DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

A case study on the validity of the postmaterialist hypothesis to account for ideological shifts of social democratic parties in Europe

Gabriele Sabatini

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the ideological transformation of European social democratic parties, with particular attention to the shift in party platforms from traditional economic priorities to cultural and identity-based issues. The main goal is to evaluate whether the transformation of these parties can be explained by the postmaterialist hypothesis; at its core this hypothesis posits that economic security prompts new value orientation on the part of the citizens, with the prioritization of non-material values (such as environmental concerns, gender equality, democratic participation). By contrast, the materialist hypothesis is rooted in the recognition of economic and material realities as the sources responsible for the changes in parties' ideology and orientation.

Through a quantitative thematic analysis of key political documents, drawing from primary and secondary sources, including the Manifesto Project dataset, the study takes into examination 3 European social democratic parties (Germany's Social democratic Party, the U.K.'s Labour party, France's Socialist party), from which I sorted political themes into materialist and postmaterialist domains, enabling an assessment of their evolution across decades.

I concluded that the data does not support the validity of the postmaterialist hypothesis. Data related to parties' documents confirms that, while increasing in visibility and salient, non-materialist concerns have not become more important than traditional material concerns. The study concludes that economic and structural pressures, rather than fundamental value shifts, are what influenced ideological repositioning of social democratic parties.

Finally, the study contributes to debates on political cleavages, party transformation, and voter realignment within the broader academic discourse.

Key words: social democratic parties, material and postmaterialist hypothesis, party manifesto, ideological shift

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1.Introduction

European social democratic parties have historically been among the most influential actors in parliamentary democracies. Throughout the twentieth century,

they were closely associated with the political representation of the working class, the expansion of welfare states, and the pursuit of economic redistribution through state intervention and social protection. Their ideological identity and electoral success were firmly rooted in class-based politics and material concerns such as employment, wages, and social security (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Over the past several decades, European social democratic parties have undergone profound ideological and strategic transformations. Parties that historically defined themselves through class-based economic redistribution, strong welfare states, and state intervention in the economy have increasingly embraced market-compatible economic policies (Mudge, 2018; Lavelle, 2009; Berman, 2006) while simultaneously expanding their emphasis on cultural, social, and identity-based issues such as gender equality, minority rights, environmental protection, and democratic participation (Inglehart, 1997; Dalton, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994). These changes have reshaped the ideological profile of social democracy and generated extensive debate within political science regarding their causes, meaning, and consequences.

A central debate in this literature concerns the relative importance of materialist versus postmaterialist explanations of party change. Materialist accounts emphasize structural economic transformations—including deindustrialization, globalization, fiscal constraints, and changes in class structure—as the primary drivers of social democratic adaptation. From this perspective, ideological moderation and strategic repositioning reflect responses to altered economic conditions and shifting electoral coalitions. (Kitschelt 1994; Boix 1998; Pontusson 2005; Berman and Snegovaya 2021).By contrast, the postmaterialist hypothesis attributes social democratic transformation to long-term changes in societal values, arguing that the rising salience of non-economic concerns—such as environmentalism, individual autonomy, and cultural recognition—has reshaped political conflict and encouraged parties of the left to reorient their programs accordingly (Inglehart 1977, 1997; Kriesi et al. 2006; Dalton 2018).

While the postmaterialist hypothesis has been influential in explaining value change among voters (Inglehart 1977, 1997; Dalton 2018),its applicability to party transformation remains contested. Existing research offers substantial evidence that postmaterialist issues have become more visible in social democratic discourse (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006), yet it remains unclear whether this value shift can

independently account for the ideological and strategic evolution of social democratic parties, as challenged by Mudge (2018) and Berman and Snegovaya (2021). In particular, it is uncertain whether postmaterialist values drove these changes, displaced traditional materialist politics, or merely complemented economic adaptation already underway (as posited by Dalton)

This thesis addresses this unresolved puzzle by asking:

Can the postmaterialist hypothesis alone account for European social democratic parties' shift, both economically and culturally, over recent decades?

Rather than treating postmaterialism as a descriptive trend, the thesis explicitly evaluates its explanatory sufficiency. It distinguishes between a *weak* version of the postmaterialist hypothesis—according to which postmaterialist issues become more salient over time—and a *strong* version, which holds that postmaterialist value change is a primary causal driver of social democratic transformation. The central contribution of this thesis lies in systematically testing the strong version of the hypothesis against alternative materialist explanations.

To do so, the thesis conducts a qualitative comparative analysis of three major Western European social democratic parties: the UK Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste). These cases are deliberately selected to capture variation in party traditions, welfare regimes, and institutional contexts, while sharing a common trajectory of electoral competition and ideological change. The inclusion of the French Socialist Party, in particular, allows the analysis to extend beyond labour-movement-based parties and assess whether similar patterns of transformation occur in a more statist and ideologically driven party tradition.

Methodologically, the study employs a transparent qualitative thematic analysis of party manifestos from the 1970s onward, supplemented by descriptive trends from the Manifesto Project dataset (MARPOR). Manifestos are analysed as authoritative expressions of party ideology, allowing for systematic comparison across time and cases. Policy statements are coded according to a replicable framework distinguishing materialist, postmaterialist, and hybrid themes, with full coding tables provided in the appendices. This approach makes it possible to trace changes in issue salience, framing, and sequencing with a high degree of analytical transparency.

The findings demonstrate a striking degree of cross-national convergence. In all three cases, materialist economic concerns dominate early party programs, followed by periods of economic moderation in response to structural constraints. Postmaterialist themes expand only after these economic shifts have occurred and persist alongside, rather than instead of, materialist priorities. Even in periods of renewed economic radicalism or party decline, postmaterialist commitments are maintained but do not structure the core political agenda.

Taken together, the evidence supports the weak but not the strong version of the postmaterialist hypothesis. Postmaterialist values have clearly become more prominent within social democratic discourse, but they do not provide a sufficient explanation for the ideological evolution of social democratic parties. Instead, party transformation is best understood as a process of sequential adaptation and ideological recompositing shaped primarily by material constraints and strategic responses to economic change.

The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on party change, materialist and postmaterialist explanations, and the role of class, identity, and political cleavages. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the case study analyses of the UK, Germany, and France. Chapter 5 provides a cross-case comparative analysis. The final chapter concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for theories of party change and the future of social democracy in Europe.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1.1 Conceptual Foundations: Party Ideology, Party Change, and Political Strategy

Party ideology is a central concept in political science, yet it is often used imprecisely. In this thesis, party ideology is understood as a structured and relatively coherent set of ideas that define a party's policy goals, normative vision of society, and preferred strategies for political action. Ideology serves both an internal function—shaping organizational identity, elite recruitment, and policy formulation—and an external function, guiding voter appeals, coalition strategies, and competitive positioning within the party system (Downs, 1957; Freeden, 1996; Budge et al., 2001).

Unlike individual attitudes, party ideology is institutionalized through formal documents and practices. Party manifestos, policy programs, and congress resolutions articulate ideological commitments in a public and authoritative manner, reflecting both strategic calculations and longer-term normative orientations. As such, party ideology is neither purely instrumental nor purely symbolic; it represents a synthesis of principled commitments and electoral strategy (Panebianco, 1988).

Importantly, ideological change does not necessarily imply ideological abandonment. Parties may reinterpret core principles, shift issue emphasis, or adjust policy framing while maintaining continuity at a more abstract level. This understanding is particularly relevant for social democratic parties, whose ideological evolution often involves redefining the meaning of equality, solidarity, and social justice under changing economic and social conditions (Berman, 2006; Mudge, 2018).

The question of why and how political parties change has been extensively debated in comparative politics. Early theories emphasized party stability, viewing parties as organizational expressions of enduring social cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). From this perspective, parties were expected to exhibit strong ideological continuity as long as the underlying social structures remained intact.

Subsequent research, however, challenged this static view. Scholars have shown that parties do change, often in response to external shocks, electoral defeats, or shifts in the competitive environment. Harmel and Janda's (1994) integrated theory of party change emphasizes the interaction between external stimuli—such as electoral losses or systemic transformations—and internal party factors, including leadership turnover and factional struggles. Change is thus understood as conditional rather than automatic.

For social democratic parties, pressures to adapt intensified in the late twentieth century as economic globalization, European integration, and declining class-based organizations altered the conditions under which traditional redistributive strategies had operated (Pontusson, 2005). Party change in this context should be understood as strategic adaptation to altered constraints rather than purely ideological drift.

A key mechanism through which parties adapt is issue emphasis. Rather than altering their positions on all policy dimensions, parties may strategically highlight certain issues while downplaying others. Issue emphasis theory suggests that parties compete not only by shifting policy positions but also by selectively mobilizing issues that resonate with their target electorates (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Green-Pedersen, 2007).

This insight is particularly relevant for analyzing social democratic transformation. A party may increasingly emphasize cultural or postmaterialist issues without fully abandoning its economic commitments, or conversely, may moderate its economic stance while maintaining rhetorical references to traditional values. Distinguishing between positional change and emphasis change is therefore essential for evaluating competing explanations of ideological transformation.

Manifesto analysis provides a well-established method for capturing patterns of issue emphasis over time. By examining changes in the salience of economic versus cultural themes, researchers can assess whether parties' ideological profiles evolve in ways consistent with postmaterialist or materialist expectations (Budge et al., 2001; Volkens et al., 2020).

While structural conditions shape the environment in which parties operate, party change is ultimately mediated by organizational actors. Party elites interpret social and economic developments, formulate strategies, and translate them into programmatic documents. Panebianco (1988) emphasizes that parties are organizations with their own internal logics, traditions, and power structures, which condition how external pressures are perceived and acted upon.

This organizational perspective helps explain variation in party responses to similar structural conditions. Social democratic parties facing comparable economic constraints have not always adopted identical strategies, suggesting that leadership choices and internal dynamics matter. However, recognizing organizational agency does not require abandoning structural explanations. Rather, organizational factors can be understood as intervening variables that shape how material or cultural pressures are translated into ideological change (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Mudge, 2018).

2.1.2 Implications for the Analytical Framework

These conceptual foundations inform the analytical framework of the thesis in three key ways. First, they justify the focus on party programs and internal documents as valid indicators of party ideology. Second, they clarify that ideological change may take the form of shifts in issue emphasis, policy framing, or strategic positioning rather than abrupt ideological ruptures. Third, they provide the conceptual tools necessary to evaluate whether observed changes align more closely with postmaterialist or materialist expectations.

By grounding the analysis in established theories of party ideology and party change, the thesis ensures conceptual clarity and analytical rigor in the empirical chapters that follow.

2.2 Class, Identity, and Political Cleavages

The concept of political cleavages occupies a foundational position in the study of party systems and political conflict. In their seminal work, Party Systems and Voter Alignments, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) define a cleavage as a durable division in society that combines three elements: (1) a social-structural division, (2) a collective identity and normative dimension, and (3) organizational and political expression, typically through political parties. Cleavages, in this sense, are not merely differences of opinion but institutionalized conflicts that structure political competition over long periods of time.

In Western Europe, the emergence of mass parties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was closely linked to the crystallization of such cleavages, particularly those generated by industrialization and nation-state formation. Among these, the class cleavage between capital and labor became the central axis of political conflict in most European democracies, giving rise to socialist and social democratic parties on the left and bourgeois parties on the right (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini & Mair, 1990).

Bartolini and Mair (1990; 2007) further refine the cleavage concept by emphasizing its stabilizing effects on party systems. They argue that once cleavages are institutionalized, they constrain party competition by anchoring parties to specific social constituencies and limiting their strategic flexibility. This perspective underscores why ideological change among social democratic parties is theoretically

significant: if parties historically rooted in a class cleavage undergo major programmatic shifts, this suggests either cleavage erosion or fundamental transformation in political conflict.

Class occupies a distinctive position among social identities in political theory and sociology. Unlike many contemporary identity categories, class is rooted in structural positions within the economic system and is directly linked to material interests. In Marx's formulation, class emerges from relations of production but becomes politically salient only when objective conditions are transformed into collective awareness and organization—a distinction captured by the concepts of a "class-in-itself" and a "class-for-itself" (Marx, 1847; 1850).

This understanding of class as both structural and political has deeply influenced scholarship on labor movements and social democracy. Historical studies demonstrate that the formation of working-class consciousness and collective identity was central to the rise of labor parties, trade unions, and the expansion of social and political rights across Europe (Thompson, 1963; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Class-based organizations did not merely aggregate interests; they actively produced political identities through education, mobilization, and institutional embedding.

Importantly, class identity differs from many contemporary forms of identity politics in its capacity to generate durable political alignments. Because class positions are reproduced through economic structures, class-based identities historically provided a stable foundation for long-term party–voter linkages. This stability helps explain the persistence of class voting patterns throughout much of the twentieth century and the central role of social democratic parties in representing working-class interests (Bartolini & Mair, 1990).

2.2.1 Cleavage Erosion and the Decline of Class Politics

From the late twentieth century onward, however, scholars increasingly documented signs of class cleavage erosion. Empirical research showed declining levels of class voting, weakening trade union density, and growing electoral volatility among traditional social democratic constituencies (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Dalton, 2018).

These trends coincided with profound economic transformations, including deindustrialization, labor market flexibilization, and the expansion of the service sector.

Several scholars argue that these changes undermined the structural foundations of class-based politics. As employment patterns diversified and occupational identities fragmented, the capacity of class to function as a unifying political identity diminished (Evans & Tilley, 2017; Heerma van Voss & van der Linden, 2002). Social democratic parties, once embedded in dense organizational networks linking parties, unions, and working-class communities, increasingly faced electorates that were socially heterogeneous and less receptive to traditional class appeals.

This erosion of class politics created conditions under which alternative axes of political conflict could gain salience. Importantly, cleavage erosion does not imply the disappearance of material inequality, but rather a weakening of its translation into collective political identities and party alignments. This distinction is crucial for evaluating postmaterialist claims, which often conflate declining class voting with the obsolescence of material interests.

2.2.2 New Cleavages, Identity Politics, and Cultural Conflict

As class-based alignments weakened, scholars observed the emergence of new political conflicts organized around cultural, social, and identity-based issues. Early work by Inglehart (1977) and Kitschelt (1994) suggested that value change and issue realignment could generate new forms of political conflict that cut across traditional class divisions. More recent scholarship has conceptualized these developments as the emergence of a new cultural or identity-based cleavage opposing cosmopolitan, socially liberal voters to more traditionalist and nationalist constituencies (Kriesi et al., 2006; Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

Unlike classical cleavages, however, these new conflicts often lack the same degree of organizational embedding and social structural anchoring. While identities related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and lifestyle have become increasingly salient in

political discourse, their capacity to generate stable and enduring party alignments remains contested (Evans & Langsæther, 2020). Some scholars argue that these identities can substitute for class as the primary lens through which individuals interpret political conflict, while others caution that they remain contingent and politically fluid.

Recent work has sought to bridge cleavage theory and identity-based explanations. Studies drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social space emphasize how cultural capital and lifestyle distinctions intersect with political preferences, producing new forms of stratification that are neither purely economic nor purely cultural (Bornschier, 2010; Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2024). From this perspective, identity politics does not replace class but reconfigures political conflict along multiple dimensions.

2.2.3 Implications for Social Democratic Parties

The transformation of political cleavages poses a fundamental challenge for social democratic parties. Historically anchored in the class cleavage, these parties must now navigate electorates characterized by declining class identities and rising cultural polarization. The postmaterialist hypothesis interprets this shift as evidence of value change and the emergence of new political priorities, while materialist accounts emphasize the weakening of class organization and the structural constraints imposed by economic transformation.

Crucially, whether new cultural identities can function as full-fledged cleavages in the Lipset–Rokkan sense remains an open question. If they lack durability, organizational anchoring, or clear links to material interests, their capacity to sustain long-term party strategies is uncertain. This uncertainty reinforces the importance of empirically examining how social democratic parties have integrated cultural issues into their platforms and whether these shifts correspond to deeper ideological transformations or more limited strategic adaptations.

2.2.4 Relevance for the Present Study

This thesis draws on cleavage theory to evaluate whether the ideological transformation of social democratic parties reflects a genuine realignment around postmaterialist values or a response to the erosion of class-based politics under changing material conditions. By analysing party programs and internal documents over time, the study assesses whether cultural issue emphasis develops independently of economic repositioning or whether both evolve in tandem.

In doing so, the thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of contemporary political conflict and the extent to which traditional cleavage frameworks remain applicable in post-industrial democracies.

2.3 Competing Explanations for the Transformation of Social Democratic Parties

Postmaterialist versus Materialist Accounts

One of the central debates in the literature on the transformation of European social democratic parties concerns whether these changes are primarily driven by value change or by structural economic transformations. Two broad and competing explanatory frameworks dominate this debate: the postmaterialist hypothesis and materialist (political economy) explanations. While both seek to account for the ideological and strategic shifts of social democratic parties since the late twentieth century, they differ fundamentally in their assumptions about the sources of political change and the mechanisms linking social change to party behaviour.

2.3.1 The Postmaterialist Hypothesis

The postmaterialist hypothesis originates in the work of Ronald Inglehart and has been one of the most influential theories of political change in advanced industrial democracies. At its core, the theory posits that long-term economic growth and rising levels of material security following World War II generated a process of intergenerational value change. Individuals socialized under conditions of economic scarcity prioritize materialist values such as economic security, physical safety, and income stability, whereas cohorts raised in conditions of affluence place greater emphasis on postmaterialist values, including self-expression, quality of life,

environmental protection, gender equality, minority rights, and participatory democracy (Inglehart, 1977; 1990; 1997).

According to this perspective, value change is gradual but cumulative, as younger, more postmaterialist cohorts replace older generations in the electorate. These changes are expected to reshape political conflict by increasing the salience of cultural and lifestyle issues relative to traditional economic concerns. In this sense, postmaterialism is not merely an attitudinal shift, but a transformation of the underlying value structure of democratic societies, with significant implications for party competition and ideological alignment.

Applied to social democratic parties, the postmaterialist hypothesis suggests that these parties adapted their platforms in response to changing voter preferences. As postmaterialist values spread among educated, urban, and younger voters—groups increasingly important to the left—social democratic parties are expected to place greater emphasis on issues such as environmental protection, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, multiculturalism, and democratic participation (Kitschelt, 1994; Dalton, 2018). From this perspective, the cultural leftward shift of social democracy represents a rational and electorally motivated response to societal value change rather than a betrayal of traditional principles.

Empirical research has provided substantial evidence for the existence of postmaterialist values at the individual level and their association with political attitudes and voting behaviour. Numerous studies using survey data have demonstrated generational differences in value priorities and have linked postmaterialist orientations to support for green parties and progressive cultural positions (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Dalton, 2018). Moreover, scholars such as Kitschelt (1994) argue that social democratic parties' repositioning on cultural issues allowed them to compete more effectively in multidimensional policy spaces characterized by both economic and cultural conflict.

However, despite its influence, the postmaterialist hypothesis faces several important criticisms when applied to explaining the overall ideological transformation of social democratic parties. First, critics argue that postmaterialism is conceptually weakly connected to the major political cleavages that historically structured European party systems. Unlike class, religion, or center–periphery conflicts, postmaterialist values do not clearly map onto stable social groups capable

of sustaining long-term party alignments (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini & Mair, 1990).

Second, while postmaterialism may explain increased attention to cultural issues, it struggles to account for the simultaneous moderation or retrenchment of social democratic parties' economic platforms, including acceptance of market-oriented reforms, fiscal restraint, and welfare state recalibration. As several scholars note, a shift toward postmaterialist values does not logically imply a retreat from redistribution or labor market protection (Pontusson, 2005; Berman, 2006). This raises doubts about whether postmaterialism alone can serve as a sufficient explanation for the full scope of social democratic transformation.

2.3.2 Materialist Explanations

In contrast to postmaterialist accounts, materialist explanations locate the transformation of social democratic parties primarily in structural economic change and shifts in class composition. From this perspective, ideological change is driven not by value evolution, but by transformations in the economic foundations of advanced capitalist societies, including deindustrialization, globalization, technological change, and the decline of organized labor.

Early materialist analyses emphasize the erosion of the traditional industrial working class and the weakening of trade unions as the core organizational pillars of social democracy (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986; Pontusson, 2005). As manufacturing employment declined and labor markets fragmented, social democratic parties faced shrinking and increasingly heterogeneous constituencies. These developments undermined the feasibility of traditional redistributive strategies and forced parties to adapt to new electoral realities.

More recent scholarship has deepened this argument by highlighting the role of political-economic constraints and elite-driven transformation. Mudge (2018) demonstrates how the rise of technocratic policy experts within social democratic parties facilitated the diffusion of neoliberal economic ideas, leading to a redefinition of social democracy around market compatibility rather than class-based redistribution. Similarly, Lavelle (2009) shows that the neoliberal turn of social democratic parties in countries such as Germany and Sweden reflected strategic

accommodation to global capital and fiscal constraints rather than voter-driven cultural change.

Piketty's (2020) analysis of electoral data further supports a materialist interpretation by documenting a transformation in the social base of left parties. He shows that social democratic and left-wing parties increasingly rely on highly educated, culturally liberal voters while losing support among lower-income and less-educated working-class voters. This realignment suggests that cultural liberalism may be a byproduct, rather than a cause, of deeper material transformations in class structure and political representation.

From this perspective, the cultural repositioning of social democratic parties is best understood as occurring alongside, and often as a consequence of, economic moderation. Berman and Snegovaya (2021) argue that social democratic parties' embrace of cultural liberalism coincided with their retreat from robust redistribution, creating space for right-wing populist parties to mobilize economically insecure voters around nationalist and authoritarian appeals.

2.3.3 Evaluating the Competing Frameworks

The contrast between postmaterialist and materialist explanations reveals a fundamental disagreement about the direction of causality in party change. Postmaterialist accounts emphasize bottom-up value change among voters, whereas materialist explanations stress top-down adaptation to economic constraints and class restructuring. While both perspectives acknowledge the growing salience of cultural issues, they diverge sharply on whether cultural change is an independent driver or a secondary consequence of material transformation.

Importantly, much of the existing literature assumes rather than demonstrates the applicability of postmaterialist theory to party-level ideological change. While value change is well documented at the individual level, fewer studies systematically examine whether social democratic parties' programmatic shifts correspond temporally and substantively to postmaterialist predictions. This gap is particularly evident in longitudinal analyses of party manifestos and internal documents, which remain underutilized in this debate.

This thesis builds on this theoretical divide by empirically assessing whether the postmaterialist hypothesis alone can account for the ideological and strategic transformation of European social democratic parties. By analyzing party manifestos, internal documents, and official statements over time, the study examines whether increases in postmaterialist issue emphasis occur independently of, or alongside, shifts in economic positioning.

In doing so, the thesis contributes to the literature by treating postmaterialism not as a background assumption, but as a testable explanatory framework, directly compared against materialist accounts rooted in political economy. The following methodological chapter outlines how this comparative analysis is conducted.

2.4 Ideational and Organizational Accounts of Party Change

A further strand of literature explains party change by emphasizing internal party dynamics, leadership agency, and ideational reinterpretation. Rather than locating the drivers of ideological transformation in structural economic change or societal value shifts, these accounts focus on how party elites actively reshape party programs in response to perceived electoral challenges or strategic opportunities.

Early contributions in this tradition highlight the importance of organizational change and leadership turnover. Panebianco (1988) argues that parties are organizations with distinct internal power structures and that ideological change often reflects shifts in the balance of power between factions, leadership groups, and professional party elites. Similarly, Harmel and Janda (1994) conceptualize party change as the product of external shocks—such as electoral defeat—filtered through internal organizational dynamics, particularly leadership change.

Empirical case studies further illustrate the role of agency in party transformation. Schonfeld's (1981) analysis of the French Socialist Party shows how strategic choices by party leaders contributed to ideological reorientation during periods of crisis. More recent research on social democratic parties emphasizes leadership-driven modernization projects, such as the "Third Way," which sought to redefine social democracy's ideological identity in response to globalization and changing electoral conditions (Giddens, 1998; Loxbo & Demker, 2016).

These ideational and organizational accounts provide valuable insights into how party change occurs, particularly at the level of programmatic formulation and public messaging. They help explain variation in party responses to similar structural conditions and highlight the importance of elite interpretation and strategic framing. However, as explanatory frameworks, they face important limitations.

First, ideational accounts often lack a clear specification of why particular ideas gain prominence at specific historical moments. While leadership agency can explain the mechanism of change, it does not, on its own, account for the broader patterns of convergence observed among social democratic parties across different national contexts. The widespread and contemporaneous nature of social democratic transformation across Europe suggests the influence of common external pressures rather than purely endogenous organizational dynamics.

Second, organizational explanations risk circularity if not embedded within a broader theoretical framework. To argue that parties changed because leaders chose to change raises the question of what shaped those choices in the first place. Without reference to external economic constraints or societal value shifts, ideational explanations remain descriptively rich but analytically incomplete (Berman, 2006; Mudge, 2018).

For these reasons, this thesis treats ideational and organizational factors as mediating mechanisms rather than independent causal explanations. Party elites interpret and respond to external developments—whether material or cultural—and translate them into programmatic change through organizational processes. Leadership agency thus operates within structural constraints and societal contexts that are more plausibly captured by materialist and postmaterialist frameworks.

By analytically subordinating ideational accounts to these broader explanations, the thesis avoids overstating elite autonomy while still recognizing the role of organizational dynamics in shaping the form and timing of ideological change. This approach allows for a more coherent and parsimonious theoretical framework, in which party agency is integrated rather than isolated.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights a broad consensus that European social democratic parties have undergone profound ideological and strategic

transformations since the late twentieth century. However, it also reveals a persistent disagreement regarding the primary drivers of this transformation. At the centre of this debate lies a tension between postmaterialist explanations, which emphasize value change and the rising salience of cultural issues, and materialist accounts, which locate party change in structural economic transformations and class realignment.

Postmaterialist theories offer a compelling account of changing political preferences at the individual level and provide a plausible explanation for the growing prominence of cultural and identity-related issues in party competition. Empirical research has convincingly demonstrated the diffusion of postmaterialist values among younger, more educated cohorts and their association with progressive cultural positions. Yet, as shown in this chapter, the extension of postmaterialist theory from voter attitudes to party-level ideological change remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. In particular, it remains unclear whether postmaterialist value change can account for the simultaneous moderation of social democratic parties' economic platforms, a core feature of their transformation.

Materialist explanations, by contrast, provide a structurally grounded account of social democratic change rooted in deindustrialization, globalization, and the decline of organized labor. These approaches offer strong explanations for the weakening of class-based politics and the constraints faced by redistributive policy agendas. However, materialist accounts often treat cultural repositioning as secondary or instrumental, leaving unresolved questions about why social democratic parties increasingly emphasize cultural liberalism and identity-related issues beyond what is strictly required by economic adaptation.

Ideational and organizational perspectives add an important layer of analysis by illuminating how party elites interpret external pressures and translate them into programmatic change. Yet, as argued above, these accounts are best understood as explaining the *mechanisms* of change rather than its underlying causes. Without integration into broader materialist or postmaterialist frameworks, they cannot on their own account for the widespread and cross-national nature of social democratic transformation.

Despite the richness of this literature, two key gaps remain. First, much of the debate proceeds at a high level of abstraction, with relatively few studies

systematically examining longitudinal changes in party ideology using party-authored documents. Second, postmaterialist explanations are often invoked as background assumptions rather than subjected to direct empirical testing against alternative frameworks. As a result, it remains unclear whether postmaterialist value change is sufficient, on its own, to explain the ideological evolution of social democratic parties.

This thesis addresses these gaps by conducting a comparative, longitudinal analysis of three major European social democratic parties. By examining party manifestos, congress documents, and official statements over time, the study directly assesses whether shifts in cultural emphasis occur independently of, or in tandem with, changes in economic positioning. In doing so, the thesis treats postmaterialism not as an assumed driver of party change, but as a testable hypothesis, evaluated alongside materialist explanations rooted in political economy.

The following chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach used to operationalize these theoretical frameworks and to assess their explanatory power.

3.Methodolgical approach

3.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative comparative research design to evaluate the explanatory power of the postmaterialist hypothesis in accounting for the ideological transformation of European social democratic parties. Rather than seeking to explain party change through a single national case, the study compares programmatic developments across three major Western European parties: the UK Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste).

The design is explicitly theory-testing rather than exploratory. The objective is not to describe ideological change per se, but to assess whether the postmaterialist hypothesis—understood as a claim about value-driven transformation—is sufficient to explain observed programmatic shifts. To do so, the study traces changes in party ideology over time and evaluates their sequencing, salience, and internal coherence.

A qualitative approach is particularly well suited to this task, as it allows for close attention to issue framing, justificatory logic, and thematic integration—elements that are central to distinguishing materialist from postmaterialist politics but are difficult to capture using purely quantitative methods.

3.2 Case Selection

The case selection follows a most-different systems logic within a constrained universe of Western European social democratic parties. The UK Labour Party, the SPD, and the French Socialist Party differ along several key dimensions, including party tradition, welfare regime, state structure, and historical linkage to organized labor.

- UK Labour Party: a labour-movement-based party operating within a liberal welfare regime.
- SPD (Germany): a mass party embedded in a corporatist welfare regime with strong trade union linkages.
- Parti Socialiste (France): a more statist and ideologically driven party operating in a centralized state with weaker organizational ties to labor.

Despite these differences, all three parties experienced comparable ideological trajectories since the late twentieth century, including economic moderation, strategic repositioning, and an increased emphasis on cultural and identity-related issues. This combination of variation and convergence makes the cases particularly suitable for testing whether a common explanatory framework—such as postmaterialism—can account for party transformation across institutional contexts.

The inclusion of the French case strengthens the comparative design by extending the analysis beyond labourist and corporatist party traditions and allowing for a broader assessment of the generalizability of the findings.

3.3 Temporal Scope

The analysis focuses on the period from the early 1970s to the late 2010s. This temporal scope is chosen for both theoretical and empirical reasons. The early 1970s

represent the final phase of post-war social democratic consolidation, characterized by strong class-based politics and welfare state expansion. Beginning the analysis in this period establishes a clear materialist baseline against which later changes can be assessed.

The subsequent decades encompass critical junctures for all three parties, including economic crises, deindustrialization, globalization, European integration, and electoral realignment. These developments provide the structural context in which ideological transformation is expected to occur. Ending the analysis in the late 2010s allows the study to capture both the consolidation of postmaterialist themes and moments of renewed economic radicalism or party decline.

Rather than analyzing every manifesto issued during this period, the study adopts a strategic manifesto selection approach. Key manifestos are selected to represent distinct phases of ideological development, ensuring analytical leverage while maintaining depth and transparency.

3.4 Data and Materials

Primary data source: Party manifestos

The primary empirical material consists of party election manifestos. Manifestos are treated as authoritative expressions of collective party ideology, formally adopted through internal party procedures and intended to communicate programmatic priorities to voters. As such, they provide a stable, comparable, and replicable source for tracing ideological change over time and across parties.

Manifestos are particularly well suited to the research question of this thesis, which concerns programmatic ideological transformation rather than elite motivations or internal deliberations. Because manifestos represent binding commitments rather than ad hoc statements, they allow for systematic comparison of issue salience and framing.

This study does not rely on elite interviews, speeches, or informal party statements. While such sources can offer valuable insights into individual motivations or internal debates, they are more susceptible to strategic framing, contextual reactivity, and retrospective rationalization. Given that the research question focuses on the

evolution of collective ideological commitments rather than decision-making processes, manifestos constitute the most appropriate and analytically consistent data source.

Supplementary sources such as interviews or internal party documents are therefore acknowledged as valuable avenues for future research but are not required to address the central analytical objective of this thesis.

3.5 Analytical Method: Qualitative Thematic Coding

The empirical analysis is based on a qualitative thematic coding of manifesto texts. The unit of analysis is the policy statement or paragraph, rather than individual words or phrases. This choice allows the analysis to capture the dominant justificatory logic underlying each policy commitment.

Each relevant passage is coded into one of three categories:

- Materialist: policies primarily justified in terms of economic security, redistribution, welfare provision, employment, housing, healthcare, or class-based interests.
- Postmaterialist: policies primarily justified in terms of rights, recognition, quality of life, environmental protection, democratic participation, or cultural values.
- Hybrid: policies that integrate materialist and postmaterialist justifications in a single dominant frame.

A dominant-frame rule is applied throughout. When economic and cultural elements co-occur, classification follows the primary justificatory logic rather than the presence of secondary themes. This rule ensures consistency across time and cases.

3.6 Coding Transparency and Reliability

To ensure analytical transparency and replicability, the full coding process is documented in detail later in the chapter. For each manifesto, the full table provide:

- translated or original policy excerpts,
- page references,

- thematic classifications,
- brief justifications for coding decisions.

For non-English manifestos (German and French), translation is performed analytically and focuses on substantive policy content rather than stylistic nuance. Translation procedures are applied consistently across cases and explicitly disclosed.

The coding framework is applied iteratively, with multiple readings of each manifesto to ensure internal consistency over time and comparability across parties.

3.7 Analytical Expectations

Before turning to the results, the analysis specifies explicit expectations derived from the competing theoretical frameworks.

- Postmaterialist hypothesis: postmaterialist themes should rise autonomously and potentially displace materialist concerns as the core of party ideology.
- Materialist framework: cultural expansion should follow economic restructuring and coexist with persistent or renewed materialist priorities.

By comparing observed patterns with these expectations, the study assesses not merely the presence of postmaterialist themes but their explanatory sufficiency.

3.8 Summary

This methodology chapter has outlined a qualitative comparative research design grounded in transparent data selection, consistent coding rules, and explicit theoretical expectations. By focusing on party manifestos as authoritative expressions of ideology and systematically tracing changes across time and cases, the study provides a rigorous framework for evaluating the postmaterialist hypothesis in the context of European social democratic transformation.

4.Result Analysis

4.1 Analytical Strategy

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of ideological change in three European social democratic parties: the UK Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste). The purpose of the chapter is to trace how these parties' programmatic priorities evolved over time and to evaluate whether these changes are consistent with the expectations of the postmaterialist hypothesis.

The chapter adopts a **process-tracing and comparative logic** rather than a purely descriptive one. Rather than merely documenting the presence of postmaterialist themes, the analysis focuses on:

1. **Sequencing** – when economic and cultural changes occur relative to one another;
2. **Salience** – whether postmaterialist themes displace or supplement materialist priorities;
3. **Integration** – whether ideological change takes the form of replacement, layering, or hybrid recomposition.

Each party is analyzed longitudinally using strategically selected party manifestos, followed by an interim assessment that synthesizes findings at the case level. A cross-case comparison is presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 Manifesto Selection Logic and Temporal Sampling

Before turning to the case analyses, it is necessary to clarify why this study does not analyze every manifesto published since the 1970s.

Although a full census of manifestos would maximize coverage, it would come at the cost of analytical depth and transparency. Instead, this chapter follows a strategic temporal sampling approach, selecting approximately one manifesto per decade (or per critical political phase). This approach is justified for three reasons.

First, the research question concerns structural ideological shifts, not short-term electoral fluctuations. Major ideological transformations tend to occur at identifiable turning points—such as economic crises, leadership changes, or strategic reorientations—rather than incrementally in every electoral cycle.

Second, a qualitative thematic analysis requires full-text reading, contextual interpretation, and justification of coding decisions. Applying this level of scrutiny to

every manifesto would be impractical and risk superficial analysis. Strategic selection allows the chapter to demonstrate the analytical process in detail.

Third, the selected manifestos correspond to critical junctures widely recognized in the literature (e.g. Labour 1997, SPD 1998, PS 1981 and 1997), enhancing theoretical leverage and comparability across cases.

4.3 Analytical Method and Triangulation Logic

The empirical analysis proceeds in two steps.

First, each selected manifesto is subjected to qualitative thematic coding, following the framework outlined in Chapter 3. Policy statements are classified as *materialist*, *postmaterialist*, or *hybrid* based on their dominant justificatory logic. This process is documented in detail in the appendices, including page references and coding justifications.

Second, the qualitative findings are triangulated with descriptive trends from the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) dataset. MARPOR data are not treated as independent evidence of ideological change, but as a contextual benchmark that allows the qualitative findings to be situated within broader longitudinal trends in issue emphasis. This triangulation strengthens the credibility of the analysis without substituting qualitative interpretation with quantitative counts.

4.4 Case Analyses

4.4.1 UK Labour Party

The UK Labour Party case traces ideological change from the mid-1970s to 2019, covering five key moments: 1974, 1983, 1997, 2010, and 2019.

The 1974 and 1983 manifestos establish a clear materialist baseline, centered on nationalization, employment, welfare expansion, housing, and redistribution. Postmaterialist themes appear sporadically and remain subordinate.

The 1997 manifesto marks a decisive economic and strategic turning point. While materialist concerns persist, they are reframed through the language of modernization, competitiveness, and fiscal responsibility. Postmaterialist themes—

such as equality, diversity, and environmental protection—expand significantly but follow this economic moderation rather than preceding it.

The 2010 manifesto consolidates this trajectory, while the 2019 manifesto demonstrates a partial return to economic radicalism without cultural retrenchment. This pattern directly contradicts strong postmaterialist expectations of displacement.

(Detailed coding tables and excerpts are reported later)

Manifesto	**Materialist themes**	**Postmaterialist themes**	**Hybrid themes**	**Overall ideological profile**
1974 (Feb)	Employment, redistribution, public ownership, welfare, housing, NHS dominate	Marginal and subordinate	Minimal	Classical materialist social democracy
1983	Intensified state intervention, labour rights, housing, health	Marginal	Low	Peak materialist / class-based orientation
1997	Moderated economic governance, welfare and health remain central	Environment, equality, rights-based migration emerge	Low	Turning point: economic moderation + cultural expansion
2010	Fiscal responsibility, activation, housing, health	Environment, equality, democratic reform, migrant rights	Medium	Postmaterialist consolidation with moderated materialism
2019	Redistribution, public ownership, labour rights, housing, NHS	Environment, identity, migration-as-rights	High	Hybrid recomposition: cultural continuity + economic re-radicalisation

These trends are derived from the full paragraph-level coding reported at the end of the chapter.

Interim Assessment: UK Labour Party

The Labour case shows postmaterialist expansion as sequential and supplementary, not causally primary.

4.4.2 German Social Democratic Party (SPD)

The SPD case covers the period from 1972 to 2017, capturing classical social democracy, the *Neue Mitte*, Agenda 2010 consolidation, and post-Agenda reorientation.

The 1972 and 1983 manifestos exhibit strong materialist dominance, with emphasis on employment, welfare, industrial democracy, and redistribution. Postmaterialist issues are present but marginal.

The 1998 manifesto represents a critical turning point, with economic moderation and the acceptance of market-compatible reforms. Postmaterialist themes become more visible, particularly in environmental and social policy, but remain layered onto the economic core.

The 2002 manifesto consolidates this shift through activation-oriented welfare reform and fiscal discipline. The 2017 manifesto reasserts redistribution and labor protection while fully retaining postmaterialist commitments.

Manifesto	**Dominant materialist themes**	**Dominant postmaterialist themes**	**Hybrid themes**	**Overall ideological profile**
1972	Employment, welfare expansion, state planning, codetermination, housing	Marginal environmental protection	None	Classic social democratic / strongly materialist
1983	Welfare state defense, employment protection	Peace, democratic participation, gender equality	None	Materialist with limited postmaterialist incorporation
1998	Economic modernization, competitiveness, welfare sustainability	Equal opportunities, gender equality	Ecological modernization	Centrally moderated social democracy (Neue Mitte)
2002	Fiscal stability, labour market activation, welfare reform	Gender equality	Environment linked to growth	Economically materialist with neoliberal-adaptive elements
2017	Redistribution, collective bargaining, worker protection	Democratic participation, anti-discrimination	Climate–industrial strategy	Hybridized but still materialist-anchored

(Detailed coding tables and translations are provided later)

Interim Assessment: SPD (Germany)

The SPD trajectory mirrors that of Labour: economic change precedes cultural expansion, and postmaterialist themes never displace materialist priorities.

4.4.3 French Socialist Party (PS)

The French case spans from 1981 to 2017 and provides an analytically distinct test due to France's statist tradition and weaker labor-movement roots.

The 1981 manifesto (*110 Propositions*) represents a paradigmatic materialist baseline, centered on nationalization, redistribution, welfare expansion, and labor rights. Postmaterialist themes exist but are clearly secondary.

The 1988 manifesto reflects post-austerity moderation without ideological rupture. Cultural and democratic themes expand but remain subordinate to economic objectives.

The 1997 manifesto embodies a Third Way synthesis, combining economic moderation with a strong expansion of postmaterialist themes such as gender parity, environmental protection, and democratic reform.

The 2012 manifesto shows a reassertion of materialist priorities in response to the financial crisis, while 2017 illustrates programmatic fragmentation and party decline rather than ideological replacement.

(All coding tables and translated excerpts are reported at the end of the chapter.)

Interim Assessment: PS (France)

The French case confirms that postmaterialist expansion follows economic adaptation and does not explain either party transformation or collapse.

Manifesto	**Dominant materialist themes**	**Dominant postmaterialist themes**	**Hybrid themes**	**Overall ideological profile**
1981	Nationalization, redistribution, welfare expansion, employment, housing	Women's rights, civil liberties	None	Radical, class-centered socialist program
1988	Employment, welfare protection, social solidarity	Democratic participation, anti-discrimination	None	Materialist with cautious cultural expansion
1997	Employment creation, labour rights, welfare, regulation of globalization	Gender parity, environment	Limited ecological–economic overlap	Materialist core with growing postmaterialist layer
2012	Redistribution, finance regulation, pensions, housing, public investment	LGBTQ+ rights, migrant voting rights	Green growth	Economically radical but culturally pluralist
2017	Employment, social protection, welfare defense	Civil rights, migration inclusion, climate	Green economy	Fragmented, hybrid ideological profile

4.5 Cross-Case Synthesis (Preview)

Across all three cases, a common pattern emerges:

1. Strong materialist baselines;
2. Economic moderation driven by structural constraints;
3. Expansion of postmaterialist themes after economic adaptation;
4. Hybrid recomposition rather than value displacement;
5. Periodic reassertion of materialist priorities in times of crisis.

This pattern directly challenges the strong version of the postmaterialist hypothesis and sets the stage for the systematic cross-case comparison developed in Chapter 5.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has demonstrated, through transparent qualitative analysis and triangulation with quantitative indicators, that the ideological evolution of European social democratic parties follows a sequential and layered process. Postmaterialist themes expand and stabilize, but they do not drive or replace materialist politics.

The next chapter builds on these findings to assess their theoretical implications through explicit cross-case comparison.

For clarity, here are the full results, divided by country case:

UK's labour party:

Manifesto year	Page	Analytical excerpt (verbatim or near-verbatim)	Policy area	Theme	Classification	Coding justification
1974 (Feb)	1	"The Labour Government will take public ownership of key industries to secure democratic control."	Economic system	State ownership	Materialist	Structural economic intervention
1974 (Feb)	1	"Public ownership is essential to planning and full employment."	Economic system	Employment	Materialist	Employment via state control
1974 (Feb)	2	"The overriding objective of economic policy must be full employment."	Labour market	Employment	Materialist	Central class-based goal
1974 (Feb)	2	"A National Enterprise Board will guide industrial investment."	Industrial policy	State planning	Materialist	Public economic governance
1974 (Feb)	3	"We will expand social services and improve benefits."	Welfare	Welfare state	Materialist	Redistribution and protection
1974 (Feb)	3	"Pensions will be raised in line with earnings."	Welfare	Pensions	Materialist	Income security
1974 (Feb)	4	"A massive council housing programme will be launched."	Housing	Housing	Materialist	Material living conditions
1974 (Feb)	4	"Rent controls will protect tenants."	Housing	Housing	Materialist	Protection against market
1974 (Feb)	5	"Trade unions must be strengthened, not weakened."	Labour relations	Labour rights	Materialist	Class power
1974 (Feb)	6	"Democratic reform of Parliament is needed."	Institutions	Participation	Postmaterialist	Democratic quality
1974 (Feb)	7	"Britain should pursue peace and disarmament."	Foreign policy	Global justice	Postmaterialist	Normative internationalism
1983	1	"Labour offers a socialist programme for Britain."	Ideology	Economic system	Materialist	Explicit socialism

1983	1	“Democratic planning will replace the market.”	Economy	Planning	Materialist	Anti-market logic
1983	2	“Major industries and banks will be nationalised.”	Economy	State ownership	Materialist	Structural change
1983	3	“Full employment will be restored through public investment.”	Labour market	Employment	Materialist	Keynesian logic
1983	3	“Welfare benefits will be increased.”	Welfare	Welfare state	Materialist	Redistribution
1983	4	“Education and health will be fully funded.”	Public services	Welfare services	Materialist	Universal provision
1983	5	“Council housing will be expanded.”	Housing	Housing	Materialist	Material security
1983	6	“Britain must abandon nuclear weapons.”	Defense	Global justice	Postmaterialist	Ethical stance
1983	7	“We are committed to equality for women.”	Equality	Gender equality	Postmaterialist	Rights-based
1983	8	“Racial discrimination will be outlawed.”	Equality	Anti-discrimination	Postmaterialist	Recognition
1997	1	“Economic stability is the foundation of social justice.”	Macroeconomics	Fiscal discipline	Materialist	Economic constraint framing
1997	1	“Low inflation and sound public finances.”	Macroeconomics	Economic governance	Materialist	Market credibility
1997	2	“Jobs will be created through competitiveness.”	Labour market	Employment	Materialist	Supply-side logic
1997	2	“Welfare reform will make work pay.”	Welfare	Activation	Hybrid	Economic + social
1997	3	“Equal opportunities for all, regardless of background.”	Equality	Equal opportunity	Postmaterialist	Recognition framing
1997	3	“Tackling social exclusion.”	Social policy	Inclusion	Postmaterialist	Quality-of-life
1997	4	“We will protect the environment.”	Environment	Ecology	Postmaterialist	Normative commitment
1997	4	“Sustainable development.”	Environment	Sustainability	Postmaterialist	Intergenerational
1997	5	“Reform public services to deliver efficiency.”	Public services	Welfare reform	Hybrid	Efficiency + provision
2010	1	“Investment in education and skills.”	Education	Human capital	Materialist	Economic productivity
2010	2	“Protecting jobs during recession.”	Labour market	Employment	Materialist	Crisis response

2010	2	“Fairness in taxation.”	Fiscal policy	Redistribution	Materialist	Equality
2010	3	“Climate change is the greatest challenge.”	Environment	Ecology	Postmaterialist	Value-based
2010	3	“Leadership in climate policy.”	Environment	Climate	Postmaterialist	Normative
2010	4	“Strengthening equality law.”	Equality	Anti-discrimination	Postmaterialist	Rights
2019	1	“Public ownership of rail, water, and energy.”	Economy	State ownership	Materialist	Structural change
2019	1	“Ending austerity.”	Economy	Macroeconomics	Materialist	Anti-austerity
2019	2	“A right to a secure home.”	Housing	Housing	Materialist	Social right
2019	2	“Mass council house building.”	Housing	Housing	Materialist	Material provision
2019	3	“Green New Deal.”	Environment	Green economy	Hybrid	Jobs + climate
2019	3	“Millions of green jobs.”	Labour	Employment	Hybrid	Ecology + employment
2019	4	“Defending LGBT+ rights.”	Equality	LGBTQ+	Postmaterialist	Recognition
2019	4	“Anti-racism at the heart of policy.”	Equality	Anti-discrimination	Postmaterialist	Identity-based

German SPD – Full Qualitative Coding Table with Translations (1972–2017):

Manifesto (Year)	Page	Translated Policy Summary	Theme	Classification
1972	1	Full employment and social justice as core aims	Employment	Materialist
1972	3	Expansion of welfare state	Welfare	Materialist
1972	6	Worker participation in firms	Industrial democracy	Materialist
1972	9	Environmental protection for quality of life	Environment	Postmaterialist
1983	2	Defense of welfare institutions	Social security	Materialist
1983	4	Peace and nuclear disarmament	Global justice	Postmaterialist
1983	7	Gender equality policies	Gender	Postmaterialist
1998	3	Modernization of social market economy	Economic reform	Materialist
1998	6	Ecological modernization	Ecology	Hybrid
1998	8	Equal opportunities	Rights	Postmaterialist
2002	4	Fiscal consolidation and stability	Macroeconomics	Materialist

2002	6	Activation-oriented labour reforms	Employment	Materialist
2002	12	Gender equality	Identity	Postmaterialist
2017	3	Social justice and redistribution	Welfare	Materialist
2017	7	Democratic participation	Participation	Postmaterialist
2017	15	Climate policy linked to industry	Environment	Hybrid

French Socialist Party – Full Qualitative Coding Table with Translations (1981–2017):

Manifesto (Year)	Page	Translated Policy Summary	Theme	Classification
1981	1	Nationalization of banks and industry	State ownership	Materialist
1981	3	Progressive taxation and redistribution	Equality	Materialist
1981	5	Housing as a right	Housing	Materialist
1981	7	Women's equality	Gender	Postmaterialist
1981	15	Abolition of death penalty	Civil rights	Postmaterialist
1988	4	Unemployment as central political problem	Employment	Materialist
1988	5	Crisis of democracy and culture	Participation	Postmaterialist
1988	7	Welfare solidarity	Welfare	Materialist
1997	2	Employment creation	Labour	Materialist
1997	4	Gender parity	Gender	Postmaterialist
1997	6	Environmental sustainability	Ecology	Hybrid
2012	3	Finance as enemy; regulation	Political economy	Materialist
2012	16	Welfare and pensions	Social protection	Materialist
2012	22	Same-sex marriage	LGBTQ+	Postmaterialist
2012	28	Green growth	Environment	Hybrid
2017	1	Employment and investment	Economy	Materialist
2017	2	Voting rights for foreigners	Rights	Postmaterialist
2017	3	Climate commitments	Environment	Postmaterialist
2017	3	Social protection	Welfare	Materialist

Chapter 5

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis: UK Labour, SPD, and Parti Socialiste

5.1 Purpose and Analytical Strategy

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This chapter brings together the empirical findings from the three case studies—the UK Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the French Socialist Party (PS)—in order to assess whether the postmaterialist hypothesis can account for the ideological evolution of European social democratic parties. Rather than repeating country-specific narratives, the chapter adopts a comparative and synthetic approach, focusing on three analytical dimensions that cut across all cases:

1. **Sequencing** – the temporal order in which economic and cultural changes occurred
2. **Relative salience** – whether postmaterialist themes displaced or supplemented materialist ones
3. **Theoretical sufficiency** – whether postmaterialism alone can explain party transformation

By comparing patterns across three different party traditions, welfare regimes, and institutional contexts, the chapter evaluates whether observed similarities point to a generalizable causal mechanism or instead suggest the limits of postmaterialist explanations.

5.2 Comparative Baselines: Materialist Dominance before the 1980s

All three parties display a strikingly similar ideological configuration in the early period covered by the analysis (UK Labour 1974, SPD 1972/1983, PS 1981). Despite national differences in party organization and state tradition, their manifestos share the following features:

- **Centrality of class-based economic politics**, including employment, wages, redistribution, welfare expansion, housing, and healthcare;
- **Strong state interventionism**, whether through nationalization (UK, France), planning (Germany), or public ownership;
- **Marginal and subordinate role of postmaterialist themes**, such as environmental protection, gender equality, and democratic participation.

Postmaterialist issues are not absent, but they are clearly secondary. Environmental policy is typically framed instrumentally, gender equality is often articulated in

economic rather than rights-based terms, and democratic reforms serve to support material redistribution rather than replace it. This shared baseline establishes that social democratic success and ideological coherence in the post-war period were not dependent on postmaterialist value appeals, thereby weakening any claim that postmaterialism is intrinsic to social democratic identity.

5.3 Turning Points and Sequencing: Economic Moderation Precedes Cultural Expansion

The most important comparative finding concerns sequencing. Across all three cases, economic change precedes cultural expansion:

- **UK Labour** moderates its economic stance in the 1990s (culminating in 1997), followed by a significant rise in postmaterialist themes related to diversity, rights, and environment.
- **SPD** undergoes economic moderation in 1998 and consolidates it with Agenda 2010 (2002), after which postmaterialist themes stabilize and normalize.
- **PS** shifts away from socialist economic radicalism after 1983, with a Third Way synthesis fully articulated by 1997, accompanied by expanded cultural and identity-based discourse.

In no case do postmaterialist values appear before or independently of economic moderation. This temporal ordering is critical. If postmaterialist value change were the primary driver of party transformation, one would expect cultural issues to rise first, pulling parties away from class-based economic politics. Instead, the evidence consistently shows that postmaterialist themes gain prominence after parties adapt their economic platforms in response to structural constraints such as globalization, fiscal pressure, European integration, and changing labor markets.

5.4 Relative Salience: Supplementation Rather Than Displacement

A second key comparative finding concerns relative salience. Across all cases, postmaterialist themes expand, but they do not displace materialist politics.

Even at their height:

- Labour 1997 and 2019,
- SPD 1998, 2002, and 2017,
- PS 1997 and 2012,

materialist concerns—employment, welfare, redistribution, housing, health, and economic governance—remain numerically and structurally central in party manifestos. Postmaterialist issues become institutionalized rather than hegemonic: they are treated as taken-for-granted commitments, not as the core axis of political mobilization.

Moreover, hybrid framings proliferate across all three cases. Environmental policy is increasingly articulated as green growth or ecological modernization; equality is framed through labor market inclusion; democracy is linked to social cohesion and welfare protection. These hybrid formulations suggest ideological recomposition, not value replacement. Postmaterialist concerns are layered onto, and integrated with, materialist frameworks rather than substituting for them.

5.5 Crisis, Reassertion, and Party Decline

The comparative analysis also highlights the limits of postmaterialist explanations in moments of crisis. In both France (2012) and the UK (2019), economic crisis and social discontent trigger a renewed emphasis on redistribution, public investment, and welfare expansion—without any rollback of cultural or identity-based commitments. Similarly, the SPD's 2017 manifesto re-centers social justice and labor protection while maintaining postmaterialist themes.

Importantly, party decline cannot be attributed to postmaterialism. The collapse of the French Socialist Party after 2017 occurs despite a platform that retains strong materialist commitments. This suggests that electoral failure is more plausibly linked to organizational fragmentation, credibility deficits, and competition on the economic axis than to an alleged overemphasis on cultural issues.

5.6 Theoretical Implications: Testing the Postmaterialist Hypothesis

Taken together, the comparative evidence allows for a clear theoretical assessment:

- The **weak version** of the postmaterialist hypothesis—that postmaterialist values have become more salient over time—is supported.
- The **strong version**—that postmaterialist value change drives or sufficiently explains social democratic transformation—is not supported.

Postmaterialism helps explain what issues were added to social democratic agendas, but not why, when, or under what conditions these changes occurred. The consistent sequencing observed across cases instead points to materialist explanations emphasizing economic restructuring, class realignment, institutional constraints, and strategic party adaptation.

Postmaterialist values appear as a secondary and complementary layer of ideological change, not as the principal causal force. They expand in contexts where economic moderation has already taken place and remain compatible with renewed materialist emphases when economic conditions change.

5.7 Conclusion: Comparative Lessons

This cross-case comparison demonstrates that the ideological evolution of European social democratic parties is best understood as a process of sequential adaptation and recomposition, not value replacement. Despite national differences, the UK, German, and French cases converge on a common pattern:

1. Materialist dominance →
2. Economic moderation →
3. Cultural expansion →
4. Hybrid recomposition →
5. Periodic materialist reassertion.

The postmaterialist hypothesis, while analytically useful, is therefore insufficient as a standalone explanation. A materialist framework—supplemented, but not replaced, by cultural and ideational considerations—provides a more comprehensive account of social democratic transformation in Europe.

This conclusion sets the stage for the final chapter, which reflects on the broader implications of these findings for theories of party change, political cleavages, and the future of social democracy.

Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis set out to assess whether the postmaterialist hypothesis can account for the ideological and strategic transformation of European social democratic parties. Focusing on three major cases—the UK Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the French Socialist Party (PS)—the study examined party manifestos over several decades using a transparent and replicable qualitative thematic analysis. The central research question was not whether postmaterialist values have become more visible in social democratic discourse, but whether they can be regarded as a sufficient explanatory factor for party transformation.

The empirical findings provide a consistent answer across all three cases. Postmaterialist themes—such as environmental protection, gender equality, minority rights, and democratic participation—have undeniably expanded over time and are now firmly institutionalized within social democratic platforms. However, this expansion does not precede, drive, or replace materialist politics. Instead, postmaterialist themes systematically follow periods of economic moderation and coexist with continued or renewed emphasis on employment, welfare, redistribution, housing, and public services. Ideological change thus takes the form of recomposition rather than displacement.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, this pattern of sequencing and coexistence holds across distinct party traditions and institutional contexts. The postmaterialist hypothesis therefore performs well as a descriptive account of issue expansion, but fails as a standalone causal explanation for social democratic transformation.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to the literature by introducing a clearer distinction between weak and strong versions of the postmaterialist hypothesis. While the weak version—postmaterialist issues become more salient over time—is

supported, the strong version—postmaterialist value change drives party transformation—is not.

This finding is significant given the enduring influence of postmaterialism in political science since its formulation by Inglehart. For several decades, postmaterialism has shaped how scholars interpret electoral realignment, new political cleavages, and party strategy, often with limited direct testing at the party-programmatic level. By operationalizing postmaterialism and subjecting it to systematic qualitative scrutiny, this thesis provides a rare empirical stress test of the theory as applied to parties rather than voters.

The findings suggest that postmaterialism should be understood as a secondary and complementary dimension of party change rather than a foundational driver. Social democratic parties expand their cultural and identity-based appeals within constraints set primarily by economic structures, institutional arrangements, and strategic adaptation to changing class coalitions.

6.3 Limitations

The main limitation of this thesis lies in its asymmetric theoretical focus. The analysis is designed primarily to disprove the postmaterialist hypothesis as a sufficient explanation, rather than to develop a single, unified materialist theory of party change. This choice reflects both a theoretical and practical consideration. Unlike postmaterialism, which offers a relatively coherent and clearly defined hypothesis, materialist explanations of party change constitute a broad analytical framework encompassing multiple sub-theories, including class realignment, globalization, institutional constraint, welfare state transformation, and electoral strategy.

Rather than privileging one specific materialist mechanism, the thesis treats materialism as a plural and flexible framework whose internal diversity has been well documented in the existing literature. This means that while the thesis demonstrates the continued relevance of materialist explanations, it does not adjudicate between competing materialist sub-theories or specify their relative causal weight.

A second limitation concerns scope. The analysis focuses on party manifestos as authoritative expressions of party ideology. While this choice is justified and methodologically transparent, future research could complement this approach with

elite interviews, internal party documents, or voter-level data to further triangulate findings.

6.4 Contributions and Significance

Despite these limitations, the thesis makes an important contribution to the study of party change and political ideology. Its primary strength lies in demonstrating that the postmaterialist hypothesis can be tested systematically and falsified at the party level using qualitative methods. By developing a clear coding framework, explicitly defining classification rules, and documenting the full analytical process, the thesis shows how qualitative research can meet high standards of scientific rigor.

This contribution is particularly relevant given the long-standing influence of postmaterialism in political science. For much of the past half-century, the theory has shaped interpretations of political change while attracting relatively limited skepticism when applied to parties. This thesis helps correct that imbalance by showing that postmaterialism, while valuable, has explanatory limits that must be acknowledged.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

The findings point toward a clear agenda for future research. Rather than continuing to test postmaterialism in isolation, scholars should return to the materialist foundations of party politics and examine how economic structures, class relations, and institutional constraints shape ideological adaptation in contemporary Europe. These foundations remain analytically sound and have not lost relevance in advanced capitalist societies characterized by inequality, precarity, and uneven development.

Future research could pursue more fine-grained materialist explanations, disentangling the relative roles of globalization, welfare state reform, electoral competition, and organizational change. Comparative studies could also extend the analysis to Southern and Eastern European party systems, where economic constraints and class structures differ markedly from those examined here.

In this sense, the present thesis should be understood not as the final word on social democratic transformation, but as a corrective intervention—one that reopens theoretical space for materialist explanations and encourages renewed scrutiny of assumptions that have long guided the field.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has shown that while postmaterialist values have reshaped the ideological landscape of European social democracy, they do not explain its transformation. Economic change, material constraints, and strategic adaptation remain central. By rigorously testing and ultimately limiting the explanatory reach of postmaterialism, the study contributes to a more balanced and empirically grounded understanding of party change in Europe.

In doing so, it reinforces a broader lesson for political science: influential theories must remain open to systematic testing and revision. The enduring relevance of materialist analysis suggests that, even in an era of cultural diversification, the economic foundations of politics continue to matter.

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