

## **The European left in crisis: competition areas and determinants of support for social democracy and the radical left in European Union countries**

The project investigates the factors driving regional support for Europe's two main left-wing political forces: social democracy and the radical left. It aims to examine how local economic and social conditions relate to their electoral success, exploring both competition and potential complementarity between these party families across European Union NUTS 2 regions.

The European left has undergone significant transformation since the Cold War's end. Influenced by the Washington Consensus, social democratic parties embraced the 'Third Way' – maintaining the welfare state with limited interference in market mechanisms. While initially successful electorally, this strategy gradually eroded their traditional working-class support base. The 2008-2009 financial crisis further weakened mainstream parties' credibility, as declining living standards and rising inequality fueled discontent. Resistance to austerity policies primarily benefited radical parties, including new left-wing movements that often employed a populist rhetoric. Consequently, the competition between social democracy and the radical left has become a defining feature of the European left.

Research in political science highlights the crucial role of evolving cleavages in understanding party support. Cultural transformations are increasingly driving political competition, leading to a reconfiguration or decline in the importance of traditional class-based divides amidst growing cultural and ideological conflict. Understanding the drivers behind support for social democracy and the radical left is especially critical now, as these ongoing transformations challenge the traditional identities and bases of both political forces. This project directly addresses this need by seeking to answer fundamental questions: Why do voting patterns differ across European regions? And how much does the specific regional context itself shape these outcomes?

To explore these questions, research hypotheses have been developed. These hypotheses focus on testing the connections between three key elements: regional conditions (economic performance, labor market dynamics, and demographic characteristics), party characteristics (e.g. left-right axis and other ideological positions), and electoral performance. The analysis spans nearly four decades (1990-2028), explicitly incorporating major events that have shaped European politics and society. This includes the profound transitions of post-communist systems, the disruptive impact of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and its aftermath, and the unprecedented societal and political effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Examining support for the left across this extended timeframe allows us to assess how these pivotal contexts shaped regional voting patterns.

To uncover these regional patterns, the project employs a complementary methodological approach. It integrates two established techniques: regression analysis and cluster analysis. This combination allows for an investigation into how local economic and social conditions, combined with parties' systemic position and ideological profiles, interact to shape electoral outcomes across European Union's regions. Regression analysis will model the relationships between these factors, using a multilevel structure that naturally accounts for regional differences nested within countries. Cluster analysis will identify groups of regions sharing similar socioeconomic characteristics and voting trends over time, helping to map distinct geographical patterns of support. These methods will be applied iteratively: insights gained from identifying regional clusters may reveal new questions to explore within the statistical models, refining the understanding of the dynamics at play.

The analysis will employ the following data sources: electoral results (scraped data combined with the established electoral datasets), regional socioeconomic indicators derived from Eurostat, and party positioning and party system datasets (such as Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Manifesto Project Dataset, V-Party, ParlGov).

By applying this integrated analytical framework across all 27 EU member states at the regional level, the project offers a uniquely comprehensive perspective on the transformation of the European left. Its key innovation lies in systematically mapping support for social democracy and the radical left region-by-region over nearly four decades. Unlike studies focusing on individual voters, this approach reveals regional-scale systemic trends – such as whether declining left-wing support is a shared continental experience or driven by specific regional contexts – and tests how well cleavage theory explains political dynamics *within* and *across* nations.