

**Hans Keman, Social democracy. A comparative account of the left-wing party family**  
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“The ominous decline of social democracy” *Washington Post*, 16 September 2018

“Who killed European social democracy?” *Politico*, 3 February 2018

“End of an Era? The slow death of Europe’s social democrats” *Spiegel online*, 22 September 2017

When one reads the headlines in the news then one cannot escape the dire state in which social democracy finds itself in Europe. This book on social democracy by Hans Keman could not be published more timelier because it addresses several of the questions raised in the media. But before turning to these questions, I will first discuss the book.

Keman provides a comprehensive account of the development of social democratic parties in 21 democracies. It is comprehensive in three aspects. First, the time scope is impressive because the analysis starts in the late nineteenth century and ends as late as 2012. In addition, Keman manages to scrutinize large amounts of data for the whole time period. Second, the book traces the development in social democracy across a wide range of dimensions and Keman meticulously traces electoral success, government participation, and policy performance of social democratic parties. Third, while analyzing the development of the social democratic party family, Keman relies on his decades long research experience and draws upon a colossal data collection.

What makes the book in particular interesting is that it provides for an innovative conceptualization and operationalization of two variables which are used to study the rise (and demise) of social democracy. One variable reflects the *pathways* of

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social democracy towards their present role and position in established democracies. The other variable taps into the *performance* of social democracy in terms of votes, office, and policy. This means that Keman goes beyond many accounts of the social democratic party family which tend to focus on electoral developments. For example, when looking at social democratic party control over government, Keman not only takes into account whether the social democratic party controls the ministries close to its policy preferences, such as education, health, and the labor market, but his measurement also includes the length of government and the extent to which ministers have to share their governmental power. In this way, Keman is in an excellent position to observe in how far social democracy has been successful in realizing its ambitions in implementing of what Keman labels the ‘Dual Welfare State.’

The sophisticated conceptualization of the ‘Dual Welfare State’ is also a major contribution of the book. This concept consists of two dimensions, economic well-being (equality and equity) and social welfare (living standards and quality of life) which are both operationalized at the individual and collective level. Consequently, Keman is also very comprehensive in his assessment into the extent to which social democracy achieved policy success. And indeed, social democratic parties have made a difference by pursuing the ‘Dual Welfare State’ and thereby social democracy has changed many societies towards more equality and equity especially during the ‘golden era’ of the welfare state between 1960 and 1990. However, the extent of this success is conditional upon the absence of a stronger right-wing party, the length of time of social democratic party rule, and the dominance of social democracy in relevant policy sectors.

In the final two chapters of the book, Keman scrutinizes the fortunes of social democracy for the post-1990 period. During the 1990s, many social democratic parties adopted so-called ‘Third Way’ policy positions in response to challenges posed by globalization, European integration and transitions in the economy, most notably the decline of the industrial sector and the rise of the services sector. The idea of the ‘Dual Welfare State’ was replaced by the idea of the social investment state whereby social justice is no longer to be achieved by reducing socio-economic inequalities but by providing equity of opportunities. And again, Keman meticulously operationalizes this programmatic shift into a fine-grained measurement. Drawing on party manifesto data Keman traces the development in social democratic party positions according to a ‘Third Way’ scale, a ‘working-class appeal’ scale, and the traditional left-right scale. Keman comes to the conclusion that the programmatic shift towards the social investment state has been mainly a rhetorical shift embraced by social democratic parties to secure access to office. And this appears to have been a successful strategy since social democratic incumbency “more often than not flourished in the 1990s” (p. 186).

I will now turn back to the headlines in the news. Since Keman’s analysis stops in 2012, he obviously could not take into account the recent large vote share losses for social democratic parties in France (from 29.4% in 2012 to 7.4% in 2017), Germany (from 25.7% in 2013 to 20.5% in 2017), Italy (from 25.4% in 2013 to 18.7% in 2018), and the Netherlands (from 24.7% in 2012 to 5.7% in 2017). However, Keman’s systematic and thorough analysis allows one to put these large vote share declines into perspective. First, in case social democracy is in decline, it cannot do



away with the fact that social democracy has made a huge impact on current-day government. The welfare state is in large part produced by the success of social democracy. Second, time and again Keman stresses the wide variety within the social democratic party family and although the above mentioned examples of vote share declines are impressive, there are other instances where social democracy is not (yet) confronted with (very) large vote share losses such as in Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. Third, Keman observes that social democracy has lost vote share during the 1990s but at the same time social democratic parties increased their government participation. In other words, successful office-seeking behavior (i.e., adopting Third Way policy positions) has come at the cost of losing votes. Thus, apart from vote share losses one also needs to take into account whether social democracy is also losing control over executive government.

Therefore, *Social Democracy* by Hans Keman is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the social democratic party family. The book offers a concise yet comprehensive account of the historical, programmatic, electoral, and governmental developments of social democratic parties in 21 advanced democracies. Conceptualization is innovative and the analyses are thorough and meticulous. This book represents comparative political science at its best!

