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Konstantin VÖSSING

Value Based Policy Communication in European Social Democracy

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Political communication, values, groups, party strategy, justifications

Abstract

Value-based policy communication entails proposing policies and invoking values to justify these policies. This article explores how we can study the extent to which European social democracy practices this kind of communication. This is important because the use of value-based communication allows social democracy to reinvigorate its electoral appeal. Currently, social democratic parties still rely predominantly on appeals to social groups (instead of values) to justify their policies. However, on its own, this approach becomes less and less effective during a period in which the relevance of group belonging for vote choices continues to decline.

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Value-based policy communication entails *proposing policies* and *invoking values to justify these policies*. This article investigates whether European social democracy practices this kind of communication. Value-based communication is an essential feature of the *party of values* that social democracy ought to become to reinvigorate its broad public appeal.[1] During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social democratic parties emerged as class parties, appealing to supporters and voters on the basis of their class affiliation (Vössing 2017). After 1945, Western European social democracy replaced its class-based approach with a broader appeal to coalitions of social groups. Social democratic parties offered more extensive policy agendas that were designed to satisfy the needs of these combinations of social groups and to negotiate a compromise between them. The *social compromise model* remains until today the dominant approach used by social democratic parties to formulate electoral strategies and policy agendas.

In political communication, social compromise parties attempt to highlight the specific benefits they offer to targeted social groups. For example, during federal parliamentary elections in 1998, the German SPD used the slogan "innovation and justice" to appeal to workers ("justice") and middle-class voters ("innovation"). After the electoral victories of third way social democracy during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the social compromise model ceased to be electorally successful. The heavy decline of social democratic vote shares during the past 20 years has made abundantly clear that the social compromise model fails to attract voters. Decades of research on voting behavior show that people simply do not vote based on their

social structural locations anymore. Values are a considerably more powerful predictor of vote choices, and social democratic values in particular are widespread in Europe.[2] This is why social democratic parties should become parties of values and abandon the social compromise model. Parties of values make values instead of target groups the decisive rationale for their actions. They say *what they want* rather than *which voters they want*.

The party-of-values principle can be translated into all domains of party activity. Most importantly, a party of values needs value-based communication. In this paper, I investigate the extent to which European social democracy relies on values in its communication with voters. First, after this brief introduction, I develop in more detail the model of value-based communication. Second, I outline a method that can be used for the empirical analysis of the scope, content, and quality of value-based communication. Third, I illustrate the usefulness of this method by applying it to a selection of illustrative cases, I briefly summarize some preliminary findings and discuss how the empirical scope of the analysis can be extended in future research using the concepts developed in this article.

The concept of value-based policy communication

Value-based policy communication constitutes the core of a value-based communication strategy, and it is an essential feature of the social democratic *party of values.* A party that relies on value-based communication highlights specific policies (rather than global positions) and justifies the desirability of its policies in reference to universal values. A party of values tries to convince its voters that the policies endorsed by the party have a positive effect on mutually shared values (see figure 1).

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Figure 1: Value-based policy communication

Desirable Policy	advances →	Value

The value-based policy justification is a particular type of "connection claim" which establishes a causal connection between two "component claims" (Vössing 2020).

Specifically, the constitutive component claims in value-based policy communication are "this is a desirable policy" and "this is a desirable value." The two components can be communicated separately, or they can be used as a value-based policy justification by connecting them through a term indicating causality ("this desirable policy advances that desirable value."). The statement "raising the minimum wage advances social justice" is an example of a value-based policy justification invoking a core social democratic value.[3] In contrast to a policy justification, a policy excuse does not claim that a policy is desirable. In addition, a policy excuse does not invoke a desirable goal to explain a policy, but rather a mitigating circumstance that can help explain why an undesirable policy should be supported. For example, the argument "we need to reform the welfare state (policy), because globalization leaves us no choice (mitigating circumstance)" constitutes a policy excuse.

Perfectly crafted policy justifications would maximize recipient support for all three claims they entail. They would contain a popular policy, a widely accepted value, and a claim about an effect of the policy on the value that the audience believes to be valid. Each of the positive impressions created in the minds of message recipients by the three components then contributes to raise the overall satisfaction of recipients with the policy justification. After that, high satisfaction with

the message will have positive effects on support for the justified policy and support for the political actor communicating the message. This model of "cumulative impression formation" (Vössing 2021a) is based on political psychological research about public opinion and persuasion (McGuire 1985, Zaller 1992, McGraw 2002) as well as studies of political explanations (Grose et al. 2015, McGraw 1991, 1990, 2002, McGraw et al 1993, 1995, Esaiasson et al 2017, Vössing 2015, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2021a, Burlacu und Vössing 2018, 2018a) and social explanations (Schönbach 1990). Studies of political and social explanations offer a wealth of evidence for the increased support for a policy and a political actor that comes from a satisfactory explanation, and a value-based justification in particular (McGraw 1991).

However, crafting policy justifications that maximize support for all three of its components at the same time will only be possible on very rare occasions. Typically, political actors will have to make judgment calls. They have to decide, for example, whether they would prefer to invoke a popular value or claim a plausible policy-value effect, given that people often do not believe that the values they cherish are truly advanced by a particular policy. Empirical social science research can inform these decisions, but they are also determined by political considerations and democratic processes in political parties related to choice of both policies and values.

Through a process of cumulative impression formation, value-based policy justifications can raise support for social democratic parties and candidates as well as the policies they propose. In addition, value-based communication can build long-term identification with social democracy. Value-based party identification can replace identification patterns of the past, eroded since the 1970s, which were founded on group belonging and buttressed by secondary associations. And finally, pushing party leaders as well as rank and file party members to think through the consequences of their

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policies by formulating value-based justifications strengthens social democracy's identity as a policy focused party. It is also a potent mechanism for steering social democratic parties away from being tactical parties and re-transform them into *political* parties with a clear political identity.

The method of explanation analysis

I will investigate the value-based communication of European social democracy using the method of explanation analysis. I have previously used explanation analysis to investigate justifications for policies of European integration. Explanation analysis is based on the model of political rhetoric developed in Vössing (2020). In this model, different types of political statements are composed of unique combinations of component claims and causal connections that create connection claims. Value-based policy justifications constitute a connection claim that consists of two component claims ("this is a desirable policy" and "this is a desirable value") as well as a term indicative of causality that links the components ("because", "given that", "this is why"). "Raising the minimum wage is a desirable policy because it advances social justice" is an example of a value-based policy justification.

I will use explanation analysis to determine the *scope*, *content*, and *quality* of policy justifications in the communication of European social democracy. *Scope* refers to the extent to which social democratic parties rely on value-based policy communication as opposed to other communication techniques, specifically benefits-based justifications, justifications invoking other (and less effective) norms, and policy excuses. The analysis will determine the absolute and relative number of value claims, policy endorsements, and policy justifications in a given body of text. Calculating the number of component and connection

claims in relation to the overall size of the text makes it possible to compare different political actors and times.

The *content* of component claims refers to the policies a party endorses and the values it invokes to justify its policies; the content of connection claims refers to the observable policy-value combinations. Explanation analysis can classify the content of component and connection claims at varying levels of specificity. For example, in my research on European integration, the value "internal security" is a specification of the value of "security", which in turn is part of the even more abstract value of "physical integrity." Policies can conveniently be classified in reference to committee structures, for example by identifying the committee of the European Parliament to which a policy would be assigned.

The *quality* of value-based communication will be judged in reference to three standards outlined in Vössing (2020), that is intelligibility, relevance, and validity. Policy justifications can suffer from a lack of intelligibility in several ways. In some cases, the policies endorsed in the justification and the values invoked to justify a policy are stated with a lack of clarity or specificity. In other cases, the connection between the two is not highlighted in a clearly intelligible fashion. A policy justification suffers from a lack of relevance when it is stated in an ill-fitting context or when it is combined with additional information that lacks relevance.

A lack of validity is currently the most frequently discussed deficiency of political statements. The terms fake news, misinformation, and disinformation identify the most egregious form of invalidity. Social democratic parties are much less likely to commit these types of invalidity. However, invalid statements are not limited to outright lies. Invalidity can also occur through "argument stretching" (Vössing 2020, 2022), which identifies political statements that stretch the truth while falling short of full-blown lies. Argument-stretching is frequently the result of an overzealous idealism, which attributes all sorts of positive

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effects to a cherished policy, which turn out to be spurious upon closer inspection. Argument-stretching is quite common, for instance, when Europhile politicians justify policies of European integration (Vössing 2022b).

Case studies of value-based communication

I will apply explanation analysis to determine the *scope*, *content*, and *quality* of value- based policy communication for an illustrative selection of documents from social democratic parties, including "A new social contract for Europe" (Party of European Socialists 2019 Manifesto. PES Election Congress, Marid, 23 February 2019); "It's time for real change. For the many, not the few" (UK Labour Party manifesto for the 2019 general elections); "Aus Respekt vor Deiner Zukunft. Das Zukunftsprogramm der SPD" (Manifesto of the German SPD manifesto for the 2021 federal elections); a speech of Keir Starmer, MP, Leader of the Labour Party, at Labour Connected, 22 September 2020; and a speech of Olaf Scholz, Candidate of the German SPD for the office of chancellor, at the party congress, 9 May 2021.

The data set created by coding these (and later more) documents will have a multilevel structure[4]. At the most basic level, the data set contains all *component claims* made in a document that can be classified as a *measure* (policy or general action), a *value*, a *benefit*, an *unspecified (other) norm*, or *a mitigating circumstance* (this is the corner stone of an excuse, the polar opposite of a justification). At the second level, the data set records the *policy justifications* (and *policy excuses*) that emerge from the various components noted at the lowest level. This makes it possible to determine, for instance, the extent

to which social democratic parties demand policies with respectively without justification to do so. It also allows me to determine the extent to which social democratic parties invoke values without linking them to policies. Moreover, it is at this level where the quality and content of justifications will be coded. The third level recorded in the data set is the *document*. Aggregating information about components and justifications (and excuses) at this level makes it possible to compare documents (and parties issuing these documents) on a wide range of indicators, including for instance the number of policy justifications relative to a certain number of words in a document, the relative number of excuses, the relative number of value-based policy justifications, and the relative number of unjustified policy demands and non-connected values. It is at this level where the scope of value-based policy communication will be coded.

For an illustrative implementation of this mode of analysis (recorded in the attached data set), see the first section of the 2019 PES Manifesto:

> "The European Union must better serve its people. The May 2019 European elections are our opportunity to change the EU and build a fairer Europe. Our societies are still bearing the social costs of the 2008 economic crisis, and we have urgent challenges to face. Europe needs to overcome inequality, fight for tax justice, tackle the threat of climate change, harness the digital revolution, ensure a fair agricultural transformation, manage migration better, and guarantee security for all Europeans. Europe needs a change of leadership and policy direction, leaving behind the neoliberal and conservative models of the past, and focusing on quality jobs for its people, a healthy environment, social security and an economic model which addresses inequality and the cost of living. The status quo is not an option. Radical change is required to build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in. Nostalgic nationalists are selling nothing but dangerous illusions,

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putting past progress and European values at risk. We – Socialists and Democrats – must guarantee citizens' wellbeing and ensure social and ecological progress, leaving no person and no territory behind in the green and digital transitions. Europe must move to a circular model of production and consumption that respects our planet's limits. We want to strengthen Europe's unity while respecting its diversity. As Socialists and Democrats, we propose a new Social Contract for Europe."

This section contains five measures, ranging from general actions to policy packages (but no specific policy): "an economic model", "radical change", "strengthen Europe's unity", "respecting its (Europe's) diversity", and "a new social contract for Europe". The section contains eight references to values: "build a fairer Europe", "Europe needs to overcome inequality", "(Europe needs to) fight for tax justice", "(Europe needs to) ensure a fair agricultural transformation", "(Europe needs to) guarantee security for all Europeans", "(Europe needs to focus on) social security", "addressing inequality", and "European values." In addition, the section contains five references to benefits: "(EU must) serve its people", "quality jobs for its (Europe's) people", "a healthy environment", "(addressing) cost of living", and "citizens' wellbeing."

Finally, the section contains no mitigating circumstances (hence no excuses), but still 15 unspecified norms (that is, norms which are neither values nor benefits): "change the EU", "tackle the threat of climate change", "harness the digital revolution", "manage migration better", "change of leadership, (change of) policy direction", "build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in", "past progress", "social progress", "ecological progress", "leaving no person behind in the green transition", "leaving no territory behind in the green transition", "leaving no person behind in the digital transition", "leaving no territory behind in the digital transition", and "circular model of production and consumption that respects our planet's limits."

However, the large number of component claims are only rarely connected to one another, so that the section contains very few explanations, or more generally speaking, very few arguments. A total number of three justifications can be found: "an economic model (policy) to address inequality (value)", "an economic model (policy) to address the cost of living (benefit)", and "Radical change (general action) to build a project for the future which all Europeans can believe in (other norm). More specifically, only one of these explanations is a value-based justification (the first one). In addition, that justification uses the weak verb "address" rather than terms expressing stronger notions of change and causality such as "solve" and "advance". And finally, the measures mentioned in the section remain at a fairly general level of specificity, or in other words, they are vague ("economic model", "radical change"). The full analysis of the SPE manifesto and the other documents will show whether this preliminary conclusion about the limited use of value-based policy communication holds up to a larger scope of evidence.

Endnotes

1   In a series of articles, Sebastian Jobelius and I have outlined the *party-of-values* model, and we have explained why social democratic parties should adopt this model (Jobelius and Vössing 2019, 2020, 2020a, 2020b).

2   Important examples for this research are detailed in Jobelius and Vössing 2019, 2020.

3   Additional components of value-based policy communication include goals that mediate between policies and values as well as evidence. Other aspects of a broader value-based communication strategy includes highlighting the competence and credibility of leaders, pointing out problems, characterizing political opponents, and issue selection.

4   The data set is appended to this article (as a means to clarify the logic of data collection with the illustrative data that has already been coded)

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