his famous book on political parties: a highly developed organisation producing a bureaucratic phenomenon leading to the "iron law of oligarchy"<sup>3</sup>.

This model overlaps with the mass party type pinned down by Maurice Duverger<sup>4</sup> or the party of social integration considered by Neumann in the same period<sup>5</sup>. Moschonas takes up and amends these concepts by speaking of "societal party, *sub* and *counter* societal at the same time" with its *class-based party declensions*<sup>6</sup>.

The number of members and their involvement gives Social Democratic parties powerful mobilisation capabilities, steady revenue and indisputable political, social and cultural influence based on the *law of numbers*<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, it is true that the ratios are sometimes outstanding. For example, Michel Charzat recalls that in the nineteen twenties, one out of every four Viennese was a member of the Social Democratic party. Nevertheless, this overall picture should be toned down in view of several factors<sup>8</sup>.

Sometimes the numbers are linked to the close ties between Social Democratic parties and trade union organisations. In this regard, the distinction between *direct and indirect parties* as criticised by Duverger does stand out<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, the impressive number of members of some Social Democratic parties is mainly due to indirect membership mechanisms. Several parties have resorted to this system. We should note, amongst others, the Belgian Workers Party (POB) until 1945, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) until 1990 or, in combination with direct membership, the British Labour Party.

Moreover, the concept of a model applies to Social Democracy in its *restrictive* internal-level party organisational model and to a policy hinging on neo-corporatism, in terms of public policy. In other words, a few key parties from Northern and Central Europe: Scandinavian, German, Austrian and Benelux parties. British and Irish Labour are a bit different and Southern European socialist parties have never been reviewed from such an organisational point of view.

## 2. Western European Social Democracy and its Members

### A. Scandinavian Social Democracy

As we said, if there is a typical Social Democratic organisational model, it must be the Scandinavian Social Democracy. In Sweden, Norway and Denmark and, to a much lesser extent, in Finland, Social Democratic membership is felt as being part of joining in a *community*.

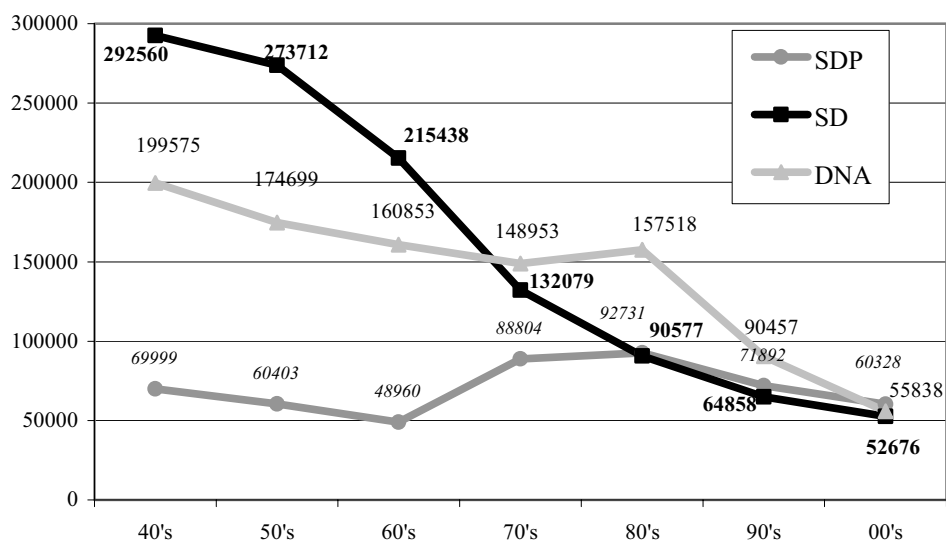
How did this develop? In the *Scandinavian model*, three cases are most self-explanatory, those of the Norwegian Labour party (DNA), the Danish Social Democratic party (SD) and the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP). At the end of the war, the three parties had a considerable number of members. They involved several hundred thousands of people. For the SAP, however, this total must be put back in context since, until 1990, it was only an indirect type of party. Therefore its curve must be considered separately.

The Danish and Norwegian parties retained an extremely powerful and unchanged social integration structure until the end of the 1960's (SD) and 1970's (DNA).

Subsequently, the two parties experienced an abrupt decline in membership. That entailed about the same membership in the 90s, that is respectively 20 per cent and 28 per cent of total membership in the 40s.

As a mirror image, the average evolution of Finnish Social Democratic Party membership figures does not show the same linear decline. Following a setback in the 50s and 60s, the SDP enjoyed an increase in the two subsequent decades before it sustained a further decline. But this setback was not as deep as that experienced by its Norwegian and Danish counterparts. As evidence of this, the three parties currently have a fairly similar average membership while they started off from wide apart bases.

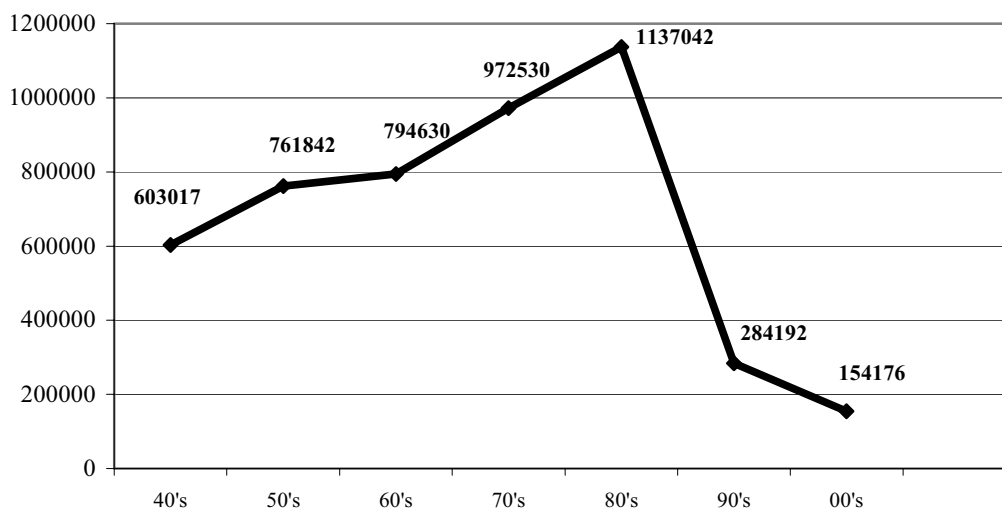
Figure 1  
Party Membership of Scandinavian Social Democratic Parties (1945-2002)



Due to the change from indirect membership to individual joining, it is difficult to make a pertinent comparative statement for Swedish Social Democrats. We do note, however, that this alternative membership system has led to loss of several hundred thousand members within just a few years.

Moreover, current observations tend to corroborate the difficulties of Scandinavian Social Democracy as a group (relative though, as it is still 150,000 members strong) as for the SAP.

*Figure 2*  
*SAP's Party Membership (1945-2004)*

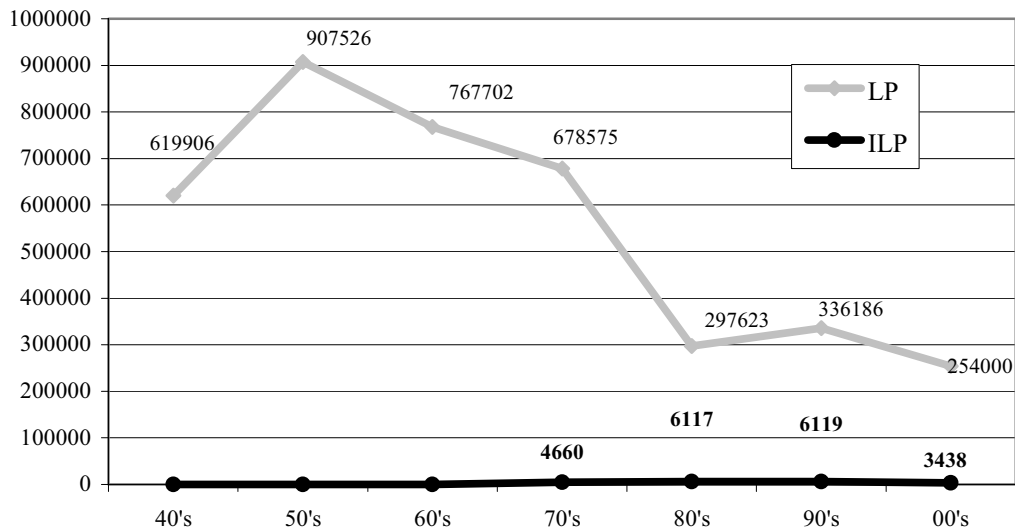


The set up for British Labour is very similar to the prevailing configuration of the Danish and Norwegian parties. At the end of the war, the Labour Party succeeded in signing up nearly one million members through direct membership. Secured in the fifties, this total soon eroded away in the following decades. Over twenty years, British Labour lost 220,000 members in total figures. In the nineteen eighties, the drop was spectacular: the party recorded the resignation of 400,000 members over a ten-year period. To be sure, the Labour Party suffered from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) breakaway in the early 80's, but all in all this only had a slight impact on the magnitude of disinvestments from British Labour.

When he took over the reins of the party in 1994, Tony Blair tried to boost direct membership in order to minimise the influence of indirect members subservient to the trade unions. Ten years later, the attempt turned out to be a failure even though the sociological aspects of the world of Labour members have changed, oddly enough<sup>10</sup>.

In the Irish party system, the Labour Party is a medium sized party between the two main ones, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. Its numbers are low and the changes are smoother. We have however noted confirmation of the current difficulty Social Democratic parties are having in recruiting members. Over ten years, the Irish Labour party has lost 45 per cent of its members.

Figure 3  
Labour Parties' Party Membership (1945-2004)



## 2.2. Central European Social Democracy

Historically speaking, the German (SPD) and Austrian (SPÖ) Social Democratic parties are the two *superpowers* of the Social Democratic model. Numbers confirm this: the SPD has hit the million member mark and the SPÖ has over seven hundred thousand. While not parallel, the two membership curves offer similar trends.

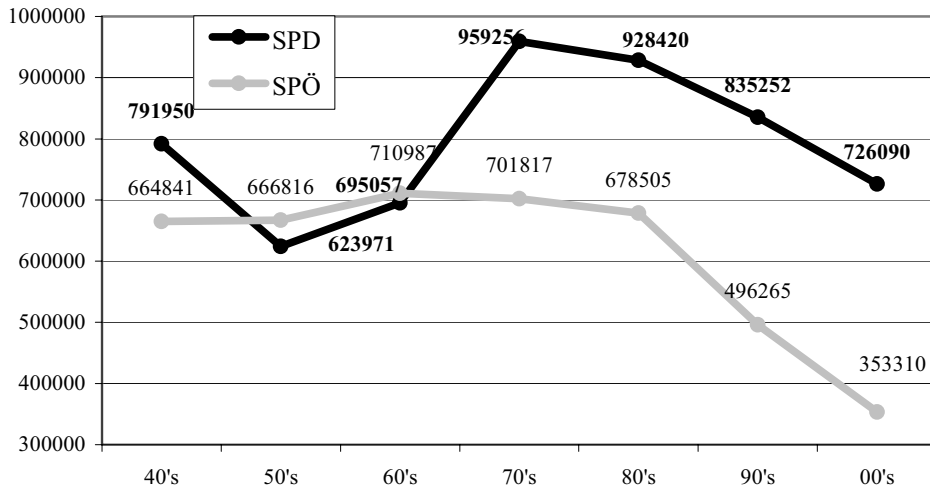
In Germany, after the years of the Christian Democratic age sustained by the legacy of Konrad Adenauer, the SPD gradually recovered prominence and regained its voter appeal at the end of the sixties and during the seventies. In ten years time, the social democrats saw their numbers increase by one third. However, since then, a decline has occurred. This has driven the SPD to membership numbers that nowadays do not exceed the seven thousand mark, even though the recruitment base has been broadened with the German reunification. (see *infra*).

Over four decades, the total number of members of the Austrian Social Democratic Party has fluctuated between 660,000 and 710,000. But for the past twenty years, there has been a radical change. SPÖ voter appeal has dropped considerably and the party has been affected by an unprecedented spiral of political indifference. In twenty years, the Austrian Social Democrats have thus had half their members resign, which contributed to lessening their place and role in Austrian society, as well as altering their organisational model.

What about the Social Democratic parties in the Benelux states?

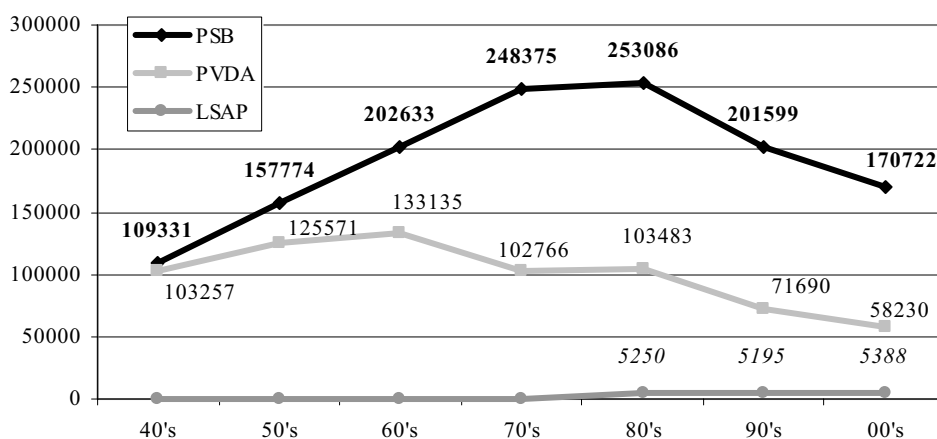
Despite demographic differences, Belgian Socialists and Dutch Labour party members started out on an equal footing in the period following World War II. The two parties had around one hundred thousand members just after the Liberation. But the two curves soon diverged.

Figure 4  
Party Membership of Germanic Social Democratic Parties (1945-2004)



The *parti socialiste belge* (PSB-BSP) (Belgian Socialist), then the *parti socialiste* (PS) (French-speaking Socialist Party) and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP, SP.a) (Flemish Socialist Party) succeeded in becoming mass parties by switching over to direct membership party status. In Belgium, the Socialists progressed in gross terms up to the mid-nineteen eighties. Since then, they too have been hit by dwindling numbers to such an extent that their current membership is some 70 per cent of what they reported in the nineteen eighties.

Figure 5  
Party Membership of Social Democratic Parties of the Benelux (1945-2004)



The expansion capabilities of the Dutch PvdA (Labour party) have been rather more limited. Its maximum was around 130,000 members in the sixties, and then it was affected by a sharp drop in numbers. The PvdA can only rely on a base of between 55,000 and 60,000 members.

As for the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, our data is incomplete for the post-war period. We noted no significant development over past thirty year period. The Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (POSL-LSAP) has retained a base of around 5,000 members.

### **B. *Socialism in Southern Europe***

In Southern Europe, the overview of membership developments does not follow the same pattern. Generally speaking, data is much harder to come by. Moreover, Greece, Spain and Portugal have to be analysed differently due to their late transition to democracy.

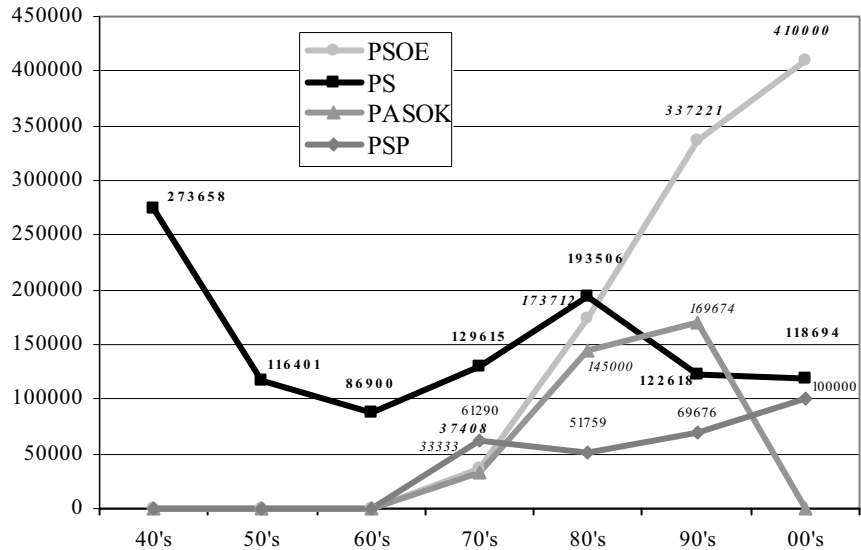
Now a well known fact, the French Socialist party has never been a mass party in the sense that it would have played a role in social integration of major segments of one or more social classes. Daniel-Louis Seiler pinpoints it as a party of activists, very sensitive to ideological swings and power struggles<sup>11</sup>. The shifts are actually rather abrupt. After reaching nearly 300,000 members at the Liberation, the SFIO [*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* – French section of the Worker's International] experienced a spectacular decline in numbers of party activists within two decades. The party suffered the loss of two thirds of its active members! The end of Molletism and the reorganisation of the party at the start of the seventies brought about a reverse trend that was largely confirmed in the decade that followed, as an after-effect of the victory of François Mitterand in the May 1981 Presidential elections. On the other hand, the second seven-year term led to activist disappointment that turned into a mass exodus from the party that could only put a damper on the victory in the 1997 legislative elections. The Socialist Party suffered a new massive loss in membership that brought it down to one hundred thousand members at the start of this millennium.

For PASOK, PSP and PSOE, we "necessarily" register progress during these past thirty years. Operating in a new democratic framework, the socialist parties could only grow to begin with. In Portugal and Greece, as far as can be ascertained from fragmentary data, stability seems to have been achieved over the last decade. In Spain, the PSOE kept growing until recently. Its current membership verges on the four hundred thousand mark.

Finally, the case of Italy is highly specific. The parties that embody democratic socialism changed over time. Consequently, comparison is complicated. Until 1992, two parties laid claim to Social Democracy and were members of international organisations for Social Democratic cooperation: the Italian Socialist party (PSI) and the break-away party, formed shortly after the Liberation, the Italian Social-Democratic party (PSDI). These two parties have impressive membership numbers: between five and seven hundred thousand for the PSI; between one hundred fifty and two hundred fifty thousand for the PSDI. These parties bore the full brunt of the operation "Mani Pulite" and the evidenced

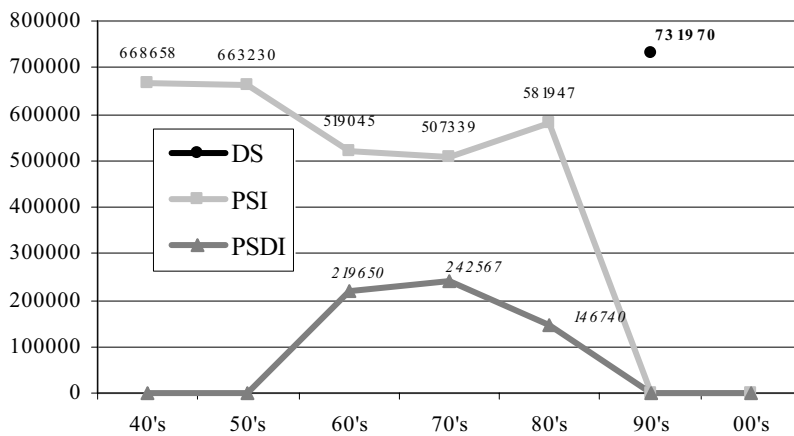
involvement of the Italian government parties. The PSI and PSDI were wiped off the Italian political scene in 1993.

Figure 6  
Party Membership of Social Democratic Parties of Southern Europe (1945-2004)



In the meantime, the Italian Communist party had given birth to two new parties: the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS) and the Communist Refoundation Party. (PRC). The PDS was the *major* fraction from the PCI. It soon received the blessing of organisations for Social Democratic cooperation and de facto became the Socialist party in the Italian political system.

Figure 7  
Party Membership of Italian Social Democratic Parties (1945-2004)





The Italian Communist party was a nearly perfect example of a party for social integration. It counted up to two million members. At the end of the eighties, before its transformation, this figure was still one million one hundred thousand! Like most European political parties, the PDS, then the Social Democrat (DS) experienced a decline in activist involvement. Its current number of members is seven hundred thirty thousand.

Besides the gross figures, we tried to put this data into perspective. We used two indicators to do this.

The first is the membership ratio. It relates the number of members of a party and the total voter base. It therefore offers comparison between the evolution in members and in voters. Are the two curves proceeding apace or are they diverging over the past sixty years? And if so, which way?

The second is the electoral penetration rate. It relates the number of members of any given political party and the total of registered voters. The latter are basically the recruitment potential for parties in a given society. This indicator further refines the information on the gross number of members.

### **3. Changes in membership ratios for Western European Social Democratic parties**

#### ***A. Membership ratios for Northern European Social Democratic Parties***

In the case of Scandinavian Social Democracy, the membership percentage reveals contrasting situations. In the past, the Finnish Social Democrats maintained a relatively stable percentage but it has been falling in recent years. Over sixty years, the SDP dropped from one member for every seven voters to one member for every twelve voters. In other words, in recent years, the electoral curve is steeper than the membership curve.

The situation is different with the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian Social Democrats. In six decades, these three parties experienced a significant collapse of their membership levels. As we noted, the Swedish case is specific, given the changes that occurred in 1990. All the same, the situation today is completely different from that immediately after the Liberation and in the first decades that followed. At the end of the war, these parties recorded one member for every three or four voters. In the last fifteen years, this ratio has changed substantially. Nowadays, the SD, DNA and the SAP only have one member for every fifteen to twenty voters! So they have lost their unique quality in European Social Democracy and at Scandinavian level, they are on a par with the Finnish SDP.

The membership ratio in British and Irish Labour is basically different. Over a forty year period, the member/voter ratio for the Labour Party was within a range of one fifteenth to one twentieth. Since the early eighties, the membership ratio has declined. All things being equal, electoral results turn out to be better than those for membership. This observation corroborates what has been observed in the case of Scandinavian Social Democratic parties.

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*Table 1*  
*Membership ratio of Social Democratic Parties*  
*(Labour and Scandinavian cases) (1945-2004)*

	<b>SDP</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>DNA</b>	<b>SAP</b>	<b>LP</b>	<b>ILP</b>
<b>1945</b>	14.97		31.35		4.07	
<b>1946</b>						
<b>1947</b>		36.64				
<b>1948</b>	15.35			35.52		
<b>1949</b>			25.40			
<b>1950</b>		34.91			6.85	
<b>1951</b>	14.69				6.28	
<b>1952</b>				42.82		
<b>1953</b>		31.68	21.43			
<b>1954</b>	11.89					
<b>1955</b>					6.80	
<b>1956</b>				44.98		
<b>1957</b>		29.13	19.07			
<b>1958</b>	11.36			43.94		
<b>1959</b>					6.94	
<b>1960</b>		25.34		35.92		
<b>1961</b>			19.15			
<b>1962</b>	9.99					
<b>1963</b>						
<b>1964</b>		20.77		40.06	6.80	
<b>1965</b>			17.01			
<b>1966</b>	8.01	17.67			5.92	
<b>1967</b>						
<b>1968</b>		18.13		33.81		
<b>1969</b>			15.69			
<b>1970</b>	10.22			37.04	5.65	
<b>1971</b>		15.41				
<b>1972</b>	11.56					
<b>1973</b>		16.66	19.19	39.06		<sup>a</sup> 2.69
<b>1974</b>					6.04	
<b>1975</b>	14.55	13.40				
<b>1976</b>				44.25		
<b>1977</b>		9.66	15.73			2.41
<b>1978</b>						
<b>1979</b>	14.42	9.01		48.46	5.78	
<b>1980</b>						
<b>1981</b>		9.70	16.76			3.16

1982				46.75		3.44
1983	11.99				3.49	
1984		9.16				
1985			16.40	46.66		
1986						
1987	12.64	8.52			2.88	5.89
1988		8.00		46.42		
1989			14.01			4.28
1990		6.35				
1991	13.17			12.62		
1992					2.42	3.00
1993			11.39			
1994		5.72		10.34		
1995	8.93					
1996						
1997			7.12		3.00	3.03
1998		4.69		9.26		
1999	10.15					
2000						
2001		5.49	8.63		2.37	
2002				7.20		2.67
2003	8.39					

a : Party Membership of 1974

#### **B. Membership ratios for Central European Social Democratic Parties**

Upon examining Central European Social Democratic parties, one first notes the specificity of the Austrian Social Democratic party, which quickly reached a membership ratio of 35 per cent<sup>12</sup>. Unlike Scandinavian parties, it did not suffer any collapse but nonetheless one does see an erosion over the past fifteen years, despite a shrinking reference voting base. The situation for active members is even worse. And yet, the SPÖ still has one member for every five Social Democratic voters, which is the best ratio among the Social Democratic parties.

The divergence of the curves for the Benelux countries underlined in terms of vote results is confirmed by membership rates<sup>13</sup>. PvdA and PSB-BSP started with a fairly similar membership ratio (between 8 and 10 per cent). Dutch Labour was to maintain this ratio for twenty-five years and finally ended up experiencing a progressive drop. At present, the Dutch Labour party has around one member for every thirty voters.

In Belgium on the other hand, the membership ratio rose steadily to reach 18 per cent at the start of the eighties. The curves for voters and for members do not keep pace but this time the situation is better for members. Over the past fifteen years,

there has been a change but a small one. The 2003 results are largely due to the major election victory of French-speaking and Flemish socialists during this election <sup>14</sup>.

The changes in the membership ratio for the German SPD are small and slow. For twenty years, especially since reunification, the ratio members/voters has been declining. This is due to a drop in membership but also to improved election results.

*Table 2*  
*Membership ratio of Social Democratic Parties of the Centre of Western Europe*  
*(1945-2004)*

	SPD	SPÖ	PVDA	PSB	POSL
1945		24.94			
1946			8.65	12.76	
1947					
1948			9.46		
1949	10.62	37.84		8.27	
1950				7.45	
1951					
1952			7.20		
1953	7.65	36.13			
1954				7.94	
1955					
1956		36.73	7.59		
1957	6.59				
1958				9.85	
1959		36.36	8.08		
1960					
1961	5.64			<sup>a</sup> 10.29	
1962		35.64			
1963			7.90		
1964					
1965	5.54			13.13	
1966		36.26			
1967			8.08		
1968				14.29	
1969	5.54				
1970		32.17			
1971		30.84	6.20	16.34	
1972	5.56		4.66		
1973					
1974				18.15	
1975		29.80			
1976	6.35				
1977			3.59	16.79	

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1978				18.44	
1979		29.89			
1980	6.07				
1981			4.46	18.44	
1982			4.20		
1983	6.23	30.04			
1984					9.78
1985				14.20	
1986		32.02	3.36		
1987	6.49			13.04	
1988					
1989					11.61
1990	5.91	30.08	3.40		
1991				13.81	
1992					
1993					
1994	4.96	31.70	3.23		12.48
1995		26.44		13.37	
1996					
1997					
1998	3.84		2.45		
1999		25.08		14.42	12.68
2000					
2001					
2002	<sup>b</sup> 3.88	19.80	3.98		
2003			2.17	<sup>c</sup> 9.05	

a : Party Membership of 1960 ; b : Party Membership of 2001 ; c : Party Membership of 2000 for the PS and 2001 for the SP.a

### ***C. Membership ratios for Southern European Socialist Parties***

What about socialist parties in Southern Europe?

Over a period of fifty years, the PSI and PSDI have had a high membership ratio for a party that was derived from the Social Democratic model (between 10 and 20 per cent). As for the Party of the Democratic Left, they retain a substantial membership ratio of 10 per cent due to the former social structural organisation of the Italian Communist party.

The French, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese Socialists on the other hand record a rather low membership ratio (between two and five members for one hundred voters). This is especially significant for the French Socialist Party, the party with the lowest membership ratio among all the parties we have studied. The specificity of Latin country socialism has been confirmed. Nonetheless, we should stress that due to the

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decline in the membership levels of Social Democratic parties, this indicator shows a trend to convergence in the European Social Democratic family.

*Table 3*  
*Membership ratio of Social Democratic Parties of Southern Europe (1945-2004)*

	DS	PSI	PSDI	PSOE	PS	PASOK	PSP
1945					7.36		
1946		18.05			8.47		
1947							
1948		13.28					
1949							
1950							
1951					4.62		
1952							
1953		22.67					
1954							
1955							
1956					3.61		
1957							
1958		11.57			3.63		
1959							
1960							
1961							
1962					3.99		
1963		11.55	8.03				
1964							
1965							
1966							
1967					1.94		
1968		<sup>d</sup> 13.76			2.21		
1969							
1970							
1971							
1972		17.92	<sup>e</sup> 16.58				
1973					2.37		
1974							
1975							3.59
1976		14.08	24.92	0.17			4.85
1977						2.08	
1978					2.81		
1979		13.48	15.46	1.85			<sup>j</sup> 3.95
1980							4.00

1981					2.15	3.67	
1982				1.18			
1983		13.21	14.26				1.67
1984							
1985						<sup>g</sup> 8.57	<sup>k</sup> 3.90
1986				2.09	2.06		
1987		11.17	11.70				<sup>l</sup> 3.72
1988					2.30		
1989				2.99		<sup>h</sup> 6.27	
1990							
1991							4.18
1992	12.19						
1993				3.83	2.56	4.92	
1994	<sup>a</sup> 8.84						
1995							NA
1996	<sup>b</sup> 8.55			3.87		5.53	
1997					1.85		
1998							
1999							<sup>m</sup> 4.24
2000				5.24		<sup>i</sup> 6.65	
2001	<sup>c</sup> 10.11						
2002					<sup>f</sup> 1.95		NA

a : Party Membership of 1993 ; b : Party Membership of 1995 ; c : Party Membership of 1998 ; e : Party Membership of 1967 ; e : Party Membership of 1971 ; f : Party Membership of 2000 ; g : Party Membership of 1984 ; h : Party Membership of 1990 ; i : Party Membership of 1998 ; j : Party Membership of 1980 ; k : Party Membership of 1986 ; l : Party Membership of 1986 ; m : Party Membership of 2000.

#### 4. The changes in electoral penetration rates for Western European Social Democratic Parties

The electoral penetration rate is the ratio between the number of members in a party and the total number of registered voters. The latter form the virtual recruitment base for political parties.

The number of registered voters is a variable that is independent of party results (membership or voters). Therefore, it offers a better appraisal of the "membership" variable in its external environment. This variable offers a corrective assessment of the gross figures of a party's membership levels.

##### A. Electoral penetration rate for Northern European Social Democratic parties

The analysis of changes in electoral penetration ratios for Scandinavian Social Democratic parties is very enlightening. From this angle, the mutations these parties have undergone are obvious.

At the end of the war, the Norwegian, Danish or Swedish Social-Democratic parties recruited between 10 and 15 per cent of all registered voters! Their social binding action appears clearly from this ratio. In comparative terms, the results of the Finnish SDP or the British Labour party are manifestly lower: 1.5 to 3 per cent.

Over the past sixty years, no matter what parties have been examined, the electoral penetration rate has either eroded or collapsed. The three major Scandinavian Social Democratic parties have declined over the entire period. And in the first twenty years, Norwegian and Danish Social Democrats saw their electoral penetration diminish by half. The trend then continued and led these two parties to a ratio ten times lower than it was at the Liberation: 1.38 and 1.57 per cent.

In the case of the Swedish Social Democratic party, it was the shift from indirect membership to direct recruitment that changed the order of things. The shift is radical since in twenty years, the SAP electoral penetration rate went down from around 20 to 2 per cent.

Starting from a much lower electoral penetration rate, the Finnish SDP also recorded a downward trend. However it does not present the linear feature of the preceding cases: the erosion is recent and its impact is limited. In-keeping with the negative trend observed for the membership ratio, this currently means the SDP is in line with the Social Democratic parties of the three other Scandinavian countries, even though it has never taken on the dominant character in the party system that the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian Social Democrats had.

*Table 4*  
*Electoral penetration rate of Social Democratic Parties*  
*(Labour and Scandinavian cases) (1945-2004)*

	SDP	SD	DNA	SAP	LP	ILP
1945	2.79		9.74		1.47	
1946						
1947		12.55				
1948	3.14			13.50		
1949			9.45			
1950		11.28			2.64	
1951	2.91				2.51	
1952				15.52		
1953		11.03	7.89			
1954	2.48					
1955					2.42	
1956				15.87		
1957		9.57	7.18			
1958	1.96			15.64		
1959					2.39	
1960		9.13		14.69		
1961			7.04			
1962	1.65					
1963						



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	SDP	SD	DNA	SAP	LP	ILP
1964		7.42		15.78	2.31	
1965			6.24			
1966	1.85	5.97			2.16	
1967						
1968		5.51		14.50		
1969			6.11			
1970	1.96			14.80	1.75	
1971		4.97				
1972	2.42					
1973		3.77	5.42	15.43		0.28
1974					1.73	
1975	2.66	3.52				
1976				17.30		
1977		3.13	5.50			0.21
1978						
1979	2.58	2.93		18.90	1.62	
1980						
1981		2.64	5.11			0.24
1982				19.32		0.23
1983	2.42				0.70	
1984		2.54				
1985			5.62	18.57		
1986						
1987	2.19	2.15			0.67	0.28
1988		2.03		17.03		
1989			3.98			0.27
1990		1.96				
1991	1.96			4.06		
1992					0.65	0.39
1993			3.17			
1994		1.65		4.00		
1995	1.72					
1996						
1997			1.95		0.93	0.21
1998		1.44		2.69		
1999	1.50					
2000						
2001		1.38	1.57		0.57	
2002				2.26		0.18
2003	1.36					

a : Party Membership of 1974

The British and Irish Labour parties never achieved the impressive ratios of certain Scandinavian Social Democratic parties. In 1950, Labour attained a maximum rate of 2.64 per cent. The downward trend is indeed present. In fifty years, the British Labour party was brought down to a ratio equal to that for 1951: 0.57 per cent! So, today, there is one Labour member for every two hundred registered voters. The situation in Ireland is more stable, but the party does not have the same status as its British *alter ego*. In 2002, we counted one Irish Labour member for every five hundred registered voters.

**B. *The penetration rate for Social Democratic parties in Central Europe***

The trends we were able to identify for Central European Social Democratic parties now converge with those for the Scandinavian parties. Over the past two decades, the electoral penetration rate has been falling, sometimes sharply. But the curves do not reveal the same feature of structural decline as those of Danish or Norwegian Social Democrats for example.

In Austria, the SPÖ has retained the same electoral penetration rate for forty years, in a 13 per cent to 15 per cent range. Yet, in the second half of the eighties and in the nineties, losses were very heavy. In 2002, the Austrian Social Democratic party "only" mustered the equivalent of one voter out of twenty compared to one out of five-six a bit less than twenty years before.

All things being equal, the same observation applies to the German SPD. During four decades, the SPD retained the same ratio. Qualitatively, the situation was obviously not the same from the moment the ratio stood around 2 to 3 per cent. The nineties recorded a significant drop. In 2002, the ratio of SPD members/German voters was reduced to half of what it was fifteen years previously. This transformation is due to the overall trend that we pointed out, but also to the broader electorate subsequent to the German reunification. And, all things being equal, the number of party members is clearly lower in the *Länder* of the former DDR than in the former Federal Republic of Germany.

The analysis made on the membership ratio for Belgian socialists is confirmed by the electoral penetration rate. Up to the start of the eighties, the ratio for the Belgian socialists stood at 4 per cent. Since then, each election shows a decline. In the May 2003 elections, the electoral penetration was half of what it was in 1981: 2.2 per cent.

For the data available to us, Luxembourg shows the most obvious stability. No noteworthy change can be singled out over the past two decades.

Finally, the Dutch Labour Party electoral penetration rate curve resembles that of the Scandinavian Social Democrats: relative stability during twenty years followed by an ongoing dwindling ever since. On the other hand, the real significance of the ratios is not identical. The electoral penetration rate peaked at only 2.32 per cent in the Netherlands and settled at less than 0.50 per cent at the start of two thousand.

*Table 5. Electoral penetration rate of Social Democratic Parties of the Centre of Western Europe (1945-2004)*

	SPD	SPÖ	PVDA	PSB	POSL
1945		10.37			
1946			2.21	3.50	
1947					
1948			2.20		
1949	2.36	13.99		2.20	
1950				2.26	
1951					
1952			1.92		
1953	1.83	14.32			
1954				2.61	
1955					
1956		14.91	2.32		
1957	1.77				
1958				3.14	
1959		15.13	2.29		
1960					
1961	1.72			3.30	
1962		14.54			
1963			2.05		
1964					
1965	1.84			3.16	
1966		14.31			
1967			1.76		
1968				3.36	
1969	2.01				
1970		14.26			
1971		14.11	1.20	3.75	
1972	2.30		1.09		
1973					
1974				4.02	
1975		13.81			
1976	2.43				
1977			1.06	4.01	
1978				4.06	
1979		13.91			
1980	2.28				
1981			1.09	4.13	

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	SPD	SPÖ	PVDA	PSB	POSL
1982			1.03		
1983	2.10	13.07			
1984					2.41
1985				3.48	
1986		12.27	0.96		
1987	2.01			3.47	
1988					
1989					2.35
1990	1.52	10.76	0.86		
1991				3.11	
1992					
1993					
1994	1.41	8.88	0.61		2.42
1995		8.45		2.75	
1996					
1997					
1998	1.28		0.52		
1999		6.58		2.40	2.43
2000					
2001					
2002	1.17	5.79	0.48		
2003			NA	2.19	

a : Party Membership of 1960 ; b : Party Membership of 2001 ; c : Party Membership of 2000 for the PS and 2001 for the SP.a

The study of electoral penetration rates for Southern European socialist parties shows the blatant difference with the Northern *model*. Even the PSI and PSDI who had a considerable membership ratio are, at this level, not in a position to rival Social Democratic parties in the organisational sense of the term. And in Italy, the Party of the Democratic Left, heir of the major, formerly prevailing Italian Communist party reveal a membership/national electorate ratio relatively low as compared with other social integration parties (around 1.5 per cent)<sup>15</sup>.

The weakness of French socialism, in terms of membership, has been evidenced once again. Currently, the French Socialist Party and the Irish Labour Party share the privilege of having the lowest electoral penetration rate of all Social Democratic parties in the European Union: 0.30 per cent.

The Socialist parties of the *new* democracies of Southern Europe have relatively identical electoral penetration rates – between 1 and 2.50 per cent. Moreover, it is difficult to trace any evolution, given the late start. At this point, we should underline the lack of any significant linear development.

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*Table 6. Electoral penetration rate of Social Democratic Parties of Southern Europe (1945-2004)*

	DS	PSI	PSDI	PSOE	PS	PASOK	PSP
1945					1.36		
1946		3.07			1.44		
1947							
1948		1.82					
1949							
1950							
1951					0.52		
1952							
1953		2.58					
1954							
1955							
1956					0.44		
1957							
1958		1.50			0.42		
1959							
1960							
1961							
1962					0.33		
1963		1.44	0.44				
1964							
1965							
1966							
1967					0.29		
1968		<sup>c</sup> 1.78			0.29		
1969							
1970							
1971							
1972		1.55	<sup>d</sup> 0.77				
1973					0.36		
1974							
1975							1.26
1976		1.23	0.76	0.039			1.41
1977						0.42	
1978					0.52		
1979		1.15	0.51	0.37			<sup>i</sup> 0.95
1980							0.93
1981					0.55	1.42	
1982				0.44			

	DS	PSI	PSDI	PSOE	PS	PASOK	PSP
1983		1.27	0.49				0.48
1984							
1985						<sup>f</sup> 3.26	<sup>j</sup> 0.61
1986				0.63	0.48		
1987		1.35	0.29				<sup>k</sup> 0.60
1988					0.55		
1989				0.85		<sup>g</sup> 1.91	
1990							
1991							0.83
1992	1.62						
1993				1.13	0.29	1.77	
1994	<sup>a</sup> 1.44						
1995							NA
1996	<sup>b</sup> 1.38			1.12		1.70	
1997					0.31		
1998							
1999							<sup>l</sup> 1.15
2000				1.24		<sup>h</sup> 2.13	
2001	ND						
2002					<sup>c</sup> 0.29		NA

a : Party Membership of 1993 ; b : Party Membership of 1995 ; c : Party Membership of 1967 ; d : Party Membership of 1971 ; e : Party Membership of 2000 ; f : Party Membership of 1984 ; g : Party Membership of 1990 ; h : Party Membership of 1998 ; i : Party Membership of 1980 ; j : Party Membership of 1986 ; k : Party Membership of 1986 ; l : Party Membership of 2000.

## 5. Conclusion

Our research has confirmed and refined the observations made on the fall in member numbers in Social Democratic parties. Viewed in terms of gross figures, membership, or electoral penetration rates, the "party membership" variable suffered a significant drop. That applies for parties experiencing decline, stability or electoral progress. We can therefore identify a specific problem relating to Social Democratic party membership.

The fall in membership numbers is not just an issue for the socialist family. The studies relating to political commitment and militancy reveal a general trend for all political families<sup>16</sup>. But this change affects Social Democracy in a specific manner.

Often analysed in terms of its organisational force, Social Democracy no longer has, or has to a lesser extent, the traits of an imposing organisation, simultaneously feared and envied by its political and social rivals.

The European Socialist parties no longer seem able to mobilise tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of members or supporters in order to achieve their

objectives. This being the case, it alters some of their traditional functions and consequently their identity. Their social structuring role, the mediation between State and wage earners and employees (workers in particular) are roles that few Social Democratic parties still appear able to fulfil.

All the Social Democratic parties have not lost their mass character, but that is due in part to the increased life expectancy of its members. The studies relating to socio-political profiles of members show this clearly and the recruitment of new members is increasingly more difficult.

Comparatively speaking, measured by the yardstick of members, the gap between socialist and Social Democratic models has narrowed. To be sure, the Austrian SPÖ and the French Socialist Party reveal extremely different organisational realities. But this applies to extremes whose political effects are in any case not the same as those of the fifties or sixties.

In short, considered from the membership point of view, our analysis confirms the anticipatory statement made by Stefano Bartolini who announced the doom of social integration parties<sup>17</sup>. Globally, the Social Democratic family is in the gradual process of become a family of parties *that are just like the others*, in this respect at any rate.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> R. MICHELS, *Political parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, New York, Dover, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> G. MOSCHONAS, *La social-démocratie de 1945 à nos jours*, Paris, Montchrestien, 1994, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> R. MICHELS, *op. cit.*

Pascal Delwit (2005), "European Social Democracy and the world of Members. The end of the Community Party Concept?", in Pascal Delwit, *Social Democracy in Europe*, Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 213-236

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<sup>4</sup> M. DUVERGER, *Political parties: their organization and activity in the modern state*, London, Methuen, 1954.

<sup>5</sup> S. NEUMANN, "Toward a Comparative Study of Political Parties", in S. NEUMANN (ed.), *Modern Political Parties: approaches to comparative Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956.

<sup>6</sup> G. MOSCHONAS, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> D. PELASSY, *Qui gouverne en Europe ?*, Paris, Fayard, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> M. CHARZAT, « Une tradition mal connue : Otto Bauer et les austro-marxistes », in *La social-démocratie en questions, par des socialistes, des sociaux-démocrates, des communistes*, Séminaire organisé par l'Institut socialiste d'études et de recherches, Editions de la *Revue politique et parlementaire*, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> M. DUVERGER, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> P. SEYD, P. WHITELEY, *New Labour's Grassroots. The transformation of the Labour Party Membership*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> D-L. SEILER, *Les partis politiques en occident : sociologie historique du phénomène partisan*, Paris, Ellipses, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See in the book our other paper: *Electoral developments in European Social Democracy*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> P. DELWIT, E. VAN HAUTE, « Les élections fédérales du 18 mai 2003 : un scrutin de « défragmentation », *L'année sociale 2003*, Bruxelles, Institut de sociologie de l'ULB, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> It is true that the Italian Communist party itself recorded significant losses before its transformation.

<sup>16</sup> P. MAIR, I. VAN BIEZEN, « Party membership in twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000 », *Party Politics*, 2001, vol. 7, n° 1, pp. 5-21.

<sup>17</sup> S. BARTOLINI, « The Membership of Mass Parties : The Social Democratic Experience, 1889-1978 », in H. DAALDER, P. MAIR (eds), *Western European Party Systems. Continuity and Change*, Londres, Sage, 1983, pp. 177-220.