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**The Social Democratic Dilemma and the Contemporary Challenges of
European Social Democracy: A Case Study of the French Socialist Party**

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Abstract

This paper examines the electoral collapse of the *Parti socialiste* (PS) in France following the 2017 French elections. Using a case study approach, it investigates the theory of the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’, as theorized by Stuart William James Thomson, to determine whether it offers a compelling explanation for the challenges faced by the French PS since 1998. At the core of this theory lies the idea that the classic Social Democratic agenda of redistributive social policy, higher taxation, pro-union labour laws, better minimum standards of employment, and an active and generous welfare state became largely incompatible with the new post-Fordist economic, political, sociological and institutional environment which has emerged since the 1970s. This paper argues that, based on a literature analysis and statistical analysis, the French PS has reacted to the new post-Fordist environment in a contradictory manner, engaging in a rhetorical commitment to leftist doctrinal orthodoxy while, once in power, adopting pro-market policies and supply-side reforms, in line with predictions made within social-democratic dilemma theory. Under these circumstances, inconsistencies between the PS’ rhetoric and policies led to a more fragile electoral base all while its electoral fortunes became increasingly tied to external events, rather than on a distinct programmatic offer. The difficulties of the party under Lionel Jospin and François Hollande may, moreover, be linked to a deeper identity crisis for the party characterized by ideological divisions, fractionalization, and the fragilization of its electoral base. With the rise of important players on both the left and right flanks of the party, the PS became caught between two distinct and contradictory visions for the party and found itself unable to lead the newest cycle of renewal on the French left as it attempted to recover from its electoral demise in 2017. As European Social Democratic parties seek to adapt to a changing political landscape in Europe, these findings provide insight in avoiding a similar demise as the French PS.

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine l'effondrement électoral du Parti socialiste (PS) en France à la suite des élections françaises de 2017. À l'aide d'une étude de cas, il examine la théorie du "dilemme social-démocrate", telle que théorisée par Stuart William James Thomson, afin de déterminer si elle offre une explication qui tient la route pour comprendre les défis auxquels le PS français a été confronté depuis 1998. Au cœur de cette théorie se trouve l'idée que le programme social-démocrate classique d'une politique sociale redistributive, d'une augmentation des taux d'imposition, d'un droit du travail davantage pro-syndical, de meilleures normes minimales d'emploi et d'un État-providence actif et généreux est devenu largement incompatible avec le nouvel environnement économique, politique, sociologique et institutionnel post-fordiste qui a émergé depuis les années 1970. Sur la base d'une analyse de la littérature et d'une analyse statistique, ce mémoire soutient que, depuis 1998, le PS français aurait réagi au nouvel environnement post-fordiste de manière contradictoire en s'engageant simultanément vers une rhétorique défendant l'orthodoxie doctrinale de gauche tout en adoptant, une fois au pouvoir, des politiques favorables au marché et des réformes axées sur l'offre, conformément aux prédictions faites au sein de la théorie du dilemme social-démocrate. Dans ces circonstances, les incohérences entre la rhétorique du PS et les politiques du parti une fois au pouvoir auraient contribué à la fragilisation de sa base électorale, tandis que le parti dépendrait aujourd'hui davantage sur des événements extérieurs plutôt que sur un programme électoral distinct lorsqu'il remporterait ses élections. Les difficultés du parti sous Lionel Jospin et François Hollande peuvent, en outre, être liées à une crise d'identité plus profonde au sein du parti, caractérisée par des divisions idéologiques, un fractionnement interne, et la fragilisation de sa base électorale. Avec la montée d'importants joueurs sur les flancs gauche et droit du parti, le PS s'est retrouvé coincé entre deux courants distincts et contradictoires, et s'est retrouvé incapable de mener le plus récent cycle de renouvellement de la gauche française alors qu'il tentait de se remettre de son effondrement électoral en 2017. Alors que les partis sociaux-démocrates européens cherchent à s'adapter à un paysage politique changeant en Europe, ces résultats permettent de tirer des leçons importantes afin d'éviter un effondrement similaire à celui du PS français.

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Introduction

The French Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*, or PS) has been the dominant mainstream political party on the left of the French political spectrum since the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958. Succeeding to the *Section française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO) in 1969, the PS first won the Presidency under François Mitterrand in May of 1981 and, soon after, gained an absolute majority for the first time under the new constitutional regime¹. At the helm of the Presidency for two consecutive mandates between 1981 and 1995, which included two cohabitations², the PS also led a left-wing parliamentary majority between 1997 and 2002 during the centre-right Presidency of Jacques Chirac as part of a coalition of the “plural left” with the Communists and the Greens in the third cohabitation of the Fifth Republic³. In 2012, after 17 years away from the Presidency and 10 years without leading a parliamentary majority, the PS returned to power with both a legislative majority and control of the Presidency under François Hollande, who became only the second Socialist President in the history of the Fifth Republic⁴.

It seemed at first that the return of the PS to power under Hollande meant that France’s mainstream party of the centre-left would, once again, offer a viable alternative socioeconomic and political paradigm to the French right. However, by the end of Hollande’s first term in power, with the outlook of the PS’ re-election in 2017 appearing grim, its position as one of the major political

¹ Christophe De Galzain, “CHRONOLOGIE Le Parti socialiste, des origines à nos jours”, *La Croix*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/CHRONOLOGIE-Le-Parti-socialiste-origines-jours-2017-02-07-1200823086>

² “Cohabitation” is a type of power-sharing which occurs in semi-presidential political systems when the President is from a different political party to that of the majority in parliament. (Sophie Di Francesco-Mayot, “The French Parti socialiste (2010-16): from office to crisis”, in *Why the left loses: The Decline of the Centre-Left in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Rob Manwaring & Paul Kennedy (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018), 164.)

³ Serenella Sferza, “Party Organization and Party Performance: The Case of the French Socialist Party”, in *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, ed. Richard Gunther *et. al.*, (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2002), 190.

⁴ Di Francesco-Mayot, “The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)”, 151.

parties of the Fifth Republic had, instead, been significantly weakened. A poll conducted by Elabe in late November of 2016 credited Hollande with only 7% of voter intentions in the first round if he were to run for re-election under the PS, with hypothetical successors at the head of the party not scoring much higher (9% for Manuel Valls, 5% for Arnaud Montebourg, and 5% for François Bayrou)⁵. Only a few days after the release of that poll, François Hollande announced, in an unprecedented manner for an incumbent French President, that he would not be seeking re-election in the 2017 presidential election⁶. This was indicative of the larger troubles facing the party on the national stage, whose fortunes would continue to unravel in the following months. After only 5 years in power, the PS would go on to suffer a crushing defeat in both the presidential and legislative elections in 2017. Not only did the party's presidential candidate, Benoît Hamon, fail to make it to the second round as he came in 5th place, but the party also saw its seat count in the National Assembly collapse from a majority in 2012 to a dismal showing at only 30 seats in 2017⁷. Five years later in the 2022 elections, the PS's presidential candidate, Anne Hidalgo, scored even worse, coming in 10th place with only 1,75% of the vote share in the first round of the presidential election⁸.

While the political and economic turmoil, as well as the domestic and international economic and socio-political challenges experienced by France during Hollande's Presidency, have been cited

⁵ Le Point, "Présidentielle 2017 : 7 % pour François Hollande !", November 30, 2016, https://www.lepoint.fr/presidentielle/presidentielle-2017-7-pour-francois-hollande-30-11-2016-2086968_3121.php#11

⁶ Ava Djamshidi, "Le jour où... François Hollande a renoncé", *Le Parisien*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/le-jour-ou-francois-hollande-a-renonce-15-07-2017-7135599.php>

⁷ Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer, "Résultats des élections législatives 2017", June 2017, [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Legislatives/elecresult__legislatives-2017/\(path\)/legislatives-2017/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Legislatives/elecresult__legislatives-2017/(path)/legislatives-2017/FE.html)

⁸ Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer, "Résultats des élections législatives 2022", June 2022, [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Legislatives/elecresult__legislatives-2022/\(path\)/legislatives-2022/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Legislatives/elecresult__legislatives-2022/(path)/legislatives-2022/FE.html)

as important reasons for the difficulties faced by the PS⁹, this may not be sufficient to explain why the party failed to recover in the following election in 2022. In part, this is because the erosion of electoral support for France’s mainstream left-of-centre party has been linked to a broader phenomenon across Europe. Indeed, mainstream Socialist and Social Democratic parties had been facing eroding voter support in elections across Europe over the last decades, which has been well documented by the literature on the subject. A recent study analyzed a sample of 22¹⁰ advanced democracies over 336 elections between 1965 and 2019, and confirmed that mainstream Social Democratic parties had, in fact, seen their vote share in elections drop significantly on average, holding steady up to the 1980s at 33-34% before falling below 25% on average since 2000¹¹. In particular, the Netherlands and Greece, alongside France, were highlighted for having seen an almost complete evisceration of their historically dominant Social Democratic party in recent years¹². As a result, we should consider how the difficulties faced by the French PS may be part of a much larger crisis of Social Democracy in Europe and, more broadly, in the West.

These circumstances have prompted researchers to hypothesize on reasons behind this phenomenon. Amongst these, we may highlight the work conducted by Stuart James William Thomson in 1998 for the University of Aberdeen entitled ‘The Social Democratic dilemma’. As part of his thesis, Thomson set out to analyze the trajectory of mainstream European Social

⁹ See for example: Rob Manwaring and Paul Kennedy, *Why the left loses: The Decline of the Centre-Left in Comparative Perspective*, 1st ed. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ The study looked at 22 countries part of the OECD which had a longstanding history of a dominant Social Democratic party of the centre-left of a country’s party system, most of which are located in Europe. The countries included in the study were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States.

¹¹ Matthew Polacko, “The rightward shift and electoral decline of social democratic parties under increasing inequality”, *West European Politics* 45, no. 4 (2021): 675, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1916294>

¹² *Ibid.*

Democratic parties from the early 1970s to the end of the 1990s. This was done by providing a comprehensive framework which would predict the future trajectories of European Social Democratic parties. By combining theoretical and rhetorical analysis with empirical evidence on European Social Democratic parties and their time in office, Thomson's hypothesis rested on the idea that mainstream parties of the European centre-left faced what he called a 'Social Democratic dilemma'. According to this theory, as European Social Democratic parties have had to gradually abandon many of the core values of 'classic' Social Democracy in the face of the changing demographic and economic environment, these parties' platform and policies would become less and less distinguishable from their competitors. This would, in theory, leave Social Democratic parties vying for votes from a more volatile and fragile electoral coalition, for whom external events would provide greater impetus of electoral support than the distinctiveness of their party platform. In this sense, Thomson predicted that parties of the European centre-left would increasingly find themselves in a situation where more and more electors behave as consumers to be swayed from election to election, with the likelihood of significant vote-switching increasing as problems of party identification continued to grow.

It is in this context that this paper will review and expand on the key elements of the theoretical framework which was developed by Stuart James William Thomson in 'The Social Democratic dilemma' to analyze the recent collapse of the French PS from a case study approach. In particular, the goals of this paper will focus mainly on the predictive element of Thomson's thesis, and whether it offers a model which provides an accurate prediction of the PS's path since 1998. More importantly, this paper will attempt to build on the literature which has aimed at better

understanding the circumstances which have led to the contemporary electoral difficulties faced by European Social Democratic parties.

This paper will be divided into three sections. The first section will break down the theoretical framework behind the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’, focusing on the conceptualization of Social Democracy and its links to France, as well as the emergence of a dilemma on the left as a response to the changing economic, social, institutional, and political changes brought on by the advent of Neoliberalism and the collapse of the Fordist economic consensus. The second section will provide a literature analysis of the evolution of French Social Democracy since 1998 and link it to Thomson’s findings based on electoral and intellectual success, economic and social success, and the strength of the electoral coalition. The third section will provide a statistical analysis of the PS’ record in government since 1998 to determine whether data related to the PS’ record in government lines up with Thomson’s predictions for Social Democrats based on electoral and intellectual success, economic and social success, attitudes of the electorate, and the strength of the electoral coalition. In the end, this paper aims to better understand the collapse of France’s historically dominant left-of-centre party.

Theoretical Framework

This section will dive into the theoretical framework used by Thomson to analyze the core elements behind the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’. More precisely, it will provide an overview of the key concepts and main arguments of this theory and link them to the French political context. Firstly, this section will review the core tenets of classic Social Democracy as a political ideology and link them to France and its mainstream left-of-centre party. Secondly, this section will look into the transition from ‘classic’ Social Democracy towards ‘new’ Social Democracy, and the various economic, political, institutional, and sociological factors which have pushed European centre-left parties in this direction.

Conceptual Foundation: Classic Social Democracy and France

The idea of a ‘classic’ model of Social Democracy is a key concept of the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’. Classic Social Democracy represents the basic and idealized model of this ideological family combining gradual reformism with an acceptance and enabling of the market. On one hand, Social Democrats in the ‘classic’ sense support the adoption of policies which would lead to the equalization of society, i.e. to prevent extremes of income and wealth disparities within the existing state structures¹³. This is usually achieved through the provision of public goods and services and the augmentation of the welfare state thanks to the use of a progressive taxation system. In this sense, ‘classic’ Social Democracy supports the adoption of policies which are materially beneficial and protective of the working classes in particular and which help maintain public confidence in the state structures¹⁴. On the other hand, Social Democrats in the ‘classic’ sense have

¹³ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

simultaneously distanced themselves from the revolutionary socialist programmes which had historically made up their founding values, and instead aim to work within the existing institutions and structures of capitalism¹⁵. Broadly speaking, ‘classic’ Social Democrats have embraced the market and have left the existing power relations within society in place, attaching themselves to parliamentary and democratic means to achieve their goals of greater equalization of society within the capitalist system. This model of Social Democracy would have applied broadly to European left-of-centre parties during the golden years of Keynesianism between 1940 and 1970.

From here, Thomson differentiates two models of European ‘classic’ Social Democracy between what he calls a ‘northern’ model and a ‘southern’ model, with France falling under the ‘southern’ classification alongside Spain, Portugal, and Greece¹⁶. Some key characteristics of French Social Democracy outlined by Thomson are worth outlining, as they provide an important background in understanding the historical and present context of the French PS and French Social Democracy.

First, according to Thomson, like its ‘southern’ counterparts, France has historically had a strong communist and far-left presence and a notable Communist party. Isabelle Clavel has highlighted an age-old rivalry between French Socialists and Communists is a century old, emerging in 1920 from the *Congrès de Tours* when a political divide within the party (then the *Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière*, or SFIO) led to the creation of the *Section Française de l’Internationale Communiste*, or SFIC¹⁷. From this point in time, the success of the party at the national level has

¹⁵ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ Emile Benech, “Présidentielle. Le Parti communiste devant le Parti socialiste, un score inédit depuis cinquante ans”, Ouest France, April 12, 2022, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/leditiondusoir/2022-04-12/presidentielle-le-parti-communiste-devant-le-parti-socialiste-un-score-inedit-depuis-cinquante-ans-31964d8a-740a-42e6-a68e-e70de0bba894>

historically been dependent on its ability to ensure that the more radical elements of the French left were consolidated under its leadership, whether that was Mitterrand and his ‘popular front’, Jospin and his ‘plural left’ coalition, or Hollande and his consolidation of the leftist elements within his own party. In this context, the rise of a new challenger on the left in the 2010s, *La France Insoumise*, could be highlighted as representing a renewal of this dichotomy between the French left’s moderate and radical tendencies. The increased popularity in recent years of this new insurgent challenger on the PS’ left flank creates renewed difficulties for the modern-day PS. This could be attributed to its inability to rally the emergent leftist party behind its leadership after the Hollande Presidency, contrasting with what it has traditionally been able to achieve in periods of electoral success. Instead, in the most recent legislative elections in 2022, the PS became a junior electoral union partner under the leadership of this new emergent leftist party, just as it continued to bleed support since the Hollande Presidency. Ultimately, the PS’ fortunes have historically been directly impacted by its ability to unite the moderate and radical elements of the left.

Secondly, the development of the French welfare system, like other countries of the southern model, did not create as strong links between organized labour and France’s mainstream left-of-centre party as could be seen in the ‘northern’ states¹⁸. Like other southern European countries, France’s political sphere was characterized by weak union-party links and mainly conservative social classes. For Escalona, the PS “has never been a mass party with links to powerful unions [...] its internal workings have been marked by significant doctrinal divisions, while its sociological base has always remained fairly heterogeneous”¹⁹. As a result, the demographic base

¹⁸ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 42.

¹⁹ Fabien Escalona, “France: Who Wants to be a Social Democrat?”, in *The Three Worlds of Social Democracy: A Global View*, ed. Ingo Schmidt (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 29.

of the party has typically been made up of only a minority of the working-class electorate²⁰. Unlike in the classic Social Democratic model, France's PS stood apart for the fact that its links to the working-class were never institutionalized like in many Northern European States²¹. As a result, the PS is a party which has typically not attempted to define itself mainly by its advocacy of the working-class, and instead has often emphasized a 'class front' in which members of different social classes found their place within the party's programmatic offer.

Thirdly, French Social Democracy tends to show patterns of party management centred around a leader who could impose a strategic vision, which has been a key aspect to understand the PS and its electoral success. François Mitterrand, France's longest-serving Socialist President, exemplifies this fact. Indeed, a central element behind his consecutive victories was his ability to unify the forces of the non-Communist left into the modern-day PS under his leadership, which he achieved by opting for a far-left stance to exert control over the more radical elements of the left²². Lazar considers that for nearly a quarter of a century, Mitterrand could effectively claim that he was the embodiment of French Socialism, which was fundamental in understanding how he remained in power for so long. In contrast, the party's extended periods away from power during the Fifth Republic have been characterized by the inability of its leaders to impose their vision. According to Di-Francesco-Mayot, the deep factionalism which has permeated the party over the years has led to internal struggles to control the party and, subsequently, difficulties at the ballot box²³. The lack of party unification in a historical and modern sense has often created significant obstacles for the PS outside of the Mitterrand years and has typically led to difficulties in appealing to the

²⁰ Escalona, "France", 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 151.

electorate and unifying the French left. Hollande's difficulties in power were, for example, synonymous with internal divisions within the party, and his inability to retain party unity once in office led to serious failings at the ballot box. As a result, strong leaders at the helm of the PS have been intrinsically linked to its electoral success.

This subsection provided a breakdown of the historical characteristics of French Social Democracy in conjunction with the theoretical elements of 'classic' Social Democracy and the distinctiveness of its 'southern' variation. Characteristics which were highlighted included the historical divisions between socialist and communist movements, party links (or lack thereof) with organized labour, and the strength of PS leadership. Resulting from significant societal changes since the 1970s, the party's move away from the 'classic' model will only continue to further exemplify the impact played by the core distinguishing characteristics of French Social Democracy on its fortunes.

The 'Social Democratic dilemma' and the emergence of 'new' Social Democracy

In "The Social Democratic dilemma", Thomson first sets out to highlight the situation in which Social Democrats found themselves by the late 1990s. Conducting an examination of the main theories which had been published at that time regarding the decline of Social Democracy, Thomson then mapped out the general changes that had occurred within these parties in order to better frame a changing political environment which saw the emergence of a 'new' model of Social Democracy in Europe, in contrast to the 'classic' model which was highlighted in the previous subsection of this paper. This divergence from the 'classic' model, in essence, is what has given rise to the core idea behind his thesis: the existence of a dilemma for Social Democrats:

“The social democratic dilemma lies in the fact that to gain (or regain) office, parties of the social democratic left are having to abandon many of their ideals, and adapt to a changed globalized, advanced market capitalist system. This in itself provides a further dilemma, how to achieve egalitarian policies in an environment which thrives on inequality.”²⁴

The starting point for this analysis lies in the profound change and evolution of the economic system in Europe, from a Fordist and Keynesian system of full-time male employment in primarily industrial communities with national governments employing the economic levers at their disposal, to a globalized, post-Fordist, Neoliberal system based on free markets and characterized by greater social mobility, higher unemployment, technological change, and new forms of competition between firms²⁵. In this sense, Fordism refers to “a specific mode of framing of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation within a specified institutional system and economic regime”²⁶, which is generally understood to have lasted from the 1930s until the mid 1970s²⁷. Under this system, the Keynesian welfare state, the mass production and consumption of standardized goods and services, and the social relations and political processes were interlinked with an overarching accumulation regime of capitalism²⁸. This system was understood to be characterized by several key elements. Firstly, wage relations were based on juridical guarantees, social protections, and distribution of productivity gains²⁹. Secondly, institutions were designed to make possible Keynesian economic policies which softened economic cycles and aimed to achieve full employment³⁰. Thirdly, a democratic system in which the sphere of private rights is extended

²⁴ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, abstract.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Emmanuel Renault. “From Fordism to Post-Fordism: Beyond or Back to Alienation?”, *Critical Horizons* 8, no. 2 (April 2015): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1558/crit.v8i2.205>

²⁷ John Carter and Mary Rayner, “The Curious Case of Post-Fordism and Welfare”, *Journal of Social Policy* 25, no. 3 (1996): 348, doi:10.1017/S0047279400023643

²⁸ John Harris and Catherine McDonald, “Post-Fordism, the Welfare State and the Personal Social Services: A Comparison of Australia and Britain”, *The British Journal of Social Work* 30, no. 1 (February 2000). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23716279>

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Renault, “From Fordism to Post-Fordism”, 207.

into public and social rights has been highlighted as a fundamental characteristic of the Fordist era³¹. For Renault, the combination of these three elements led to “the highest level yet of democracy and social justice”³², where demands from workers’ movements gained a specific social validity. In many ways, the Fordist era was largely compatible with the ideals of ‘classic’ Social Democracy, and parties of the European centre-left found much success in implementing their economic and social reforms across Europe during this period. However, following the economic crises of the 1970s, a profound restructuring of the capitalist accumulation regime occurred in Europe and the West, which changed the Keynesian social welfare regime towards what has been described as a post-Fordist, “mixed economy of welfare”³³. These changes, which emphasized free markets, free trade, and a more limited role of the state, led to profound transformations in the organization of work and in the provision of welfare³⁴. With the abandonment of policies of full employment, the increase in long-term unemployment for a large number of individuals, and the dismantling of social protections, the post-Fordist era was characterized by social polarization, increased poverty, the weakening of social support, and an overall uptick in social exclusion³⁵. In this new age of Neoliberalism, Thomson considers that the ‘classic’ model of Social Democracy was forced to adapt towards a ‘new’ model of Social Democracy and, in the process, accept continuous compromises which diluted the key tenets of its programmatic offer. The effects of these changes for Social Democrats would extend beyond the economic sphere, and according to Thomson, these changes reverberated onto the political, institutional, and sociological environment as well.

³¹ Renault, “From Fordism to Post-Fordism”, 207.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Harris and McDonald, “Post-Fordism, the Welfare State and the Personal Social Services”, 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52

³⁵ Renault, “From Fordism to Post-Fordism”, 207.

Politically, post-Fordism led Social Democrats to find themselves with different policy options and with changing opportunities for successes because of the changing economic conditions and shifting public values of the electorate³⁶. A slew of political changes has been pointed out to reflect this reality, from socio-demographic changes to policy constraints brought on by globalization and increased European integration. Some researchers have argued that Social Democrats faced increased limits to their classic programmatic offers because of these changes³⁷. In addition, public support for redistributive policies and welfare expansion have been shown to change as the need for them changes. Moene and Wallerstein have demonstrated that support for some kinds of welfare spending may increase with increased inequality, while the support for other types of welfare spending may in fact decrease with higher inequality³⁸. In this sense, changing levels of inequality and a transformation of income distribution in the post-Fordist period inevitably led to changing opinions on redistribution and welfare policies, which affected the support that ‘classic’ Social Democratic policies and platforms garnered from the electorate.

Institutionally, an important transformation led my market-driven economics is the changes it triggered in key Social Democratic institutions such as the welfare state and unions³⁹. These are vital institutions for Social Democrats as they are closely associated with the implementation of their policies and their mobilization of their electorate historically, even in France where party links to unions were less developed than elsewhere in Europe. Not only has the creation and

³⁶ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 111.

³⁷ Koen Damhuis and Johannes Karremans, “Responsive to whom? A comparison of the Mitterrand and Hollande presidencies”, *West European Politics* 40, no. 6 (2017): 1271, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1300472>

³⁸ Karl Ove Moene and Michael Wallerstein, “Inequality, Social Insurance, and Redistribution”, *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 4 (December 2001): 859, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3117718>

³⁹ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 111.

expansion of social welfare programs been a central objective of the trade union movement and organized labour, but the subsequent reform and expansion of the welfare state, a defining policy of Social Democrats, have been a key factor in explaining the electoral growth and persistence of these parties of the centre-left in Europe in the Fordist era⁴⁰. Social Democrats have historically established issue ownership over welfare reform and expansion and have typically been perceived by a large number of electors as the best to handle such reforms⁴¹. As for trade unions, they have been shown to play a central role in political mobilization, with survey data from roughly 60 countries finding that union members participate more than non-members across a range of electoral and extra-institutional political acts⁴². Considering that member of trade unions (in addition to the working class) have traditionally been a strong base of support for Social Democrats and for welfare expansion, the decline in unionization across Europe has been directly tied to the fortunes of Social Democratic parties in the post-Fordist era⁴³. In addition, with what a large number of publications on welfare research have called a ‘crisis of the welfare state’ starting in the 1970s, the phase of retrenchment and restructuring of the welfare state which occurred in the post-Fordist period has inevitably led to societal changes which have directly impacted Social Democratic parties and the appeal of their policies⁴⁴.

Sociologically, Thomson states that changing class structure significantly affected Social Democrats, as the decline in blue-collar working-classes and the shift towards white-collar middle-

⁴⁰ Karl Loxbo et. al, “The decline of Western European social democracy: Exploring the transformed link between welfare state generosity and the electoral strength of social democratic parties, 1975–2014”, *Party Politics* 27, no.3 (2021): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819861339>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 427.

⁴³ Jeremy Waddington, “Trade union membership in Europe: The extent of the problem and the range of trade union responses”, ETUI-REHS, 1-2 July, 2005, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/gurn/00287.pdf>

⁴⁴ Klaus Schubert, Simon Hegelich, and Ursula Bazant (Ed.), *The Handbook of the European Welfare Systems* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

classes eroded one of their traditional core electoral groups⁴⁵. With deindustrialization, tertiarization of the workforce, and especially the expansion of education and training across Europe, there was a decline of employment in the skilled and low-skilled industries and a shift towards high-skilled service sectors as part of a massive ‘occupational upgrading’ in the post-Fordist era⁴⁶. For some scholars, the demographic breakdown of one of Social Democrats’ key electoral groups led these parties of the centre-left to build a more heterogenous electoral coalition formed by two distinct groups: members of the dwindling working class, and the left-leaning parts of the growing middle class⁴⁷. Researchers have highlighted the fact that these middle classes essentially became the main electoral potential for Social Democratic parties after the 1970s based on cultural rather than economic-distributive attitudes as was previously the case⁴⁸. As such, while holding clearly pro-welfare preferences, this electoral bloc has been shown to prioritize issues of cultural liberalism above economic-distributive ones⁴⁹. Despite this, no comparative studies have been able to demonstrate a link between progressive cultural values of Social Democratic parties and declining support from working-class voters. Instead, there appears to be more evidence to suggest that Social Democratic parties with less progressive cultural values are more likely to lose support from younger, highly educated and professional voters who are part of the middle class⁵⁰. While recognizing that middle-class voters have been shown to prioritize issues of cultural

⁴⁵ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 111.

⁴⁶ Jane Gingrich and Silja Häusermann, “The decline of the working-class vote, the reconfiguration of the welfare support coalition and consequences for the welfare state”, *Journal of European Social Policy* 25, no. 1 (2015): 52.

⁴⁷ Achim Hildebrandt & Sebastian Jäckle, “The shifting classbase of social democratic parties in Western Europe”, *European Politics and Society* (2021): 2.

⁴⁸ See Gingrich and Häusermann, “The decline of the working-class vote”; Ronald Inglehart, “The Changing Structure of Political Cleavages in Western Society”, in *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment*, ed. Russell J. Dalton, Scott C. Flanagan, and Paul Allen Beck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Herbert Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Simon Bornschier, *Cleavage Politics and the Populist Right: The New Cultural Conflict in Western Europe* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Gingrich and Häusermann, “The decline of the working-class vote”, 52.

⁵⁰ Tarik Abou-Chadi and Markus Wagner, “Electoral fortunes of social democratic parties: do second dimension positions matter?”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 259. doi:10.1080/13501763.2019.1701532

liberalism over economic issues, there remains broad support for Social Democratic parties amongst electors holding pro-welfare positions⁵¹. While individuals with high redistribution positions are 70 percent more likely to vote for leftist parties, this goes both ways, as Social Democratic voters have been shown to be overwhelmingly in favour of redistribution as well⁵². However, even though the poor and working classes have been shown to be overwhelmingly in favour of redistribution⁵³, there remains a pronounced restructuring of class voting since the 1960s and 1970s as Social Democrats suffered significant electoral losses during this era among its traditional working class voting bloc, with many heading to the Far-Right in particular⁵⁴. This presents a significant challenge to Social Democrats seeking to bring these voters back and prevent the realignment of voting blocs⁵⁵.

In the face of these profound transformations, Thomson explains that Social Democrats adapted by adopting economic policies evolving around creating a stable macroeconomic framework instead of increasing spending or taxation aimed at reinforcing the provision of public services⁵⁶. This, however, presented them with a profound dilemma regarding their programmatic offer. On one hand, they could follow the direction of their economic policy, which would imply lowering social costs and wages for the economy to compete internationally, but which would contradict the original goals and values of the ‘classic’ model of Social Democracy⁵⁷. On the other hand, they could instead aim to improve social services and social security payments to help the poorest in

⁵¹ David Rueda and Daniel Stegmueller, *Who Wants What? Redistribution preferences in comparative perspective* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2019), 187. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108681339>

⁵² Polacko, “The rightward shift and electoral decline of social democratic parties under increasing inequality”, 668.

⁵³ Rueda and Stegmueller, *Who Wants What?*, 187.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Gingrich and Häusermann, “The decline of the working-class vote”.

⁵⁶ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

society and reduce inequality in line with the values of ‘classic’ Social Democracy, which would increase social costs, taxation, and wages and contradict their economic policy⁵⁸. This, in essence, is the dilemma facing Social Democrats. The new economic environment of the post-Fordist era, which demanded economic and social policies which coincided with market flexibility, is largely incompatible with a Social Democratic agenda of redistributive social policy, higher taxation, pro-union labour laws, minimum standards of employment, and an active and generous welfare state⁵⁹.

As a result, by attempting to adapt to this new environment, Social Democrats have found themselves in the midst of an identity crisis. Faced with this existential dilemma, European Social Democratic parties like the French PS increasingly adopted policies which embraced elements of Neoliberalism and, in the process, compromised their core values and beliefs. Essentially, these parties have begun moving away from the ‘classic’ model of Social Democracy and closer towards the ‘new’ model of Social Democracy by embracing market-friendly policies and supply-side economic reforms. This phenomenon is further validated by the literature on the topic, which has continued to observe this trend in the 2000s and 2010s. Lipset described what he calls the “Americanization of the European left”, with his analysis of party manifestos presenting clear evidence of a gradual movement of European Social Democratic parties towards the ideological centre and their abandonment of many distinctly traditional leftist positions⁶⁰. Evans and Tilley, for their part, described the phenomenon in Western Europe of Social Democratic parties increasingly moving to the centre ground to become catch-all parties as a way of both offsetting the decline of their traditional class base and mobilizing new constituencies from the middle

⁵⁸ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Americanization of the European Left”, *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 2 (April 2001): 76.

class⁶¹. Similarly, Polacko agreed that European Social Democratic parties had shifted to the right and demonstrated that this had in fact contributed to eroding support from their core constituencies at the ballot box⁶². In this sense, contemporary Social Democratic parties face a problem of party identification, as the weakening of their adherence to their core beliefs and values has made them unable to offer a distinct alternative vision. For Thomson, this has led to a crisis of Social Democracy and a collapse of large segments of these parties' traditional electoral base.

This subsection provided an overview of the societal changes which have led European Social Democratic parties to move towards a new model of Social Democracy in the post-Fordist era. With profound economic, political, institutional, and sociological changes occurring after the economic crises of the 1970s, Social Democrats found themselves in an existential dilemma where they have had to adapt to this new environment by abandoning many of their core policies, leading to an identity crisis which has materialized at the ballot box. From this point, the question remains as to what extent the evolution of the PS since 1998 follows patterns of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Theoretical Framework Overview

This section provided a breakdown of the theoretical framework used by Thomson in 'The Social Democratic dilemma'. It reviewed the key arguments of his thesis and linked them to the French context and the history of the PS up until 1997. The first subsection broke down the conceptual basis behind his argument which rests on the idea of a 'classic' model of Social Democracy as well

⁶¹ Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, "The Depoliticization of Inequality and Redistribution: Explaining the Decline of Class Voting", *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 964. doi:10.1017/S0022381612000618

⁶² Polacko, "The rightward shift and electoral decline of social democratic parties under increasing inequality", 684.

as a ‘southern’ variant applicable to France. The second subsection deconstructed the main arguments behind the theory of the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’ involving the transition of countries like France towards ‘new’ Social Democracy and the accompanied challenges left-of-centre parties faced with the changes brought about in the post-Fordist era. Combined, these subsections have laid out the theoretical foundation to understand today’s PS from a historical perspective. From here, questions remain as to the extent to which this dilemma has applied to the PS post-1997, and whether this can explain its recent electoral difficulties. Indeed, Thomson’s observations of the party stopped at the start of Lionel Jospin’s tenure as Prime Minister of France. Thomson noted how, even from the start, Jospin showed signs of embracing ‘new’ Social Democracy, but his analysis did not span past 1997 and, hence, relied on the available evidence at the time. As a result, it is imperative to look into the evolution of the PS in the decades which followed the publication of Thomson’s work in order to determine whether his predictions of Social Democrats’ trajectory lined up with actual developments after the publication of his work.

Literature Analysis

The present literature analysis has the goal of better contextualizing and adapting Thomson’s findings considering the changes experienced by the French PS in the years after the publication of his theory in 1998. It aims at providing a brief yet focused overview of the French PS in the more than two decades since the publication of his work to better situate the changes experienced by the party. Ultimately, this section will serve as the first step in determining whether it can be argued that the party followed what Thomson predicted would be the path of Social Democratic parties because of their embrace of ‘new’ Social Democracy.

This literature analysis was conducted using various databases such as JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Cairn, Cambridge University Press, Proquest, and the Library of the University of Ottawa's OMNI search tool. These databases were selected for their repertoire of peer-reviewed journals, publications, and books, for their variety of different sources, as well as for their advanced search options, giving a more precise overview of the relevant references on the topic. The timespan for this research was broadly defined as the period of the French Fifth Republic, the current constitutional regime of France, which spans from 1958 until today. More precisely, when discussing in more detail the evolution of the French PS since the publication of Thomson's work, the timespan of our literature search was reduced to the period spanning from 1998 until today. The themes and topics which were targeted by this literature search include the broader study of French politics, the specifics of the French PS and in particular the Jospin government and the Hollande and Mitterrand presidencies, voting patterns and voter affiliations, demographic changes within the French electorate, electoral and economic records of French governments, left-wing ideology in France, and factionalism within political parties.

This section will be broken down in a manner which is closely inspired by Thomson's approach to analyzing the record in government of the mainstream left of centre parties in Europe. In chapter 6 of 'The Social Democratic dilemma', Thomson considers a series of measures of success which relate to the aims of Social Democracy. For him, the most important measure of success for Social Democratic parties lies in the political realm. While a party which can set the terms of its agenda can inevitably be considered successful, adhering to someone else's framework is, for him, a clear sign of failure⁶³. In line with this, he considers two broad categories of success which inevitably affect their performance in the political realm: electoral and intellectual measures of success on

⁶³ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 277.

one hand, and economic and social measures of success on the other. These two categories closely relate to Thomson's analysis of Social Democratic parties' records in government later in the chapter, which provides evidence of failures of Social Democrats who held office in the 1980s on these two fronts because of their steady embrace of 'new' Social Democracy. Additionally, Thomson also considers the failure of Social Democrats' electoral coalition because of their move towards the centre, using New Labour as a case study to demonstrate the highly heterogeneous, volatile, and fragile electoral coalition which he predicts awaits other parties which follow a similar path. From here, our literature analysis of the French PS will also analyze the strength of the PS' electoral coalition, and whether we can observe patterns of shifting class support and electoral volatility since 1998. This section will ultimately seek to demonstrate whether the party's ideological shifts have materialized towards 'new' Social Democracy after the publishing of Thomson's work in 1998, and whether the literature considers that the record in government of the PS under Jospin and Hollande is consistent with what Thomson predicted. This literature analysis will thus be broken down into three sub-sections: electoral and intellectual success, economic and social success, and strength of the electoral coalition.

Electoral and Intellectual Success

Thomson outlined a series of three electoral and intellectual indicators that he considers to be key in assessing the success of European Social Democratic parties⁶⁴. The first key measure relates to the ability of a party to form a government. According to Thomson, if a Social Democratic party is the largest party on the left, or if it is regularly able to hold a position within government, it will be provided with enhanced opportunities for electoral success. Likewise, if it is seen as important by outside groups, it will enjoy media coverage which will aid and sustain its political presence. The second key measure relates to the intellectual cohesiveness of a party. This implies that an ideologically unified party will undoubtedly have more sway in the setting of the political agenda, whilst a party which is prone to factionalism and internal divisions will negatively affect its electoral appeal and therefore its ability to set the political agenda. The third key measure relates to a party's ability to retain its vote share or of a position in government. This ability implies that if a Social Democratic party can be construed as one that can still present itself as an alternative government when it is out of office, it is much more likely to impact the political agenda. From this, this subsection will closely rely on these three measures to determine whether the PS has shown patterns of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Writing in *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Cole has outlined the fact that the French PS has been defined both by its long periods in government office and by its attempts to reconcile radical reformism with government experience⁶⁵. Indeed, for most of the duration of the French Fifth Republic, the party has consistently alternated in and out of government as it has sought to balance its radical reformist tradition in a strategic and instrumental manner. In this sense, a key

⁶⁴ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 277.

⁶⁵ Alistair Cole, "The French Socialist Party and its Radical Ambiguity", *French Politics, Culture & Society* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 45.

characteristic of the French PS which can be highlighted is its near-constant struggle for the soul of the party between two movements, or *courants*: a radical and revolutionary socialism on one hand, and a more moderate and reformist *deuxième gauche* ('second left') which embraces the market economy and economic liberalism on the other⁶⁶. For Clift and McDaniel, the primary function of the parties of the Fifth Republic is to act as a springboard for a presidential candidacy due to the inherent nature of the French Semi-Presidential system⁶⁷. As a result, they highlight how the PS has adapted to this institutional environment by operating under a form of presidentialized factionalism where the pressure exerted by the desire to govern pushes its various *courants* and factions behind a single candidate to have a shot at forming government⁶⁸. In addition to the party's internal ideological struggles, Sferza states that the party must simultaneously convince the communist and far-left electorate of their left credentials and intent whilst expanding horizontally outside of the traditional left bloc by attracting moderate voters⁶⁹. In these circumstances, instead of steering the party into a clear direction, Sferza argues that the societal and institutional nature of the Fifth Republic pulls the PS in two opposite directions. While moving in only one of these directions would be insufficient for electoral success, taken together, they are a recipe for what he describes as "incoherence and paralysis"⁷⁰. For Grunberg and Bergounioux, the tensions between the party's two ideological camps have created the definitional relationship within the PS as a party of government. On one hand, the PS is defined by its ambition for governmental power, while, on the other hand, it must continually deal with the remorse from its left flank at the realities of

⁶⁶ Ben Clift and Sean McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different? Hollande, the rise of Macron, and the reconfiguration of the left in the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections", *Modern & Contemporary France* 25, no. 4 (2017): 405.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Sferza, "Party Organization and Party Performance", 170.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

governmental compromise⁷¹. This can be related back to the findings seen in the first section of this paper, which highlighted that the ability of the party's leader to unite the PS behind their strategic vision whilst rallying the radical elements of the French left are often prerequisites to the party's electoral success. As outlined by Clift and McDaniel, uniting behind a candidate is one thing, but remaining united in the face of the compromises and failures of government leads to even more significant challenges⁷². Because of this, Grunberg and Bergounioux have theorized of three recurring cycles in the stages of French Socialism: (1) a foundation (or re-foundation), characterized by leftist doctrinal orthodoxy, (2) the compromises of holding public office, and (3) the feeling of political failure and rejection of that government thereafter⁷³. This, in essence, points to an unstable pattern for the PS, where holding office is typically followed by divisions, infighting, and collapse. This cycle can be observed time after time during the French Fifth Republic.

François Mitterrand was arguably the most successful leader of the party during the Fifth Republic for his ability to unite his party and the French left behind his leadership. Towards the end of his second mandate, however, the PS experienced its biggest electoral defeat in its history up to that point, pushing the party's leaders to re-evaluate their economic strategy and engage in a process of auto-critique which involved a challenge to the dominant neoliberal orthodoxy of the time⁷⁴. In contrast, after years away from power following the Mitterrand Presidency, the party, under the leadership of Lionel Jospin, attempted to adapt its policies to the changing socioeconomic context by striking a balance between more liberal economic policies with a commitment to Social Democracy. This was done, at first, to contrast what was happening across the English Channel in

⁷¹ Gérard Grunberg and Alain Bergounioux, *Les socialistes français et le pouvoir: L'ambition et le remord* (Paris : Fayard, 2007), 7-9.

⁷² Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 405.

⁷³ Grunberg and Bergounioux, *Les socialistes français et le pouvoir*, 10.

⁷⁴ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 154.

Britain, where a turn to the centre and an embrace of Neoliberalism had been undertaken by Tony Blair and his 'New Labour' government at the time⁷⁵. The strong showing of Lionel Jospin in the 1995 presidential election provided him with the authority within his party to push for a series of bilateral deals with smaller parties in what was baptized the 'plural left'⁷⁶. This coalition, which Bell considers having largely imitated Mitterrand's Socialist-Communist alliance of the 1970s (with the addition of other smaller leftist parties such as the Greens), allowed Jospin to become the leader of the left and, soon after, Prime Minister of France in 1997⁷⁷. However, the internal tensions of the union proved ultimately debilitating, as Jospin's rhetorical commitment to left-wing radicalism, which had initially allowed him to resolve the differences in the coalition, became increasingly incompatible with the government's actual policies⁷⁸. While Jospin initially sought to distance himself from Tony Blair's 'Third Way' politics, which Thomson classifies as 'new' Social Democracy⁷⁹, Levy considers that Jospin's 'new left' eventually became interchangeable with 'Third Way' politics on a policy level despite its leftist rhetoric⁸⁰. On this point, Bell argues that the abandoning of many traditional views by the PS when in government of what we have previously described as 'classic' Social Democracy (for example, embracing privatizations, pushing for more flexible labour laws, and trying to give a progressive twist to Neoliberal ideas) discredited the party in the eyes of many on the left and led to resentment amongst its electorate and its coalition partners⁸¹. As a result, this opened the PS up to internal

⁷⁵ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 154.

⁷⁶ D.S. Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 2 (2003): 80.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*.

⁸⁰ Jonathan D. Levy, "Partisan politics and welfare adjustment: the case of France", *Journal of European Public Policy* 8, no. 2 (2001): 271.

⁸¹ Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 80.

divisions and opponents on its left⁸². In addition, Di Francesco-Mayot argues that the disagreements amongst faction leaders within the PS regarding the party's ideological and programmatic commitments affected the party's image as well as its ability to convince the electorate that it offered a viable and distinct program⁸³. In the 2002 election, faced with a disunited left and a fractured party, Jospin attempted to target the centre by convincing Conservative and Liberal voters that the project he was advocating was "not a Socialist one", a strategy which Bell considers having been much more in line with US Democrats than with European Social Democrats⁸⁴. In the end, Mareek highlights the failure on all fronts of this strategy, as Jospin simultaneously alienated his own voters while failing to convince his new target audience⁸⁵, therefore eliminating from the second round of the presidential election⁸⁶. With Jospin's failed candidacy for President and the collapse of the 'plural left' coalition between the PS, the Greens, the PCF, the Radicals, and the Chevènement's Citizens' Movement, the French left found itself in what Bell describes as "a worse condition than at any time since the 1960s"⁸⁷. In this sense, it was the party's lack of ideological and intellectual cohesiveness and subsequent inability of Jospin to retain his initial broad electoral coalition with the left which led to the party's downfall.

It would take a decade and two more unsuccessful attempts at the presidency for the PS to return to power, this time with both a parliamentary majority and the presidency in hand. A common element which has been identified in the literature behind Hollande's victory in 2012 is the strength of the protest vote against the unpopular outgoing President from the right, Nicolas Sarkozy, as

⁸² Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 80.

⁸³ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 153.

⁸⁴ Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 81.

⁸⁵ Philippe J. Mareek, "Political Communication and the Unexpected Outcome of the 2002 French Presidential Elections", *Journal of Political Marketing* 2, no. 2 (2003): 16.

⁸⁶ Mareek, "Political Communication", 16.

⁸⁷ Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 77.

opposed to the actual appeal of Hollande and his party platform⁸⁸. Kuhn considers that Hollande greatly benefitted from the unpopularity of Sarkozy, whose record of policy achievements was badly damaged by the economic and financial crisis during his time in office⁸⁹. Alternatively, Hollande's decisive association with the centre-left, which allowed him to balance both the leftist elements of the party with the need to appeal to the centre ground, is considered by Grunberg to have been a crucial element behind the unification of his party and, subsequently, his win in 2012⁹⁰. Clift and McDaniel argue that Hollande's commitment to renegotiating a new Euro-Keynesian architecture within the eurozone and his anti-finance rhetoric of tackling the power of global financial capital, which they described as the typical "Socialist doctrinal orthodoxy" of the party, was very welcomed by the PS rank-and-file⁹¹. While this leftist discourse and the inclusion of some symbolic leftist measures within his sixty campaign commitments allowed him to unify his party, Grunberg argues that his main commitment to reduce the budget deficit to 3 percent by 2013 and bring it to balance by 2017 in line with European objectives gave him a pro-European stance which also provided him with a centrist appeal that facilitated his win in the presidential election⁹². Once in power, however, Clift and McDaniel consider that Hollande's more leftist and radical pledges were faced with the realities of governing and the contradictions they presented with his more centrist policies and pledges⁹³. For Brizzi, Hollande's policies in office prioritized budgetary austerity, economic competitiveness, and structural reform⁹⁴. For Damhuis and Karremans,

⁸⁸ Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 77.

⁸⁹ Raymond Kuhn, "Mister Unpopular: François Hollande and the Exercise of Presidential Leadership, 2012–14", *Modern & Contemporary France* 22, no. 4 (2014): 438.

⁹⁰ Grunberg and Bergounioux, *Les socialistes français et le pouvoir*, 406.

⁹¹ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 406.

⁹² Gérard Grunberg, "The Year of the Rose: The Socialist Victory of 2012", in *France after 2012*, ed. Gabriel Goodliffe and Riccardo Brizzi (New York/Oxford : Berghan Books, 2015), 79-80.

⁹³ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 406.

⁹⁴ Riccardo Brizzi, "Conclusion. Assessing the Hollande Presidency One Year into Office", in *France After 2012*, ed. Gabriel Goodliffe and Riccardo Brizzi (New York/Oxford : Berghan Books, 2015), 196.

empirical data demonstrates that justifications of the government's policies centred on the traditional Social Democratic commitment of redistributing wealth across society was much lower for Hollande than under Mitterrand and were largely absent during the central part of his term⁹⁵. As a result of Hollande and his Prime Minister Manuel Valls' embrace of post-Fordist economics once in government, discontent from the PS' left flank grew into a full-on parliamentary rebellion nicknamed the '*Frondeurs*', which saw over 50 members of the parliamentary party in the National Assembly break from the party line⁹⁶. Not only was it a clear illustration of deep divisions within the PS, but it was also indicative of a party which was, once again, without a clear and unified ideological vision. For Di Francesco-Mayot, François Hollande failed to develop and implement a clear, consistent, and practical political and economic strategy, and was unable to project an image of an effective leader in the public sphere⁹⁷. This left the PS in shambles, with Hollande renouncing to stand for re-election in the 2017 election as the party faced dismal poll numbers. For Martin, this *droitisation*, or 'rightification' of the PS on both economic and social policy can be highlighted as a central element of the party's declining electoral support under Hollande. In this sense, this phenomenon directly contributed to the growing disillusionment with democracy and to the delegitimizing of left-wing political discourse in France, which in turn has led to higher abstention rates in subsequent elections⁹⁸. The rise of an insurgent centrist movement led by the young and charismatic Emmanuel Macron, the party's former economy minister who quit the PS in August of 2016, further pushed French Socialism to the breaking point. As Macron had the ability to embrace post-Fordist economic policies without the same inconsistencies seen by the PS,

⁹⁵ Koen Damhuis and Johannes Karremans, "Responsive to whom? A comparison of the Mitterrand and Hollande presidencies", *West European Politics* 40, no. 6 (2017): 1276

⁹⁶ Frédéric Sawicki, "PS : un parti en ordre de bataille, mais sans bataillons", *Esprit* 416, no. 7 (July 2015) : 82.

⁹⁷ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 156-157.

⁹⁸ Éric Fassin, *Gauche : l'avenir d'une désillusion* (Paris : Textuel, 2014).

he was able to better attract members of the PS's 'Social Liberal' wing towards his movement⁹⁹. Meanwhile, the emergence of *La France Insoumise* under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who also quit the PS and whom Clift & McDaniel describe as "hell-bent" on "destroying" the party he once adhered to, presented a viable far left alternative to the divided PS which threatened the party's leftist electorate¹⁰⁰. With the PS candidates for President in 2017 and 2022 being squeezed out on both sides by Macron and Mélenchon, the party faced an existential threat to its existence. In this context, the party ultimately agreed to an electoral union with the left as a junior partner under the leadership of Mélenchon in the 2022 legislative elections. This new phase of renewal on the French left may have, at least for now, marginalized the PS following its electoral collapse in 2017.

This literature analysis of the PS' intellectual and electoral performance has outlined how the party has been defined by important electoral and intellectual challenges since 1998. Faced with profound internal divisions in its attempt to balance traditional Social Democratic values with post-Fordist policies while in power in the last two decades, the party has consistently experienced electoral collapse after its first terms in office as seen under Jospin and Hollande. This analysis provides evidence to support the idea that the modern-day PS faces an important weakening of its adherence to its historical Social Democratic roots according to the 'classic' model, which has led to intellectual inconsistencies, factionalism, and ideological divisions within the party. While its leaders employed a more radical and leftist discourse more closely aligned with 'classic' Social Democracy in order to win power, their simultaneous embrace of market-friendly policies in line with 'new' Social Democracy can be clearly observed under Jospin and Hollande. While both

⁹⁹ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 404.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Socialist leaders were initially able to form wide-enough electoral coalitions to win power in a similar manner as Mitterrand, the ideological gap between their rhetorical commitments and their policies while in office has inevitably led to the erosion of the PS' intellectual distinctiveness and to the fragilization of the party's electoral coalition as evidenced by their crushing defeats in 2002 and 2017. Hollande is a clear case in which external events, rather than the party's platform, appear to have provided the main impetus for electoral victory in 2012, which further illustrates both the erosion of the party's intellectual distinctiveness and the fragilization of its electoral base. Ultimately, since 1998, many of the patterns of the 'Social Democratic dilemma' can be observed for the PS when it comes to its intellectual and electoral circumstances. Before 1998, the PS was typically able to unite and maintain its dominant position as the main figure of the left despite the intellectual and ideological divisions it faced, which allowed it to continue to aspire to form government. However, since the 1990s, it became increasingly apparent that the party has faced significant electoral and intellectual challenges which have left it in an existential crisis.

Economic and Social Success

Thomson outlined a series of measures of economic and social success for Social Democratic parties which are noteworthy¹⁰¹. While some differences are to be noted between 'classic' and 'new' Social Democracy, both models share economic and social measures of success which broadly revolve around these parties' ability to ensure high levels of employment, improved equality in society in terms of wealth, power, and income, widely available public services, and overall success in cultivating a social and economic environment which suits the expectations of the electorate. It is considering these aims that the transition towards post-Fordism has led

¹⁰¹ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 278-280.

European Social Democratic parties to leave office with disappointing economic and social records, as Thomson considers that these policies do not effectively reach these core objectives which serve as the cornerstone of Social Democracy. In light of these measures of success, this subsection look into the record in government of the PS on economic and social issues since 1998 to determine the party's ability to achieve its key economic and social aims. As Jospin's time in office was part of a cohabitation government under a President issued from the right, his time in office is less representative than when Hollande was in power, as he commanded both the Presidency and a majority in the National Assembly. As a result, this subsection will provide a brief literature overview of Hollande's economic and social record in government.

The literature has provided a clear picture of the PS' economic and social record under François Hollande between 2012 and 2017. At the time of Hollande's election, France faced rising interest rates, faltering growth, rising unemployment, and an economic recession which brought significant challenges to the newly elected President¹⁰². Indeed, at the time of his election, France had undergone a global financial and Eurozone crises which saw public debt grow from about 65 percent in the mid-2000s up to 89.6 percent in 2012, public deficit swell from 2.8 percent to 5.3 percent between 2008 and 2012, and the downgrading of its 'AAA' sovereign bond credit rating by Standard and Poor's in 2012¹⁰³. Comparing Hollande's economic pledges to Mitterrand's, Di Francesco-Mayot outlines how the new President came into office with promises to address France's economic woes by tackling the eurozone crisis, stimulating France's economic growth, and reversing the tide of France's rising unemployment through activist fiscal policy which

¹⁰² Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 406.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

resembled Mitterrand's platform¹⁰⁴. In addition, Hollande had pledged to move Europe away from austerity policies and transform the European Union's economic policy architecture by renegotiating critical elements of the EU settlement towards a more Keynesian-inspired economic settlement¹⁰⁵. Clift & McDaniel outline how Hollande's time as President, instead, saw significant programmatic failings in his economic and social policy, which led to his failure to fill these key electoral pledges. Firstly, Holland initially attempted to apply policies which complied with both his anti-austerity discourse and his promise to cut France's deficit and debt in line with EU targets, which he attempted through progressively oriented tax increases (as opposed to cuts). Instead, he eventually had to shift his macroeconomic policy in the face of the dire economic situation. In this sense, as these policies were not sufficient to achieve his goals, Hollande felt the need to accept an enhanced role for liberalizing supply-side reforms, tax cuts and tax credits for businesses, and fiscal consolidation in the form of spending cutbacks worth over €50 billion¹⁰⁶. While the initial 'tax shock' of his tax increases, the largest increase in taxation in post-war French history¹⁰⁷, was responsible for slowing down French economic growth even further, his subsequent introduction of tax cuts for businesses in 2014 had yet to translate into significant job growth by the end of his term¹⁰⁸. Secondly, Hollande's radical pledges to renegotiate key European treaties opened a damaging chasm between his campaign rhetoric and the realities of governance, as his economic strategy had placed great emphasis on his commitment to the anti-austerity reorientation of Europe which Germany was likely never to accept. As a result, Hollande quickly had to renounce one of his major economic pledges when he was forced to sign the Fiscal Compact into French organic

¹⁰⁴ Di Francesco-Mayot, "The French Parti socialiste (2010-16)", 157.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 407.

¹⁰⁷ Xavier Ragot, "Le désajustement européen", *Problèmes économiques: Crise, croissance et modèle social* (November 2014): 23.

¹⁰⁸ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 407.

law without modification, as it had already been negotiated prior to his election as President by his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy¹⁰⁹. Thirdly, against the difficult economic backdrop characterized by low economic growth in which France found itself, Hollande was unable to keep his promise of reversing the trend of rising unemployment¹¹⁰. Kuhn outlines that the structural constraints of France's comparative lack of international competitiveness among advanced economies, the low levels of growth of other Eurozone economies, and the inability to devalue its national currency in a bid to improve its export competitiveness and balance of payments strongly limited its ability to ensure economic growth at levels which are considered necessary to reduce unemployment¹¹¹. While Hollande's implementation of policy measures which aimed to help those seeking work did have the effect of slowing down the rise of unemployment, Milner considers that these did not have the desired effect on its progression on the longer term¹¹².

Ultimately, the literature appears clear in how the Hollande presidency was characterized by significant economic failures. Faced with a dire economic environment characterized by high unemployment and an economic recession, Hollande attempted to address France's economic woes all while pushing forward with an economic policy which was anti-austerity and Keynesian-inspired. In the face of the realities of governing, however, Hollande reversed course on his Social Democratic economic platform and instead implemented market-friendly policies and supply-side reforms in line with post-Fordist ideology, in sharp contrast with his leftist rhetoric and soft commitment to Social Democracy during the campaign. Furthermore, this conflicting economic

¹⁰⁹ Clift and McDaniel, "Is this crisis of French socialism different?", 407.

¹¹⁰ Kuhn, "Mister Unpopular", 441.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 441-442.

¹¹² Susan Milner, "Employment and labour market policy during the Hollande presidency: a tragedy in three acts?", *Modern & Contemporary France* 25, no. 4 (October 2017): 430.

policy did not solve the important economic problems faced by France, as it did not lead to lower unemployment and instead directly contributed to lowering French economic growth due to the initial tax shock of his income tax increase, putting France even further away from reaching the economic and social the goals of Social Democrats. As a result, Hollande's economic and social record in government is marred by significant failures. His legacy on this front has inevitably impacted the party's ability to retain its fragile electoral coalition in the following election, while his inability to push through with a coherent economic vision which was consistent with the party's leftist identity can easily be tied to the PS' problem of party identification after 2017.

This subsection reviewed the PS' record on economic and social policy during Hollande's term in office. It provided evidence to support the idea that the modern-day PS had faced significant inconsistencies between its rhetoric and its actual economic policy when in office. The party's time in power during the Holland Presidency was marred by important economic failings and ideological inconsistencies which led to serious failings on an economic level. While Hollande's rhetoric emphasized the tenets of the 'classic' model of Social Democracy, he not only failed to deliver on these promises, but was also unable to reverse course on France's economic woes. As a result, the PS' time in office after 1998 demonstrates that the party has followed many of the elements laid out by the 'Social Democratic dilemma' when it comes to its economic and social record in government.

Strength of the Electoral Coalition

In discussing the strength and makeup of European Social Democrats' electoral coalitions, the decline of the blue-collar working-class is an important factor in understanding the changing nature

of these parties' electoral bases as part of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'¹¹³. This erosion of the working-class vote has generally pushed European Social Democratic parties to attempt to expand their electoral bases to include new social groups to make up for the fragilization of what was once one a larger and more stable core group of supporters. However, in attempting to attract new electorates through an embrace of the centre ground in line with the 'new' model Social Democracy, Thomson predicted that Social Democrats would experience increasingly volatile electorates while increasingly alienating the popular and working-class support for their party. In this context, our analysis will attempt to determine whether a similar fragilization and erosion of the PS' electoral coalition and abandonment of the working classes, as theorized by Thomson, has been observed within the party by the literature in order to assess the strength of the party's base of support in the decades after the publishing of Thomson's work.

The decline of the working-class electorate in Europe in the last few decades has been well documented in the literature. Gingrich and Häusermann have outlined how structural changes like deindustrialization and the tertiarization of the workforce have led to a transformation of the European electorate through a decline of employment in the skilled and low-skilled industries, which has caused an impressive decline in the working-class electorate¹¹⁴. Adding to this observation, Beaud and Pialoux discuss the 'destructuration' of the working and industrial classes in France, which have progressively become depoliticized and silenced by the loss of their political and union representation¹¹⁵. At the same time, this social group has experienced increasingly heterogenous social realities which, according to Lefebvre, has led to the decline of their position

¹¹³ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 98.

¹¹⁴ Gingrich and Häusermann, "The decline of the working-class vote", 52-53.

¹¹⁵ Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, "Pourquoi la gauche a-t-elle perdu les classes populaires ?", *Savoir/Agir* 4, no. 34 (2015): 64-65.

as a unified voting bloc¹¹⁶. The decline in class voting, however, does not appear to be limited to the working classes, nor is it only affecting Social Democratic parties. Mair has written extensively on the fragilization of electoral coalitions and the increase in electoral volatility in Western democracies overall¹¹⁷. With an increase in popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics, a growing political indifference and volatility at the ballot box for citizens who remain engaged, and the decline in voting loyalties and party membership, he considers that party politics have been profoundly weakened as voting patterns have become increasingly unpredictable in recent years¹¹⁸. Noting the pronounced demographic decline in the working-class constituencies, Mair has also stated that the homogeneity of political preferences within the remaining class cohorts has also been lost¹¹⁹. In this sense, political parties in Western democratic states, whether Social Democratic or not, have had to face off with increasingly fragile electoral coalitions in recent years. As a result of these demographic transformations and overall decrease in voter loyalties, scholars such as Gingrich and Häusermann have echoed Thomson's assessment that Social Democrats have turned their attention towards parts of the middle class to compensate for declining working-class support and the fragilization of their traditional voting bloc¹²⁰. The question remains as to how closely these realities line up with France and its specific political context.

As highlighted previously in section 1, French Social Democracy has never been characterized by an over-reliance on the working classes. Instead, while parties like the PS did have important bases

¹¹⁶ Rémi Lefebvre, "Le socialisme français et la « classe ouvrière »", *Nouvelles FondationS* 1, no. 1 (2006): 65.

¹¹⁷ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void : The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013), chapter 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹²⁰ Gingrich and Häusermann, "The decline of the working-class vote", 53.

of support within the popular and working classes, it has typically aimed at creating a ‘class front’ of people from varying social classes as part of its electoral coalition. Escalona outlined how the sociological base of the PS, which has not historically been a mass party with formal links with unions, has always remained fairly heterogenous¹²¹. While the party often fought side-by-side with leftist and unionist militants and regularly encouraged the dual Socialist/unionist partisan identity, it simultaneously cultivated strong links with socially influential intermediaries (teachers, the feminist movement, leftist Christians, human rights organizations, etc.) while providing a privileged place in the party to intellectual professions in its attempt to forge a ‘class front’ between the working and middle classes under the leadership of its first President, François Mitterrand¹²². Echoing this, Conan has highlighted that when the PS came to power in 1981, the bulk of its electorate was in fact made up of workers and public sector employees¹²³. In contrast, by 2002, the PS’ leader, Lionel Jospin, garnered the support of only 11 per cent of workers and 14 per cent of the unemployed (which was far behind both the Far-Right and the Gaullist right’s figures) while winning over 24 per cent support from the managerial class¹²⁴. Additionally, under Jospin’s leadership, only half of PS supporters and a third of non-PS leftist supporters voted for the PS in 2002, while the party trailed the Gaullist right for every age group except the under 25s and the intermediate professions and employees¹²⁵. Cole considers that, at that time, the PS faced a historic collapse of its working-class support under the leadership of Jospin. He points to the fact that Jospin oversaw a significant transformation of the party’s electoral coalition away from Mitterrand’s, which had been composed mainly of the new middle classes and the popular

¹²¹ Escalona, “France”, 29.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹²³ Eric Conan, *La gauche sans le peuple* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 11.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Bell, “The French left after the 2002 elections”, 81.

electorate¹²⁶. For Conan, this situation is unsurprising given that Jospin's strategy in 2002 had been to target the middle-class electorate specifically¹²⁷, while, as outlined by Bell, the party had abandoned its reference to workers during the campaign¹²⁸. For Cole, the PS has never fully recovered from this divorce with the popular electorate, and the party's continued discursive radicalism has not been able to reverse this¹²⁹. The PS' candidate for President in 2007, Ségolène Royal, performed better than Jospin did in 2002 amongst the traditional segments of the left electorate where Jospin lost significant support, but this did not signify a revival of Mitterrand's electoral coalition, as Royal remained far behind the party's showing in 1981 and 1988 for key segments of the population which made up Mitterrand's electoral coalition¹³⁰.

The PS' electoral campaign under the leadership of François Hollande in 2012 allowed the party to regain a parliamentary majority for the first time in a decade and win the presidency for the first time since 1988. Hollande did fairly well in the election in absolute terms, securing the psychological advantage of coming ahead of the incumbent, Nicolas Sarkozy, in the first round and defeating him in the second round by a margin reminiscent of Mitterrand's margin over Giscard d'Estaing in 1981¹³¹. However, researchers have outlined a very fragile electoral coalition behind these numbers. Sineau and Cautrès point out that in the second round, almost one third of the votes for Hollande were cast principally to stop Sarkozy winning a subsequent term¹³². Similarly, Ballet emphasized the importance of the register of 'indignation' against Sarkozy in

¹²⁶ Cole, "The French Socialist Party and its Radical Ambiguity", 44.

¹²⁷ Conan, *La gauche sans le peuple*, 24.

¹²⁸ Bell, "The French left after the 2002 elections", 81.

¹²⁹ Cole, "The French Socialist Party and its Radical Ambiguity", 44.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Kuhn, "Mister Unpopular", 438.

¹³² Mariette Sineau and B. Cautrès, "Les Attentes vis-à-vis du nouveau président", In *La Décision électorale en 2012*", ed. Pascal Perrineau (Paris : Armand Colin, 2013), 230

Hollande's electoral strategy, which represented 42.5% of the emotional repertory in his campaign (compared to 28.4% for Mitterrand in 1981)¹³³. For Kuhn, Hollande was elected President with "no strong foundation of popular support", as he argued that his victory was just as much a rejection of the incumbent as a positive endorsement of his candidacy¹³⁴. When attempting to better understand the sociological makeup of Hollande's electoral coalition, Damhuis and Karremans' 2017 study, which analyzed the political responsiveness of the Hollande and Mitterrand governments' presentation of the national budget to different social groups, offers an important look into the PS' targeting of the interests and preferences of the electorate¹³⁵. In this regard, they emphasized the findings from the literature according to which the French PS had both lost support from working-class voters and had instead been attracting more and more voters from the expanding middle classes in 2012. From there, Damhuis and Karremans' empirical analysis demonstrated that, compared to the Mitterrand governments, there had been a decline in the Hollande governments' responsive justifications towards the low-income classes and the appearance of the middle classes in the PS budget speeches¹³⁶. Their analysis led them to confirm that the increased attention to the middle classes and emphasis on de-conflictualisation (where the party claims not to disadvantage various social groups at the expense of others) implied that the party's ideological distinctiveness was fading as their focus shifted towards the general functioning of society¹³⁷. At the same time as the PS was focusing less on the working classes and was attempting to appeal to the broader middle classes, the party had experienced a significant erosion and fragilization of its electoral coalition as exemplified by the collapse of its vote share between

¹³³ Marion Ballet, *Émotions et élections. Les campagnes présidentielles françaises (1981–2012)*. (Paris: INA Éditions, 2014), 180.

¹³⁴ Kuhn, "Mister Unpopular", 438.

¹³⁵ Damhuis and Karremans, "Responsive to whom?", 1269.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1278.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

the 2012 election and the 2017 election. As a result, despite his numerical victory in 2012, Hollande does not appear to have been able to rebuild Mitterrand's electoral coalition. Instead, the demographic makeup of the PS vote in more recent years did not significantly change since Jospin's electoral defeat in 2002. In addition, the party's shift away from working-class advocacy towards a more general approach to the functioning of society as a whole is a significant factor to consider when understanding the party's current identity crisis. In this context, the PS has had to rely more and more on external events rather than a specific program for its electoral impetus as seen by Hollande's 2012 victory. In essence, this situation appears to have led the party to rely on a very fragile, volatile, and heterogenous electoral coalition which was vulnerable to the unravelling that occurred at the ballot box in 2017.

This subsection analyzed the strength of the PS' electoral coalition in order to outline the party's challenges in holding together a strong and stable base of support. The PS had historically been able to win power, under Mitterrand most notably, thanks to its ability to form a 'popular front' grounded in the popular and working classes but which also won support from members of the middle and upper echelons of society. However, the party increasingly abandoned its advocacy of the working classes in favour of appealing to the educated middle classes in the face of transformative demographic shifts. The PS' new electoral coalition, while remaining broad enough to win elections as seen with Hollande in 2012, has been characterized by fragilization and volatility just as the party's programmatic offer has become less grounded on class issues. From these findings, it becomes clear that the trajectory of the party's electoral coalition has closely followed Thomson's predictions. As the party has attempted to attract the middle classes and adapt its programmatic offer according to what Thomson considers 'new' Social Democracy, it has

simultaneously alienated the popular classes and has become unable to hold together a stable electoral coalition. What remains today of the party's 'popular front' is but a shadow of what it once was, which points to a clear observation of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Overall Findings From the Literature Analysis

This section has provided a literature analysis which establishes the extent to which the evolution of the PS since 1998 has mirrored Thomson's predictions for Social Democratic parties. More precisely, it has outlined evidence from the literature based on elements of its electoral and intellectual success, economic and social success, and the strength of its electoral coalition. Firstly, the PS consistently experienced significant failures in the electoral and intellectual realm, with a consistent pattern of internal divisions, intellectual and ideological infighting, factionalism, and electoral breakdown as a result of the inconsistencies it faced between leftist doctrinal orthodoxy and the realities of governing which line up clearly with Thomson's theory. Secondly, during its time in power under Hollande, the PS oversaw an economic and social policy which not only rescinded key electoral promises and contradicted core values of the party, but which failed to create a positive economic legacy, leaving it with a dismal record in government which mirrors Thomson's assessment. Thirdly, an overview of the evolution of the electoral makeup and demographic targeting of the PS in elections has confirmed Thomson's assumption that the party has experienced significant transformations of its electoral base which led to the fragilization of its electoral coalition as it embraced elements of 'new' Social Democracy in an attempt to win over a broader electorate. From this, it is clear that the party has faced important challenges on all three fronts. With the party abandoning its core values and policies at the heart of 'classic' Social Democracy in the face of profound demographic and economic changes in France, it has been

faced with important contradictions between its rhetoric and its record in government all while it has become less and less distinct in its programmatic offer. The party's shift in strategy, both during elections and while in office, has resulted in the fragilization of its voter base just as new challengers on both its left and right flank have emerged to appropriate the key segments of its electoral base. Without a clear sense of self, the party, faced with the collapse of its vote share, has found itself unable to lead the newest cycle of renewal on the French left as it has traditionally been able to do. This leaves the contemporary PS in a dire situation which has closely mirrored what had been predicted by the theory of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Empirical Analysis

This section will conduct an empirical analysis of the collapse of the French Socialist Party's electoral support in France's national elections, in line with Thomson's theoretical framework in 'The Social Democratic dilemma'. Similarly to the structure of the literature analysis, this section will break down the empirical data for key indicators of success for Social Democrats. This analysis will rely on various data sources and databases which are best tailored to address each subsection. Firstly, using data on election results from the University of Sherbrooke's *Perspective Monde* tool, the first subsection will analyze the PS' intellectual and electoral record in government. Secondly, using economic and social data compiled by the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE), the second subsection will analyze the PS' economic and social record in government. Thirdly, using opinion polling data extracted from the European Social Survey (ESS), the third subsection will analyze the attitudes of the electorate during the PS' time in office. Fourthly, using polling data extracted from the ESS, the fourth

subsection will analyze the strength of the PS' electoral coalition. Overall, this section will aim to show whether statistical measures of success for Social Democrats have been achieved or not during the French PS's time in office since 1998. This will attempt to determine whether the party's shift towards more market-friendly policies, as seen in the previous literature analysis, has affected its ability to achieve the aims of Social Democracy in line with the theory of the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Record in Government: Intellectual and Electoral Indicators

This subsection's analysis of the intellectual and electoral indicators relevant for the PS closely aligns with Thomson's approach in determining Social Democratic parties' success and failure on this front. In order to be successful on an intellectual and electoral level, Thomson laid out a series of measures for Social democrats which included the importance of the party within the political space and its ability to form government, its intellectual cohesiveness, as well as the retention of its voting share/a position in government. While a party's intellectual cohesiveness is harder to measure empirically, the election results of the PS in both the legislative and presidential elections can offer evidence of electoral success through the party's ability to form government and retain its vote share. Indeed, as we have seen previously, the PS has experienced important electoral and intellectual challenges since 1998, with significant internal divisions and lack of intellectual cohesiveness which have plunged it into an identity crisis as it has become unable to offer a distinct programmatic offer to voters. In light of this, this data will provide additional details on the extent to which the party's results at the ballot box on the national level are indicative of its intellectual and electoral success.

Figure A: Evolution of the French Socialist Party's legislative election results, 1981-2017		
Year	Vote Share, First Round (%)	Seat Count
1981	37.5%	283
1986	31.0%	206
1988	34.8%	260
1993	17.6%	57
1997	23.5%	246
2002	24.1%	141
2007	24.7%	186
2012	29.3%	280
2017	7.4%	30

Figure B: Evolution of the French Socialist Party's presidential election results, 1981-2017	
Year	Vote Share, First Round (%)
1981	25.9%
1988	34.1%
1995	23.3%
2002	16.2%
2007	25.9%
2012	28.6%
2017	6.4%
2022	1.7%

Source: Isabelle Lacroix, “Élections Françaises”, Perspective Monde/Université de Sherbrooke, accessed on October 15 2022.

<https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA2017611&codeInstitution=1>

Figures A and B look at the evolution of the PS’ electoral results in the French legislative and presidential elections between 1981 and 2017. The electoral results for the 2022 legislative election were excluded from these tables as the union of the PS under the NUPES coalition blurs the cards when it comes to interpreting the results of the party, while 1981 serves as the start of our analysis as it can illustrate the evolution of the party’s vote share since the election of the first PS President, François Mitterrand. This analysis is based off of data from Perspective Monde under the *École de politique appliquée* at the University of Sherbrooke, which, under the supervision of Isabelle Lacroix, extracted the electoral results for the French elections reported by different sources since 1945. This data was chosen because electoral results tend to diverge from one outlet to the next, as preliminary results reported by news outlets tend to remain the only available in many cases, whereas Perspective Monde extracts this data in the weeks following the elections in order to

provide final results. Moreover, this analysis covers the results from only the first round of voting, as this more accurately reflects voters' preferences without the potential distortions in voting intentions which runoff elections may bring. The party's electoral wins are outlined in pink in figure A (when the parliamentary majority is led by the PS) and in figure B (when the President is issued from the PS).

The PS has held the presidency for 15 years and three terms under two different presidents since 1981. Out of eight presidential elections, the party's candidate has achieved the highest office on three occasions since 1981. As for the legislative elections, the PS has been the dominant party in the National Assembly for more than 20 years since 1981 and has led four parliamentary majorities out of the last nine elections between 1981 and 2017 . However, moving past these facts, it is noteworthy that as time goes on, the party has had to win less and less of the vote share in the first round in order to end up with the same number of seats after the second round. This can be observed in figure A where the party's legislative majority in 2012 is almost identical to the one it won in 1981 despite the party seeing a drop of 8% of its support. In most elections prior to 2017, the PS' vote share in the first round generally did not drop below 23% in the first round, illustrating how the party had been able to maintain in most cases in the past its share of the vote. In particular, during the 1980s, the party maintained its vote share in the legislative elections between 30% and 35% even when it did not end up with a majority of seats. Similarly, after the PS' defeat in 1993, it continuously improved its election score up to 2012. These can illustrate a degree of retention which is noteworthy. Moving past this, however, the party has experienced large drops in its vote share following almost every victory in the legislative elections in the 1990s onwards. The notable exception to this trend would, however, be the 2002 legislative election. Nevertheless, this data

shows that the PS has followed a disastrous showing at the Presidential election since the 1990s overall. Whilst the PS usually has done fairly well in the legislative elections, it has experienced more difficulties in the Presidential elections overall, winning only a little more than a third of elections when its leader has run for President since 1981. In this regard, the vote share won by the PS in the Presidential election appears to oscillate much more from one election to the next as seen in figure B. Only on one occasion has the party broken 30% in the first round, which was during the re-election campaign of François Mitterrand. Mitterrand, as it has been mentioned previously, is most notable for having had the ability to unite his party behind his strategic vision in order to claim to be the personification of French Socialism during the 1980s. This, however, has not been successfully replicated by any other French Socialist since. Jospin was the first PS leader who was able to command a parliamentary majority after Mitterrand's exit, as seen by his win in the 1997 legislative elections in figure A. However, after five years as Prime Minister of France, Jospin led the party to one of its worst showings when he ran for the Presidency, failing to make it to the second round with only 16.2% of the popular vote in the first round in 2002. It would take until 2012 for the PS to be able to win the Presidential election under François Hollande, whose electoral results surpassed even Mitterrand's in his first campaign for the Presidency (despite not reaching the same level of support in the first round of the legislative election, however).

Ultimately, it is noteworthy how the party's ability to form a government completely collapsed in the years following François Hollande's presidency after 2017, which do not appear to have recovered as it usually did in the past. While the party only obtained 6.4% and 1.7% in the first rounds of the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections respectively, it scored an equally disappointing

7,4% in the 2017 legislative election. This shows that, in recent years, the PS has been completely unable to hold on to the electoral support it had been able to earn previously. For a party which regularly scored above 30% in the first round of the legislative elections in the 1980s, and which had never scored worse than 15% in any national election before 2017, the party's collapse is noteworthy. In addition, while the PS historically had overcome its main challenger on the left from the PCF in order to become the main party of the left, the rise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France insoumise* party on its left flank represents a new existential threat to the party. In both 2017 and 2022, Mélenchon far outpaced the PS's candidates for President, scoring 19.6% and 22.0% in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections respectively (which, in both cases, was less than 5 points away from the top candidate, Emmanuel Macron)¹³⁸. This, in turn, puts the PS' once-dominant position on the left into question, as even smaller parties such as the Greens and even the PCF gained a larger vote share in the 2022 presidential election than it did.

From these results, we can observe that the electoral success of the PS has dwindled significantly in recent years. During the 1980s and the 1990s, the PS consistently rotated in and out of government from one legislative election to the next, albeit with notable periods away from office. In addition, the party regularly made it to the second round of the presidential elections (a notable exception being in 2002 under Jospin) up until the Hollande presidency. Broadly speaking, while the PS has remained the dominant party of the left for most of the last 30 years, this position has nevertheless been characterized by significant periods away from power with patterns of electoral collapse on a few occasions which the party was usually able to overcome in due time. As a result, it had, over time, remained an important party which could rightfully aspire to form government

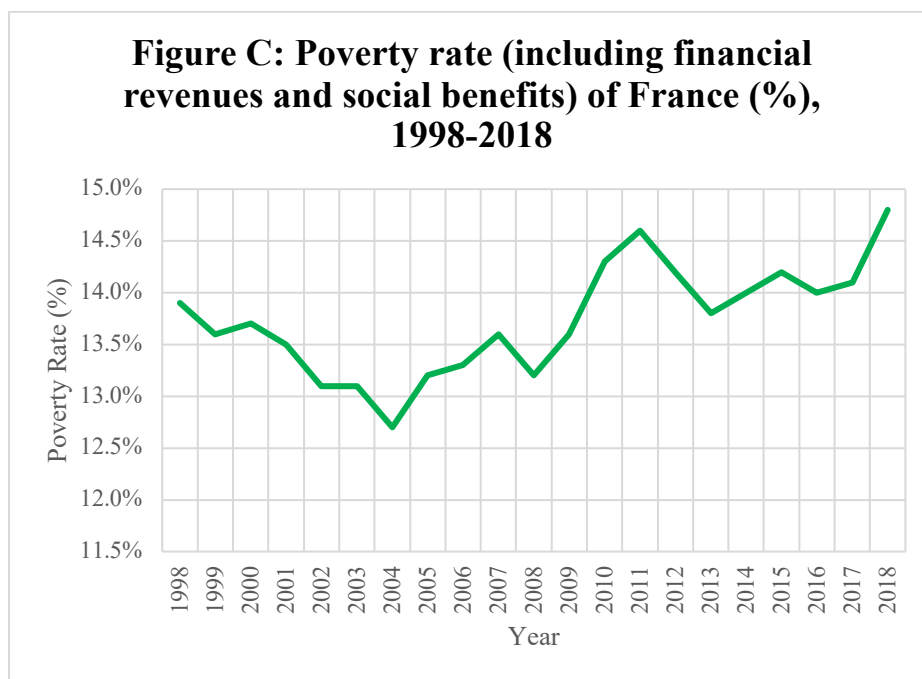
¹³⁸ Lacroix, "Élections Françaises".

despite its patterns of collapse. It would appear, however, that this ability to bounce back may have come to an end since 2017. It is clear the party once held a dominant position on the left, but the party's electoral fortunes after Hollande's term in office seem to have completely reversed. As the party's path to government becomes more and more elusive, so too has its once-dominant position on the left of the French political spectrum. In essence, the PS no doubt was a party which enjoyed important electoral success, but which, from this data, is now fighting for its political survival.

Record in Government: Economic and Social Indicators

This subsection's analysis of the economic and social success of the PS will look into key economic and social indicators in order to provide evidence of whether the party's time in power was accompanied by any noticeable improvements in the goals and aims of Social Democrats to determine its success while in office. In order to be successful on an economic and social level, Thomson laid out a series of measures of economic and social success for Social Democrats which included measures of poverty and social exclusion, economic inequality, and unemployment (amongst many other indicators). In light of this, this section will focus on these three indicators, as they closely relate to some of the most fundamental aims of Social Democracy. Our analysis will rely on data from the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE), which is the national statistics bureau of France which collects and publishes information about the French economy and people in addition to carrying out periodic national census. The literature analysis conducted in section 2 found important challenges for the PS regarding its economic and social policy. While in office, the PS' legacy was characterized by a significant U-turn away from leftist rhetoric and Keynesian-inspired economics in favour of an embrace of supply-side reforms as a means to address the economic woes of France during Hollande's tenure as President. In this regard, this empirical analysis will provide additional evidence from social and economic

indicators in order to determine whether, despite these policy failings, the PS under Hollande was still able to improve on some of the aims of classic Social Democracy while in power in contrast to the PS' periods away from office.



Source: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), “ L’essentiel sur...le chômage”, 2022, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4805248>

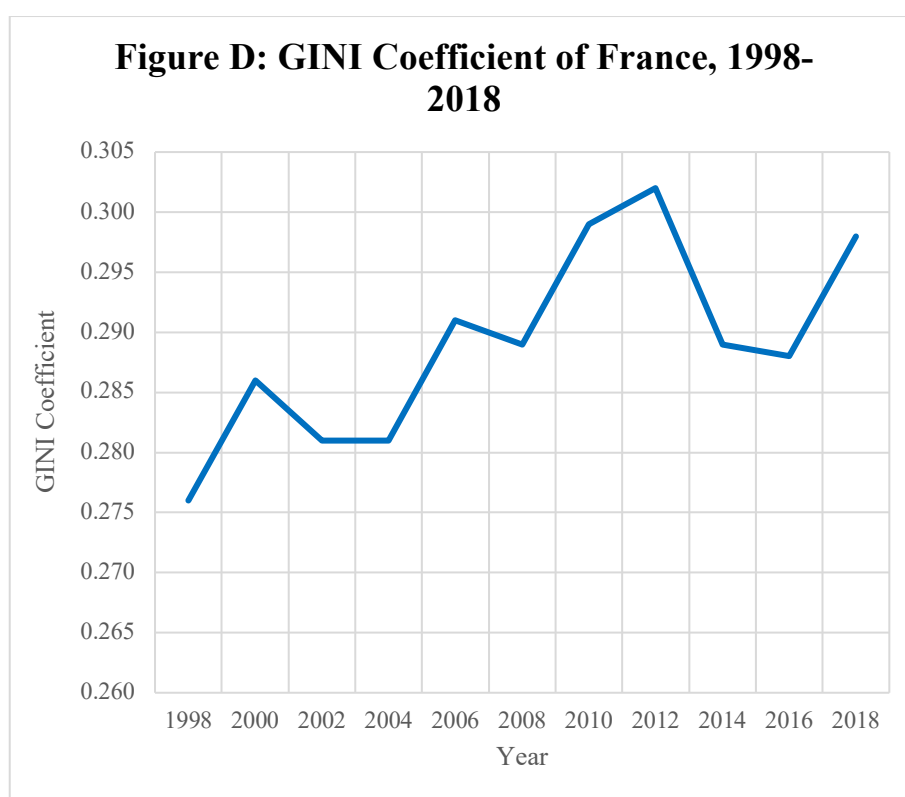
Figure C illustrates the evolution of the poverty rate (which takes into account financial revenues and social benefits) of metropolitan France between 1998 and 2018 based on the level of income set at 60% of the median income, which excludes data from France’s overseas territories. This rate is measured amongst individuals who live in a household whose declared income is positive or null and who are not students. Our analysis chose to observe the data on poverty which did not exclude financial revenues and social benefits from the analysis, as these sources of income better reflect the actual financial situations of individuals while taking into account the welfare state’s ability to prevent individuals from falling below the poverty line. From this graph, we can observe that the poverty rate has been higher on average in the 2010s than during the 2000s. In addition,

despite the financial crisis following 2008, it took a few years for the poverty rate to reach its peak in 2011 at 14.6%. During Hollande's time in office between 2012 and 2017, the poverty rate saw a noticeable decline, according to this data when factoring for income from welfare benefits. The most noticeable drop in these figures can be observed in the first two years of his term, when it declined from 14.6% in 2011 before his election down to 13.8% in 2014, two years into the PS' time in office. The poverty rate did slightly pick up in the last years of Hollande's presidency at 14.0%, but overall it remained relatively stable after experiencing a drop at the start of his term. The arrival of the PS in power, therefore, was in fact accompanied by an improvement albeit a modest one, when it comes to poverty. While Hollande was unable to bring this back down to the levels seen in the 2000s, he did, however, manage to bring down the poverty rate to the lowest levels seen in the 2010s. This can be highlighted considering the fact that his time in office saw significant economic difficulties which included stagnating economic growth, a discredited credit rating, and high unemployment rate. In turn, despite the PS' embrace of market-friendly policies and supply-side reforms while in office, Hollande managed to noticeably reduce the poverty rate in France while in office, demonstrating that his administration's policies did achieve, in a limited sense, a key aim of Social Democracy.

Figure D illustrates the evolution of the GINI coefficient of metropolitan France between 1998 and 2018 within 2-year intervals¹³⁹, which excludes data from France's overseas territories. The GINI coefficient is an indicator which tracks the dispersion of income in order to identify the levels of income inequality for a given population, varying between 0 (perfect equality) and 1 (extreme

¹³⁹ A 2-year interval was necessary to illustrate this data and avoid inconsistencies and breaks, as the data between 2010-2012 had not been adjusted to changing methodologies seen in the 2012-2018 period, whilst only the data between 1998-2010 had been adjusted for these changing methodologies in order to be compared to the more recent data. See <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2491918#graphique-figure1>

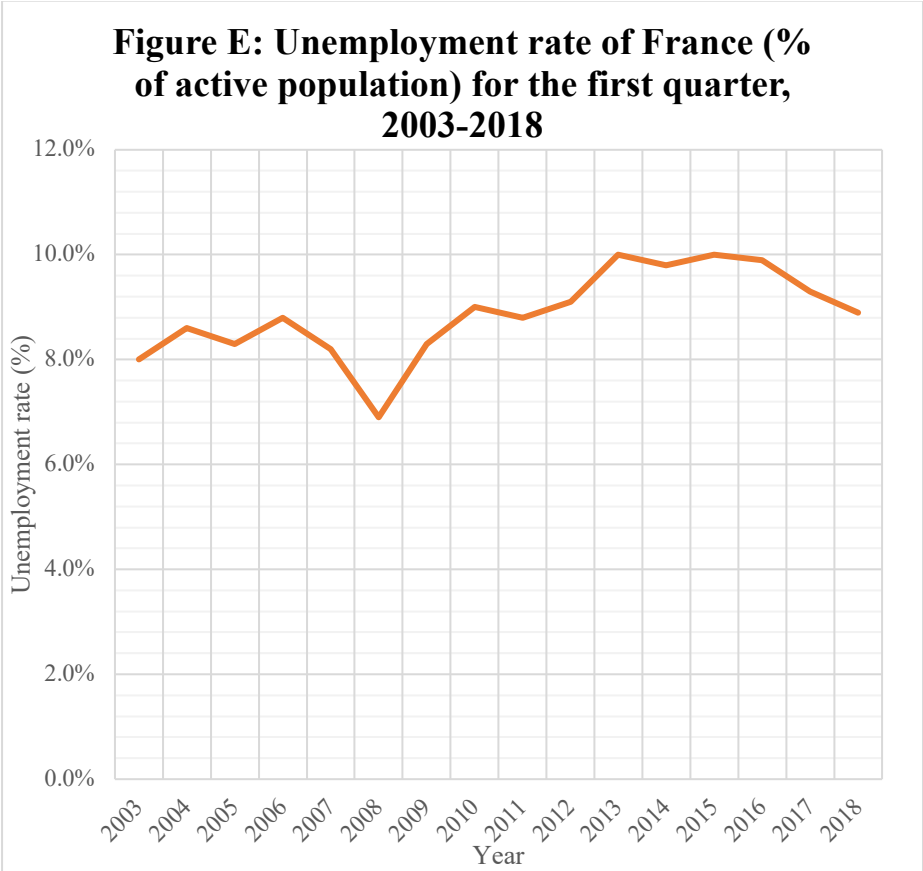
inequality). This indicator was measured for individuals living in a household whose declared income is positive or null and who are not students. In this graph, the GINI index follows a general trend upwards between 1998 and 2012, from 0.276 up to 0.302. From this, we can observe that Economic inequality in France increased in the decade when the PS was in opposition between 2002 and 2012. In the years when François Hollande was President, however, we can see that economic inequality declined throughout his time in office, from a record high of 0.302 in 2012 when he took office, down to 0.288 in 2016 a year before leaving office. Hollande, while unable



Source : Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), “Niveau de vie et indicateurs d’inégalités : Données annuelles de 1975 à 2019”, 2021, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2491918#graphique-figure1>

to reduce income inequality to what it had been in the 2000s, was at least successful in bringing it back to pre-2008 levels during his term. In this sense, we can see that the PS’ time in office between 2012 and 2017 once again contrasts with other governments which came before and after the

Hollande administration, as both Nicolas Sarkozy, Hollande’s predecessor, and Emmanuel Macron, Hollande’s successor, oversaw increases in the GINI index under their time in office. In contrast, the election of François Hollande and the PS in 2012 was accompanied by reduced income inequality despite the economic difficulties he encountered while in office. Like the poverty rate, the level of income inequality, which is a key area of interest for Social Democrats in office, saw notable improvements despite the abandonment of many key Social Democratic economic policies by Hollande in office.



Source: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), “ L’essentiel sur...le chômage”, 2022, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4805248>

Figure E illustrates the evolution of the unemployment rate of metropolitan France between 2003 and 2018¹⁴⁰ as measured as a percentage of the active population, which excludes data from France's overseas territories. As the data published by the INSEE only covered the period from 2003, our analysis does not go back to 1998 as the other indicators of economic and social success. From this graph, the most important observation is the high level of unemployment which was seen during François Hollande's presidency between 2012 and 2017. Indeed, in the 15 years covered by this data, it is during the PS' time in office that unemployment figures saw their highest levels, which remained quite stable during the entire term. Under Hollande's leadership, France saw record-level unemployment which reached the symbolic threshold of 10%. These record-high unemployment figures consistently remained at these levels during Hollande's term, and only started to slowly decline towards the end of his presidency. In our literature analysis, the high levels of unemployment experienced by France were highlighted as a significant policy failure of Hollande when he was President of France, which likely left its mark with the French electorate as it deserted the party in 2017. This is quite significant because not only is high employment a key tool used by Social Democrats to achieve many of their core aims when in office, but it remains a general indicator of success in government for its impact on quality of life and the economy, and for acting as a barometer of the success of economic policies in general. This demonstrates that the policies implemented by Hollande when in office did not in fact translate into lower unemployment levels. Instead, as the party's economic U-turn on its campaign promises have led it to a crisis of identification, its embrace of conflicting economic policies did not succeed in

¹⁴⁰ A 2-year interval was necessary to illustrate this data and avoid inconsistencies and breaks, as the data between 2010-2012 had not been adjusted to changing methodologies seen in the 2012-2018 period, whilst only the data between 1998-2010 had been adjusted for these changing methodologies in order to be compared to the more recent data. See Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), "L'essentiel sur...le chômage", 2022, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4805248>

improving this key indicator. Instead, his policies likely contributed directly to the collapse of the party's electoral coalition, as problems of party identification are bound to increase with a negative economic and social record in government.

From this data on poverty, economic inequality, and unemployment, we are able to reach some conclusions regarding the PS' record in government and how successful it was on economic and social issues. Overall, the party's time in government between 2012 and 2017 was marked by some mild improvements when it comes to France's poverty rate and level of economic inequality, two key issues for Social Democrats. For these indicators, the arrival of Hollande in power was accompanied by improvements which contrasted with his predecessor and successor. However, a major failure of the PS' time in office under Hollande relates to the party's inability to tackle the record-high unemployment rate of France at the time. This is a significant failure for Social Democrats, as employment can be closely tied to a range of Social Democratic ideals such as reduced inequality, as employment is often used as a direct means to alter and alleviate levels of poverty¹⁴¹. In essence, this is arguably one of the most significant failures of the party on the economic and social dimension during its time in office. With the transition away from 'classic' Social Democracy and towards a 'new' model, while the idea of full employment has been abandoned, low unemployment still remains one of the main economic objectives of Social Democrats to achieve its broader programmatic offer. In light of this, at the same time as the PS has transitioned away from the Fordist economic consensus and embrace of 'new' Social Democracy, the party's record in office under Hollande has been marred by notable failures on key issues, with only minor successes when it comes to its economic and social policy.

¹⁴¹ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 285.

Record in Government: Attitude of the Electorate

This subsection's analysis of the evolution of French voters' opinions on key questions related to the state of the country is inspired closely by Thomson's consideration that some of the most important information about the performance of any government is the attitude of the electorate to certain key questions which relate to its performance while in office. In this sense, as Social Democracy must provide raised expectations and a sense of optimism during their time in office in order to be considered successful, the electorate's view of issues of trust and confidence in government, politicians, and the nation's institutions provides an important barometer as to the success of Social Democrats when in power¹⁴². From here, this subsection will use data from the European Social Survey on evolving opinions regarding the economy, the satisfaction with the present government, the level of trust in politicians, and the level of trust in the country's parliament between 2002 and 2020 in order to observe whether the PS' time in office under Jospin and Hollande was accompanied by any significant changes in voters' opinion.

Figure F illustrates the evolution of respondents' average satisfaction and trust with the state of the country on a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being very low and 10 being very high) through data extrapolated from the European Social Survey¹⁴³, with the years where the PS led a parliamentary majority outlined in pink. This table looks at four different variables: average satisfaction with the present state of the economy, average satisfaction with the present government, average trust in politicians, and average trust in the country's parliament. From this data, the evolution of each

¹⁴² Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 298.

¹⁴³ European Social Survey, "ESS 1-9", Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, 2020.

Figure F: Evolution of respondents' average satisfaction and trust with the state of the country on a scale of 0-10, 2002-2020

Year	Average satisfaction with present state of economy	Average satisfaction with present government	Average trust in Politicians	Average trust in country's parliament
2002	3.52	4.24	3.68	4.52
2004	3.79	4.27	3.55	4.32
2006	3.69	3.85	3.32	4.35
2008	2.99	3.90	3.54	4.52
2010	3.30	3.51	3.21	4.19
2012	3.13	3.54	3.22	4.16
2014	2.95	2.88	2.83	4.06
2016	3.51	3.16	2.94	4.10
2018	3.74	3.58	3.63	4.23
2020	4.65	4.79	3.97	4.67

Source: European Social Survey, "ESS 1-9", Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, 2020. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS-CUMULATIVE

indicator follows a very similar trend across the board. In the years following the end of the Jospin government in 2002 led by the PS, all indicators followed a general downwards trend in the next decade just as the party left office. At first glance, this is welcome news for the party. However, the election of François Hollande in 2012 and the PS' first parliamentary majority in over a decade did not reverse the declining overall trend of lower satisfaction and trust in the 2000s. On the contrary, during Hollande's tenure as President of France, average levels of satisfaction with the economy, satisfaction with the government, trust in politicians, and trust in parliament recorded by respondents hit an all-time low in every case. In particular, it is the average satisfaction with the government which deteriorated the most significantly between Jospin's time in office and Hollande's, from an average score of 4.24/10 in 2002 at the end of the Jospin government to a mere 2.88/10 in 2014 in the middle of François Hollande's term. Levels of trust in the country's parliament, while also declining since 2002, did not experience as significant of a drop during this

same period, going from 4.52/10 in 2002 down to 4.06/10 in 2014. Respondents' satisfaction with the economy seems to have recovered for Hollande between 2014 and 2016, reaching the same levels of satisfaction seen in 2002 at an average of 3.51/10. Lastly, respondents' average trust in politicians remained stable fairly throughout the entirety of Hollande's time in office, even as other attitudes seemed to pick up in the latter half of his term. For all of these indicators, it is in the years after the PS left office that general attitudes increased more significantly to reach their highest levels since the start of the European Social Survey in all four categories in 2020. This is an important reversal from the low point of the Hollande years, as in a span of 6 years, respondents' attitudes went from their lowest levels of trust and satisfaction to their highest.

These trends do not bode well for the PS' time in office under the leadership of François Hollande. Overall, the attitude of the electorate towards key indicators of performance reached a low point in the middle of his term, illustrating the troubles he faced with French voters while in office. The low levels of trust expressed by respondents towards parliament and politicians during Hollande's time in power echo Martin's findings that the 'rightification' of the PS' policies while in power between 2012-2017 directly contributed to growing disillusionment with democracy in France, as the party's inability to present and implement a consistent and coherent policy programme would inevitably sow discontent and disillusionment towards the political process from electors anticipating the party's promises¹⁴⁴. The low level of satisfaction with the Hollande government, for its part, provides clear evidence that respondents were not pleased with the PS' time in power, illustrating a significant failure to leave a positive impression with voters while in office. Meanwhile, the low levels of satisfaction with the economy during Hollande's Presidency directly

¹⁴⁴ Lipset, "The Americanization of the European Left", 76.

relate to the failures experienced by the party due to its ineffective and inconsistent economic and social policy. These attitudes remain a key measure of failure for Social Democrats like the PS. Just as Thomson had observed in the 1980s, the time spent by the PS in office between 2012 and 2017 failed to provide a sense of optimism amongst respondents¹⁴⁵. From this data, it is clear that the party has been unable to meet the electorate's expectations during its time in power, which likely had a lasting impact on its electoral fortunes¹⁴⁶. As Thomson had predicted, by failing to convince the public that a 'better society' was forthcoming while in office, it appears likely that the PS significantly alienated voters during Hollande's presidency between 2012 and 2017.

Record in Government: Indicators of Electoral Coalition Strength

This subsection's analysis of the strength of the PS's electoral coalition uses data on electoral volatility and general party affiliation in line with Thomson's approach for the third failure of 'new' Social Democracy. Using New Labour in the UK as an example due to its shift away from 'classic' Social Democracy while in office, Thomson's analysis of the measures of volatility within the electorate as well as declining party affiliation offered indications that New Labour's electoral coalition was fragile in nature despite its electoral success. This, in turn, provided evidence for Thomson's argument that Social Democratic parties which, like Labour, moved towards 'new' Social Democracy would broaden and fragilize their electoral coalitions as their abandonment of key policies and positions from 'classic' Social democracy would make them less distinct from their competitors. From that starting point, this section will look into the evolution of electoral volatility in French elections, changing political affiliation for the French PS, and the evolution of

¹⁴⁵ Thomson, *The social democratic dilemma*, 298.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

unaffiliated voters in the electorate in order to determine whether Thomson's predictions can apply to the French context after more than 20 years after his work was published.

Figure G illustrates the evolution of the index of volatility (commonly known as the Pedersen Index) in French parliamentary elections between 1973 and 2017, which looks at the rates of vote-switching between elections. While the information used covers the period ranging from 1945 to 2022, this analysis will exclude elections prior to the 1970s as the post-Fordist period is only considered to have begun in that decade, and will exclude the most recent 2022 election due to the complications related to the electoral union of the PS with other leftist parties under the NUPES alliance in the legislative elections. The data used was taken from the Dataset of electoral volatility and its internal components in Western Europe (1945-2015)¹⁴⁷, which provides a score between 0 (where no parties gained voters, and therefore no parties lost any voters) and 100 (all the parties from the previous election were reduced to zero votes) for the parliamentary elections (lower house) of 20 Western European countries for the 1945-2015 period. From this, Figure G looks at three components: the total electoral volatility, the electoral volatility which is caused only by considering vote switching between existing parties, and the electoral volatility which is caused only by vote switching between parties that enter or exit from the party system in French parliamentary elections.

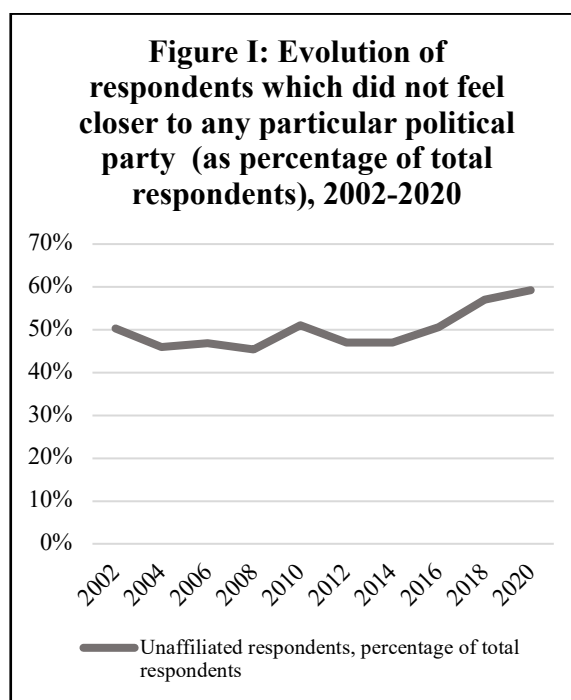
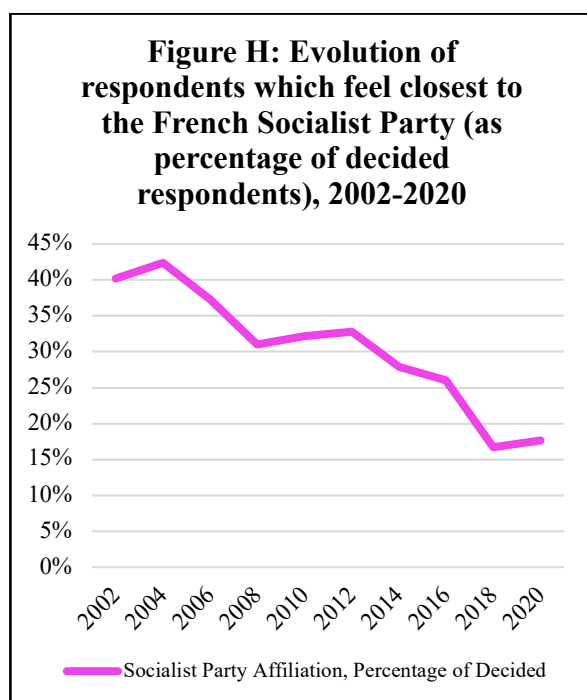
¹⁴⁷ Vincenzo Emanuele, "Dataset of Electoral Volatility and its internal components in Western Europe (1945-2015)" (Rome: Italian Center for Electoral Studies, 2015).

Figure G: Index of Volatility in French Parliamentary Elections (0-100), 1986-2012			
Year	Total electoral volatility	Electoral volatility caused by vote switching between existing parties	Electoral volatility caused by vote switching between parties that enter or exit from the party system
1973	19.1	10.9	6.7
1978	8.2	5.5	1.5
1981	13.4	10.8	1.3
1986	13.5	6.4	5.5
1988	8.8	5.5	1.2
1993	19.3	12.8	6.0
1997	16.9	12.9	3.5
2002	27.8	21.6	5.0
2007	14.5	11.8	2.0
2012	23.6	21.8	0.7
2017	40.7	23.2	15.3

Source: Vincenzo Emanuele, “Dataset of Electoral Volatility and its internal components in Western Europe (1945-2015)” (Rome: Italian Center for Electoral Studies, 2015).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7802/1112>

This data shows a progressive increase in total electoral volatility in French parliamentary elections as time goes on, which appears to be in large part due to vote switching between existing parties. Indeed, while the average score for electoral volatility was merely of 13.6 in the 1970s and of 11.9 in the 1980s, it progressively increases to 18.1 in the 1990s and 21.1 in the 2000s before dramatically increasing in the 2010s to an average score of 32.2. The most significant outlier in these results is the 2017 election, which was arguably the most volatile French parliamentary election in recent history. While there was a noticeable vote switching between existing parties in a manner similar to the 2002 and 2012 election, there was also an unprecedented level of vote switching between parties which entered or exited the party system in 2017. The party system has, as evidenced here, exhibited patterns of instability following the end of the Hollande presidency, as both the traditional main parties (the PS and the Republicans) experienced significant losses just as Emmanuel Macron’s *La République En Marche!* (LREM) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La*

France Insoumise emerged. This brings us to another observation: when the PS performed well in the legislative elections, as it did in 1981, 1988, 1997, and 2012, the following election consistently sees an increase in electoral volatility just as the PS experiences electoral losses. This may be indicative of increased instability in the PS’ electoral coalition, and indicate that the party’s voters are more and more likely to desert the party after it spends time in government as observed previously in the electoral results for the party.



Source: European Social Survey, “ESS 1-9”, Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, 2020. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS-CUMULATIVE

These observations can be understood best alongside trends in evolving political identification in France from 2002 to 2020 as seen in figures H and I. These graphs rely on data from the European Social Survey¹⁴⁸, which asked respondents if there is a political party they felt closer to than all other parties. Figure H illustrates the evolution of respondents which felt closest to the PS as a percentage of decided respondents, while figure I illustrates the evolution of respondents which

¹⁴⁸ European Social Survey, “ESS 1-9”.

did not feel closer to any particular political party as a percentage of all respondents. From this data, we can clearly observe two significant trends. Firstly, respondents became increasingly likely to feel like they did not identify with one single party during this period, leading to a rise in unaffiliated voters as seen in figure I. While 45% of respondents did not feel closer to any particular political party in 2008 for instance, the aftermath of the Hollande Presidency saw this number increase from 51% in 2016, to 57% in 2018, to 59% in 2020. Secondly, just as the share of respondents identifying with a single party decreased, there was an even more significant decrease in the number of decided respondents who identify with the PS, as the 42% of decided respondents identifying with the party in 2004 collapsed to a low of only 17% in 2018. When François Hollande was elected in 2012 as President, the party had already been experiencing an overall negative trend in identification with the party over the previous decade, as a more comfortable share of respondents identified most closely to the PS in the early to mid 2000s. However, far from reversing this downward trend, the PS' latest term in office was instead accompanied by a collapse of respondents' identification with the party, from 33% at the beginning of Hollande's term in 2012, to 26% in 2016 one year prior to the election, to 17% in the year following the party's electoral defeat in 2017. This trend is in sharp contrast to the previous time the PS enjoyed a majority in the National Assembly, as the years following the end of the Jospin government under the *Gauche plurielle* in 2002 was followed by a small increase in party identification for the PS from 40% in 2002 to 42% in 2004. As evidenced by this data, the election of Hollande as President was achieved with low levels of voter identification with the party, which points to the fragility of its electoral coalition and the erosion of its voting base.

From these results, we are able to reach some general conclusions which provide a snapshot of the state of the PS's electoral coalition. Thomson had predicted that, as evidenced by New Labour in the late 1990s, Social Democratic parties would increasingly face volatile electoral coalitions and declining party identification as they moved away from 'classic' Social Democracy and embraced market-friendly policies in line with 'new' Social Democracy. In France, the evidence which has been presented in this section feeds into this narrative. As French elections have seen increasingly volatile voting patterns of vote-switching and an increasing number of unaffiliated respondents, the PS has simultaneously seen a sharp decline in party identification at the same time as it has embraced supply-side economic reforms and abandoned its Keynesian-inspired electoral promises under Hollande. The evidence provided here of declining party identification with the PS in particular lends additional evidence that Hollande's win in 2012 was more of a product of external events than a testament to the party's strong appeal to voters. As the party's programmatic offer continues to erode its distinctiveness just as it increasingly moved away from its advocacy of the working class, the fragilization of its electoral coalition as illustrated here is noteworthy. With these results, the data presented in this subsection suggests that the makeup of the electoral coalition of the PS lines up with the framework laid out by Thomson in 'The Social Democratic dilemma'. All in all, with a loss of its distinctiveness, the decline of PS party identification, and the loss of its vote share in 2017, the party now finds itself in a dismal situation when it comes to the state of its electoral coalition.

Overall Findings from the Empirical Analysis

This section's empirical analysis has provided important evidence on the PS' time in office and record in government which paints a clear picture of the PS' record. Indeed, from this statistical

analysis, it appears that on almost every metric, the party's trajectory has closely followed Thomson's predictions. Firstly, on the electoral and intellectual level, while the party has historically been able to win power over and win parliamentary majorities in spite of its pattern of collapse, its complete breakdown after the Hollande presidency and the rise of significant challengers on its left and right flanks have eviscerated its path to power. Secondly, on the economic and social level, while the Hollande presidency oversaw some minor improvements on key indicators of success for Social Democrats such as for poverty and wealth inequality, the party's important failure to improve the country's unemployment rate against the backdrop of the literature's findings related to its challenging economic and social policy in office leaves it with a disappointing economic record. Thirdly, regarding the attitudes of the electorate, the PS' time in office was accompanied by the lowest polling numbers in the last 20 years for key indicators related to trust and satisfaction, in line with the increased disillusionment from the electorate and the party's inability to provide the necessary sense of optimism to voters. Lastly, regarding the strength of the party's electoral coalition, while the empirical evidence has outlined increased electoral volatility and decreasing political affiliation in France, the continuous decrease in the party identification with the French PS provides important evidence of the party's electoral coalition of voters becoming more and more fragile as time has gone on. All in all, as the empirical evidence and subsequent analysis which was presented here line up closely with Thomson's predictions, it appears as if the party's difficulties in recent years can in fact be reasonably explained by the 'Social Democratic dilemma'.

Conclusion

This major research paper set out to analyze the recent collapse of the French PS. From this objective, the approach taken by this paper was to centre its analysis around the theory of the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’ published in 1998 by Stuart William James Thomson. This theory was chosen as the basis for this analysis primarily for its capacity to provide a coherent and detailed theoretical framework to diagnose the difficulties experienced by European Social Democrats, for its ability to evaluate and integrate the main theories on this same topic, for its use of case studies and empirical evidence to back up its claims, and for its attempt at predicting the path of these parties in the future. In this sense, this theory presented us with an important opportunity to test out its framework as part of a modern-day case study, as it offered a clear roadmap to potentially understanding the realities of mainstream left-of-centre parties. As such, this paper’s analysis has attempted to determine whether the French PS has, in fact, experienced a ‘Social Democratic dilemma’, and whether this theory can help explain why the party has undergone significant difficulties in recent years.

The first section provided a breakdown of Thomson’s theoretical framework in order to link it more closely to the circumstances of the French political context. The first subsection allowed us to evaluate and review his conceptual foundation based on the idea of ‘classic’ Social Democracy and its ‘southern’ variation and evaluate it within the context of French politics. From this, we can observe that France’s PS has a long history of facing political challengers on its left flank, does not have a strong history of association with unions and the working class, and has been most successful when its leader has been able to unite the party under a clear vision in order to overcome its patterns of factionalism and internal divisions. The second subsection provided us with an

overview of the main points and arguments of this theory and allowed us to confirm its reasoning so as to apply it to the PS. From this, it appears that the 'Social Democratic dilemma' stems from the profound societal changes which occurred in the transition towards post-Fordism, and emerged as Social Democratic parties have attempted to adapt to the new economic environment and changing sociological, political and institutional circumstances by adopting policies which increasingly embraced market-friendly reforms but which, in the process, have led to weakening electoral coalitions and a crisis of party identification. In this context, it remained to be seen whether these findings could apply to the French PS since 1998.

The second section focused on a literature analysis which provided evidence to affirm that the literature broadly supports the idea that France's PS demonstrated patterns of a Social Democratic dilemma as exemplified by its time in office since 1998. Firstly, in the electoral and intellectual sphere, the PS has shown signs of a crisis of identification characterized by the broadening of its electorate at the expense of its links to the working class, accompanied by electoral collapse, factionalism, and lack of intellectual cohesiveness pointing to important difficulties. Secondly, in the economic and social sphere, the PS's time in office under Hollande saw an important reversal from its commitments on Keynesian-style economic policy towards supply-side reforms which did not end up delivering on his economic objectives, leaving the party with a dismal economic track record characterized by ideological inconsistency and a subpar economic track record. Thirdly, regarding its electoral coalition, the PS put aside its advocacy of the working class and instead broadly targeted the middle classes through a moderation of its programmatic offer away from the distinctiveness of a Social Democratic platform, and in the process has significantly weakened its grasp on its traditional electoral base. As a result, we can find patterns of deep difficulties which

line up with the Social Democratic dilemma as the party has unsuccessfully attempted to adapt to the changing economic, political, sociological, and institutional changes seen in France.

The third section conducted an empirical analysis of key statistical indicators of success which offer additional evidence that adds to the findings from the literature analysis. This data has shown that the PS has, in fact, exhibited patterns of a Social Democratic dilemma since 1998. Regarding its electoral and intellectual record, while the PS has seen repeated electoral breakdown which has not prevented it historically from regaining office and forming government thanks to a cycle of renewal, this newer phase of collapse is much more noteworthy for it has plunged the party down to new lows which it has been incapable of escaping. Regarding its economic and social record, the PS moderately succeeded in improving some key aims of Social Democrats while in office when it comes to poverty and wealth inequality, but the party's failure to reign in the record-high unemployment rate when in office was likely a defining item which tarnished the party's appeal under Hollande when considered against the backdrop of its larger economic troubles while in power. Regarding the attitudes of the electorate, the PS' time in office under Hollande was accompanied by historically low levels of confidence in the economy and the government as well as low trust towards the country's politicians and parliament, which illustrates an unpopular government whose ineffectiveness, internal divisions, and policy reversals likely left their mark on the national psyche. Regarding the strength of its electoral coalition, an increase in electoral volatility, increasing non-affiliation, and collapsing identification with the PS point to the fragilization of the PS' electoral coalition which, when considered alongside the party's crisis of identity and more recent electoral collapse, spells bad news for it going forward. Ultimately, on

key indicators, this section demonstrates how the PS has faced important failings which line up with a dilemma of Social Democracy.

The theory of the ‘Social Democratic dilemma’ has provided a crucial roadmap to the understanding of the contemporary challenges faced by mainstream left-of-centre parties in Europe. Our case study analysis on France has demonstrated the value of this theory, and the extent to which it is able to explain why the PS has seen such difficulties in recent years. In light of this paper, some key areas of interest which deserve more attention in future studies should include the demographic shifts in the French electorate and the transformations of the French economy since the early 2000s. An important topic which could not be addressed in enough detail in this paper but which deserves increased attention is the rise of *La France insoumise* and the union of the left in the 2022 legislative election under the NUPES agreement, which points to an important restructuring of the French left. These topics would merit the attention of scholars in the future, as their impact on the understanding of topics analyzed as part of this paper would be significant. Nevertheless, this paper has provided an additional piece of research which helps in better understanding the current state of Socialist and Social Democratic parties in Europe and, more broadly, in the West.

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