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Frank Etzerodt, Søren; Kongshøj, Kristian

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The implosion of radical right populism and the path forward for social democracy: Evidence from the 2019 Danish national election

Søren Frank Etzerodt¹  | Kristian Kongshøj² 

¹TUM School of Social Sciences and Technology, Technische Universität München, Munich, Germany

²Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

Correspondence: Kristian Kongshøj, Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, Fibigerstræde 1, 9220 Aalborg, Denmark.

Email: kongshoj@dps.aau.dk

Abstract

The collapse of the Danish People's Party (DPP) was pivotal for the Danish 2019 election since a substantial bloc of their previous voters moved to the Social Democratic Party (SDP). This provides an interesting countermovement to the trend of mainstream left parties losing voters to populist or radical right-wing parties across European countries. This paper seeks to explain the driving issues in this voter movement, thereby shedding light on how mainstream left parties can turn the tables vis-à-vis their new right-wing challengers. Specifically, we focus on the traditional or first-dimension issues of welfare and redistribution versus the second-dimension issue of immigration. The simultaneous left-wing turn on welfare and redistribution and right-wing turn on immigration of the Danish SDP has provided room for varying interpretations of the election result. This paper utilizes new survey data to analyze the voter movements from and to the SDP with a special focus on defectors from the DPP. We find that attitudes toward welfare and redistribution were pivotal in moving voters from the DPP to the SDP. Meanwhile, the SDP has not completely “neutralized” the issue of immigration, which still tends to induce these voters to remain loyal to the DPP. We do not find support for the claim that immigration attitudes condition the extent to which redistributive preferences increase the likelihood of switching to the SDP. The SDP's right turn on immigration, moreover, seems to push voters to the immigration-friendly (center-left wing) support parties.

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INTRODUCTION

The defining electoral trend of the previous decade has been the waning, and in some instances plummeting, support for established mainstream parties, particularly social democratic parties (Benedetto et al., 2020; Berman & Snegoya, 2019; Häusermann, 2018; Loxbo et al., 2021). The waning support for mainstream social democratic parties is partly driven by the rise of new challengers from left and right-wing parties, sometimes labeled “populist” or “radical” parties (Burgoon et al., 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2019; Kaltwasser & Hauwaert, 2019; Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Kurer, 2020; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020).

The Danish 2019 national election, in which the defining voter movement was voters migrating from the populist Danish People's Party (DPP) to the mainstream Social Democratic Party (SDP), provides an interesting counterpoint. This paper addresses a core question in the literature—whether social democratic parties have lost voters or can win voters back from populist right parties mainly via their position on immigration, or rather by their positioning on traditional issues of welfare and redistribution (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020; Benedetto et al., 2020; Horn, 2021; Polacko, 2022; Spoon & Klüver, 2020; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020). Based on a new data set from the Danish 2019 national election, this paper finds that the Danish SDP won over voters mainly due to stronger and more traditional left-wing positioning on welfare and redistribution, whereas the party has not managed to completely “neutralize” the issue of immigration.

The rise of populist right-wing parties has mainly been attributed to a combination of economic insecurity, marginalization, regional core–periphery divides, as well as the increasing salience of the cosmopolitan-communitarian value cleavage, namely the issue of immigration (Algan et al., 2017; Burgoon et al., 2018; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2019; Kurer, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Strijbis et al., 2018; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020).

The slow decline (and in a few countries spectacular collapse) of social democratic parties reflect that political struggles have become more diversified in tandem with a more fragmented social class structure—a context which is radically different from that of the early 20th century when social democratic parties rose to prominence (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020; Benedetto et al., 2020; Garritzmann et al., 2018; Gingrich, 2017; Häusermann, 2018; Loxbo et al., 2021). This means that they increasingly run the risk of alienating one voter base if the other is approached (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019, 2020; Gingrich, 2017; Häusermann, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994).

Until the 2019 national election, Denmark would appear to be a best case of these trends. Historically, the SDP has been the dominant party. However, the loss of votes to the DPP since the 2001 election was pivotal in inducing a “new normal” in Danish politics. The SDP was in office for most of the period from 1929 to 2001. Since 2001 right-wing governments have dominated (2011–2015 as the only

exception), backed by the DPP. The 2019 election was a turnaround in the sense that the DPP's electoral support plummeted from 21.1% to 8.7%, going from 37 seats in parliament to 16.¹ The SDP re-entered office by gaining working-class and rural voters (Stubager & Hansen, 2021), many of whom presumably came from the DPP. Meanwhile, other social groups left for the socialist and social liberal support parties. The result was a firm election win for the center-left coalition.

Denmark is furthermore interesting since it is a case in which the SDP has moved in a “left conservative” direction,² and to a large extent adapted to the DPP on immigration (Bale et al., 2010; Mariager & Olesen, 2020). The DPP, meanwhile, is a pioneer of welfare chauvinism and has moved toward the parliamentary mainstream (Christiansen, 2016; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). As we elaborate below, this leads us to argue that Denmark is a best case of potential voter overlaps between a “left conservative” social democratic party, and a mainstreamed, pro-welfare, populist right-wing party.

However, such party positioning makes it difficult to disentangle the importance of different issues. In Danish and international media, the election result was described as a success achieved by some combination of the SDP's turn to the left on welfare and redistribution and the turn to the right on immigration and related issues. Interpretations have differed with respect to whether the decisive factor was the party's position on immigration or rather welfare and redistribution.

We argue that the success achieved by the SDP in the 2019 national election occurred mainly due to these voters' preferences for equality and welfare and that our survey results at least show that it could not have been achieved without these issues. The voters that migrated from the DPP to the SDP in the 2019 national election have much stronger preferences for equality and welfare, whereas the voters who stayed with the DPP have somewhat stronger preferences for tough stances on immigration. The Danish SDP has not completely neutralized the challenge from the right on immigration, but they managed to win over these voters by appealing to social policies rooted in traditional social democratic values. The proposal of a new early retirement scheme nicely encapsulates this appeal (Green-Pedersen, 2020).

We moreover show that the SDP's move to the right on immigration has resulted in voters migrating to the support parties on the center-left (the socialist parties and the Social Liberal Party). To the extent that these voters are migrating to the Social Liberals, we see a potential trade-off between policy strategies on immigration and welfare. If the SDP loses voters to the Social Liberals due to the issue of immigration, it can be difficult to pursue a more leftist welfare policy, since the Social Liberal Party has a more centrist or center (rightist) position on welfare and economic issues. The analysis hence unveils how party positioning and voter movements are linked, and the potential electoral trade-offs facing social democracy in a context with a well-established (populist) right party. The argument is tested with new survey data from the Danish 2019 national election.

NEW RIGHT-WING CHALLENGERS AND OLD SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

The literature provides different answers to the question of which policy attitudes induce voter movements to and from social democratic parties. A classical strategy for social democratic parties (SDPs) is to resort to their historical issue ownership on welfare and redistribution (Kitschelt, 1994). Recent studies confirm that this issue, and perceived performance on it, is still important for the electoral fate of social democratic parties (Benedetto et al., 2020; Horn, 2021; Jylhä et al., 2019; Kurer, 2020; Polacko, 2022; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020). However, new class structures also contribute to a more fragmented electoral landscape concerning economic and social policies (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020; Arndt, 2014; Benedetto et al., 2020; Häusermann, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Rennwald & Evans, 2014). The traditional working class has declined in numbers, and the smaller modern working class no longer has the same propensity to vote for mainstream left or social democratic parties. Instead, the new middle class of sociocultural professionals and educated service-sector workers have gradually come to dominate the social democratic vote, at least in Northern and Central Europe (Arndt, 2014; Gingrich, 2017; Häusermann, 2018; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Kitschelt, 1994; Oesch, 2013).

The traditional working class and the new middle class may seem to share a taste for welfare and redistribution. However, while the working class generally has stronger preferences for consumption-oriented policies aimed at sheltering and protecting individuals from market forces and social risks (unemployment benefits, pensions, etc.), the new middle classes tend to be more in favor of investment-oriented social policies designed to develop skills and human capital (particularly education) (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019; Benedetto et al., 2020; Beramendi et al., 2015; Busemeyer et al., 2013; Garritzmann et al., 2018; Häusermann, 2018; Loxbo et al., 2021; Marx, 2014). Catering to both investment- and protection-oriented preferences is not an easy balance to strike in times of spending restraints. Social democratic parties may also be rewarded among parts of the electorate for more centrist positions on economic policy and adherence to fiscal restraint or perceived fiscal “responsibility” (Benedetto et al., 2020; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Loxbo et al., 2021).

Furthermore, some social democratic parties have struggled to maintain their voter bases in the face of competition from populist right-wing parties. These parties are characterized by conservative nationalist or anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalist stances, Euroscepticism, and anti-internationalism, usually based on populist discourse pitting the common people against elite interests (Burgoon et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Rydgren, 2017; Stanley, 2008). Also, many populist right-wing parties have come to present themselves as defenders of the welfare state but coupled with a “welfare chauvinist” discourse in which it is argued that social rights should be less generous or more restrictive for immigrants

(Afonso & Rennwald, 2018; Rovny & Polk, 2020). Such right-wing parties have particularly had success in Northern and Central Europe.

When explaining support for these parties, the literature has mainly discussed the role of economic insecurity and low or declining socioeconomic status as well as counter-reactions to the perception of being on the losing side of an (elite-driven) erosion of traditional majority culture. Support has been found for both “economic” and “cultural” grievances as explanatory factors, and they are arguably mutually interdependent forces in transformations affecting modern societies (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Kurer, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020).

The politics induced by both of these trends—divides and clashes in terms of economic (in)security as well as culture and identity—are not mutually exclusive and may constitute two sides of the same coin. Both concern issues of social integration or loss of social status. The populist right-wing vote may be seen as a reflection of perceived exclusion or alienation from economic status and the traditional majority culture (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Kurer, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2020). The result is that modern social democratic parties find themselves struggling with a significantly more fragmented class structure and a diversified (and in some cases polarized) climate of ideology and new values. If mainstream left parties want to retain some of their old voter bases, they need to strike some balances or tradeoffs, as famously discussed by Kitschelt (1994).

Recent studies looking specifically at voter dynamics between our two-party types in European countries offer opposing answers with respect to whether social democratic parties gain from moving closer to populist right-wing parties on immigration as the Danish party has arguably done. Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2020) find on the one hand that social democratic parties lose out by alienating more voters than they gain with such a strategy. On the other hand, Spoon and Klüver (2020) find that center-left (but not center-right) parties benefit from accommodating the views of anti-immigration right-wing parties. van Spanje and de Graaf (2018) moreover find that mainstream parties might benefit from “parroting” their new challengers, but that this is conditional on “ostracizing” them at the same time, that is, systematically refusing to cooperate with that party. Finally, Hjorth and Larsen (2020), utilizing a survey experiment with Danish data, find that stricter immigration policies on the one hand may attract voters to the SDP, while they on the other hand lose voters to other left-wing parties.

Häusermann (2022) and Häusermann et al. (2021) have furthermore argued, and to some extent shown, that it is largely a myth that radical or populist right-wing parties are the main challengers for mainstream left parties. Instead, they lose more votes to mainstream right parties or other left-wing parties or have more untapped voter potential among these parties. However, Häusermann

et al. (2021) also acknowledge that the voter overlaps between the two kinds of parties may be more significant in Denmark. We will continue to show and argue further below that Denmark constitutes a best case for how elections may be decided by the relationship between a pioneering, welfare chauvinist, and gradually more mainstreamed populist right-wing party and a “left conservative” social democratic party.

PARTY POSITIONING AND THE DANISH CASE

It is difficult to understand voter movements without considering the strategic positioning of parties. We will outline party strategies here as we discuss how the Danish Social Democratic Party and the DPP have changed positions vis-à-vis each other and other parties in general.

In Denmark, the SDP had a firm grasp on government power in the 20th century. In the 73 years from 1929 to 2001, the party was in office for 55 years (and 26 of the 30 years from 1953 to 1982 during the so-called “golden age” of the welfare state). From 2001 until the recent national election in 2019, the party was only in office in 2011–2015. Popular support declined steadily from around 40% in the 1960s to 25%–26% in all five elections since 2005, as shown in Table 1. The 2001 election that kicked off nearly two decades of mostly right-wing governments was characterized by a substantial net loss of more than

TABLE 1 Support and voter movement: Social Democrats and the Danish People's Party, 1998–2019

Election year	SDP vote share	SDP change (previous election)	DPP vote share	DPP change (previous election)	SDP net gains from the DPP (percentage points)
1998	35.9	1.3 ^a	7.4	7.4 ^b	-0.9
2001	29.1	-6.8	12	4.6	-3.2
2005	25.8	-3.3	13.3	1.3	-0.4
2007	25.5	-0.3	13.9	0.6	-0.3
2011	24.8	-0.7	12.3	-1.6	1.2
2015	26.3	1.5	21.1	8.8	-0.8
2019	25.9	-0.4	8.7	-12.4	3.1

Abbreviations: DPP, Danish People's Party; SDP, Social Democratic Party.

^aThe SDP gained 34.6% in the 1994 national election.

^bDPP entered parliament for the first time in 1998.

Source: Danish Parliament. National elections 1953–2019. SD net gains from 1998 to 2015 are calculated using survey data from the Danish National Election Study (Valgprojektet.dk) while 2019 data are from the survey utilized here (data weighted by vote choice and/or sociodemographic factors where available).

3 percentage points of the voters to the DPP. This was not turned around until the recent 2019 election. The party re-entered government in 2019 with 25.9% of the vote, a gross stability which mainly is a story of net gains from right-wing parties and corresponding net losses to support parties, particularly the Social Liberals and the Socialist People's Party. As shown in Table 2, the SDP gained a total of 3.3% of all voters from right-wing parties, predominantly from the DPP, whereas the party handed off 1.8% of voters to the two support parties, among people who voted for a party in both elections (first-time voters were less likely to vote for the SDP).

Since the DPP entered parliament in 1998, the SDP has strategically responded to the party in numerous ways and with varying success (Bale et al., 2010; Meret, 2021). The party started by mostly arguing and positioning itself against the DPP on the issue of immigration, then tried shifting the debate toward other traditionally social democratic issues, and then finally and gradually adapted to the DPP on immigration. In short, the SDP has moved significantly rightwards on immigration. Signature proposals such as externalizing the receipt and processing of asylum applicants to other countries as well as limiting asylum permits as much as possible are testament to this (Mariager & Olesen, 2020; Meret, 2021).

In terms of broad ideological positioning, the combined left-wing turn on economic policies and right-wing turn on cultural issues can be described as left conservatism (Kitschelt & Häusermann et al., 2021; Mariager & Olesen, 2020). Under the leadership of Mette Frederiksen since 2015 (Prime Minister since 2019), the party in rhetoric, and to some extent in policy as well, broke with the Third Way-inspired or Social Liberal economic policies of her predecessor Helle Thorning-Schmidt, and promised to defend and rebuild the welfare state and “The Denmark You Know.” The party launched a new proposal for early retirement rights, and promised to secure general welfare expenditures in a new “Welfare Law.” This “left conservatism” is pronounced in rhetoric emphasizing the principle of reciprocal social rights and obligations and promises of limiting immigration even further (Arndt & Kersbergen, 2015; Mariager & Olesen, 2020; Meret, 2021).

The DPP entered parliament in 1998 with 7.4% of the votes. This share rose to 12%–13% in subsequent elections. The party was arguably the most important support party for the right-wing governments in 2001–2011 and 2015–2019. Support for the DPP spiked at 21.1% in 2015 where the party became the second-largest party in Denmark and the biggest party in the center-right bloc in 2015–2019. However, the 2019 election offered a spectacular collapse from 21.1% to 8.7% of the votes. Defectors to the SDP from the DPP represented 3.5% of all votes (Table 2) which is substantial. The loss to the SDP represents the biggest loss to another party for the DPP in the 2019 election, but the party also handed off about 5% of voters (combined) to the Liberals and the New Right (not shown).

TABLE 2 Gross and net gains for the Social Democratic Party between the 2019 and 2015 elections (as % of all voters aged 22 and above, i.e., voters who were eligible voters in both elections)

	Center-left coalition (support parties for the new SDP government)					Right-wing parties (new opposition parties)						
	Red-Green Alliance	The Alternative	Socialist Peoples Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Christian Democrats	Liberal Alliance	Conservatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People's Party	New Right	Hard Line
2019 vote among 2015 SDP voters	0.9	0.2	2.6	19.9	1.0	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.1	0.1
2015 vote among 2019 SDP voters	0.9	0.5	1.4	19.9	0.4	1.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	3.5		
2019 net gain for the SDP (percentage of all voters)	0.0	0.3	-1.2	-0.6	-0.2	0.6	-0.1	0.1	0.1	3.1	-0.1	-0.1

Source: YouGov survey on the Danish 2019 election. *N* = 4743 (all voters above 22 years). Only voters who voted for one of the above parties, that is, voters who did not vote, cast a blank vote, voted for candidates outside of political parties, do not remember party choice, or do not want to state party choice are discounted. The Christian Democrats, New Right, and Hard Line did not run in the 2015 election. Another party, Klaus Risker Pedersen (fronted by a party leader of the same name), ran in 2019, but does not figure here since the share of previous SDP voters is below 0.1.

The DPP is a pioneer among radical right parties moving toward the center on economic and welfare issues—and even left of center on specific issues (such as the elderly), however, with a strong welfare chauvinist policy and a conservative inclination on income benefits (Andersen & Bjørklund, 1990; Christiansen, 2016; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Rovny & Polk, 2020). The party gradually mainstreamed itself in parliamentary behavior as a reliable support party that could enter political agreements (Christiansen, 2016; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). Notwithstanding, the party has continued to rely on populist rhetoric, but it has managed to combine this with the ability to enter broad reforms under successive right-wing governments, and in later years even cooperated separately with the SDP and the Socialist People's Party (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). The stance of the DPP on welfare and redistribution is somewhat “blurry” or may seem to be both left, right, and center depending on time and place (Rovny & Polk, 2020). DPP voters are also relatively divided on the issue. However, the party is generally closer to the SDP and the Socialist People's Party than the Social Liberals are, the traditional center-left coalition partner (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020).

Altogether, we suggest that Denmark constitutes a best case for significant overlaps between a “left conservative” social democratic party, and a mainstreamed, pro-welfare, populist right-wing party. As Table 1 shows, the pivotal 2001 election that paved the way for many years of right-wing governments was marked by a sizeable share of voters migrating from the SDP to the DPP, many of whom presumably stayed with the DPP in later elections. The SDP has only managed to win office when they gain voters from the DPP (2011 and 2019), and the 2019 election partly looks like the antithesis to the 2001 election. The election was marked by a clear welfare agenda, but immigration continued to play a role in public debate (Green-Pedersen, 2020).

DATA

The analysis is based on survey data collected in the aftermath of the Danish 2019 national election on June 5. Data were collected between June and September 2019 by YouGov and respondents were drawn from a web panel that YouGov maintains in Denmark. With a dropout rate of 6.48%, the final data set contains 5924 respondents from the age of 18+. For Danish national election study standards, the n value is high, which allows us to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of movements between, for example, the DPP and the SDP without reaching a critically low n value. The data set contains statistical weights for age, gender, region (NUTS2), and education. We have run all models with weights, but the main findings remain the same irrespective of weighting. Women, the elderly, and people with higher education were somewhat overrepresented in the final sample.

We summarize all variables here, but full information on questions and coding can be found in the Supporting Information Appendix and Table SA1. We code three dependent variables to measure the voter movements from the DPP to SDP as well as the voter movements more broadly from the SDP and the DPP to other parties. The first binary dependent variable measures loyal DPP voters (voted for the DPP in both 2015 and 2019, $n = 462$) versus defectors to the SDP (voted for the DPP in 2015 and the SDP in 2019, $n = 160$). The second dependent variable consists of loyal SDP voters (coded as 0, $n = 926$) versus defectors from the SDP to other left-wing parties (coded as 1, $n = 230$) and finally defectors from the SDP to any right-wing party (coded as 3, $n = 86$) (see Table 2 for the distinction between these two political blocs).³ The third dependent variable distinguishes between loyal DPP voters (0, $n = 462$), defectors from the DPP to any center-left party (1, $n = 205$), and finally defectors from the DPP to other right-wing parties (3, $n = 369$). In all three dependent variables, we exclude young voters (age 18–21) who were not eligible to vote in 2015 but voted for the first time in 2019.

The two main explanatory variables of interest are perceptions of immigration and inequality & welfare.⁴ Immigration is measured by a composite index containing nine items measuring voters' attitudes toward (1) whether immigrants constitute a threat to national culture, (2) access to and generosity of welfare benefits for immigrants and refugees, (3) the intake of refugees, and (4) deportation of immigrants. While these aspects may theoretically be multidimensional, explorative factor analysis indicates that they are one-dimensional (not shown). The immigration index hence captures the most important aspect of second-dimension politics or cultural/identity politics.

General attitudes toward inequality and redistribution are measured by a composite index containing four items measuring voters' perceptions of (1) current differences in income, (2) whether people with high incomes should pay higher taxes, (3) normative assertions of equal economic conditions, and (4) changes in inequality since the last election. The measure captures aspects of the state-market dimension and economic policy—that is, first-dimensional politics—with respect to redistribution as discussed in the literature (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Strijbis et al., 2018).

While the general inequality measure taps into overall perceptions of inequality and redistribution, it does not capture voters' perceptions of the quality of welfare provided. We, therefore, include a five-scale single item of welfare perceptions that asks the respondents to assess the provision of public welfare compared with 4 years ago. Higher values indicate perceptions of worsening of the quality of welfare.

We also include measures of preferences for unemployment spending and education spending to capture the consumption-investment dimension (Beramendi et al., 2015). We construct a measure of consumption-oriented benefits with two items measuring preference for spending on unemployment

insurance and social assistance. We compute those two items into a single composite index. We furthermore include a single item measuring preferences for education spending as a proxy for investment policies.⁵

We also control for age, gender, employment status (employed or not), income, city size, regional inequality perceptions, and experiences with recent school closings.⁶ Based on the data set it is, however, not possible to construct a class scheme consistent with dominant schemes in the literature (Oesch, 2013). Instead, we control for educational attainment which does capture some of the class differences. Finally, regional fixed effects for the five administrative regions are included to control for broader regional differences, seeing that the SDP recaptured key regions in the 2019 election.

Models including the first dependent variable are run with binary logistic regression, whereas models including the second and third dependent variables are run with multinomial logistic regression. To test if and how first- and second-dimension politics interact we include an interaction term between the immigration index and the general inequality measure.

Logistic regression in Stata (and other software as well) by default drops observations if they have missing information on just one variable (listwise deletion). While we do not end up with critically low n values when analyzing the voter movement from the DPP to the SDP, a drop from 622 in the full sample to 291 observations is substantial. The issue is similar for the second and third dependent variables capturing broader voter movements to and from the SDP and DPP. We, therefore, run Little's missing completely at random (MCAR) test, which suggests that it is highly unlikely that observations are MCAR ($p = 0.003$). However, as listwise deletion also formally requires that observations are MCAR or MAR (missing at random), Graham (2009) argues that multiple imputation is at least as good in such cases. Due to the relatively high number of missing values in the full models, we run the full models with 100 imputations. When we run the full models with multiple imputations, the main findings stay intact which is reassuring (see Table SA6 in the Supporting Information Appendix). As Table SA6 shows, we have conducted imputation using both multivariate normal distributions and chained equations. Furthermore, these imputations were run with gender and age as auxiliary variables, since analyses did show that they are related to missingness, bringing us closer to the MAR assumption in which missingness is conditioned by observable variables.

RESULTS

As displayed in Table 3, loyal DPP voters (voters who voted for the party in both 2015 and 2019) on average score higher on the immigration attitude index (i.e., more restrictive attitudes) relative to the 2015-DPP voters that went to the SDP in 2019. The voters that went to the SDP from the DPP on average, however, score higher on the general inequality index, the welfare quality measure, and the

TABLE 3 Descriptive attitudes

	Loyal DPP voters	DPP to SDP	Loyal SDP voters
General inequality	56.68	71.03	72.41
Immigration	83.39	72.41	48.46
Welfare	3.11	3.45	3.42
Unemployment spending	48.47	59.44	60.05
Education spending	2.24	2.39	2.52
Regional inequality	3.50	3.78	3.73
School closing	0.21	0.26	0.22

Note: Loyal DPP voters (voted for the party in both 2015 and 2019), loyal SDP voters, and defectors to the SDP. Abbreviations: DPP, Danish People's Party; SDP, Social Democratic Party.

unemployment spending measure. The remaining differences are small or substantially insignificant. Hence, the data suggest that the voter movement from the DPP to the SDP is driven by attitudes toward inequality and welfare. The voters that stay with the DPP want tough immigration policies, while they are less concerned with inequality and welfare. Previous DPP voters that went to the SDP also want tough immigration policies, but they resemble loyal SDP voters more concerning attitudes toward inequality and welfare.

Table 4 furthermore shows the regression results using vote choice between the DPP and SDP as well as voter movements from SPD and DPP to other political blocs. Attitudes toward inequality are positively and highly significantly related to the move from the DPP to the SDP (Model 1). Figure 1a indicates that 2015 DPP-voters who score 72 (the average for loyal SDP voters) on the inequality index on average have close to 30% chance of defecting to the SDP. On the contrary, attitudes toward immigration are negatively but significantly related to the move from the DPP to the SDP. Figure 1b shows that the probability of DPP voters switching to the SDP is much lower at higher levels on the immigration index. In fact, voters that in the sample score 83 (the average of loyal DPP voters) on the index roughly have a 20% chance of voting for the SDP, whereas voters that score around 61 (the 25th percentile) have around 45% chance or higher of voting for the SDP. The welfare variable mirrors that of the inequality measure indicating that voters who think the quality of welfare, in general, has been worsening over the last 4 years have a higher tendency to move from the DPP to the SDP.

Model 2 furthermore shows that attitudes toward inequality and immigration drive the propensity for former SDP voters to vote for other center-left parties and right parties. The inequality measure is positively (but insignificantly) correlated with the move to other center-left parties, and negatively and

TABLE 4 Relationship between vote choice, inequality, and immigration

	(1)	(2)		(3)	
	DPP to SDP	SDP to center-left	SDP to right parties	DPP to other right parties	DPP to center-left parties
General inequality	0.024** (0.010)	0.011 (0.009)	-0.038*** (0.012)	-0.017*** (0.006)	0.021** (0.009)
Immigration	-0.069*** (0.013)	-0.028*** (0.007)	0.046*** (0.012)	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.061*** (0.010)
Welfare	0.537*** (0.205)	0.034 (0.158)	-0.495** (0.245)	-0.221* (0.129)	0.475*** (0.171)
Unemployment spending	0.014* (0.008)	0.003 (0.006)	-0.010 (0.009)	0.001 (0.005)	0.009 (0.006)
Education spending	0.556* (0.314)	0.086 (0.271)	-0.469 (0.425)	0.016 (0.209)	0.266 (0.268)
Regional inequality	0.235 (0.262)	-0.221 (0.207)	0.664* (0.372)	0.224 (0.168)	0.323 (0.221)
School closing	0.928** (0.394)	-0.232 (0.343)	0.532 (0.529)	0.207 (0.276)	0.592* (0.332)
Age	0.012 (0.015)	-0.024** (0.011)	-0.012 (0.017)	-0.014 (0.010)	-0.009 (0.012)
Gender	0.317 (0.379)	-0.475 (0.290)	-1.429*** (0.492)	-0.031 (0.251)	0.379 (0.324)
Employment	0.322 (0.467)	0.408 (0.360)	-1.029* (0.624)	0.281 (0.318)	0.237 (0.400)
Income	0.140 (0.090)	-0.014 (0.059)	0.230** (0.099)	0.060 (0.058)	0.038 (0.074)
Education (ref: Primary school)					
High school	-0.049 (0.773)	0.802 (0.599)	-0.966 (1.354)	0.467 (0.482)	-0.120 (0.649)

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)		(3)	
	DPP to SDP	SDP to center-left	SDP to right parties	DPP to other right parties	DPP to center-left parties
Vocational school	0.292 (0.460)	-0.101 (0.437)	-0.865 (0.641)	0.357 (0.328)	-0.132 (0.383)
Short-cycle higher education	-0.729 (0.827)	-0.450 (0.684)	0.392 (0.791)	-0.510 (0.600)	-0.615 (0.685)
Medium-cycle higher education	-0.152 (0.597)	0.628 (0.470)	-0.223 (0.707)	0.602 (0.413)	-0.223 (0.516)
Long-cycle higher education	0.655 (0.932)	0.369 (0.655)	0.708 (0.932)	0.387 (0.601)	0.379 (0.776)
City size (Ref.: Copenhagen)					
Allborg, Aarhus & Odense	2.080** (0.947)	1.103 (0.719)	1.603 (1.130)	-0.616 (0.650)	2.016** (0.826)
>40,000 inhabitants	0.222 (0.841)	0.286 (0.654)	1.030 (0.997)	-0.337 (0.552)	0.681 (0.727)
20,000–39,999 inhabitants	1.714** (0.874)	-0.451 (0.766)	0.286 (1.248)	0.413 (0.599)	1.706** (0.758)
5000–19,999 inhabitants	0.132 (0.953)	1.244* (0.658)	-0.417 (1.125)	-0.566 (0.590)	0.675 (0.764)
1000–4999 inhabitants	0.625 (0.869)	-0.171 (0.730)	1.881* (1.039)	-0.432 (0.573)	0.710 (0.758)
<1000 inhabitants	0.973 (0.992)	0.269 (0.763)	1.811 (1.167)	-0.436 (0.649)	0.962 (0.848)
Countryside	-1.643 (1.300)	2.384*** (0.884)	1.746 (1.588)	0.164 (0.756)	0.206 (0.984)
Constant	-4.934** (1.956)	0.962 (1.415)	-0.179 (2.219)	1.166 (1.215)	-2.276 (1.551)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)		(3)	
	DPP to SDP	SDP to center-left	SDP to right parties	DPP to other right parties	DPP to center-left parties
Region fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pseudo R^2	0.3126	0.2507	0.2507	0.1890	0.1890
Observations	291	482	482	464	464

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

Abbreviations: DPP, Danish People's Party; SDP, Social Democratic Party.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

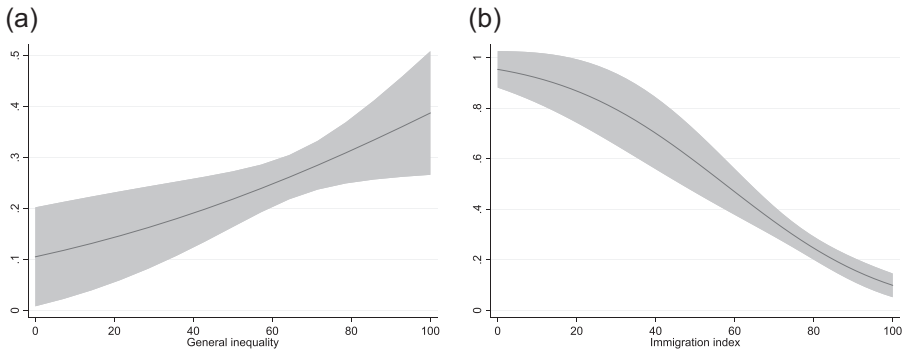


FIGURE 1 Marginal plot of the chance of switching from the DPP to the SPP given various positions on the inequality and immigration attitude indices. (a) and (b) are based on Model 1 in Table 4

significantly correlated with the switch to right parties, meaning that loyal SDP voters have stronger preferences for equality relative to the defectors to the right parties. The immigration measure is negatively and highly significantly related to the move toward other center-left parties and negatively and highly significantly related to the move toward right parties—immigration progressive SDP voters migrate to the center-left support parties, while SDP voters with tougher immigration preferences tend to migrate to the right parties. The welfare measure mirrors that of the inequality measure. In Table SA2 in the Supporting Information Appendix, we distinguish between movements within the center-left parties, showing that the immigration measure is negatively correlated with the move from the SPD to the supporting parties, as also shown in Table 4. The welfare measure, however, yields an interesting result: The move

from the SDP to the economic mainstream center party, the Social Liberal Party, is negatively related to this issue (and significant at the 0.055 level).

Model 3, moreover, shows that the inequality and immigration measures are also important for the move from the DPP to other right parties and center-left parties. The inequality measure is negatively correlated with the move from the DPP to right parties and positively related with the move to center-left parties—both are significant at conventional levels. This indicates that former DPP voters who prefer more equality vote for the center-left parties, while those who do not tend to vote for the center right-wing parties. The immigration measure is negatively (but insignificantly) correlated with the move to other right parties, while it is negatively and highly significantly related with the move to center-left parties, indicating that DPP voters with preferences for strict immigration policies stay with the party. The welfare measure mirrors that of the inequality measure. In Table SA2 we, furthermore, divide other right parties into mainstream right parties and new radical right parties, showing that the move from the DPP to the new radical right parties is negatively and significantly correlated with the inequality measure but positively and significantly correlated with the immigration measure. The new right-wing parties, therefore, seem to attract DPP voters with stronger preferences for stricter immigration policies. The move from DPP to mainstream right parties is negatively and significantly correlated with the inequality index but insignificantly related with the immigration measure.

To show that the results are not arbitrarily driven by the variable composition, we also run the models in Table 4 in a step-by-step procedure including the attitudinal variables one by one (see Tables SA3–SA5 in the Supporting Information Appendix). The models presented in Table 4 have, furthermore, been rerun with multiple imputation (MI) to address the issue of missingness addressed in the method section above (see Table SA6). The MI regressions corroborate the findings in Table 4, which is reassuring.⁷ The models are also run with weights for age, gender, region, and education, essentially showing the same results (Table SA7). To further strengthen the claim that the issue of inequality is of primacy for the SDP and the issue of immigration correspondingly for the DPP, we have also run a set of logistic models with SDP votes versus all other party choices and DPP votes versus all other party choices in the 2019 election. These models also indicate that the SDP, in general, attracts voters due to their stances on (in)equality, and the DPP, in general, attracts voters due to their immigration preferences (see Table SA8).

We are also interested in whether attitudes toward redistribution and immigration interact in explaining the voter movement from the DPP to the SDP. We want to test whether the tendency to switch to the SDP with more inequality-averse attitudes is conditioned by more restrictive immigration attitudes, as this would suggest that it is necessary for the SDP to pursue redistributive policies *and* restrictive immigration policies at the same time to attract DPP voters. As already shown in Table 3, the DPP voters that went to SDP on average have much

tougher stances on immigration compared with loyal SDP voters (48 vs. 72 points on the index). In fact, the former DPP voters that went to SDP are on average closer to the loyal DPP voter when it comes to attitudes toward immigration (72 vs. 83). Loyal SDP voters and previous DPP voters, however, score closer to one another on the inequality and welfare measures. These descriptive findings show that the SDP manages to win over voters with tough immigration stances who also have stronger preferences for welfare and equality. To what extent is it necessary for the SDP to adhere to very strict immigration policies to win over these voters, or put differently, to what extent do immigration attitudes condition the effects of attitudes toward (in)equality for these voters? To test this, we include an interaction term between the inequality and immigration variables. We test the claim using (multiple) logistic regression analysis and OLS (with robust standard errors). The logistic and OLS models test if inequality is conditioned by immigration in the move from DPP to SDP, while the multiple logistic models compare the difference between loyal SDP, loyal DPP, and DPP defectors to the SDP (a loyal voter is a voter who voted for the same party in two consecutive elections).

As shown in Table SA9, the interaction terms between inequality and immigration are all insignificant when including controls, indicating that there is no conditional relationship. Model 5 in Table SA9, however, yields an interesting finding, showing that there is a statistically significant difference between loyal SDP voters and the DPP defectors to the SDP with regard to immigration. These findings indicate that, while the move from the DPP to the SDP is mainly driven by inequality and welfare, the social democratic electorate is quite diverse with respect to second-dimension issues such as immigration. The issue of immigration has not been completely “neutralized” by the SDP in Denmark (with more negative attitudes toward immigration, DPP voters are still more likely to stay with the party or switch to the other, new radical right parties). The issue entails some potential tradeoffs that we will discuss further below.

CONCLUSION

In most of Europe populist parties have been on the rise, while electoral support for mainstream Social Democratic Parties has been declining. The Danish 2019 national election provides an interesting case for a countermovement. The defining voter movement in that election was voters migrating from the (populist right-wing) DPP to the (mainstream left) Social Democratic Party.

In this paper, we explain this voter movement by focusing on the issues of welfare, redistribution, and immigration. Both academic and public debates on the Danish case have offered varying interpretations of the role of these issues for voter movements between the two-party types. By outlining how the two Danish parties have positioned themselves strategically, it is clear that the Danish SDP since the late 1990s has changed its stance on immigration

radically, and gradually adapted to the DPP. The party has also turned from a “Third Way”-inspired, social investment logic toward a more traditional concern with social protection, albeit combined with a rhetoric emphasizing how obligations and social rights are reciprocal. We have argued that Denmark constitutes a best case for potential voter overlaps between a “left conservative” social democratic party, and a (welfare chauvinist) pro-welfare, populist right-wing party, that has mainstreamed itself in parliamentary behavior while retaining its populist right rhetoric and positioning on immigration.

We find that this countermovement occurred mainly due to these voters’ preferences for redistribution and welfare and the SDP’s strategic move toward the left on inequality and welfare. Voters that voted for the DPP in 2015 and migrated to the SDP in 2019 have much stronger preferences for equality and welfare relative to the loyal voters that stayed with the DPP in 2019. The voters migrating from the DPP to the SDP also to a larger extent feel that the welfare state has deteriorated during the previous 4 years. The SDP won over a group of voters who are concerned with welfare and redistribution. At the same time, the issue of immigration has not been completely neutralized, and DPP voters with very restrictive immigration attitudes tend to stay with the DPP or switch to new radical right parties. The SDP’s right turn on immigration has, however, pushed voters toward the center-left support parties, consistent with the finding by Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2020) that mainstream left parties may alienate substantial amounts of voters with such a strategy. Meanwhile, the new radical right challengers are attracting voters from the DPP. The DPP hence seems to be squeezed between the SDP on the one hand and the new right-wing challengers on the other. An open question is, however, what this balancing act means for the SDP’s ability to win office. To the extent that the SDP’s right turn on immigration pushes voters away to the left parties, it may not be an electoral issue as these parties support a welfare and equality agenda. However, the SDP’s right turn on immigration can potentially undermine the center-left coalition. This is the case when (too) strict immigration stances alienate voters that leave for support parties further to the economic right, such as the Social Liberal Party in Denmark. This naturally depends on the potential welfare coalitions the SDP can form without picking a fight with the Social Liberals. Judging by the first to and half years in government, the Danish SDP seems able to flexibly maneuver the political landscape, however, as with most balancing acts, they may be difficult to maintain in the medium to long run.

We moreover find little support for the argument that the effect of preferences for inequality is conditioned by attitudes toward immigration. Descriptively we find that the voters immigrating to the SDP have tougher stances on immigration relative to the loyal SDP voters indicating that the voter base of the SDP has become diverse with respect to immigration; however, interaction models show no conditional relationship. These findings suggest that the defining voter movement in the 2019 Danish national election was mainly driven by preferences for equality

and welfare—not preferences for tougher immigration policies, as has sometimes been argued. The findings hence support recent findings and arguments by Polacko (2022), Benedetto et al. (2020), Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019), Loxbo et al. (2021), Häusermann (2018), and Gingrich (2017), namely that social democratic parties need (and are able) to resort to their traditional strongholds of welfare and redistribution if they want to succeed electorally.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and do-files (in Stata) can be made available upon request.

ORCID

Søren Frank Etzerodt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6634-5069>

Kristian Kongshøj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5088-8162>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This is the second biggest loss of seats in Danish electoral history since 1915 when women achieved suffrage.
- ² “Left conservative” denotes a situation in which a social democratic party places itself to the left on issues related to welfare and redistribution (i.e., first-dimension issues), and right on cultural and value-related issues (i.e., second-dimension issues) (Kitschelt & Häusermann, 2021; Mariager & Olesen, 2020).
- ³ Other right parties include Christian Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives, Liberal Alliance, New Right, and Hard Line. Center-left parties include Red-Green Alliance, The Alternative, Socialists Peoples Party, Social Democrats and Social Liberals; see also Table 2.
- ⁴ Chronbach's α of >0.7 indicated a high internal reliability of the composite indexes computed.
- ⁵ The data set also includes an item measuring spending on childcare and daycare institutions; however, we obtain similar results with either measure, why we continue with the education spending variable.
- ⁶ We control for the latter two seeing that the economic and political geography of elections has come to the fore in the literature (Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Moretti, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Storper; 2013).
- ⁷ Although the general inequality measure in Model 3 is not significantly correlated with the move from DPP to other right parties in models with normal MI. This does however not change our main conclusion.

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