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Cover Story:
Surprise: the Left is Not Going Away
Left Margin
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The reported demise of the European left has been greatly exaggerated.

In fact, with the results of Sunday's balloting in Greece a case can be made for the opposite conclusion.

"A specter is haunting Europe — the specter of Socialism's slow collapse," wrote [Steven Erlanger](#) in the *New York Times*. "Even in the midst of one of the greatest challenges to capitalism in 75 years, involving a breakdown of the financial system due to 'irrational exuberance,' greed and the weakness of regulatory systems, European Socialist parties and their left-wing cousins have not found a compelling response, let alone taken advantage of the right's failures," wrote Erlanger September 28. That line has been conspicuously repeated in articles in the major U.S. media over the past few weeks, the thread being that even amid the severe economic crisis voters in the major industrialized countries are moving to the right. However, the evidence for this shift, for Erlanger's contention that the left is being "trounced," across the continent simply isn't there.

That is, unless you start confusing categories like "socialist" with "social democratic" and "left." It's true that the fortunes of the mainline social democratic or labor parties have declined (but even that is not as severe as it is being portrayed). It's possible to see it that way if you ignore how well some of the "left-wing cousins" are doing.

Let's look at some of the recent election tallies:

- Germany. Three parties increased their votes in the September 27 parliamentary elections; two of them are on the left. Angela Merkel will remain as chancellor in coalition with the pro-business (but socially liberal) Free Democratic Party). But her party the Christian Democratic Union hasn't done so badly in 60 years. Its sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria was indeed trounced. The biggest gainers in the election were the left party "Die Linke" (11.9 percent) and the Green Party (10.7 percent) and the FDP. As John Palmer noted in the *Guardian* (UK), almost as many Germans voted for parties to the left of the Social Democrats as for the SPD itself.
- Norway. Norwegians returned their Labor-dominated government to office, and, in the words of the *New York Times*, narrowly endorsing the government's "pursuit of expanded public services and rejecting angry demands by some of his opponents to crack down harshly on immigration." A three-party left-wing coalition won a total of 86 seats in the 169-seat Parliament. Labour remained Norway's biggest party, winning 64 seats with 35 per cent of the vote, the results showed. Its junior partners, the Socialist Left and the Centre Party, each won 11 seats. Of the opposition parties The Progress Party led with 23 per cent of votes and 40 seats
- Portugal. Portuguese voters returned the Socialists to power in national elections, but the party fell slightly short of the absolute majority it needed in parliament to carry out its program alone. The Socialists (37 percent) won 113 seats, three short of an absolute majority and only one more than they held in the previous 230-seat parliament. The conservative Social Democrats declined to 84 seats, down three from the previous parliament. The Communist-Green Party coalition captured over 30,000 more votes than in the last election while the Left Bloc, an alliance of former Maoist, Trotskyist and other left groups secured 16 seats (10 percent) and the Communist Party won 15 seats. The conservative Popular Party, (10.5 percent) garnered 21 seats. The fact that nearly 30 percent of the vote went to parties to the left of the ruling Socialist can be attribute to a series of reforms it has instituted which have upset the countries unions such as raising the civil service retirement age from 60 to 65 and sharp cuts in social welfare services.

("In France, the Socialist party also lost many votes in the last general election to factions to its left, although their failure to offer a united progressive alternative meant that the political impact of these votes was greatly diminished," observed Palmer in the *Guardian*. " In Denmark, the Social Democrats now find themselves running almost neck and neck with the left wing – but generally pro-European – Peoples' Socialist party. One reason why the Portuguese party only narrowly scraped back into office in the general election was the loss of votes to parties to its left.")

- Greece. The Socialists PASOK scored its largest margin of victory ever (43.7 percent) and will have commanding majority in the new parliament. The conservative New Democracy party was indeed trounced (34.6 percent). The Communist Party (7.54 percent), the far right-wing LAOS (5.63 percent) and the Syriza Left Coalition (4.9 percent) retained their representation in parliament. At 2.5 percent, the Greens will not make it into the new parliament.

And so it goes. The much touted decline of the European left turned out to be pretty much of a mirage. The continent's politics are being realigned not in spite of but because of the economic crisis. And the much of the gain has gone to the left – taken as a whole.

In fact, as each of these results indicates, it was precisely the performance of the traditional socialist parties in response to the crisis that motivated the balloting. In some cases it was their failure to adequately challenge the economic policies of the conservatives and present clear alternatives that resulted in misfortune for the social democratic parties. A major point of contention has been the right's drive for "labor market reform" – which means relaxing labor regulations, weakening trade union influence, making it easier to fire workers and reducing labor costs. Although the Socialist came out on top in Portugal, "anger over the government's reforms drove many Socialist voters to the hard left," reported *AFP*.

The incoming center right government in Germany "is good for Germany's economy and business – but how good remains to be seen," observed the *Financial Times*. "The outcome is complex. Paradoxically, Germany appears to have shifted rightwards just when the financial crisis has exposed the pitfalls of policies traditionally associated with the right. In fact, the result is as much about the decline of Germany's two big parties and rise of smaller parties at either end of the spectrum. The CDU and Social Democrats, which once commanded 90 per cent of votes between them, this time took below 57 per cent, both scoring their worst result for nearly six decades."

Perhaps the drive to picture a rise of the right and the supposed decline of the left was prompted by the now likely (don't count your chickens) electoral rout of what passes for the "left" in the upcoming election in Britain. The Conservatives appear headed for victory over divided and dispirited Labour Party. It is, there perhaps that the crisis of classic social democracy is most obvious.

"The irony – that the left fails together with the banks – has been much noted, but may be less of a contradiction than is apparent," writes John Llyod in the *Financial Times* October 2. "In different ways, European social democracy was pro-market and pro-globalization – especially New Labour, which in Tony Blair's early years in power was both leader and exemplar. Liberal social reforms, a lesser role for trade unions and, above all, mass immigration were all part of centre-left politics and were broadly acceptable to the mass of the people so long as living standards rose and public services improved. Now, that implicit deal is threatened."

"In this situation, it is not only the right that exults," Llyod wrote. "The left, within these mainstream parties and outside, now sees a chance. The times are propitious: those charged with writing a manifesto for a party such as Die Linke ... would have a pleasant task. The widely mooted collapse of capitalism; rapidly rising unemployment; the determined resumption of the habits of greed by bankers and others able to skim off fresh supplies of cream; the present or coming cuts in public services and pay; the continuing human cost and fiscal drain of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan – these are a rich menu on which to make a meal of a centre-left that did well out of a successful capitalism's surplus and now struggles in its decline. John Harris, the left-Labour commentator, encapsulated his position's scorn for New Labour in the current issue of *Prospect* magazine, describing its policies as 'a mishmash of beliefs that only entrenched the changes wrought by Margaret Thatcher'."

Often, the most perceptive rejoinders to articles that appear in the major print media are found in the comments section. But you won't see them unless you are online because they don't show up in the letters-to-the editor section. "This is just total nonsense," wrote Christian Haesemeyer of Los Angeles in response to Erlanger's premature obituary for the European Left. "The reason parties like the SPD suffer is because they aren't socialist any longer. In those countries where the further left have gotten their act together – Germany, Portugal, France – parties to the left of the old

reformist social democratic ones have begun to flourish. It is amazing that Erlanger completely ignores the string of outstanding results for the new Die Linke (The Left) party in Germany (which gained 12 percent of the vote in Sunday's general elections, and is the second strongest party in a number of states), as well as the very strong results for the Left Bloc in Portugal (they doubled their number of parliamentary seats in Sunday's elections), the popularity of radical left figures in France, the election of a Trotskyist to the European parliament in Ireland.

"All these show that actual socialist politics, if aggressively pursued by a well-organized left willing to overcome its sectarian impulses, is popular and can work."

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