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Variations in Social Europe? National political parties' positions on EU-level social regulations

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Abstract

How do national political parties vary in their views on Social Europe? I focus on an aspect that has received less attention despite its growing prevalence—EU regulations with ambitions to diminish social inequality to encourage social convergence among Member States. Since the Juncker Commission, the European Commission has become increasingly active in pursuing this aspect of Social Europe. Thus, understanding parties' positions on this aspect of Social Europe has become more important. However, current literature lacks measures of national party stances towards Social Europe, and explanations for these stances. Here, I use data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2006, 2009, 2014 and 2019) to develop an indirect measure of party positions on Social Europe. Leveraging studies in party politics and EU politics, I propose that party families and national economic conditions may affect parties' positions on Social Europe. The analyses suggest substantial variation in parties' positions on Social Europe both within and across party families. The analyses also demonstrate that socialist and green parties support Social Europe most, whereas radical right parties support it least. Lastly, I do not find systematic evidence that national economic conditions influence parties' support for this aspect of Social Europe.

KEYWORDS

European Union, political parties, party positions, Social Europe

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the Juncker Commission (2014–2019), the European Union (EU) has become more active and ambitious in diminishing social inequality across Member States. This ‘Social Europe’ turn is marked by a pursuit of regulations aiming to diminish social inequality across Member States to achieve a degree of social convergence. This approach and ambition contrast with those from the Barroso Commissions (2004–2014) (Keune & Pochet, 2023). They may be motivated by a realisation that a lack of social cohesion—partly brought about by EU responses to the Great Financial Crisis and also in response to Brexit—threatens the European project. The self-declared ‘last chance Commission’ under Juncker thus attempted to address social inequality and improve social cohesion in Member States through Social Europe (Copeland, 2022; Vesan et al., 2021). The pinnacle of the turn to Social Europe, since the Delors years (1985–1994) (Kilpatrick & De Witte, 2019), is the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which lists and describes 20 common principles and rights to guide its social policymaking. Notably, EU directives based on the EPSR (e.g., the Work-Life Balance Directive, the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive) are couched in rights-based language and elucidates the role of the EU in diminishing social inequality by improving the state of social rights across Member States (de la Porte & Palier, 2022; Vesan & Pansardi, 2021).

A rich body of research on this ‘Social Europe’ turn zooms in on the role of the European Commission (Copeland, 2022; Mailand, 2020; Vesan & Pansardi, 2021; Vesan et al., 2021), the European Parliament and its European Parliament Groups (Kantola et al., 2022; Vesan & Corti, 2019), and to a lesser extent, the demands of citizens (Kleider & Stoeckel, 2019; Pellegata & Visconti, 2022). Few studies focus on national political parties’ positions on Social Europe (e.g., Cavallaro et al., 2018; Jadot & Kelbel, 2017; Leruth et al., 2020). When they do focus on national political parties, the primary focus is EU integration. When studies allude to Social Europe (e.g., Braun et al., 2019), more attention is paid to the aspect of Social Europe pertaining to redistributive social policies via fiscal transfers (e.g., European Structural and Investment Funds). Less attention is given to the aspect pertaining to EU regulation of minimum standards across Member States to overcome social inequalities as enshrined in the EPSR (de la Porte et al., 2023; Elomäki & Kantola, 2020; Kantola et al., 2022). This study focuses on this latter aspect of Social Europe.

Considering how national political parties position themselves on this aspect of Social Europe is relevant for at least two reasons. First, the use of EU-wide minimum standards to diminish social inequalities grew under the Juncker Commission. However, this trend has become even more prevalent under the von der Leyen Commission (2019 onwards) (Keune & Pochet, 2023). Second, despite its growing prevalence, we still know little from existing literature about how national parties view the expanded use of this form of EU social policymaking. This gap matters because national political parties influence EU policymaking through at least two avenues (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016, pp. 423–424). They influence policymaking through participation in the Council when elected to their national governments and/or by being elected as Members of the European Parliament. Participation in the Council and the European Parliament influence policymaking through the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP) where the European Commission is obliged to consult both chambers when conducting policymaking. Hence, the positions of national political parties on Social Europe can influence whether the EU successfully pursues Social Europe, and also its form. Therefore, this article asks—how do national political parties vary in their positions on Social Europe which here refers to EU regulations imposing minimum standards to diminish social inequality, and which party and national-level factors influence these parties’ positions? To explore these variations, I rely on four rounds (2006, 2009, 2014 and 2019) of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to uncover variations in these parties’ positions on Social Europe.

The next section begins by defining the specific aspect of Social Europe, which this article interrogates before theorising variations in national political parties’ positions on it. Thereafter, I describe the data and method before presenting the results. Lastly, I discuss these results and conclude.

2 | ASPECTS OF SOCIAL EUROPE

The term Social Europe is not new and has been used since the Delors era, but it remains somewhat vague. At its broadest, it refers to the purpose of fostering the social dimension of the 'continental state-building process' (Leibfried & Pierson, 1992, p. 333) towards a 'supranational social market economy' (Crespy & Menz, 2015, p. 3). In terms of field, Leibfried and Pierson (1992) considered EU social policymaking to be on the margins of what is typically considered to be traditional social policy since it focused on fields like consumer protection, equal opportunities, health protection and industrial safety. In terms of types of policies, Falkner (2010) distinguished between distributive, regulatory, coordinating and liberalising EU social policies (Majone, 1996). Concurrently, the term Social Europe is also contextually dependent. Prior to the Juncker Commission, the aim of EU social policies was to enhance the market functioning of the EU. From the Juncker Commission onwards, EU social policies appear to have the dual aim of improving the functioning of EU markets and enhancing the state of social rights across Member States to improve solidarity (Ferrera, 2017). As such, the term Social Europe suffers from being a 'catch-all' concept (Goetschy 2006) that makes itself slippery for researchers to study. Thus, Pascual and Jepsen (2006) argue that it is 'highly ambiguous and polysemous [...and a lack of] clear definition of what constitutes its essence seems to be lacking in most articles on the subject [...] and] insofar as definitions are to be found, they do not necessarily converge' (p. 1). Likewise, Crespy and Menz (2015) criticise the lack of a satisfactory definition of Social Europe (p. 3).

This ambiguity suggests that there are various aspects to Social Europe. Consequently, any study of it needs to begin with defining the particular aspect being examined. Since the Juncker Commission—during which the EU paid greater attention to social issues to improve social convergence (Copeland, 2022; Keune & Pochet, 2023; Mailand, 2020), there appears to be at least two major types of policies associated with Social Europe. On the one hand, there are redistributive policies like the European Structural and Investment Funds that aim to fiscally minimise social inequality. These policies would fall under the typical scope of 'traditional' social policies. On the other hand, there are also EU regulations recommending or setting EU-wide minimum standards on a range of social issues. These redistributive policies and EU regulations on social issues are not new. However, what marks the Juncker and subsequent von der Leyen Commissions from the previous ones is their growing prevalence and widening scope (Im et al., 2024; Keune & Pochet, 2023).

This article focuses on the second aspect of Social Europe. As alluded to above, this aspect of Social Europe is distinguishable by its locus of authority, aim and form (see also de la Porte et al., 2023; Falkner, 2010; Kilpatrick & De Witte, 2019; Sciarra, 2020; Vesan & Corti, 2019). Locus of authority refers to the source or provenance of Social Europe outputs. Aim refers to the objectives of Social Europe, and form refers to how the objectives are to be achieved.

For this aspect of Social Europe, the EU is the locus of its authority (Vesan & Corti, 2019, p. 991). In other words, Social Europe here refers to policy outputs from the EU. In terms of aim, this aspect of Social Europe seeks to correct or minimise social inequality in Member States (see de la Porte et al., 2023; Elomäki & Kantola, 2020; Kantola et al., 2022). For example, the EU's European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSRs) list 20 areas of social inequality which the EU intends to address and overcome. These 20 areas can be aggregated to three broader domains—equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; social protection and inclusion. In terms of form, EU regulations on these social issues often rely on EU-wide minimum standards (de la Porte & Palier, 2022). Whilst some of these regulations are recommendations, others are enforced minimum standards. The latter has become more prevalent since the Juncker Commission (Im et al., 2024; Keune & Pochet, 2023; Scheele et al., 2023; see also Copeland, 2022; Vesan et al., 2021). These minimum standards set the floor but leave Member States with autonomy on how to meet the aims of the regulations (de la Porte et al., 2023). Here, I focus on enforced minimum standards as they are more impactful on diminishing social inequality by virtue of compelling Member States to comply with EU-wide minimum standards (Pircher et al., 2024; Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022).¹

In sum, the particular aspect of Social Europe studied here refers to EU policy outputs (locus of authority) that aim to diminish social inequality within and arising from the labour market (aim) through enforced EU-wide minimum standards (form). Put differently, it refers to EU efforts to tackle social inequalities in or from the labour market but

through regulation rather than fiscal instruments. An example of this aspect of Social Europe is the Work-Life Balance Directive (2019). One of the directive's aims is to reduce labour market inequalities between fathers and mothers due to unequal sharing of care responsibilities (de la Porte et al., 2023; Elomäki and Kantola 2020). Here, the EU established the minimum requirement of (adequately) remunerated non-transferable (between parents) parental leave but left Member States to decide on the level of remuneration, which they consider adequate to raise fathers' take up of parental leave (de la Porte et al., 2023; Pircher et al., 2024).

3 | VARIATIONS IN NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES' VIEWS OF SOCIAL EUROPE

Do national political parties share the European Commission's view and formulation of Social Europe? Or do they have other perspectives on what Social Europe ought to be? Although there is a rich literature on national political parties' positions towards the EU as a whole—especially on EU integration (e.g., Hix, 2008; Hooghe et al., 2002), there is much less research on these parties' positions on Social Europe itself. Among the studies that do examine parties' positions on Social Europe, more attention is paid to aspects of Social Europe related to redistribution than to the one studied here (e.g., Vesan & Corti, 2019). I attempt to fill this gap in this study.

There may be various factors at the party and country levels, which influence national parties' positions on this aspect of Social Europe. At the party level, national parties' positions may reflect their views on the EU, regulations and social inequality. Arguably, parties' views on the EU may be the most dominant factor in deciding their positions on Social Europe. If parties reject the EU, they are likely to reject Social Europe altogether regardless of its form and aim (see related Kreisi et al., 2008; Rooduijn et al., 2017). Among parties that support the EU, their positions on Social Europe may still vary. Parties that consider social inequality to be a problem to be addressed are more likely to support Social Europe than parties that do not. Concurrently, parties' positions on regulation as a policy instrument to correct or mitigate social inequality will also affect their support for Social Europe.

Among the various party families that are dominant in Europe today, centre-left and green parties are perhaps most likely to support a Social Europe that involves EU regulations of minimum standards to correct social inequalities including those in and from the labour market. These parties are generally positive towards the EU, consider it necessary to address social inequalities, and regard regulations as appropriate policy instruments to achieve these aims. By contrast, radical right parties are perhaps most opposed to Social Europe. These parties generally oppose the EU, and are thus likely to reject Social Europe altogether regardless of its form and aim. The positions of parties from the remaining party families are likely to fall between the positions of centre-left and green parties and radical right parties. Although radical left parties typically support addressing social inequalities through regulations, some of them are more predisposed to the EU than others (Rooduijn et al., 2017). For example, Podemos and La France Insoumise hold diverging positions on the EU. Centre-right parties also probably occupy a position between these two poles. They may consider addressing social inequalities to be less important in comparison to centre-left and green parties, and may also be less supportive of regulations as a policy instrument. Centre-right parties may also vary in their views on the EU with some more supportive of the EU than others (Treib, 2020). I summarise my first hypothesis about support for this aspect of Social Europe as follows:

Hypothesis 1. National parties vary in their support for Social Europe by their party families.

National parties' support for Social Europe may also vary across Member States. At the country level, Vesan and Corti (2019) build on Ferrera's (2017) conceptualisation of tensions between Member States on European integration to suggest four lines of conflicts over Social Europe. Here, Vesan and Corti (2019) adopt a broad definition of Social Europe that encompasses both fiscal redistribution and EU regulation of enforceable minimum standards. The four lines of conflicts are about “(1) market-making versus market-correcting priorities of the EU; (2) national social sovereignty/discretion versus EU law/conditionality; (3) supporters versus opponents of fiscal stability of cross-national transfers

(creditor versus debtor conflict); (4) intra-EU 'systemic competition' between high-wage/high-welfare EU countries and low-wage/low-welfare EU countries" (p. 979) (see also Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018). As the authors argued (pp. 980–981), the first two lines of conflict are less territorially-bounded and more party-bounded. That is, parties' positions on government intervention in the economy and EU integration determine national positions on Social Europe more than national specificities themselves. By contrast, the latter two lines of conflict are more territorially-bounded and suggest that national economic specificities may shape national positions on Social Europe.

Building on this perspective, it is plausible that Member States' economic vulnerability (the third dimension described above) affects national parties' overall level of support for this aspect of Social Europe (see related Armingeon & Sacchi, 2023). On the one hand, when Member State's economies are vulnerable, the overriding priority may be securing economic growth rather than addressing social inequality. Under a neoliberal economic paradigm, which emphasises economic growth, policymakers often consider regulations as impediments or red tape to growth (Bulfone & Tassinari, 2021). Thus, these economic constraints may restrict national parties' support for Social Europe. On the other hand, if economic vulnerability entails worse economic precarity for citizens, there may be greater citizenry demand for Social Europe. From a risk insurance perspective which argues that citizens prefer policies and regulations that diminish their economic risk (e.g., Busemeyer et al., 2023; Rehm, 2009), citizens may support Social Europe if they consider it to be an insurance against economic precarity. If national parties respond to this demand, they may support Social Europe more. In short, Member State's economic vulnerability may influence national parties' positions on this aspect of Social Europe, but the direction of this influence remains uncertain.

Additionally, Member State's wage and welfare dynamics (the fourth dimension described above) may affect national parties' overall level of support for Social Europe. Vesán and Corti (2019) found some but limited and implicit evidence for this proposition through their review of European Parliamentary debates on the EPSR. The authors found that Central and Eastern European Members of the European Parliament (MEP) belonging to the European People's Party (EPP) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) European Parliamentary Groupings (EPGs) were more likely to oppose the EPSR than Western European MEPs from the same EPGs. MEPs from the former group of Member States were more opposed to stricter regulations for upwards wage convergence than MEPs from the latter group of Member States. MEPs from Western European Member States sought stricter regulations than MEPs from Central and Eastern European Member States out of concerns about social dumping (Furåker & Larsson, 2020, p. 114; Vesán & Corti, 2019, pp. 988–989; see also Bernaciak, 2016).

This division is exemplified in the lead up and responses to the European Court of Justice's (ECJ) Laval ruling. In this case, the Swedish construction trade union, Byggnads, demanded Laval, a small Latvian company to sign a collective agreement to ensure that posted workers were paid Swedish wages (Arnholtz, 2023). Laval's refusal to sign the agreement kickstarted a chain of events that led to the case being heard at the ECJ. The ECJ ruled that Byggnads' collective action was deemed illegal under EU law as it went beyond stipulations in the Posted Workers Directive (PWD). This ruling created an uproar and fueled views in some Western Member States that social dumping through posting was legitimised (ibid.). Conversely, when the PWD was being revised in 2018 due to pushback, national politicians in Central and Eastern Member States were strongly opposed to the revision as it may weaken intra-EU labour mobility for their workers (Furåker & Larsson, 2020). In short, these examples illustrate a potential East–West divide on Social Europe stemming from differences in wage and welfare across Member States. That is, national political parties may be more skeptical of Social Europe overall in EU Member States with lower wages and weaker welfare states.

Conversely, it is plausible that national parties in high wage countries with generous welfare states may support Social Europe less overall. Burgoon (2009) finds that citizens' support for Social Europe is weaker in more generous welfare states, but stronger in more residual welfare states. The public may perceive Social Europe as a competition to their generous welfare states, which may then undercut their standard of living. By contrast, the public may consider Social Europe as a necessary complement in residual welfare states to improve their standard of living. If national parties' positions on Social Europe are at least partly influenced by domestic public opinion, then there is a possibility that national parties in EU Member States with higher wages and higher welfare are more opposed to Social Europe.

Both perspectives suggest that the overall level of national party support for Social Europe may vary across countries. In other words, national parties' support for this aspect of Social Europe may not only vary within Member

States based on their party families, but also across Member States. I summarise the second and third sets of competing hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 2a. National parties in more economically vulnerable Member States support Social Europe less than national parties in less economically vulnerable Member States.

Hypothesis 2b. National parties in more economically vulnerable Member States support Social Europe more than national parties in less economically vulnerable Member States.

Hypothesis 3a. National parties in Member States with lower wage and lower welfare support Social Europe less than national parties in Member States with higher wage and higher welfare.

Hypothesis 3b. National parties in Member States with lower wage and lower welfare support Social Europe more than national parties in Member States with higher wage and higher welfare.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

4.1 | Data

To the best of my knowledge, there is no publicly available dataset that directly measures national parties' positions on this aspect of Social. This reason may explain why there are few studies on this subject to date. Despite this limitation, the CHES which measures experts' placement of national political parties' positions on a range of national and EU-related issues may offer some indirect insights on this subject. This dataset contains the mean of all experts' placement of these parties on these issues. Unlike the Comparative Manifesto Project, which measures the salience of various issues for parties, CHES captures the positions of parties more directly and is often used in studies, which examine parties' issue positions (e.g., Jolly et al., 2022).

I pooled the four latest rounds of the CHES (2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019). I excluded the two earlier rounds (1999, 2002) because they did not contain the relevant variables required to proxy national parties' support for Social Europe (see Section 4.2). I also used publicly available national annual economic data from Eurostat, and merged this country-level data with the CHES dataset. The unit of analysis is national parties. Following Dassonneville et al. (2023), I excluded regionalist parties, agrarian/centre parties and parties whose family was unclassified. I also excluded parties, which were not EU Member States at the point of data collection. These steps yielded 712 observations. I then performed listwise deletion on missing observations across the included covariates (see Section 4.2). The final sample consists of 677 parties nested in 100 country-years with an average of 6.8 per country-year. In 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019, respectively, 20.68%, 23.49%, 27.92% and 27.92% of parties were observed.

4.2 | Variables

I used three variables to operationalise the dependent variable. To reiterate, this aspect of Social Europe consists of three dimensions—the locus of authority is the EU, the aim is to address social inequality, and the form is through regulations that enforce minimum standards.

To operationalise support for the EU as a locus of authority of regulations, I relied on the variable measuring support for EU integration which proxies for support for policymaking from the EU. As support for EU policies may co-align with support for EU integration, this variable is a suitable proxy. To operationalise support for regulations, I relied on the variable measuring parties' positions on deregulation of markets as a proxy. Although this variable does not measure regulation per se, one may plausibly expect parties that oppose deregulation to favour regulation to correct social and market failures.

Lastly, to operationalise support for addressing social inequality, I relied on the variable measuring parties' positions on liberal social lifestyle (e.g., rights for homosexuals, gender equality), which imply an expansion of social rights. This variable admittedly does not measure support for tackling social inequality per se, but it comes closest to this notion in comparison to other variables contained in the CHES dataset. Parties that seek to expand social rights across different societal groups are often more likely to support diminishing social inequality (see Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008). Put differently, the lack of social rights may be seen by these parties as a symptom of social inequalities to be addressed. Thus, this variable is a useful albeit indirect and limited proxy. Unlike the first variable, the latter two variables focus on parties' positions on the national rather than on the EU context. Thus, they do not offer a direct measure of support for addressing social inequality through regulations at the EU level. Despite this limitation, these two variables may still offer some implicit insight as national positions on these issues often carryover to the EU level (see Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017; Vesan & Corti, 2019, p. 979). In summary, the variables used to construct support for Social Europe are indirect and with limitations. Pending more precise measures, however, they are still useful to offer an initial and implicit glimpse into national parties' positions on this aspect of Social Europe, which is currently understudied.

In terms of scale, all three variables are Likert scales. Support for EU integration ranges from 1 to 7 for which higher values indicate greater support for EU integration. Support for deregulation ranges from 0 to 10 for which higher values indicate greater support for deregulation. I flipped the scale such that higher values indicate stronger support for regulation. Like above, support for expanding social rights ranges from 0 to 10 for which higher values indicate lower support for expanding social rights. Likewise, I flipped the scale such that higher values indicate stronger support for expanding social rights.

I constructed the dependent variable in two ways. First, I recoded the three variables into binaries (support/opposition) to create eight combinations based on these three recoded variables. I used this first operationalisation to describe the variety in national parties' positions on Social Europe. Second, I create an index that sums the standardised scores of the three variables (see related Armingeon et al., 2022). This summative index proxies parties' support for Social Europe. I used standardised scores instead of the original scales because the three variables have different scalar ranges. Since higher values on each of the flipped variable indicates higher support for EU integration, regulation and expanded social rights respectively, higher values on this summative index indicate greater support for Social Europe.

Regarding the party-level explanatory variable, I used the CHES's categorisation of party families. Following Dassonneville et al. (2023), I combined confessional parties together with Christian democratic parties. This variable thus consists of seven categories—radical right, conservative, liberal, Christian democratic, socialist, radical left, and green.

Regarding country-year level explanatory variables, I operationalised economic vulnerability as a country's public debt, which is measured as the annual general government consolidated gross debt expressed as a percentage of annual national gross domestic product (GDP). Higher values indicate greater public debt and suggest worse economic vulnerability. To operationalise the wage and welfare divide, I relied on an interaction term composed of two variables. National annual GDP per capita (logged) proxies wage differences between countries, and national public expenditure on social protection benefits (expressed as percentage of GDP) proxies welfare differences between countries. Higher GDP per capita and higher social protection expenditure proxy Member States with higher wage and high welfare, and vice-versa.

Lastly, I included the following controls. At the party level, I controlled for the share of votes that parties received in the last national elections, and whether they were in government or not. At the country-year level, I controlled for annual unemployment rate (logged) and the number of years since the last national elections.

4.3 | Method

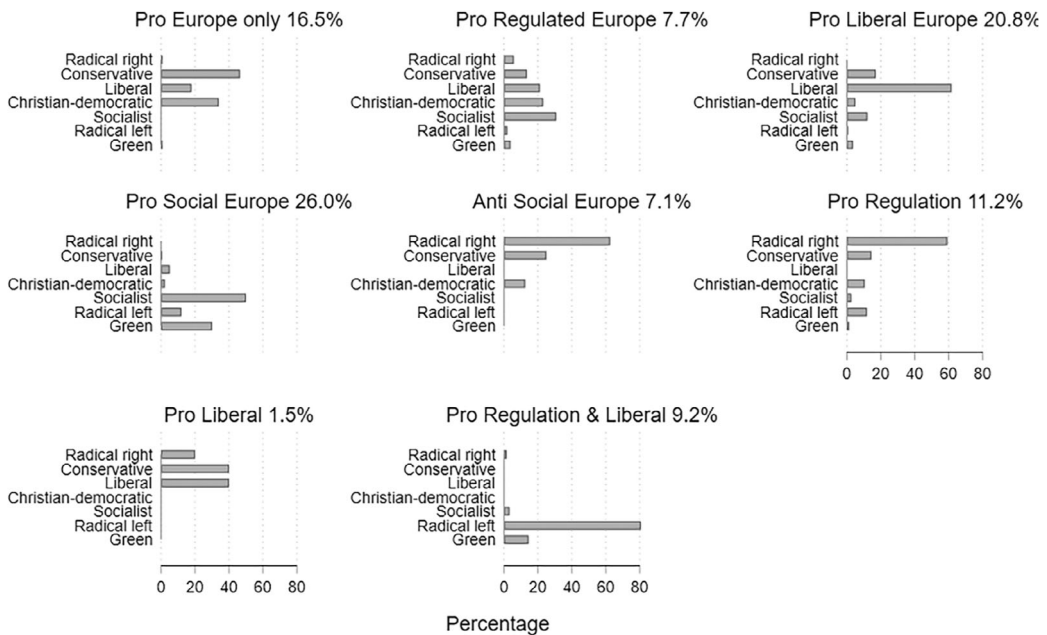
I first describe national parties' positions on Social Europe. I then examine the associations between the explanatory variables and support for Social Europe. I nested parties within their country-years, and applied a multilevel random intercept model. I also applied country and year fixed effects to absorb all unaccounted country and year (level-2) variance. I relied on ordinary least squares (OLS) as an estimator with robust standard errors clustered at the country-year level. In total, 677 parties were nested in 100 country-year groups with an average of 6.8 parties per group.

The analysis was performed stepwise. In the first model, I included party-level covariates, and non-economic country-year level covariates, which are the number of years since the last national elections, country and year fixed effects. The second included logged GDP per capita. The third included social protection expenditure. The fourth included an interaction term composed of logged GDP per capita and social protection expenditure. The fifth model included unemployment rate (logged). The sixth model included public debt. In the seventh and final model, I included all party-level and country-level covariates. Lastly, I performed a series of sensitivity checks (elaborated below) to ascertain if the findings from the main models are robust to alternate estimation strategies.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Variations in party positions on Social Europe

Figure 1 presents the frequencies of the eight positions on Social Europe disaggregated by party families. The eight positions reflect combinations on three variables—EU integration, regulations and expansion of social rights. These three variables proxy for three dimensions of Social Europe studied here—EU policymaking, regulations and addressing of social inequality.



*If position on an issue is not indicated, it means opposition (anti) to the issue.

FIGURE 1 Variations in position on Social Europe, frequencies and disaggregation by party family. For each of the eight positions on Social Europe (presented as individual groups), the horizontal axis reflects the percentage of observations (parties) for each party family. Percentages listed beside each of the eight positions reflect each position's frequency. 1) Pro-Europe: + EU integration, -Regulations, - Liberal on social values. 2) Pro Regulated Europe: + EU integration, + Regulations, - liberal on social values. 3) Pro Liberal Europe: + EU integration, - Regulations, + Liberal on social values. 4) Pro Social Europe: + EU integration, + Regulations, + Liberal on social values. 5) Anti Social Europe: - EU integration, - Regulations, - Liberal on social values. 6) Pro Regulation: - EU integration, + Regulations, - Liberal on social values. 7) Pro Liberal: - EU integration, - Regulations, + Liberal on social values. 8) Pro Regulation & Liberal: - EU integration, + Regulations, + Liberal on social values.

Overall, the most common positions that can be derived from the proxies are support for Social Europe (EU regulations that address social inequality), Pro Liberal Europe (support for the EU and addressing social inequality but not regulations), and Pro Europe (support for the EU but no support for addressing social inequality or regulations). These three positions account for 63.3% of the distribution of parties' positions on Social Europe. By contrast, the least common position is Pro Liberal (support for addressing social inequality, but no support for the EU or regulations), which accounts for a mere 1.5%. The remaining four positions—Anti Social Europe (opposition to Social Europe altogether), Pro Regulated Europe (support for the EU and regulation but not for addressing social inequality), Pro Regulation (support for regulations but not for the EU or addressing social inequality) and Pro Regulation and Liberal (support for regulations to address social inequality, but not for the EU)—make up 35.2% of positions on Social Europe.

Crucially, parties' positions on Social Europe are stratified by their party family. The Pro Social Europe group of parties consists of socialist, green and radical left parties. Conversely, the group most opposed to Social Europe (Anti Social Europe) consists mostly of radical right parties, and to a lesser extent, conservative and Christian democratic parties.

Regarding specific parties, socialist parties appear split between three groups—Pro Social Europe, Pro Regulated Europe, and to a lesser extent Pro Liberal Europe. Green parties are primarily in the Pro Social Europe group, but some are in the Pro Regulation and Liberal group. Radical left parties appear split between three groups. Most are in the Pro Regulation and Liberal group, which suggest that they are willing to address social inequality through regulations but not with EU intervention. A smaller number of them are split between the Pro Social Europe and the Pro Regulation groups. Christian democratic parties are found especially in three groups—Pro Europe only, Pro Regulated Europe, Anti Social Europe. In contrast to other parties, conservatives appear to be most split. They are found in six groups. The two groups, which they are not part of are the Pro Social Europe as well as the Pro Regulation and Liberal groups. Liberals also appear split and appear in four groups—Pro Europe only, Pro Regulated Europe, Pro Liberal Europe, and Pro Liberal. Lastly, radical right parties are mostly found in two groups—Anti Social Europe, Pro Regulation. A smaller number of them are found in the Pro Liberal group. In short, parties' positions on Social Europe is stratified by party family, but no party family is associated with a single and particular position.

5.2 | Predictors of support for Social Europe

Table 1 presents regression estimates for support for Social Europe. It relies on the second operationalisation of the dependent variable, which is a summative index of the three proxy variables. Model 1, which consists only of party-level covariates, shows that there are significant differences in support for Social Europe across party families when compared against the reference category, green parties. For ease of interpretation, these results are illustrated and elaborated further below.

Turning to country-level predictors, Models 2 to 7 show that none of these predictors is significantly associated with support for Social Europe. In Model 2, logged GDP per capita was added. The results show that it is a statistically insignificant predictor of parties' support for Social Europe. Model 3 replaces logged GDP per capita with social protection expenditure, and it similarly returns an insignificant association with support for Social Europe. In Model 4, I added an interaction term composed of logged GDP per capita and social protection expenditure to test for the joint impact of national wages and welfare support. Neither the individual terms nor the interaction term is statistically significant at conventional levels of significance ($p < 0.05$). In Model 5, I replaced the country-level variables specified in Model 4 with logged unemployment rate. Logged unemployment rate is an insignificant predictor of support for Social Europe. Model 6 replaces logged unemployment rate with national public debt to test for the impact of economic vulnerability. It does not significantly predict parties' support for Social Europe. The final model, Model 7, adds all country-level

TABLE 1 Regression results.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Fixed effects | | | | | | | |
| Party-level parameters | | | | | | | |
| Green (ref.) | | | | | | | |
| Radical right | −4.824*** (0.224) | −4.823*** (0.224) | −4.824*** (0.224) | −4.825*** (0.224) | −4.826*** (0.224) | −4.824*** (0.224) | −4.835*** (0.224) |
| Conservative | −3.216*** (0.225) | −3.216*** (0.225) | −3.216*** (0.225) | −3.217*** (0.225) | −3.215*** (0.225) | −3.216*** (0.225) | −3.223*** (0.225) |
| Liberal | −1.593*** (0.166) | −1.593*** (0.165) | −1.593*** (0.166) | −1.594*** (0.165) | −1.594*** (0.166) | −1.593*** (0.166) | −1.601*** (0.166) |
| Christian democratic | −2.868*** (0.154) | −2.868*** (0.154) | −2.868*** (0.154) | −2.870*** (0.154) | −2.866*** (0.154) | −2.867*** (0.154) | −2.872*** (0.154) |
| Socialist | −0.415*** (0.142) | −0.414*** (0.142) | −0.415*** (0.141) | −0.417*** (0.142) | −0.414*** (0.141) | −0.413*** (0.142) | −0.419*** (0.142) |
| Radical left | −0.522*** (0.166) | −0.522*** (0.166) | −0.523*** (0.166) | −0.522*** (0.166) | −0.524*** (0.166) | −0.522*** (0.166) | −0.524*** (0.167) |
| Vote share in last national election | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.005 (0.004) |
| Not in government (ref.) | | | | | | | |
| In government | 0.171 (0.097) | 0.172 (0.097) | 0.172 (0.098) | 0.174 (0.098) | 0.172 (0.097) | 0.175 (0.098) | 0.178 (0.098) |
| Country-year level parameters | | | | | | | |
| Years since last national elections | −0.003 (0.027) | −0.005 (0.028) | −0.004 (0.027) | −0.004 (0.028) | −0.008 (0.027) | −0.008 (0.027) | −0.009 (0.028) |
| Logged GDP per capita | | 0.074 (0.262) | | 0.185 (0.297) | | | 0.112 (0.282) |

TABLE 1 (Continued)

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 |
|---|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Social protection expenditure | | | −0.005 (0.019) | 0.105 (0.169) | | | 0.351 (0.204) |
| Logged GDP per capita X Social protection expenditure | | | | −0.011 (0.016) | | | −0.034 (0.019) |
| Logged unemployment rate | | | | | −0.092 (0.101) | | −0.167 (0.127) |
| Public debt | | | | | | −0.003 (0.003) | −0.004 (0.004) |
| Intercept | 2.473*** (0.158) | 1.709 (2.696) | 2.609*** (0.489) | 0.754 (3.255) | 2.652*** (0.263) | 2.730*** (0.262) | 1.910 (3.113) |
| Random effects | | | | | | | |
| Standard deviation in intercept | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Standard deviation in residuals | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.963 (0.036) | 0.962 (0.036) |
| Number of observations | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 | 677 |
| Country fixed effects? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year fixed effects? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
 $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.005$.

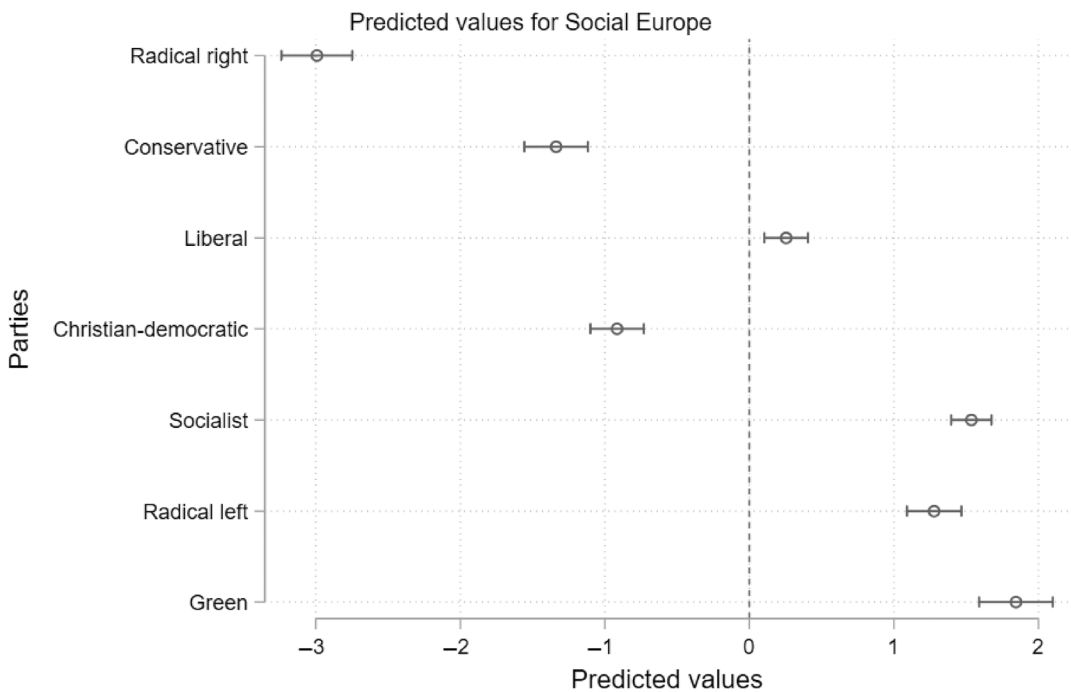


FIGURE 2 Predicted level of support for Social Europe (based on estimates from Model 7).

variables in the same model. In this model, neither logged GDP per capita, social protection expenditure, their interaction term (high wage-high welfare/low wage-low welfare), nor public debt (economic vulnerability) significantly predicts support for Social Europe. Conversely, party family remains a significant predictor. Hence, it appears that support for Social Europe is influenced by party-level factors more than country-level factors.

To ease interpretation, Figure 2 illustrates predicted values of support for Social Europe for different party families. Predictions in Figure 2 are based on estimates from the final model (Model 7). Figure 2 shows that greens and socialists have highest predicted support for Social Europe, and their level of support is statistically indistinguishable. Radical left parties also exhibit high levels of support for Social Europe, but it is significantly lower than the level of support of greens. Conversely, radical right parties exhibit lowest predicted support for Social Europe. Though higher than radical right parties' support, conservatives and Christian democrats still have low predicted support for Social Europe. The level of support between conservatives and Christian democrats is statistically indistinguishable. Lastly, liberals are predicted to support Social Europe more than radical right, conservative and Christian democratic parties, but less than socialist, radical left and green parties.

5.3 | Sensitivity checks

I performed four sensitivity checks (results available in the Supporting Information). Unless otherwise specified, they replicate the covariates used in Model 7 of the main analyses.

The first and second checks address the concern that more than half of all observations appear in multiple rounds of the CHES dataset. The first check replicates Model 7 but estimates with a pooled model and party-clustered standard errors. The second check replicates Model 7 but controls for the number of occurrence of each party in the pooled dataset. In both checks, differences in support for Social Europe between party families (as observed in Figure 2) persist. However, there is no longer a significant difference in support for Social Europe

between radical left and green parties in the first check. In the second check, radical left parties' support returns to a level that is significantly lower than the one of green parties. Regarding country-level factors, the results do not vary according to model specification. The exception is higher wage and higher social protection expenditure. They are significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively associated with Social Europe support in the second check but insignificant in the first check, which suggest sensitivity to model specification.

The third check replicates Model 7 but omits country and year fixed effects to relax absorption of unaccounted country and year (level-2) variance. When compared against results in Model 7, there is no substantive difference in party-level or country-level results.

The fourth check replicates Model 7 but uses a different operationalisation of the dependent variable. Instead of a summary index, I used an index generated from a factor analysis of the three proxy variables.² When compared against results from Model 7, there is no substantive difference in country-level results. For party-level results, there is no difference except for radical left parties, which now has a lower predicted level of support for Social Europe.

Overall, these results suggest that Hypothesis 1 cannot be rejected. Hypothesis 1 states that national parties' positions on Social Europe vary by their party family. In particular, the results show that centre-left and green parties support Social Europe more than other parties, whereas radical right parties oppose Social Europe more than the others. The results also suggest that radical left parties' support for Social Europe is sensitive to model specification. These party-level differences are insensitive to model specification. Conversely, Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a and 3b can be rejected. Hypothesis 2a or 2b states that national parties in Member States, which are more economically vulnerable support Social Europe more/less. Hypothesis 3a states that national parties in Member States with higher wage and higher welfare support Social Europe more, whereas Hypothesis 3b states that national parties in Member States with lower wage and lower welfare support Social Europe more.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the Juncker Commission, the European Commission has expanded an aspect of Social Europe to a greater extent than during the previous Commissions (Keune & Pochet, 2023). This aspect of Social Europe represents EU regulations that set enforceable minimum standards to diminish social inequality. Examples of this aspect of Social Europe - along with its opportunities and challenges - are described and discussed comprehensively in the special issue on Social Europe that this contribution is a part of. With its rising prevalence, understanding parties' positions on this aspect Social Europe becomes important. However, the literatures on party politics and EU politics lack measures of national party stances towards Social Europe, and explanations for these stances. Here, I use data from the CHES (2006, 2009, 2014 and 2019) to develop an indirect measure of party positions on Social Europe.

The results show that more than a quarter of national parties in EU Member States support Social Europe, and more than half of all national parties support EU integration but not necessarily Social Europe per se. Crucially, support for Social Europe is stratified by party families. Centre-left and green parties are consistently and significantly more likely to support Social Europe than all other party families, whereas radical right parties are least likely to. However, there is also heterogeneity within socialist, and to a lesser extent, green parties. Some socialist parties support EU intervention through regulations, but others are ambivalent about such interventions being used to address social inequality. Lastly, national economic contexts seem to matter less for national parties' positions on Social Europe. As such, it appears that party-level dynamics, more so than national-level contexts, influence national political parties' views on Social Europe. Perhaps worsening political polarisation may explain why party-level dynamics seem to matter more than national-level contexts. If political polarisation has exacerbated, national parties' views of national-level contexts may diverge. That is to say that national parties from different families may increasingly respond to the same national economic context dissimilarly. Consequently, party families seemingly exert a greater impact on national parties' positions on Social Europe than national economic contexts.

Overall, these findings suggest that there is a group of national parties that may provide national-level political support to the European Commission's ambitions to expand Social Europe, and these parties belong to a narrow set of party families. However, whether the European Commission depends on these parties for political support when pursuing Social Europe remains unknown (see Copeland, 2022). The European Commission may pursue its own Social Europe initiatives regardless of political party support, if it views these initiatives as critical for stabilising the EU (Copeland, 2022; Vesan et al., 2021) or as imperative for its own ambitions (Im et al., 2024). Alternatively, the European Commission may rely on political support from EU-level institutions, such as European Parliamentary Groups (Kantola et al., 2022; Vesan & Corti, 2019) more than support from national political parties. In these circumstances, the trajectory of this aspect of Social Europe will be less dependent on national parties' positions on Social Europe.

Additionally, it remains uncertain whether national level political parties consider the issue of Social Europe to be politically salient. If they do not, their positions may co-align and be indistinguishable from their positions on the EU itself. However, it seems that national parties do distinguish between these two EU-level issues in some circumstances. For example, Pircher et al. (2024) demonstrate that Danish political parties, which traditionally support the EU, opposed the Work-Life Balance Directive (WLBD) which is an example of this aspect of Social Europe. In these circumstances, discerning variations in national parties' positions on Social Europe and their determinants become essential to understand dynamics in the Council where national parties may participate as representatives of government. These variations also matter because national parties influence how EU regulations are nationally implemented. Thus, whether the EU's ambition of regulating social inequalities yields social convergence across EU Member States will also depend on national parties' positions on Social Europe (see Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022), especially on Social Europe issues that are politically salient like work-life balance and minimum wages (Natili & Ronchi, 2023; Pircher et al., 2024). From this perspective, the trajectory of this aspect of Social Europe may depend on national parties' positions on Social Europe.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing field on Social Europe by linking it to national political parties. However, the findings here should be caveated in four respects. First, this study relied on three proxy measures to construct national parties' positions on Social Europe. Thus, results presented here are implicit, rather than explicit, about parties' position on Social Europe. Two of these variables measure parties' positions on deregulation and social rights within national contexts rather than at the EU level. Although parties' positions on these two issues at the EU level probably co-align with their positions at the national level, future studies could construct measures that directly tap into their EU positions on these two issues to ascertain alignment. Future studies can also improve measurement precision by developing a single measure for Social Europe and compare the results with the ones presented here. Second, some Social Europe issues are more salient than others. Future studies could explore which of these issues are sufficiently salient to activate national parties' position on Social Europe rather than their overall position on the EU. Future studies could also examine if national political parties defer to their European-level counterparts on low salient Social Europe issues. Third, this study has thus far considered economic conditions as potential explanations for national variation in parties' position on Social Europe. Future studies could explore the impact of other national-level variations, such as institutional differences in employment relations, welfare regimes and electoral systems. Fourth, it is worth considering the source of national parties' positions on Social Europe. Senninger et al. (2022) show that the European Parliament and its party groups may lead to party policy diffusion when national parties learn from their respective European Parliamentary party groups (see also Schleiter et al., 2021). As such, future studies could explore the extent to which national parties' positions on Social Europe is driven by their interactions within the European Parliament.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the [supplementary material](#) of this article.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Due to the principle of subsidiarity, which gives Member States autonomy in implementing EU directives, national compliance with EU minimum standards may lead to variations in national responses. That is, Member States may implement EU minimum standards in different ways leading to differentiation in policy outcomes rather than convergence (see Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022).
- ² The main models rely on the summative index because the factor analysis shows that the three variables yield a two-dimensional solution (see Supporting [Information](#)). Unlike the latter, the summative index does not assume that the three variables are underpinned by the same latent dimension.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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