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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT AND ITS IMPACT ON (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In recent decades, Western European political landscapes have undergone significant transformations. While scholars and commentators have increasingly scrutinised the electoral decline of social democracy and the ascendance of the populist radical right, comparatively less attention has been devoted to assessing the trajectory of mainstream right parties. This policy study seeks to bridge this research gap by examining the purported radicalisation within mainstream right parties and its implications for the broader political landscape, notably for (social) democracy. Central to this inquiry is a comprehensive analysis of the extent to which mainstream right parties have embraced more extreme positions and the resulting ramifications. Through a comparative lens, this policy study delves into the evolving positions of different mainstream right-wing party families – Christian democrats, conservatives and liberals – alongside those of the populist radical right and social democracy across Western Europe. Drawing upon extensive public opinion data spanning the last two decades, an empirical examination of the shifting attitudes both in favour of and against these different party families is presented. Moreover, the policy study offers detailed case studies from Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden. These case studies provide illuminating insights into the specific dynamics at play within each country, enhancing our understanding of more recent trends.

Overall, the findings presented here underscore that mainstream right parties across Western Europe remain loyal supporters of the liberal democratic framework. Thus far, they have refrained from morphing into a surrogate version of the populist radical right, as it has happened, for instance, recently in the USA under the aegis of Donald Trump. Nonetheless, the policy study highlights the substantial evidence indicating that this peril looms ominously over several Western European countries. Indeed, mainstream right parties in these contexts run the risk of becoming conduits for the illiberal political agenda espoused by the populist radical right. Either through coalition-building or governance arrangements with the populist radical right, mainstream right parties can inadvertently bolster the normalisation of far-right ideas and practices within society. This enabling role holds significant implications not only for social democracy but also for the broader democratic fabric. Recognising this challenge is paramount for safeguarding the integrity of democratic principles in Western Europe and beyond.

A significant takeaway from this policy study underscores the contrasting levels of public sentiment towards the populist radical right and social democracy. While media attention often emphasises the growing electoral influence of the populist radical right in Europe, this narrative overlooks the nuanced data presented here, which indicates a rising tide of opposition to this political force. Conversely, discussions surrounding the challenges facing social democracy fail to acknowledge that it enjoys relatively lower levels of public aversion, despite garnering fewer votes. This paradox warrants further examination by scholars and policymakers: why does social democracy, despite its smaller electoral base, encounter less public animosity compared to the populist radical right? The policy study suggests that there is untapped potential for social democratic forces to expand their support by crafting compelling narratives that resonate with the values and aspirations of a broader segment of the electorate, one that shares both democratic and progressive ideals. This strategic endeavour hinges on developing fresh and resonant messaging that aligns with the evolving socio-political landscape and addresses the concerns of a diverse array of voters. To achieve this, it is essential to move beyond nostalgic rhetoric and articulate forward-thinking ideas about constructing a better political order for the future.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER[1]

From a progressive standpoint, the current global landscape is undeniably disconcerting. Far-right forces are triumphing in elections across various nations; the tangible consequences of global warming are increasingly apparent on economic, political and social fronts; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine challenges any optimism about a world where tensions are resolved without resorting to armed conflicts. The comprehension of the ongoing political shifts in the world and the endangerment of progressive values is an immense undertaking that extends beyond the scope of this policy study. However, this study aims to direct attention to a specific aspect that has thus far received scant consideration, yet holds the potential to offer crucial insights into both the present and future state of democracy in Europe: the mainstream right.

Since its inception, electoral competition in representative democracies has been characterised by the enduring struggle between two ideological blocs: left and right. Empirical evidence underscores that the subsistence of democracy relies on the commitment of the competing actors between these two ideological blocs to uphold the rules of the game. In this context, the contemporary challenge facing European societies goes beyond the mere ascent of the populist radical right. Rather, the critical concern is the extent to which the mainstream right is dedicated to supporting the liberal democratic framework. The attempt by Donald Trump to overturn the November 2020 election, with the implicit or explicit backing of a significant portion of the Republican Party, underscores that this challenge is not merely theoretical. While it may seem unlikely that mainstream-right-wing forces in Western Europe would emulate the path taken by their counterparts in locations such as the USA under Trump or Turkey under Erdoğan, scholars, journalists and policymakers typically presume the "mainstream nature" of the European mainstream right to be a given. Unfortunately, there are unsettling indications that warrant a more sceptical outlook.

Perhaps nowhere in Western Europe is this more evident than in the current state of the Conservative Party in the UK. Following the Brexit referendum, the party has been immersed in significant turmoil and internal conflicts among different factions, each staunchly advocating for divergent and antagonistic perspectives.[1] On one hand, there is a faction arguing for maintaining a profile that combines core conservative principles, such as nationalism and a free-market economy, with a commitment to upholding the pillars of liberal democracy, including human rights, checks and balances, and adherence to international rules to address global challenges like climate change. On the other hand, an opposing faction contends that the party's future lies in aggressively reducing migration numbers at any cost; withdrawing from treaties that may

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compromise the sovereignty of "the British people" (such as the European Convention of Human Rights); and fostering an ultra-business-friendly environment characterised by low or zero corporation tax, meagre wages, weakened trade unions, minimal welfare provisions and lenient environmental regulations.

As exemplified by the British case, it is imperative to thoroughly examine and closely monitor the evolution of the mainstream right across Europe. Hence, this policy study systematically organises existing empirical data and introduces new insights to address two pivotal questions: (1) the degree to which the European mainstream right is undergoing radicalisation; and (2) the repercussions of this alleged transformation on (social) democracy. In tackling these two inquiries, the study utilises aggregate data encompassing the entirety of Western Europe, complemented by several case studies. The former furnishes a comprehensive overview, while the latter delves into nuanced and detailed analyses. It is worth noting that the main focus of the report is Western Europe, rather than Europe as a whole. Given that the political system in Eastern European countries has its own peculiarities, which make it not identical to the one in Western European countries, it is not simple to make generalisations for Europe as a whole. Nevertheless, the policy study includes one chapter from Eastern Europe (Poland), since one can learn important lessons from this case study when it comes to thinking about the radicalisation of the mainstream right and its implications for (social) democracy. The policy study is divided into ten chapters, concise summaries of which are provided as follows.

Chapter 1 provides operational definitions of key concepts used in the study, notably delving into the notions of the mainstream right and the populist radical right. A critical component of this chapter involves presenting data showcasing the electoral support trends for mainstream-right-wing parties, the populist radical right and social democracy in Western Europe since 1980. This data not only highlights a decline in support for social democrats, Conservatives and Christian Democrats, but also underscores the consolidation of the populist radical right in Western Europe.

In Chapter 2, utilising the previously outlined working definitions, the study systematically organises evidence concerning the programmatic evolution of the mainstream right in relation to the populist radical right and social democracy in Western Europe. The authors draw upon expert surveys to chart the extent to which radicalisation processes for different party families can be discerned on specific issues over time. Notably, this chapter reinforces the assertion that, despite its increasing electoral appeal, the populist radical right is *not* moderating its policy positions. Simultaneously, it highlights that diverse trends can be identified within various mainstream-right party families.

In Chapter 3, a voting perspective is adopted. Analysing public opinion from 1996 to 2021 in Western Europe, the authors present evidence regarding supporters and detractors of mainstream-right-wing parties, the populist radical right and social democracy. Notably, the chapter reveals that a substantial number of voters strongly disfavour the populist radical right, while social democracy enjoys considerable popularity among a significant portion of the voting public. This suggests that the latter may possess untapped potential for growth. Additionally, the chapter provides pertinent information that both supports and contradicts prior findings concerning the characteristics of those who endorse and reject various party families in Western Europe.

Chapter 4 delves into the Austrian case study, which holds emblematic significance within Western Europe, as the first country of the region to witness a government coalition between the populist radical right and the mainstream right. The authors present various pieces of evidence illustrating the evolution of the programmatic positions of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), along with insights into the profile of its supporters. The evidence indicates a discernible shift towards conservatism on the cultural dimension

for the Austrian mainstream right, although it does not overtly challenge liberal democratic institutions. Intriguingly, the authors posit that this transformation is intricately tied to internal conflicts within the party. Consequently, the future trajectory is likely contingent on how these internal tensions are addressed and resolved.

Chapter 5 focuses on France and examines the extent to which the mainstream right has undergone a process of radicalisation. It explores the factors propelling this transformation and assesses its impact on the political left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy within the country. The radicalisation of the mainstream right in France, as discussed, is a prolonged and multifaceted process influenced by both party competition and public opinion, with organisational factors serving as mediators. Despite this, the developments have not followed a uniform trajectory, revealing substantial variation in voter demand, party supply and strategy across different periods of the mainstream right in France. These variations are contingent on electoral incentives shaped by shifts in public opinion and the electoral performance of the populist radical right.

Chapter 6 assesses the potential radicalisation of the German mainstream right in response to the recent rise of the populist radical right. The authors put particular emphasis on the willingness and extent of cooperation between mainstream-right parties and the populist radical right; shifts in policy positions of Christian democratic and liberal forces towards the far right (especially concerning immigration issues); and finally the adoption of policy ideas by the mainstream right that challenge fundamental pillars of liberal democracy, such as the protection of minorities and freedom of speech. While the chapter analysis reveals that, to date, the mainstream right has not undergone radicalisation in response to the populist radical right, it identifies some concerning signs.

Chapter 7 considers the situation in Poland. As the author reveals, the structure of the Polish party system has undergone a fundamental influence from right-wing radicalism. While the departure from liberal democracy surprised those who viewed Poland as a relatively successful case in the post-communist transition to democracy, the effective mobilisation of pro-democratic forces in the 2023 election implies a division rather than a regression. There has been a dual shift in the country: (1) the metamorphosis of the "Law and Justice" party (PiS) between 2001 and 2015, from a relatively conventional mainstream-right party into a populist radical-right entity; and (2) the response of moderate parties spanning both right and left to PiS's post-2015 dominance. This response has played a pivotal role in the "re-mainstreaming" of Polish politics, and help us to understand why a very diverse coalition won the 2023 elections, aiming to roll back many of the illiberal institutional changes implemented over the last eight years.

Chapter 8 directs its focus towards Spain, a third-wave democracy, where the emergence of the far right occurred belatedly. The author scrutinises the radicalisation of the mainstream right, the Partido Popular (PP), and evaluate its ramifications for the broader democratic landscape, as well as the tactics and strategies employed by the Spanish social democratic forces. In a nutshell, the chapter develops an argument about a process of "double contagion", meaning that the influence of the populist radical right partially contributed to the radicalisation of the mainstream right, subsequently fuelling heightened levels of polarisation among their political adversaries. This polarisation is notably observed in affective/identitarian dimensions and territorial matters.

Chapter 9 looks at Sweden. The author provides a brief introduction to the Sweden Democrats and outline aspects of the political and societal context that are considered most relevant to understanding the rising influence of this populist radical-right party, which has transitioned from a political outsider to the second-largest party in the 2022 national elections. Moreover, the chapter shows that the recent collaboration

between Swedish mainstream right-wing parties and the Sweden Democrats might pave the wave for the normalisation of ideas and practices that can harm liberal democracy.

Chapter 10 serves as the concluding section of the policy study, presenting a concise summary of the key findings from the various chapters and offering final reflections on the current state of the mainstream right in Western Europe. Special attention is devoted to assessing the repercussions of the alleged transformation of the European mainstream right on both democracy and social democracy. A significant takeaway from this chapter is the recommendation for academics and policymakers to maintain vigilant monitoring of the (potential) radicalisation of the mainstream right. Such a process poses significant challenges to liberal democracy, compelling social democracy to reconsider not only its programmatic positions but also its approach to coalition building in politics.

1. THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT AND THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE TODAY

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CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER

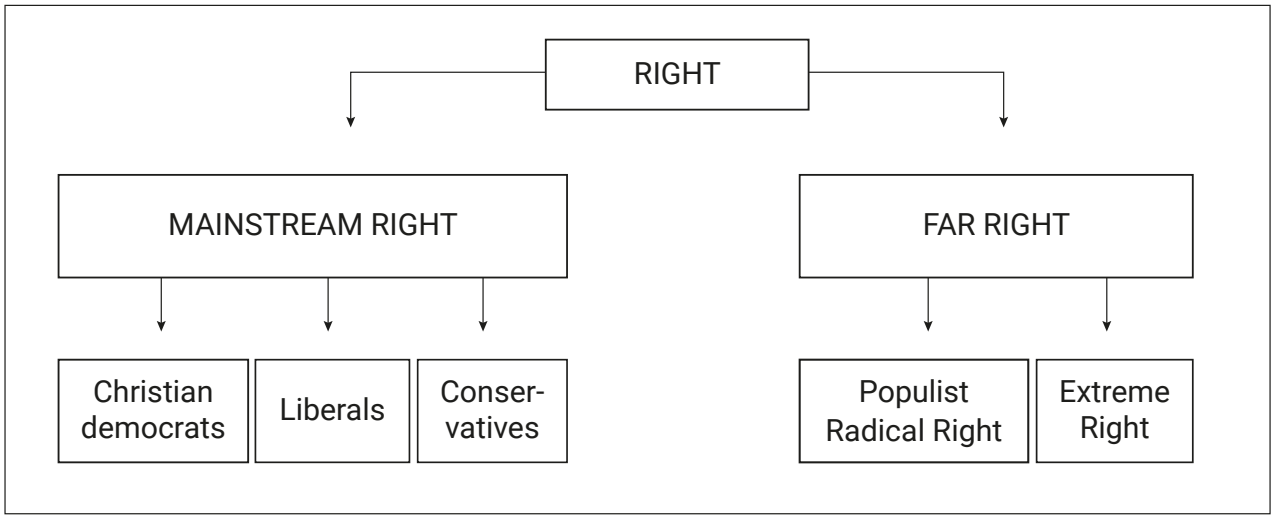
Democracy cannot thrive without democrats. Although this is a truism, it deserves close attention in contemporary Europe. After all, populist radical right parties are receiving an increasing number of votes across Europe, and the evidence shows that these forces maintain a difficult relationship with democracy.[2] While these parties do not claim that they want to destroy democracy, they undertake a subtle attack, since they are particularly at odds with the liberal component of democracy. In fact, they tend to oppose actors and institutions that defend minority rights, the rule of law and separation of powers (including independence of the judiciary, the media and non-majoritarian institutions operating at both national and supranational levels). Not by chance, there is a growing number of studies revealing who is supporting the populist radical right and the ideas that the latter is promoting.[3]

Nevertheless, if democracy cannot thrive without democrats, one has to look not only at the populist radical right alone, but also at the impact that latter has on the political system as a whole. The stronger the far right becomes, the bigger the chance that other political parties might become tempted to imitate its ideas and transform themselves. Several scholars argue that the potential conversion of the mainstream right into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right embodies a major threat to European democracy.[4] In effect, the consolidation of the latter after 1945 is directly related to the existence of electorally strong mainstream right-wing parties, that is, political organisations, which, when defending right-wing ideas, are willing to respect the rules of the game that are intrinsic to the liberal democratic order.[5] It would be a mistake to ignore that the very formation of the EU, the welfare state and the growing acceptance of minorities has been possible not only because of social democracy, but also due to the gradual adaptation of the mainstream right to societies that have become increasingly liberal in sociocultural terms and that demand the existence of institutions committed to providing basic economic security for its citizens.[6]

Seen in this light, the potential transformation of the mainstream right could strongly challenge the apparent post-war consensus of what democracy means and how democracy should function in Europe. As Larry Bartels has recently argued,[7] democratic regimes in Europe seem to be eroding not from growing public support for authoritarianism, but rather from the willingness of political leaders to adopt ideas and behaviour that pave the way for democratic backsliding. This means that the "mainstream" nature of mainstream right-wing parties cannot be taken for granted anymore. As the radicalisation of the US Republican Party under the aegis of Donald Trump shows, scholars and policymakers should carefully analyse whether mainstream right parties in Europe are gradually transforming themselves and the consequences of this potential process for (social) democracy.

To better understand this problem, it is important to provide working definitions of two key concepts: the mainstream right and the far right (see Figure 1). To distinguish between these concepts, extant academic literature normally employs two criteria: spatial attributes (moderate versus hardcore positions) and the relationship with democracy (loyal versus disloyal behaviour).[8] According to these criteria, the mainstream right defends right-wing ideas in a relatively moderate way and respects the democratic rules of the game. By contrast, the far right adopts radical positions in the right-wing camp and is not fully loyal to democratic norms. Moreover, within each of these two right-wing camps, one can identify different kinds of political parties. On one hand, the mainstream right in Europe is composed of the conservative, Christian democratic and liberal party families. Given that each of them has its own historical trajectories and develops different programmatic offers, in the following, a concise description of each of these party families of the mainstream right is provided.

Figure 1. Typology of right-wing parties in Western Europe.



Source: Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021, 9.

Christian democracy is distinguished not only by its advocacy for integration, class compromise, accommodation and pluralism, but also by the promotion of a distinctive welfare regime, which prioritises families over individuals and operates on the principle of subsidiarity. Moreover, Christian democracy has played a crucial role in the Europeanisation process, as emphasised by van Hecke[9] and Kaiser.[10] Amongst the different exponents of this party family, one of the most studied and electorally strongest cases can be found in Germany (CDU/CSU), but Christian democracy here has been gradually losing electoral appeal. Not by chance, three of the four governments of Angela Merkel (2005-2021) were grand coalitions with the social democrats.

Since their inception, European conservative parties – the second party family that belongs to the mainstream right – have been identified by their commitment to upholding the existing economic and political order. However, as time progressed, they recognised the necessity of adapting to societal changes. This adaptation involved embracing democratic ideals and appealing to both workers and owners, often employing nationalist rhetoric rather than focusing solely on class distinctions. It is crucial to acknowledge that these parties have played a role in championing transformative policies. A notable example is the neoliberal revolution, which aimed to reduce the size of both the state and the welfare regime. Presently,

conservative parties are generally characterised by their advocacy for free-market economics, aligning them with a clear right-wing ideology in sociocultural terms. Within the European context, the clearest and probably most successful instance is the British Conservative Party. Nevertheless, as Tim Bale has well documented,[11] after Brexit, the latter is experiencing a process of turmoil and transformation with unknown consequences.

From a historical perspective, the liberal party family emerged in Europe to represent the ideas and interests of the ascending bourgeoisie, advocating for personal liberties, economic freedom, constitutional reform and the secularisation of the state. Since the late 1990s, most liberal parties in Western Europe have unequivocally embraced free-market principles, aligning them with the right-wing political spectrum. Despite this economic alignment, liberal parties often emphasise individual rights and freedoms, leading to more moderate or occasionally left-wing stances on sociocultural issues. Consequently, these parties exhibit a distinctive programmatic mix, combining right-wing positions in the economic domain with progressive stances in the cultural sphere. A notable example is Emmanuel Macron's project in France, which, by intentionally aiming to transcend traditional left-right political divisions, is contributing to a further destabilisation of the French political system.[12]

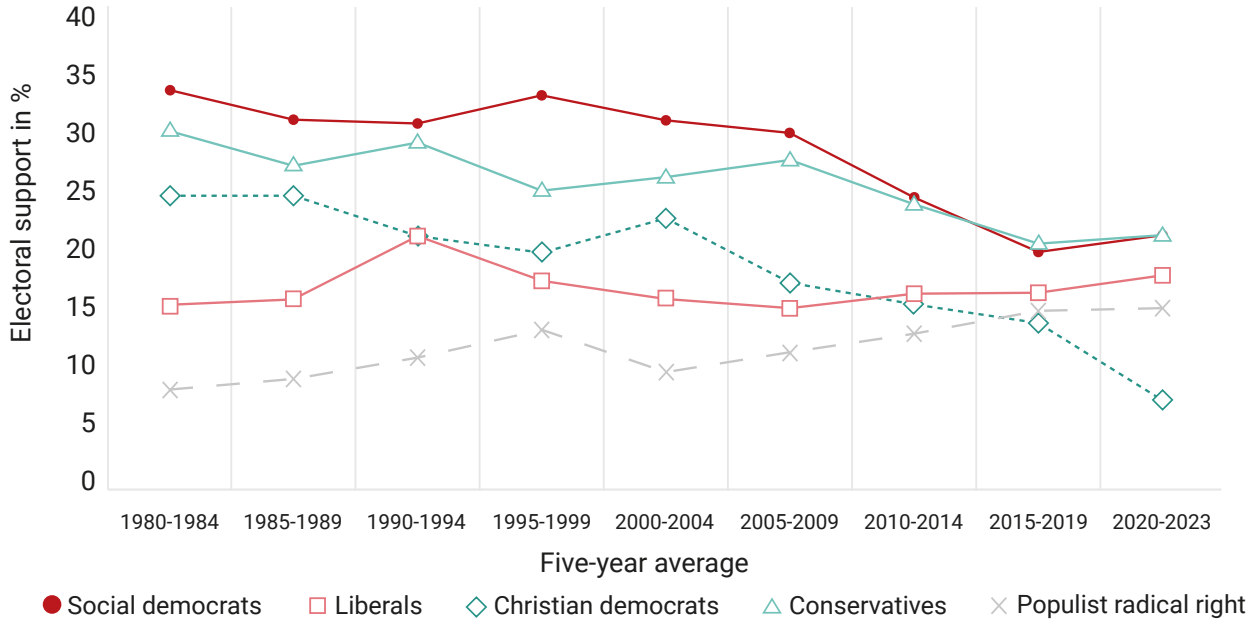
On the other hand, as seen in Figure 1, the far right in Europe brings together the populist radical right and the extreme right. The main difference between them is that the former is nominally democratic, while the latter is openly authoritarian. To better understand this distinction, it is worth briefly specifying the characteristics of each of these two party families. The presence of extreme-right-wing ideas and parties in Western Europe is not a recent phenomenon, as evidenced by historical instances of fascism. Indeed, post-war Europe saw the emergence of extreme-right parties with roots in fascism across several countries. Due to their direct challenges to democracy and associations with fascist ideologies, these parties are typically shunned by other political entities and depicted negatively in the media. As a result, most extreme-right parties find themselves on the fringes or are essentially defunct in contemporary Europe. One notable exception is Golden Dawn in Greece, which – at least for a period – remained relatively competitive in the electoral arena compared to other extreme-right parties.[13]

As it is well known, populist radical right parties present themselves as the voice of the (silent) majority and do not attack the democratic system itself, but rather the existence of actors and institutions specialised in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities. More specifically, populist radical right parties are characterised by three ideological components: (1) authoritarianism, defined as the defence of clear societal hierarchies, under which any type of deviant behaviour must be severely punished; (2) nativism, conceived as the notion that the political system must essentially promote the interests of the native population, as foreign ideas and foreigners themselves pose a threat to the homogeneity of the nation state; and (3) populism, understood as a political ideology that not only portrays society as divided between two opposing groups, "the people" versus "the corrupt elite", but also argues to respect popular sovereignty by all means.[14] Populist radical right parties have firmly established themselves in (almost) all Western European countries, successfully securing positions in government in some instances. Even in cases where they have not directly entered government, these parties wield significant influence in shaping public discourse, particularly in the realm of immigration.

After briefly discussing the key concepts in the academic debate on the right-wing camp in contemporary Europe, we present empirical evidence about its electoral strength. Given that the extreme right obtains a minimal number of votes, we focus on the populist radical right and on the three mainstream-right party families discussed above: Christian democracy; Conservatives; and Liberals. Moreover, we also show the electoral strength of social democracy because this permits us to contrast its overall performance in

comparison with the other party families. For the sake of simplicity, we present the average data divided in periods of five years in parliamentary elections from 1980 until 2023, and we include only those parties that have obtained at least 4% of the vote in national elections across Western Europe.[15]

Figure 2. Electoral results in national elections for social democracy and right-wing parties in Western Europe since 1980 (average per five years in percentage).



Examining Figure 2 reveals a discernible trend that has sparked considerable debate and concern within progressive circles, namely, the diminishing support for social democracy. Interestingly, a parallel trend is evident for two mainstream-right-wing parties in Western Europe: conservatives and Christian democrats. Notably, the current predicament of the latter is particularly alarming compared to social democracy, while the trajectory for the conservative party family closely mirrors that of the social democrats. Additionally, Figure 2 underscores the stability of the liberal party family, consistently securing approximately 15% of the vote with minimal changes over time. Lastly, Figure 2 highlights a disconcerting pattern, which has been already well documented and debated by academics and pundits alike: the consolidation of the populist radical right and its growing ability to mobilise an increasing number of votes.

Figure 2 vividly illustrates the significant transformation undergone by the political landscape in Western Europe over the past decades. As established by prior research, mainstream right parties are facing heightened challenges due to the rise of the populist radical right. Hence, this policy study aims to systematically organise existing empirical data, while presenting new evidence to delve into the depth of radicalisation within the European mainstream right and its potential repercussions on (social) democracy. The policy study is guided by two primary questions.

The first question focuses on the mainstream right's radicalisation, considering two crucial criteria: spatial attributes (ranging from moderate to hardcore positions) and the relationship with democracy (displaying either loyal or disloyal behaviour). The first criterion gauges the extent to which mainstream-right parties embrace more radical stances along the left-right political spectrum (e.g., views on the state's role in the

economy, immigration and moral issues). Meanwhile, the second criterion assesses how the mainstream right modifies its rhetoric and actions concerning the liberal democratic system (e.g., questioning judicial independence and willingness to limit certain fundamental rights). We contend that a comprehensive understanding of the "mainstream" nature of the mainstream right requires a thorough examination of these two criteria. For instance, while there is no straightforward evidence indicating that the US Republican Party has become progressively conservative in programmatic terms, given its historical adherence to strong right-wing positions (especially when compared to Western European contexts), there is a growing consensus that, particularly since the ascent of Donald Trump, the party has adopted confrontational stances toward the liberal democratic regime. Conversely, the situation in Western Europe might be different, with mainstream right parties potentially maintaining loyalty to liberal democracy while increasingly incorporating radical positions, particularly on immigration-related issues.[16]

The second question delves into the repercussions of the (purported) radicalisation of the mainstream right on (social) democracy, necessitating a distinction between its broader impact on democracy as a whole and its specific consequences for social democratic forces. Concerning the former, our focus is on understanding how the (alleged) radicalisation of the mainstream right poses challenges to, and potentially threatens, the state of liberal democracy in Western Europe in the foreseeable future. Examining this requires careful consideration of whether the transformation of the mainstream right is instigating gradual shifts at both formal and informal institutional levels[17] that may impact not only the quality of democracy but also fundamental tenets of liberal democracy. Given that scholarly literature indicates that processes of democratic backsliding are strongly related to changing behaviour at the elite level,[18] this scrutiny is vital. In other words, if political elites disrespect liberal democratic conventions (think about Trump's unwillingness to concede his electoral defeat), it is hard to imagine that democracy can last. Turning to the impact of the alleged transformation of the mainstream right on social democratic forces, there are two noteworthy dimensions for exploration. Firstly, it is plausible to hypothesise that a radicalisation of the mainstream right may leave certain segments of the electorate feeling marginalised, prompting them to endorse alternative political offerings that staunchly support liberal democracy and progressive values. Secondly, the transformation of the mainstream right could significantly influence coalition-building dynamics. It is conceivable that the radicalisation of the mainstream right not only facilitates the participation of the populist radical right in government, but also bolsters the legitimacy of the latter's ideas. Consequently, more individuals may be inclined to support the populist radical right, urging social democratic forces to be open to forming coalitions with diverse political actors to safeguard democracy and progressive values.

2. THE POSITIONS OF THE MAINSTREAM AND POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE

2. THE POSITIONS OF THE MAINSTREAM AND POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE

CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER AND STEVEN M. VAN HAUWAERT

2.1 Introduction

The European political sphere has experienced significant changes in the last decades. As the data presented at the beginning of this policy study shows, electoral support for mainstream right-wing parties has been diminishing, while more people are supporting populist radical right parties.[19] Extant empirical research reveals that many of those who support the latter did vote for the mainstream right in the past,[20] and as a consequence, one can observe a growing tension within the right-wing bloc. Not by chance, pundits and academics alike have warned that the mainstream right might feel tempted to imitate the proposals of the populist radical right – a development that might have important consequences for the liberal democratic regime. With the aim of assessing this risk, this chapter offers an overview of how the positions of the mainstream right, social democracy and the populist radical right have evolved over time and across Western Europe.

As the empirical analysis reveals, there are no major shifts in the programmatic proposals advanced by mainstream right forces across Western Europe. Although it is true that one can identify a trend towards more conservative standings on certain issues for some party families that belong to the mainstream right, it would be an exaggeration to claim that a major radicalisation process is under way. Moreover, social democracy also shows stable positions marked by the defence of progressive policies in the sociocultural and socioeconomic dimension. However, as we argue in this chapter, programmatic transformations normally do not occur overnight, and as a consequence, academics and policymakers should continue to pay close attention to the ideas defended by the mainstream right to examine the extent to which some of its members might become an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right. Moreover, as we explain below, given that we are interested in providing an overall picture for the whole region, we work with average data for several Western European countries until 2019. This means that the evidence presented here does not permit national outliers to be detected, but the country cases included in this policy study give a more fine-grained analysis of different national trajectories and with a stronger emphasis on recent developments.

2.2 The party families and expert opinions

Political parties compete against each other by developing ideas and policies that are attractive to the voting public. Consequently, there is extensive academic literature that looks into how we can best assess party positions and their evolution over time.[21] One possibility is to look at parties and their rhetoric, focusing on

speeches, interventions or even party manifestos. This certainly has numerous advantages. When looking at speeches or interventions, we can obtain a systematic idea of where politicians stand and how they speak to different audiences. When examining party manifestos, we can get a closer understanding of the formal policies proposed by parties. Another possibility is to rely on expert opinions to position parties alongside various criteria. This has a different set of advantages, most notably that it accounts for the context specificity of rhetoric or even its strategic nature. Supposedly, it provides a more "objective" analysis of parties and their positions, based on a wide variety of experts on the topic.

Throughout this chapter, we rely on the latter approach. More specifically, we employ the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). This project estimates party positions on ideology and various policy issues in six different waves (1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019) and allows us to include 13 West European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK). While there are numerous expert surveys available to the public, we rely on the CHES because it allows us to go back furthest in time. The good news is that most expert surveys tell a similar story when it comes to the observations we present in this chapter. As part of our analysis, we distinguish between five party families, namely, social democrats, liberals, Christian democrats, conservatives and the populist radical right.[22] In what follows, we contrast the ideological and policy positions of these party families over time.

Before presenting the empirical analysis, it is worth highlighting what previous studies on this topic have already found and to what extent the approach developed here innovates in comparison with extant research. In fact, previous studies have worked, for instance, with party manifesto data to examine if the rise of the populist radical right has led mainstream right parties to adopt more conservative programmatic positions.[23] This kind of research shows that the mainstream right in Western Europe has indeed seen a clear transformation of its agenda in one specific issue: a strong shift towards anti-immigration positions. To reexamine the validity of this finding and innovate as well, this chapter does not use party manifesto data but rather relies on expert opinions. Additionally, we also include and examine the positions of the social-democratic party family.[24] This allows us to assess not only if the mainstream right is moving closer to the populist radical right on certain issues, but equally if social democratic forces are changing their positions to try to cope with the (alleged) transformation that is occurring within the right-wing bloc.

2.3 Ideological positions

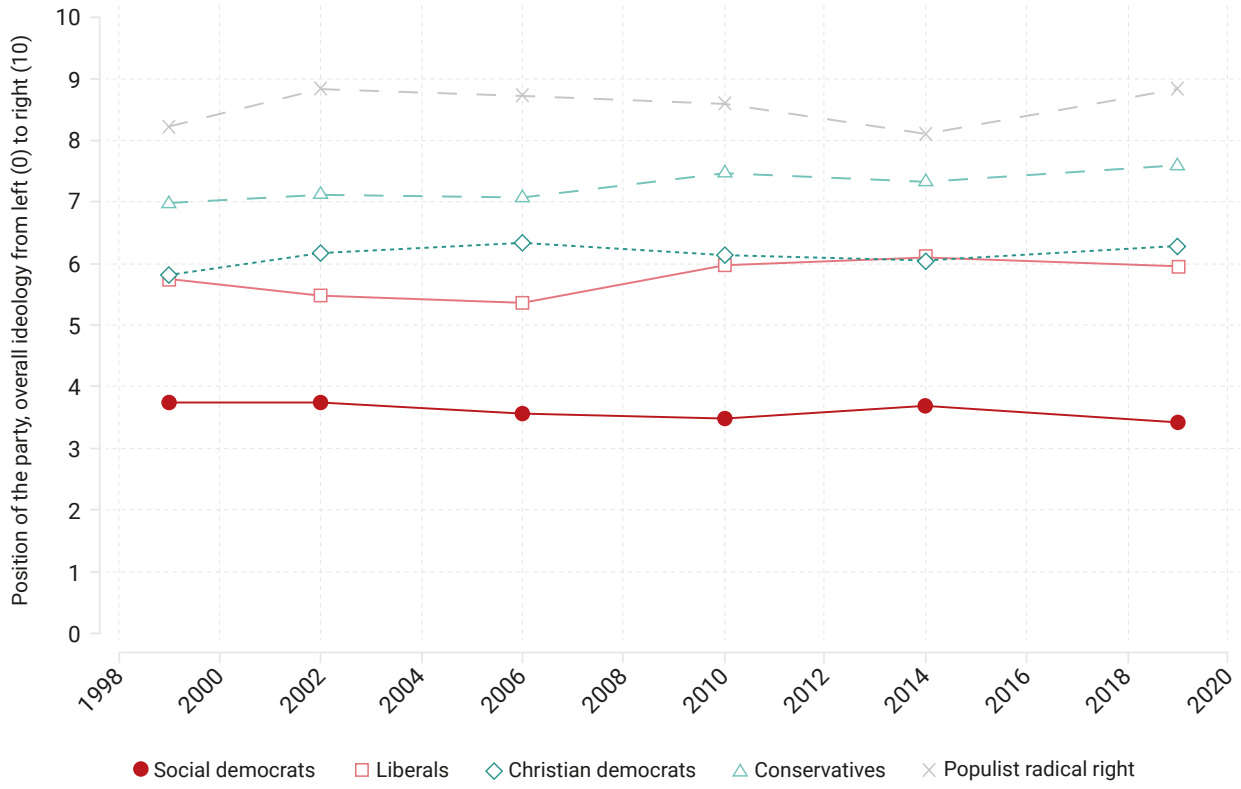
Our analysis commences with the visualisation of a broad and overarching ideological positioning variable, ranging from zero (extreme left) to ten (extreme right). Figure 3 paints a rather unsurprising picture. It shows that the average ideological position of social democratic parties is to the left of all the other included parties. The four right-wing parties are generally positioned to the right of the social democratic party family. While we notice some minor changes in the ideological positions of individual party families over time, the overall story here is one of stability and consistency. This provides an important counterfactual to claims that we can see an overall shift to the right – or the so-called *Verrechtsing* or *droitisation* – of politics.[25]

Figure 3 shows this is not necessarily the case for the evolution of party positions. Moreover, we think that at least three aspects are worth highlighting. Firstly, despite the "Third Way" approach – the attempt to combine economically liberal and progressive policies[26] – adopted by many social democratic parties in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the latter present a rather stable picture in terms of their overall placement on the left-right scale. Secondly, populist radical right and conservative parties are the two party families located the furthest on the right. Thirdly, Christian democratic and liberal parties seem to be converging

when it comes to their ideological placement, as they remain more centrist than social democrats, on one hand, and conservatives and the populist radical right, on the other hand.

In summary, Figure 3 reveals there are little to no signs of major ideological shifts across the different party families under scrutiny. We also find no conclusive evidence of radicalisation or polarisation. If anything, we notice convergence between liberals and Christian democrats, as well as between conservatives and the populist radical right. Altogether, this could be indicative, not so much of polarisation in its pure sense, that is, an evolution towards two distinct political poles (like in the USA), but rather of a clearer division in ideological camps of West European party families (and perhaps with it, a narrowing of political competition).

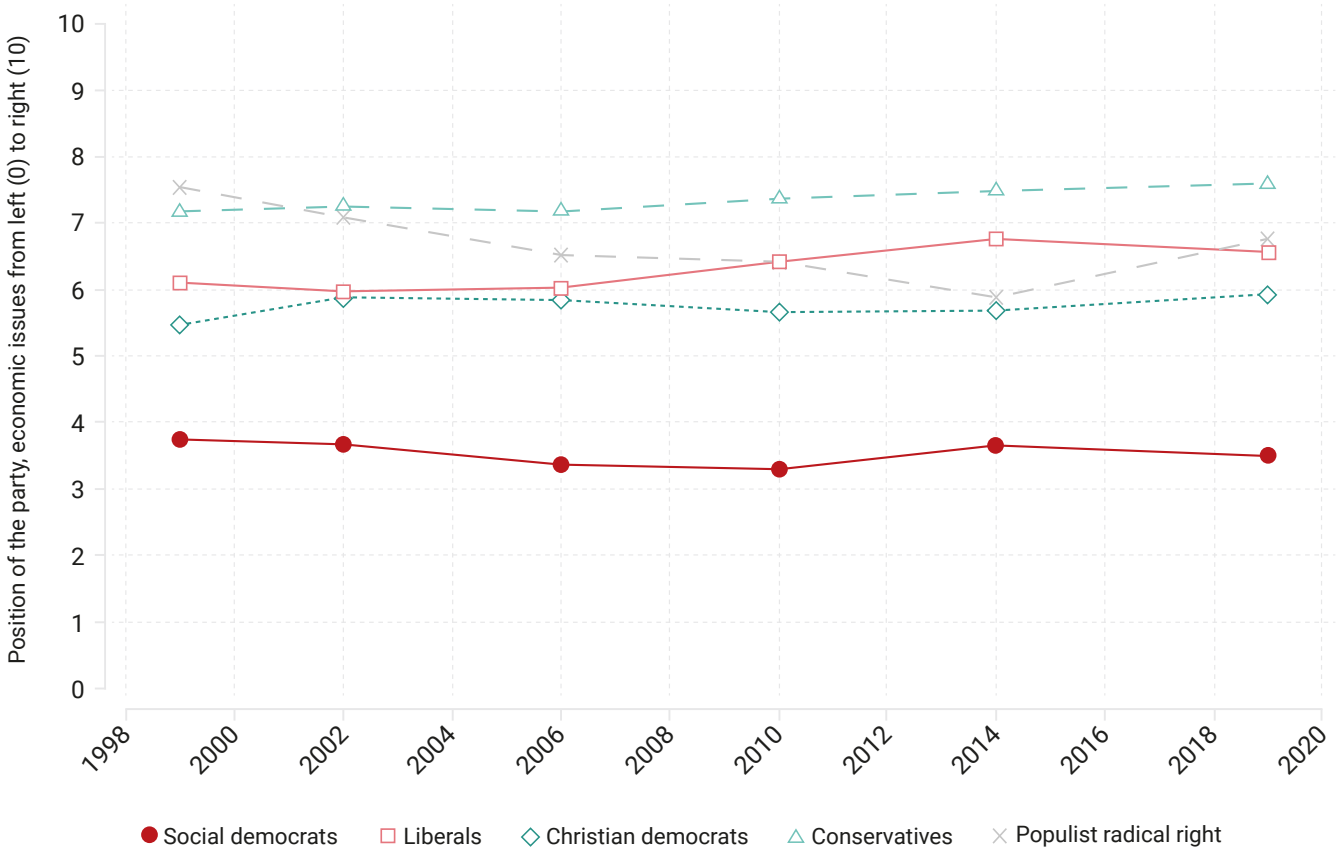
Figure 3. Party positions based on overall ideological stance.



Drawing from this overall picture, we can then zoom in a bit more and disaggregate the "ideological positions". After all, most scholarship argues that Western European politics can be thought of in two dimensions: an economic one and a socio-cultural one.[27] Figure 4 illustrates the party family positions when it comes to their ideological stances on economic issues.

The observations for the traditional party families remain quite similar to those of Figure 3. Social democratic parties hold mostly left-wing positions, meaning they want governments to play a relatively active role in the economy. The three mainstream party families on the right hold more economically right-wing positions, advocating for market freedom and a reduced role for government. Nevertheless, there are some interesting differences: while Christian democrats are the least pro-market within the right-wing camp, liberals and conservatives present a slight increase in the defence of state intervention in the economy. Seen in this light, a potential coalition between social democrats and Christian democracy should be less complicated than with the other right-wing parties, which have a more pronounced position on market freedom.

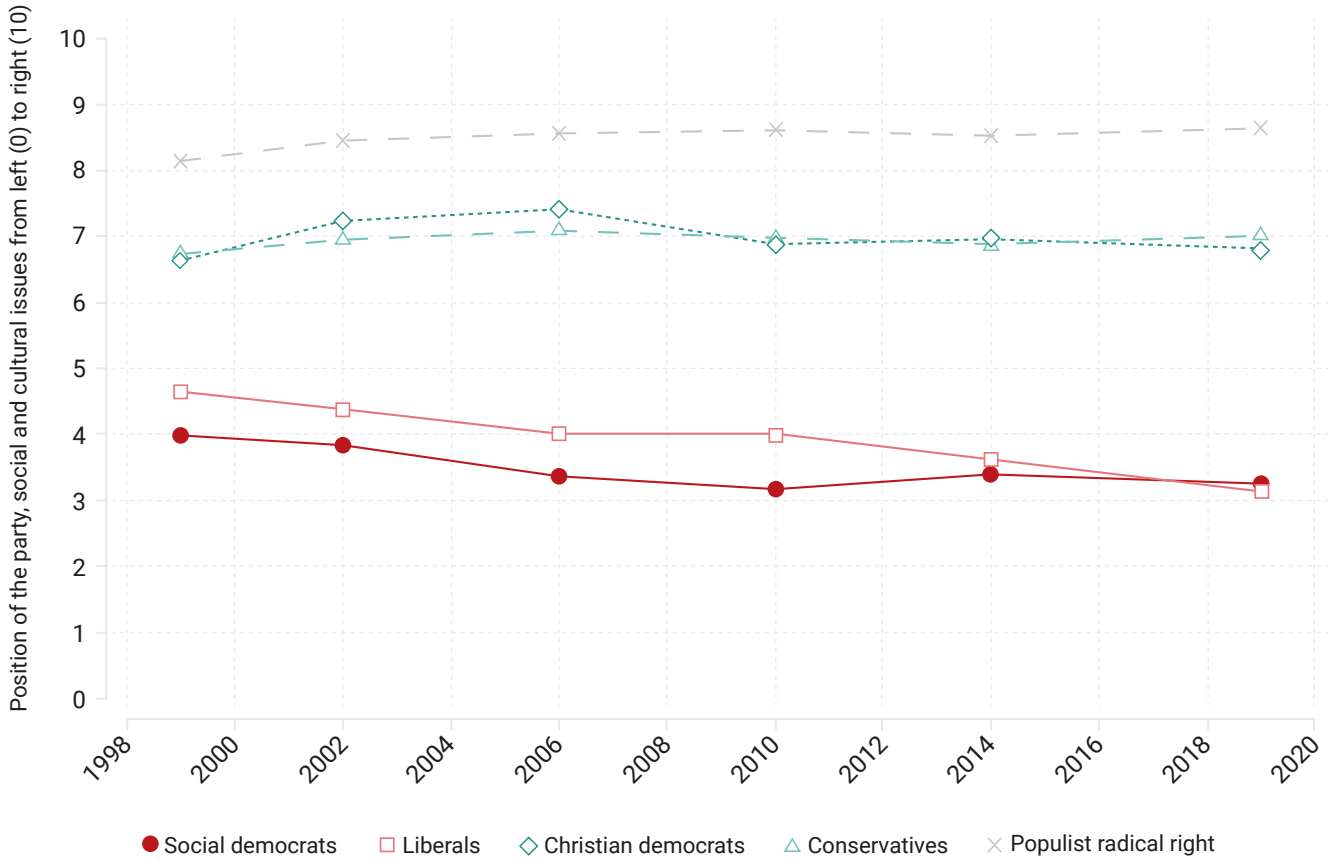
Figure 4. Party positions based on ideological stance towards economic issues.



When looking at populist radical right parties in Figure 4, we notice their economic positions have shifted to the left compared to the late 1990s, even including the recent uptick in their economic positioning back to the right. Moreover, the economic positions of populist radical right parties are less right wing than those of conservative parties, and at times even than those of liberal parties. This moderation in the past decades can clearly be observed in their increasing emphasis on the importance of welfare state protection for natives, or so-called "welfare chauvinism".[28] As extant research has shown, part of the growing electoral success of the populist radical right in Western Europe is linked to its programmatic transformation that tries to present itself as a political force defending a strong welfare regime for the "native" working class.[29]

Complementary to this, Figure 5 illustrates the average party positions on social and cultural issues. This paints a very different picture than Figures 3 and 4, to some extent showing that, when experts are asked about a party's overall position, they tend to reflect their economic position – not necessarily their social and cultural positions. Figure 5 shows that both liberal and social democratic parties share a relatively progressive set of positions, which tend to reflect personal freedoms (e.g. abortion rights, divorce and same-sex marriage). Over time, these two party families seem to have become more progressive on social and cultural issues. They are adapting to the value transformation of European societies towards more liberal and cosmopolitan ideas.[30] In contrast to Figure 4, this reveals that it should be easier for social democrats to build coalitions with liberals in comparison with any other right-wing party. In other words, a comparison between Figures 4 and 5 highlights that, while liberal parties compete with other right-wing parties alongside the economic spectrum, they primarily compete with social democrats on the social and cultural spectrum of politics.

Figure 5. Party positions based on ideological stance towards social and cultural issues.



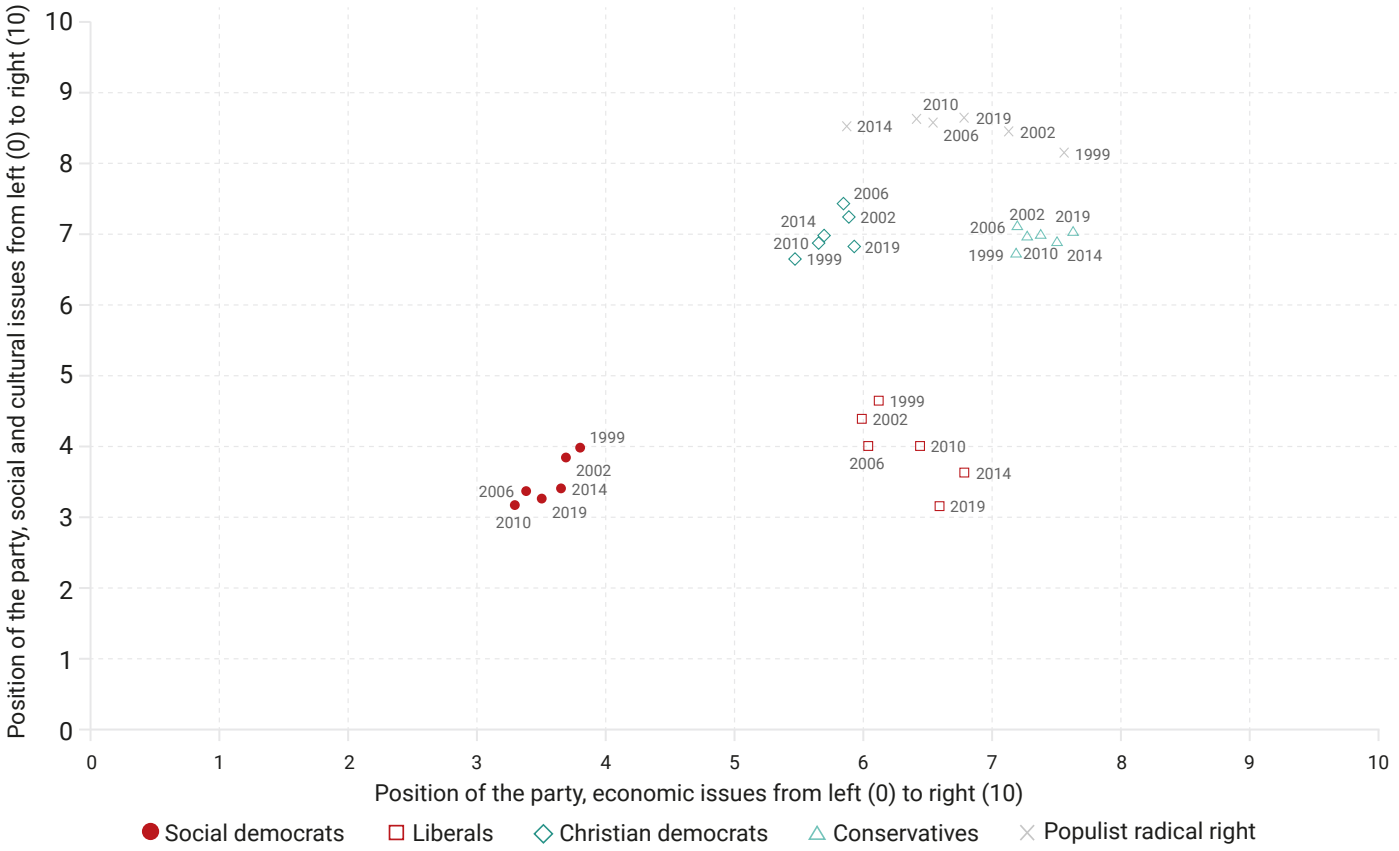
Moreover, it is worth noting that conservative and Christian democratic parties share a more traditional set of positions related to social and cultural issues than social democrats and liberals. They are sceptical of expanded personal freedoms and favour order, tradition and stability, giving important moral authority to the government in this regard.

While conservative and Christian democratic parties have a relatively stable position on these issues, populist radical right parties exhibit a gradual tendency towards the adoption of more conservative positions on social and cultural issues. This finding stays in line with the existing research, which shows that the increasing electoral power of the populist radical right has not led to its moderation, but rather to its radicalisation.[31] It is not far-fetched to suggest, therefore, that we see little to no signs of the populist radical right toning down its agenda. Rather than moderate itself, it seems a more popular strategy is to continue being "the stick behind the door". By continuously advocating stricter positions on the cultural dimension, the populist radical right aims to give more importance and weight to the issues it defends, so that the population in general is more aware of these problems and the solutions proposed by the populist radical right.[32]

We further illustrate this in Figure 6, where we combine the previous observations about party families' ideological stances on both economic and social and cultural issues on a single two-dimensional graph. We notice that, even if there is some movement within party families in terms of their ideological stances throughout the years, that movement remains minimal – especially if we consider the full spectrum within which parties can move. All changes are rather small, indicating that party families do not overhaul their positions from one day to another. Any changes they make are both around the margins and gradual. As

a result, and unsurprisingly, we notice five clear and compact clusters in Figure 6. Most of the variation we notice is within the liberal and populist radical right party families, with the former primarily becoming more socially and culturally progressive and the latter becoming more economically interventionist.

Figure 6. Party positions based on ideological stance towards economic and social/cultural issues.



When looking at this data, we should not forget these are the average positions for a series of different parties across Western Europe. Consequently, it could be that in some countries we observe specific trajectories, which are not well captured in the evidence presented in Figure 6. Moreover, the data used here is only until 2019, which means our discussion does not cover party transformations that might have occurred after the official withdraw of the UK from the European Union (EU) in 2020, the presidency of Donald Trump (from January 2017 until January 2021) and the Russian military invasion of Ukraine that started in 2022. Not by chance, this policy study includes a series of country studies, which employ different methodologies and fine-grained analyses to assess the alleged transformation of certain party systems to date (see Chapters 4-9).

Some scholars argue there might be a third dimension of competition between political parties, or at least one that can be considered different enough from the social and cultural dimension that it warrants separate attention, namely, the position towards European integration.[33] In Figure 7, we therefore map the overall orientation of party families about this issue, which ranges from one (strongly opposed) to seven (strongly in favour). We notice here that all mainstream party families, left and right, hold positions either somewhat or clearly favouring European integration.

Figure 7. Party positions based on ideological stance towards European integration.

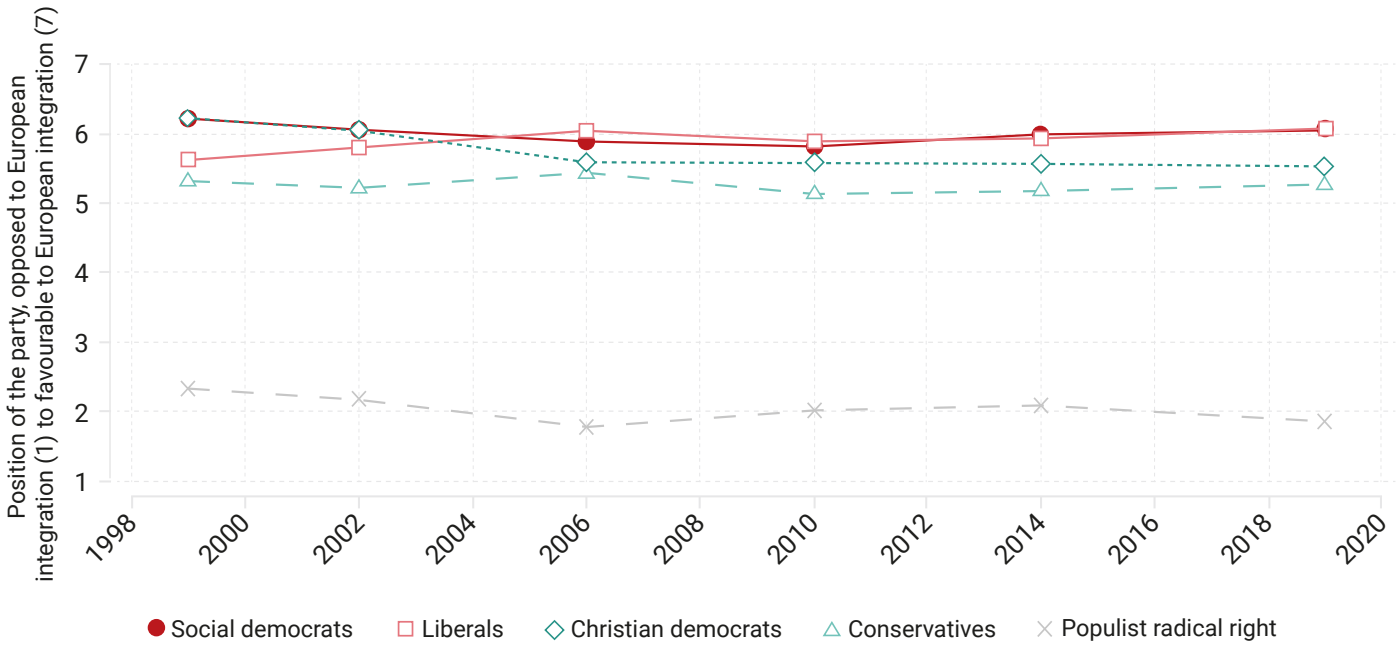


Figure 7 also shows that right-wing populist parties tend to oppose European integration, making this an important distinction between mainstream parties (which have historically been a part of the consensual process of integration) and their populist radical right counterparts (which have typically been sidelined or did not yet exist throughout this process). This suggests that, if the populist radical right continues to expand electorally and can conquer executive office (either alone or in coalition with other parties), governing the process of European integration will become not only more challenging, but it can turn into a dysfunctional process that might even lead to the strengthening of the far right.

On one hand, the less the EU is able to govern effectively, the stronger the rejection of the voting public might become towards the European project, something that benefits the populist radical right. On the other hand, if the latter has enough electoral power to enter government, it becomes more difficult for the EU to oversee and sanction infringements to the rule of law undertaken by administrations in which the populist radical right participates. Moreover, increasing political power of the populist radical might equally lead to a programmatic modification of is relationship to the EU: instead of trying to leave or abolish the EU, to push for a radically reshape of the EU towards a more nationalistic version in line with far-right ideas.

2.4 Policy dimensions

The CHES data has the advantage that it allows us to disaggregate our observations even further. Rather than look at more general left-right positions like we did in the Figures 3-7, we can also examine specific policy areas of the different party families under consideration. This is exactly what we do in this section.

Figures 8 and 9 present us with more detailed insights into the economic policy positions of the five party families under consideration. They highlight the extent to which party families prioritise improving public services and want to reduce taxes and redistribution from the rich to the poor. The common expectation is that left-wing parties are more favourable of expanded welfare states and redistribution, whereas right-wing parties are more amenable to lower taxes and less state intervention. For all intents and purposes, this is exactly what we see in Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8. Improving public services versus reducing taxes.

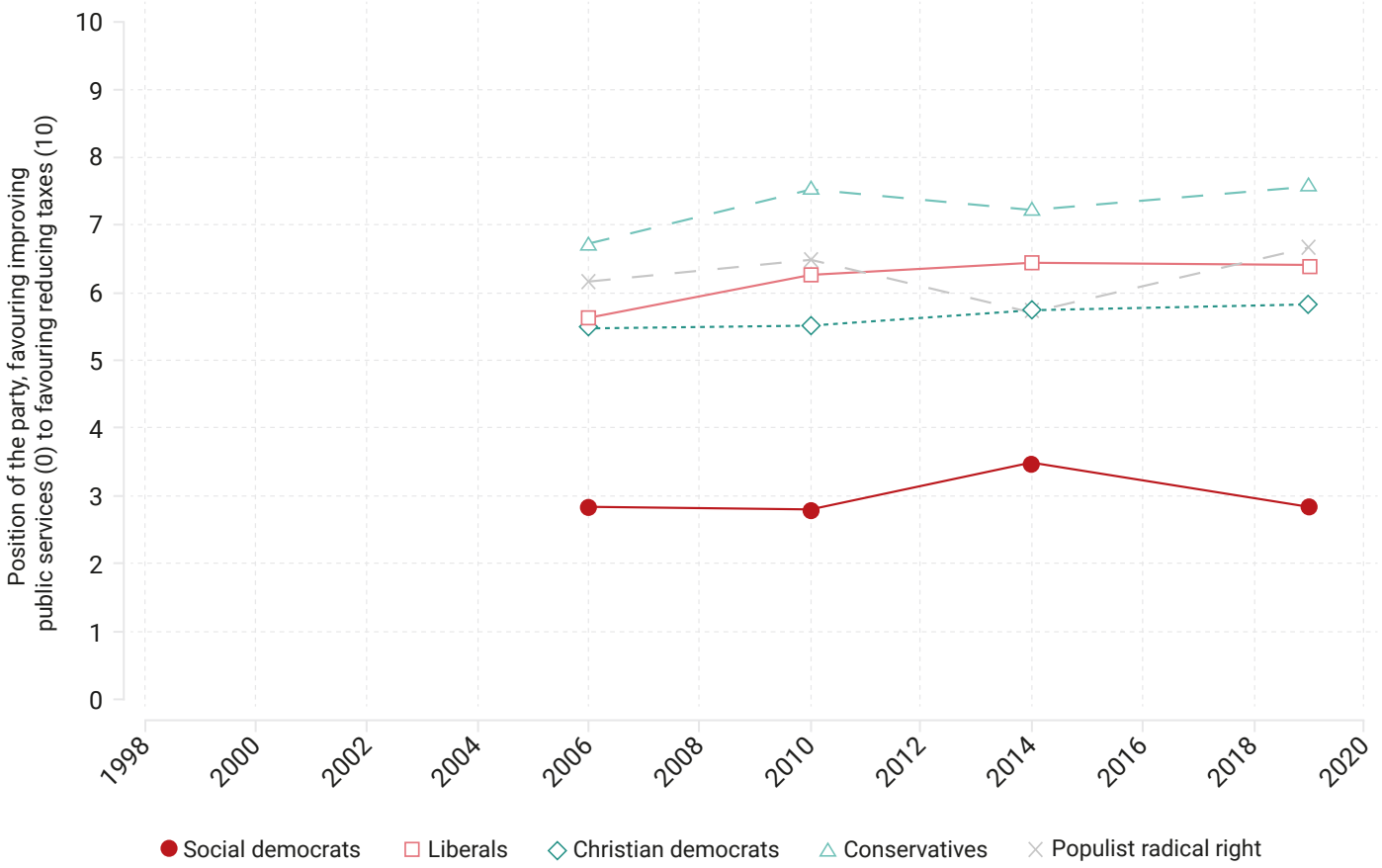
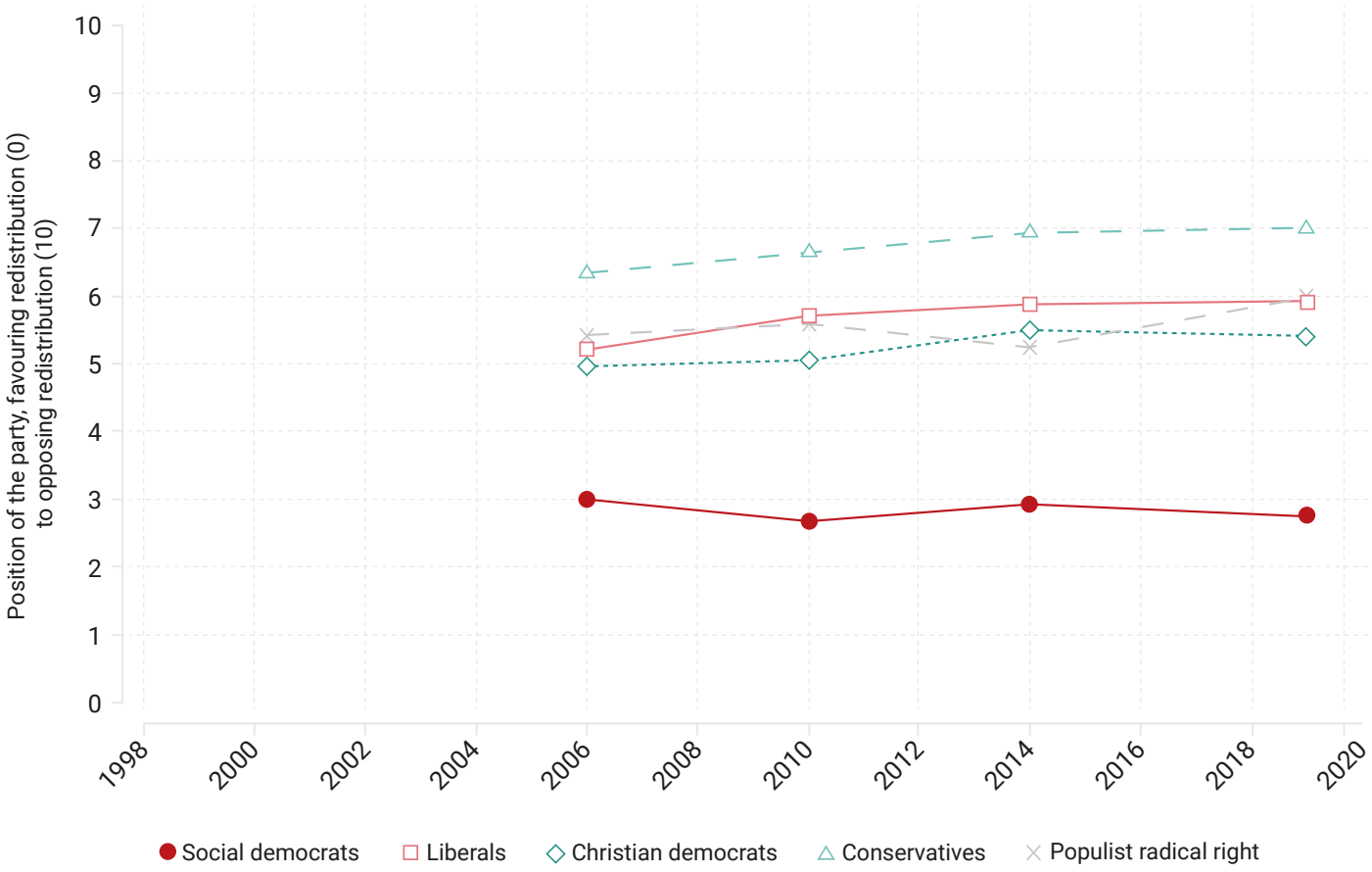


Figure 8 illustrates that social democratic parties are much more favourable to improving public services and expanding the welfare state compared to their right-wing counterparts. By contrast, all right-wing parties are more favourable to reducing taxes and the corresponding welfare state. Here, conservative parties have relatively strong preferences for reducing taxes over improving public services, while the positions of liberal, Christian democratic and populist radical right parties remain more moderate. Even though there is a clear, yet unsurprising, difference between left- and right-wing parties, we notice that stability once again is the key

observation here. Parties barely change their positions over time when it comes to state interventionism. By considering this observation, it becomes clear that for social democrats it is challenging to build compromises with any right-wing party on this issue, especially because economics and the overall notion of "who gets what, when and how" is still a central question in politics.[34]

A similar observation can be made for the parties' positions on redistribution in Figure 9. We notice that social democrats strongly favour redistribution, whereas right-wing parties oppose redistribution. Within the latter party families, conservative parties most strongly oppose redistribution, whereas the other right-wing parties have a more moderate stance. Interestingly, the increasing adoption of "welfare chauvinist" positions by the populist radical right does not go in line with defence of politics of redistribution from the rich to the poor. Part of the explanation for this probably lies in the fact that extant research shows that an important core constituency of the populist radical right is labour market insiders rather than outsiders.[35] Given that these labour market insiders are less interested in a major reshuffle of the economic system, it makes sense that the populist radical right holds positions on the issue of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor that are similar to the ones defended by the mainstream right parties, rather than those of social democratic parties. Consequently, this evidence reinforces the argument that populist radical right and social democratic parties advocate very different programmatic positions. Not by chance, scholars have highlighted that it is misleading to overestimate the affinities between the voters of these two parties.[36]

Figure 9. Position on the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.



Figures 10-12 allow us to gauge more specific policy positions alongside the social and cultural axis of party competition. Figure 10 explores the extent to which the different party families prefer stronger law and order (e.g., tougher measures to fight crime) over the promotion of civil liberties (e.g., equal treatment under the law). We notice that social democrats and liberals are stronger proponents of civil liberties (although they remain relatively centrist in their overall position), whereas conservatives, Christian democrats and populist radical right parties are stronger proponents of law and order.

The populist radical right stands out as a very strong opponent of law and order, systematically scoring around nine out of a possible ten. In fact, part of the populist radical right agenda is centred on more conservative positions on law and order, something that it is related to its emphasis on authoritarianism, understood as the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority should be severely punished.[37] Seen in this light, the high scores on law and order can be explained by the populist radical right's emphasis on respect for traditions and existing hierarchies, something that is also often linked to harsh criticism to (excessive) accommodation towards certain minority groups that allegedly puts existing norms at risk.[38]

Figure 10. Position on civil liberties versus law and order.

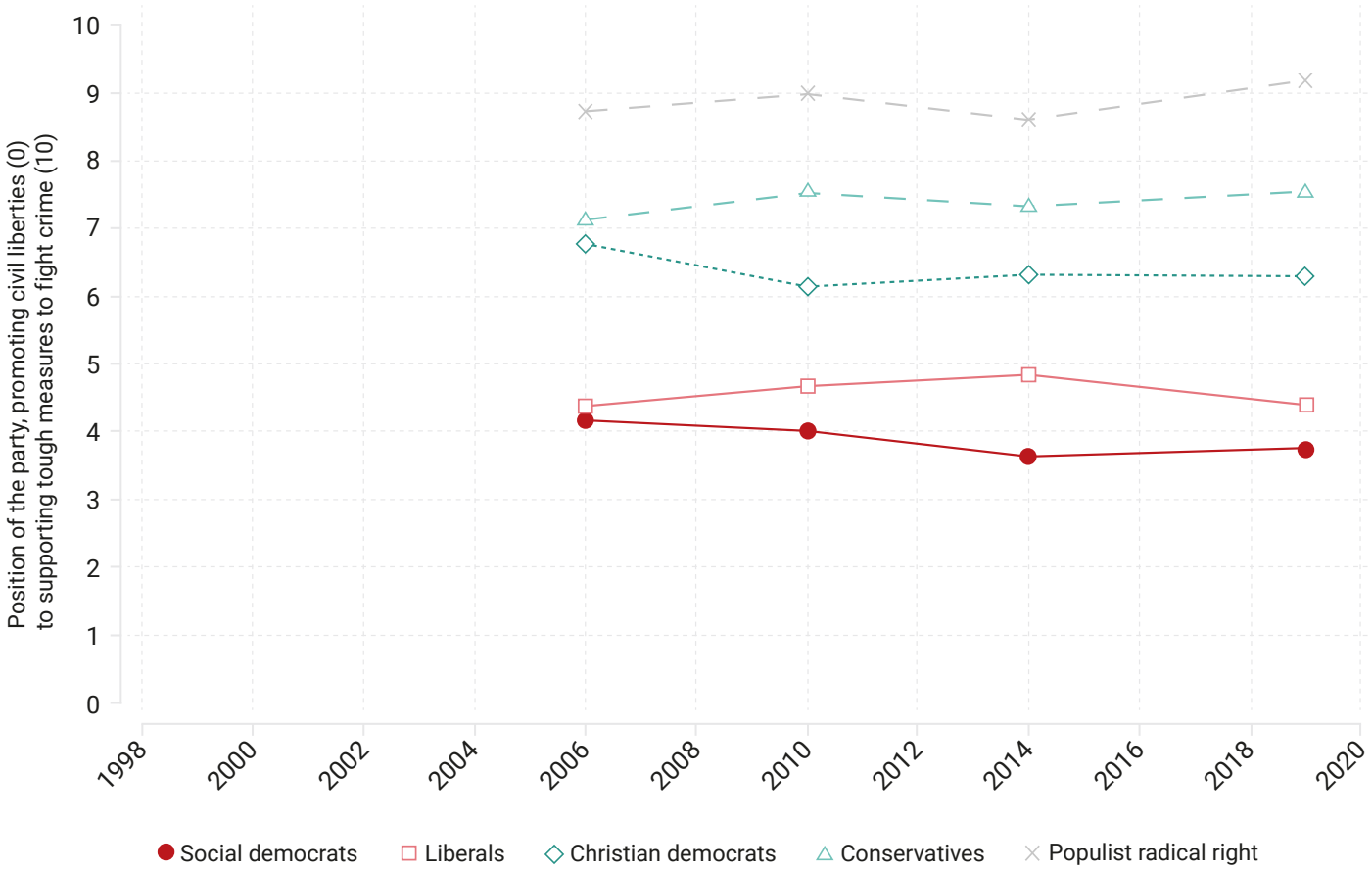
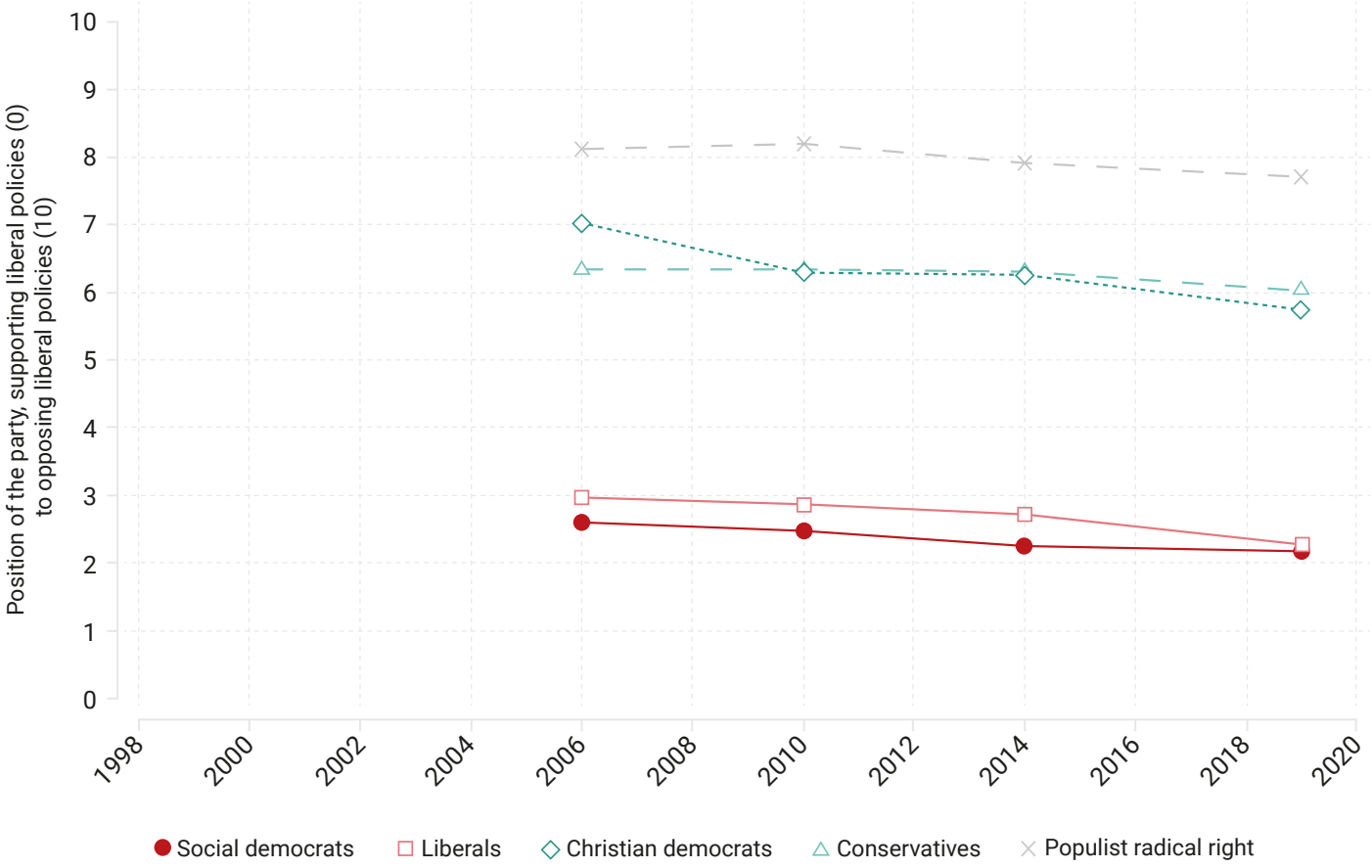


Figure 11 presents us with some insights into the parties' positions on social lifestyle, which includes rights for homosexuals and gender equality. This shows a similar picture to Figure 10, yet with some important differences. We again observe the distinction between social democrats and liberals on one hand, and

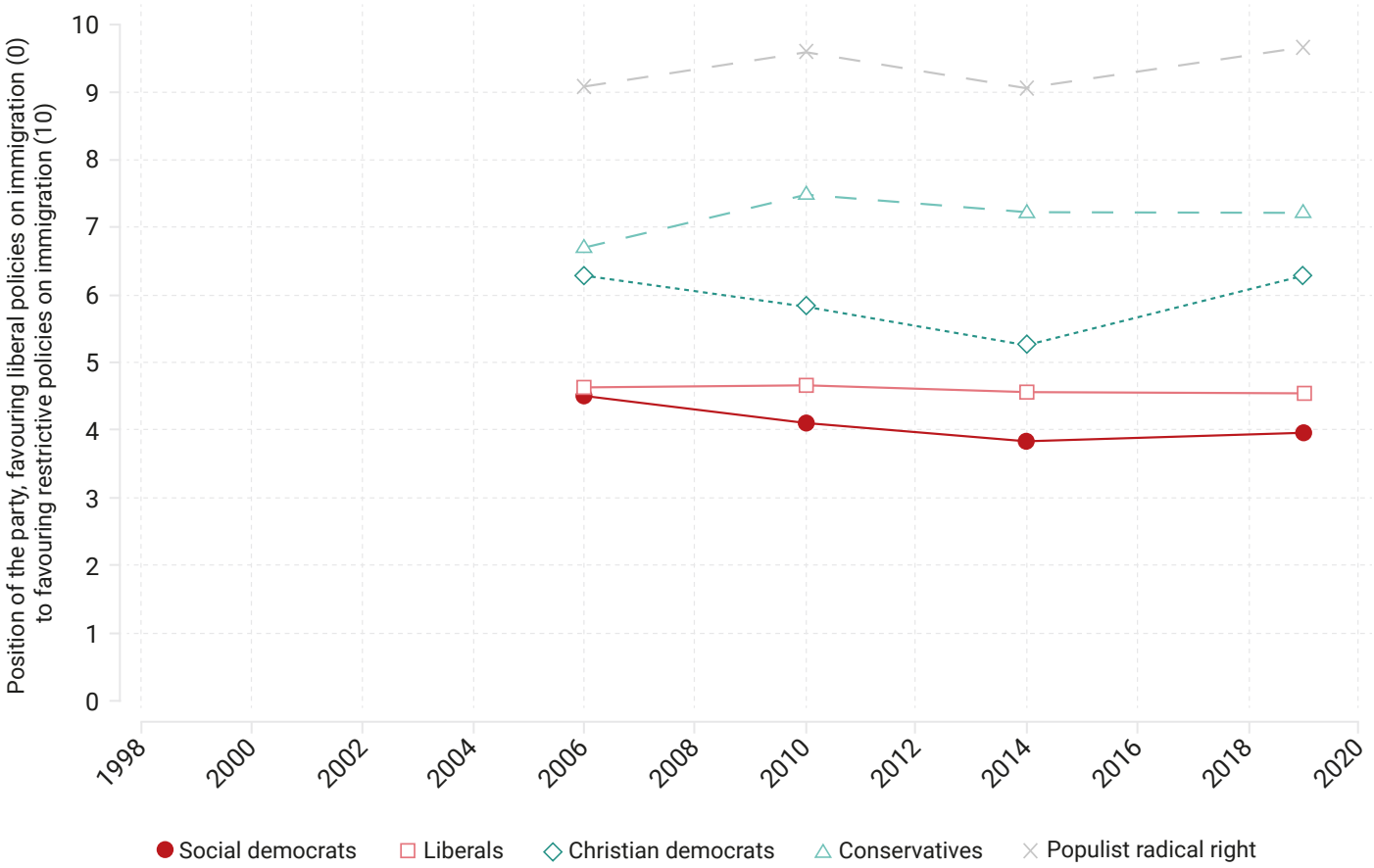
Christian democrats, conservatives and populist radical right parties on the other hand. The former set of parties support more progressive social policies, whereas the latter set of parties are more socially conservative. What stands out here is that the difference in policy position is much more pronounced that it was in Figure 10. That is, whereas most mainstream party families hold relatively centrist positions in the civil liberties versus law-and-order debate (with nonetheless clear preferences), their positions on social lifestyle are less centrist. They can serve as a more obvious identifier between clusters of party families: social democrats and liberals with very clear progressive positions; conservative and Christian democratic parties with moderately conservative standpoints; and finally the populist radical right with the most conservative position.

Figure 11. Position on social lifestyle.



As immigration represents a key societal debate in Western Europe, party positions on this issue are particularly relevant to study, and we visualise this in Figure 12. Similar to Figures 10 and 11, we notice a clear distinction between social democrats and liberals on one hand, and conservatives, Christian democrats and populist radical right parties on the other hand. The former party families hold relatively centrist positions on immigration, while particularly conservative and populist radical right parties are more restrictive in terms of their desired immigration policy. Populist radical right parties stand out even more because they hold such highly restrictive positions on immigration in both absolute and relative terms. Scholars have indeed emphasised this is the main issue populist radical right parties set out to politicise, so that they can claim "issue ownership" on this topic.

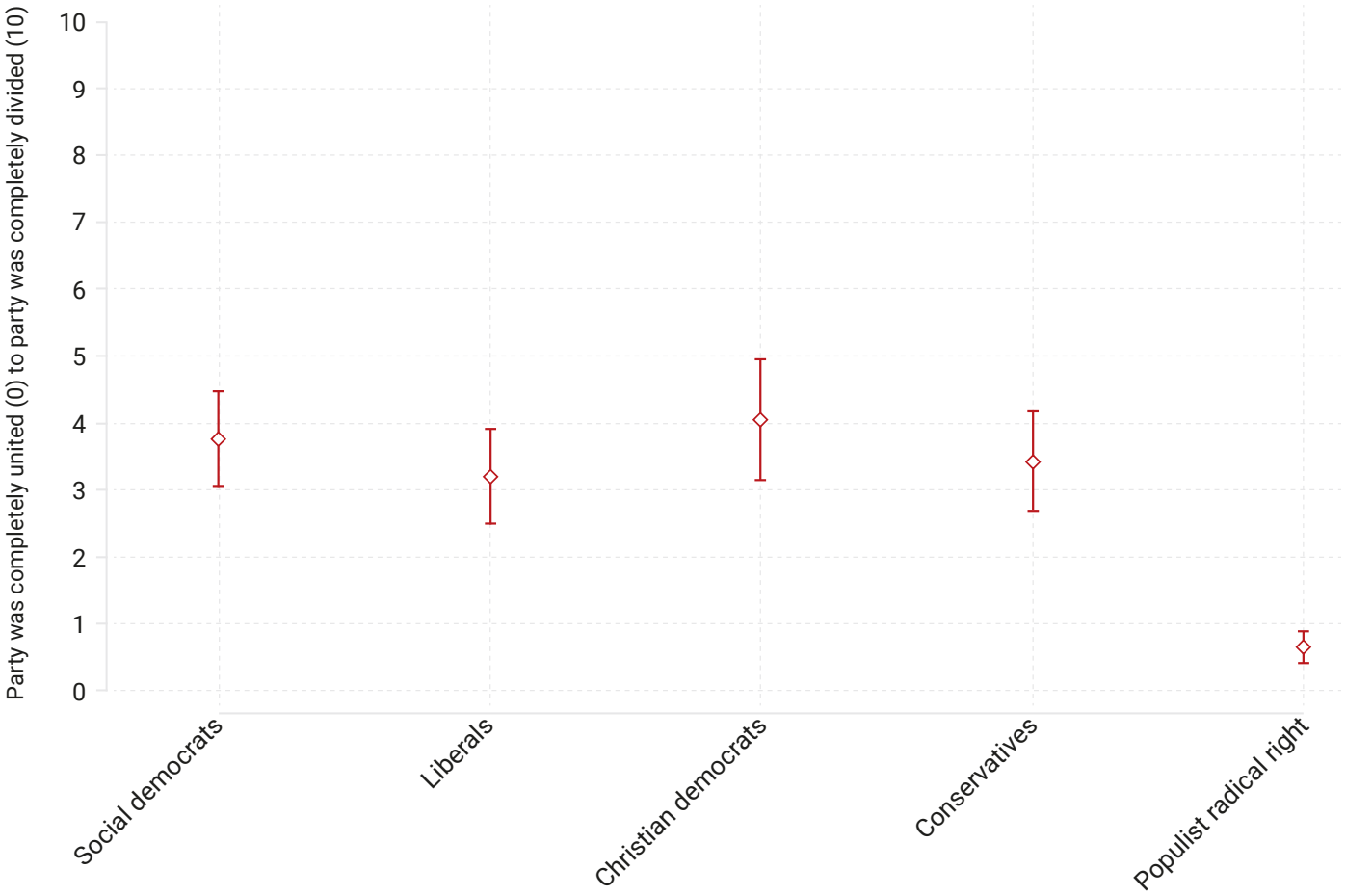
Figure 12. Position on immigration policy.



It is worth noting what we do *not* observe in Figure 12. That is, none of the party families under consideration hold clearly accommodating positions on immigration policy. That is, none of the parties are located on the lower end of the scale, favouring clearly progressive policies on immigration. Even the most progressive party family under observation in our study, the social democrats, has only a middle-of-the-scale position on immigration policy. This suggests that West European party families might compete less on their immigration positions, that is, whether they are for or against it, but more on the question of *how* to tackle the challenges related to immigration (in the academic literature, this is called a valence issue). Seen in this light, the challenge for social democracy and progressive forces is to find the right policy solution on immigration that resonates with the electorate, while at the same time give enough attention to other issues that they are not only better equipped to own but also to credibly defend (e.g., social justice).

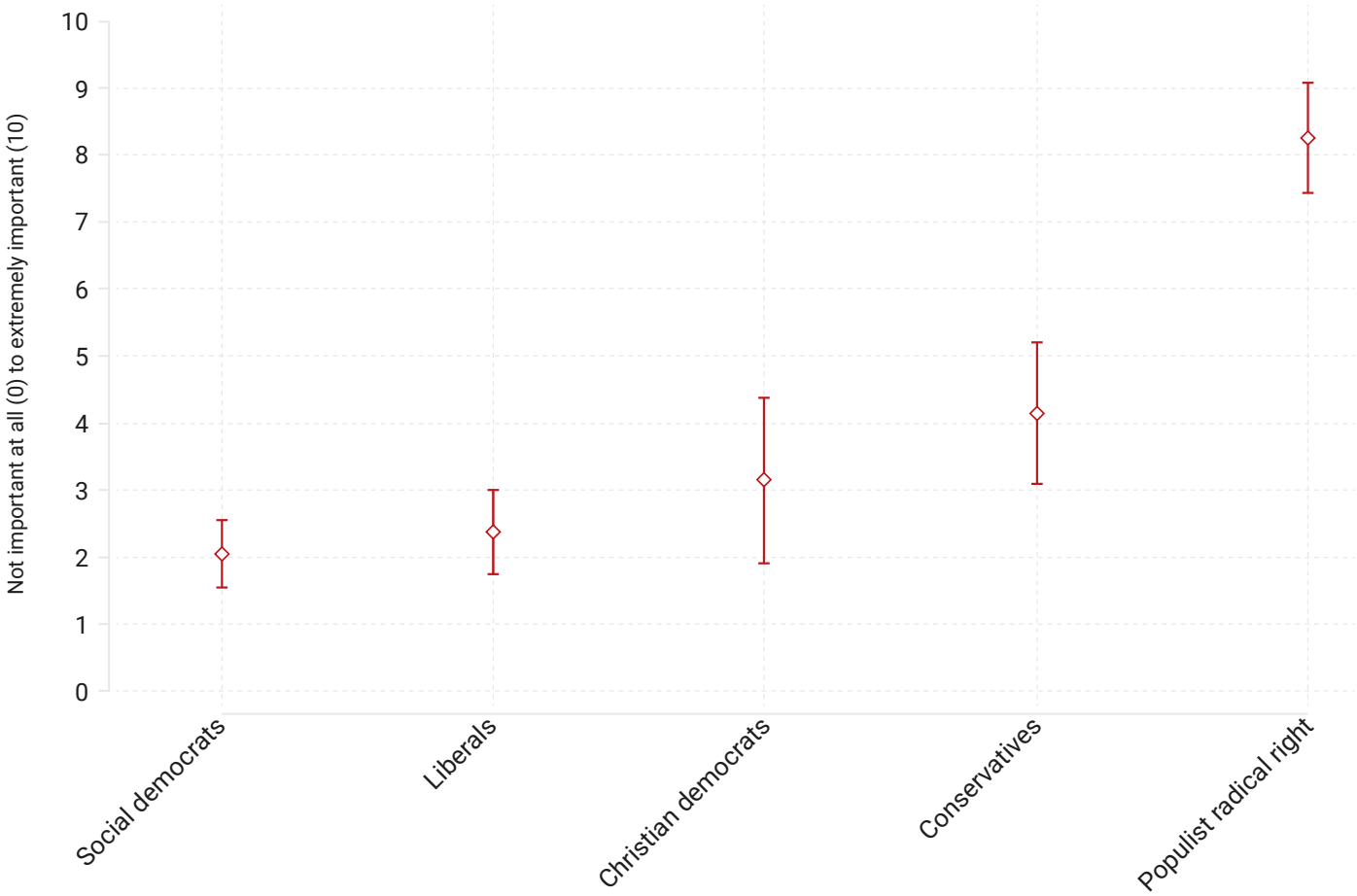
One additional piece of evidence that the CHES dataset allow us to examine is the degree of dissent on immigration policy experienced by the different party families. Unfortunately, this information is available only for the latest measurement (2019), but Figure 13 shows very clearly that the populist radical right homogenously defend anti-immigration positions, while the other party families have more internal dissent on this topic. This is anything but a trivial finding, as political parties do have different political factions and comparative evidence reveals that some of them might be more willing than others to imitate the positions and/or behaviours of the populist radical right.[39] In fact, some of the country analyses included in this policy study reveal that, although mainstream right parties in Western Europe are not unequivocally radicalising, some of its factions might be willing to follow this path.

Figure 13. Degree of dissent on immigration policy for different party families (2019).



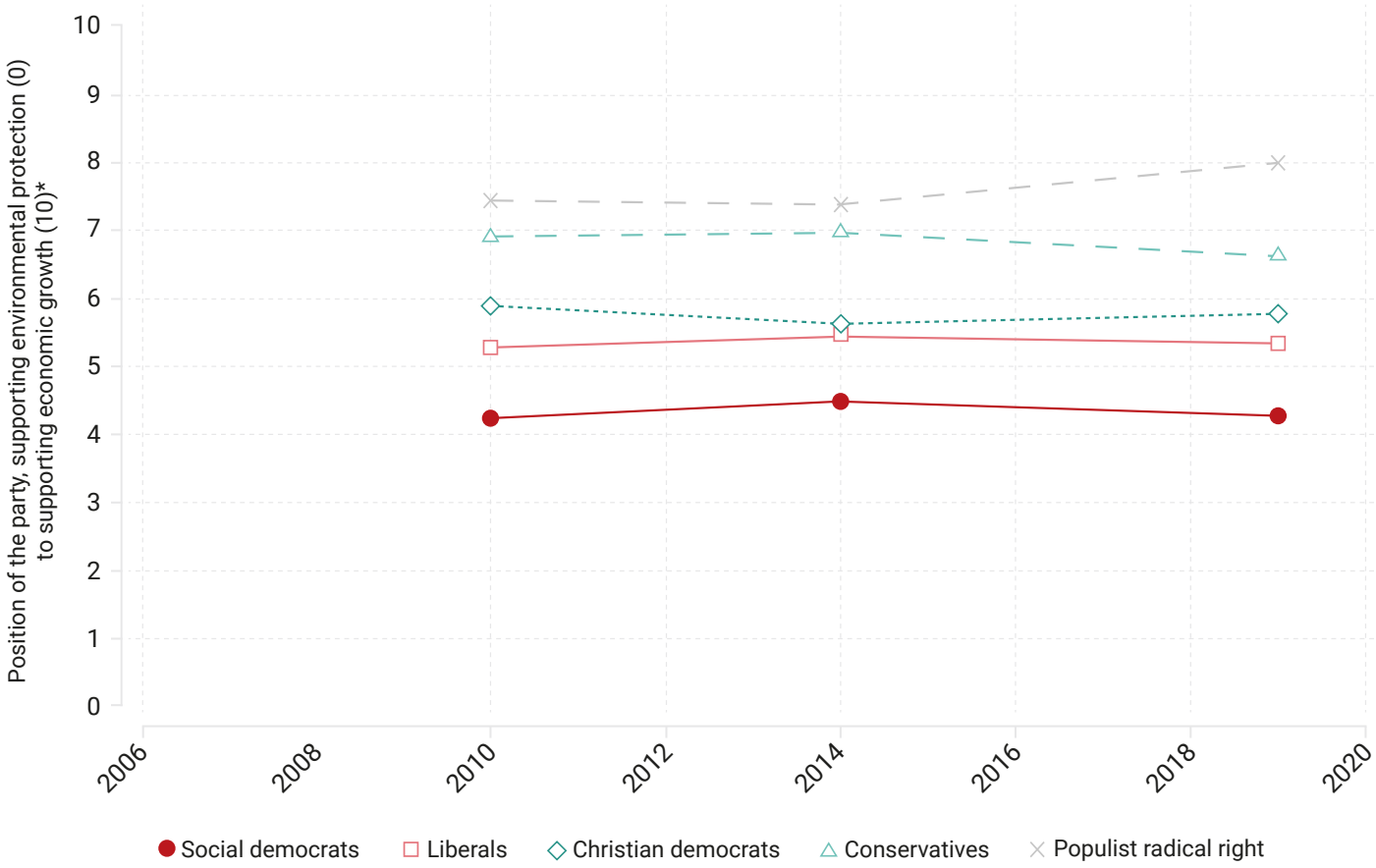
To further complement Figure 13 and explore the idea that different political parties may emphasise certain issues to different extents, in Figure 14 we present the saliency of anti-Islam rhetoric. Even though this measure is only available for 2019, it is worth presenting this, because the growing critique of immigrants is deeply linked to the idea that people adhering to Islam are particularly problematic, since they are allegedly incompatible with the liberal values that are engrained in West European society. Before discussing Figure 14, it is worth highlighting that here we talk about *saliency* and not position. Whereas the former alludes to how much emphasis political parties place on an issue (i.e., how important they find it), the latter refers to the policy standpoint that political parties have on an issue. By giving specific issues saliency, political parties can try to own the issue in question and present themselves as the only ones capable of solving it.[40] Taking this into account, the data reveals that anti-Islam rhetoric is very important for the populist radical right and much less so for the other party families.

Figure 14. Saliency of anti-Islam rhetoric for different party families (2019).



Finally, Figure 15 outlines party families' position on environmental sustainability. Here, lower positions indicate support for environmental protection, even at the cost of economic growth. Higher positions indicate support for economic growth, even at the cost of environmental protection. Even more than in other policy areas, stability and similarity are the key narratives from Figure 15. None of the included party families take extreme positions, and all are located in the centre of the graph. This surely suggests that environmental sustainability does not give way to extreme or polarising policy positions, like, for example, in the USA.

Figure 15. Position towards environmental sustainability.



*The full label of the Y-axis is 'Position of the party, supporting environmental protection even at the cost of economic growth (0) to supporting economic growth even at the cost of environmental protection (10)

Moreover, even though the differences between party families are relatively small, the observations specific to party families are similar to those from Figures 10 to 12. Social democrats and liberals (as well as Christian democrats) lean most towards favouring environmental protection over economic growth. Conservatives and populist radical right parties lean more towards economic growth over environmental protection, if a choice has to be made. It remains to be seen if the populist radical right in Western Europe will follow the path of other far-right forces (e.g., the Republican Party in the USA or Bolsonaro in Brasil) that have adopted a climate change denialist approach.

Given that the consequences of climate change will become more visible in the near future, it is probable that the debate about the trade-off between support for economic growth at the cost of environmental protection will become more salient. It is an open question, thus, if policy positions towards environmental sustainability will remain stable over time or will rather generate strong debate between different party families.

2.5 Comparative takeaways

West European political systems have been experiencing important changes in the last decades. Extant research shows that most countries are seeing growing fragmentation of the political space. We can equally observe an open battle within the right-wing bloc because of the emergence of the populist radical right. In fact, mainstream right forces are running into trouble electorally, something that it is well documented at the beginning of this policy study (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). Part of the problem faced by the mainstream right is that it is being challenged by the populist radical right, with the latter stealing a significant number of voters that in the past supported the former. To confront this challenge, the mainstream right might feel tempted to radicalise itself, that is, to move its policy positions to the right, with the aim of regaining these votes and diminishing the electoral support for the populist radical right.

To examine if this process of radicalisation is indeed happening, this chapter provides systematic empirical data illustrating how programmatic positions of the mainstream right, the populist radical and social democracy evolved from 1999 until 2019. While several findings stand out and are worth discussing in more detail, we want to close this chapter by underlining four ideas. The first important finding is that we do not observe a particularly noteworthy trend of mainstream right radicalisation across Western Europe. Seen in this light, the empirical evidence discussed here gives little ground to think that a US scenario marked by the dramatic transmutation of a long-established mainstream right party into a populist radical right party is occurring in Europe nowadays.

However, and this is the second important finding of this chapter, the populist radical right is anything but toning down its positions. Justified by its growing electoral support and increasing access to government, the populist radical right maintains hard right-wing positions on issues such as immigration, the EU, and the defence of law and order. We notice this in both absolute and relative terms. The third finding that it is worth highlighting lies in the identification of different trends within the mainstream right: while conservative and Christian democratic forces maintain stable support for free markets and traditional values, the liberal party family combines progressive cultural positions with right-wing economic positions. Fourthly, and finally, social democracy retains a stable and clear profile, characterised by the promotion of progressive values and state interventionism to counter economic inequalities.

Taking these findings together, the possibility of building coalitions between social democratic parties and the different forces of the right-wing bloc is not always that straightforward, particularly with the complexification and expansion of party competition. On one hand, the adoption of more welfare chauvinist positions of the populist radical right, in theory, facilitates a rapprochement with social democracy. However, the evidence discussed here shows that populist radical right parties advocate neither for a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, nor for the expansion of public services. In addition, given that the populist radical right advances very conservative positions on the cultural dimension, it is highly complex to find an agreement on this with social democracy. As a matter of fact, there is no precedent for this in Western Europe. On the other hand, given that liberal parties and social democratic parties tend to agree on the cultural axis but strongly disagree on the economic axis, building a coalition between these two forces might prove equally complex. Yet, we have numerous examples of this, therefore hinting at the fact that differences alongside the economic axis might be easier to overcome than different positions on the cultural axis. Lastly, since Conservatives and Christian democrats are prone to adopt positions that, even though they are not radical, stay in antagonism with social democracy, it presents some challenges to establish agreements with them.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the findings discussed here rely on average scores for Western Europe and data collected until 2019. This means there might be national outliers and recent developments that could depict a different picture. Take, for example, the situation in the UK today. After the official withdrawal of the UK from the EU in 2020, the Conservative party has not been able to appease its different factions, and there are enough reasons to worry that the most radical sectors might move the party into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right (assuming it is not already there). This is a similar concern to what we observe in the USA. Moreover, the evidence we have discussed here is about the positions defended by the mainstream right, but not about its relationship with the liberal democratic system. To address this, and gain a better understanding of the latest developments, the report includes six case studies (Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden). In the conclusion of this policy study, we also consider the information provided by these cases, so that we can obtain a more detailed image of the state of the mainstream right and social democracy across Western Europe today.

3. WHO SUPPORTS AND REJECTS THE MAINSTREAM AND POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE?

3. WHO SUPPORTS AND REJECTS THE MAINSTREAM AND POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE?

CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER AND STEVEN M. VAN HAUWAERT

3.1 Introduction

Across Western Europe, the electoral arena has been undergoing notable changes in the past couple of decades, all contributing to its overall transformation.[41] The encompassing developments go beyond party competition (see Chapter 2), but also translate to the voting patterns and characteristics of the electorate. Numerous scholarly accounts have supported popular claims that European electorates are shifting to the right,[42] or might even be radicalising.[43] Most of these accounts remain anecdotal in nature, by generalising from a handful of emblematic cases (e.g. 2007 election in France) or a very specific set of issues (e.g. immigration).

The larger question, whether such claims are also supported by empirical evidence, is something we tackle in this chapter. Do we observe a genuine and comprehensive shift to the right of European electorates? Is such a potential shift limited to voters on the right, or does this extend to voters of the left as well? How does this impact the potential support for mainstream parties, and particularly social democratic parties? Where can the parties find these potential voters, that is, what ponds can they fish from? We set out to provide unique insights to answer these questions, and more, throughout this chapter. Specifically, we examine the potential for different party families through the notion of positive and negative partisanship, that is, we empirically assess the evolution of those who support and reject political parties. The main focus here is on the social democrats, the different mainstream right-wing forces (Christian democrats, liberals and conservatives) and the populist radical right.

We divide the chapter into four sections. We start with an explanation of our main concepts (positive and negative partisanship), as well as the dataset and measurement technique we use to examine these concepts. After this, we describe those citizens who supported the different party families under consideration in Western Europe from 1996 until 2021. The next section looks at the other side of the coin, namely, those citizens who reject the different political parties under consideration. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the main comparative findings and a general reflection of what these takeaways mean for political parties trying to maximise their electoral potential today.

3.2 Supporting and rejecting political parties in Western Europe

Ever since the 1960s, *The American Voter* has been a classic reference in political science because it demonstrates that partisanship is one of the more important – if not the most significant – factors that can explain vote choice, and political behaviour more generally.[44] Here, by partisanship – or, more precisely, positive partisanship – we mean the adherence, dedication or loyalty of an individual to a particular political party, faction, person or ideology.[45] Initially, this referred to individuals who shared a sort of psychological identification with one of the main political actors in the American two-party system. Since then, however, the term has been expanded to a multiparty setting, where individuals may hold multiple positive partisanships towards different parties.[46] In other words, voters can (and do) show or feel loyalty to multiple political parties.

While the importance of positive partisanship remains undeniable across democratic politics, its often-overlooked counterpart – negative partisanship – is equally important (if not more). In fact, *The American Voter* already argued that we must study and understand both aspects of partisanship to fully comprehend its implications and political impact. After all, voters might vote for a specific party not only and necessarily because they like that party, but also because they dislike its alternative(s).[47] Even more, recent research reveals that negative evaluations and feelings can be more powerful than positive ones, particularly because people tend to give more weight to bad experiences and information than to good ones.[48] This is particularly prevalent in presidential systems across the Americas, where positive preferences for one party increasingly lead to negative preferences for its alternative.[49] Recent research also shows that negative partisanship across European multiparty systems entails similar consequences to those in the Americas.[50]

Although it is true that both scholars and pundits alike have given much more attention to positive than negative partisanship, interest in these two types of partisanships has been growing in the last few years. With the aim of contributing to this debate, our chapter sets out to empirically understand the characteristics of those who support and reject different political party families. Scholars rely on one of two types of measures from survey data to gauge who supports or rejects political parties: (1) use positive or negative feelings towards specific political parties, thereby showing either sympathy or apathy; or (2) rely on citizens' willingness or unwillingness to vote for specific political parties, thereby indicating an actual vote preference.[51] These distinct empirical strategies are both valid, and each have their own merits and shortcomings. For practical and theoretical reasons, however, we work with the former, that is, we examine those who like or dislike various political parties. This empirical strategy allows us to really tap into the vote *potential* for certain parties, as well as highlight which portions of the electorate remain unattainable for certain parties. We also believe that using a more abstract apathy or sympathy variable is more telling of how people really *feel* about certain parties, as the actual vote can be reflective of other motives than like or dislike.[52]

Several datasets include questions in which respondents are asked to place a set of political parties on a 0-10 likeability scale. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), more specifically, has data for several years across multiple West European countries and for up to nine different parties that compete at the national level.[53] The exact question wording of these survey items is

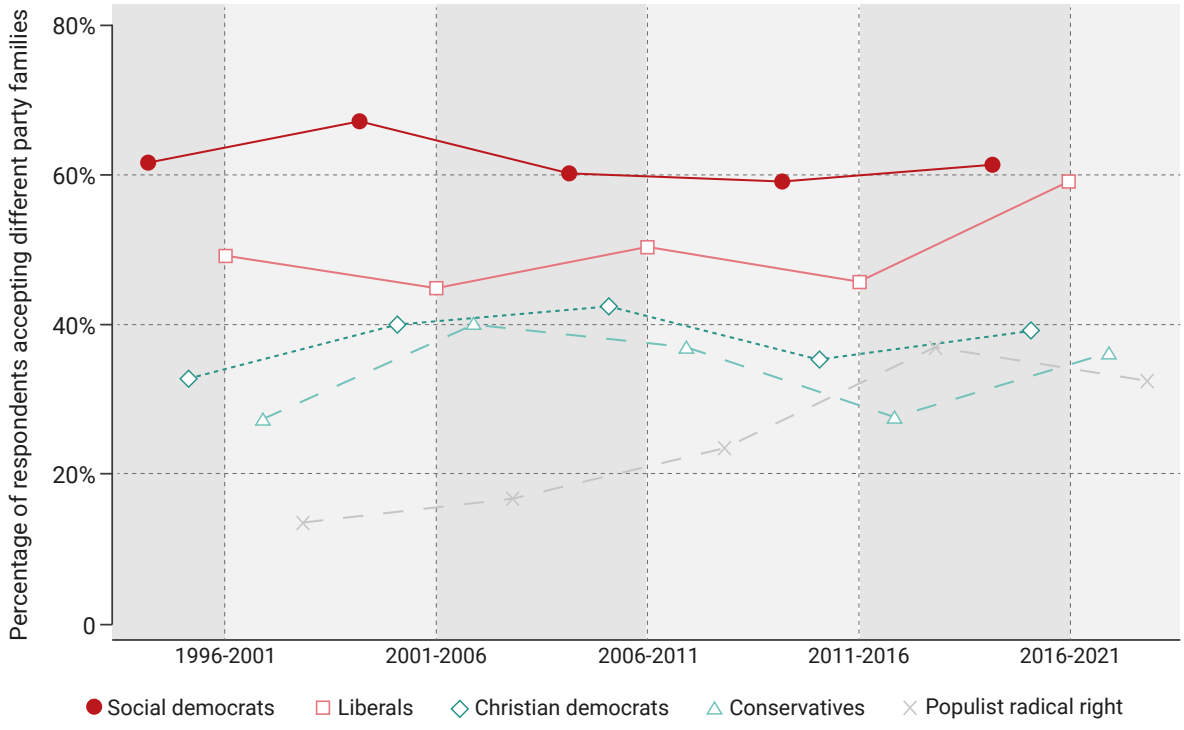
> *I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so. The first party is [PARTY NAME].*

In this policy study, we use the following operationalisation: we add values 6 to 10 to obtain the value of support for a political party, and we add values 0 to 4 to get the value of the rejection towards a political party. Those who respond with 5 are not included in the analysis, nor are those who do not reply to this question or indicate they are not familiar with the party in question. Given that the surveys ask for up to nine political parties at every time point in each country, we cluster the answers for the different party families we want to examine, namely, social democrats, Christian democrats, liberals, conservatives and the populist radical right.[54] For example, if a German respondent qualifies as someone who likes the SPD, they are grouped as someone who supports the social democratic party family, while if a German respondent qualifies as someone who dislikes the AfD, they are grouped as someone who rejects the populist radical right. It is worth noting these kinds of likeability question are asked for key political parties at the national level, and consequently, respondents can support and reject multiple party families, something that it is expected to occur in multiparty systems across Western Europe.

3.2.1 Levels of support for political parties across Western Europe

We start the analysis by presenting the average values of support for the five separate party families across Western Europe (see Figure 16). An important takeaway from Figure 16 is the high level of public support for social democratic parties, in both absolute and relative terms. On average, about 60% of citizens indicate their willingness to vote for social democratic parties, which substantially outweighs the number for any other party family. Considering the average vote share of social democratic parties across Western Europe is about 20% today (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1), this means there is considerable untapped potential for these parties. In other words, although the amount of people that actually vote for social democratic parties has steadily declined in the last few years across Western Europe, our data shows that people are not necessarily less inclined to support this party family.

Figure 16. Support for different party families across Western Europe.

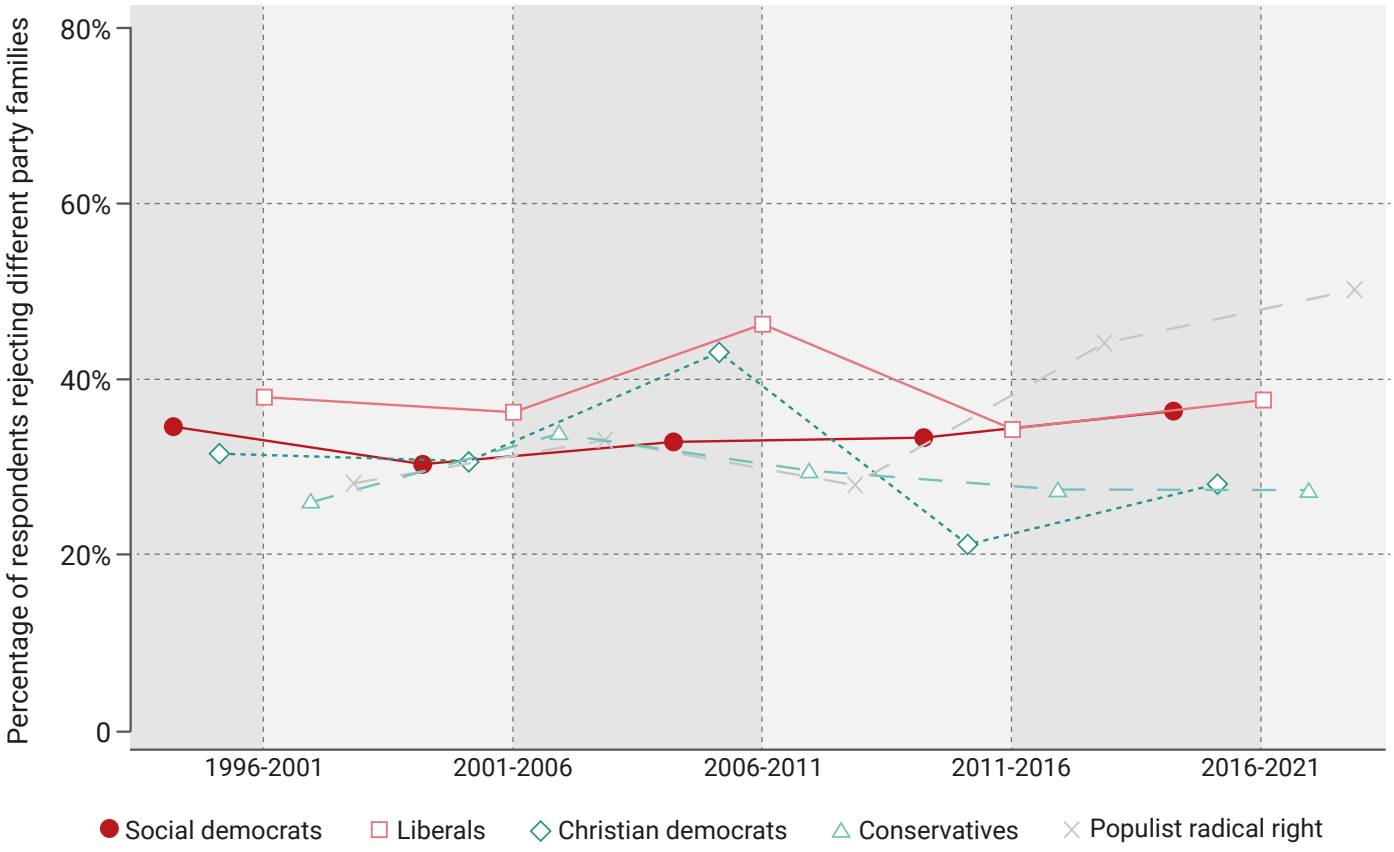


What equally stands out from Figure 16 is the stability in the level of support for different party families. Even though most party families experience relatively minor fluctuations, this might very well be attributed to the electoral cycles in the underlying countries. As an exception though, we observe a relatively linear increase in support for populist radical right parties, doubling from about 15% to more than 30% in about two decades. This is indicative of the two very visible phenomena across Western Europe: growing electoral success and the normalisation of populist radical right parties.

3.2.2 Levels of rejection of political parties across Western Europe

And what about the other side of the coin? Figure 17 shows the levels of rejection of the same five party families across Western Europe. Whereas the overarching observation regarding support for different political parties was one of stability, Figure 17 presents a more erratic picture when it comes to people's rejection of them. This evolution is modest for social democratic parties, as around 35% of potential voters dislike them. The three traditional right-wing party families experience a similar evolution, with peaks in their levels of rejection in the mid-2000s and lows in the early 2010s. Particularly for the Christian democratic parties in our sample, we notice a drastic increase to nearly 45% of rejection in the early 2000s and an equally drastic decrease in rejection to about 20% of the electorate in the early 2010s. Even though there are specific trends, one could also argue that the percentage of electorates rejecting the mainstream remains within a stable range between 30 and 45% of the electorate. In and of itself, this might indicate a structural vote potential for mainstream parties that they currently are not tapping into.

Figure 17. Rejection of different party families in Western Europe.

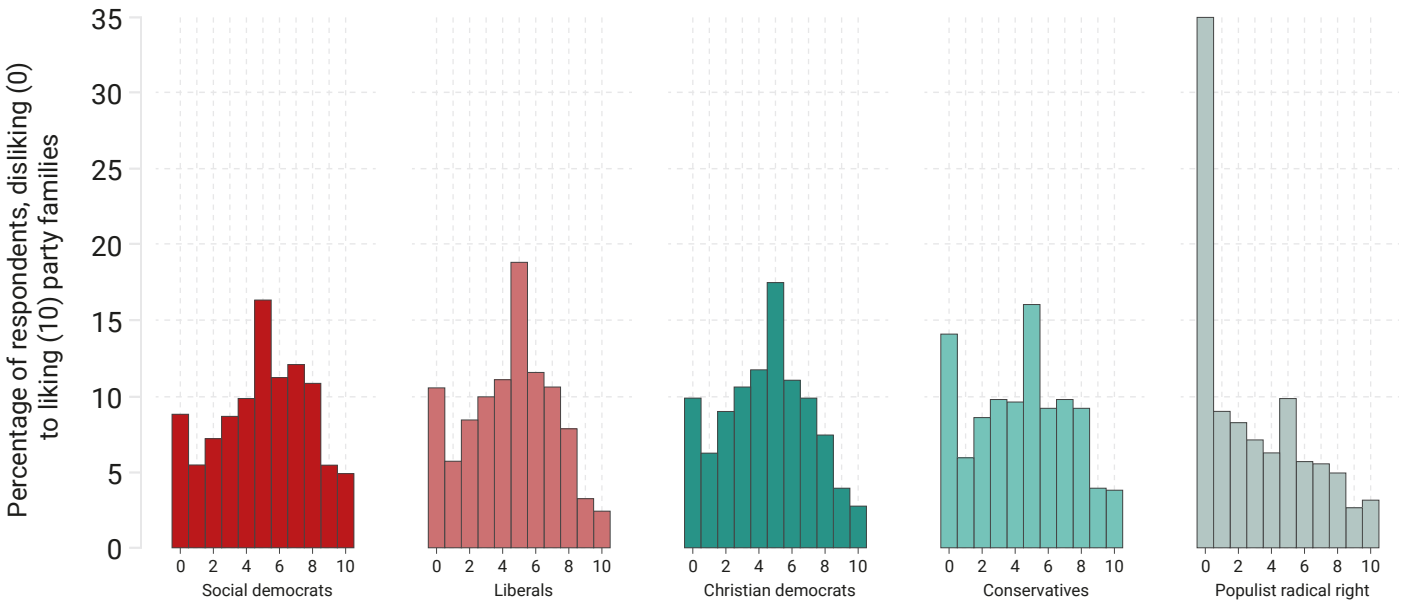


Like in Figure 16, we observe a near-linear growth in people's dislike for populist radical right parties, being just shy of 30% in the late 1990s and increasing to about 50% three decades later. This shows that, even with the success and normalisation of this party family, the number of people who reject them still systematically increases to levels that outweigh those of any other party family today. Again, this might indicate there is an increasing number of citizens that constitute a potential voter base for mainstream parties.

Figures 16 and 17 reinforce the findings of other studies, which reveal that the populist radical right is becoming more attractive to voters across Western Europe.[55] However, something scholars often overlook is the increasing number of people who also reject the populist radical right.[56] The latter is therefore both highly liked and disliked. One could argue that the more popular the populist radical right becomes, the more citizens seem to be at odds with this party family. This means we observe a genuine polarisation amongst the electorate when it comes to citizens' emotional affinity toward the populist radical right.

To further substantiate this point, Figure 18 illustrates the distribution of our 0-10 likeability scale for each of the party families for the entire period under consideration and across Western Europe. Figure 18 supports that the populist radical right has a very polarising profile: on average, approximately 35% of the electorate shows the highest possible score (0) of absolute dislike towards the populist radical right. By contrast, on average, less than 10% of the electorate gives the maximum score (0) of absolute dislike towards the social democratic party family, representing the lowest value of the five party families under consideration. This is in line with previous research, which shows that such a strong rejection of the populist radical right can be a sign that people are convinced of liberal democratic credentials. Even more, this observation substantiates a clear electoral ceiling for this party family, at least in Western Europe.[57]

Figure 18. Dislike-like scale for different party families in Western Europe.



At the same time, our observations for the social democratic party family present somewhat of a paradox: while it is the party family with the highest amount of support and only modest levels of rejection, fewer people recently voted for social democratic parties across Western Europe (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). This inconsistency reveals there is not only a relatively high electoral ceiling for social democratic parties, but also a considerable untapped potential for them. We return to this point at the end of the policy study, when we provide some ideas about what social democrats should try to do (and not do) to get more visibility, become more attractive, construct a clearer profile and possibly achieve better electoral results.

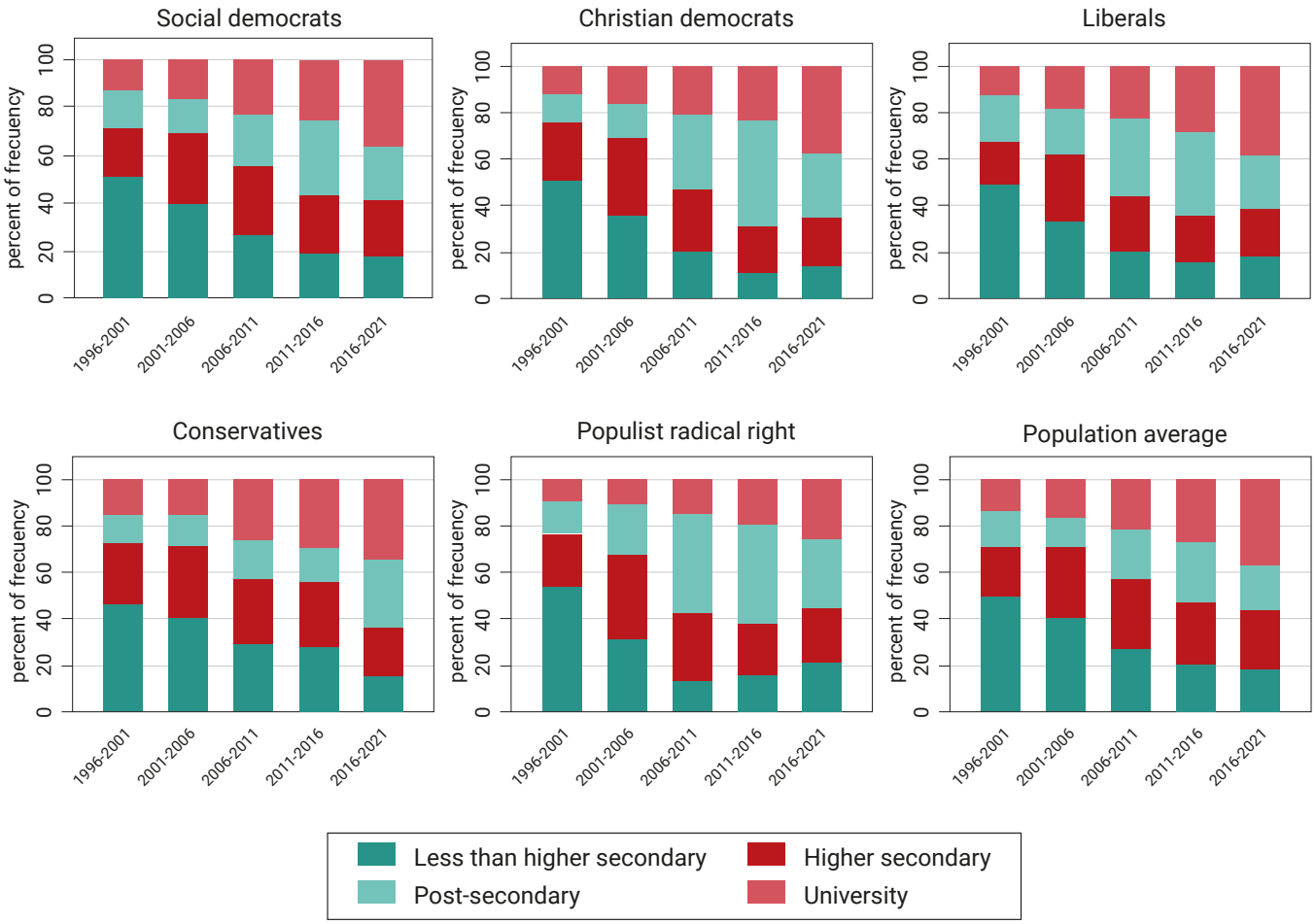
3.3 The supporters of different party families and their characteristics

In this section, we map some of the more important characteristics of support for the previously specified party families, as well as the West European population average. As we mentioned above, we employ data from the CSES, which has fielded five waves, starting in the mid-1990s until 2021. We more precisely examine key characteristics of party supporters, focusing on their education, age, gender, income, perceived urban or rural residence, socio-economic status, and ideological self-identification.[58]

Starting with education, Figure 19 shows that the overall percentage of lower educated with a positive affinity towards the various party families is decreasing considerably, going from above 40% in the mid-1990s to less than 20% today. The opposite evolution is true for those with a tertiary degree: where they made up only around 10% of those with a positive affinity towards the various party families in the mid-1990s, they now make up close to 40% of them. We notice this trend of higher-educated party supporters across all party families, which is in line with the ongoing expansions of and access to university education across Western Europe – especially for the younger generations.[59] It tells us – at least to some extent – that increasing levels of education do not favour certain parties, or that those with higher levels of education do not necessarily become attracted to a default party come election time. This might sound like a truism, but one of the implications of societies with increasing levels of education is that all political parties benefit from this societal evolution, likely even including those not under consideration here.[60]

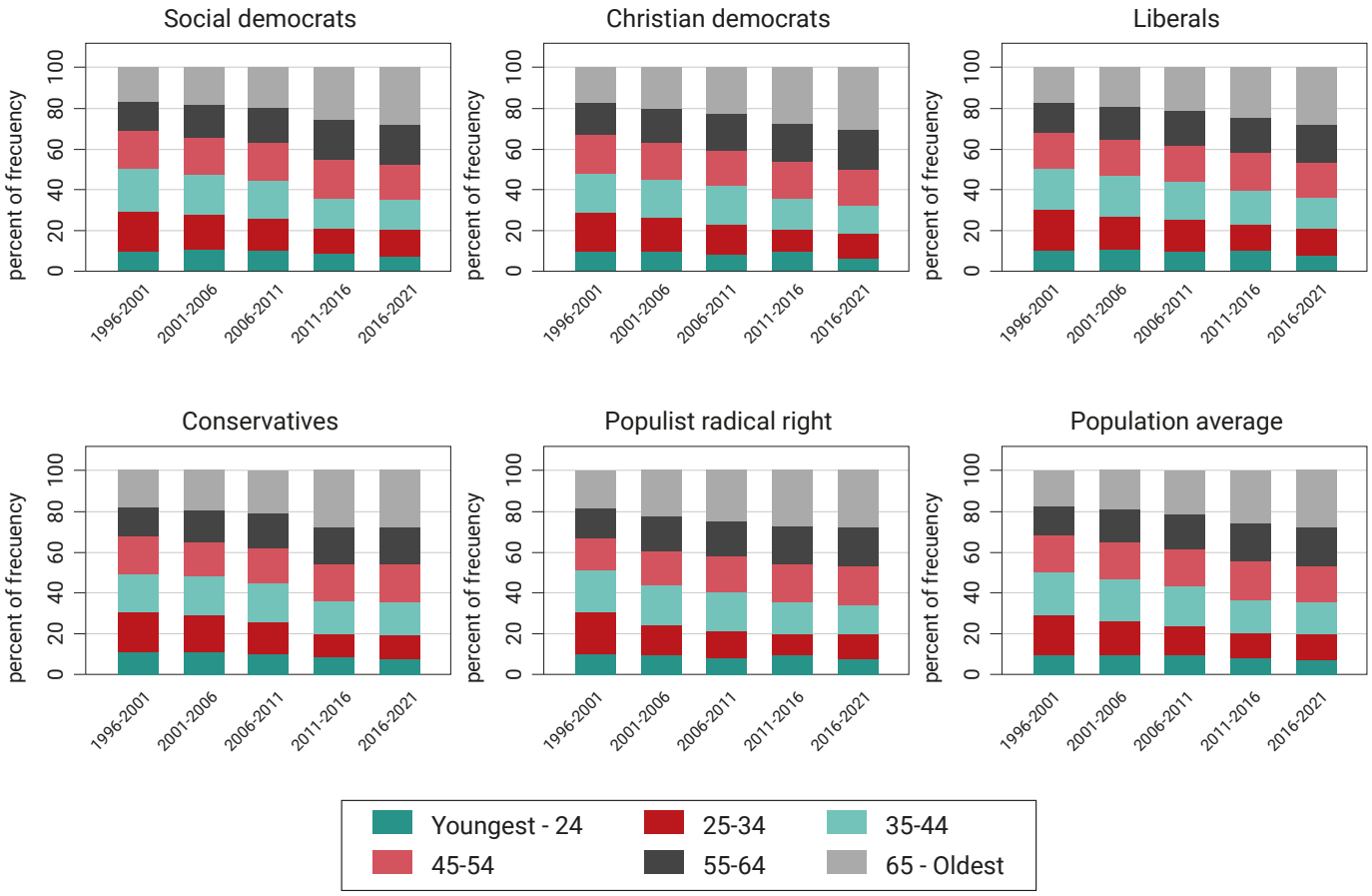
The time trend here is particularly worth noting, because once we take a closer look at the differences between party families, we have little to no choice but to conclude there are few to no such differences. In other words, where we observe a clear evolution across party families, the story between party families is one of relative stability and few dissimilarities. Perhaps a minor observation nonetheless worth noting is that, relatively speaking, the proportion of higher-educated people supporting populist radical right parties remains modestly below that of the other parties, as well as the population average.[61] This lends support to the common hypothesis that the electorates of populist radical right parties tend to comprise a higher proportion of lower-educated citizens, largely as a consequence of their blue collar message and their attraction to the so-called “losers of globalisation”.[62]

Figure 19. Distribution of educational attainment amongst supporters towards five party families in Western Europe.



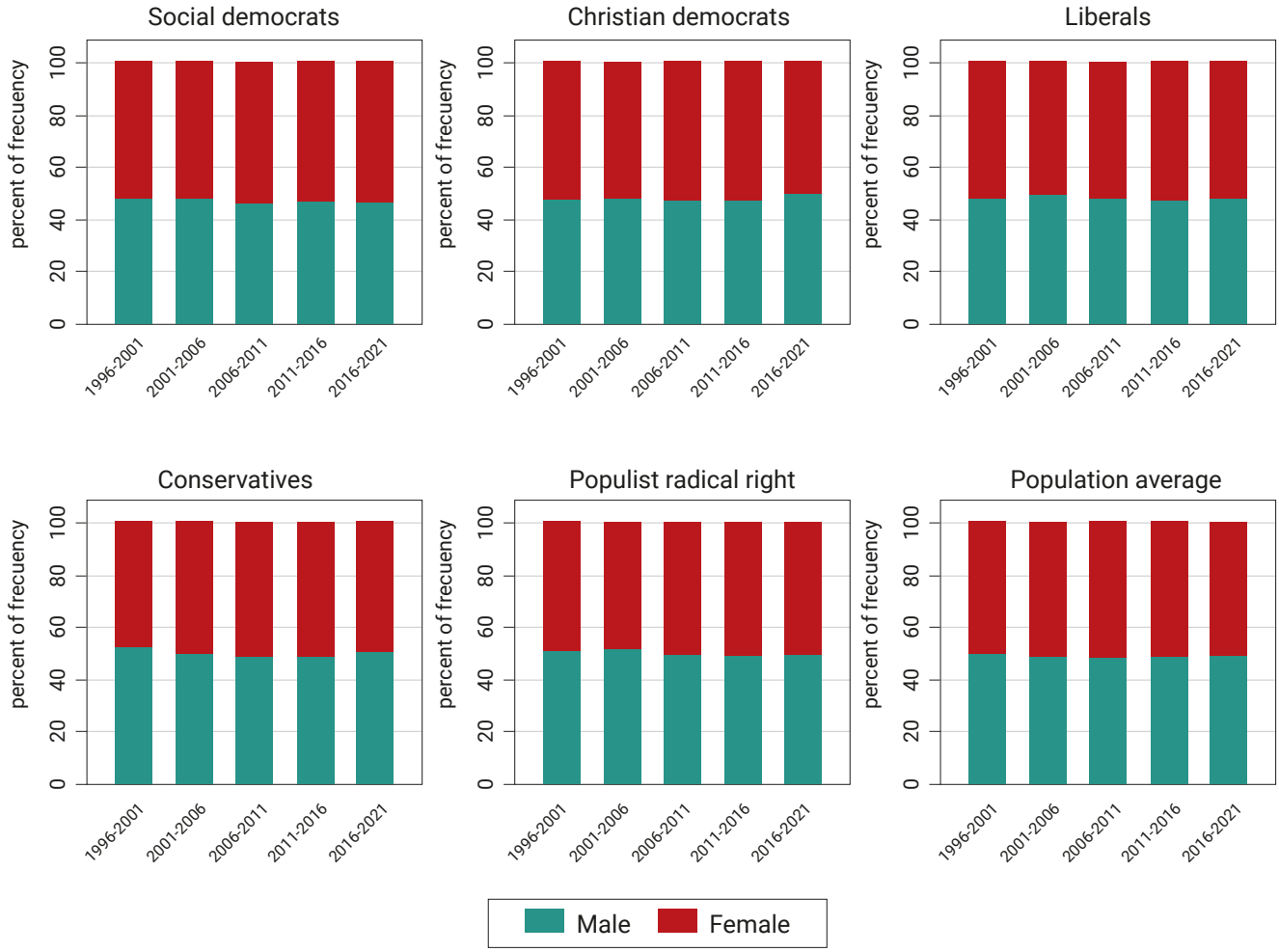
Moving on to age in Figure 20, we notice a similar picture. There is a minor trend over time of political party supporters becoming older. We primarily notice this by the increasing proportion of the 65+ group between the mid-1990s and today, as well as a decreasing proportion of the 25- to 34-year-old cohorts. The distribution of the other age groups remains relatively stable over time. Even more, there appears to be little to no differences between party families, thereby countering the argument that those favouring populist radical right parties tend to be older.[63] While this may be the case in absolute terms, our evidence, at least, shows this is not the case compared to other party families, or even the broader population. Here, it is important to remember that all West European societies are marked by an aging population, primarily due to an increase in life expectancy.[64] Therefore, the older cohorts simply carry more electoral weight, most notably because of their greater propensity to turn out and vote.[65]

Figure 20. Distribution of age groups amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.



Looking at gender in Figure 21 reveals even more stability amongst the supporters of different party families than we illustrated in Figures 19 and 20 related to education and age, respectively. Here, we notice an almost equal 50/50 gender split between all party families and over time. There is no overrepresentation of men or women within particular groups of supporters for the five party families under scrutiny. This goes against commonly held beliefs that men tend to be more favourable of right-wing parties, whereas women might be more favourable of left-wing parties,[66] or – even more – that men are more likely than women to be populist radical right supporters.[67] At least when we look at the extent to which people like (rather than vote for) certain parties, we do not observe such a difference.

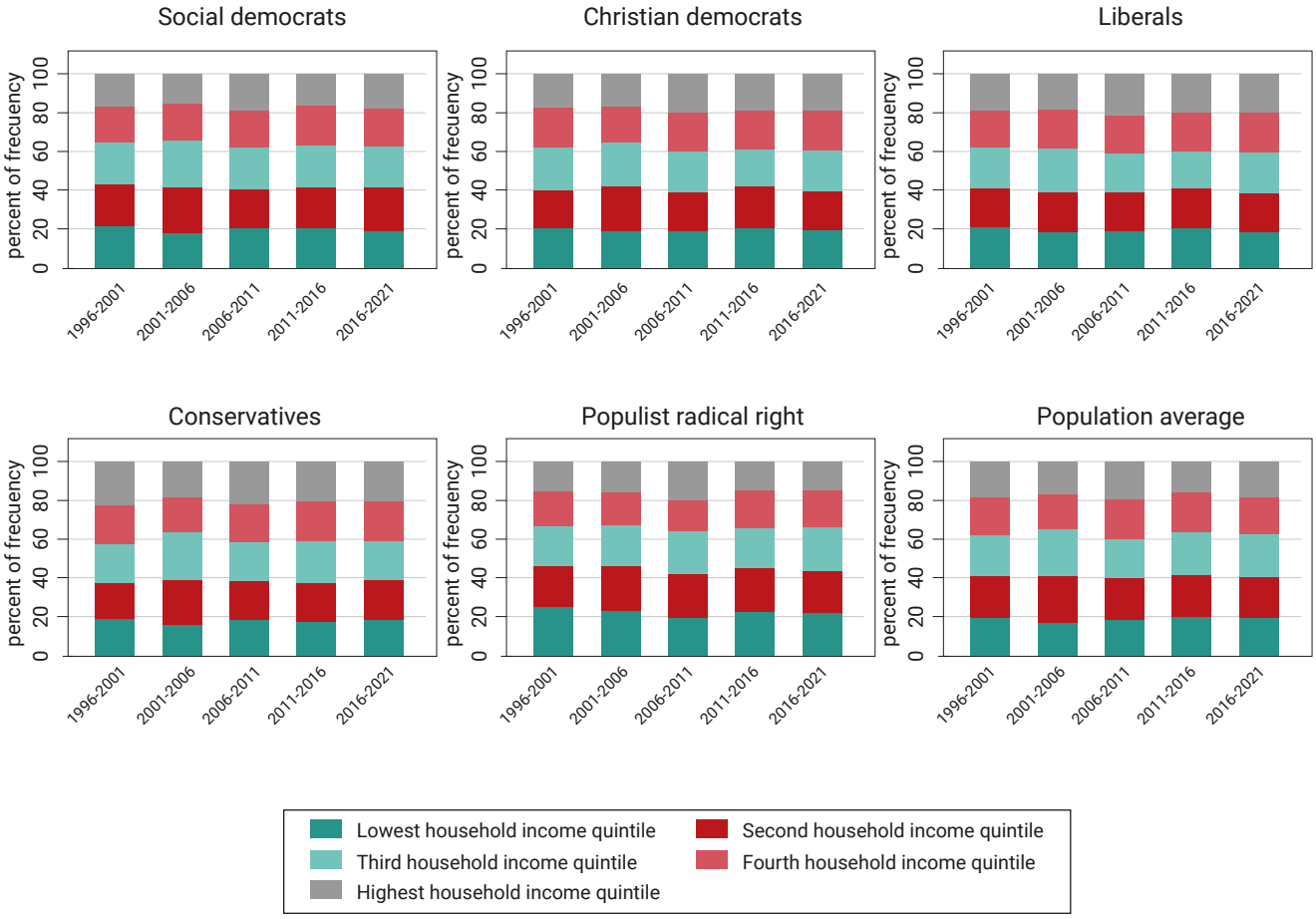
Figure 21. Distribution of gender amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.



When we look at the distribution of income amongst those supporting different party families in Figure 22, we once again notice some stability. At first sight, there are few to no differences between the different party families. A closer look teaches us that supporters of the three traditional right-wing parties tend to have a modestly higher income, that is, they are part of the highest-two income quintiles. This is not very surprising, since mainstream right-wing parties typically advance economic policies that favour some of the more affluent sections of society (e.g. lower taxes, less government intervention, a compact welfare state).

Opposite to this, we notice that the populist radical right party family is prone to have a mildly higher proportion of supporters that fall in a lower (especially the lowest) income quintile and a smaller proportion of supporters that fall in the highest income quintile.[68] Moreover, supporters of the social democratic party family are more in line (in terms of their income distribution) with the mainstream right than they are with the populist radical party family. This challenges the common myth that populist radical right and socialist electorates fish from the same pond, namely, the working class. As the recent study by Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger and Mudde reveals,[69] while the populist radical right has gained proportionally more support from the working class, only a small proportion of that working class actually favours populist radical right parties. Even more, only a small percentage of populist radical right supporters used to support social democratic parties.[70]

Figure 22. Distribution of income amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.

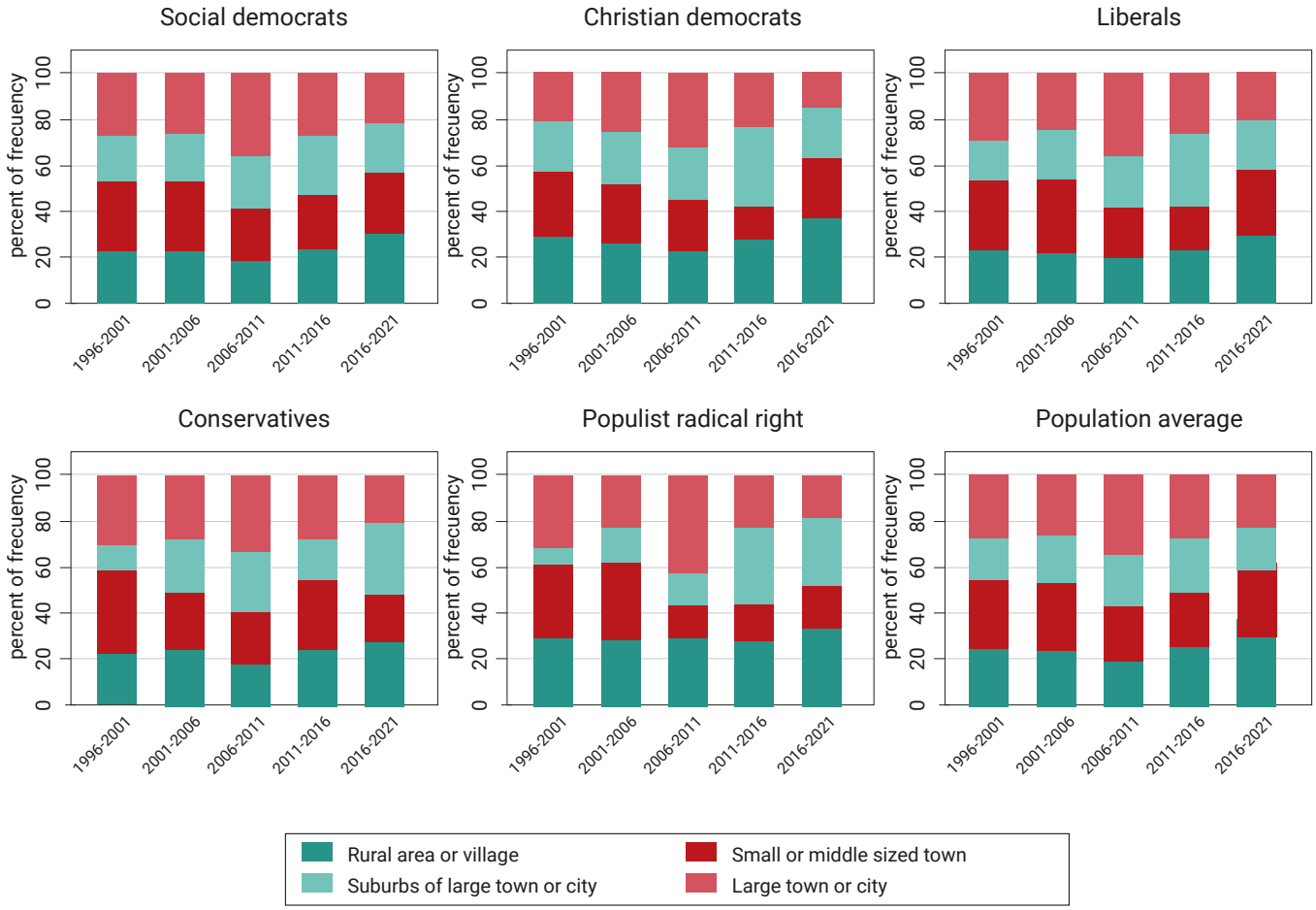


If we turn to the correlation between the perceived residence by citizens and their support for different party families in Figure 23, we notice some important differences. Particularly since the mid-2000s, we see that support for the populist radical right is more pronounced amongst citizens who consider themselves living in either more urban or highly rural settings.[71] The latter might align with the main thesis of post-modernisation[72] and the so-called "losers of globalisation" hypothesis,[73] while the former might point to more cultural reasons for support (e.g. the rejection of multiculturalism).[74] At least, this observation rejects the stereotypical notion that populist radical right partisans are (only) those living far away from the cosmopolitan elites, a narrative that has always been particularly prominent in Western Europe to explain radical right party success,[75] but has gained even more traction since the 2016 victory of Donald Trump in the USA.[76]

Most generally, the differences between party families remain minimal. Yet, it is worth highlighting some observations. Much like supporters of the populist radical right, Christian democratic partisans seem somewhat overrepresented in rural areas and underrepresented in large towns and cities.[77] Supporters of the conservative party family appear to come disproportionally from small- and middle-sized towns and suburbs.[78] Liberal and social democratic partisans are not really overrepresented anywhere, and their distribution is fairly similar to that of the overall population. If we look at possible evolutions over time, we also notice that, with the exception of the mid- to late-2000s, the distribution of the residence variable has

remained relatively stable. This might indicate that the previously discussed observations strike at the heart of partisan differences.

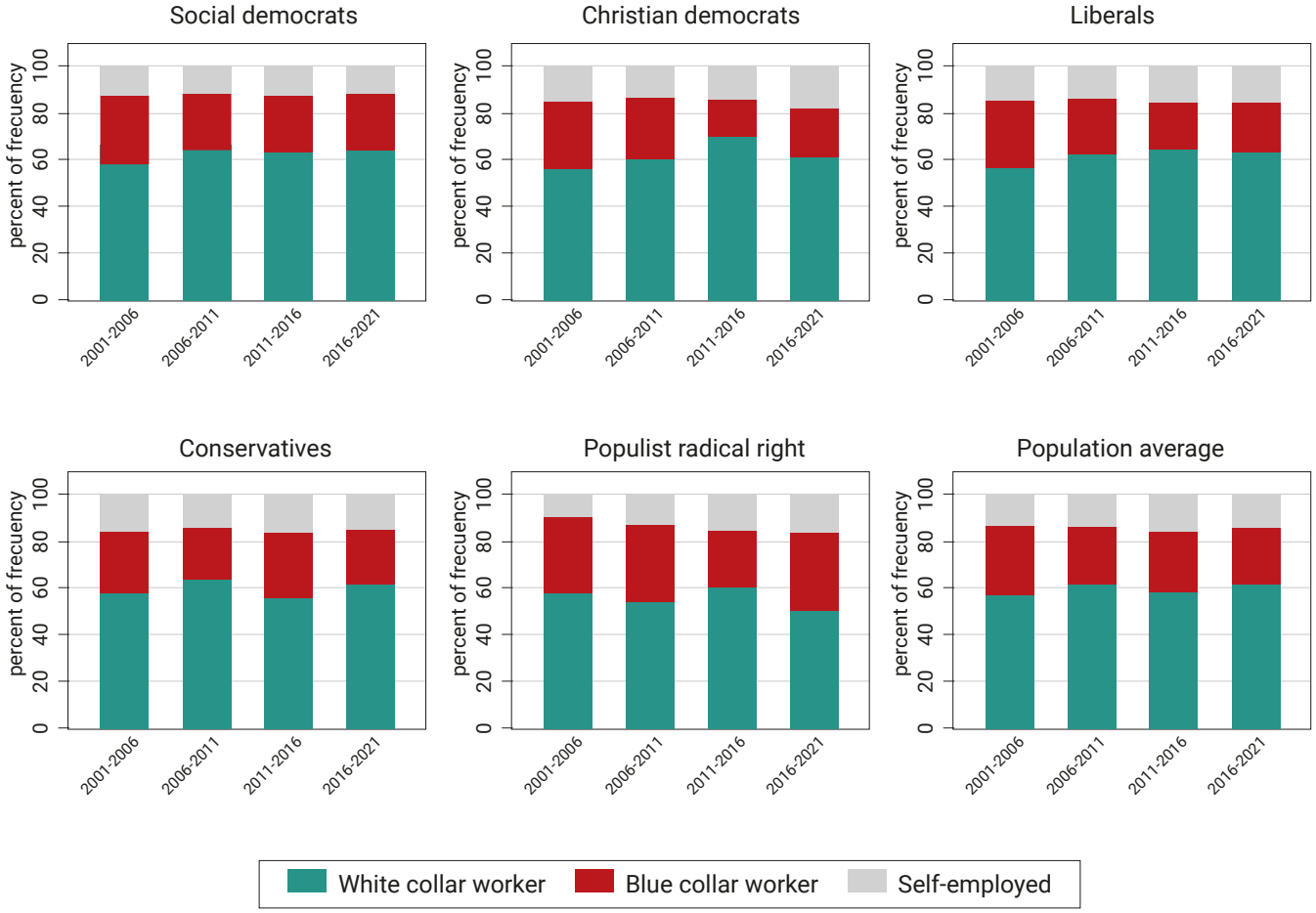
Figure 23. Distribution of urban-rural residence amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.



Turning to socio-economic status in Figure 24, some interesting observations stand out. Supporters of the three mainstream right-wing parties tend to share a similar distribution to the population average in terms of their socio-economic status. More blue-collar and fewer white-collar workers are supporters of the populist radical right, hinting that more economically vulnerable groups might be more attracted to the populist radical right.[79] More white-collar workers support social democratic parties, thereby at least challenging the notion that the prime electorate of these parties (still) comes from the working class.[80]

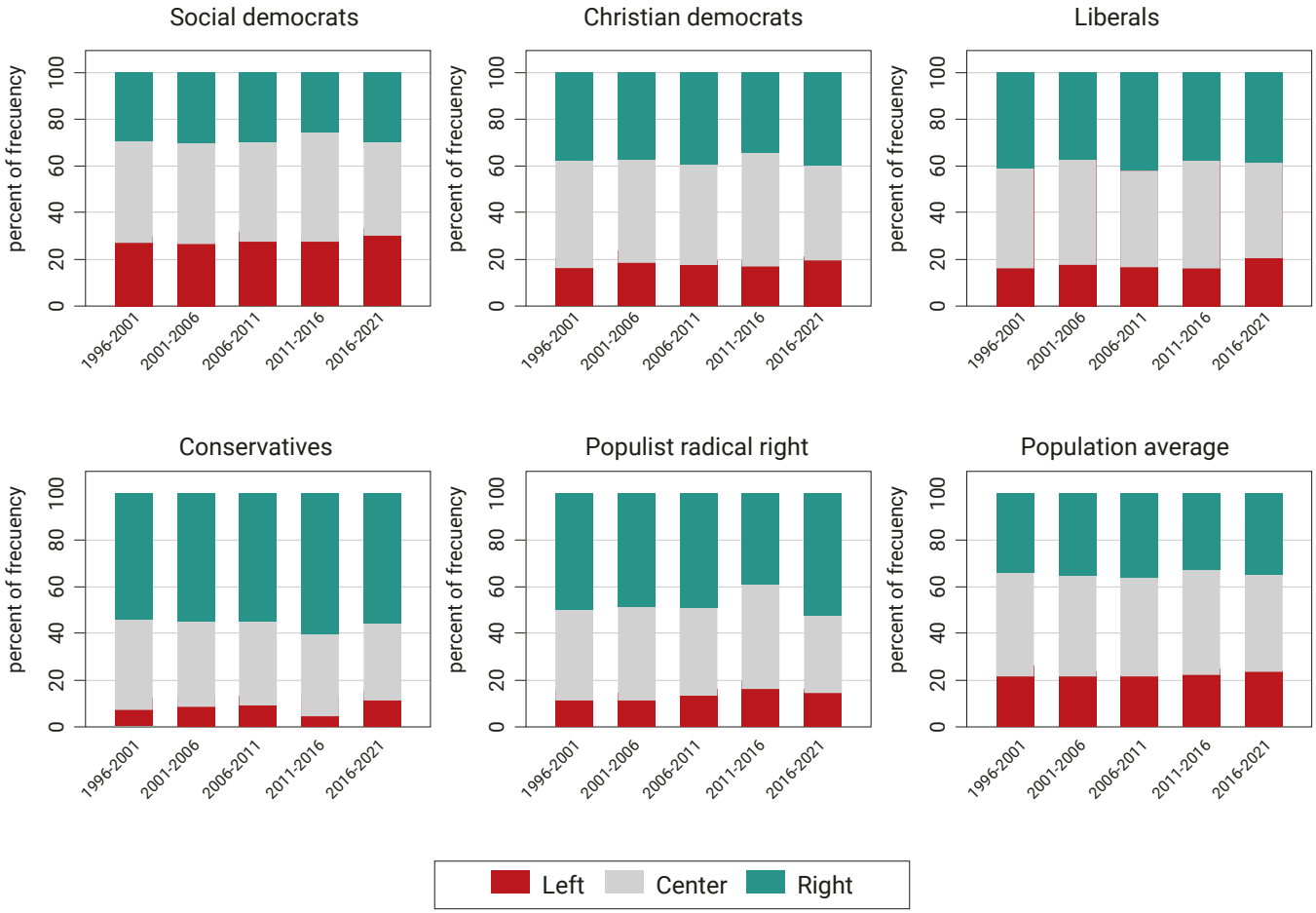
At the same time, the overall decline of traditional industries – and, by proxy, blue-collar workers – might also be partially responsible for this observation, as the social groups available for social democratic parties shrank.[81] When looking at the self-employed group, they tend to be more supportive of any right-wing party, rather than a left-wing party.[82] This is a likely consequence of the fact that those who are self-employed tend to be more in tune with the ideas underlying meritocracy, which is more often articulated in different ways by right-wing political forces.

Figure 24. Distribution of socio-economic status amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.



Finally, turning to left-right self-identification in Figure 25, it is not surprising that those who position themselves on the right side of the political spectrum are also disproportionally in favour of the mainstream right as well as the populist radical right. For liberal and Christian democratic parties, we notice that that the distribution of political affinity is relatively in line with that of the population. For social democratic parties, two observations stand out. Firstly, those who consider themselves right wing hold – unsurprisingly – lower levels of support towards these parties. Secondly, those who consider themselves left wing are more willing to support these parties, yet – surprisingly – this is to a much lesser extent than right-wing citizens exhibiting an affinity towards the mainstream right or the populist radical right. This illustrates that social democratic parties have difficulties translating their voting potential into actual support and much of their potential remains untapped, perhaps even lost.

Figure 25. Distribution of left-right self-identification amongst supporters for different party families in Western Europe.



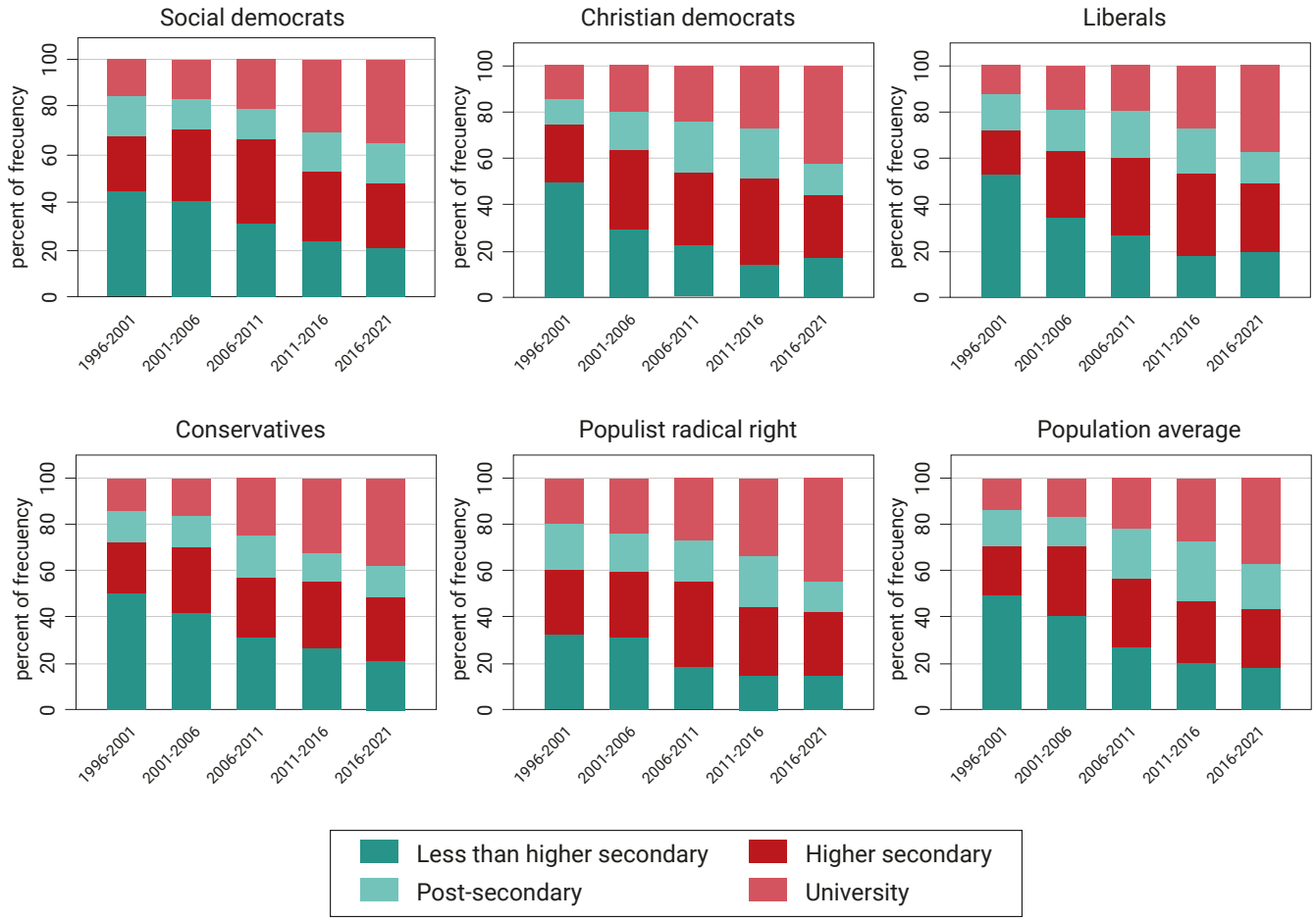
3.4 Those who reject different party families and their characteristics

In this section, we map some of the more important characteristics of those who reject the previously specified party families, as well as the West European population average. As we mentioned above, we employ data from the CSES, which has fielded five waves, starting in the mid-1990s until 2021. We more precisely examine the characteristics of those rejecting certain party families, focusing on their education, age, gender, income, perceived urban or rural residence, socio-economic status, and ideological self-identification.

Starting with education, Figure 26 shows that the evolution of rejection of these different party families is similar to that of support for them. In fact, we clearly notice the same trend over time: the proportion of lower-educated citizens who reject political parties decreases over time, whereas the proportion of higher-educated people who reject political parties increases over time. This trend is shared across party families and amongst the electorate more broadly, meaning that those who lack some kind of affinity to our included party families are increasingly higher educated. This does not necessarily mean that more-educated citizens

are becoming more dismissive of certain parties, but it rather ties into the overall trend of increasing levels of education across the population we outlined earlier.

Figure 26. Distribution of educational attainment amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.



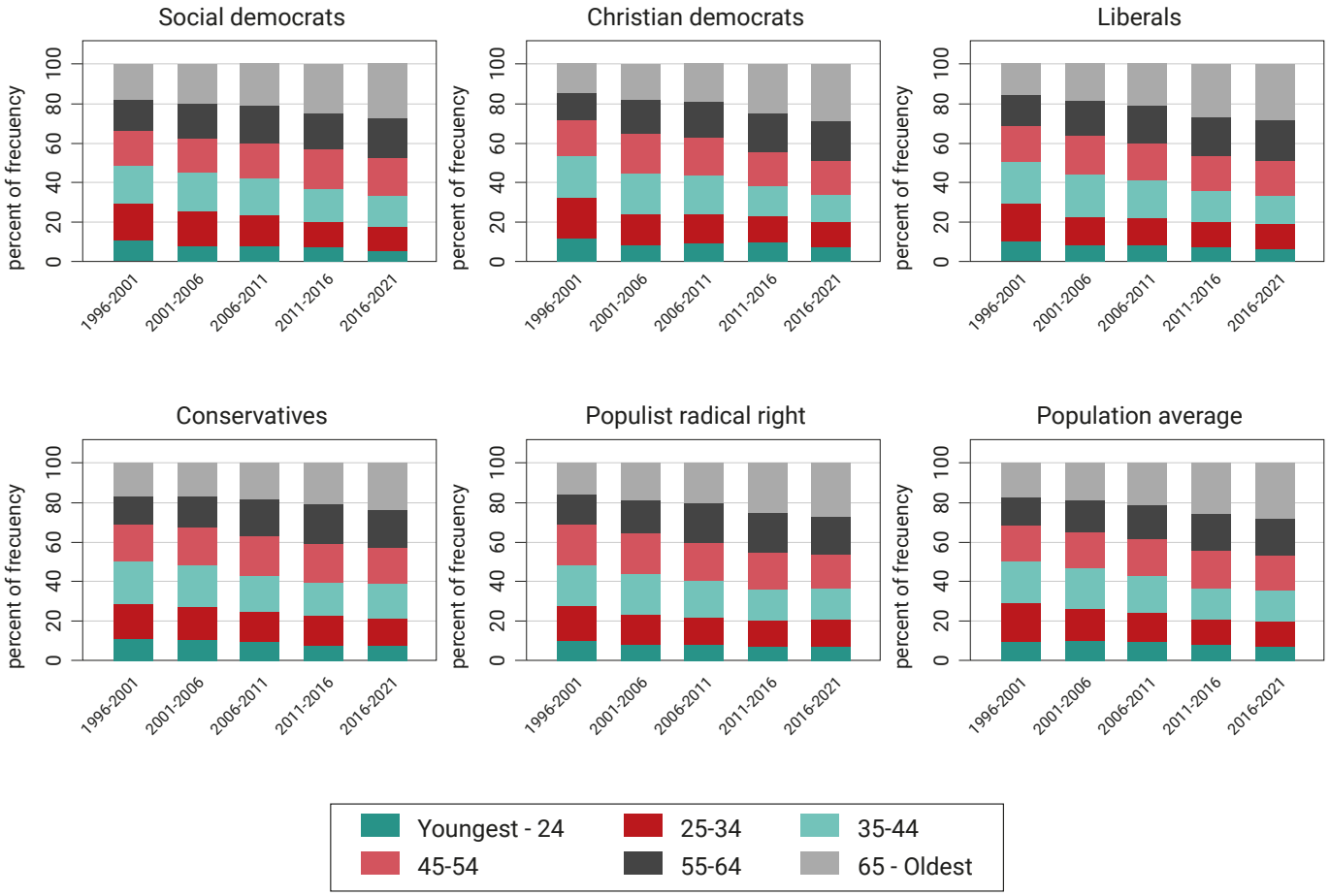
As extant research shows, it is not far-fetched to suggest that growing levels of education across Western Europe seem to have fostered an important transformation, namely, from so-called allegiant citizens in the 1960s to more assertive citizens today.[83] Whereas the former tend to be politically passive, trust institutions and deferent towards authorities, the latter are characterised by an inclination to be politically active, distrust existing institutions and remain more sceptical towards authority. In other words, with higher levels of education come independent thinking, critical reflection and a more vocal expression of opinions – especially disapproving ones, for example, by rejecting social hierarchies.[84] All of these put citizens in a position where it becomes "easier", or at least more common, to express feelings of dislike and rejection – something that in earlier times of extreme partisan dependence (like the 1950s and 1960s) was not necessarily the case[85] – or at least no longer align with political parties in stable and predictable ways.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the link between higher levels of education and increasing rejection of political parties is particularly noticeable for the populist radical right and Christian democrats. It is not unthinkable for this to be related to the values promoted by these party families. After all, fewer people in

Western Europe identify as Christians, while larger proportions of the electorate have become increasingly sceptical of religion and the highly conservative values it promotes more generally. This might also be explained by the fact that Christian democratic parties tend to represent more rural interests and West European countries are increasingly urbanising, but we will come back to this shortly. Equally, citizens with higher levels of education are more inclined to be progressive, tolerant of out-groups, give higher priority to cosmopolitan values and advocate for minority rights as part of a larger adherence to equality. This aligns less with the populist radical right.

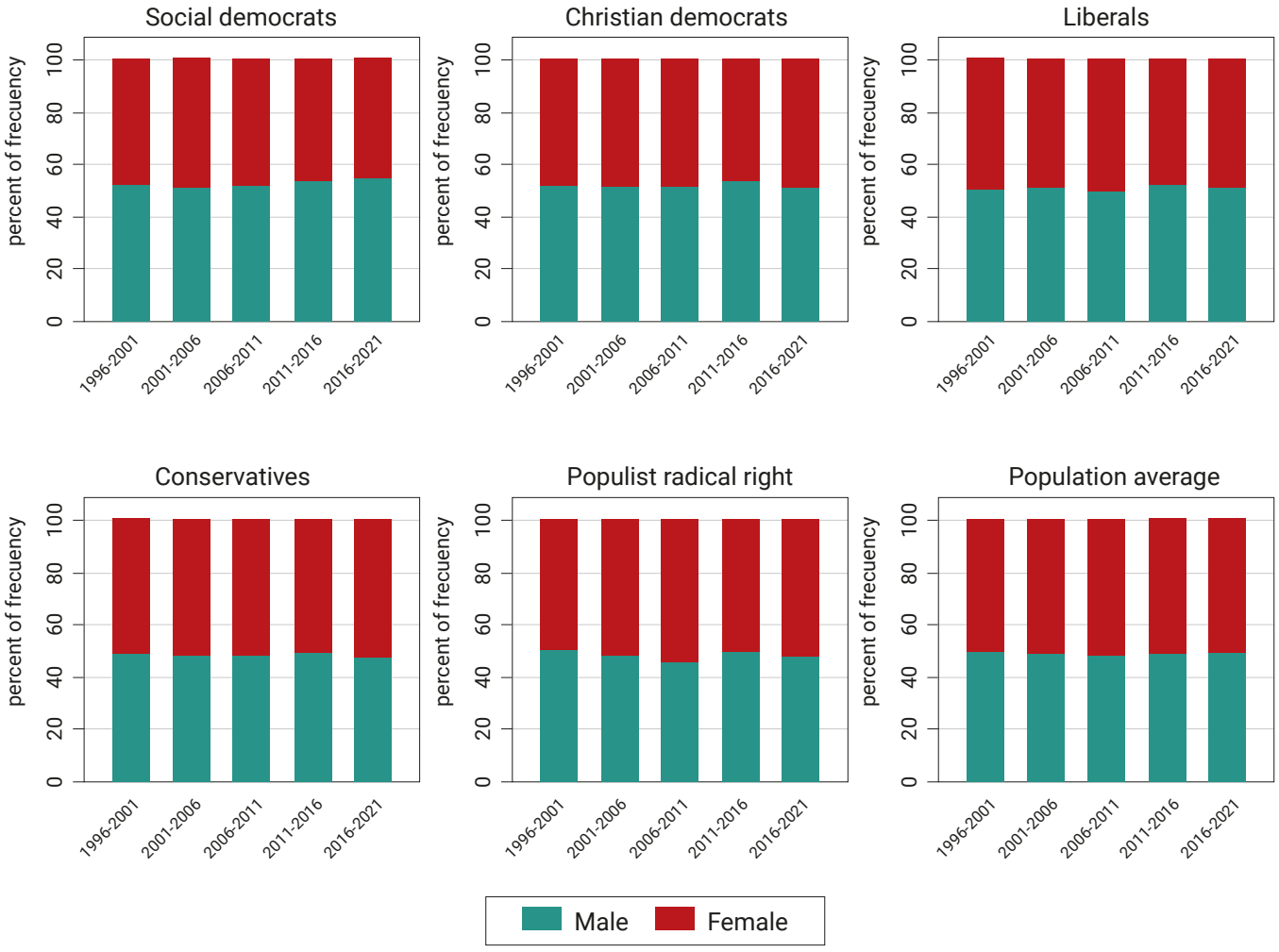
Moving on to the age distribution of those rejecting different political parties, Figure 27 paints a similar picture to Figure 20 (the correlation between age and support for the same party families). That is, the proportion of voters who reject the party families under consideration increases over time. More specifically, we notice a more considerable number of people who reject these party families amongst the 65+ cohort, while fewer of them come from the 25- to 44-year-old cohorts. Even though part of this might be related to the aging of European electorates, it is nonetheless an important trend. In conjunction with Figure 20, this might indicate that younger cohorts are more likely to be positive partisans and, thus, express an explicit liking of certain parties, whereas older cohorts are more likely to be negative partisans and, thus, express an explicit dislike for certain parties. At the same time, we notice there is – once again – little difference between party families.

Figure 27. Distribution of age groups amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.



Looking at the gender distribution of citizens who reject the party families under consideration in Figure 28 further confirms the initial observations related to gender and support for different party families. We notice an almost equal 50/50 gender split between all party families and over time. There is no overrepresentation of men or women within particular groups of potential voters who reject certain party families. Although existing research tends to show the prevalence of male voters within the populist radical right,[86] the data discussed here suggests there is no evidence of a gender gap when it comes to rejecting the populist radical right over time in Western Europe. This is a notable finding and further highlights that some of the voter potential for all parties under consideration, even the social democrats, is not tied to a particular gender group.

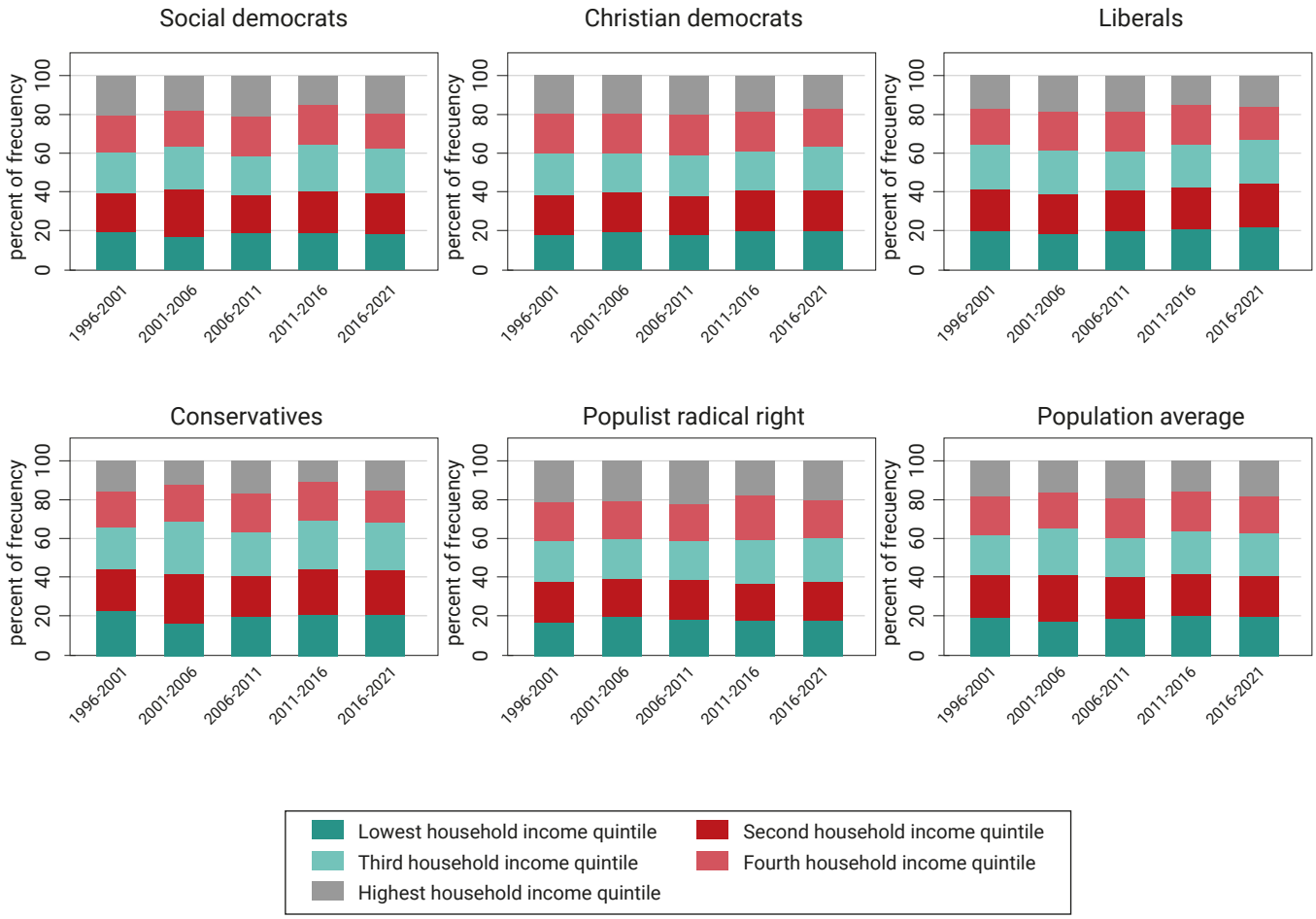
Figure 28. Distribution of gender amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.



Looking at the income distribution amongst people who reject the different party families in Figure 29, we notice a relatively equal distribution amongst the five income quintiles, both within each party family and over time. Nonetheless, there are some modest differences that are worth pointing out. For example, we notice that the rejection of conservative and liberal parties is more prevalent amongst those with lower levels of income, something that it is probably related to the tendency of these parties to defend more restrictive welfare policies and oppose government intervention.

Similarly, we notice that fewer citizens who fall in the highest income quintile tend to be at odds with the traditional right-wing parties. We do not see such a (modest) trend amongst people who reject social democrats and populist radical right parties. Citizens who reject these two party families are similar to the population average in terms of their income distribution. In and of itself, this is not all that surprising, as the rejection of these parties might stem from an overall desire for less welfare and government intervention.

Figure 29. Distribution of income amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.

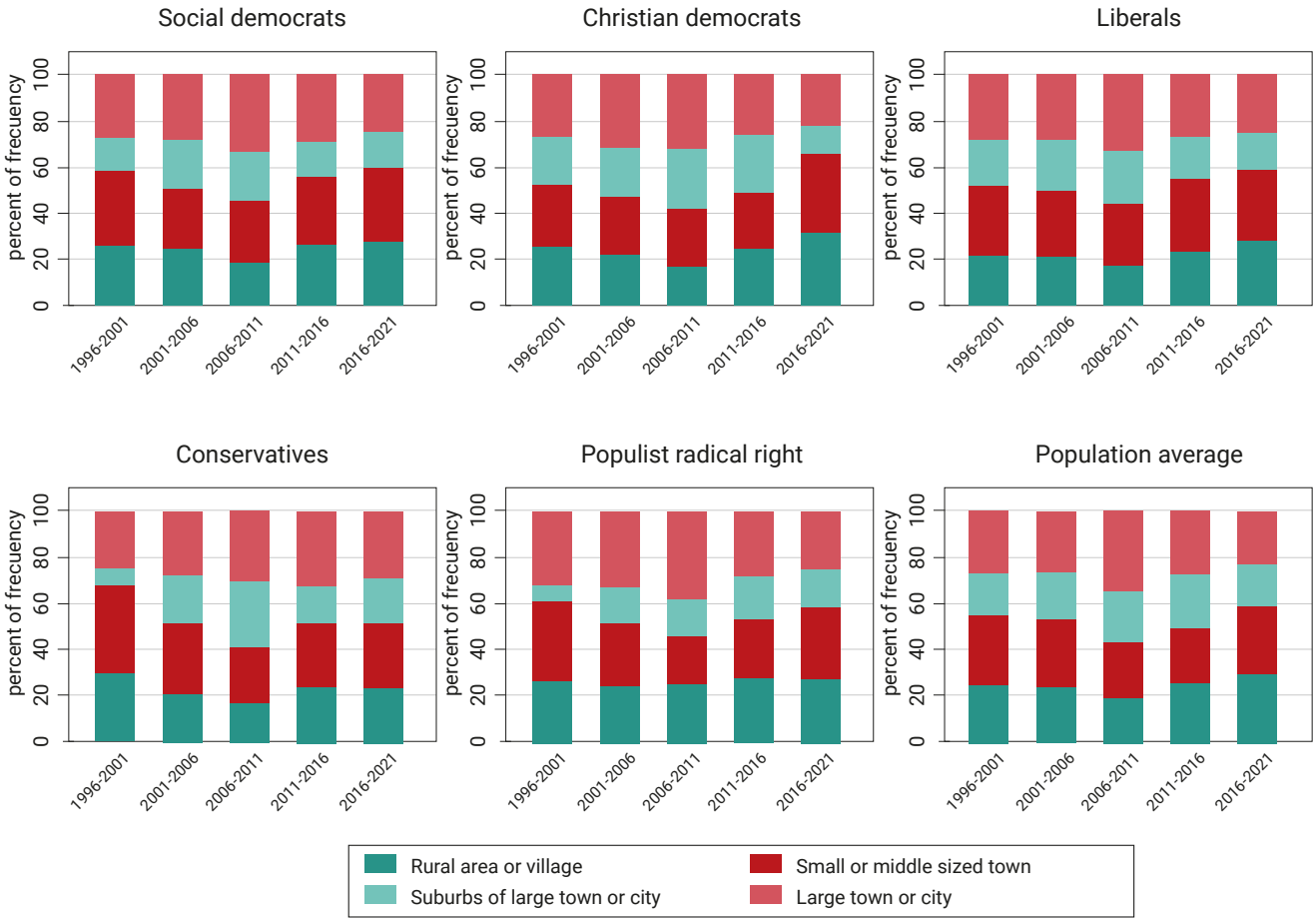


When we examine the residence of those people rejecting the different party families in Figure 30, several interesting observations stand out. First and foremost, we notice that more voters who reject the populist radical right come from highly urban areas. The same is true for those rejecting conservative and liberal parties, at least recently. To a certain extent, these findings reinforce the argument of the continued relevance of the urban-rural cleavage, and geography more generally, when it comes to understanding political behaviour in contemporary Western Europe.[87] It is something we not only see in Western Europe, but across the world. For example, in the USA, "[…] the Democrats, quite simply, have evolved into a diverse collection of urban interest groups, and the Republicans into an assemblage of exurban and rural interests".[88]

Even more, it further highlights what classical scholars, like John Rawls and Émile Durkheim, already alluded to, namely, the political difference between urban and rural politics, and – by proxy – the corresponding disparities in people's life chances or so-called spatial injustice.[89] Interestingly, this holds true for both

rejecting and supporting different party families (for comparison, see Figure 23). As for the mainstream party families under analysis, the distribution is in line with that of the population, meaning there might not be a discernible residential origin of those showing disdain for certain party families.

Figure 30. Distribution of urban-rural residence amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.

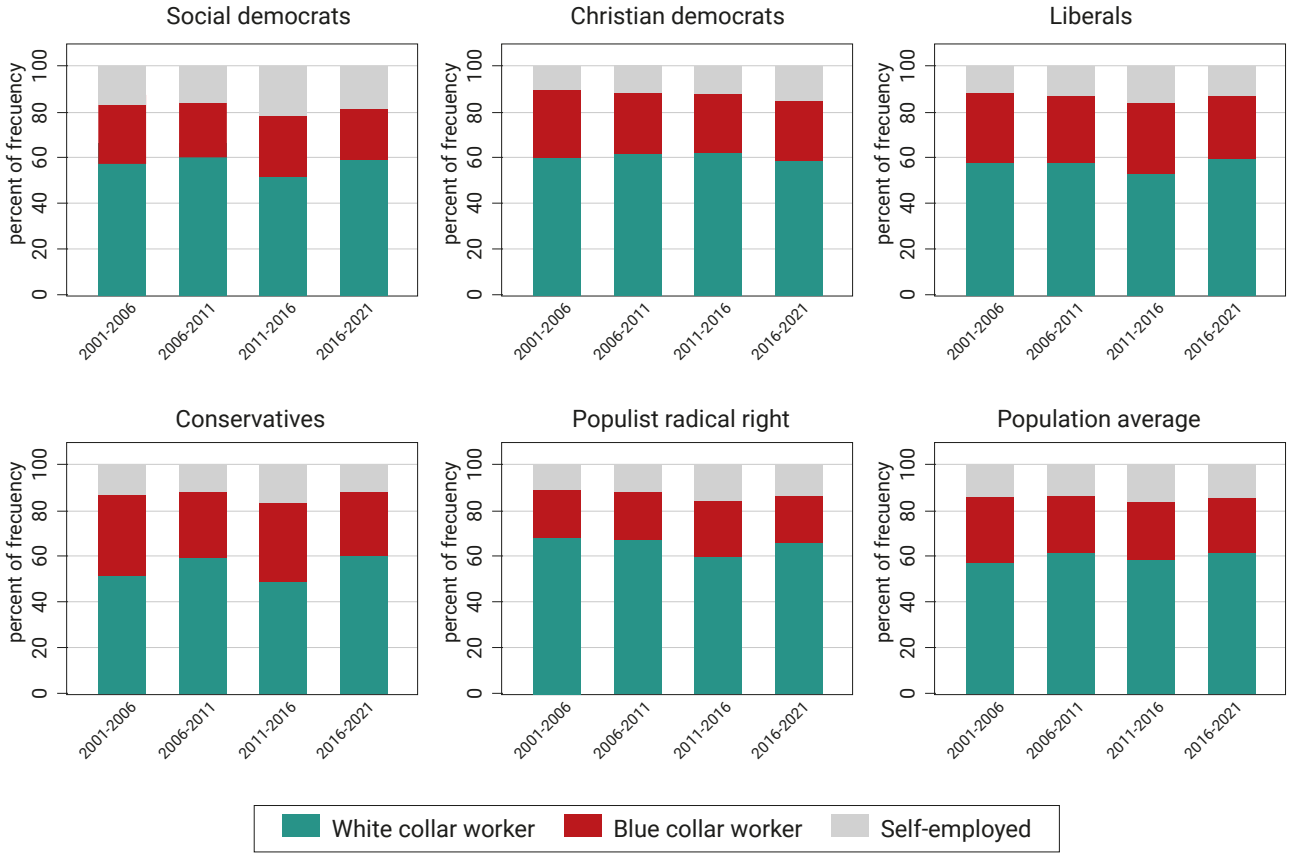


Overall, however, we notice that the rejection of political parties was more tied to residence in the mid-1990s than it is today. A negative affinity towards populist radical right and conservative parties used to stem disproportionately from small or mid-sized towns and suburbs, which might be related to these peripheral regions experiencing relative depletion of their human and economic capital in the 1990s and casting blame on these parties. Today, the distribution is much more balanced and in line with the population average. This is in line with increasing urbanisation, as well as the overall trend of spatial development across Western Europe.[90] Today, more so than some decades ago, mega-city regions and smaller high-tech towns act once again as magnets for population and skills.[91] This suggests that the economic development of less urban areas and their overall transformation over time reduce the rejection of right-wing parties that was traditionally disproportionate in those areas.

We now turn to the distribution of socio-economic status amongst those rejecting the party families under consideration in Figure 31. When looking at white-collar workers, more of them tend to reject populist radical

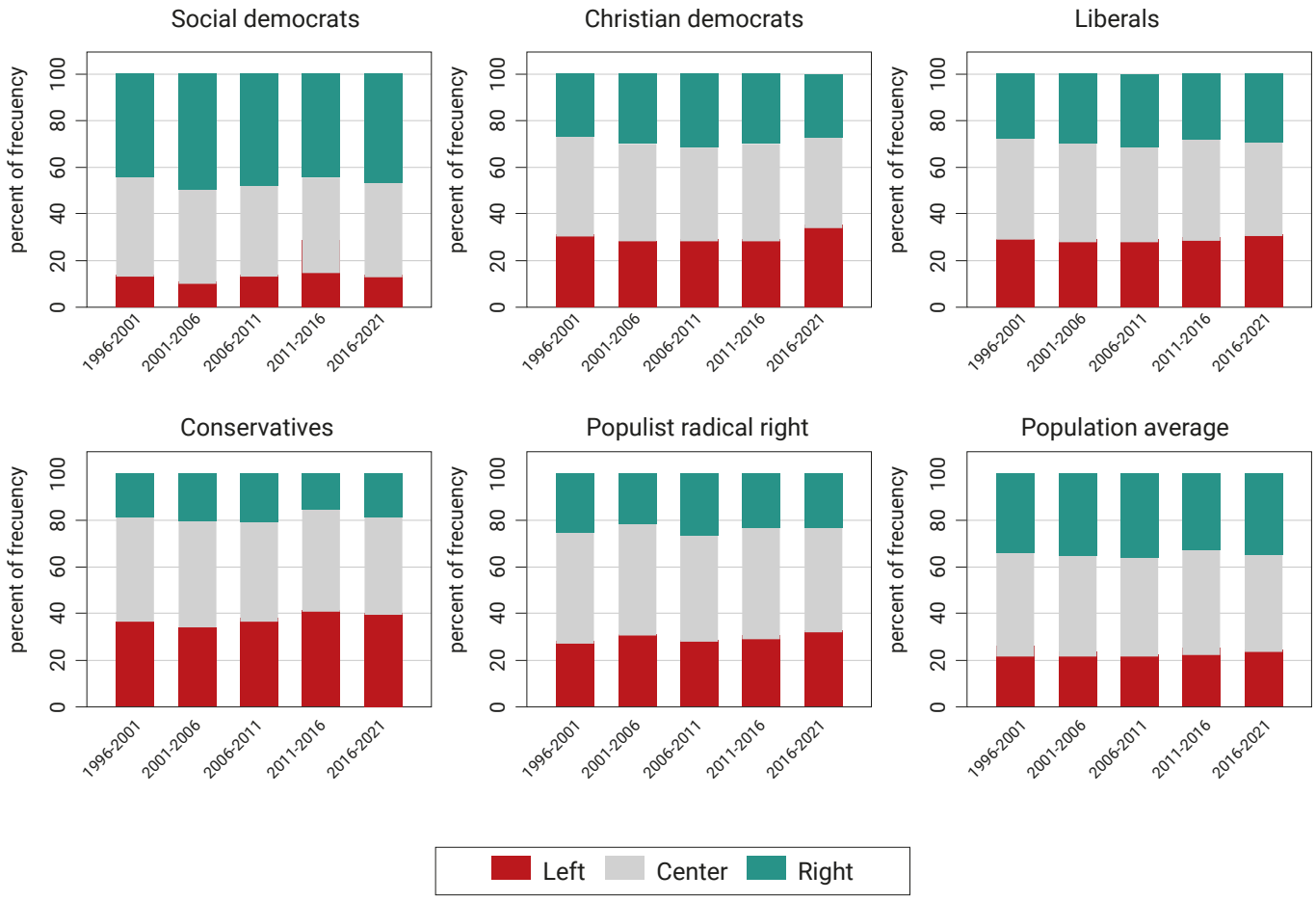
right parties compared to the population average, while fewer of them are inclined to reject conservative parties. In turn, blue-collar workers are disproportionately prone to reject both conservative and liberal parties. Surprisingly, blue-collar workers are not less likely to reject populist radical right parties, something that reinforces the argument that blue-collar workers should not be thought of as a monolithic bloc, but rather as a diverse group, including people at odds with the populist radical right.[92] Finally, we notice that people who are self-employed tend to be disproportionately more negative to social democratic parties; a trend that can be partially explained by social democratic parties mostly advocating for the regulation of the free market.

Figure 31. Distribution of socio-economic status amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.



Finally, we examine left-right self-identification of citizens rejecting different party families in Figure 32. Right-wing individuals are considerably less likely to reject conservative and populist radical right parties. At the same time, those self-identifying as right wing are much more prominent amongst those rejecting social democratic parties. Left-wing individuals are overrepresented amongst those rejecting any right-wing party. Simultaneously, fewer self-identified left-wing individuals show rejection of social democratic parties. None of this is all that surprising, but it highlights that left-right self-identification helps us understand the extent to which people reject different party families. Moreover, it also reveals that an important part of the overall voting public (nearly 40% at each point in time) identifies as right wing. Given that a faction of this group rejects various right-wing party families, it is not far-fetched to suggest there is an important level of competition between right-wing parties for these voters and an important source of potential for social democratic parties that might remain unexploited.

Figure 32. Distribution of left-right self-identification amongst voters rejecting different party families in Western Europe.



3.5 Comparative takeaways

We started this chapter by outlining the extent to which citizens support and reject the five party families we set out to examine here. Most generally, neither support nor rejection of *mainstream* parties fluctuates much over time. That is not to say that their (potential) electorates are stable over time. As a matter of fact, we know they are not. Yet, it does mean that the extent to which people like and dislike mainstream political parties is not something that drastically changes. Consequently, there is not only a permanent pond these political parties actually fish from, but there are also potential ponds from which mainstream parties can fish – thereby leaving a good number of prospective votes untapped.

This is slightly different for the populist radical right. Compared to its mainstream counterparts, we notice a relatively linear trend upwards for both like and dislike of the party family. In other words, while we see that more people come to like populist radical right parties, we simultaneously see more people come to dislike these parties. Interestingly, the latter trend is something more recent, which might be due to these parties becoming more visible and even participating in or supporting government in numerous West European countries (Austria, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands). An important implication of this latter observation is

equally the polarising potential of these parties. In the recent CSES wave, more than 50% of people disliked these parties, while about 35% of people liked them, leaving only a small minority out there without a clear stance of opinion on these parties.

In a second step, we explored the characteristics of those who support and reject the party families under consideration. Overall, the main takeaways here are those of stability and continuity. That is, we find that – with few exceptions – there are few to no discernible differences between the socio-demographic profiles of citizens supporting or rejecting the different party families. Even more, we find there are few notable changes over time in these profiles. In other words, the trends that we observe are not ones with significant fluctuations, but they rather project a certain steadiness and balanced nature of the partisan profiles under consideration. In most instances, where we do observe changes, they are primarily related to societal changes, such as ageing populations, urbanisation, and increasing levels and access to higher education, rather than parties suddenly attracting different sections of the (potential) electorate.

One notable difference that is worth highlighting relates to the perceived residence of citizens. That is, urban or rural residence relates to the support and rejection of certain party families, more so than some of the other factors under consideration in this chapter (like gender, household income, age, etc.). While there only appear some minor patterns in terms of geographic origins of support and rejection of mainstream parties, we do find more indicative evidence that citizens rejecting and supporting populist radical right parties are overrepresented in what citizens believe to be highly rural and urban areas. Altogether, it alludes to the remaining political (and electoral) relevance of the perceived urban-rural divide within West European countries.

What does all this mean, and what should we take away from this? First and foremost, the entirety of our empirical analyses shows there is perhaps less of a social, political and electoral divide between the different party supporters across Western Europe. Or, at least, whatever divides there are, they remain limited in time and less structural than scholars might claim. Secondly, we notice important levels of dislike for all parties under consideration, meaning that the potential voter pool for the different parties is considerate. After all, voters who express a clear dislike for certain parties could be considered potential voters for other parties. Political science has highlighted for decades that party support is lower than ever, while volatility (and rejection) is higher than ever. While we can look at these as grim phenomena delineating European politics, we can also highlight the potential they bring forward. Political parties have more potential voters now than they have ever had. On the flipside of this same coin, we could also argue that parties might need to work harder than ever before to attract these voters.

Finally, and specifically for the social democratic party family, their potential is perhaps larger than that for any other party family under consideration. They have the highest levels of support of all party families under consideration, while they have a relatively low and stable number of people rejecting them by default. Yet, at the same time, their larger potential combined with their modest vote share across Western Europe also means they remain relatively inefficient at mobilising and engaging their potential. While more than 60% consistently express a certain affinity to the party, their average vote share has decreased from nearly 35% in the early 1980s to about 20% today (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). The questions that social democratic parties across Western Europe must ask themselves are why there is an increasing gap between the potential and the actual vote share, on one hand, and why they are not able to fully take advantage of this potential, on the other hand.

4. THE STRATEGIC RESPONSE OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT TO THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT CHALLENGE: THE CASE OF THE AUSTRIAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (ÖVP)

4. THE STRATEGIC RESPONSE OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT TO THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT CHALLENGE: THE CASE OF THE AUSTRIAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (ÖVP)

MARTIN DOLEZAL, REINHARD HEINISCH AND DIANA LUCIA HOFMANN

4.1 Introduction

Austria is a crucial case for studying the potential radicalisation of the mainstream right, as the country has been a stronghold of the populist radical right since the 1990s. Migration has been an important issue in party competition, and levels of Euroscepticism have been higher than in most other EU member states.

Research on party competition has identified different strategies by which mainstream parties respond to the rise of the populist radical right.[93] Generally, mainstream parties have two options for reacting to a populist challenger: either they opt for a dismissive strategy and ignore them; or they choose an adversarial strategy of co-optation. The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which represents the mainstream right by combining Christian democratic, (neo)liberal and conservative orientations, initially tried to ignore the growing challenge by the populist radical-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). As this, however, did not produce the expected results of containing the FPÖ's appeal, the ÖVP switched to an adversarial strategy by adopting several of the FPÖ's positions, ideas and rhetoric.[94]

While there have been proposals to establish a "*cordon sanitaire*" against the populist radical right, as the example of Belgium shows, in Austria the ÖVP has twice formed coalitions with the FPÖ. Thus, when faced with a radical-right populist challenger, the behavioural pattern by the conservatives runs from dismissal to convergence and even governmental cooperation.[95] According to Bale,[96] such cooperation leads to a mainstreaming of the extreme right and a bipolarisation of the party systems. But does this also lead to a radicalisation of the mainstream right?

Although the number of studies on the ÖVP's programmatic and strategic transformation since the turn of the millennium has been limited, several authors have interpreted the development as far-reaching. For instance, Wodak wrote that the ÖVP "shamelessly integrated some (not all) aspects of the FPÖ's election programme",[97] while Hadj Abdou and Ruedin classified the ÖVP as an "anti-immigration actor".[98] Strobl interpreted the recent development of the ÖVP as an example of "radicalised conservatism".[99] We are primarily interested in the supposed transformation of the ÖVP and ask whether cooperation with the FPÖ is indeed the result of a genuine programmatic reorientation that could be categorised as radicalisation. In a second step, we ask how this may affect (social) democracy.

We begin with a brief overview of the ÖVP's development and the Austrian political context. We then examine whether and how the party may have radicalised by reviewing recent literature and using various available

and original data on the party's positioning, program and communication. Finally, we turn to the implications of the (potential) radicalisation of the ÖVP for Austrian democracy in general and for the development of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) in particular.

4.2 The ÖVP and its political context

Austria is a federal state comprising nine *Bundesländer*, the legal and financial powers of which are limited, but which nevertheless form an important additional layer of the political system. Another important feature of Austrian politics is corporatism, which, despite its decline after the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, is still relevant to economic policymaking.

Since the establishment of the Second Republic after the Second World War, the ÖVP – together with the SPÖ – has been the dominant party in Austrian politics. The Freedom Party is not a new party either, having been founded in 1955. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it went through a liberal phase, which ended when Jörg Haider became party leader in 1986. The FPÖ is thus an example of an insider-converted established party turning into a populist radical-right party. Other relevant parties include the Greens, which are relatively strong by European standards, and the smaller liberal formation NEOS (as well as its predecessor LIF in the 1990s). Despite regional exceptions, radical leftist parties have been too weak to matter politically.

4.2.1 The evolution and organisation of the ÖVP

The political forerunners of the Austrian conservatives date back to the late 19th century, when the Christian Social Party emerged as an anti-socialist and anti-liberal mass party based on Catholic social doctrine, representing the rural population, the urban bourgeoisie and small businesses. The historical legacy of the ÖVP also includes a clerical-fascist authoritarian state from 1934 to 1938, which went down in Austrian history as Austrofascism, and which was only swept aside and overshadowed in its repressive nature by the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. Thus, the clerical and corporatist heritage positioned the ÖVP, founded after the Second World War, from the outset as comparatively conservative in orientation.

Organisationally, the People's Party used to be characterised by a weak centre and relatively powerful component organisations and regional branches. Its six so-called "leagues" (*Bünde*), based on professional and demographic characteristics (Employees' League, Business League, Farmers' League, Women's League, Seniors' League and Young Conservatives' League), are independent under the law and can potentially act autonomously from the party leadership. The ÖVP is also shaped by powerful regional party branches and their leaders. Thus, national party leaders always strive for leverage with regard to these different internal factions. Spatially, the ÖVP's organisation corresponds to the country's federal structure. Of all the Austrian parties, the conservatives still have, by far, the highest organisational density.

While the SPÖ traditionally saw themselves as the party of the industrial proletariat, the conservatives formed the collective political force for almost all strata of the bourgeoisie, as well as Austria's rural population. As such, the ÖVP was not only a party for the well-to-do and business interests but saw itself as a genuine "people's party"; hence, its official name in German *Volkspartei*. As a bourgeois catch-all party, it has contained a variety of ideological currents, such as conservatism, (market) liberalism and Catholic social doctrine.

The ÖVP was able to claim the most important cabinet posts and the chancellorship during the long succession of conservative-social democratic coalition governments from 1945 to 1966, followed by a single-party government until 1970. However, the emerging new middle class, which was politically more liberal and socially mobile, turned out to be an increasingly poor fit for the traditionalist orientation of the People's Party. The demographic changes in the population also inevitably altered the balance of power between the suborganisations of the party. Being the junior partner in a grand coalition with the SPÖ from 1987 onward significantly constrained the ÖVP's modernisation agenda. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the constant internal tug-of-war between the various factions created the image of a bickering party with a weak leadership. In the transformation of the Austrian political system during the 1970s into a "chancellor democracy",[100] political personalities became increasingly important thus exposing the relative weakness of the ÖVP leadership by comparison. Over time, the conservatives have been vulnerable to persistent criticisms, particularly from the rising populist radical right, the FPÖ. From 1986 to 1995, voter support for the ÖVP dropped from 41.3 to 28.3%.

The conservatives were well aware of their problems and, therefore, made several efforts to reform their organisational structures and sharpen their ideological profile. The 1995 program formalised the ÖVP's philosophical return to ideological and cultural conservatism, signalling the end of the party's more liberal phase. Four years later, the then ÖVP leader, Wolfgang Schüssel, struck a deal with the Freedom Party to form a coalition, despite being third in the 1999 elections. This allowed the People's Party to take control of the government, with Schüssel as chancellor and the FPÖ as junior partner. Although initially regarded as an international pariah, the conservatives retained the chancellorship until 2007, benefitting from the FPÖ's internal problems and eventual collapse in government, when it was replaced by a breakaway formation called Alliance Future Austria (BZÖ) in 2005.

4.2.2 Party change under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz

By the mid-2010s, the ÖVP was once more the junior partner in a coalition with the SPÖ and again in great electoral distress. By then, the FPÖ had long recovered from its nadir. The reverberations of the refugee crisis of 2015 threatened to result in further defections by conservative voters to the Freedom Party. In addition, the SPÖ managed to install a politically promising new party leader and chancellor, Christian Kern, in 2016. In response, the ÖVP also opted for new leadership by bringing in Sebastian Kurz, the foreign minister and, at the time, the most popular and youngest (aged 31) member of the government.

Kurz had been a vocal critic of Austria's handling of the refugee crisis, distancing himself from the party's "old guard". He abandoned positions that were unpopular with conservative and right-wing voters, such as the ÖVP's staunchly pro-European stance, and struck a critical tone toward immigration and Islam. Kurz rebranded the party – creating a new colour scheme (from black to turquoise) and party name ("New People's Party") – centring the party's appeal around the new leadership and the change in direction he would provide, even though the ÖVP had been continually in government since 1987 and has been part of the political establishment since the Second World War.[101]

Although the ÖVP's strategy of coopting the Freedom Party in both style and ideas was indeed successful in 2017 (and in 2019), as the ÖVP could mobilise likely (and former) Freedom Party voters, the new coalition built with the FPÖ lasted less than two years. A video surfaced in May 2019, showing an intoxicated FPÖ leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, acting in a way that suggested he was involved in influence peddling and public corruption. This scandal, named after the island of Ibiza, where the video had been shot, led to the ousting of the FPÖ leader and, subsequently, the collapse of the coalition. This was mainly because the

conservatives also insisted on the resignation of the FPÖ interior minister, Herbert Kickl, who was accused of interfering in investigations into right-wing extremist groups shortly after the new government had taken office. Evidently, the more moderate groups in the ÖVP saw the government reshuffle as an opportunity to get rid of Kickl, whom they regarded as a political liability. However, Kurz's plan to form a short-term minority government of his ÖVP with some independent ministers until an early election failed. Following a vote of no confidence, a transitional government of experts was appointed, and new elections were held in September 2019.

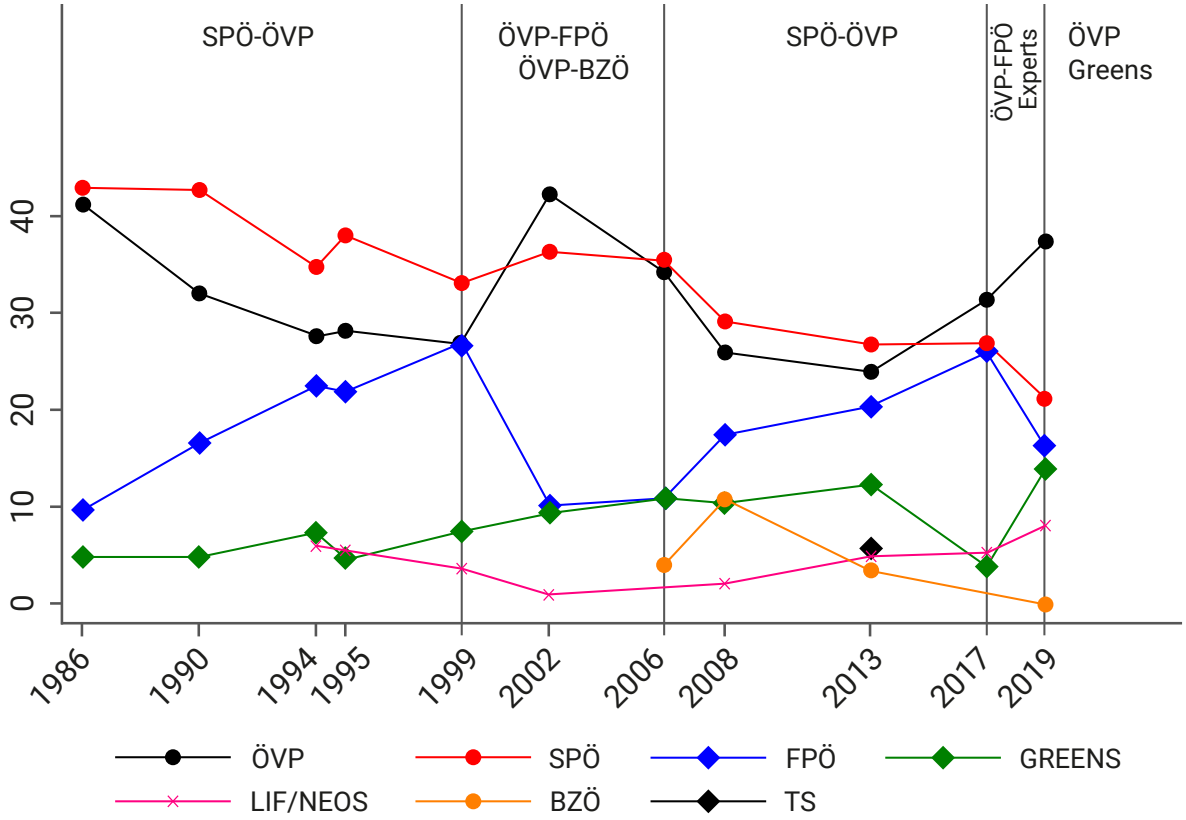
As a result of these events, the ÖVP pursued a dismissive strategy, trying to ignore the FPÖ and instead seek a new coalition with the Greens. The opportunity presented itself because, in the 2019 election, the FPÖ lost almost 10% of its voters, while the Greens achieved their best electoral win yet. The ÖVP had been in the best position to appeal to many disappointed FPÖ voters and, thus, improved on its already strong showing from 2017 (from 31.5 to 37.5%). The People's Party reckoned that they had little to fear from the right, as the FPÖ was internally divided and preoccupied with its own problems. In addition, the coalition agreement with the Greens ensured that conservative migration policy, which mattered to Kurz and the ÖVP greatly, could not be blocked by the Greens, so the conservatives would be free to find alternative majorities in parliament if the Greens were uncooperative.

Unexpectedly, however, the Greens, who controlled some of the key ministries, often succeeded in pushing back against the conservatives. Leaked chat conversations pointing to the possible involvement of key ÖVP officials, including Chancellor Kurz, in political and public corruption, as well as an extensive investigation by prosecutors protected by the Greens justice minister, significantly undermined the ÖVP's standing with the public. This, in turn, strengthened the leverage of the Greens, who in October 2021 threatened to leave the coalition if Kurz, who was facing a vote of no confidence, did not resign. The distinct prospect of a new government without the conservatives prompted the party to push for Kurz's resignation first as Chancellor and then as party leader. The ÖVP foreign minister, Alexander Schallenberg, briefly took over the Chancellorship until the ÖVP subsequently elected Karl Nehammer as party leader (interim 2021, elected 2022) and Federal Chancellor (December 2021). In office, Nehammer followed an adversarial strategy of publicly attacking the FPÖ and its leader Kickl as unfit to govern, but, at the same time, continued to pursue an agenda designed to attract voters from the right.

Summing up, the development of the People's Party in recent years suggests that the liberal wing of the party has disappeared, and the Christian democratic profile has been weakened in favour of a more conservative orientation.

Figure 33 gives an overview of the national election results (shares of votes) of all parties that have won seats in the parliament's main legislative chamber since 1986. It also attests to the centrality of the ÖVP as the nearly perennial government party, as can be seen at the top of Figure 33 where all coalitions are displayed.

Figure 33. Elections to the national parliament (Lower House; *Nationalrat*).



Source: Nationalratswahlen. Federal Ministry of the Interior.

Notes: Since 1994, there has been a 4% threshold; since 2008, the legislative period has lasted five years.
Legislative and government periods may not correspond, as governments often take office the following year.
The second ÖVP-FPÖ cabinet lasted only until April 2005, when the BZÖ formally replaced the FPÖ as the ÖVP's coalition partner without new elections being called.
Abbreviation: TS, Team Stronach; all other parties are mentioned in the main text.

4.3 Party change and the ÖVP's shift to the right

When exploring the potential radicalisation of mainstream right parties, as explained in Section 4.1, it is important to distinguish between two concepts of radicalisation. It may refer to changing spatial attributes, such as the shift from moderate to hardcore positions in specific policy fields. Alternatively, radicalisation may be reflected in the fact that leading party officials or party positions start questioning central principles of liberal democracy, such as the independence of the judiciary or the freedom of the press. Since the latter aspect, as we show, is hardly relevant for understanding the general development of the ÖVP, we concentrate on the former.

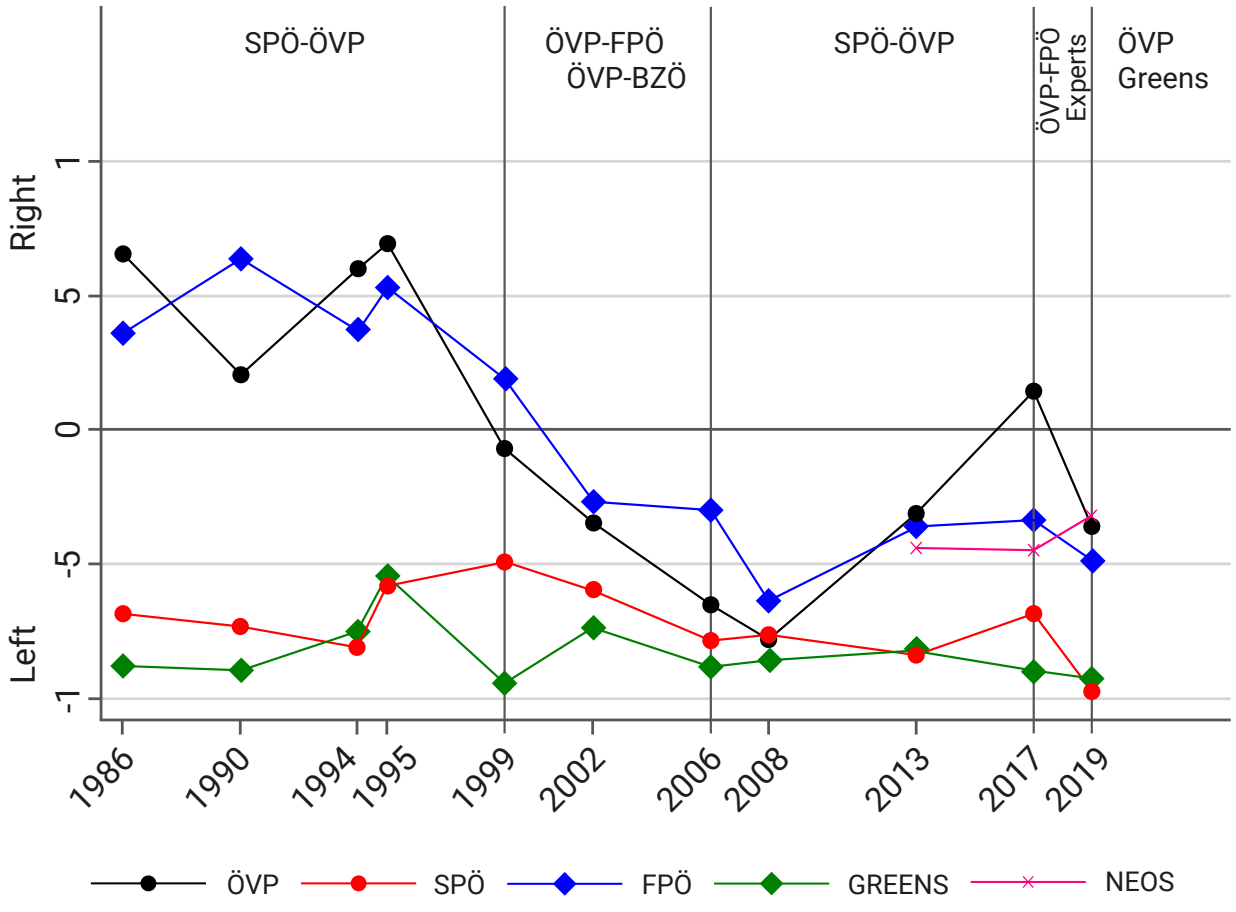
To first analyse the programmatic development of the party in Section 4.3.1, we trace the overall development of the ÖVP based on data from content analyses of party manifestos provided by the MARPOR project.[102]

Here, we distinguish between the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions of party competition. Subsequently, we trace the positions on European integration based on expert surveys. To provide more information on the salience of the issues that the ÖVP communicates, in Section 4.3.2, we present the results of a new content analysis of party press releases, including information on the political and other actors that the ÖVP attacks. Finally, we discuss the party's coalition behaviour in Section 4.3.3.

4.3.1 Programmatic change and party positioning

Regarding the development of positions on socioeconomic issues, Figure 34 suggests that the FPÖ and the ÖVP approach parallel patterns on this dimension. Even more striking, however, is that the differences in economic policy positions between all five parties currently represented in parliament have diminished over time and that both right-wing parties, the ÖVP and the FPÖ, have abandoned their neoliberal positions of the 1990s. Since all parties now take a left or centre position, a potential radicalisation (or even transformation) of the ÖVP on economic policy has hardly taken place.

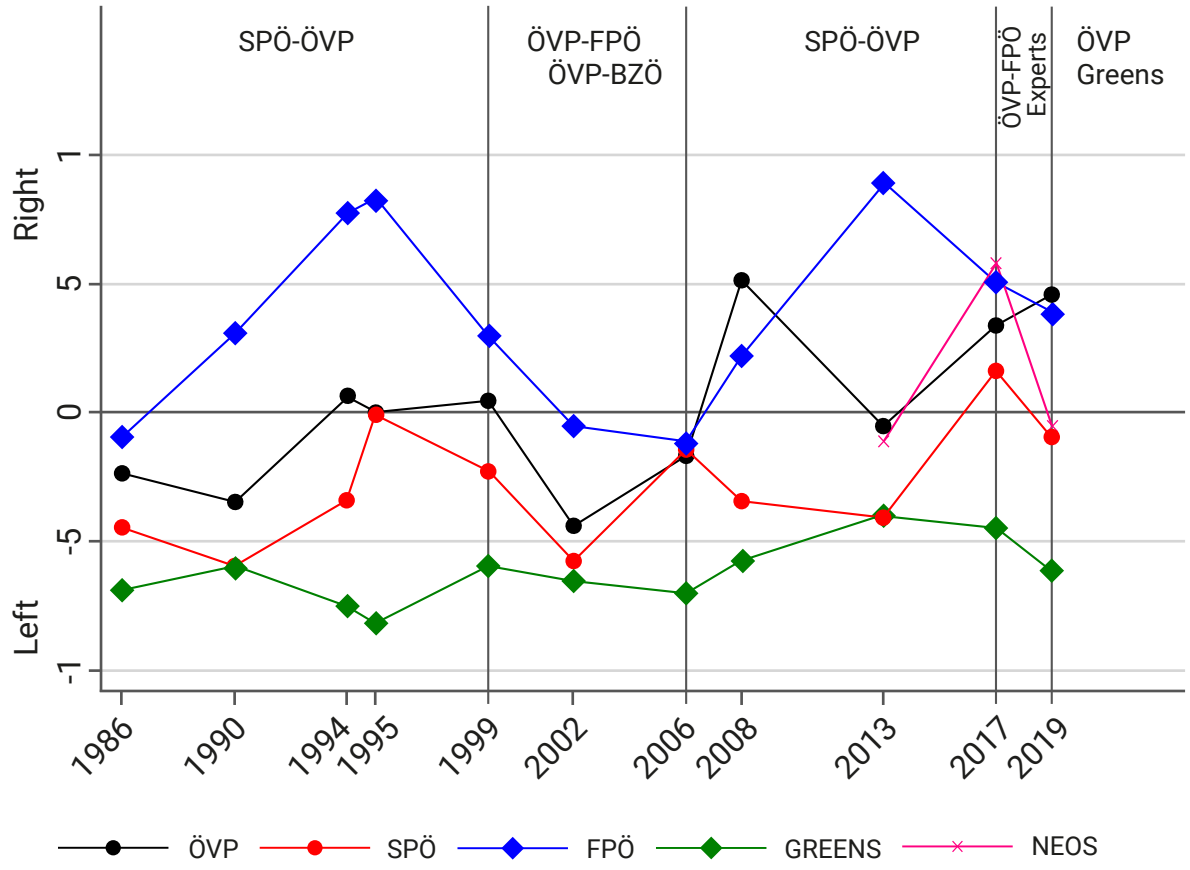
Figure 34. Economic left-right positions of the main Austrian parties over time (1986-2019).



Source: Heinisch and Werner (2021), p. 147, with an update for 2019. The figure uses data of the MARPOR project; the calculation of the left-right position is based on Franzmann (2009) "The change of ideology: How the left-right cleavage transforms into issue competition; an analysis of party systems using party manifesto data".

In terms of convergence on socio-cultural issues, we see a different pattern. Figure 35 shows that the ÖVP maintained a moderate orientation at least until 2006, remaining rather close to the SPÖ. The conservatives moved to the sociocultural right after losing their majority in the 2006 elections, while contending with an FPÖ that had moved sharply to the right. However, after 2008, both the SPÖ and the ÖVP were more concerned with the financial crisis and its aftermath, rather than sociocultural issues. Following the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, and especially after Kurz took the reins of the party, we see the ÖVP veer sharply to the socio-cultural right again. Under Kurz, the party began focusing more on "political" Islam, extremism and the question of the cultural integration of immigrants into Austrian society.[103] In 2019, it was hardly distinguishable from the FPÖ on this dimension of conflict.

Figure 35. Sociocultural left-right positions of the main Austrian parties over time (1986-2019).

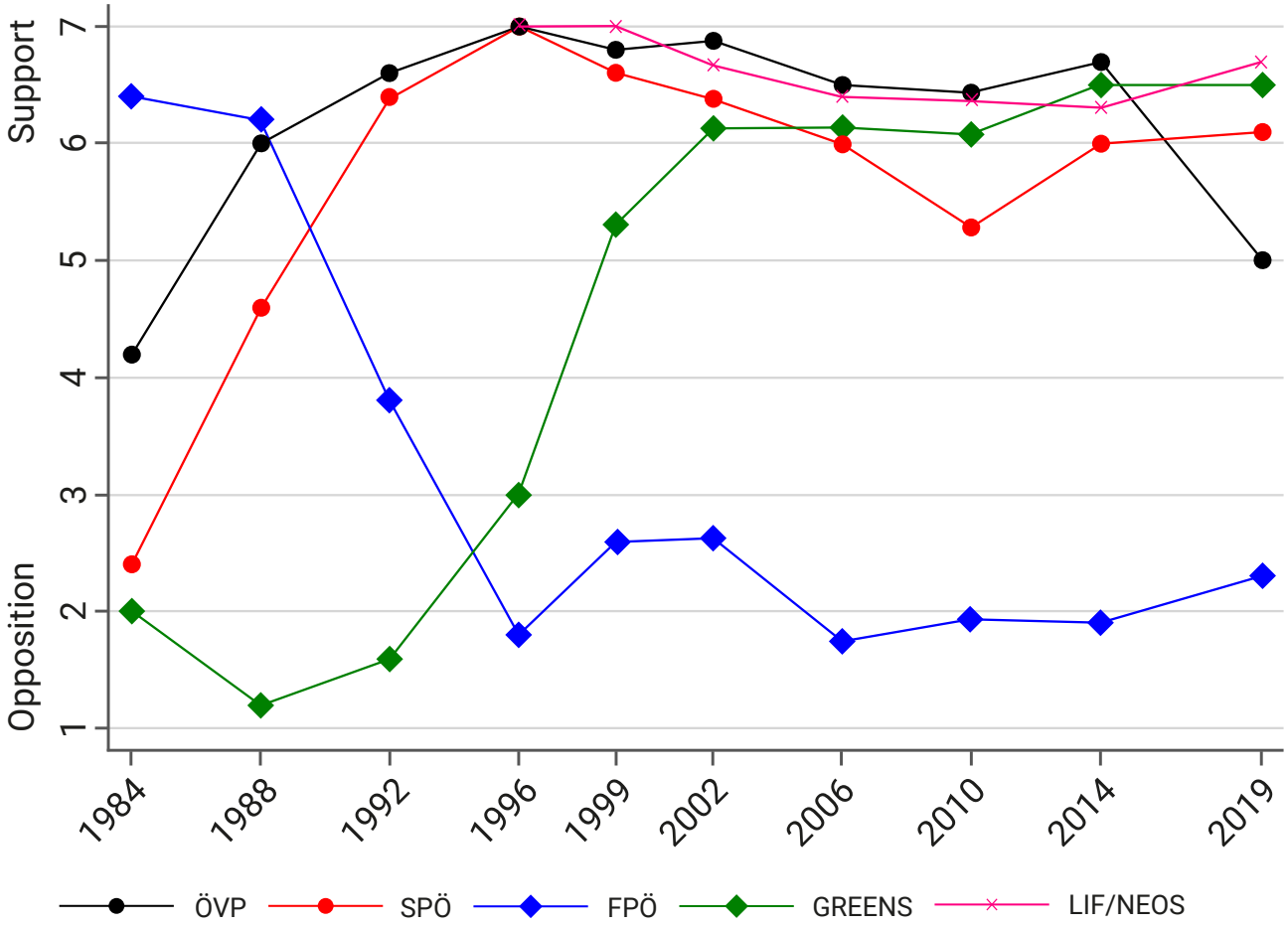


Source: Heinisch and Werner (2021) with an update for 2019. The figure uses data of the MARPOR project; the calculation of the left-right position is based on Franzmann (2009).

A closer look at ÖVP election programs between 2013 and 2017 reveals that, in areas such as immigration, EU policy, economic sovereignty and security policy, claims positioned on the right increased in both scope and scale, meaning that they resembled nationalist and far-right positions previously associated with the FPÖ.[104] The ÖVP manifesto, *Der Neue Weg*,[105] emphasised teaching "Austrian values" to immigrants, rejected voting rights for qualified foreigners (in local elections), warned against foreign (especially Turkish) influence on Austrian civil society, advocated for border controls, vowed to protect cash transactions (from alleged EU plans to the contrary) and so on.

The ÖVP's position on European integration, by comparison, has remained more stable, but we, like other authors,[106] observe a turning away from the party's former enthusiastic support.[107] The results of several expert surveys indeed show the more subtle change of the ÖVP in recent years (Figure 36). While the ÖVP has not become Eurosceptic, the recent shift towards more criticism has nevertheless led to internal tensions. This is best exemplified by a long-running public conflict between Kurz and his successors in the ÖVP leadership, on one hand, and the party's own leading member of the European Parliament (EP) and its first vice-president, Othmar Karas, on the other.[108] Karas, who has been a member of the EP since 1999, is one of the most prominent figures in the People's Party, regularly criticising his own party and the ÖVP-led Austrian government for taking positions contrary to European interests. Karas eventually announced that he would no longer stand for the ÖVP in the European elections of 2024. In many ways, Karas is the embodiment of what the ÖVP once was and how it has changed, especially in terms of European integration and Christian democratic values.

Figure 36. Austrian parties' positions on European integration (1984-2019).



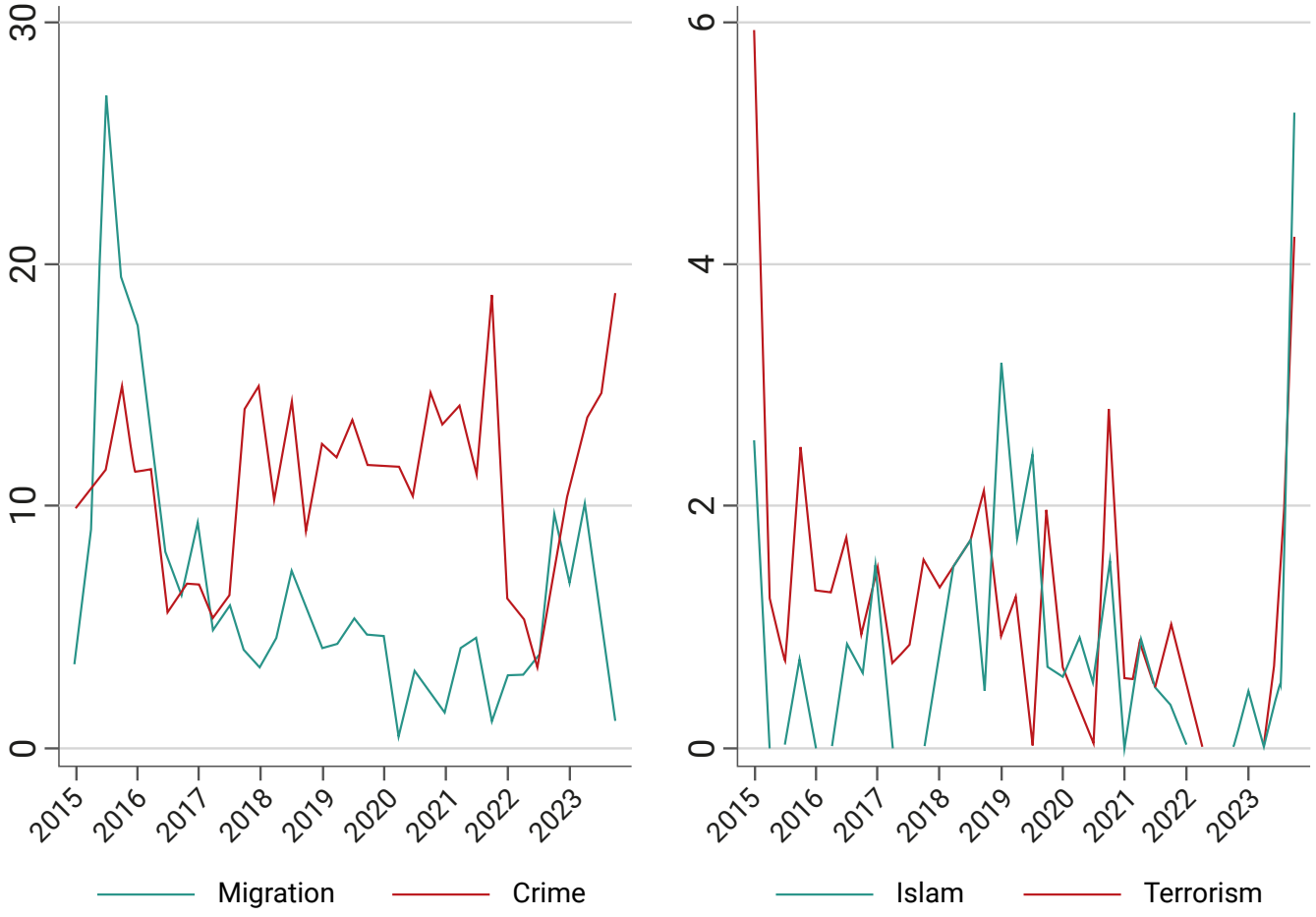
Source: Expert surveys: *European Journal of Political Research, 2(36): 283-306. DOI: 10.1023/A:1007009106184; 1999–2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File.*

Note: Experts rated parties' position on a scale running from one "opposition" to seven "support".

4.3.2 Issue salience and attacks against opponents

While the ÖVP has certainly moved to the right on the socio-cultural dimension of conflict, it is still an open question how important the issues comprising this dimension are for the party's general profile. Turning therefore to issue salience, we track the ÖVP's development over time by conducting a content analysis of the party's press releases from January 2015 to October 2023. Given that the party's economic policies can hardly be considered radical, we deliberately focus on a limited list of socio-cultural and security issues, namely, migration and internal security, as well as Islam and terrorism. Figure 37 shows the relative importance of these four issues over time since 2015. To make both graphs more readable, we aggregate our fine-grained data and present quarterly figures.

Figure 37. Salience of selected issues based on ÖVP press releases, January 2015-October 2023 (percentages per quarter).



Source: Own content analysis using OTS, a website run by the national news agency APA.

The salience of migration, which in our analysis also includes issues related to integration, is primarily driven by external factors, most notably the migration crisis of 2015-2016. In September 2015, at the peak of this crisis, no fewer than 45% of all press releases were related to this topic. This peak is also visible in the

quarterly data, with the third quarter of 2015 showing, by far, the largest share. Since then, the topic has been present but has never regained such prominence. The salience of crime, the other topic shown in the left of Figure 37, has been more stable. Islam and terrorism, shown on the right, have been less important in ÖVP communication – note that the *y*-axis uses a different scale. The peaks are typically the result of Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe, including an attack in Vienna (2 November 2020), and most recently the war between Israel and Hamas. However, in 2018 and 2019, the ÖVP also focused on "political Islam" and specific policies, such as banning the wearing of headscarves.

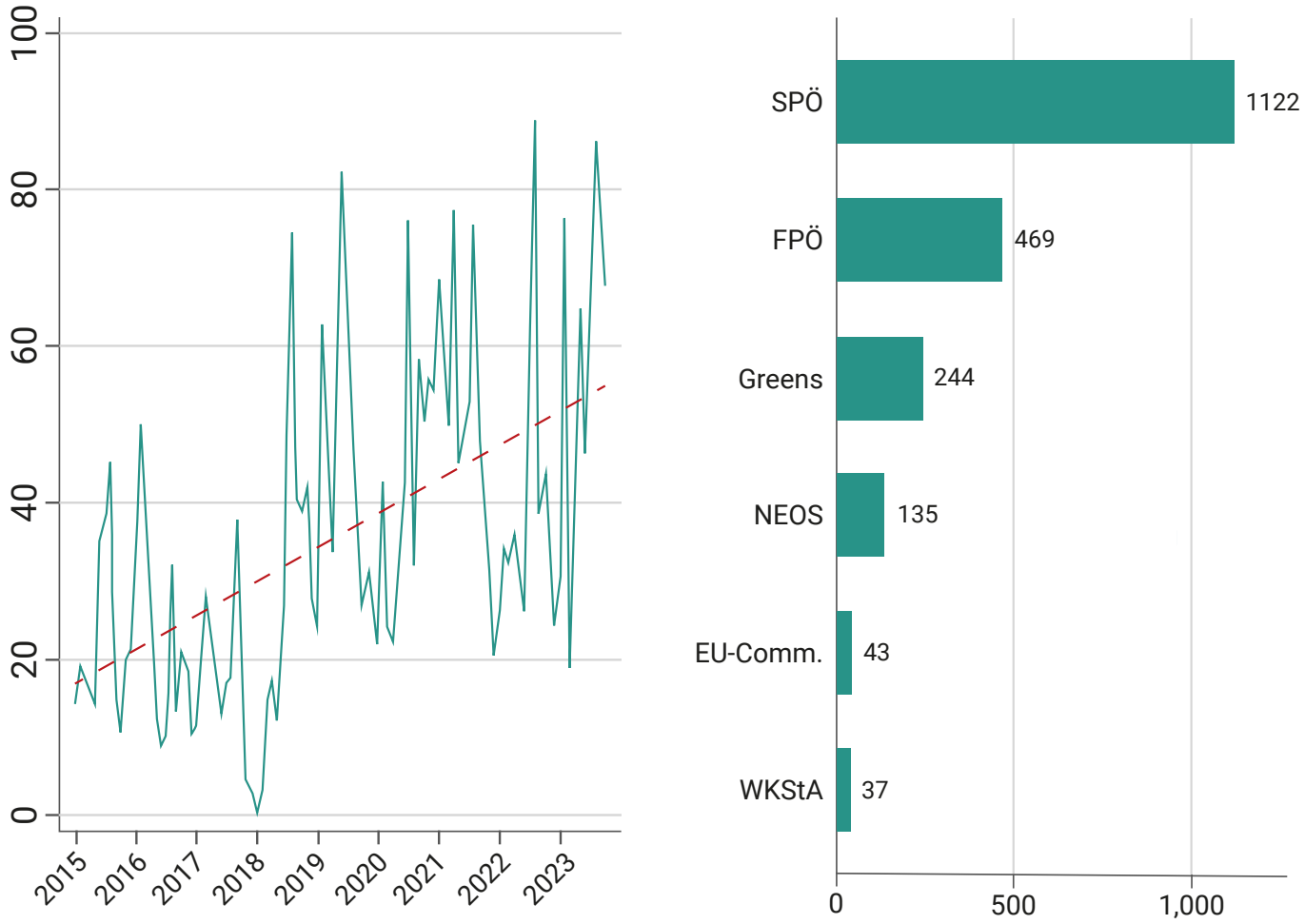
While migration and, to a lesser extent, Islam have been salient topics in the ÖVP's communication since 2015, the party has refrained from politicising those cultural issues that are at the forefront of the so-called "culture wars," as in the USA. Nonetheless, especially on Islam, the shift by the ÖVP has been pronounced, given that conservative religious practices and piety were once welcome in a party for which secularism constituted a central problem.[109] However, most of these other cultural issues have typically not become salient, which is why we have refrained from systematically recording them in our content analysis of press releases. For example, while gun control is not a prominent issue in Austrian politics, battles over abortion have flared up periodically since the 1970s, when the then majority SPÖ – against strong opposition from the ÖVP (and FPÖ) – established that abortion remains illegal but not punishable during the first three months of pregnancy. Neither the ÖVP nor the FPÖ have attempted to reverse this decision, but access to it is more difficult in some conservative-governed states (but also in SPÖ-led Burgenland).

The current debates on LGBTQ+ rights are another example of the ÖVP's acceptance of changing values in society. Progressive legislation, such as the introduction of same-sex marriage or the recognition of a third gender in official documents, has partly been initiated by the Constitutional Court, not by parliament (or the government). However, the ÖVP has typically accepted such changes without expressing strong opposition. Recently, there have been efforts to push back against gender-sensitive language. The new ÖVP-FPÖ government in Lower Austria (see below) decided to abolish this form of writing in official documents, but the practical (and legal) consequences of this decision remain an open question. A final issue related to culture wars is the ÖVP's recent struggle with various aspects of "wokeness". Here, the People's Party is defining "normalcy", which it claims needs defending, such as eating meat or the right to pay cash. The related idealisation of rural life, where people live in single-family homes and use cars, is additionally often mixed with the party's traditional anti-Vienna rhetoric. In 2019, a leading ÖVP official in parliament lamented that their children go to Vienna (that is, to university) only to return as Greens. All these positions express traditional, conservative ideas, but they hardly indicate a transformation or radicalisation of the party.

In addition to changes in a party's political profile, radicalisation can also be expressed in its relations with other parties. Following similar work that systematically investigated the extent and targets of negative campaigning in election periods,[110] we therefore also coded all parties and other actors that the ÖVP attacked in press releases – including a statement against Karas, the aforementioned MEP critical of his own party.[111]

The share of press releases containing attacks against competing parties, or other (political) actors, has increased dramatically over time. While the development of issue salience shown above hardly reflects the party's transformation from the old to the "new" ÖVP, the image on the left of Figure 38 is quite different. The party's level of negativity has increased substantially, which is particularly interesting since the use of attacks is typically associated with opposition parties. Strobl claims that the ÖVP under Kurz has switched to a permanent campaign mode,[112] which might be reflected in the increase of negativity expressed in press releases. However, the ÖVP's new communication pattern also reflects the general increase in conflict in Austrian politics since the last period of the grand coalition government.

Figure 38. Monthly share of press releases with attacks (left side) and the main targets (right side).



Source: Own content analysis using OTS, a website run by the national news agency APA.

The right of Figure 38 shows the main targets of all attacks since 2015, displaying the absolute number of press releases including these attacks. The SPÖ has been the main target of the ÖVP, followed by the FPÖ and the two smaller parties currently represented in parliament. A closer look at the development over time (not shown due to space limitations) reveals an interesting pattern: the SPÖ was the main target, even when both parties formed the government. For the FPÖ, on the other hand, the ÖVP had refrained from attacking the party before and during its second coalition (2017-2019). Since the Ibiza scandal, and especially since the FPÖ became the strongest party in opinion polls in December 2022, the FPÖ has been a primary target, but typically behind the SPÖ. In comparison, the share of attacks against the European Commission is much smaller, but still shows that the EU is no longer “sacrosanct”. Next on the list of targets is the Economic and Corruption Prosecution Office (WKStA), a special office within the public prosecutor’s office that deals with cases of economic crime and corruption. In recent years, as mentioned above, several high-ranking (former) ÖVP politicians and people close to the inner circle of the party have been suspects or even defendants in corruption cases.

4.3.3 Coalition behaviour and the radical right

As noted above, radicalisation is also indicated by party behaviour that seems to violate the taboo of not cooperating with radical parties which are seen as a threat to liberal democracy or openly challenge the democratic rules of the game. In this respect, the ÖVP differs from many other conservative parties in its willingness to form coalitions with the populist radical right. While the first coalition, formed in 2000, led to widespread protests in Austria and many European countries, the second coalition, formed in 2017, was more widely accepted as politics as usual. In this respect, the inclusion of the FPÖ in national governments has contributed to a normalisation of radical-right populism. But coalitions including the FPÖ have remained the exception.

Crucially there are two factors that need to be understood when evaluating the behaviour of the ÖVP. Grand coalitions between the conservatives and SPÖ have been the norm in Austria (1945-1966, 1987-2000, 2007-2017), not the exception. It was precisely this partocracy that originally fuelled the growth of the radical right. Since 1986, the ÖVP was always the junior partner in that coalition and, as such, was haemorrhaging voters much more than the SPÖ, which by the 1999 elections placed the ÖVP in existential jeopardy. It is this context in which the party opted for a way to escape what it considered a political trap. Secondly, Austrian elections since 1986 have consistently delivered majorities to the right of centre, yet the country continued to have social democratic government leaders through 2017, except for the years 2000-2007. In short, the ÖVP has always had majorities with the FPÖ in parliament. However, only in three of 11 elections and under specific conditions did it choose to cooperate with the FPÖ. In each case, the Freedom Party had either moderated or signalled its willingness to support key parts of the conservative agenda. And each time the parties coalesced at the national level, the FPÖ collapsed in public office, leaving the government in political disarray. Conversely, the Freedom Party always recovered and radicalised when it went back into opposition.

While coalitions with the FPÖ may have contributed to the normalisation of radical-right politics, it is also important to note that, since the 1990s, both conservatives and social democrats have repeatedly adopted policy positions and expressed views on issues such as migration and Islam that were derived from the Freedom Party's discourse. In short, both parties contributed in different ways to the normalisation of radical politics.

4.4 Impact on (social) democracy

A radicalisation of the mainstream right would have severe consequences for the future development of liberal democracy. But it would also affect the mainstream party of the left, that is, the SPÖ. We first briefly discuss the potential impact of the ÖVP's shift to the right on the state of liberal democracy in Austria before we turn to the consequences for the SPÖ in terms of potential vote switching from the mainstream right to the mainstream left and the consequences for coalition making.

4.4.1 Democratic backsliding (also) in Austria?

The current debate on democratic backsliding not only refers to the impact of populism and the far right, but also concerns the behaviour of political elites as a decisive factor. In general, most authors would categorise Austria as a stable liberal democracy. However, several comparative international indices rating the quality of democracy recently ranked Austria at the bottom of the top group of liberal democracies (e.g., the Economist Intelligence Unit) or reported that Austria's ranking had slipped both as an electoral democracy

(from an index score of 0.85 in 2017 to a score of 0.79 in 2022) and as a liberal democracy (from a score of 0.77 to 0.7).[113] Using a limited number of variables, V-Dem recently even downgraded Austria from a liberal to an electoral democracy. However, the V-Dem measures may suffer from methodological problems given the small number of country experts providing estimates.

4.4.2 Impact on social democrats I: Vote switching

Social democratic forces might profit from a radicalisation of their competitors if voters of the mainstream right do not support their traditional party's new radical course. However, as shown in Section 4.3, Austria hardly represents a fully-fledged example of radicalisation on the mainstream right. Moreover, the share of vote switching between left and right is rather low. Using aggregate (ecological) data provided by SORA on the level of voter transitions, we can trace vote switching from 1999 to 2019. Unfortunately, no directly comparable data are available for periods extending further back in time. The aggregate data show that since 1999, ÖVP voters rarely switched their support to the SPÖ. Instead, the conservative voters turned to the FPÖ and the former breakaway formation of the latter, the BZÖ, as well as the Greens or the liberal NEOS. The SPÖ, on the other hand, primarily lost voters to the FPÖ, Greens and non-voters. While vote switching between the ÖVP and SPÖ occurs only rarely, former SPÖ voters did change to support the ÖVP, particularly in the elections of 2017 and 2019 when the party made significant gains.[114]

The data show how the ÖVP mobilised voters from its populist challenger, the FPÖ, by winning over 17% of voters in 2017 and 20% in 2019 who had previously voted for the FPÖ. This seems to support the idea that coopting the challengers' ideas, program and rhetoric may prove successful in mobilising voters. However, thinking of the FPÖ's implosion following each time the party joined the government as a coalition partner, this may not be due to co-optation but rather due to inexperience and incompetence of the populist party in government.[115] Moreover, the electoral gains for the ÖVP may not only result from co-opting the immigration issue, but also the ÖVP's attempt of an image overhaul and Kurz's popularity as a political leader.

In 2017, 3% of former SPÖ voters switched to the ÖVP and 12% moved to the FPÖ. In 2019, 5% changed their vote to support the ÖVP, 2% switched to the FPÖ, and 14% voted for the Greens. The strong trend toward the Greens in 2019 may be a consequence of people wanting to ensure the Greens' presence in parliament after they had failed to clear the 4% hurdle required for parliamentary representation two years prior. But it also demonstrates a significant overlap of potential voters for both parties in general.

Overall, the SPÖ did not win many voters from the ÖVP in either 2017 or 2019; if anything, they lost voters to the conservatives in these elections. Bigger movements away from the ÖVP are much more likely in 2024 when the party will certainly lose votes. But moderate ÖVP voters disappointed with the ÖVP's shift to the right (mostly on the socio-cultural dimension) might prefer NEOS to the SPÖ. It appears that the latter has more potential to mobilise Green and FPÖ voters, or even those of other smaller parties as well as non-voters. Finding a strategy to mobilise these diverse groups is difficult. For example, embracing stricter immigration policies might appeal to individuals with right-wing attitudes,[116] as it did for the ÖVP in the 2017 and 2019 elections, but the SPÖ would automatically lose voters on the left, which hence would not change the overall balance of power. In the recent struggle for party leadership in June 2023, the SPÖ opted for the most left-wing candidate, Andreas Babler. Burgenland's governor, Hans Peter Doskozil, who lost the internal election, represents an alternative strategy that mixes strict positions on migration with traditional left-wing economic policies. Babler being elected as party leader might prevent a challenge from the left (as it happened in recent state elections) but hardly makes the party attractive for conservative voters.

4.4.3 Impact on social democrats II: Coalition building

To understand coalition building in Austria, one must consider both the developments at the national and state (*Länder*) levels. Until the early 2000s, most state governments used a system that allocated seats in the executive according to the parties' strength in the legislature. The FPÖ in particular benefited from this system (which is still used in all local elections), as it was automatically part of the "established" parties. In recent years, by contrast, government coalitions at the state level can be viewed as a political laboratory for testing potential coalition building, as political rules now largely follow those that also apply at the national level. The coalitions formed at the state level may serve as blueprints, as coalition formation at the national level benefits from the experience of coalitions at the state level. For instance, the coalition between the ÖVP and the Greens seems to have been facilitated by such cooperation between the two parties in three state governments.[117]

As of 2023, the elections in the nine federal states resulted in three different forms of coalitions from the ÖVP's perspective: in coalitions with the SPÖ; coalitions with the FPÖ; and coalitions with the Greens. Only in two states (Burgenland and Vienna) is the ÖVP currently in opposition (see Table 1).

Table 1. Previous and current coalitions at the state level.

	Burgen-land	Carin-thia	Lower Austria	Upper Austria	Salzburg	Styria	Tyrol	Vorarl-berg	Vienna
Previous	SPÖ FPÖ	SPÖ ÖVP	ÖVP SPÖ FPÖ	ÖVP FPÖ	ÖVP Greens NEOS	ÖVP SPÖ	ÖVP Greens	ÖVP Greens	SPÖ Greens
Current	SPÖ	SPÖ ÖVP	ÖVP FPÖ	ÖVP FPÖ	ÖVP FPÖ	ÖVP SPÖ	ÖVP SPÖ	ÖVP Greens	SPÖ NEOS
(Starting)	(2020)	(2023)	(2023)	(2021)	(2023)	(2019)	(2022)	(2019)	(2020)

Note: As of November 2023. The sequence of states follows their alphabetical order in German.
The party mentioned first in each column holds the office of governor (*Landeshauptmann/Landeshauptfrau*).

Recent government formations in three states suggest a possible revival of an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition at the national level after the 2024 general election. But given the ÖVP's pivotal position in the party system, other options are possible, too. In the last five years, the party has cooperated with all other relevant parties in either state or national governments.

How can the SPÖ respond? Since the FPÖ's transformation into a populist radical-right party, the SPÖ has always ruled out a coalition with the FPÖ. This so-called "Vranitzky Doctrine" (named after the former chancellor (1986-1997) and party leader, Franz Vranitzky) has thus severely limited the SPÖ's options. Since

no left-wing majority (beyond the ÖVP and FPÖ) has emerged in national elections since 1979, the SPÖ is dependent on the willingness of the ÖVP to cooperate. Some in the SPÖ thus have argued for abandoning this "doctrine", but there have only been two instances at the state level in which the SPÖ has deviated from this pattern. An SPÖ-FPÖ coalition at the national level, therefore, seems unlikely under the current leadership of the two parties. Another scenario could be an SPÖ-led majority beyond the ÖVP and FPÖ due to a split in the People's Party. This scenario is currently unlikely, but Karas, the ÖVP's internal critic, has not ruled out running in the next national elections.

A different coalition scenario is suggested by the fact that the political environment in 2024 appears to have shifted significantly to the left on social and economic issues. The experience of high inflation, and therefore high prices, coupled with an economic downturn; Austria's largest bankruptcy case, which highlights the influence peddling between wealthy individuals and state officials; and widespread industrial action in support of higher wages and better working conditions, make the political environment one from which the SPÖ should be able to benefit. The fact that, despite these and the government's ongoing problems, the SPÖ remains in second place in opinion polls, some 5% behind the FPÖ a few months before the elections, points to internal problems, such as lack of cohesion and certain difficulties in connecting with the people.[118] However, another way of reading this is to conclude that the SPÖ's ability to maintain their public standing and remain in second place, despite internal divisions and a rather botched process to find a new party leader, suggests that their economic message is resonating with voters. If the ÖVP were to focus more on economic competence and less on migration and identity, a possible strategy suggested by recent polling data, the SPÖ and ÖVP could form a coalition centred on the economy. However, both parties would probably need a third coalition partner, such as the Greens or NEOS, to achieve the necessary majority.

4.4.4 Impact on social democrats III: Debate on the orientation of the party

The ÖVP's repositioning further to the right, combined with a resurgent populist radical-right Freedom Party, has had an impact on the orientation of Austria's other political parties, especially the SPÖ. While the FPÖ is firmly anchored on the far right of the socio-cultural political divide, the Greens and the liberal NEOS are positioned on the socio-cultural cosmopolitan left. This also corresponds to the rather homogeneous voter profile of these parties. However, the situation for the SPÖ was quite different, as the party, while still positioned on the socio-economic left, was pushed in different directions on socio-cultural issues such as national identity, immigration and Islam. Thus, a divide opened up between urban and liberal groups, especially in Vienna and other cities where the SPÖ still appealed to middle-class voters for whom the ÖVP was too conservative and traditionalist, and traditional social democratic voters in the industrial working class and smaller towns. This divide was embodied in a conflict between Pamela Rendi-Wager, party leader from 2018 until June 2023, and Burgenland governor and SPÖ regional party chairman Hans Peter Doskozil, who clashed frequently and publicly over the party's course on immigration, security, Covid measures and cooperation with the FPÖ.

Moreover, as the ÖVP had also moved to the right economically under Kurz, the left in the SPÖ increasingly demanded a response in the form of a repositioning of the party further to the left on the economic dimension. This led to a three-way contest in 2023 for party leadership between three individuals, each representing a group in the party: Rendi-Wager, the incumbent, stood for the liberal-urban centre; Doskozil, the socio-cultural right combined with a dirigiste state; and Andreas Babler, the economic left reminiscent of the SPÖ of years past. In a hard-fought race marked by controversy and technical glitches in the party's internal voting process, Babler won the leadership contest against Doskozil after Rendi-Wager announced her withdrawal.

The rise of the left in the party was aided by the emergence of other left-wing groups outside the SPÖ, such as the Communists (KPÖ+), who made a respectable showing in the city of Graz and the state of Salzburg. In Graz, they took over the mayoralty of Austria's second-largest city in 2019, and in Salzburg they won 11.6% of the vote in 2023. Another left-wing party, the Austrian Beer Party of the musician Dominik Wlazny (alias Marco Pogo), made a respectable showing in the presidential election of 2022 and has announced it will run in the 2024 general election. These left-wing rivals are an indication that there is still plenty of room to the left of the SPÖ, which finds itself somewhat caught between the two extremes and fears losing voters to either side.

4.5 Conclusion

Has the ÖVP been merely "parroting the pariah"[119] or indeed has it adopted the pariah's agenda wholesale? Has the ÖVP's reaction to the populist challenger also set in motion a process of normalisation, as Wodak points out,[120] in that the ÖVP adapted radical-right-wing ideas, such as on migration policy? As we show in this chapter, the number of transgressions against previously accepted political norms and discursive conventions have increased, including the normalisation of verbal attacks on democratic institutions such as the judiciary and especially the public prosecutor's office. Does this amount to radicalisation in a transformative sense though? Based on the empirical evidence for the two criteria of spatial attributes and the general relationship with democracy, our answer is no.

With respect to the first criterion, the ÖVP has certainly moved to the right and now holds fewer moderate positions regarding migration (and Islam) than in earlier periods. In some respects, it is hardly distinguishable from the populist radical right, but the more restrictive policies proposed (and partly implemented) are nevertheless mostly acceptable within the framework of a liberal democracy. Instances in which the ÖVP's proposed reforms pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable within a liberal democratic setting, such as the banning of headscarves in schools or the indexation (but mostly reduction) of family benefits for migrants' children residing outside Austria, were blocked by national and European court rulings, demonstrating democratic control through the rule of law.

We also recognise the party's waning enthusiasm for European integration, but the ÖVP has not become a Eurosceptic party like the FPÖ. Moreover, the ÖVP has mostly abstained from politicising issues that, especially in the USA, are categorised as "Culture Wars".

Regarding the second criterion, the party's relationship with democracy, the People's Party respects the democratic rules of the game. Furthermore, the ÖVP is less likely to attack liberal institutions due to its current dominant position and the fact that many public offices are staffed by its own people. Nonetheless, the ongoing legal proceedings against top party officials, including former party leader and Chancellor Kurz, will serve as a kind of "litmus test".

Still, when it comes to the so-called radicalisation of the mainstream right, neither the political discourse nor the political behaviour of the ÖVP can in any way be compared to what has occurred when right-wing parties came to power in Hungary or Poland. This assessment also applies to the periods when it governed together with the FPÖ. As the dominant party in these coalitions, the ÖVP was able to stop the rise of the populist radical right, which always collapsed in public office and suffered severe setbacks in the subsequent elections. However, things might look different if the FPÖ were to enter such a coalition as the stronger party. In such a constellation, the ÖVP's previous strategy of "taming" the radical right in public office could come to an end.

5. THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT TURN OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN FRANCE

5. THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT TURN OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN FRANCE

GILLES IVALDI

"What sets us apart from the National Rally is our ability to govern."

Éric Ciotti, April 2021[121]

5.1 Introduction

In comparative terms, because of the very early arrival of the populist radical right in the mid-1980s, France provides a relevant case study for the analysis of the impact that the populist radical right may have on other political actors in the party system, and how such actors respond to the new competitive challenges emerging from the electoral and organisational consolidation of their populist radical-right challenger.

Therefore, the evolution of the mainstream and the populist radical right in France may be seen as a blueprint of recent developments elsewhere in Europe. The electoral rise of the *Front National* (FN) – now *Rassemblement National* (RN) – since the mid-1980s has presented a major challenge for parties of both the mainstream left and right in France. As Meguid argues, mainstream parties must decide whether to dismiss, accommodate or attack their new competitor.[122] The empirical analysis by Abou-Chadi demonstrates that the electoral success of populist radical-right parties provides an incentive for established parties to shift their position toward a cultural protectionist profile and to emphasise the immigration issue.[123]

In France, the established parties have adjusted their responses to the FN's political challenges, in both discourse and policy. Because of its spatial proximity to the FN, the mainstream right has been more susceptible to competition for votes with the populist radical right.[124] In seeking to recapture the votes lost to the FN, the mainstream right has progressively moved towards more authoritarian and exclusionist positions on the cultural dimension of competition.[125] Over time, this shift has been most discernible in immigration, security and – more recently – European integration.

Taking France as a case study, this chapter looks at the extent to which the mainstream right has been undergoing a process of "radicalisation". It examines the factors that have driven such transformation, and its impact on the political left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy in the country. As discussed, the radicalisation of the mainstream right in France must be seen as a long-term process, driven by both party competition and public opinion, and which has been mediated by organisational factors. These developments have not been monotonic, however. We see significant variation in voter demand, party supply and strategy across different periods of the mainstream right in France, depending on the electoral incentives produced by shifts in public opinion and electoral performances by the populist radical right.

Moreover, the radicalisation of the mainstream right should be placed in the historical context of the broader right-wing reactionary movement that has developed in France since the late 1970s.[126] From the early 2000s

onward, this right-wing reactionary movement has gained visibility and influence in public discourse and media debates in France. This has helped heighten the salience of FN issues in the mainstream political space and media, and it has had a strong influence on both elites and public opinion, thus somewhat facilitating the amalgamation of the mainstream and populist radical right.

Looking at the evolution of the mainstream right since the mid-1980s, this chapter argues that the recent reorientation of *Les Républicains* (LR) under the new leadership of Éric Ciotti and Laurent Wauquiez has been marked with a significant radical-right turn, which is taking LR closer than ever to the RN. Once the dominant party of the right pole of French politics, LR is now reduced to a minor flanking party. Such marginalisation casts doubt on the viability of the post-Gaullist right in the tripolar party system that has consolidated in the 2022 elections, and which is currently dominated by the radical left, Macron's Renaissance, and the RN.

Finally, we look at the extent to which such radicalisation has contaminated other political forces to the left and centre of French politics, and the impact it may have more broadly on liberal democracy in France. The radicalisation of the mainstream right participates in the erosion of democracy. LR's strategic repositioning in the political space may herald a significant reconfiguration of the right pole of French politics in the future, with an increasingly normalised RN as its dominant force.

5.2 The mainstream and populist radical right in France

Since the mid-1980s, the French right has been split into the mainstream and the populist radical right. Historically, the mainstream right in France has been divided into two main families, namely, the conservative Gaullists and non-Gaullist liberal centrists. These two strands of the right are characterised by different trajectories and ideologies, as well as internal ideological heterogeneity.[127]

5.2.1 The two strands of the mainstream right

The Gaullists represent the conservative pole of the mainstream right in France. They have traditionally been defenders of national independence and national sovereignty and, therefore, more sceptical of European integration. They are proponents of strong leadership and keepers of the institutions of the Fifth Republic as the legacy of De Gaulle. In contrast, centrists have traditionally supported more progressive and culturally liberal policies, and they have been more supportive of federalism and a more integrated EU. They also have historically been more open to institutional reform and modernisation.

The bulk of the Gaullists is now found in LR, which is the successor party of the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP) that was formed as an electoral umbrella for the French right in the early 2000s. The centrist component remained relatively marginal throughout the 2000s, and it was embodied in the *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) led by François Bayrou. In 2017, Emmanuel Macron's newly formed LREM took over this "independent" political centre, winning moderate voters from both left and right.[128] Since 2017, Macron has moved towards the right of French politics, both in policy terms and by accommodating former conservative right elites, such as Edouard Philippe, Bruno Lemaire and Gérald Darmanin. Such a move has presented a significant challenge for LR: in the 2022 presidential election, a substantial share of previous LR voters – nearly four in ten – defected to Macron.[179] As Jaffré demonstrates, there has been a significant shift to the right among Macron voters: in 2017, 27% placed themselves to the right compared with 45% in 2022.[129]

5.2.2 The populist radical right

Turning to the populist radical right, it is currently represented by two parties in France, Marine Le Pen's RN (previously FN) and Éric Zemmour's *Reconquête!*. The FN, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, made its first electoral breakthrough in the 1980s, politicising cultural issues of immigration and law and order. Since her accession in 2011, Marine Le Pen has set a new trajectory for her party, seeking to shed its extremist profile to gain legitimacy and maximise electoral support. While keeping with the nativist, authoritarian and populist agenda of the old FN, Le Pen has taken her party to the economic left in response to the many economic anxieties produced by the succession of crises, namely, the 2008 financial crisis, Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine.[130]

Alongside the RN, the 2022 elections have witnessed the electoral rise of former newspaper columnist and media pundit Éric Zemmour. A political newcomer, Zemmour founded a new party, *Reconquête,* and he mounted a presidential campaign within only a few months. He won just over 7% of the first-round vote, splitting the populist radical right, while simultaneously winning a substantial number of former conservative right voters who had previously supported LR in 2017.[131]

Recent analysis confirms that Zemmour shares the core defining ideological features of the populist radical right, showing its typical nativist, authoritarian and populist ideology. Unlike Le Pen, however, Zemmour's radical-right ideology is combined with liberal market economics, and reactionary right-wing, anti-feminist and sexist positions. Finally, his campaign showed strong criticism of key liberal values, such as minority rights and the role of the judiciary, which placed Zemmour closer to the extreme right.[132]

Zemmour's extremist profile contrasts with Le Pen's strategy of normalisation, which has essentially been to "detoxify" the party's far-right reputation since the early 2010s. Negative partisanship towards Le Pen has been declining in recent years, and electoral support for the RN has been steadily increasing: in the 2022 presidential runoff, Le Pen won a total 41.5% of the vote compared with 17.8% for her father in the 2002 election. According to the December 2023 Barometer of RN image, only 41% believed that the RN posed a danger to democracy, compared with 58% in 2017 and up to 70% twenty years earlier, reflecting its normalisation.[133]

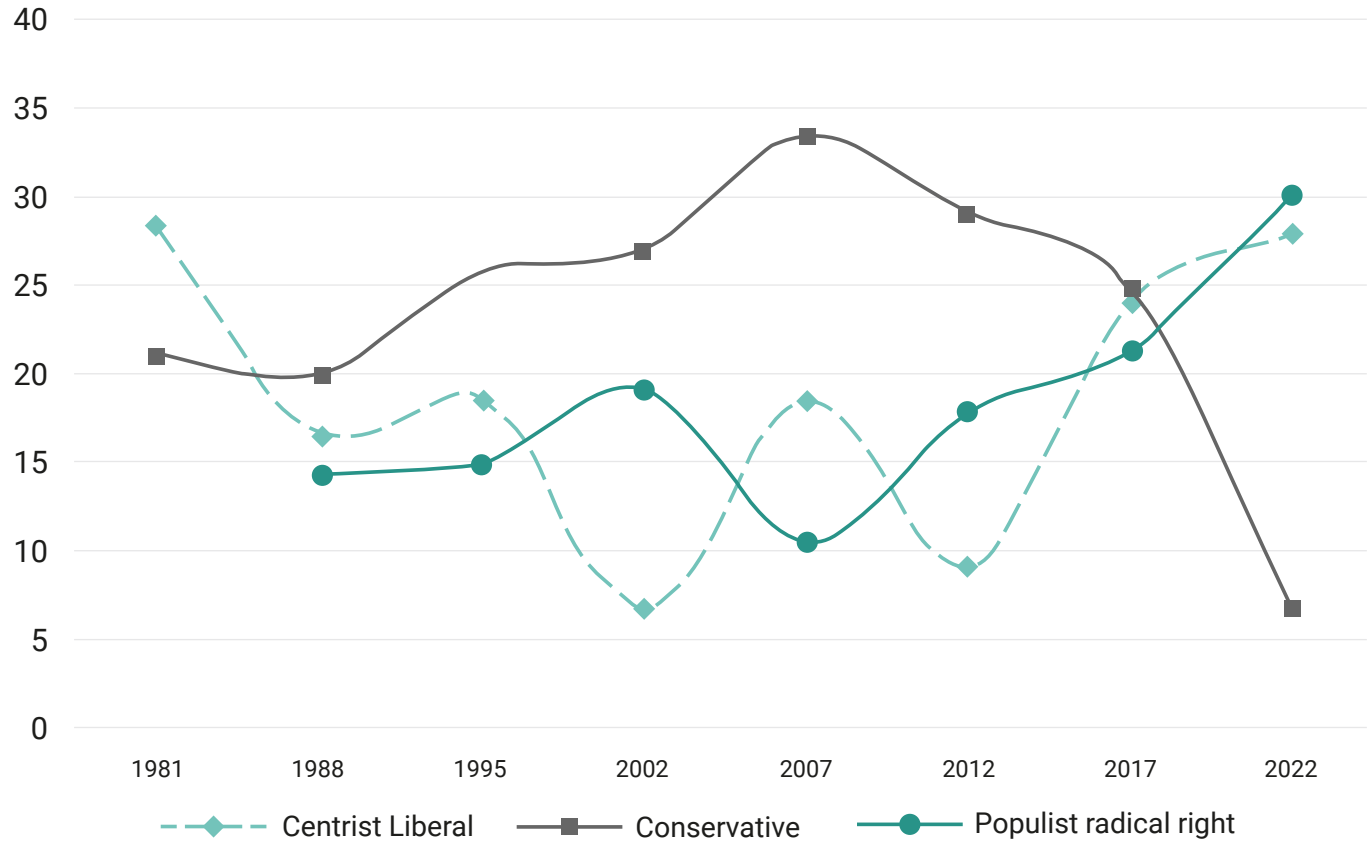
5.2.3 Electoral trends

Recent elections in France have attested to substantial changes in the balance of forces both across and within the main political blocs. One of the most significant reorientations has been the electoral collapse of LR since 2007 (see Figure 39). Once the dominant force in French politics – holding the presidency between 1965 and 1981, and again between 1995 and 2012 – the conservative right found itself at its historical low in the 2022 elections, with presidential candidate Valérie Pécresse winning just under 5% of the first-round vote, compared with an average of about 24.5% throughout the 2000-2010s. In the 2022 legislative elections, LR managed to secure only 62 seats, down from an average 260 over the past two decades.

Meanwhile, Emmanuel Macron has established a credible centre-right alternative, adopting a liberal market and pro-European agenda, winning two successive presidential elections in 2017 and 2022. Since 2017, Macron has significantly moved to the right both on the economy and on cultural issues, such as immigration, which increased his appeal to former conservative voters in the 2022 elections. His party, LREM, renamed *Renaissance*, failed to achieve an overall majority in the 2022 legislative elections, however,

essentially reflecting growing public discontent with his style of presidency and the economic fallout of the war in Ukraine.[134]

Figure 39. Electoral results in presidential elections of right-wing parties in France since 1981.



Note: % of first-round valid votes cast in presidential elections;

Centrist Liberal: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1981); Raymond Barre (1988); Edouard Balladur (1995, UDF support to Gaullist candidate); François Bayrou (2002, 2007, 2012); Emmanuel Macron (2017, 2022)

Conservative: Jacques Chirac (1981, 1988, 1995, 2002); Nicolas Sarkozy (2007, 2012); François Fillon (2017); Valérie Pécresse (2022)

Populist Radical Right: Jean-Marie Le Pen (1988, 1995); Jean-Marie Le Pen + Bruno Mégret (2002); Marine Le Pen (2012, 2017); Marine Le Pen + Éric Zemmour (2022)

Finally, one important development has been the rise in support for the populist radical right, the diversification of its electoral base and its institutionalisation in the 2022 elections. Together, Le Pen and Zemmour won 30.2% of the first-round vote (see Figure 39). Le Pen herself captured 23.2% and progressed into the runoff against Emmanuel Macron, winning 41.5% of the vote and over 13 million votes, by far the highest level of support ever achieved by the RN/FN. In the legislative elections, the RN won an unexpected and historical 89 seats, making it the largest single opposition party in the National Assembly.

5.3 The radicalisation of the mainstream right

France is a relevant case to study the potential conversion of the mainstream right into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right. Such a long-term process of adjustment and transformation has been amply documented in the literature, and it may be seen as a response to both party competition and public opinion, with regards to immigration and multiculturalism.[135]

Historically, in France, debates about immigration have been linked to a wide array of socio-political issues, including Muslim integration into society – as illustrated by the many controversies over the Islamic veil, burqas and mosques – socio economic inequality, urban unrest and Islamic terrorism.[136] Over time, mainstream parties of the right have adjusted their political agenda to the rising salience of immigration issues. Such vote-seeking strategies were at play as early as in the 1970s, that is, prior to the electoral breakthrough of the FN. In 1973, the first oil shock and the economic recession that followed had already led the centre-right President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to adopt more restrictive immigration policies, claiming to halt labour immigration to the country.[137]

From the mid-1980s onwards, the electoral rise of the FN has represented a new competitive challenge for the mainstream right, however. The politicisation of immigration and crime by the FN has resulted in a new cultural dimension for party competition with which traditional parties of the right have had to realign themselves.[138] Restrictive and repressive policies introduced in the areas of immigration and law and order have been generally interpreted as a reaction by the moderate right to the electoral entrenchment of the FN within the party system.[139]

These developments have not been monotonic, however, and they have also been dependent upon the balance of forces between different ideological factions within the French right at any specific point in time. Drawing from Evans and Ivaldi,[140] this section looks at the radicalisation of the mainstream right in France over five main periods since the early 1980s, which are characterised by significant variation in party supply and strategy (see Table 2).

Table 2. Main phases of the mainstream right in France since 1981.

Period	Leadership	Strategy	Cultural issues	Europe
The FN entry phase (1981-1991)	Chirac	Sporadic cooperation with the FN at the local level	Co-optation of FN cultural issues (immigration, law and order) Cultural conservatism continued from previous period	Gaullist move towards pro-EU positions
Exclusion of the FN (1992-2004)	Chirac, Juppé	Cordon sanitaire; Republican Front	Stability of right-wing cultural agenda and policies	Gaullist support of Maastricht
The Sarkozy period of national-identity politics (2005-2012)	Sarkozy	Cordon sanitaire; "neither the FN nor the left" strategy	Persistence of right-wing cultural agenda Co-optation of FN ethno-cultural agenda and identity politics	UMP support to the ECT and Lisbon Treaty Soft Eurosceptic narratives
Fillon and the social-conservative agenda (2013-2022)	Copé, Wauquiez, Jacob		LR shift towards social conservatism and reactionary right	Soft Euroscepticism
The radical-right turn (2023-)	Wauquiez, Ciotti	"Neither the RN nor the left" strategy	Nativist policies National sovereignty claims Culture war against "wokeism"	Euroscepticism

Source: Adapted and updated from Evans and Ivaldi (2021).

5.3.1 Competing with the FN during its entry phase

As early as the mid-1980s, the RPR/UDF coalition of centrists and Gaullists tried and adjusted their positions on immigration and crime to the expectations and concerns of those voters who were beginning to desert them and turn to the FN.[141] This was evident, for instance, in the policies adopted by the RPR/UDF in 1986/88 and again in 1993/97, as well as in the controversial symbolics and narratives by right-wing party leaders, such as hardliner Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua, to regain ground among FN voters.[142]

Such process primarily concerned shifts towards more restrictive immigration and tougher law-and-order policies. Meanwhile, the mainstream right would essentially continue to operate within the liberal democratic

system and comply with international human rights conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, with respect to areas such as migrant family reunion, for instance. Parties of the mainstream right would also retain the core principles of republican secularism, while preserving birthright (*jus soli*, right of soil) as the basis for French citizenship, and explicitly rejecting FN nativism.

5.3.2 The political exclusion of the FN

After sporadic episodes of local cooperation with the FN in the mid-1980s, the mainstream right, under the leadership of Chirac and Alain Juppé, moved towards moral condemnation and political exclusion of the populist radical right. Essentially the mainstream right adopted two strategies of exclusion with respect to the FN: (1) a *cordon sanitaire*, whereby parties of the right would refuse to ally with the FN; and (2) a *Front Républicain* (Republican Front) consisting of ad hoc alliances of parties across the spectrum wherever and whenever a populist radical-right candidate would be likely to win a decisive round in elections.[143]

Throughout the 1990s, inter-party competition on immigration became progressively framed by the ethno-cultural agenda of the FN, however, as Le Pen's party was increasingly gaining visibility and electoral strength. As Schain explains, during that period, the definition of immigration issues made a transition from "a labour-market problem to an integration/incorporation problem, to a problem that touches on national identity, problems of education, housing, law and order, as well as the requirements for citizenship".[144] The post-9/11 international context and the 2005 urban riots in France further exacerbated cultural xenophobia, fuelling immigration fears and negative feelings towards Islam.[145] The 2002 presidential election reflected the growth in support for the populist radical right, as Le Pen progressed to the second-round runoff against Chirac, winning 17.8% of the vote.

5.3.3 Sarkozy's national-identity politics

A significant shift occurred during the period of Nicolas Sarkozy's leadership over the UMP right-wing coalition between 2005 and 2012. As Marthaler suggests, Sarkozy's discourse and action on immigration control and integration diverged in significant respects from earlier centre-right handling of these issues, changing the terms of the immigration debate in France, as a response to political competition with the populist radical right, and to growing concerns about immigration from the general public.[146]

Under Sarkozy, the mainstream right co-opted the FN's ethno-cultural agenda, explicitly linking immigration with crime, welfare abuse and – most importantly – national identity.[147] This shift was reflected, for instance, in Sarkozy's account of the urban riots of 2005, whereby Sarkozy linked violence to problems of social disintegration allegedly inherent in the multiplication of polygamous families, thus turning to ethno-cultural narratives and racial categorisation.

Such politicisation of immigration was further illustrated in the controversial creation of the ministry of immigration and national identity in 2007; the launch of a nationwide debate on national identity in November 2009; Sarkozy's recognition of France having "Christian roots" and the inflammatory speech that he gave in Grenoble in July 2010, in which he declared a "war on crime", while announcing the deportation of Roma.

Until Sarkozy, parties of the right had been more cautious not to relate immigration issues to national identity because of the strong negative connotation inherited from the Vichy regime during World War II.[148]

The national-identity turn reflected both changes in the immigration debate, from socio-economic to cultural terms, and the pervasiveness of the ethno-cultural differentialist agenda of the New Right, which had been brought to the FN by intellectuals such as Bruno Mégret, Jean-Yves Le Gallou and other members of the *Club de l'Horloge*.

Put into historical perspective, the reorientation of the mainstream right under Sarkozy more largely borrowed from the ideological corpus of the French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*). Blistering attacks on the so-called hegemonic "egalitarian dogma" and "permissive" political philosophy of the left were key to Sarkozy's electioneering, providing the basis for his tough stance on law and order, and his pledge to restore traditional social hierarchies and duties. Additionally, Sarkozy sought to portray himself as spokesman of the "silent majority" against the supposed "permissiveness" of cultural elites, which evokes a populist framing.

The early stage of Sarkozy's leadership was marked with the electoral collapse of the FN. In the 2007 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen polled a mere 10.4% of the votes cast, compared with his previous performance of 2002 (16.9%). In the subsequent legislative elections, the FN's score dropped down to 4.3%, which plunged the party into a deep internal crisis over ideology, future strategy and leadership, not to mention critical financial losses entailed by the candidates' poor showing in the polls. Electorally, the mainstream right-wing UMP was the main beneficiary of the electoral losses by the FN in 2007.[149]

In terms of party strategy, the electoral debacle of the FN, which corresponded with the end of Jean-Marie Le Pen's period of leadership, temporarily made the cordon sanitaire and Republican Front irrelevant to the mainstream right. By the end of the period, however, the electoral revitalisation of the FN under Marine Le Pen put the Republican Front strategy under greater strain, which led the mainstream right to adopt an ambiguous "neither/nor" stance in cases where the FN would compete locally against parties of the left.[150] Such a strategy was inaugurated in the 2011 cantonal elections, and it has been the rule in virtually all local and legislative elections since then.

5.3.4 Fillon and the social-conservative agenda

The mainstream right continued its rightward shift on the cultural dimension in the post-Sarkozy era, showing an ever-growing divide between centrist liberals, such as former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, and conservative hardliners within LR. During the 2010s, immigration issues regained salience in the context of the 2015 Paris and 2016 Nice terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, the 2015 refugee crisis fuelled immigration fears and electoral support for the FN.[151]

In 2017, the presidential candidacy of former Prime Minister François Fillon against Juppé attested to the persistence of LR factionalism. Moreover, Fillon came closer to right-wing reactionary social movements, such as by *Manif' pour Tous* and *Sens Commun*, which had strongly campaigned against the same-sex marriage law passed by the socialist government in 2013, thus aligning his presidential bid with the preferences of core conservative voters.[152] This essentially concerned gay rights, however, as Fillon was more careful not to endorse the far-right's agenda on abortion or gender, which would go against a predominantly culturally liberal trend in French public opinion.[153]

Such a social-conservative turn on moral issues, together with the perpetuation of Sarkozy's hardline strategy on immigration and hard stance on law and order, represented yet another significant departure from the more moderate social conservatism of the past, opening a wider space for Macron at the centre-right of French politics. In the 2017 presidential election, Fillon failed to progress to the second round, coming in

third place behind Macron and Le Pen, at 20% of the vote. Such failure was partly linked to a political scandal after allegations that Fillon's wife had been paid for a fake job. More importantly, however, the outcome of the 2017 election suggested that, while Sarkozy's policy radicalisation had been a successful strategy in 2007, it had nevertheless eroded the mainstream right's capacity to develop a credible program to effectively compete against a renewed and progressively de-demonising the FN.

The leadership of Laurent Wauquiez between December 2017 and June 2019, and his choice of Catholic hardliner and *Sens Commun* activist, François-Xavier Bellamy, to lead LR's list in the 2019 European elections reflected such an ideological reconfiguration of the mainstream right, and the party's attempt to appeal to its increasingly ageing and bourgeois electorate. LR's European platform promoted a civilisationist vision of Europe, pledging, for instance, to enshrine Europe's "Judeo-Christian roots, Greco-Roman heritage, and the Enlightenment in European treaties".[154] Bellamy's list won a mere 8.5% of the vote in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, which were dominated by the RN and Macron's LREM. Moreover, LR's electoral debacle in the 2019 EP elections showed deep internal divisions over ideology and strategy within the right, which opposed Macron-compatible centrist liberals, on one hand, and right-wing hardliners leaning towards the RN, on the other hand.

Internal fractionalisation was perpetuated in the 2022 elections. The December 2021 presidential primary opposed right-wing hardliner Éric Ciotti to Valérie Pécresse, head of the Paris region and former Minister under Chirac, who represented moderates within the party. While she won 61% of the primary vote, Pécresse would need to accommodate the radical sector of LR, adopting a tougher stance on immigration and law and order. During the presidential campaign, she promised a "good stiff dose of authority" and suggested "building walls at the external borders of the EU". She proposed "immigration quotas" as well as a "referendum on immigration, security and secularism", while alluding to extreme-right themes such as "the great replacement" – without formally endorsing it.

This eventually resulted in significant swathes of moderate right-wing voters turning to Emmanuel Macron in the 2022 presidential election.[155] In the first round, support for Pécresse dramatically collapsed to just under 5% of the vote, the right's lowest performance ever since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Pécresse's failure paved the way for hardliners Eric Ciotti and Laurent Wauquiez within LR's leadership.

5.3.5 A radical-right turn of the mainstream right

The more recent period of the mainstream right under the new leadership of Ciotti, since his winning the leadership with 53.7% of the membership vote at the party congress of December 2022, has been marked by a shift further to the right, which has taken LR closer to the RN, in both discourse and policy. This shift concerns four main areas: immigration; crime; European integration; and moral values.

The Ciotti leadership has been marked with a clear radical-right turn, adopting RN nativism. The nativist shift had already surfaced in the 2019 European election, when LR had proposed that "migrant boats should be systematically returned to African coasts", while pledging to put an end to "automatic access to social benefits for non-Europeans".[156] In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti endorsed the extreme-right conspiracy theory of the "great replacement", claiming that he was "the candidate of a people who refuse to disappear […] proud to embody the heritage of our Judeo-Christian civilisation so that France remains France, particularly in the face of mass immigration and the rise of Islamist communitarianism (cultural separatism)".[157] Ciotti has also proposed a ban on wearing the Islamic veil for minors and users of public services, and that the "Judeo-Christian roots" of France should be enshrined in the constitution.[158]

Meanwhile Ciotti has adopted RN nativist policy positions, such as the systematic deportation of criminal and delinquent foreigners, and that of "radicalised" foreigners turning to *jus sanguinis* for citizenship – against France's long-established tradition of *jus soli* – putting an end to immigrant family reunion, as well as establishing national and European priority for jobs, social housing and social benefits. In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti explicitly linked crime to immigration, calling for a halt to "mass immigration". During the riots of July 2023, LR's plan to restore public order clearly accentuated such culturalisation of urban violence, by stating "the causes of these riots are multiple: hatred of France, uncontrolled migratory flows, juvenile delinquency, parental irresponsibility, insufficiently dissuasive penal response, and submission to the yoke of drug traffickers in France's suburbs".[159]

Such reorientation was partly translated into the policy plan put forward by LR in June 2023 to "stop mass immigration". As stated in the plan, "the objective is to affirm France's national sovereignty [...] An immense effort is now necessary to put things back in order if we are to emerge from the migratory chaos, and to regain control". The plan adopted the RN's idea of cultural separatism, by claiming that "no one may become French unless they can prove assimilation into the French community", adding "no one may take advantage of their origin or religion to evade the laws of the Republic and exempt themselves from complying with common rules". Additionally, the plan called for facilitating deportations of undocumented migrants and foreign offenders. It also included drastic control of social and medical aid, in particular the emergency healthcare available to migrants (*Aide Médicale d'État*-AME) described as the "suction pumps" of immigration, again appropriating an old theme of the FN.[160] Reflecting, however, intra-party factionalism and the persistence of a more moderate group of elites within LR, the plan was limited to imposing new restrictions on *jus soli* by excluding children born from undocumented immigrants.

This nativist turn has been accompanied by national sovereignty claims that have taken LR further away from the more pro-EU stances under the Chirac and Sarkozy periods of leadership and closer to the Eurosceptic agenda of the RN. During the 1990s, the mainstream right had progressively moved towards more pro-EU positions, in contrast to the old Gaullist agenda of national sovereignty and independence during the 1970s. By 1992, the main parties of the right were supportive of European integration, campaigning in favour of "yes" in the Maastricht referendum.[161]

After the "no" vote of the French to the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) in the 2005 referendum, Sarkozy adopted a soft Eurosceptic tone, castigating EU "bureaucracy", while calling for the adoption of a "simplified treaty", which somewhat helped him reconcile pro- and anti-EU voters of the right, particularly among working-class and lower-middle-class voters, who had turned to the "no" vote in the ECT referendum.[162]

The recent Eurosceptic drift has been clear in the adoption by LR of the RN's plan to hold a constitutional referendum to restore the primacy of French law over European directives in the areas of immigration and security. Such national sovereignty claims were translated into policy and formally incorporated into LR's immigration plan in June 2023, which proposed an organic law that would "constitute a constitutional shield protecting national legislative provisions from the stipulations of international law". This constitutional change would make it possible to enshrine in the constitution the possibility of derogating from the primacy of treaties and European law "in order to ensure respect for the constitutional identity of France or the safeguarding of the fundamental interests of the Nation",[163] thus going against one of the founding principles of the EU and contradicting the obligations of EU membership.

Consistent with the previous social-conservative agenda of LR under Fillon, the Ciotti leadership has also continued with the defence of moral values, claiming that the French should be "freed from political correctness and the taboos dictated by the single mindset (*pensée unique*) of the left". Reflecting a broader

movement in French media and politics,[164] LR has imported themes and ideas from the American culture war, most particularly with respect to fighting the so-called "wokeism", that is, all "dogmas" that would supposedly be imposed on France by the political and cultural left. During the 2022 election, Pécresse had already denounced "wokeism" as "contrary to the [French] Republic". In his primary campaign, Ciotti pledged to put an end to "wokeist madness" in French schools and universities.[165]

Such a notion of wokeism has been tied to that of *Islamo-gauchisme* (Islamo-leftism), namely, the idea of an alliance between leftist and Islamist political ideologies over issues such as race, decolonisation, feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. Ciotti has launched numerous attacks on LREM and left-wing politicians, such as Grenoble Mayor Éric Piolle, accusing them of being the "champions of Islamo-leftism".[166] The political manipulation of the concept of "Islamo-leftism" was further illustrated in the decision by Laurent Wauquiez, president of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional council, in December 2021 to put an end to the €100,000 public subsidy to the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Grenoble due to its alleged "ideological and communitarian drift".[167]

The adoption by LR of the ideas and themes of the American culture war has been progressively translating into policy. In November 2023, the LR parliamentary group in the Senate put forward a new bill to ban gender-inclusive writing (*écriture inclusive*) from official texts, thus going against a long-running battle by feminist movements to make the French language more inclusive.

As during previous periods of mainstream right radicalisation, such shifts must be seen as a response by LR to both party competition and public opinion. Polls show significant concerns over immigration among the French. According to a Fondapol survey conducted in the 2022 elections, 63% of voters think that "most immigrants do not share the values of our country and that this poses a challenge for coexistence".[168] The "great replacement" conspiracy theory has permeated public opinion. Almost half of voters (47%) said they agreed that "populations of foreign origin will end up being the majority in France". Such opinion was predominant among right-wing voters: 52% of Valérie Pécresse's voters; 61% of Marine Le Pen's voters; and 83% of Éric Zemmour's voters .

In March 2023, no fewer than 59% of the French agreed that "Islam represents a threat to the Republic", while another 61% called for "a good dose of authority and law-and-order instead of more rights".[169] Recent polls indicate a hardening of attitudes towards the reception of migrants and refugees. In September 2023, 65% of the French population opposed the reception of migrants from Lampedusa, as opposed to 47% against the reception of Syrian refugees in September 2015 and 59% in January 2018 [170]

5.4 A broader right-wing reactionary movement

Put into historical perspective, the radicalisation of the mainstream right should be placed in the context of the broader right-wing reactionary movement that has developed in France since the late 1970s and which has gained strength since the early 2000s.[171] This movement initially emerged from the New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*) as an attempt to contest the "cultural hegemony" of the left, and it has been embodied in think tanks such as the *GRECE*, *Club de l'Horloge, AGRIF* and *Comités d'Action Républicaine*. The New Right's national-liberal-authoritarian ideological synthesis has set the basis for structuring the "right-of-the-Right" pole of national politics in the late 1970s before reshaping the FN ideological agenda during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Such a movement is embodied by cultural elites, including journalists such as Yvan Rioufol and Elisabeth Lévy, essayists such as Eric Zemmour and philosophers such as Alain Finkielkraut. These elites produce a

profusion of literature, public discourses and media debates, offering new interpretative frames for socio-economic and cultural issues, which tend to transgress the boundaries of legitimate political discourse.

Unlike the *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1970s and the 1980s, which had relatively little public visibility, the current conservative movement operates within the mainstream, with regular access to major media outlets, for example, TV channel C-News, radio station Europe 1, and newspapers and magazines such as Paris Match and *Le Journal du Dimanche*, all owned by right-wing conservative media mogul Vincent Bolloré. Such media presence is complemented with the development of online right-wing politics in France. The web is host to a vast array of right-wing conservative and extremist actors, providing a space for the diffusion of their critique of the progressive left and propagation of their counter-cultural discourses.[172]

Since the early 2000s, this right-wing reactionary movement has gained increased visibility and influence in public discourse and media debates in France.[173] It has helped increase the salience of FN issues in the mainstream political space and media, and it has had a strong influence on both elites and public opinion, thus somewhat facilitating the amalgamation of the mainstream and populist radical right. In December 2023, one third of the French population said they subscribed to Le Pen's ideas, the highest level recorded since the mid-2010s, while another 43% said that the RN is now capable of governing, as opposed to 25% when Marine Le Pen took over the party in 2011.[174]

5.5 Conclusion: Challenges to the left and liberal democracy

To conclude, we look at the impact that the radicalisation of the mainstream right has had on the social-democratic left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy in France.

5.5.1 Implications for the social-democratic left

Social democracy is in a state of deep crisis in France. Once the dominant party on the left, the Parti Socialiste (PS) received its worst results in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections. On both occasions, voters delivered severe blows to socialist candidates, with Benoit Hamon and Anne Hidalgo polling a mere 6.4 and 1.8% of the first-round vote, respectively. Meanwhile, the elections have shown a rise in support for Mélenchon's populist radical left at 19.6 and 22% of the vote share in 2017 and 2022, respectively.

Such a structural collapse of social democracy is only partly related to the rise of the populist radical right. Historically, the mainstream left in France, like the right, has faced the growing electoral strength of the populist radical right, particularly among working-class voters previously attached to left-wing parties and who have defected in numbers to the FN/RN since the late 1980s.[175] In the 2022 presidential runoff election, Le Pen won no fewer than 67 and 57% of the votes among working-class and lower-middle-class white-collar workers, respectively[176].

The main factors for the decline of PS lie elsewhere, however. As argued by Chabal and Behrent, attitudes towards neoliberalism became a major line of fracture within the party during the 1990s, splitting the party between social-liberals and social-statists.[177] Such a division was accentuated during the Hollande socialist presidency between 2012 and 2017. The latter was characterised by significant policy shifts in both the cultural and economic dimensions of competition. Firstly, while preserving adversarial strategies with respect to the populist radical right, the Hollande presidency took a rightist turn on law and order in the wake of the Islamic terrorist attacks of 2015, which alienated the cultural left and the Greens.[178] Secondly, as Fulla

explains, the adoption by Hollande of social liberalism and supply-side economic policies alienated core socialist voters, also causing deep internal dissent within the PS.[179]

Since 2017, the socialist left has grappled with the consolidation of both Macron and La France Insoumise (LFI). In the 2022 legislatives, despite ideological divergences, the PS entered an alliance with LFI, *de facto* accepting Mélenchon's leadership over the left. Meanwhile, Macron's party, as a central force in the national party system, intersecting between the left and the right, continues to mobilise among moderate centre-left and right voters, thus largely depriving the social-democratic left of the opportunity to recruit voters who may feel abandoned by the mainstream right due to its radicalisation.

As elsewhere in Europe, the future of social democracy in France lies in its ability to articulate a new vision and credible policy agenda, prioritising social justice and equality, tackling climate change, while also addressing identity and security issues that have become paramount in the eyes of French voters, particularly in the working and lower middle classes. In a context marked with rising rates of abstention, the PS needs to speak to disenfranchised voters and mobilise across marginalised sectors of society. Socialists still have a strong presence at the local and regional levels, which may serve as a basis for a comeback in national politics, while also providing a reservoir of new elites. Strategically, the PS also needs to distance itself from Mélenchon's LFI and to reposition itself to the centre-left of French politics.

Until recently, because of his role as a central force in the national party system, intersecting between the left and the right, Macron has been able to mobilise among moderate centre-left and right voters, thus largely depriving the social-democratic left of the opportunity to recruit voters who may feel abandoned by the mainstream right due to its radicalisation. The 2023 pension reform and controversial immigration bill have signalled a significant policy shift to the right by Macron, however, which may alienate his previous left-wing supporters. Macron's party itself was deeply divided over the new immigration law in December 2023, as a substantial number of Renaissance MPs – about one in four – particularly on the left side of the party, voted against the bill or abstained. As Macron will not seek re-election in 2027, the next presidential election may see a return to a more traditional bipolar competition, which may open a space for the PS to recapture the left-wing vote lost to Macron since 2017.

5.5.2 Challenges to liberal democracy

Finally, the radicalisation of the mainstream right increasingly represents a challenge to liberal democracy in France. The adoption by LR of a radical-right agenda is exerting significant pressure on Emmanuel Macron's centrist government. This was recently illustrated by the passing of the immigration bill in December 2023with the support of both LR and the RN. The LR group proposed, among other things, the elimination of state medical aid and revoking birthright citizenship. Additionally, LR senators suggested tightening family reunification rules and reinstating the offense of illegal stay for undocumented immigrants. The final bill contained hardline measures such as reduced access to welfare benefits for foreigners, which allowed Le Pen to claim the new law as an "ideological victory" for her party's idea of "national preference".

The immigration bill has also seen LR adopting a populist rhetoric opposing core constitutional principles. The mainstream right has joined the RN in warning against an unfavourable decision by France's Constitutional Court regarding the conformity of the new law, suggesting it would then be a "politically motivated decision". LR leaders such as Wauquiez seized the opportunity to claim that, if the law were repelled, "the French people should have the final say through a referendum".[180] Such criticism was widely echoed by right-wing media of

the Bolloré group, which denounced a "government of judges", while arguing that the rule of law ultimately constrains popular sovereignty.[181]

The nativist shift by LR also involves questioning fundamental principles outlined in international conventions on human rights and the role of international courts, especially the European Court of Human Rights, breaking with the attitude of the conservative right in previous periods. Ciotti has embraced illiberal views, claiming to "give back their voice to the people through the use of referendum", while vowing to fight against the "taboos of political correctness" and to "free France from the yoke of the European Court of Human Rights". In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti went as far as to propose a "French Guantánamo" to deal with terrorism.[182]

Another significant indicator of this illiberal drift is LR's stance towards extreme-right groups. Alongside the radicalisation of the conservative right in France, there has recently been a resurgence of political violence and street activism from extreme-right groups, such as *Les Natifs*, *Guignol Squad* or the *Division Martel*, with links to the hooligan movement, and roots in the identitarian movement. During extreme-right demonstrations and marches in November 2023, following the murder of a 16-year-old boy in the Drôme department, Ciotti initially refused to condemn the violent actions of extreme-right members in Romans-sur-Isère before retracting his statement. Meanwhile, he referred to the murder as yet another "consequence of mass immigration" and "anti-White racism", which is an old FN idea.[183]

Finally, in terms of party strategy, Ciotti's leadership has been marked by the waning of the *cordon sanitaire*, as Ciotti further distanced himself from the political centre by announcing his intention to endorse Éric Zemmour in a possible presidential runoff against Macron. Unlike Pécresse and other moderates within LR, Ciotti crucially refused to endorse Macron in the 2022 presidential runoff against Le Pen, leaving the door open to supporting the radical-right candidate.

Overall, France illustrates the role of political elites in exploiting the chronic vulnerabilities of democracy. As recently suggested by Bartels, democracy essentially erodes from the "top".[184] The ideological radicalisation of LR participates in such an erosion of democracy. The success of the populist radical right in France is not so much a reflection of growing nativist and authoritarian attitudes among voters, but a reflection of how populist entrepreneurs successfully politicise such issues and raise their salience.[185]

Put into historical perspective, one lesson from the French case is that the policy radicalisation of the mainstream right may be a successful strategy in the short term – as illustrated by Sarkozy's electoral success in the early 2000s – but it may significantly erode its capacity to develop a credible program in the long run. The strategic repositioning of the mainstream right may herald a significant reconfiguration of the right pole of French politics in the future, with an increasingly normalised RN as its dominant force.

6. NO ONE TO OUR RIGHT? THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN GERMANY AND ITS IMPACT ON (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

6. NO ONE TO OUR RIGHT? THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN GERMANY AND ITS IMPACT ON (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

ANNA-SOPHIE HEINZE AND SANNA SALO

6.1 Introduction

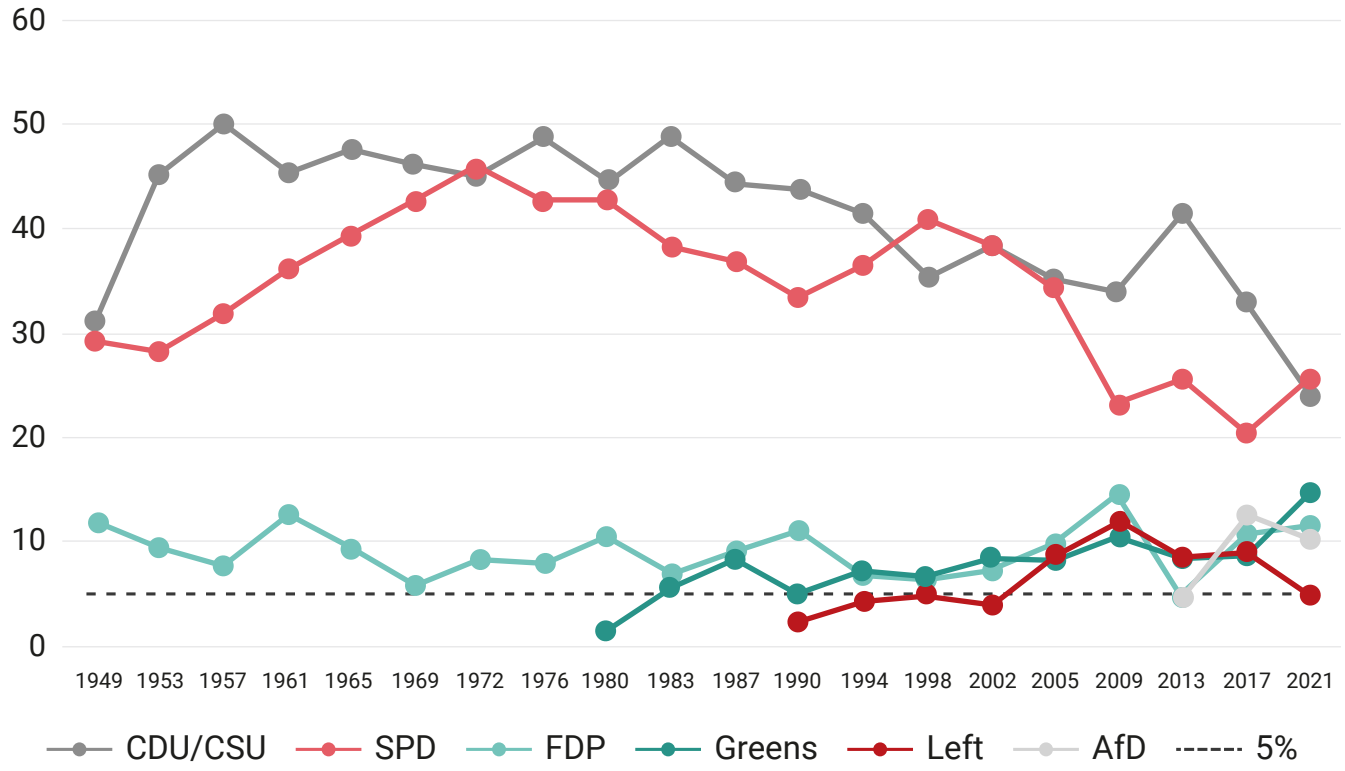
In this chapter, we analyse the potential radicalisation of the German centre-right in response to the growth of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) in the past decade, and its implications for German democracy in general and social democracy in particular. Our focus is on two centre-right parties, the Christian Democrats (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*/*Christlich-Soziale Union* in Bavaria, CDU/CSU) and the liberal Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP). We analyse the potential radicalisation of the CDU/CSU and the FDP with respect to three aspects: (1) whether or not, and to what extent, the centre-right parties have been willing to *cooperate* with the AfD; (2) whether the CDU/CSU and FDP have *shifted* their policy positions towards the far right, notably on immigration issues; and (3) whether the centre-right has *adopted* policy ideas that challenge the key pillars of liberal democracy, such as the protection of minorities or freedom of speech. Our analysis covers both the federal and state levels, taking into account the multi-level system in Germany.

Our findings show that the centre-right has not (yet) "radicalised" in response to the AfD, but there are initial signs. The "firewall" against cooperating with the AfD has already been broken at the subnational level, and the CDU/CSU and FDP have partly adopted rhetoric that is clearly influenced by the AfD. Due to their position as the most relevant centre-right mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU and FDP have a crucial gatekeeper role when it comes to preventing (or promoting) the spread of far-right positions and frames among the public sphere, which makes these developments all the more worrying.

6.2 Mainstream right and populist radical right in Germany

For a long time, Germany was considered a blind spot on the European map without a successful radical right party. In general, the party system was relatively stable for decades. Until the end of the 1970s, the "two and a half party system" was concentrated on two catch-all parties, the CDU/CSU and Social Democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), and the smaller FDP. In the 1980s, the Greens joined them, and in the 1990s (after German reunification) the PDS/Left (see Figure 40).

Figure 40. Election results for Bundestag elections 1949-2021.



Source: Own representation with data from Deutscher Bundestag.

Founded in 2013, the AfD managed to enter all 16 state parliaments, the German Bundestag and the European Parliament in the years that followed – something that previous far-right parties always failed to do.[186] The AfD was founded as a Eurosceptic party around former CDU politician Alexander Gauland and economics professor Bernd Lucke. Its core concern at the time was the rejection of the crisis management measures of the EU and the German government. The AfD advocated the dissolution of the euro and called for a return to a Europe of sovereign states.[187] It first contested the 2013 Bundestag election, but narrowly missed the 5% threshold. In 2015, Lucke lost the party leadership to Frauke Petry, a shift that is associated with the transformation of the AfD into a fully fledged radical-right party, whose core messages are anti-immigration and open xenophobia.[188] To date, the AfD has become increasingly radicalised, driven by groups such as "the Wing" or its youth organisation, "Young Alternative".[189] As a result, more and more state offices for the protection of the constitution have observed individual state associations (and later the federal association) as "suspected right-wing extremist cases" and even categorised some as "proven right-wing extremist" (in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia).

The AfD entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.3% of the votes, getting almost a million voters from the CDU/CSU (see Table 4). In the 2021 election, it lost some ground and received 10.3% of the vote (see Table 3). However, in the eastern German states, the AfD made strong gains and became the largest party in Saxony and Thuringia.[190] It is also in "the East" where the AfD mobilised early on with more radical positions, and three of its eastern state associations are now classified as "proven right-wing extremist" and are monitored by the intelligence services (see above). Against the backdrop of the energy and cost-of-living crisis resulting

from the Russian war in Ukraine and the associated debates on climate change and immigration, the AfD has made further gains and polled at around 23% nationwide and 36% in Thuringia in mid-January 2024.[191]

Table 3. Latest election results for the 2021 Bundestag election and the 16 state elections.

	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD	Others
Bundestag (2021)	24.1	**25.7**	11.5	14.8	4.9	10.3	-
Baden-Württemberg (2021)	24.1	11.0	10.5	**32.6**	-	9.7	-
Bavaria (2023)	**37.0**	8.4	-	14.4	-	14.6	**15.8** (FW)
Berlin (2023)	**28.2**	18.4	-	18.4	12.2	9.1	-
*Brandenburg (2019)	15.6	**26.2**	-	10.8	10.7	23.5	5.0 (FW)
Bremen (2023)	26.2	**29.8**	5.1	11.9	10.9	-	9.4 (BIW)
Hamburg (2020)	11.2	**39.2**	5.0	24.2	9.1	5.3	-
Hesse (2023)	**34.6**	**15.1**	5.0	14.8	-	18.4	-
Lower Saxony (2022)	28.1	**33.4**	-	14.5	-	11.0	-
*Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (2021)	13.3	**39.6**	5.8	6.3	9.9	16.7	-
North-Rhine Westphalia (2022)	**35.7**	26.7	5.9	18.2	-	5.4	-
Rhineland-Palatinate (2021)	27.7	**35.7**	5.5	9.3	-	8.3	5.4 (FW)
Saarland (2022)	28.5	**43.5**	-	-	-	5.7	-
*Saxony (2019)	**32.1**	7.7	-	8.6	10.4	27.5	-
*Saxony-Anhalt (2021)	**37.1**	8.4	6.4	5.9	11.0	20.8	-
Schleswig-Holstein	**43.4**	16.0	6.4	18.3	-	-	5.7 (SSW)
*Thuringia (2019)	21.7	8.2	5.0	5.2	**31.0**	23.4	-

Source: Own representation with data from Bundeswahlleiterin; Notes: Only parties that entered parliament; grey = government coalition (premier in bold); other parties: BIW (Citizens in Rage), FW (Free Voters), SSW (South Schleswig Voters' Association, minority party); * eastern German states

When analysing the impact of the far right, the centre-right parties are typically brought into play first. They are closest to the far right on the left-right scale and act as their gatekeeper for its entry into parliamentary cooperation. In Germany, there are two centre-right parties at the federal level: CDU/CSU and FDP. The CDU and its sister party, the CSU in Bavaria, succeeded for a long time in establishing themselves as the strongest centre-right party. As early as 1987, Franz Josef Strauß (CSU) demanded: "There must be no democratically legitimised party to the right of the CDU/CSU". In fact, the CDU/CSU succeeded for decades in using conservative positions to bind voters on the right fringe. In 1999, for example, the then Hessian Prime Minister Roland Koch mobilised against the planned reform of the red-green government towards dual citizenship. The liberal FDP, in turn, was central in tipping the scales when it came to forming a coalition: until the founding of the Greens, it sometimes helped the CDU and sometimes the SPD to form a government majority.

The rise of the AfD has fundamentally shifted this balance of power in the party system and influenced the coalition options of the mainstream parties. The classic "intra-camp" alliances (CDU-FDP or SPD-Greens) are now rarely formed at the federal and state levels. Instead, there are more and more "colourful" government coalitions, which are usually first "tested" at the state level and then transferred to the federal level, if successful (e.g., the current "traffic light" coalition of SPD, Greens and FDP). This is another reason why the subnational level should be included in the analysis of party competition in Germany. Moreover, the German electorate is very heterogeneous, leading to different party strongholds. For example, the Left Party and the AfD are stronger in the eastern German states than in the western ones, but there are also differences between the (more conservative) south and the (more social democratic) north.

How might the responses of the mainstream right develop, and under what conditions would it cooperate with the AfD, including at the federal level? Before we analyse the possible AfD normalisation and CDU/CSU radicalisation, we briefly present our analytical framework.

A growing number of studies in the literature address the adaptation of the mainstream right to the rise and consolidation of the radical right.[192] The radical right impacts both the form and content of party competition. When the far right grows electorally, it complicates the formation of parliamentary majorities on the left-right scale, as discussed above regarding the AfD's rise. This forces the mainstream parties to either form coalitions across the left-right divide or to cooperate with the radical right by accepting it as a coalition partner or as a support party for a minority right-wing coalition (as is currently the case in Sweden).

Moreover, the rise of the radical right also influences mainstream parties' positions.[193] Firstly, when the salience of an issue – for example, immigration or climate – increases, parties respond by emphasising this issue more strongly in their own political offerings. Secondly, and in the context of vote seeking, centre-right parties have an incentive to shift their positions on the issues favoured by the far right in their direction.[194]

When assessing the possible radicalisation of the German centre-right, we therefore look at three dimensions. Has the mainstream right cooperated with the AfD and, if so, to what extent? Has it increased the salience of immigration, law-and-order or minority issues in its political offer, and adopted more radical positions? And finally, has the centre-right adopted positions that challenge its commitment to key elements of liberal democracy, such as minority rights or judicial independence? Where possible, we also present demand-side data on voter attitudes and preferences on key issues, particularly immigration.

The focus of our analysis is mainly on immigration issues, which are highly salient and can thus provide evidence of possible radicalisation processes. In this way, we follow the issue-competition literature, which argues that parties compete not only by taking distinct positions on a range of issues, but also – and

sometimes primarily – by advocating for the salience of certain issues.[195] When the salience of an issue on the "party system agenda"[196] is high, large parties in particular cannot avoid taking positions on this issue. This has been the case in Germany for some time with regard to immigration policy. Not least due to the AfD, the topic of immigration dominates the public agenda and all parties, including the centre-right, are forced to address the issue and revise their positions on it.

6.3 Radicalisation of the CDU/CSU?

The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the CSU, can be considered one of the most successful mainstream right-wing parties in Western Europe. The CDU/CSU is one of the German "catch-all" parties with broad social constituencies, which have dominated the electoral landscape in the post-war period.[197] They have been in government for most of the post-war era, except for about 25 years when its main opponent from the centre-left, the SPD, was in power. CDU/CSU and SPD have alternated in government, either in coalition with each other or with the two other mainstream parties, the Greens and the FDP.

The CDU/CSU has also been exceptionally strong in electoral terms, habitually receiving around 30-40% of the vote in federal elections (see Figure 40). It has a broad and relatively stable electoral constituency, where voters over the age of 60, religious voters, voters from western German states, voters from rural areas and the self-employed are overrepresented.[198] Women were also overrepresented until the early 2000s, when the trend reversed. The CDU/CSU's Roman Catholic "social capitalist" legacy also means that the party has endeavoured to maintain a cross-class appeal, thus securing a share of working-class voters.[199]

In terms of its political offer, the party unites three political strands: a Christian-social; a liberal; and a conservative one. The Bavarian component of the party, the CSU, has a slightly more value-conservative, EU-sceptic and sometimes populist political profile.[200] As most centre-right parties, the CDU/CSU is thus a "catch-all party" of different political and geographical factions; this sometimes leads to intense internal strife. Such intra-party disputes have been particularly pronounced in the past five years. They reflect both the power vacuum left by the abrupt departure of party leader (and Chancellor) Angela Merkel in 2018, and the changed party competition created by the AfD's rise.

After decades of stability, the CDU/CSU's programmatic orientation began to change drastically in the late 1990s. The party went through what Clemens has called three "waves of modernisation" in Merkel's time as party leader in the 2000s.[201] The impetus for programmatic re-orientation came from structural changes in the CDU/CSU's electorate and German society at large, some of which were further exacerbated by German unification. Secularisation led to a decline in the churchgoing bourgeoisie and the parallel decline of organised labour corroded the party's base among Catholic blue-collar workers.[202] The general value liberalisation, not least with regard to women's place in working life, challenged the party's family policy based on the idea of a "male-breadwinner".[203] Finally, demographic change in Germany has led both to a shrinking workforce in relation to those living on welfare entitlements, such as pensioners, and to a more diverse society due to immigration. The ageing population makes labour immigration compelling and leads to difficult positional trade-offs for the CDU, which traditionally represents a relatively generous welfare model and a restrictive stance on immigration.[204]

Under Angela Merkel's tenure, first in opposition and then in government, the CDU/CSU liberalised its family policy, moved first to the right and then to the centre in economic and welfare policy, and took a liberal direction in immigration policy. The four Merkel governments (2005-2021) largely continued the reform course of the previous red-green governments. In direct contradiction to the CDU's traditional notion of family

and gender roles, the CDU under family minister Ursula von der Leyen introduced salary-scaled parental leave; improved financial incentives for unmarried couples with children and acknowledged different family forms, including same-sex couples.[205]

In the area of immigration, the CDU came closer to accepting Germany as an "immigration country" during the Merkel era, although no coherent reform path can be detected. The immigration policy of Merkel governments followed a dual track: on one hand, liberalising reforms were passed with regard to skilled labour immigration, while, on the other, the conditions for asylum seekers to stay in Germany were revised and tightened in practice.[206]

Yet the "refugee crisis" of the mid-2010s proved to be the defining moment for Merkel's tenure and a key juncture for the development of the German party system. More than a million people arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2015. In a controversial move, Merkel decided in August 2016 to override the EU's Dublin agreement and allow immigrants who were at the German-Austrian border to enter Germany and apply for asylum there. The government introduced measures to expedite the integration of those allowed to stay and funds for the local governments to manage this. On the other hand, and in some contrast to her open-borders decision, the Merkel government strove to reduce the number of immigrants entering Germany and deport those with little chance of being granted asylum. In March 2016, Merkel took a leading role in the EU's negotiations with Turkey's President Erdogan to prevent more refugees from entering the EU from Greece.[207]

The Merkel governments' partly controversial immigration policy also provoked intense reactions from within its own party ranks. Particularly, the Bavarian sister party CSU and the conservative CDU factions, such as the *Werteunion* with its chairman Hans-Georg Maaßen, opposed the liberal components of Merkel's policy.[208] Public opinion also shifted in a more restrictive direction.[209] Merkel's approval rates as Chancellor dropped from 80 to 50% between March and August 2015, the CDU/CSU's poll ratings fell and those of the AfD rose.[210] The data on vote switching in federal elections gives a similar picture: in 2013, the CDU/CSU only lost voters to the AfD (290,000); and in 2017, the numbers even increased (980,000; see Table 4).[211] Conservative voters with an aversion to liberal immigration policies flocked from the CDU/CSU to the AfD. In the 2017 federal election, the CDU/CSU received 30.2% of the vote and lost 65 seats.

Table 4. Voter switching at Bundestag elections, 2013-2021.

	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD
CDU/CSU						
2013		+210,000	+2,110,000	+420,000	+120,000	−290,000
2017		+20,000	−1,360,000	−30,000	−90,000	−980,000
2021		−1,530,000	−490,000	−920,000	+20,000	+80,000
FDP						
2013	−2,110,000	−530,000		−170,000	−90,000	−430,000
2017	+1,360,000	+450,000		+110,000	+60,000	−40,000
2021	+490,000	−180,000		−240,000	+110,000	+210,000
AfD						
2013	+290,000	+180,000	+430,000	+90,000	+340,000	
2017	+980,000	+470,000	+40,000	+40,000	+400,000	
2021	−80,000	−260,000	−210,000	−60,000	+90,000	

Source: Own representation with data from Tagesschau. Read from left to top right, e.g., in 2013, the CDU/CSU won 210,000 voters from the SPD.

The period between the 2017 and 2021 elections was difficult for the CDU/CSU. The party was alarmed by its electoral defeat and the AfD's rise. It was thrown into a leadership crisis and an intense intra-party struggle after party leader Merkel abruptly announced in 2018 that she would not run for another term.[212] The post-2017 period showed how unprepared the CDU/CSU was for the rise of a serious challenger party to its right.[213]

This was followed by a period of infighting, which manifested itself in disputes over how to deal with the AfD, but ultimately also over the party's programmatic direction after Merkel. At its 2018 party conference, the CDU/CSU officially banned any cooperation with the AfD at all federal levels. Nevertheless, parts of the CDU, and especially the CSU under chairman Markus Söder, experimented with an "adaptation strategy" and (again) occupied more socio-culturally conservative and economically liberal positions.[214] This strategy did not pay off and the CSU suffered heavy losses in the Bavarian state elections in 2018 and 2023. Despite attempts to hold the line at the federal level, the AfD's electoral strength – especially in the eastern states – made it sometimes difficult to form coherent government majorities without it. This led the mainstream parties to try out new coalitions between ideologically disparate parties such as the CDU, SPD and Greens. Especially in Saxony-Anhalt, such a "Kenya" coalition proved fragile, and the CDU sometimes voted for AfD motions.[215] In the eastern states of Saxony and Thuringia, where the AfD had achieved around 25% of the vote, the CDU branches also deviated from the party's cooperation ban.

These disagreements came to a head in February 2020, when Thomas Kemmerich (FDP) was elected prime minister of Thuringia with the votes of CDU, FDP and AfD. Even though he announced his resignation after just one day after heavy criticism, including from Merkel, his election underlined the strength of conservative – and even illiberal – factions within the CDU/CSU and FDP, and demonstrated that the CDU was more open to collaborating with the AfD than with the Left Party. Finally, the episode showed Merkel's strength in holding the various party strands together. Without her leadership, the internal rifts became apparent. Her successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, failed to persuade the regional parties to dissolve the state parliament. Her lack of authority led to her resignation and another leadership vacuum.[216]

In January 2021, North-Rhine Westphalia premier, Armin Laschet, was elected party leader. However, the power struggle continued because both Laschet and the CSU leader, Markus Söder, wanted to become the CDU/CSU's candidate for Chancellor. Söder represented the more conservative, populist wing and was more popular among party members, while Laschet belonged to the liberal, centrist Merkel camp. The party leadership favoured Laschet and ultimately pushed him through in a less-than-democratic manner, which further damaged the party's external image.[217] After more mishaps, such as Laschet's laughing fit in the flood-hit town of Erfstadt, the CDU/CSU performed disastrously in the 2021 Bundestag election. With only 24.1%, it achieved the party's worst result since it was founded. This time, the CDU/CSU gained 80,000 voters from the AfD, but lost other voters to the SPD (1,530,000), Greens (920,000) and FDP (490,000).[218]

The CDU responded to the election defeat with a convention for a new basic programme (*Grundsatzprogramm*), which was intended to clarify its image both internally and externally and "renew" the party.[219] In January 2022, it also changed the party leader, this time with Friedrich Merz, who belongs to the party's conservative wing and had campaigned on the promise of halving the AfD's support. This underlines that the CDU has perceived the AfD's threat as something that affects the party's strategic decisions, such as the choice of party leadership.

On a rhetorical level, Merz maintains the party's official cooperation ban with the AfD and even threatens to expel anyone from the party who breaks it.[220] Yet such statements sound empty, as the ban has already been broken. In Thuringia, for example, the AfD, CDU and FDP have passed various laws in recent months (e.g., to regulate amusement arcades or to reduce the real estate transfer tax[221]) without any consequences from the party. In 2022, the CDU, with the support of the AfD, passed a motion in the Thuringian state parliament against the use of gender-inclusive language in the state's official communication.[222]

In terms of immigration policy positions, Merz has attracted attention with statements leaning towards the far right's rhetoric, for example, by calling Ukrainian refugees "welfare tourists"[223] or claiming that rejected asylum seekers were having their "teeth redone", while German citizens would not get dental appointments.[224] Merz has actively been taking up the migration debate and taken more restrictive stances than his predecessors, for example, by calling large-scale migration Germany's biggest problem[225] or pushing for faster repatriation of rejected asylum seekers.[226] Currently, this appears to be consistent with the views of CDU/CSU voters: in October 2023, 70% of CDU/CSU sympathisers believed that immigration was a "disadvantage" for Germany (compared to 93% of AfD sympathisers and 22% of Greens' sympathisers).[227]

In December 2023, the CDU/CSU finalised its first draft of a new party programme. The draft decisively shifts the party's positions on immigration policy to the far right: it calls for a significant reduction in the number of arrivals in Germany; the transfer of asylum procedures to "safe third countries" and the strengthening of EU border controls, including the expansion of Frontex into a "border police".[228] The draft also includes proposals to cut welfare benefits and reservations against "forced gendering", for example, the increased use of gender-sensitive language in official communication.[229]

In summary, while the CDU/CSU cannot currently be described as "radicalised" in response to the AfD, the signs are worrying. Firstly, the firewall that CDU leader Merz is allegedly pursuing has already been broken at the state level, and we know from other countries (e.g., Sweden) that this could be the beginning of the end of the centrally imposed ban. Secondly, the CDU/CSU under Merz is drifting towards a more far-right rhetoric on immigration issues and, more recently, on other socio-cultural issues, such as the norms of official language. Thirdly, while the CDU/CSU does not explicitly question liberal democracy or its institutions, there are parts of the party that are quite close to the AfD's views in this regard, as illustrated by the parties' convergence in the debate on gender-sensitive language. The AfD's rise has exposed the deep divisions within the CDU/CSU, where the conservative and liberal factions are sometimes far apart. This complicates the party's ability to find coherent responses to the AfD and the associated questions about its programme and cooperation with the party.

6.4 Radicalisation of the FDP?

The FDP is a liberal market party that traditionally focuses on issues of economic, financial and tax policy.[230] It can be located on the right on the socio-economic axis and rather on the left on the socio-cultural axis.[231]

Until the 1970s, the FDP acted as kingmaker for the CDU or SPD in the "two and a half party system". At the federal level, it usually received between 6 and 12% of the vote (see Figure 40). Since 1949, it has only failed to enter the Bundestag once: in 2013, after an unpopular government participation alongside the CDU/CSU. In this election, the FDP lost voters to all parties, especially to the CDU/CSU (2,110,000), but also to the SPD (530,000), AfD (430,000) and others (see Table 4).[232] In 2017, the FDP made a strong comeback, with 10.7% of the vote, and won votes from almost all parties but the AfD (40,000).[233] In 2021, the FDP managed to even increase its electoral result, gaining votes from the CDU/CSU (490,000) and AfD (210,000), but losing others to the Greens (240,000), SPD (180,000) and others.[234] To date, FDP voters are the most inclined to consider the AfD as an electable party: only 67% rule out voting for the AfD in principle, compared to 80% of all respondents and even 87% of CDU/CSU voters.[235]

In general, the FDP's electoral strongholds are in western Germany, particularly in Baden-Württemberg, but also in Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine Westphalia and Hesse. In the eastern German states, it is traditionally weak and often not represented in parliament. To date, eastern German voters are hardly receptive to the FDP's core messages (emphasis on personal responsibility and competition) and core constituency (self-employed and people with above-average income).

After being voted out of the Bundestag in 2013, the FDP quickly managed to change programmatically, organisationally and personally – a process that was mainly driven by the new party leader, Christian Lindner.[236] The new programmatic priorities included education, family and digitalisation.[237]

From 2017 to 2021, the FDP acted as an active opposition party without sharing forces with the AfD. During the COVID pandemic, the FDP emphasised individual fundamental rights and explicitly opposed overly strict restrictions on freedom, such as night-time curfews.[238] It also focused on the economic policy consequences of the measures, for example, by clearly opposing additional financial burdens for citizens and businesses and giving high priority to the competitiveness of the German economy.[239]

In the 2021 election campaign, too, the FDP appeared as a rather liberal market party that remains sceptical of state interventionist approaches (despite a certain moderation in the economic sphere since Lindner became party chairman in 2013).[240] In its election manifesto, the party called for tax relief (especially for

middle- and low-income earners), a reduction in bureaucracy and the introduction of equity-based capital financing of pensions (in addition to pay-as-you-go financing).[241] In doing so, the FDP appealed to its core constituency (self-employed and people with above-average income). With its other priorities – digitalisation, education and climate protection – it also appealed to younger voters. Since climate and environmental issues had become more important in the German public discourse after 2019, the FDP tried to debate specific demands, but supported the "Fridays for Future" protests less actively than the left-wing parties.[242]

Crucially, and in clear contrast to the AfD, the FDP always fundamentally affirmed EU and euro membership, supranational integration and free trade; open to migration; and emphasised fundamental rights and the rule of law.[243] Even at the peak of the so-called "refugee crisis" in the summer 2015, the FDP "took a rather conservative course in migration politics".[244] In doing so, it "emphasised both their liberal openness and their critique of the Merkel government's naïve approach to migration politics", and thus, distanced itself from the refugee-friendly course of the government as well as from the AfD.[245]

The biggest taboo break so far was the aforementioned election of Thomas Kemmerich (FDP) as Thuringia's prime minister by votes of the FDP, CDU and AfD in 2020.[246] While Kemmerich initially saw no problem in such cooperation (with one of the most extreme AfD state associations) and the federal party also acted inconsistently, there was great national and international outrage. Ultimately, party leader Lindner called on Kemmerich to resign. Nevertheless, this election left the bitter taste that some politicians of the FDP and CDU apparently preferred to be elected to government by the AfD, rather than tolerate a left-led government that fully supported the liberal democratic system. This seems to be particularly the case in the eastern German states, where the FDP holds more socio-culturally conservative and economically liberal positions than in the western states, with Thuringia representing the most extreme case.[247]

Even after the controversial election, Kemmerich continued to attract attention, for example, by attending anti-COVID demonstrations of the "*Querdenken*" (lateral thinking) movement.[248] This revealed a broader internal conflict: on one hand, of all the mainstream parties, the FDP was the most open to liberal positions and tolerated the *Querdenken* protests for a long time. Even after the first riots in August 2020, it emphasised the importance of liberal-democratic fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly. On the other hand, this automatically brought it closer to a field of supporters that overlaps with the AfD.[249]

In 2021, the FDP joined a "traffic light" coalition with the SPD and the Greens at the federal level. This gives the party the opportunity to act as a "liberal corrective" in financial, economic, social and environmental issues and – from its point of view – to prevent the Greens and SPD from overly dirigiste ideas of state intervention.[250] At the same time, the FDP must strategically differentiate itself from the other two coalition parties and actively emphasise its own positions (e.g., in the wake of the much-discussed "Heating Law" or the recent budget dispute), since its voters are actually closer to those of the CDU/CSU than those of the Greens or the SPD.

In this context, it is also understandable why the FDP largely tries to distance itself from the AfD, but still uses at least some populist rhetoric against migrants, thus normalising far-right positions and frames. One of the most prominent examples within the FDP is deputy chairman Wolfgang Kubicki, who proposed an upper limit of 25% migrants in city districts to counteract the "emergence of parallel societies".[251] Recently, even Lindner claimed that the German welfare state acts like a "magnet" and that benefits should be reduced.[252] Crucially, both statements were made within government, which further fuelled conflict within the coalition.

Overall, the FDP has not yet "radicalised" in response to the AfD, but has already collaborated with it, particularly at a subnational level (especially in Thuringia). Individual FDP members also repeatedly make

populist statements, thereby normalising far-right positions and frames. This underlines the fact that there are also illiberal tendencies within the FDP, but they are still in the minority.

6.5 Impact on (social) democracy

The electoral growth and normalisation of the far right constitute a challenge to liberal democracy and its institutions. In this section, we ask to what extent the AfD's rise and the potential radicalisation of the German centre-right parties pose a threat to German democracy in general and to the SPD, as one of the key pillars of German post-war democratic order, in particular.

How can we identify threats to liberal democracy when we see them? One of the challenges of democratic backsliding is that it is usually gradual, so it can go unnoticed for some time. Van der Brug et al. emphasise the "constitutional pillar" in this context, meaning the constraints of even the strongest majority rule to protect constitutional rights, as a key component to observe when analysing democratic backsliding.[253] They point out that particularly populist parties (on the right and on the left) tend to oppose such constraints on executive power when they collide with the "will of the people" that the populists claim to defend. These two principles are in tension, for example, when policymakers weigh up the "public demand" to close national borders to undocumented migrants against the basic human right to protection. Therefore, we would observe threats to the liberal-democratic basic order in Germany, for example, if not only the AfD, but also the CDU and FDP would defend the principle of majority rule against executive constraints, even if this were in tension with fundamental rights.

There are initial signs that the CDU and FDP are supporting policies with the AfD that can be seen as contradictory to liberal-democratic norms and, moreover, justify such support with the will of the majority. A recent example concerns the use of gender-sensitive language in official communication. In Thuringia (where the AfD could became the strongest party in the state elections in autumn 2024 and, therefore, pose a particularly strong threat to the CDU and FDP), the CDU state association, with the AfD's support and against the CDU's federal headquarters' will, has advocated a ban on "gendered" language in Thuringian schools. The CDU and AfD want to ban gendering in schools by law and argue that a majority of speakers reject gender forms.[254] In their eyes, there is also a danger that these forms will hinder many pupils from learning the language. The CDU presents itself as concerned about six million people (e.g., migrants or people with visual or hearing impairments) who would be excluded by "gender language". This is an example of the centre-right using language that contrasts the "general will" with policies designed to protect a "disadvantaged" group. Whilst this example relates to the subnational level, we know from previous research that it can precede political developments at the national level.[255]

Another example of the erosion of liberal-democratic norms within parts of the centre-right is the use of language regarding immigration. In October 2023, CDU politician Jens Spahn criticised Chancellor Olaf Scholz's (SPD) statement that people with no prospects of staying in Germany should be deported "more and faster" as insufficient, calling instead for "irregular migration movements" to be stopped "with psychological force" if necessary.[256] In doing so, Spahn joined a spiral of radical demands on the topic of migration, triggered by the AfD. It culminated in January 2024 in the revelations of a "secret meeting" between AfD politicians, leading European right-wing extremists as well as CDU members, in which the "remigration" of thousands of people from Germany was discussed. By engaging in such debates, the centre-right risks a gradual erosion of language that disregards liberal-democratic norms, such as the fundamental right to protection.

The second question we seek to answer in this section concerns the impact of the potential radicalisation of the centre-right on the SPD. In the 2021 federal election, the SPD won over 1.5 million voters from the CDU/CSU (see Table 4). This initial evidence underlines that the CDU/CSU's internal controversies and difficulties in finding a coherent response to the AfD could benefit the SPD and centre-left parties in general (as the Greens also gained almost a million votes from the CDU/CSU). Between the 2017 and 2021 elections, the CDU/CSU changed its course from Merkel's centrist liberalism towards a right-tilting conservatism, currently embodied by Friedrich Merz.

Yet the SPD was unable to retain its voters and polled at just 15%, behind the CDU/CSU (30%) and the AfD (19%) at the beginning of February 2024.[257] In most of the eastern German states, the SPD is even weaker and the AfD stronger: in Thuringia, where the AfD is now classified as "proven right-wing extremist" by the intelligence services, the SPD polled at 7% and the AfD at 33% in mid-January. Regarding the 2024 state elections, the SPD is therefore in a weak position, while the AfD in Thuringia has a chance of winning a "blocking minority" (*Sperrminorität*, at least 33.3%) and having great blackmail potential, posing a major threat to the constitutional order. In such a scenario, the AfD could block all decisions that require a two-thirds majority, such as appointments to the committee for the election of judges (*Richterwahlausschuss*) if its candidates are not elected. In the next few years, around a third of the judges in Thuringia will have to be replaced. This alone gives the AfD the opportunity to block the committee and the entire judiciary and then blame that crisis on the other parties (who have not met their conditions).

The SPD's decline is partly an incumbency effect, as governing parties tend to lose voters. However, it also reflects the much-debated structural crisis of Western European social democracy.[258] In general, the occupational structure of the electorate has changed and the SPD is increasingly supported by educated, urban, middle-class professionals, rather than manual workers.[259] The latter, their former core constituency, is shrinking, ageing and attracted to the radical right. The SPD is therefore mainly competing with other centrist parties over middle-class voters.

What should the SPD's strategy be in this competitive environment? The first question would be to clarify the goal: is it (a) vote seeking, to gain (back) voters from other parties; or (b) policy seeking, to maximise social democratic positions and reduce the policy impact of the right in general and the far right in particular? These goals can lead to different strategic choices.

As Kitschelt and Häusermann note, there is no single strategy for social democrats that would only lead to gains and no losses.[260] Instead, all programmatic choices involve trade-offs: they may attract some voters and risk losing others. Overall, social democratic parties are losing voters to other left-wing parties, particularly the Greens. This is also true in Germany: in the 2017 federal election, the SPD lost almost 800,000 voters to the Greens and 260,000 voters in 2021.[261] The other main party with which the social democrats are exchanging voters is the mainstream right. In 2017, the SPD lost over 800,000 voters to the CDU/CSU, but in 2021, it won back over 1.5 million voters.

The reasons why social democratic voters move either to the Greens or to the centre-right are different. While the shift to the mainstream right is likely to be motivated by fiscally conservative attitudes, the shift to the Greens is rather linked to comparatively more progressive attitudes towards non-economic political issues, such as climate or migration. On one hand, social democrats could try to win back voters from the moderate right by adopting a "centrist" strategy, which includes a moderate position on economic and socio-cultural issues. This strategy could reduce the vote share of the political right in general and, hence, the coalition options and impact for the radical right, but also make coalitions with radical left and Green parties less likely. On the other hand, social democrats could gain voters who would defect to the Greens by adopting a

"New Left" strategy, which combines support for redistribution with highly progressive positions on socio-cultural issues, such as gender, climate and migration. The disadvantage of this strategy could be losing more conservative-minded voters to the centre-right and even radical right.[262]

In an environment characterised by the CDU/CSU's and FDP's shift to the right, who are flirting with the idea of a cooperation with the AfD, it does not seem like a winning strategy for the SPD to follow suit. Rather, it seems advisable to offer a counterforce based on progressive, politically realistic policy positions on economic and cultural issues, while adhering to liberal-democratic principles. For example, the SPD could politicise and (re-)occupy the distribution conflict between "top" and "bottom" more strongly (instead of between workers and benefit recipients or migrants).[263]

In view of the recent mass pro-democracy protests in Germany, such policy would also be in line with current public opinion: at the beginning of February 2024, nationwide support for the AfD dropped below 20% for the first time since summer 2023, while the majority of the population (72%) supported the protests.[264] Moreover, 39% of respondents named right-wing populism and extremism as the greatest threat to democracy in Germany – in October 2022, it was only 20%. It seems that the normalisation of far-right positions has been slowed down for the time being, but it can pick up speed again at any time if the parties step in.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed the alleged radicalisation of the CDU/CSU and FDP, the main centre-right parties in Germany, in response to the AfD. Firstly, we outlined some examples in which both parties already cooperated with the AfD, thus breaking the nationwide *cordon sanitaire*. This happened primarily at the subnational level, with the biggest "breach of taboo" to date being the election of Thomas Kemmerich as Thuringia's prime minister in 2020. Even after that, both parties sometimes voted with the AfD in favour of parliamentary initiatives. Secondly, we concluded that neither the CDU/CSU nor FDP have yet "radicalised" to a large extent, but they have clearly shifted some of their positions and rhetoric in the direction of the AfD. This can be observed above all in immigration issues. When it comes to the key pillars of liberal democracy, both parties are still trying to keep the far right at bay. At the subnational level, however, we observed some initial signs of eroding liberal-democratic norms, for instance, in the course of gender-sensitive language.

The 2024 elections in the eastern German states will therefore be of utmost importance. In opinion polls, the AfD is often in first place there, despite being partly classified as "proven right-wing extremist" by the intelligence services. In this context, the SPD finds itself in a rather weak position, often receiving less than 10% of the vote in eastern Germany. Given the broader changes in its core electorate and party competition, it has to choose between two options: a "centrist" and a new "New Left" strategy. There is no single "magic formula", but each strategy involves trade-offs. What can be said with certainty, however, is that accommodating far-right positions and frames would not limit the AfD's influence. Rather, offering a progressive but realistically rooted counterforce for both economic and cultural issues seems to be the way to go.

7. DOUBLE SHIFT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN POLAND

7. DOUBLE SHIFT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN POLAND

BEN STANLEY

7.1 Introduction

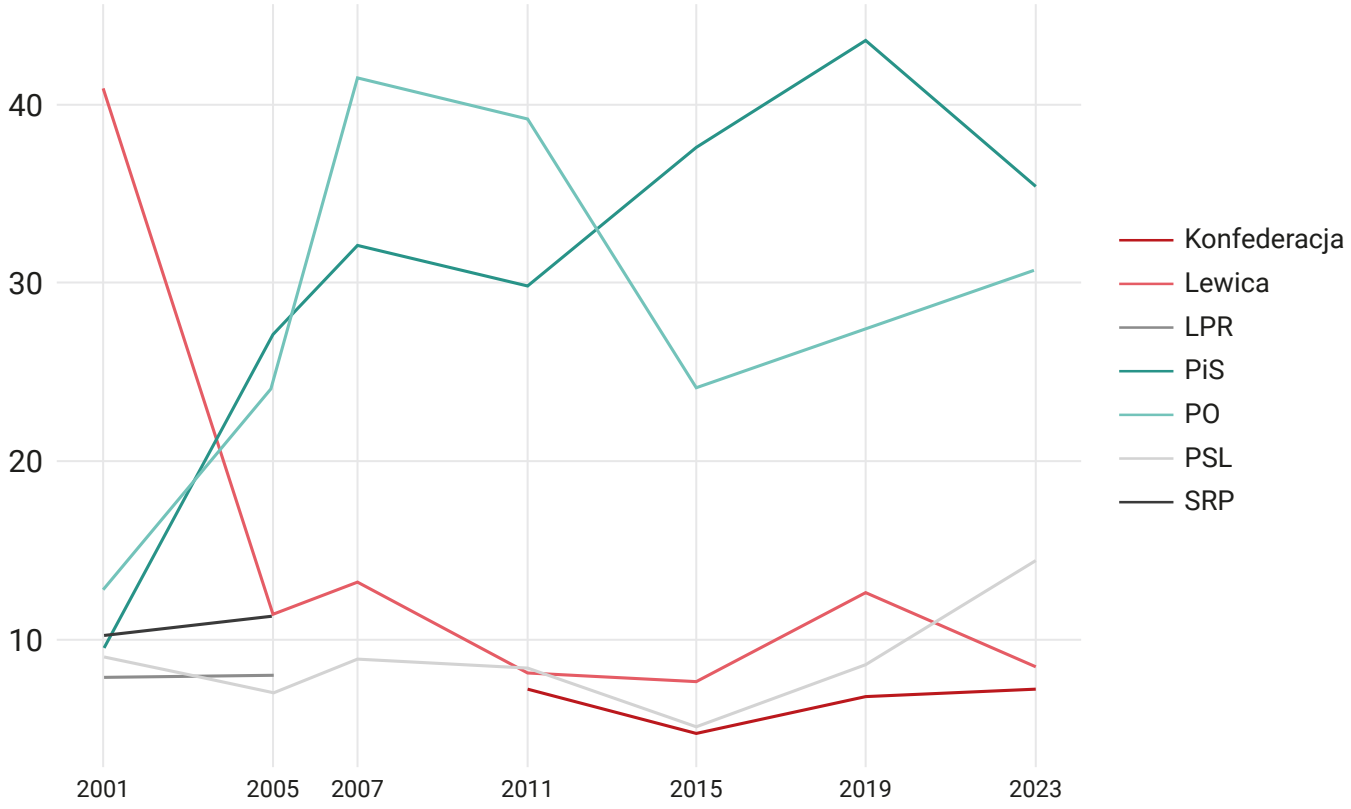
It has become something of a cliche to describe each forthcoming Polish parliamentary election as "the most important since 1989", and yet the result of the October 2023 election may well prove worthy of the label. While the incumbent radical-right populist party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) gained a plurality of votes (35.4%) and seats (194) and was accordingly granted the first opportunity to form a government by President Andrzej Duda, the election was almost universally regarded as a victory for the "democratic opposition" and for pluralism itself. With the radical-right Confederation (*Konfederacja*)[265] party seriously underperforming initial expectations and winning only 18 of an anticipated 40-something seats, PiS was left with no obvious coalition partner.

The three formations[266] that constituted the democratic opposition together gained enough seats to cross the threshold for a majority. The centre-right Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*, KO),[267] in which the main player is former governing party Civic Platform *Platforma Obywatelska*, PO), won 157 seats; the liberal-conservative coalition Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*, TR) gained 65 seats and the Left (*Lewica*) alliance 26. This gave the three formations, which had pledged before the election to work together to restore liberal democracy in Poland after eight years of democratic backsliding,[268] a potential 248-seat majority, although ultimately the seven MPs from the Together (*Razem*) party, which ran on the Lewica list, opted not to join the government.

The impression of resounding victory for the opposition was intensified by the turnout of 74.4% – the largest recorded since transition to democracy after 1989 – and a significant increase in participation among young voters, with an exit poll estimating turnout among those aged 18 to 29 at 68.8%, up from 48.4% in the previous election.[269] This led the outcome to be hailed abroad as "a great democratic moment" that revived the animating spirit of the post-1989 transition.[270]

Yet, while this election may appear to be a breakthrough, it should be understood as a clarification of the political landscape that has emerged in Poland over the last two decades. As Figure 41 shows, Polish politics has been dominated during this period by parties of the right. PiS remains the largest party, and one that, even in apparent defeat, provides the key point of reference in Polish politics. Its 2023 share of the vote is only 2.2% lower than in its breakthrough year of 2015, and it clearly speaks for a large section of Polish society. While the other parties (aside from Konfederacja) remain united over the virtues of a pluralistic, liberal-democratic political system and the need to roll back many of the illiberal institutional changes implemented over the last eight years, they are ideologically heterogeneous and likely to find much to disagree on when the euphoria of the post-electoral moment passes and the time comes to govern in "ordinary" mode.

Figure 41. Vote share for key Polish parties and coalitions, 2001-2023.



Note: in 2019 and 2023, the figures for PO are those obtained by KO. In 2023, the figure for PSL is that obtained by the Third Way coalition, which included PSL and Polska 2050. In 2011 and 2015, the figures for Konfederacja are those obtained by Nowa Prawica-Janusz Korwin Mikke and KORWiN, respectively. Both parties are ideological and organisational precursors of Konfederacja.

KO remains the largest formation in this "democratic coalition", while the left – which has appeared in various guises over this period – has failed to recover the position it enjoyed during the 1990s, when it seemed set to form one of the focal points of the party system. Its decline after 2001 owed much to allegations of corruption during this period, and to general post-transition "fatigue". Its subsequent failure to recover can be attributed to the emergence of a new line of competition in the Polish party system after 2005, which created the opportunity for PiS to appeal to voters holding the kind of left-wing economic sympathies that previously swelled the ranks of the left's support.

As such, the Polish party system is one that has been fundamentally shaped by right-wing radicalism and – with two radical-right-wing parties set to form the next opposition – will continue to be shaped by it. If the shift away from liberal democracy came as a shock to observers who had assumed Poland to be one of the more successful cases of post-communist transition to democracy, the successful mustering of pro-democratic forces in the 2023 election suggests bifurcation rather than backsliding. There has been a double shift: (1) the transformation of PiS between 2001 and 2015 from a relatively mainstream conservative party into one of the radical right; and (2) the response of moderate parties of both right and left to PiS's post-2015 dominance, which has played a significant role in the "re-mainstreaming" of Polish politics. This chapter explores this dynamic.

7.2 The radicalisation of the mainstream right

The increasing relevance of the radical right at the electoral and governmental levels in European politics has led to much recent interest in the effects of this process on party systems. Scholars have identified processes of "mainstreaming", by which the ideas, discourses and institutions associated with the radical right become more widely accepted as legitimate,[271] and of "radicalisation", by which political actors move toward more extreme positions to align more closely with perceived changes in public opinion and to head off the electoral challenges of radical parties.[272]

What both dynamics imply is that the mainstream is relative and changeable. As mainstream parties move towards more radical positions, and as radical parties become more acceptable to the mainstream, the understanding of what constitutes radical or mainstream rhetoric and policy is reshaped. As Bill and Stanley argue, Polish politics has been characterised in recent years by the reopening of unresolved "metapolitical" questions that touch not only on the stuff of policy itself, but on who can be considered a legitimate political actor.[273] What is meant by "mainstream" has itself become a matter of dispute, with the key principles, norms and institutions of the post-1989 liberal-democratic political order coming under challenge.

While in some contemporary European cases the radicalisation of the right is a more recent phenomenon, in the Polish case, it is a process that dates to the mid-2000s. During the first decade of post-communist democratisation, parties of the right had been characterised by weak organisation and ideological incoherence. A "post-communist divide" persisted between the social-democratic successors to the communists and a vast array of "post-Solidarity" parties, many of which had little in common other than their identification with opposition to communism.[274] For as long as a taboo existed against cooperation across this divide, the party system was organised by default around it. During this period, both radical and moderate right-wing currents existed, but the organisational weaknesses of individual parties ensured that radical parties were either pushed to the margins of the party system or buried deep within large umbrella coalitions, whose broad commitment to transition orthodoxies largely kept radical-right policies off the political agenda.

It was only following the "unexpected earthquake"[275] election of 2001 that parties of the right started to become more organisationally and ideologically coherent. This election saw the emergence of two right-of-centre parties in the form of PiS and PO, and two populist parties in the form of the agrarian protest-movement-turned-party Self-Defence (Samoobrona, SRP) and the clerical-nationalist League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR). While the last two parties would prove short-lived, their respective economic and socio-cultural radicalism would be absorbed by PiS during and after the premature collapse of the PiS-SRP-LPR government of 2006-2007.[276]

The following analysis illustrates this radicalisation using data from V-Party, an expert survey, which provides a wealth of party placements on individual issues and broad political dimensions from 2001 to 2019.[277] For broad political dimensions, we use the standard two-dimensional economic/socio-cultural issue space and a liberal-democratic issue space, in which parties are arrayed according to populist versus anti-populist attitudes, and pluralism versus anti-pluralism. These are shown in Figures 42 and 44, respectively. We also analyse attitudes on several component elements of these dimensions, as shown in Figures 43 and 45.[278]

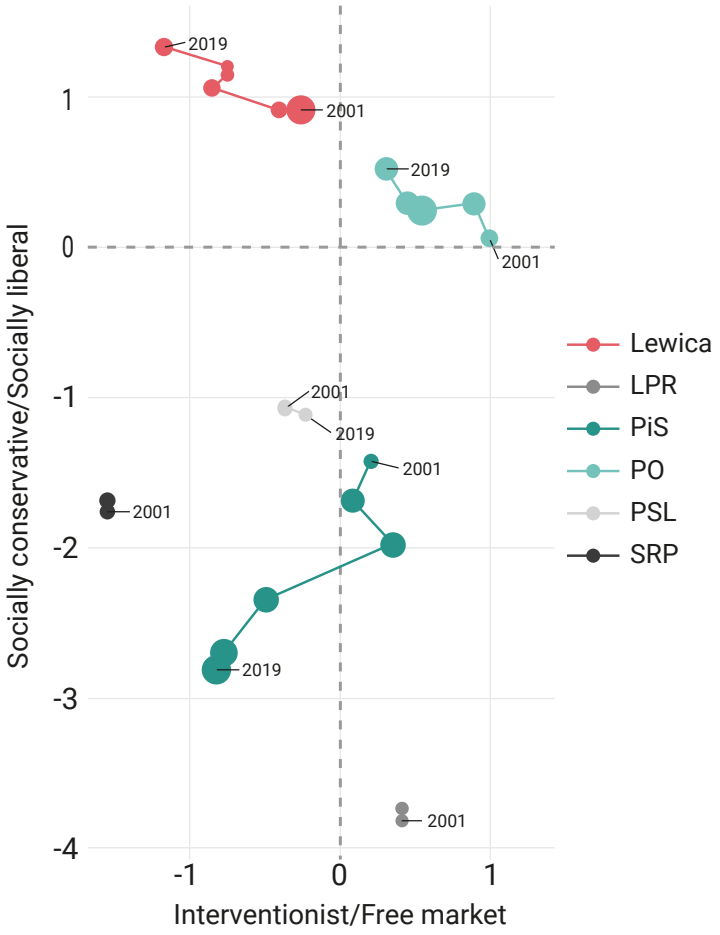
Figure 42 plots the evolution of the positions of the four main political formations in economic and socio-cultural issue space. The size of the points corresponds to the share of votes in a given election year gained by the leading party of the formation in question, and the linked path between the points shows how a given formation's ideological position has evolved over time.

While the positions of parties have shifted, there is a consistently legible triangular distribution to the positions of PiS, PO and Lewica, with PSL occupying a relatively centrist position. Two general trends can be noted. In economic terms, all formations except PSL have moved to more interventionist positions since 2001 but have done so within a relatively constrained ideological space. In socio-cultural terms, there has been significant divergence, with PiS moving from a moderately conservative position to a much more conservative one, while both Lewica and PO have become slightly more socially liberal.

These trends underline that in both economic and socio-cultural terms PiS was, in 2001, well within the political mainstream, being distant in economic terms from SRP and in socio-cultural terms from LPR. Socio-culturally, it was little more radical than the perennially centrist PSL, and economically it was no more radically free market in orientation than SLD, the main element of Lewica, was interventionist. By 2019, PiS had moved away from the mainstream, absorbing the more radical appeals of SPR and LPR.

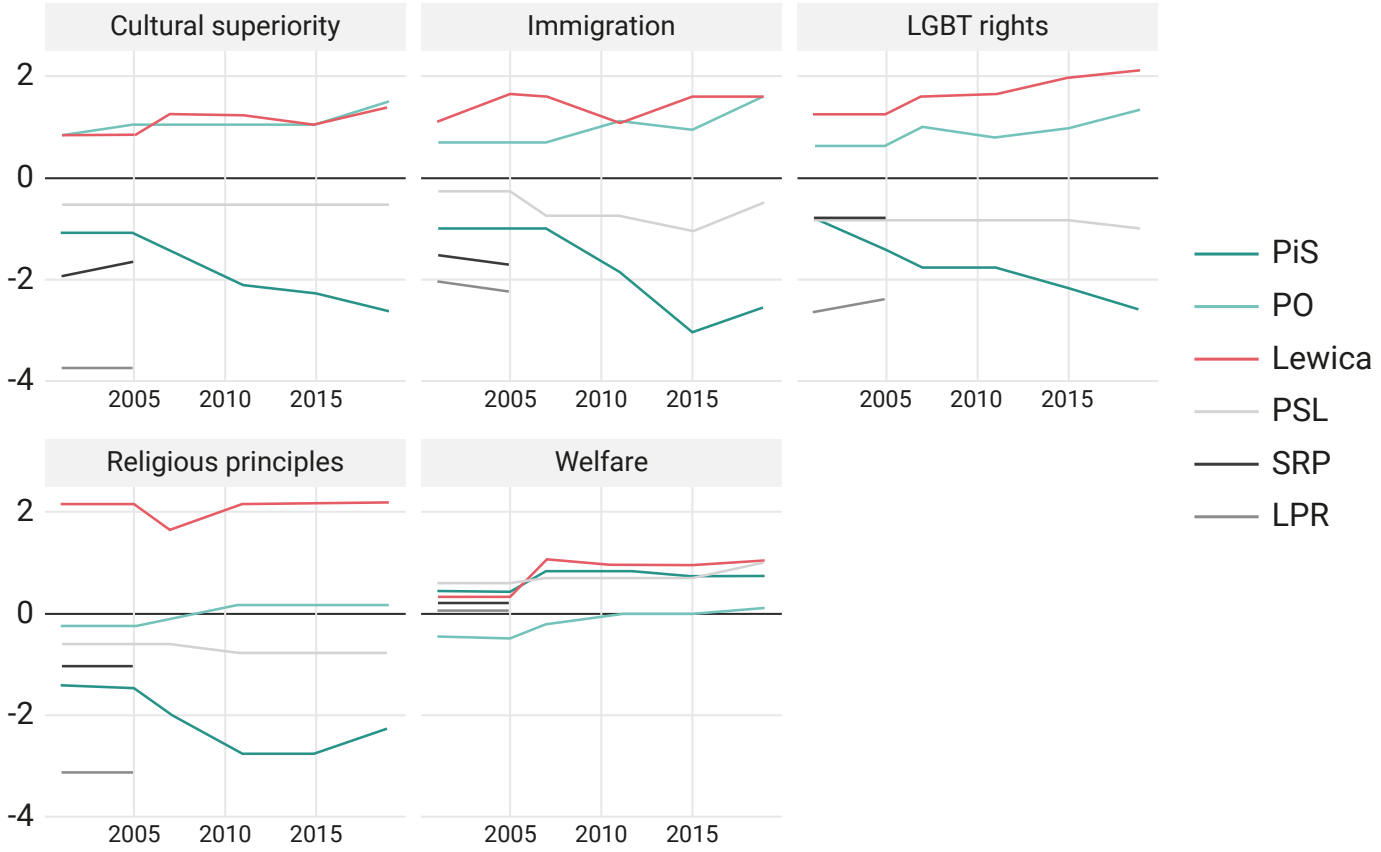
It is also clear that PO – which, in the 2001-2005 parliamentary term, was regarded as a potential coalition partner for PiS – has moved into the centre of ideological space over time. In 2001, it was more clearly pro-market than PiS, but by 2007 had started to migrate towards the centre, and by 2019 occupied a moderately pro-market position almost precisely corresponding to the one held by PiS in 2001. At the same time, as PiS moved towards a much more socially conservative position, PO became more socially liberal, although the party would still maintain a significant conservative faction.

Figure 42. Main Polish political formations in left-right ideological space, 2001-2019.



At the level of individual policy stances, Figure 43 shows this divergence in more detail. On welfare policy, there is little difference between the parties, with PO slightly less pro-welfare than the others but moving from a moderately anti-welfare position to a purely centrist position on this issue. On the socio-cultural issues, the difference is much clearer. In the case of cultural superiority, responses range from the assertion of the cultural superiority of a specific social group or the nation overall to the strong rejection of this claim. Here, a clear divergence is noted. While PO and Lewica have rejected this notion and PSL has only moderately endorsed it, PiS has moved from a moderately conservative position in 2001 to a strongly conservative position in more recent elections.

Figure 43. Changes in positions on policy stances, 2001-2019.

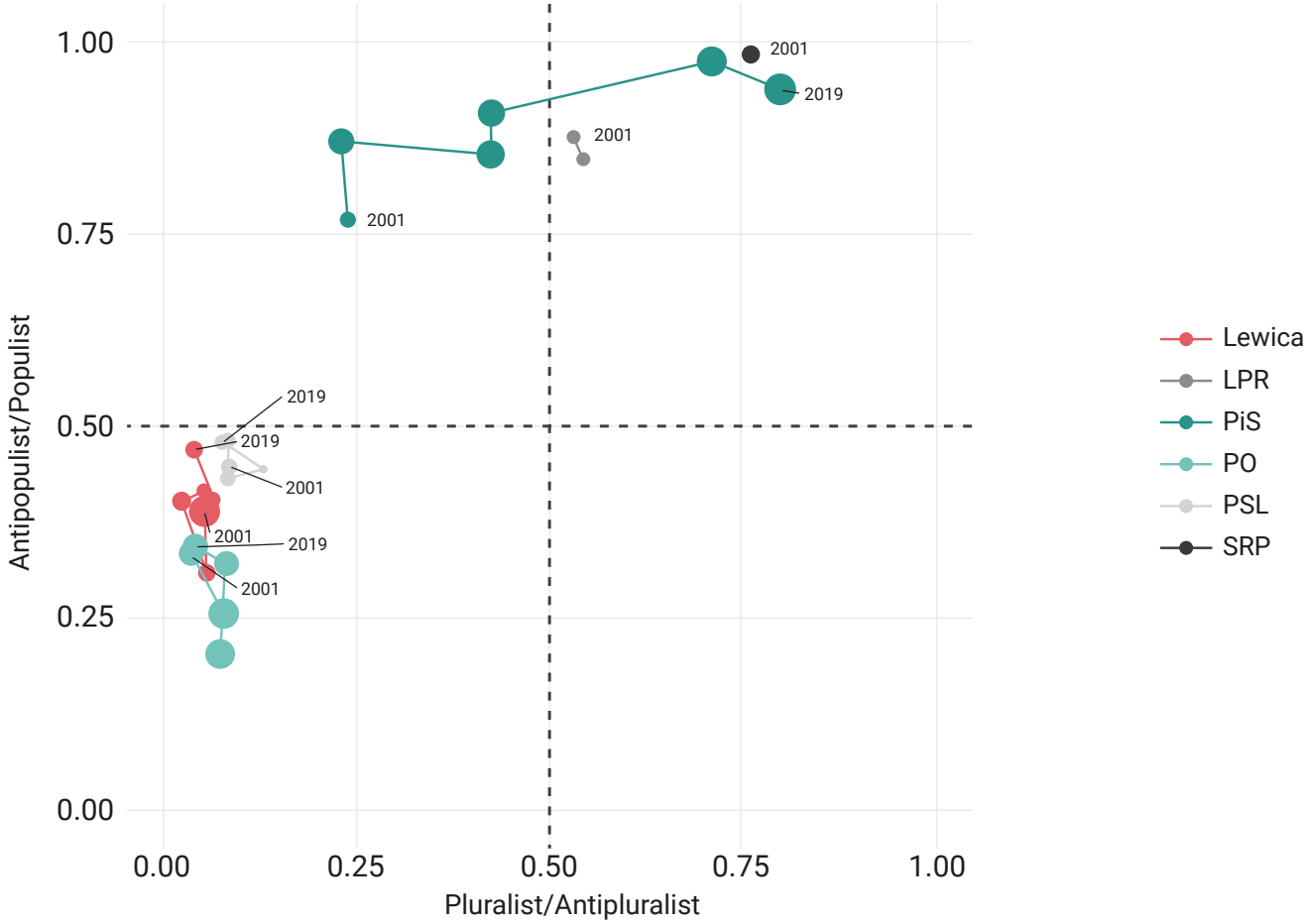


There has been a similar change in the case of immigration. In 2001, PiS, like PSL, took an ambiguous, moderately negative position on immigration, while both PO and Lewica were moderately in favour. After 2007, though, PiS's opposition to immigration was increasingly pronounced, going beyond the stances taken by SPR and LPR in 2001-2005, while the other formations persisted in their moderate stances, with PO becoming slightly more pro-immigration. Attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights also evince a similar pattern. In 2001, there were differences between the four main formations, with PiS and PSL taking a moderately conservative stance and PO and Lewica a moderately liberal one. Yet significant divergence occurred thereafter, with PO and Lewica becoming slightly more liberal on this issue, while PiS became much more conservative, to the extent that by 2019 it was as radical on the issue as LPR had been in 2001-2005. Finally, there has also been a divergence in the case of religious principles. In 2001, PiS, PO and PSL all took a moderately conservative

stance on the issue of the extent to which religious principles should influence policymaking, with Lewica much more opposed on the issue. After 2005, PiS moved to a much more conservative position, at one point coming close to the explicitly clerical-nationalist position of LPR.

When these political formations are plotted in liberal-democratic issue space, the differences between PiS and the rest become strikingly apparent. Figure 44 shows that, despite the policy differences between them, PO, Lewica and PSL have consistently occupied a part of this political space that is moderately anti-populist and strongly pluralist. In contrast, PiS was already notably more populist in 2001, coming closer to the levels of SRP and LPR. After 2005, the party moved towards a strongly populist and anti-pluralist position, to the extent that by 2019 it was approximately as populist and anti-pluralist as SRP had been in 2001.

Figure 44. Main Polish political formations in liberal-democratic ideological space, 2001-2019.

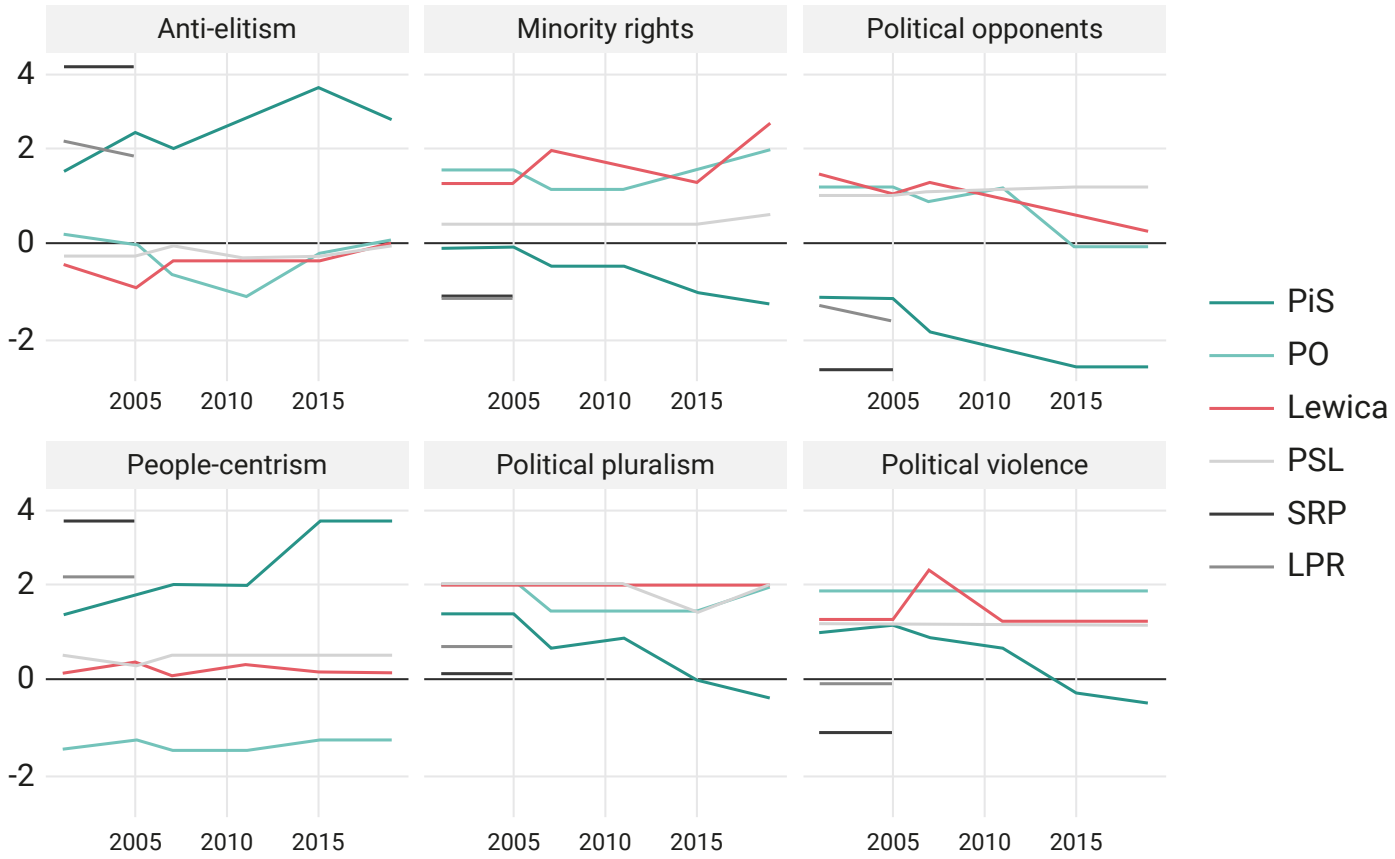


Breaking down populism/anti-populism and pluralism/anti-pluralism into their constituent issues shows a consistent pattern of deviation from the mainstream on PiS's part. While in 2001 PiS was already clearly more anti-elite than PO, PSL and Lewica, by 2019 this gap had grown, although PiS's origins within the post-Solidarity intelligentsia and its experience of government militated against it reaching the heights of the anti-elitism characteristic of SRP during the 2001-2005 parliamentary term. There was a more significant shift in the case of people-centrism, the populist principle that the preferences of the majority should be given

precedence over those of minorities. While PO continued to demur from identifying with the ordinary people, PiS became increasingly more radical in this respect, to the extent that by 2019 it was as people-centric as SRP had been in 2001.

Where the pluralism/anti-pluralism divide is concerned, PiS has diverged from other parties on all counts. In 2001, PiS did not take a clear stance on minority rights, while PO and Lewica were mildly in favour. However, since 2005, the party's position on this issue has moved towards a more radical position. Where depreciating political opponents is concerned, it should be noted that the increasing polarisation in Polish politics over the last two decades has led to all formations becoming less intolerant of dehumanising attacks on political opponents. However, while PO, PSL and Lewica are moderately opposed to attacks on political opponents, PiS was already more accepting of such tactics in 2001 and has become more willing to countenance them over time. In 2019, PiS's stance on the demonisation of political opponents was comparable to that of SRP, a party notorious for such practices. There has also been significant divergence in the case of political pluralism and political violence. In both cases, PiS has moved from a position of moderate pluralism and disavowal of political violence – a position expressed throughout by PO, PSL and Lewica – to a more ambiguous position on both issues.

Figure 45. Changes in positions on liberal-democratic issues, 2001-2019.



A clear picture emerges from this analysis. Over the last two decades, the Polish party system has been characterised by the increasing radicalisation of PiS in the direction of social conservatism, populism and anti-pluralism, while other prominent political formations have remained relatively moderate on socio-cultural issues, opposed to populism and committed to political pluralism. Where economic issues are concerned, there has been no divergence, but rather a shift towards somewhat more interventionist positions and away from the pro-market orthodoxies of the 1990s. The empirical evidence suggests that Polish politics has become increasingly structured around two lines of conflict: a socio-cultural axis present since the 1990s, but on which parties have become increasingly polarised; and an axis marked by support for or opposition to liberal democracy that has become more significant over the last two decades, particularly following PiS's ascent to power in 2015.

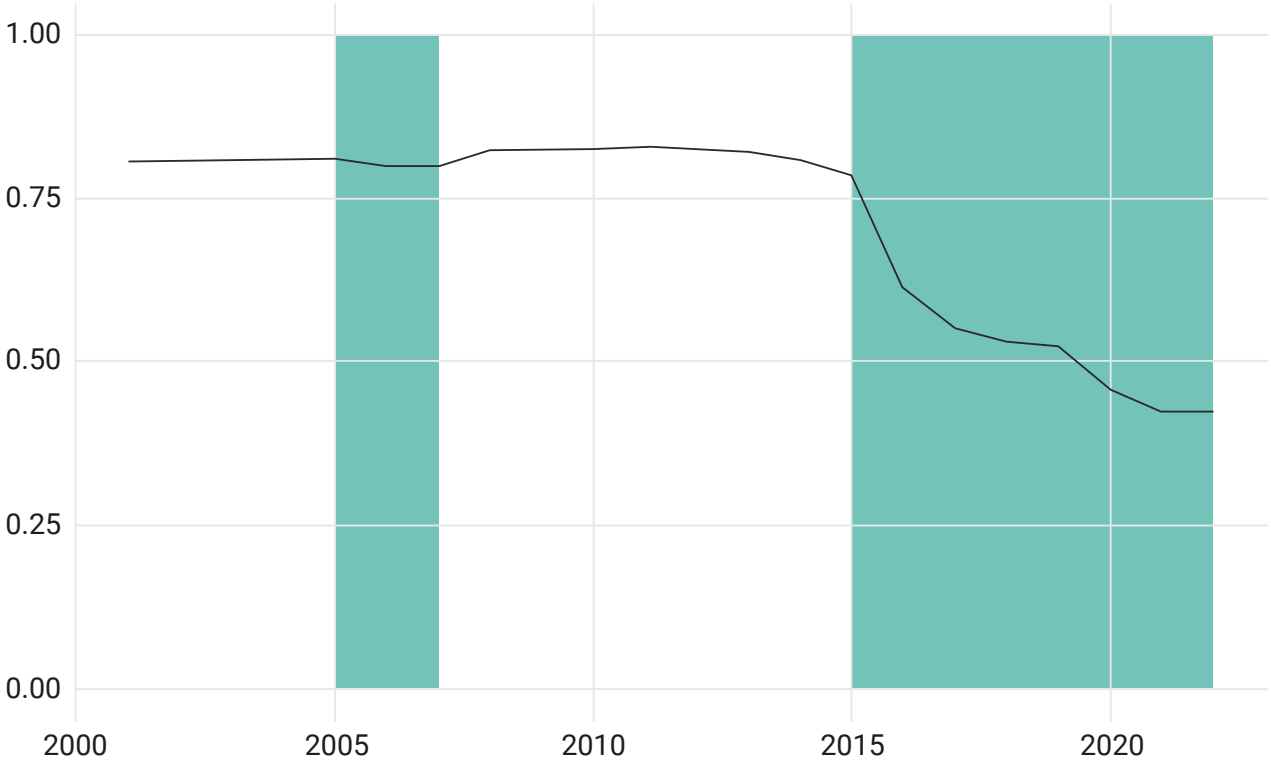
7.3 The impact of the radicalisation of the mainstream right on democracy

Radicalisation is not simply a set of orientations; it is also made manifest in the willingness of radicalising actors to perform actions of increasingly extreme scope, and to "shield these extreme actions from influences that might prevent them".[279] The presence of such actors as important elements of the party system thus carries profound risks for the functioning of a liberal democracy, as they undermine the "compromise, bargaining and moderation" that allow such regimes to function.[280] This risk is particularly high in those cases where these actors are able to access power.

On coming to power in 2015, PiS embarked on a holistic legislative agenda it dubbed the "Good Change" (*dobra zmiana*). The radical ambition of this project was explicitly contrasted with the outgoing PO-PSL government's unambitious, administrative ethos. The implementation of Good Change has had a strongly negative impact on the quality of liberal democracy in Poland. The changes introduced after the party came to power in 2015 have led to repeated clashes with international institutions, particularly the European Commission, European Court of Justice and European Court of Human Rights, and criticism from organisations upholding human rights and the rule of law. While PiS's attacks on the independence of the judiciary have commanded the most attention, the last eight years have seen a deterioration in the quality of Poland's liberal democracy in several respects.

To assess this, we use data from V-Dem, the leading expert survey of democratic quality.[281] Figure 46 shows the trend for Poland of V-Dem's index of liberal democracy over the period 2001-2022. The blue shaded areas correspond to the periods when PiS was in power.

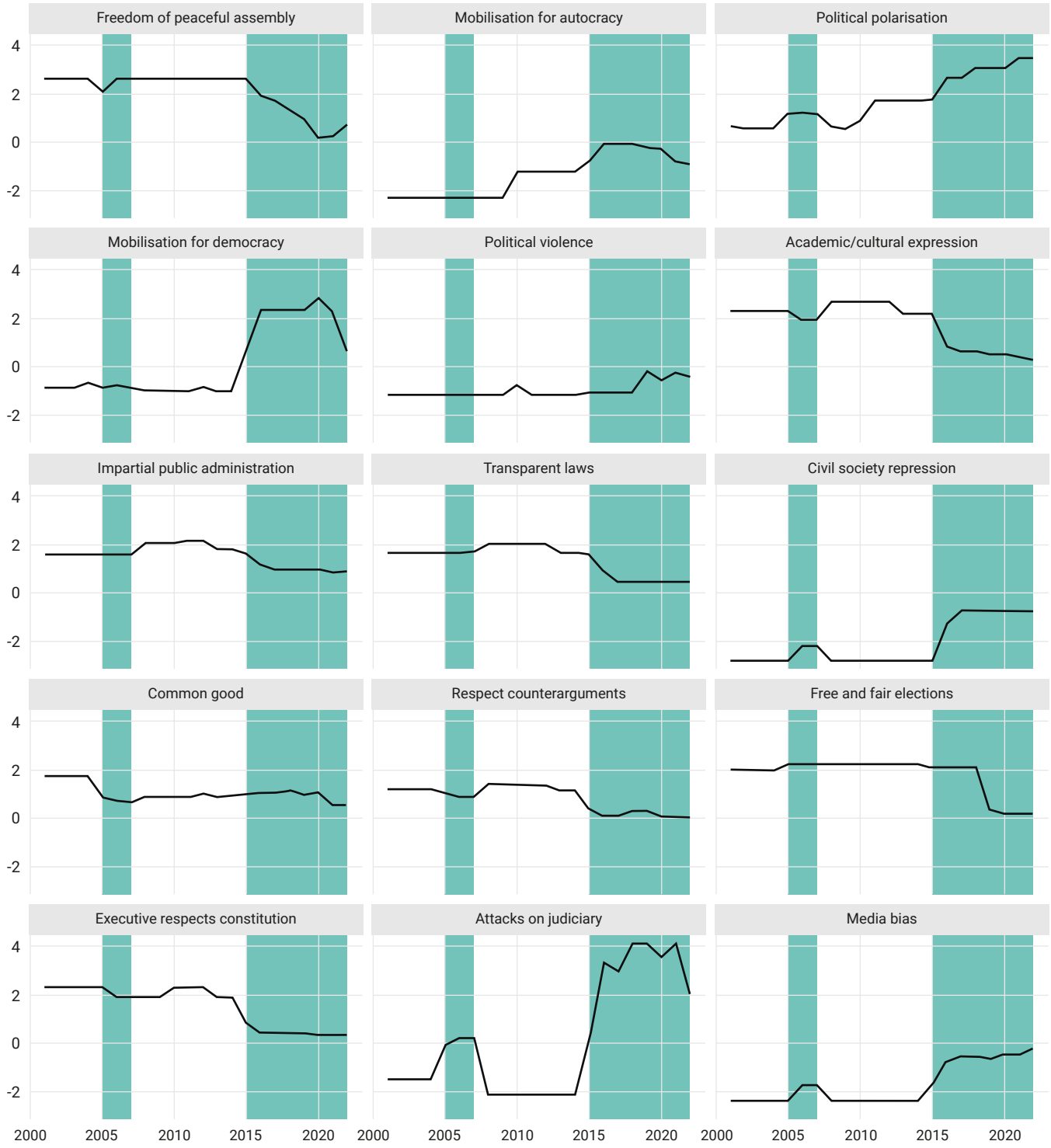
Figure 46. Index of liberal democracy, 2001-2022.



There has been a clear decline in the quality of liberal democracy during the period 2015-2022. In substantial part, this reflects PiS's assault on the rule of law and judicial independence and its bypassing of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary scrutiny in the passage of legislation. A significant component of the liberal democracy index – and of V-Dem's conceptual understanding of democracy more generally – is electoral democracy, which refers to the fundamental principle of a genuinely competitive struggle for the popular vote. Since 2015, there has been a strong deterioration from an imperfect but essentially polyarchic democracy to one beset by significant flaws, and this is reflected in the decline in the liberal democracy index. In their preliminary report following the 2023 election, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observers noted that PiS enjoyed a "clear advantage through its undue influence over the use of state resources and the public media".[282] While elections remain free in the sense that a variety of parties are able to compete without hindrance, the ability of PiS to use the communication resources of state-owned enterprises and their total dominance over public broadcaster TVP – since 2016, essentially an instrument of government propaganda – means that elections cannot be described as fair.

The drivers of the decline in the overall quality of democracy can be identified by examining more specific measures. Figure 47 plots trends on a variety of relevant variables. Firstly, the significant rise in political polarisation over the last 15 years is both cause and effect of radicalisation. With the increasingly emotional and personalised enmity between PiS and PO driving the underlying dynamic of the party system since 2005, and with a divide opening up between PiS and the self-styled "democratic opposition" during PiS's time in power, this polarisation has served to justify aggressive and zero-sum political actions and – with rare exceptions, such as the Polish response to the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – has prevented de-escalation to a more cooperative and consensus-based mode of governance.

Figure 47. Measures of liberal-democratic quality, 2001-2022.



Note: For ease of interpretation, "attacks on judiciary", "civil society repression" and "media bias" have been reversed.

The assault on the judiciary and rule of law has been the most prominent and consequential effect of PiS's radicalisation. The capacity of the judiciary and the Constitutional Tribunal to control the legislative and executive branches' exercise of power is a recurrent source of frustration for those with a political mandate to govern, but particularly for those whose radicalism tests the boundaries of what the constitution will permit. Part of the reason for PiS's turn towards more radical stances was the conviction of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński that Poland's constitutional settlement, as enshrined in the 1997 constitution, was, in practice, a means by which a liberal minority had manoeuvred to entrench their interests in the institutional architecture of Polish democracy. For those opposing liberal orthodoxies, this "network" (*układ) and the "privileged caste" that populated it constituted a "mono-power" that preached pluralism while constraining the political space available to dissenting actors.*[283] This was a belief compounded by PiS's experience of having key legislation ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Tribunal during the 2005-2007 parliamentary term.[284] It was inevitable that the more radical PiS's policy aims became, the more it would come into conflict with the judicial branch.

From the very beginning of PiS's term in power, a purge of the judiciary was accorded priority. The Constitutional Tribunal was first paralysed and then politically captured through the appointment of loyalists. The National Council for the Judiciary, the body responsible for nominating judges, was subject to a similar process of capture, with the PiS majority legislating itself the power to appoint most judges to this body, thus establishing a direct line of political control. A special chamber of the Supreme Court was created for the disciplining of judges, populated solely by PiS appointees. The posts of Justice Minister and Prosecutor General were combined, leading to greater scope for political interference in the work of prosecutors. The impact of these changes is visible in two measures from the V-Dem data presented in Figure 47: attacks on the judiciary by government politicians became much more frequent after 2015, while executive respect for the constitution declined.

Another key priority of PiS was gaining control of public media, an objective which it justified as a pluralistic measure to balance out the alleged pro-opposition bias of private media, but which, in reality, entailed turning public television and radio into outlets of government propaganda, regulated by a new PiS-dominated Council of National Media, a new body created to usurp the functions of the existing National Council of Broadcasting and Television. Attempts to "repolonise" private media by imposing minimum requirements for Polish capital in the ownership of Polish-based media were unsuccessful, and Poland retained a lively and pluralistic media landscape. However, given the significant role played by public media in political life, its capture by the governing party nevertheless made a substantial contribution to the rise in media bias over this period. The unwillingness or incapacity of public media to hold PiS to account was, in turn, a significant component of the declining quality of free and fair elections.

The turn towards illiberalism was also reflected in a deterioration of the quality of lawmaking and public administration. As long-term observers have noted, lack of transparency in Poland's legislative process is not a new phenomenon. The author of a monograph published just prior to PiS's election victory in 2015 concluded that parliament consisted of a "closed political system" that was impregnable to information from the outside and in which discussion of bills served mainly to legitimise the decisions of the executive, rather than expose those decisions to the force of genuine argument.[285] Yet, despite PiS's initial promises of a "democratic package" of reforms that would address these flaws, the expert assessments shown in Figure 47 point to further deterioration in the transparency of lawmaking, rather than any discernible improvement. Existing flaws were amplified: bills were passed with scant social consultation and legislative scrutiny, even under circumstances where haste was not required.[286] While PiS may have been critical of the flaws in the legislative process when in opposition, when in power they had little incentive to repair a system conducive to ad hoc problem-solving. If the separation of powers was one of the reasons for the persistence

of "impossibilism" in Polish political life, reforms aimed at increasing the autonomy of the legislature in relation to the executive would only deepen the problem. Increasing the scope for the opposition to play a meaningful role in parliament would also be at odds with the conviction that opposition parties were not to be regarded as legitimate participants in the political process. Accordingly, respect for counterarguments also decreased during this period.

The elite-level polarisation between parties is reflected at the popular level in increased political mobilisation. As Figure 47 shows, since 2015, there has been a rise in both mobilisation for democracy and mobilisation for autocracy. The controversial nature of many of PiS's changes, particularly those relating to the judiciary and women's rights, led to the flourishing of social protest after a period of political quietism. While support for autocratic forms of government remains at a low level, there has been a noticeable increase over the last decade.[287] While there has been a slight increase in political violence during PiS's time in power, non-violent protest is the more significant manifestation of polarisation. However, at the same time, there has been a significant decline in freedoms of peaceful assembly, with PiS's use of legislation to privilege established "cyclical demonstrations", placing significant restrictions on the possibilities for counterprotest.

As sources of independent ideas and criticism, civil society organisations and academia are also frequent targets of the radical right. The V-Dem figures show a significant increase in the level of civil society repression after 2015. As Bill documents, this took the form of exerting pressure on politically uncongenial civil society organisations by withdrawing funding and using public media to discredit them, while state resources were used selectively to promote – or even to create – a "counter-elite" of civil society organisations, "whose boundaries with the party political elite are porous."[288] A new institution, the National Freedom Institute–Center for Civil Society Development, was set up to centralise cooperation between the state and civil society and the disbursement of state funds to its organisations. This resulted in the funnelling of significant sums to favoured organisations, prominent among which were organisations promoting conservative social policy and the dissemination of nativist historical narratives. At the same time, human rights non-governmental organisations – particularly those defending LGBTQ+ rights – were subjected to orchestrated smear campaigns in public and PiS-friendly private media, starved of domestic sources of funding, and those funded from outside Poland were denigrated as agents of foreign influence.[289]

These actions were consistent both with the movement of PiS towards more radical ideological preferences and discursive expressions and with the fundamental suspicion evinced by the party to "initiatives which are not the authentic emanations of social movements".[290] A similar dynamic was in evidence in the case of academia, where PiS had limited instruments to directly encroach on the autonomy of scholars but could use indirect methods of pressure and promotion. While the National Science Centre, the main domestic grant agency, was increasingly unable to fund qualifying research bids due to real-terms budget cuts, PiS set up a new grant-disbursing institution, the Nicolaus Copernicus Academy, populated in large part by scholars sympathetic to the party and its aims. While Polish academia did not experience the same repressive environment as that experienced by those who were prominent in their criticism of the government, it expect to be targeted by PiS-sympathising media outlets, particularly if their research concerned sensitive issues that clashed with PiS's preferred narrative of Polish history. The treatment of Jews by collaborationist Poles in occupied Poland during World War Two was a particular focal point, with the introduction of a law penalising the public attribution of Holocaust crimes to Poland or the Polish nation.[291] In one particularly egregious case, Michał Bilewicz, a social psychologist at the University of Warsaw, whose research into antisemitic attitudes among Poles has earned him the ire of the right-wing media, was denied promotion to full professor through the refusal – on spurious procedural grounds – of President Andrzej Duda to sign off on his appointment, the exercise of a presidential prerogative hitherto regarded as ceremonial in character.

7.4 The impact of radicalisation on the political mainstream

The elections of 2023 were widely regarded as, in significant part, a backlash against the consequences of radicalisation, yet, at the same time, they constituted an endorsement – in both a positive and a negative sense – of the politics of radicalism. Positive, in the sense that over a third of the electorate was still prepared to vote for a formation that had run the election on a defence of its radicalism and promised to take it further if granted a third term. Negative, in the sense that in both policy and party-political terms PiS was an unavoidable point of reference for the "democratic opposition". The polarisation of Polish politics around both the emotional rivalry between PiS and PO and the political substance of PiS's turn towards the radical right has had two significant effects, both of which played into the electoral campaign.

Firstly, the impact of eight years of radicalism has made several political issues much more salient than before. In some cases, there has been a clear shift in what constitutes the political mainstream. For example, the popular child benefit policy PiS introduced during its first term in office has become a non-negotiable element of social policy, with none of the electorally significant parties willing to advocate its abolition. In other cases, issues have become more salient because of PiS's radicalisation. PO, which previously evinced only limited enthusiasm for issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and abortion rights, has been forced to take a clearer stance on these topics or risk losing the support of more moderate centre-right voters, whose benchmarks on these policies are now more aligned with Western European centre-right positions. There are exceptions: while PO surprised many observers by insisting that its candidates for the 2023 election endorsed abortion on demand in the first trimester, party leader Donald Tusk opted to challenge PiS's anti-immigration rhetoric on the grounds of the party's hypocrisy on the issue, rather than through the articulation of a pro-immigration alternative, leading to criticism that he was helping stoke fears about Muslim immigrants.[292] Regardless of whether this was an audacious tactic to nullify PiS's attempt to centre the election on a topic it deemed advantageous or a genuine shift towards an anti-immigrant stance, the fact that it was deemed a necessary element of the election campaign is testament to the extent to which migration has become a salient issue in Polish politics, as a result of PiS's radical rhetoric on the issue, if not necessarily its actions.

The second significant effect concerns the broader political narrative. When in power from 2007 to 2015, PO (along with coalition partner PSL) was often accused of an excessively technocratic and administrative approach to politics that was dubbed "warm water in the tap", in the sense that it envisaged the role of the state as simply being to ensure that, when people turned on the taps, warm water came out. One of the reasons for PiS's victory in 2015 was that it offered a much richer and more emotionally engaging political narrative than its competitors. Yet the political narrative accompanying PiS's radicalisation has generated its own antithetical critique. As a consequence of eight years of violations of the rule of law and liberal-democratic norms and values, the mainstream right has access to a narrative about the "return to Europe" and the "restoration of democracy" that has remained essentially dormant since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, an event that was seen as confirmation of democratic consolidation and Poland's acceptance into the comity of liberal democratic nations. The extent to which Poland's mainstream right – both PO and the Third Way coalition – can take advantage of a story about Poland's future, which clearly helped galvanise turnout and support for opposition parties in October's election, will depend on how they deal with the consequences of PiS's rule. Rolling back rule of law violations in a manner that is both effective and legally unimpeachable will be a very difficult task, and the temptation to cut corners and seek revenge in what is still a very emotionally volatile political culture could severely undermine the self-image of the "democratic opposition".

Indeed, the heterogeneous nature of the coalition that is likely to form the next government in Poland is testament to the ambiguous position in which the Polish political mainstream finds itself as a result of right-

wing radicalisation. This leaves the constituent parties of Lewica – the New Left (Nowa Lewica, NL) and Left Together Razem – facing a dilemma. On one hand, the need to create a common front against radicalism has led to a situation in which social democrats are likely to enter power for the first time in nearly two decades, providing the left with the possibility to exert an influence disproportionally greater than its 8.6% share of the vote. On the other hand, the urgency of confronting illiberalism has resulted in social democrats coming under significant pressure to scale back their preferences for the sake of a common front.

As the analyses of party positions in Figures 42 and 43 show, there are significant differences between PO and Lewica on economic policy, and between PSL (a constituent party of the Third Way coalition) and Lewica on socio-cultural policy. With both the ideological and numerical centre of gravity of Polish politics firmly on the right, the left risks alienating its already fragile support base. Indeed, following post-election negotiations, Razem soon decided not to join the governing coalition, citing insufficient commitment to its key policies in the coalition agreement.[293]

While PiS's turn towards a more economically interventionist policy platform has had the effect of shifting the mainstream in favour of social policies previously derided by the centre-right as impractical and unaffordable, there is limited scope for the left to be the main beneficiaries of this shift. Much of the more economically vulnerable electorate is still reluctant to vote for a party offering socially liberal policies, and while the stereotype of the modern Polish left as a coterie of prosperous urban radicals is an exaggeration, the party still lacks the "heartland" appeal that has enabled PiS to capture many of the voters the left might hope to mobilise through attacking neoliberalism. According to exit poll data, in October 2023, only 1.1% of those who voted for PiS four years previously transferred their vote to Lewica, and while 15% of those who did not vote in 2019 voted for Lewica in 2023, the coalition lost a greater percentage of 2019 left-wing voters to KO (23.1%) and nearly as many to Third Way (14.1%).[294] These figures underline the "squeezed" position in which Polish social democracy finds itself two decades after the beginning of its decline: the economic policies it needs to implement to increase its support base are likely to prove elusive in a party dominated by the centre-right, while the socially liberal cultural policies it has benefited from may be growing in popularity with the electorate, but are increasingly embraced by centre-right parties reacting against PiS's shift to radical social conservatism.

7.5 Conclusions

The radicalisation of the right has had profound implications, not only for the quality of liberal democracy in Poland, but also for the dynamics of party politics and the trajectory of future development. Although the ousting of PiS has been adduced as an example of how it is possible to fight back effectively against democratic backsliding, and although the fact that the opposition can defeat PiS is evidence that the situation is nothing like as parlous as in Hungary, the result of the 2023 election is very much a response to radicalism rather than its defeat. PiS built its support base by moving to more radical positions, has held onto that base, despite the evident exhaustion of its political vigour over the last couple of years, and remains the most popular single party in a relatively stable party system. As such, radicalism is not just a feature of Polish political life, but a defining characteristic of one of its main elements.

This radicalisation has also spilled over into Polish public life more generally. Both radicalisation and the response to it have exacerbated existing tendencies towards polarisation, the effect of which has been to recalibrate norms of acceptable behaviour and interaction in the public sphere. Verbal aggression towards and demonisation of political and social "enemies" has been normalised, and the standard for judging

something reprehensible or scandalous has been raised to the extent that most actions and rhetoric now pass comfortably beneath it.

This situation both helps to explain the current weakness of social democracy in Poland and to point to some of the opportunities for its renewal. On one hand, the left has clearly been a victim of the dominant position of the right in Polish politics over the last two decades. The crumbling of the initial cleavage between the social-democratic successors to the communists and the post-Solidarity at the moment of backlash against an unpopular left-wing government created a structural problem for the left. With PiS outcompeting it for socially sensitive economic policies and better able to cater for the social conservatism of many "heartland" voters, while PO could better appeal to a growing class of urban voters with liberal views on both the economy and socio-cultural matters, the left was squeezed out of the running for power, a situation exacerbated by a series of uninspiring leaders. The left spent the 2011-2015 parliamentary term out of power and seemed on a course to become entirely moribund.

However, the radical turn in Polish politics since 2015 has generated opportunities for social democracy in two respects. Firstly, the conservative backlash enacted during the years 2015-2023 may have answered some public expectations for anti-minority, anti-migrant and clerically infused policy. Yet this has generated a backlash of its own. Secularisation continues at a steady and unrelenting pace, and Polish society is becoming increasingly multicultural and multiethnic in character as immigration – despite the rhetoric of the right – increases. Greater tolerance for LGBTQ+ people and more liberal laws on abortion reflect a rejection of the harshly repressive rhetoric and actions of PiS and Konfederacja. These are issues over which the left can credibly claim ownership, although it will face competition in this regard from KO.

The second way in which a new path has opened for the left is in its return to power after nearly two decades in opposition. The broad pro-democratic coalition runs the gamut of moderate conservatism through centrist liberalism to Lewica's social democracy. This places some restrictions on what it can achieve: the conservative elements in the coalition are likely to resist radical policy shifts on socio-cultural matters. However, they will by no means be as staunchly opposed to progressive policies as PiS, as already evidenced by the passage of legislation aimed at restoring funding for in vitro fertilisation. The integrity of the coalition will repeatedly be put to the test, but stands to provide a younger cadre of left politicians, who are untainted by the legacy of post-communism, with the opportunity to establish a record of tangible policy delivery and practical experience of government. The opportunity that is afforded social democrats to help *shape* the political agenda in the next few years, rather than simply to react to the actions of others, will mean the left can credibly position itself as a protagonist rather than a bystander.

Not all of those on the left are convinced of these opportunities: the decision of the Left Together party not to join the coalition was determined, in part, by the perception that left-wing policies will be unacceptably watered down in what is still a predominantly centre-right government. Yet there are also risks in further marginalisation; in the short-to-medium term, social democrats can, at most, hope to influence the course of events, rather than to dictate them, and having *some* influence is arguably preferable to having none.

The radical turn of the last decade may in one sense have come to an end, but it will continue to exert a significant impact on the course of Polish politics in the coming years. Even if the new government broadly succeeds in the difficult task of undoing the damage caused to the rule of law, and even if it can bring to account some of those responsible for that damage, the next election will be fought by the same rivals, and over the same questions. However, the Polish left may, by then, be better placed to offer convincing answers.

8. FROM RADICALISATION TO POLARISATION: THE “DOUBLE CONTAGION” SHAPING SPAIN’S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

8. FROM RADICALISATION TO POLARISATION: THE "DOUBLE CONTAGION" SHAPING SPAIN'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

LISA ZANOTTI

8.1 Introduction

The political landscape of contemporary democracies has undergone significant shifts, with the radicalisation of mainstream right parties becoming a central topic in both academic and public discourse. This chapter focuses on Spain, a third-wave democracy, where the far right emerged belatedly. Along with Portugal, Spain represented an exception in Western Europe until 2018 by not having far-right parties represented in parliament. Specifically, we examine the radicalisation of the mainstream right, the Popular Party (*Partido Popular* (PP)), and assess its implications for the broader democratic landscape, as well as the tactics and strategies of the nation's social democratic forces. This chapter revolves around two central questions. Firstly, we examine the trends of radicalisation within Spain's mainstream right, considering both programmatic shifts and its rhetorical strategies. This investigation encompasses changes in ideological positions, especially concerning immigration, moral values, the country's unity and evaluation of the parties. Secondly, we seek to comprehend the potential consequences of this observed radicalisation on the state of democracy in Spain in a more holistic way, with a particular emphasis on social democracy. This segment delves into the "double contagion" theory, where the far right's influence has partial responsibility for the radicalisation of the mainstream right, which, in turn, has sparked heightened levels of polarisation of their political adversaries, notably in the affective/identitarian sense and on territorial matters. In summary, this policy study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in one of Europe's major democracies, offering insights with potentially broader implications for the study of political transformations in the contemporary era.

8.2 Context: The Spanish party system after the return to democracy

While recent years have seen their share of political turbulence, the overarching narrative of Spanish politics is more aptly described as stable rather than volatile. In this context, there's a general agreement on the existence of four distinct electoral cycles that have shaped Spanish politics since 1977 (see Figure 48). Each of these cycles is marked by unique configurations of electoral support for major parties; the structure of the party system; competitive dynamics among parties and key electoral dimensions, such as fragmentation, volatility and ideological polarisation.[295]

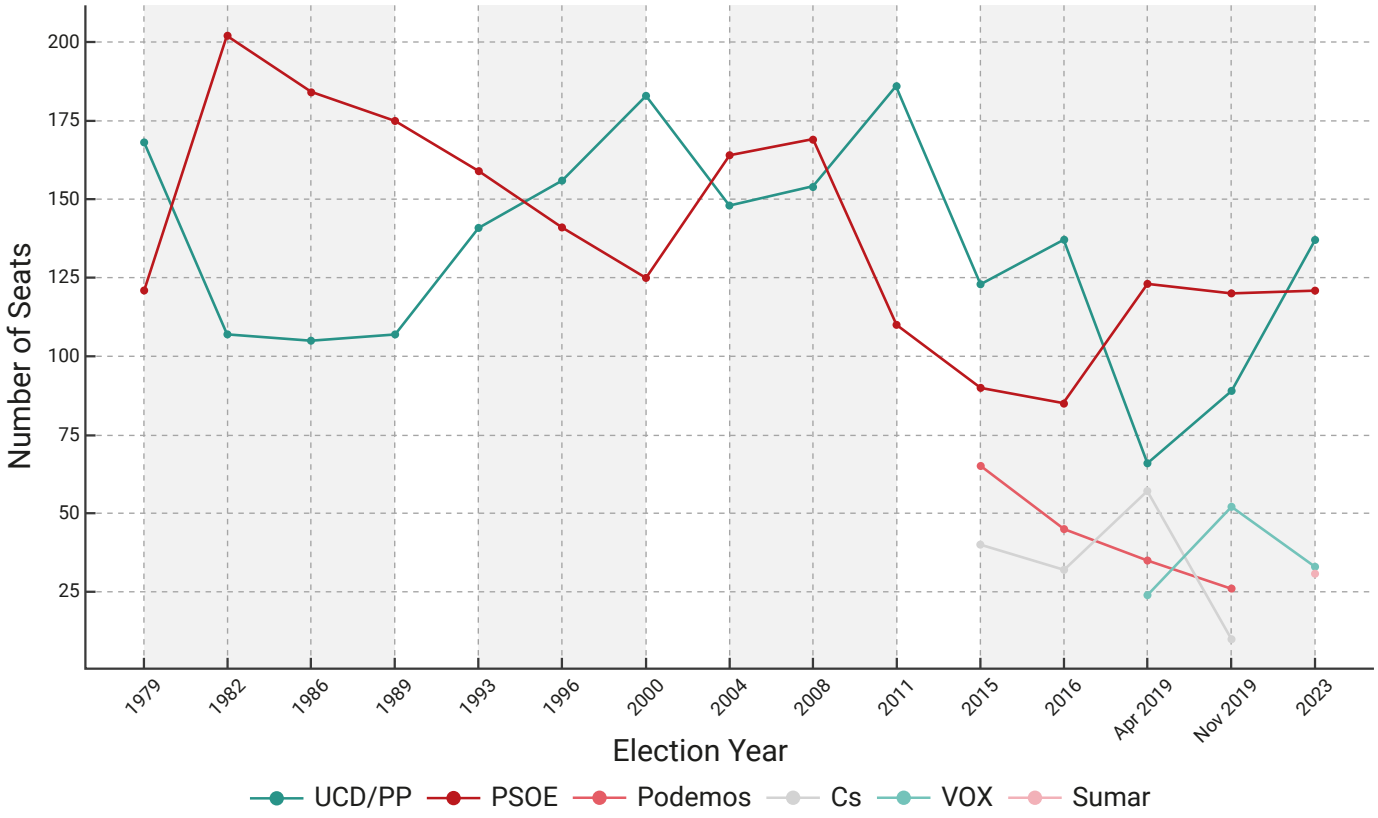
The early democratic transition in Spain, encompassing the 1977 and 1979 elections, established a moderate and pluralistic party system after decades of Francoist rule.[296] The centre-right Union of the

Democratic Centre (*Unión de Centro Democrático* (UCD)) under Adolfo Suárez dominated this phase, leading the nation towards a democratic constitution and territorial decentralisation. However, Suárez's tenure faced challenges, culminating in his resignation and the ascent of Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo. The subsequent electoral phase, spanning the 1982 to 1993 elections, witnessed the rise of Felipe Gonzalez's socialist PSOE. This era saw Spain integrate with international institutions like NATO and the EU and undergo substantial economic modernisation. The transformative 1982 elections solidified PSOE's dominance, with the party achieving impressive electoral results in subsequent polls.[297] Notably, González navigated the political landscape through alliances with regional parties like Convergence and Union (*Convergència i Unión* (CiU)) and the Basque Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV)).

In the initial stages of Spanish democracy, emerging from Franco's regime, the UCD and its successor, the PP, exemplified a problematic aspect of Spain's transition. While pivotal in the democratic transition, the UCD, and later the PP, navigated the complexities of inheriting supporters and politicians from Franco's regime, reflecting tensions between past authoritarian legacies and the nascent democratic ethos. This intricate relationship was highlighted in 1996, when the PP first came to power, and the opposition leveraged historical anniversaries to pressure the party into confronting its Francoist connections. Some of the PP's voter base included pro-Franco adherents compelling the party into a delicate balancing act. It was not until 2002 that the PP formally condemned the dictatorship, a significant move considering their electoral base and historical ties.[298] This transition period for the PP, marked by a gradual shift from its authoritarian roots to a more democratic and centrist identity, mirrors the broader democratic consolidation in Spain.

The third electoral cycle, ranging from 1996 to 2011, was marked by intense rivalry between the PSOE and PP. During this period, the PP's evolution continued, as it positioned itself unequivocally as a mainstream right-wing party, completing its transition from the fringes of its Francoist origins to becoming a central figure within the European context of conservative parties. This transformation entrenched its status as a defender of liberal democracy, engaging in the political contest as a legitimate competitor against the socialist PSOE, and solidifying its role in the democratic fabric of Spain. Throughout this phase, governance often depended on the backing of regional nationalist parties, though coalition governments were not the norm. This period also saw frequent power shifts between the PSOE and PP, and while both parties' seat shares generally increased, the political landscape remained dynamic.[299] The last electoral phase reflected a marked decline in support for traditional parties, aligning with broader European trends.[300] The 2015 general elections were particularly transformative, resulting in reduced vote shares for the PP and PSOE and the rise of new political entities, such as *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*. The resultant political fragmentation, coupled with regional complexities, notably in Catalonia, posed significant governance challenges.

Figure 48. Seats obtained by the main parties in general elections between 1979 and 2023 (House of Congress).



Source: Own elaboration from Spanish Interior Ministry data.

Generally speaking, when examining the primary distinctions that have underpinned Spanish politics since its democratic resurgence, scholarly work on the cleavages influencing the Spanish party system predominantly centres on two key divides: the socioeconomic and the centre-periphery divides.[301] This distinction is of paramount importance when analysing radicalisation in the Spanish context. Both the left-right spectrum, reflecting socioeconomic disparities, and the territorial dimension, highlighting the centre-periphery dynamics, serve as crucial axes of political polarisation. Hence, to fully grasp the nature and drivers of radicalisation, it is essential to consider both these dimensions, as they collectively shape the political discourse, alignments and conflicts in Spain.

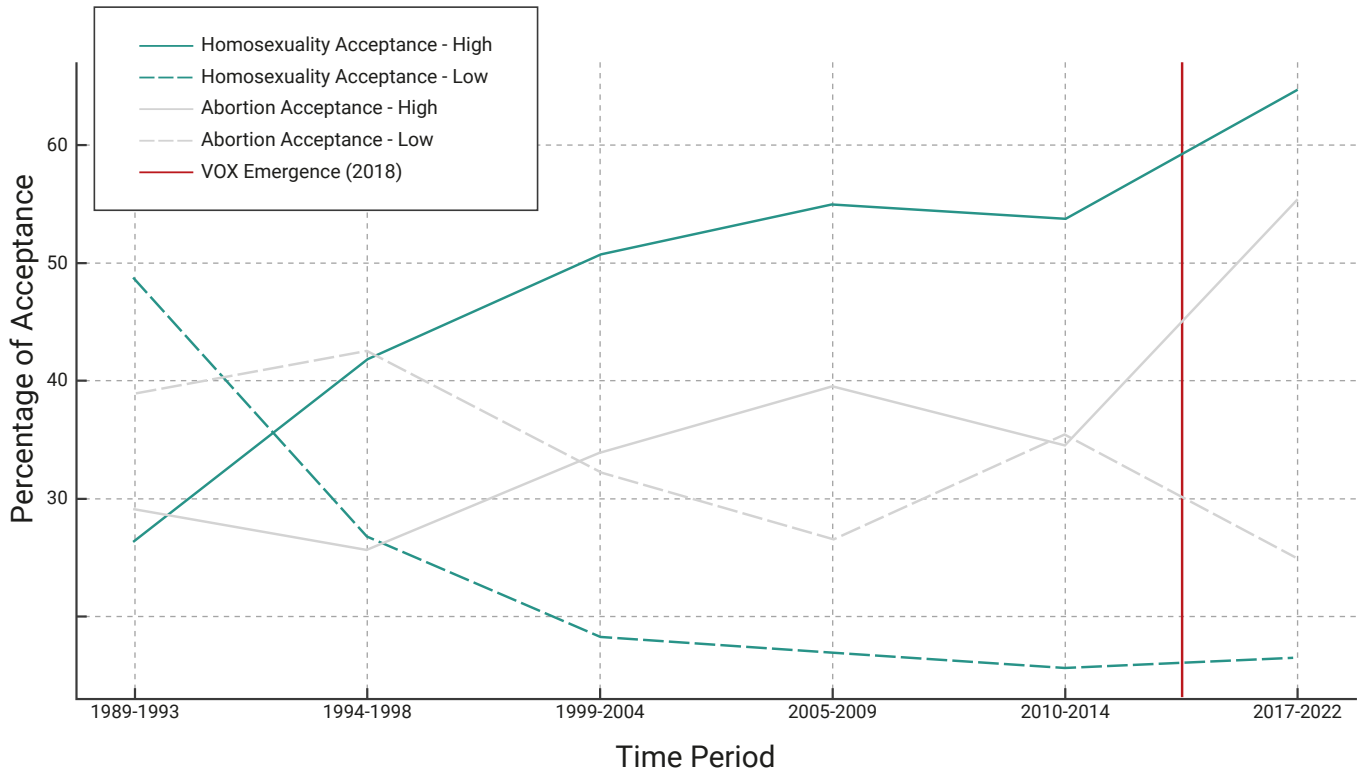
8.3 The end of the Spanish exceptionalism: Crisis of the PP, emergence of VOX and the politicisation of the territorial issue

Historically, the PP has been a pillar of Spanish politics, alongside the PSOE, since transitioning from Franco's regime. Both parties have effectively functioned as catch-all entities, securing widespread electoral support for nearly four decades. The PP underwent significant ideological moderation during the 1990s to expand its appeal to centrist voters, facing little challenge until the emergence of Ciudadanos in 2015, and subsequently VOX.[302] VOX entered the electoral fray in the 2018 Andalusian election, capturing 11% of

the vote.[303] Its national breakthrough came in April 2019, securing over 10% of votes and 24 parliamentary seats. The momentum continued in the November snap election, with VOX achieving more than 15% of the vote and increasing its seats to 52, marking its establishment as a significant force in Spanish politics. The ascendance of the far-right VOX is linked to Catalonia's contentious and unsanctioned separatist referendum. This development marked a pivotal moment, exacerbating the centre-periphery cleavage in Spain. Historically a nation with diverse regional identities, the rise of VOX has intensified the politicisation of national unity. The catalyst for this sharpened focus was the controversial "*Procès*", the series of events leading to and including the unauthorised 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia. Internationally, VOX portrayed immigration, especially from non-European sources—mainly Islamic, as a siege on Spanish cultural and national identity echoing a common theme in the discourse of xenophobic parties who leverage societal fears to gain traction for their exclusionary agendas.[304] Domestically, the party framed the electoral gains of pro-separatist parties and their secessionist endeavours as an assault on Spain's territorial integrity.

To understand the increasing support for VOX, it is essential to consider whether this reflects a broader conservative shift among the Spanish electorate, potentially signalling a cultural backlash. This question bears significance, as it could indicate growing sympathies for political forces advocating for traditional values. To address this inquiry, it is pertinent to present empirical evidence of societal attitudes towards issues typically associated with progressive and conservative values.

Figure 49. Levels of high and low acceptance of homosexuality and abortion over time (1989-2022).



Source: Own elaboration from World Values Survey (WVS) data.

Contrary to the hypothesis of a conservative backlash, the trajectory of Spanish attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion demonstrates a clear movement towards progressive values. The levels of "high acceptance" of these issues has been consistently rising, particularly since the early 2000s, as depicted in Figure 49. This upward trend stands in stark contrast to the waning "low acceptance", indicative of a society increasingly distancing itself from conservative stances.

Moreover, when compared to more pressing concerns like economic crises, unemployment, political issues in general, and specific dissatisfaction with the government or politicians, which have consistently ranked higher in perceived importance[305] (e.g., economic problems at 27.4%, political problems at 22.3%, unemployment also at 22.3%), immigration has not been a predominant issue for the majority of the Spanish population, even though surveys have reported its increasing importance (see Table 5). This context suggests that the singular increase in concern over immigration in 2024, portrayed in Table 5, might not necessarily reflect a deep-seated conservative turn or a cultural backlash but could be influenced by short-term factors or specific events.

Table 5. Percentage of respondents identifying immigration as a relevant problem in Spain (2013-2024).

Year	1st problem (%)	2nd problem (%)	3rd problem (%)	Total
2013	0.3	0.7	0.9	1.9
2014	0.5	0.8	0.7	2
2015	0.1	1	0.6	1.7
2016	0.4	1.3	1.7	3.4
2017	0,4	1.2	1.7	3.3
2018	0.7	1	1.2	2.9
2019	1.6	3.7	3.5	8.8
2020	1.3	3.5	3.7	8.5
2021	0.5	0.8	1.1	2.4
2022	0.3	0.6	1.1	2
2023	0.7	1.5	2.0	4.2
2024	2.8	4.9	4.2	11.9

Source: Own elaboration based on CIS barometers questionnaires (2013-2024).

In summarising the argument, it is evident that the demand side of politics reveals no substantial evidence of a cultural backlash in Spain at the mass level. Despite VOX's electoral success, it does not appear to stem from a societal retreat to conservative values. Instead, the support for VOX could be attributed to specific political dynamics, such as the party's stance on regional independence movements, or particular socioeconomic concerns that have resonated with a segment of the electorate.

The 2015-2019 period marked a tumultuous phase for the PP, rattled by the rise of Cs and VOX and rocked by a 2018 corruption scandal. The scandal, termed "the largest bribery scheme since the return to democracy",[306] led to the conviction of nine affiliated businessmen and officials, and culminated in a €245,000 fine against the PP. It also triggered a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Rajoy, propelled by PSOE's Pedro Sánchez. Rajoy's subsequent resignation from leadership further underscored the scandal's profound impact on the party's political fortunes.

Table 6. PP voter loyalty and voter changes.

	2016 PP voters (April 2019 vote)		April 2019 PP voters (November 2019 vote)	
	Cases	**Percentages**	**Cases**	**Percentages**
UP	3	0.3	0	0.1
PSOE	45	4.0	4	0.6
Cs	148	13.2	9	1.5
PP	541	48.2	447	72.3
VOX	211	18.8	78	12.6
Others	24	2.2	3	0.4
Null/blank	3	0.3	3	0.4
Abstained	148	13.2	75	12.2
Total	1,123	100.0	618	100.0

Source: Own elaboration based on the April and November 2019 Spanish general elections post-election questionnaires.

Notes: UP = Unidas Podemos PSOE = Partido Socialista Obrero Español Cs = Ciudadanos, PP = Partido Popular. Post-stratification electoral weights employed.

Table 6 delineates the PP's fluctuating voter loyalty, revealing a significant dip to 48.2% in April 2019, with many voters transitioning to Cs and VOX. By November 2019, PP loyalty rebounded to 72.3%, while defections to Cs and VOX declined, although this could also be due to the very short time between the two elections.[307] This voter shift reflects VOX's emergence, often at the PP's expense, suggesting a realignment of political loyalties in Spain. Scandals eroding trust in the PP have propelled voters towards populist alternatives.[308] Notably, VOX's leadership, including Santiago Abascal, the president of VOX, shares roots with the PP, indicating a transfer not just of voters but of political personnel.[309]

Table 7. VOX voter loyalty and voter changes.

	April 2019 VOX voters (2016 vote)		November 2019 VOX voters (April 2019 vote)	
	Cases	**Percentages**	**Cases**	**Percentages**
UP	5	1.4	6	1.4
PSOE	16	4.6	14	3.6
Cs	48	13.5	43	10.8
PP	211	58.9	78	19.6
VOX			215	54.2
Others	28	7.8	4	1.1
Null/blank	8	2.1	4	1.0
No right to vote	13	3.6	4	1.1
Abstained	29	8.2	28	7.2
Total	358	100.0	397	100.0

Source and notes: see Table 6.

Table 7 illustrates VOX's voter base during the 2019 federal elections, revealing substantial crossover from the PP. In April 2019, nearly 58.9% of VOX's voters were ex-PP supporters, and 13.5% came from Cs. VOX also activated 8.2% of its electorate from previously non-voting individuals, indicating its mobilisation impact.[310] By November, VOX had retained the allegiance of 54.2% of its voters from the April election and attracted 19.6% of former PP supporters and 10.8% from the Cs constituency. These figures underscore VOX's ongoing appeal to former PP voters, reflecting a significant realignment within Spain's political right.

8.4 The modern PP: Shadows of radicalisation and factionalism

This section examines the PP's ideological pivot under the leadership of Pablo Casado and Alberto Nuñez Feijóo from 2018 to the present. It scrutinises the party's gravitation towards more radical policy proposals and the alterations in the PP's discourse while in opposition. The relevance of studying this shift lies not only in its impact on the party's public stance but also in understanding the internal dynamics and struggles between factions. Political parties are not monolithic entities; the ideological tug-of-war within them can catalyse significant changes in a party's direction. Thus, examining the interplay of different ideological groups within the PP is essential to grasp the nuances of its radicalisation and the potential ramifications for the Spanish political spectrum.

While the PP has demonstrated a discernible shift towards more radical policy endorsements and increasingly polarising rhetoric during the last years, it is crucial to distinguish this from a fundamental disloyalty or semi-loyalty to democratic principles. It is, however, pertinent to note that radical elements within the party are gaining increasing influence, as highlighted in subsequent sections of this chapter. The PP's rightward ideological shift under Pablo Casado's leadership from 2018 to 2022 can be seen – at least partially – as a direct strategic response to the rising success of VOX in national polls and elections. The emergence of VOX on the political scene, particularly its notable performance in the April 2019 general election, where it

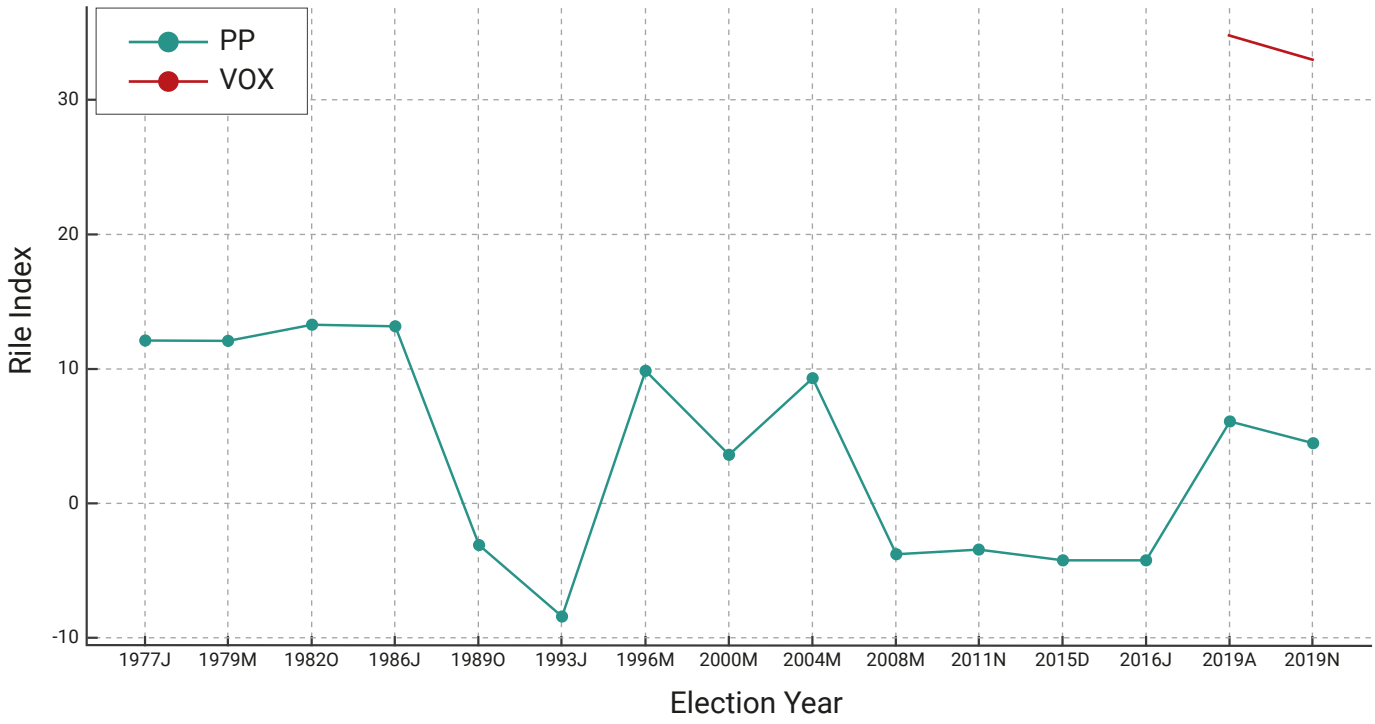
entered the national parliament with over 10% of votes, marked a pivotal moment that pressured the PP to recalibrate its policy stances. VOX's ability to capture the attention of the public and influence the political discourse on matters of national identity and immigration has been significant. This success stirred a sense of urgency within the PP to address potential voter attrition. Specifically, the PP took a firmer stance on immigration, with Casado advocating for stricter border controls and an assimilation-focused approach to national identity, which paralleled VOX's platform. This pivot was not merely rhetorical but was reflected in policy proposals and legislative agendas aimed at consolidating a more conservative voter base.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the local elections on 28 May 2023, the PP's willingness to form governing coalitions with VOX at the subnational level in various regions is a development of considerable significance. These alliances, while reflective of a practical political strategy to gain or retain power, raise questions about the PP's ideological trajectory and its impact on the overall political landscape in Spain. These collaborations with VOX, a party with more explicitly radical positions, could potentially influence the PP's policy directions and public discourse, contributing to a broader, albeit nuanced, shift in Spain's political dynamics.

8.4.1 Ideological stance and behaviour under Casado and Feijóo (2018-2022)

As mentioned before, the radicalisation of the PP, starting in 2018, can be observed in two realms: policy positions and rhetoric. In terms of position on salient issues, the PP's ideological course under Pablo Casado (2018-2022) veered towards conservatism, a trend not entirely reversed by Alberto Núñez Feijóo's leadership.

Figure 50. PP's right-left index (1977-2019).



Source: Own elaboration based on MARPOR data.

To examine the programmatic trend of the PP since Spain's transition to democracy, we use the MARPOR rile index. This index is the result of the sum of 13 coding categories seen as being on the "left", 13 seen as being on the "right" and the subtraction of the percentage of aggregated left categories from those of the right. The index range is [−100 to +100], which, respectively, represent extreme left and extreme right.[311] The rile index in Figure 50 indicates the PP's rightward shift post-2016, suggesting a programmatic radicalisation. This mirrors Aznar's era (1996-2004), marked by strong immigration and nationalist policies, which softened under Rajoy (2008-2016). Casado's tenure saw a return to hardline stances, challenging historical memory laws, tightening immigration, and taking conservative turns on issues like euthanasia and abortion with both policy positions and rhetoric reminiscent of the far right.

8.4.2 Immigration

The PP, under Casado, hardened its immigration policy, aligning with European and national far-right stances. Casado's rhetoric underscored strict border controls and an assimilationist outlook, diverging from leftist humanitarian views. His approach, mirroring VOX, emphasised national security and cultural unity, responding to rising immigration concerns after the European migrant crisis.[312] Casado consistently advocated for "orderly and legal" immigration, hinting at Spain's spatial constraints for immigrants. His 2018 Andalusian campaign remarks, urging immigrants to respect "Western customs" or risk being in the wrong country, hinted at cultural supremacism and stirred fearmongering accusations.[313] Casado, defending his controversial migration stance, portrayed his directness as the opposite of radicalism, attempting to soften the perceived extremism of his statements. Despite his rationale, his words resonated with far-right European rhetoric[314] and incited strong rebukes from government entities, human rights groups and political rivals, who criticised his tilt towards ultra-right positions.

The Spanish Network for Immigration rebuked Casado's rhetoric, likening it to fear-mongering tactics used by the Italian League's Matteo Salvini and other leaders who invoke the "full-boat" argument against immigration. Casado's comments drew parallels to hard-liners like José María Aznar, Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán. His assertions regarding Spain's capacity challenges in accommodating millions of African migrants, coupled with his critique of the "pull factor" created by the rescue operations of migrants aboard vessels such as the Aquarius, resonate with the exclusionary rhetoric often associated with Europe's far-right movements. Such stances have led to questions about the PP's adherence to its historically liberal-democratic values.[315]

8.4.3 Moral issues

In the realm of socio-moral issues, the PP under Casado took a definitive conservative shift. This was evidenced by a renewed focus on the defence of traditional moral values, aligning the party with a broader conservative wave that seemed to resonate with a segment of the electorate concerned with cultural and ethical continuity. Casado's agenda was increasingly characterised by a stance that emphasised the sanctity of the traditional family, life issues and national identity. It reflected an intent to counterbalance the narrative potency of VOX, which, as Rama et al. highlight, had strongly asserted itself on defending moral values.[316] He pushed for a reversion to the restrictive 1985 abortion laws, contrasting with the current 14-week allowance, linking abortion to Spain's demographic concerns, and positing it as a national survival issue. Moreover, he framed the abortion debate around Spain's "demographic winter", suggesting that higher birth rates were essential for sustaining pensions and healthcare, reflecting conservative views that advocate for population growth and traditional family models to address economic and social issues.[317] Finally, Casado criticised the socialist government's approach to socio-moral issues, branding it as divisive and incapable

of fostering a life-valuing society. He called for a dialogue centred on maternity support, work-life balance, young adult independence, housing and childbearing tax incentives. This stance underscored a policy shift towards encouraging childbirth and family support, affirming the PP's commitment to pro-life positions.[318] Javier Maroto, the PP's vice-secretary of organisation, contended that abortion is often misused for family planning, particularly when deciding on a third child, suggesting the need for better support for family growth rather than viewing abortion as a right.[319] On euthanasia, the PP staunchly opposed the PSOE's regulatory efforts, rejecting euthanasia as a right and affirming its conservative stance on moral grounds, reinforcing its image as a defender of traditional values against liberal policies.[320]

8.4.4 Spain's unity

Under Casado, the PP hardened its approach to regional autonomy, championing a more centralised vision of the Spanish state. This firmer stance mirrored VOX's core ideological tenets, which place a strong emphasis on national unity and Spanish nationalism as non-negotiable principles. VOX's electoral relevance was significantly bolstered by the Catalan independence crisis, which altered the political opportunity structure and allowed it to capitalise on a surge of nationalistic sentiment.[321] VOX's unyielding position on the integrity of Spain resonated with a constituency of voters who were increasingly prioritising the sovereignty and indivisibility of the nation in the face of separatist challenges.

In the initial decades following the return to democracy, conservative parties favoured re-centralisation, while the left inclined towards autonomy or federalism – a reflection of a deep-seated ideological divide within Spanish politics.[322] Yet, in regional elections, both the PP and PSOE had tempered their centre-periphery rhetoric, often for strategic reasons, as the issue lacks the immediacy of other concerns.[323] Practicalities of coalition formation also play a role, as these parties sometimes ally with regionalists favouring greater power devolution.[324]

Casado's tenure marked a shift in the PP's stance on Spain's territorial integrity, with a new focus on regional autonomy. The PP began to reassess regional powers post-Catalonia's independence bid. Casado himself was scrutinised for claims about linguistic discrimination in Catalonia, which, though controversial, fell under free speech. These comments highlighted the move towards centralism, politicising language to argue for increased central governance.[325] Casado portrayed the PP's dedication to Spain's unity as a core tenet in his speeches, casting the party as the custodian of national solidarity, staunchly opposing separatism.[326]

The 2019 general elections were framed as a choice between the PP's constitutional fidelity and the purported disorder of leftist and separatist governance. Casado's narrative posited a vote for the PP as a vote for legal integrity and unity, countering what he depicted as the splintering risk posed by regionalist forces.[327]

Despite the PP's ideological shifts under Casado, some regional PP leaders expressed concerns about its electoral repercussions, foreseeing internal friction.[328] The party's unanimity was disrupted, leading to factional struggles and debates over leadership direction. This growing internal division was apparent in parliamentary debates, where Casado's confrontational style, including serious accusations against the PSOE government, clashed with calls for moderation from figures like Alberto Núñez Feijóo, contributing to the strain on the PP's institutional standing.

The PP's internal crisis surfaced publicly in February 2022, with reports of alleged financial misconduct involving the brother of Isabel Díaz Ayuso, one of the most prominent voices of the party's radical factions

and president of the Community of Madrid. These allegations, related to medical supply contracts during the pandemic, intensified existing internal friction within the PP, going beyond mere financial impropriety to expose deeper ideological divides and power struggles. Further complicating matters were accusations of covert surveillance of Ayuso's family, supposedly orchestrated by the party's central office through Madrid City Council. On COPE radio, Casado demanded Ayuso provide documentation to clear up any impropriety, questioning the morality of her actions during Spain's intense COVID-19 crisis. This scandal deepened rifts within the PP, sparking calls for accountability and leadership changes.[329] The PP unanimously agreed that Casado would remain leader until an extraordinary congress, where he chose not to run again. Leadership transferred to Alberto Núñez Feijóo on 2 April 2022, and Casado resigned his congressional seat two days later.[330]

Feijóo's entry as a moderate signalled a possible ideological recalibration for the PP, contending with the impact of Casado's tenure and the tension between traditional conservatism and radical right-wing shifts. In 2022, under Feijóo's leadership, the PP aimed to reclaim its moderate stance, providing an alternative to the PSOE and countering VOX's influence. Despite his moderate image, Feijóo's views on migration and cultural matters, as well the use of inflammatory language, at times reflected far-right rhetoric. His critique of the government's handling of immigration suggests a strategic approach that addresses conservative voters' concerns while avoiding extreme positions. For example, Feijóo's handling of the migration crisis and his response to religiously charged incidents revealed an inclination towards more divisive rhetoric that could potentially alienate the party's moderate supporters.

In 2023, he made remarks that could be construed as contrasting. Initially, Feijóo reiterated his stance on the non-existence of "Catholic terrorism", while acknowledging the threat of "Islamic extremism", a statement that raised concerns over potential stigmatisation.[331] He later clarified, distinguishing between fanaticism and religion, and stressed that no religion should be criminalised. Despite his subsequent emphasis on a collective effort against such extremism, referencing attacks in Atocha, Las Ramblas, Paris and the Twin Towers, his initial comments sparked discourse on the nuances and implications of his declarations.

In general terms, Feijóo's tenure as the leader of the PP has led the party to adopt stances that notably diverge from his previously established moderate governance in Galicia. While it remains unclear whether this represents a strategic move or a genuine shift in ideology, there is discernible radicalisation compared to the more centrist approach he maintained in regional politics. This change is evident in his rhetoric on religious extremism and immigration, indicating a departure from his prior political persona.

The polarising rhetoric was evident during the campaign for the local election on 28 May 2023, as well as the snap general election on 23 July of the same year. The party managed to shift the electoral debate to focus on contentious issues such as ETA (and Bildu) and allegations of vote buying in certain regions, casting doubt on the electoral process's integrity. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, the PP received the most votes and parliamentary seats, but fell short of an absolute or simple majority in the two votes in Congress to decide on the next prime minister. Feijóo managed to rally the backing of only the PP, VOX, *Coalición Canaria* (CC) and *Unión del Pueblo Navarro* (UPN), amassing a total of 172 affirmative votes, four shy of the absolute majority, which proved insufficient against opposition from other parliamentary groups.

Following Feijóo's failure, King Felipe VI appointed Pedro Sánchez to form a government. Sánchez's success hinged on the support of *Junts per Catalunya*, a party that had previously opposed his government. Despite initial resistance, Sánchez's PSOE shifted its stance to advocate for amnesty, a move that provoked widespread protests, particularly from right-wing factions. However, this did not prevent Sánchez from securing an absolute majority on 16 November 2023.

8.4.5 New radical factions

The PP's recent ideological and rhetorical radicalisation can be traced to both external and internal catalysts. Externally, the ascent of VOX has undeniably influenced the PP's strategic positioning, as it responded to the right-wing party's success and its appeal to conservative values. Internally, a significant factor has been the rise of more radical factions within the PP, which are progressively gaining influence. This shift is exemplified by regional leaders, such as Isabel Díaz Ayuso, whose ascent within the party reflects a move towards a more decentralised power dynamic within the PP and an ideological pivot that is reshaping the PP's stance on national issues. Her influential stance, particularly in her management of the pandemic, favoured local governance and economic priorities over stringent lockdowns, reflecting an ideological shift within the PP. Her approach has received mixed reactions, highlighting internal complexities.

Despite the PP's lack of majority post-elections, Ayuso supported Feijóo, dispelling rumours of discord. Her prominent role in the 23 July campaign, evident in the slogan "*Derogar el Sanchismo*" ("Repeal Sachismo"), signalled a strong rebuke of Pedro Sánchez's policies, underscoring her influence on the PP's direction. Ayuso's significant narrative control within the PP underscores the growing impact of regional leaders on national politics, a trend also visible across European democracies.

The PP's internal dynamics have been notably turbulent amid Ayuso's rise, marked by scandals and her divisive comments. Financial improprieties linked to her brother and her statements on COVID-19's impact on immigrants have tarnished the PP's reputation, prompting scrutiny of its ethical standards and inclusiveness. Ayuso's prominence within the PP denotes a critical juncture, hinting at an ideological shift and a reconfiguration of power. Her ascent and assertive stance may redefine the PP's governance strategies, alliance formations and conceptualisation of national identity. This shift also reflects the tension between appealing to radical elements within the party to galvanise supporters and upholding the PP's historical centrist values. The PP's ability to manage this dichotomy will shape its future within Spain's evolving political landscape and the wider European political scene.

8.5 From radicalisation to (affective) polarisation: The PP-PSOE dynamics and liberal democracy

While the PP has not undergone radicalisation in terms of loyalty to democratic values, the party's shift in rhetoric under the leadership of Pablo Casado and Alberto Núñez Feijóo has broader implications for Spanish democracy. This shift, particularly the PP's alignment with VOX's radical stances, has partially contributed to the phenomenon of affective polarisation, as described by Torcal.[332]

Affective polarisation extends political divisions beyond policy disagreements into emotional and personal realms, marked by increasingly negative perceptions and attitudes towards opposing groups. Driven largely by political leaders and party elites, this trend erodes mutual respect foundational to democracy and shifts political discourse from policy-centric to identity-centric debates. The PP's narrative convergence with VOX has not only fuelled this polarisation but also impacted left-wing parties and their voters, intensifying an "us versus them" mentality across the political spectrum.[333] This phenomenon has effects on the democratic regime. Empirical evidence points to affective polarisation as a significant force that complicates compromise and consensus building, which are essential for effective governance. This shift has also been shown to degrade public trust in democratic institutions and processes, as political debates are reframed through the lens of personal and group identities. The PP's adoption of a more confrontational style, particularly during

Casado's tenure, aligns with Waldner and Lust's indicators of democratic backsliding[334] and Levitsky and Ziblatt's warnings about the transformation within established parties threatening democratic norms.[335]

The dynamics that generate affective polarisation are generally related to the electoral success of new challenging parties that adopt a much more aggressive communication strategy peppered with attacks on the status quo and representative institutions for electoral gain.[336] However, the emergence of VOX and the PP's convergence with its positions is just one part of the story. Polarisation takes place not only among the voters of these parties, who promote polarising rhetoric, but also among the supporters of the opposite political spectrum (left-wing parties), who react negatively and polarise because they perceive such rhetoric as threat. The interplay between VOX's ascent and the politicisation of territorial issues, particularly the 2017 Catalan referendum, has intensified this affective polarisation, adding a dimension of territorial identity to the already complex ideological landscape.[337]

This affective polarisation has been significantly influenced by a process of "social sorting", where ideological and social identities coalesce into two broadly sorted groups – right and left. The right increasingly identifies with traditionalist, unitary and nationalist sentiments, while the left embraces progressive, autonomous and internationalist perspectives.[338] This sorting process means that these groups have fewer and fewer commonalities, leading to less cooperation and more division, which is detrimental to the democratic process. As ideological cleavages align with social identities, the electorate becomes more segregated, intensifying partisan animosity and reducing the incentive for political compromise. The key challenge now is for political actors to navigate this polarised and sorted landscape without sacrificing the core democratic values and principles of inclusive governance. The PP, in particular, stands at a crossroads, where its future actions will significantly influence the trajectory of Spanish democracy.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter delves into the ideological realignment within Spain's mainstream right due to VOX's rise, particularly focusing on the PP's adaptive strategies. The "double contagion" effect not only illustrates VOX's influence on the PP's stances on key issues like immigration, morality and national unity, but also highlights its broader impact on the political spectrum, including the left's reaction. This phenomenon has resulted in heightened affective polarisation among Spanish voters, leading to a more pronounced division and an intensified political discourse. The contagion thus unfolds in a dual manner: by solidifying the PP's policy positions, amplifying polarizing rhetoric; and indirectly influencing the left's counter responses, further deepening societal divisions.

Empirical findings from this analysis indicate that the PP, while edging towards more conservative stances, continues to operate within democratic confines. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of factions within the PP complicates the prediction of its evolution and the degree to which it may embrace more radical challenges to liberal democracy.

The implications for social democracy, specifically for the PSOE, are critical in this environment of "double contagion". Firstly, as the PP adopts more conservative positions, the PSOE could theoretically appeal to the "median voter" by offering a platform that addresses radicalisation without adopting extreme cultural positions. Secondly, the PSOE's coalition politics can now leverage the argument of preventing far-right influence in governance, utilising negative partisanship towards VOX as a rallying point. Lastly, the PSOE must consider strategies for building coalitions at the subnational level, which involves engaging with both the moderate and radical factions within the PP.

In conclusion, the rise of VOX has triggered a "double contagion" effect – radicalising the PP and, consequently, stoking affective polarisation throughout Spain. This polarisation transcends policy differences, deeply influencing emotional connections and widening the gap between political groups. The PSOE's strategic response to the PP's ideological shifts, its ability to connect with diverse voters, and its commitment to democratic principles will be determinants in shaping the course of Spain's liberal democracy. The management of this double contagion by Spain's political actors will be crucial for the country's democratic health and social unity.

9. SHIFTING ALLIANCES: THE RADICALIZATION OF SWEDEN'S MAINSTREAM RIGHT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

9. SHIFTING ALLIANCES: THE RADICALIZATION OF SWEDEN'S MAINSTREAM RIGHT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

GEFJON OFF [2]

9.1 Introduction

Since entering parliament in 2010, the radical-right Sweden Democrats have moved from being a political outsider to becoming the second-largest party in the 2022 national elections and acting as supporting party to the mainstream (centre-)right-wing government. The collaboration between Swedish mainstream (centre-) right-wing parties with the radical-right Sweden Democrats is unprecedented in the Swedish parliamentary context, which was long considered immune to the rise of the radical right.[339] This development raises questions about the extent to which the rise of the Sweden Democrats was accompanied by changes in the Swedish mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties and potential implications for the Social Democratic Party. To address these questions, we briefly introduce the Sweden Democrats and aspects of the political and societal context that we deem most relevant to understanding the rising influence of the Sweden Democrats. We then analyse whether and to what extent the above-described political developments are accompanied by a transformation of the Swedish mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties in selected political positions, their relationship with the Sweden Democrats and their relationship with key institutions of liberal democracy. We conclude with an outlook on potential implications for the Social Democratic Party.

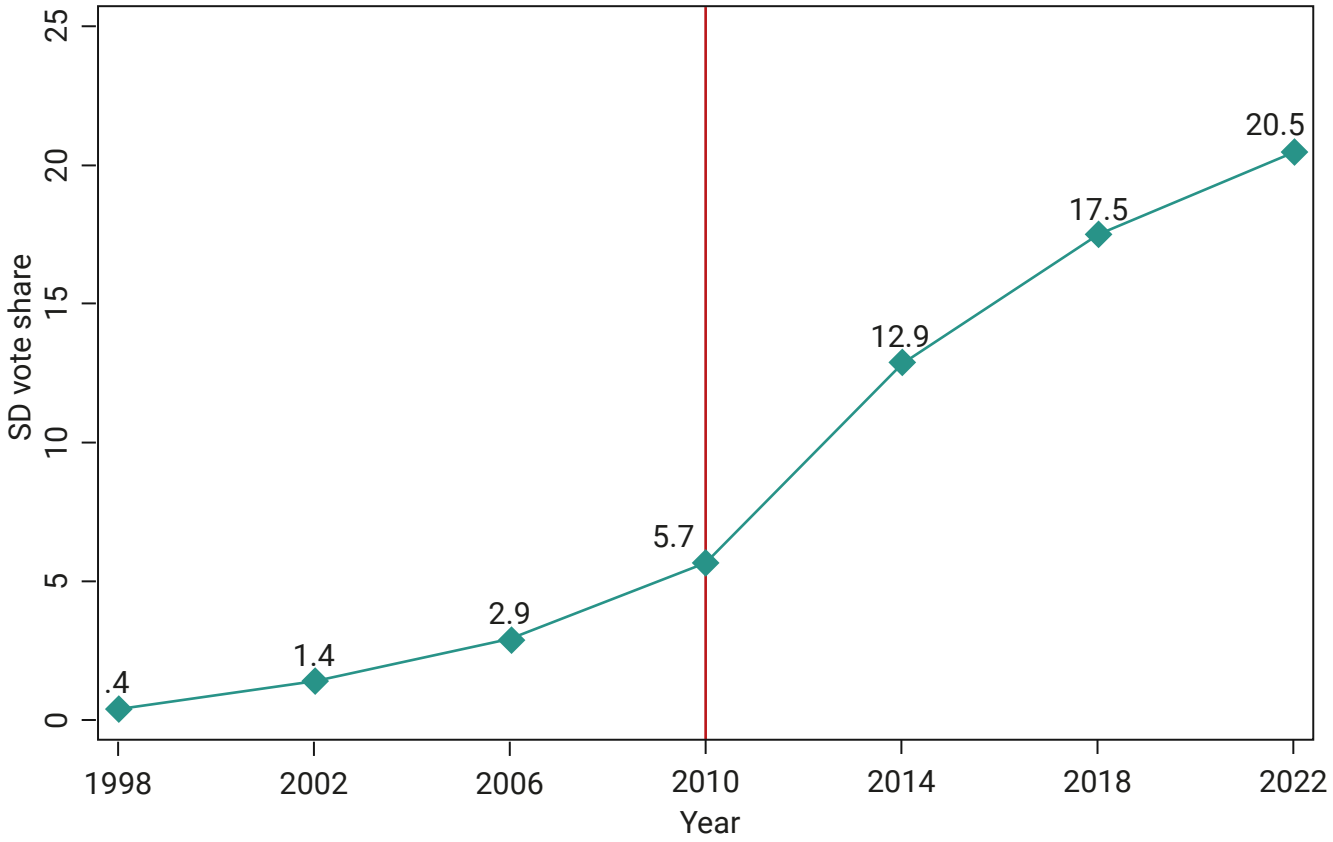
9.2 The Sweden Democrats

Founded in 1988, the Sweden Democrats emerged from a previous far-right political party and included members with extremist ties and criminal records.[340] The number of party members with criminal records and Nazi connections dropped since the late 1990s, and by the early 2000s, the Sweden Democrats had established themselves as the dominant force on the Swedish radical right,[341] scoring 1.4% of votes in 2002. In 2005, Jimmie Åkesson became party leader, which he remains today, and worked towards the party's deradicalisation together with a few other leading party officials.[342] Official party documents have expressed support for procedural democracy, human rights and liberties, and condemned discrimination based on gender, politics, religion or ethnicity.[343] Already in the 2000s, the Sweden Democrats were involved in agreements to secure political majorities in local councils.[344] In 2010, the Sweden Democrats first entered the Swedish national parliament, scoring 5.7% of the votes. It more than doubled its vote share by 2014

2 I would like to thank Ann-Kristin Kölln, Henrik Oscarsson, Patrik Öhberg and Sofia Axelsson for access to and help with different data sources, as well as Bo Rothstein, Sarah Engler and Daniel Carelli for very valuable feedback, and Sirus Dehdari for important initial input.

(12.9%) and scored 17.5% in the 2018 elections, and most recently, 20.5% in the 2022 elections. Figure 51 illustrates the growth of the Sweden Democrats at the national level over the past 25 years.

Figure 51. The Sweden Democrats' vote share over time.



Source: Valforskningsprogrammets faktablad 2018:29.

Note: The vertical line represents the Sweden Democrats' entry into the national parliament.

While the Sweden Democrats have collaborated with other parties at the local level, its past extremist ties long constituted an impediment to any collaboration with mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties on the national level. Furthermore, the party's anti-immigration stances clashed with the rest of Sweden's political parties, which previously had "strived to make immigration a non-salient issue in their competition for voters".[345]

Today, the immigration issue is highly salient in Swedish politics. Anti-immigration stances are mostly framed within debates about gang and honour crime. While political parties across the ideological spectrum now take stances towards immigration and crime, it remains the Sweden Democrats' main issue. In its party manifesto, the first discussed issues are crime and punishment, gang crime, crime victims, the police, terrorism, integration, migration and problems related to honour (crime).[346]

Among its more radical current standpoints, the party advocates not only deporting foreign criminals, but also withdrawing residence permits and, where possible, Swedish citizenship of immigrants who commit serious offenses.[347] It further advocates stopping asylum immigration from countries outside Sweden's

neighbourhood and pausing the intake of quota refugees.[348] Recently, party leader Åkesson advocated imprisoning people without suspicion of crime and introducing lifelong sentences for 13 year olds.[349] Party figures have made numerous statements that may qualify as "racist, antidemocratic, illiberal, anti-Muslim, and even anti-Semitic".[350] In 2022, a Swedish research company identified 214 candidates running for the Sweden Democrats that have expressed Nazism or racism.[351]

While the party's proposals compromise asylum seekers' and immigrants' rights, it advocates for some other minority rights, for example, LGBTQI+ rights,[352] freedom of speech, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary and free press in their manifesto.[353] However, the party has also forwarded parliamentary motions to reform public service broadcasting, aiming to address a "lack of objectivity and impartiality" in media reporting and to make public service broadcasting "slimmer and sharper" (own translation).[354] The Sweden Democrats' views on public broadcasting have been interpreted as problematic for journalism and have led to disagreement, even among mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties.[355]

9.2.1 A political and societal context conducive to the rise of the Sweden Democrats

Two aspects of the Swedish political and societal context can help understand the rise of the Sweden Democrats: (1) the context of Swedish party competition; and (2) the increasing importance of crime.

9.2.1.1 Swedish party competition: Fragile governments and new coalitions

Since the 2000s, Swedish party competition was characterised by two main blocs: (1) the left-wing bloc led by the Social Democrats supported by the Left Party and the Green Party; and (2) the right-wing "Alliance" led by the Moderate Party joined by the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Center Party. Before the rise of the Sweden Democrats, these blocs would compete for the majority of votes. However, as the Sweden Democrats grew, voters switched to the Sweden Democrats from both blocs. In 2018, 19% of the Sweden Democrats' voters were previous voters of the Social Democrats and 18% were previous voters of the Moderates.[356] In 2022, 14% of the Sweden Democrats' voters were previous voters of the Moderates, while 12% had voted for the Social Democrats in previous elections. It became impossible to build a majority for both blocs. Thus, increasingly unstable minority governments have led Sweden.

While Sweden has a long tradition of minority governments,[357] the 2018 elections were further marked by a relatively long period of four months of government formation, given both blocs' inability to build a government. The 2018 centre-left government could eventually be installed only because the centre-right Liberal and Center Parties refrained from voting *against* it.[358] However, the government's reliance on support from the Left Party *and* the centre-right Liberal and Center Parties resulted in a government crisis in 2021 due to a disagreement between the supporting parties. In short, the 2021 government crisis led to a successful no-confidence vote against the prime minister, his resignation and the election of a new prime minister leading a new left-wing government just ten months before the 2022 national elections.

The 2018 elections and subsequent government crisis demonstrated the fragility of Swedish governments and resulted in the end of the "Alliance", as the Liberal and Center Parties decided to support the centre-left government instead. The split of the Alliance paved the way for new parliamentary coalitions, which eventually led to the current centre-right government collaborating with the radical right. The Center Party continuously decided not to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats and, therefore, sided with the centre-left bloc in the 2022 elections.[359]

However, the Liberal Party, which had long-supported refugees and immigrants and stood by liberal principles, decided to collaborate with the remaining centre-right parties and the Sweden Democrats.[360] The collaboration of the Liberal Party with the Sweden Democrats may have been most surprising for observers of Swedish politics, given their previous commitment to liberal values regarding immigration. In response, previous leading party figures of the Liberals openly rejected and left the Liberal Party.[361]

Overall, the rise of the Sweden Democrats and resulting problems for government formation, and the consequent dissolving of previous coalition blocs, contributed to shaping a window of opportunity for a collaboration between the mainstream (centre-)right and radical right.

9.2.1.2 The increasing importance of crime and immigration

Besides the above-described political context, an important factor in understanding the rise of the radical right constitutes of the increasing importance and politicisation of crime and immigration in Sweden. Nowadays, immigration is widely debated in Swedish politics and most prominently opposed through the lens of a law-and-order discourse. Since 2005, gun homicide rates in particular have been rising in Sweden.[362] In comparison with other European countries, Sweden stands out as the only country with continuously increasing gun homicide rates.[363] The increase in gun homicide mostly occurs among young adults aged between 20 and 29 in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods and is linked to criminal gangs and illegal drug markets.[364] According to a report by the mainstream newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*,[365] 85% of people suspected of gun violence are born abroad or have at least one parent who is born abroad.

Meanwhile, Sweden took in the highest number of refugees by population size ever registered in an OECD country in 2015, a number that far exceeded respective numbers in other Nordic countries.[366] The Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) ranks Sweden among the top-three countries with favourable integration policy worldwide.[367] Still, Swedish cities have long been highly segregated compared with other Nordic cities,[368] and it is in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods that much crime takes place, even though it has more recently spread to other areas, too.

Given the increasing salience of crime, politicians from all camps have been campaigning on this issue. As we elaborate in the following, politicians of the (mainstream centre-) right have particularly linked the crime issue to immigration and become more conservative and authoritarian on these issues. However, the politicisation of immigration not only occurred among right-wing parties. As we further illustrate below, the Swedish Social Democrats have adopted a more critical discourse towards immigration, too. For instance, in a much debated statement in August 2022, a few weeks before the elections, former Prime Minister and party leader of the Social Democrats Magdalena Andersson declared that "we don't want Chinatown, Somalitown or Little Italy".[369] Furthermore, Magdalena Andersson repeatedly declared that she was open to collaborate with the Moderates on the issues of immigration and crime.[370] This change in the immigration discourse of social democrats further illustrates the normalisation of anti-immigration discourse.

The politicisation of immigration, mostly through a law-and-order lens, is reflected at the voter level, too. Every election year, in the Swedish exit polls,[371] voters are asked to assign a level of importance to a list of political issues. Over the years, the survey has included questions about mostly the same issues. In the aggregate, we can thus assess how many people assigned high importance to each issue, and how these issues ranked relatively to each other in perceived societal importance. In the 2014 elections, law and order ranked tenth on a list of political issues, with 35% of voters assigning high priority to the issue. By 2022, 50% of respondents assigned high priority to law and order in their vote choice, and the issue ranked

third.[372] Regarding the issue of refugees and immigration, the issue ranked equally low in 2014, with 35% of respondents assigning high importance to it. The share of respondents assigning high priority to refugees and immigration increased to 41% in 2018 and decreased to 39% by 2022. In 2018 and 2022, however, it only ranked ninth on the list of political issues that were perceived as most important in the election.

The high importance assigned to law and order in the 2022 elections is driven by voters of the now-governing mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties and the collaborating radical-right Sweden Democrats. Law and order ranked as the most important issue among voters of the Sweden Democrats and the mainstream (centre-)right-wing Moderates and Christian Democrats. It ranked second most important among voters of the Liberal Party. In contrast, voters of all opposition parties assigned less importance to the issue, with the issue ranking tenth or lower.[373]

Supporting the argument that the collaboration between the (centre-)right wing and the Sweden Democrats centres on law-and-order issues, refugee immigration ranks second most important *only* among voters of the Sweden Democrats. All other parties' voters do not assign as much priority to refugee immigration and prioritise other issues, such as the economy and health sector. Voters of the mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties tend to coincide with voters of the Sweden Democrats in the prioritisation of law and order much more than in the prioritisation of refugee immigration.

9.3 Did the Moderates radicalise?

As described above, the Sweden Democrats gained influence in a context marked by the difficulty to form stable governments, as well as increases in immigration and a type of crime that is disproportionately committed by people with a migrant background. As we show in the following, this context paved the way for Sweden's mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties to change in two ways: (1) by adopting a more critical immigration and tougher law-and-order discourse; and (2) by starting to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats. We focus on the issues of immigration and law and order because, arguably, the mainstream (centre)-right-wing parties changed most strikingly in their positions on these issues, and these changes were most crucial for enabling their collaboration with the radical right. We further focus on the Moderate Party in particular, since it is Sweden's biggest mainstream right-wing party.

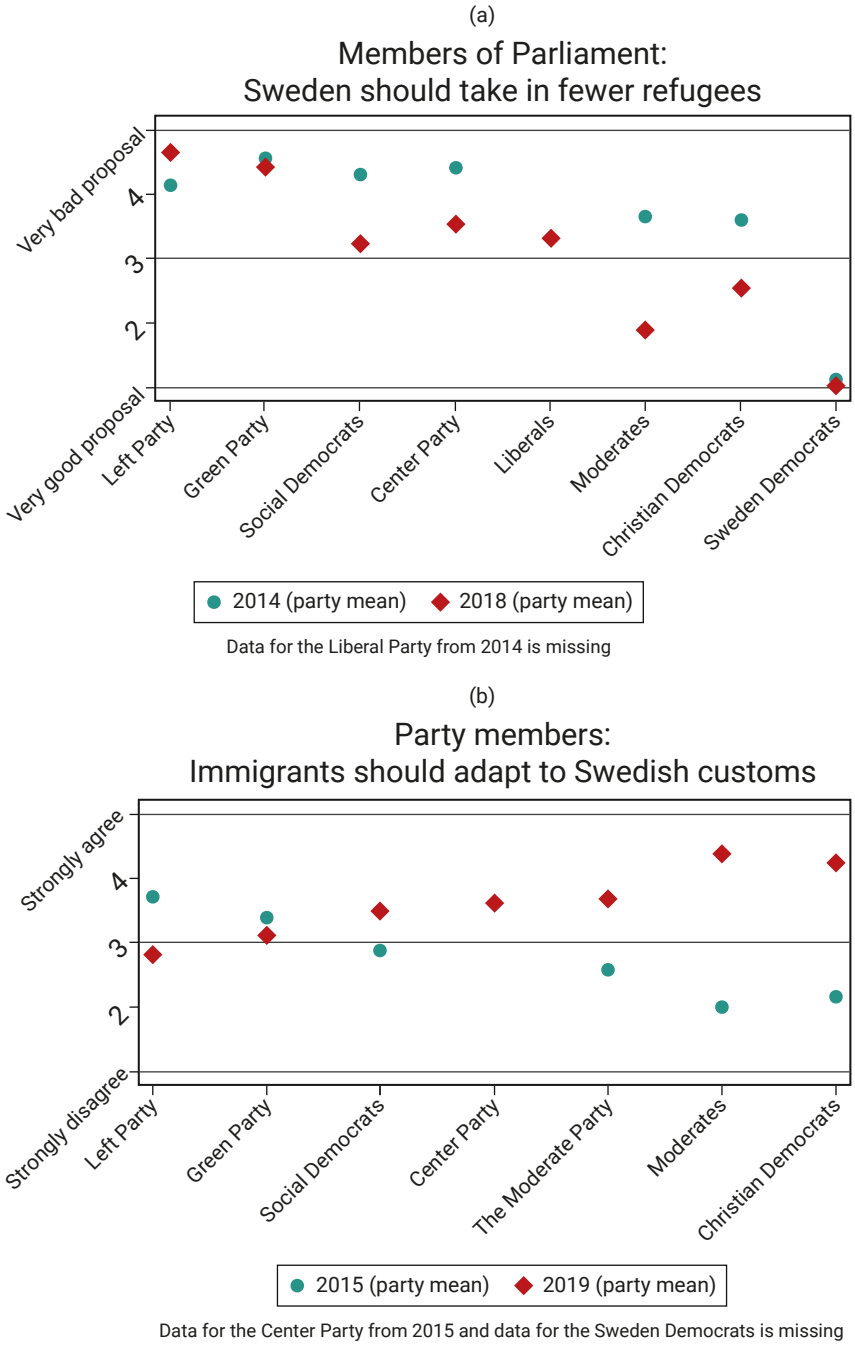
9.3.1 Immigration

Swedish mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties took harsher stances on immigration over the past years. Figure 52a-c illustrates these changes for the period from 2014 to 2018 and 2015 to 2019.[374] Similar trends can be observed for the Social Democratic Party. Figure 52a shows that all parties' MPs, except for the Left and Green Parties MPs, became more critical of immigration.[375] In 2014, all parties' MPs, except the Sweden Democrats MPs, considered the proposal to take in fewer refugees rather bad or very bad, on average. By 2018, MPs of the Social Democrats, the Center Party, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats had become significantly more critical of taking in refugees, with the MPs of the Moderates and the Christian Democrats taking most critical stances (besides the MPs of the Sweden Democrats).

With regard to party members,[376] Figure 52b shows that the mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties' members shifted from moderate disagreement in 2015 to strong agreement in 2019, with the statement that immigrants should adapt to Swedish customs. In contrast, the Left and Green Parties' members initially more strongly agreed with this statement and became more disagreeing by 2019. More like the mainstream

(centre-)right-wing parties, the Social Democrats' party members agreed more with the statement that immigrants should adapt to Swedish customs.

Figure 52. MPs' and party members' stances and manifesto data on immigration, 2014-2018 and 2015-2019.



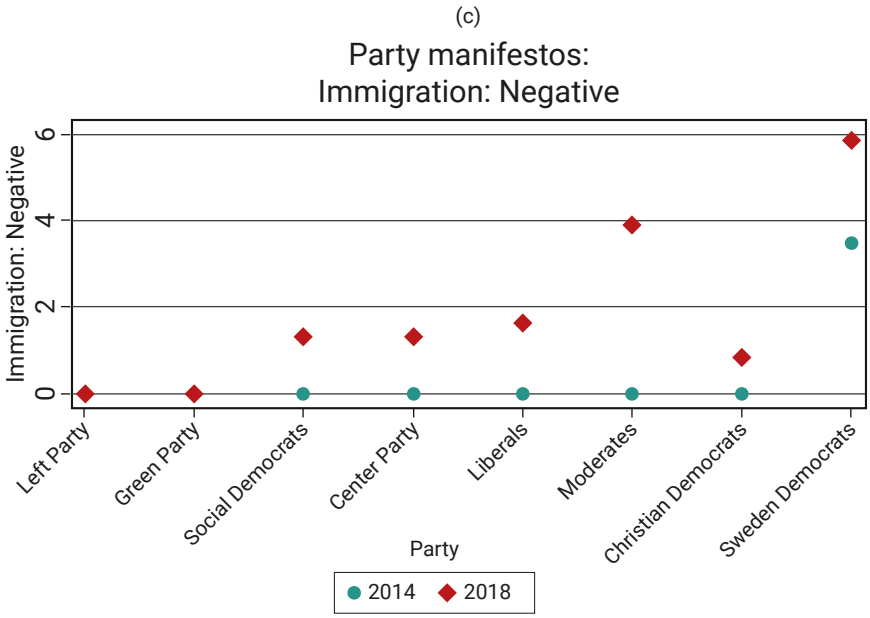


Figure 52c shows that changes in the parties' manifestos between 2014 and 2018 corroborate the trends in MPs' and party members' positional changes towards immigration.[377] According to manifesto data, in 2014, no parties, except the Sweden Democrats, discussed immigration in a negative way. By 2018, all parties, except the Left and Green Parties, discussed immigration in more negative terms than before, where the Moderates observed the greatest increase in the share of the manifesto devoted to negative statements about immigration.[378]

In the Moderates' 2014 party manifesto, the party is supportive of "humane asylum politics" and to Sweden being a "haven for those fleeing persecution and oppression".[379] The manifesto further argues that "Sweden should continue to be a country that takes responsibility for the world's most vulnerable".[380] By 2018, immigration features more prominently and earlier, as the third point in the Moderates' party program. Compared to 2014, the party's stance changed drastically. The 2018 manifesto argues that

we have to make the difficult balance between what we can contribute – and what we can handle. We have never really thought this through in Sweden. The old migration policy did not work. […] It is therefore high time that we tackle and put in place a long-term sustainable migration policy. Sweden's migration policy must be strict […].[381] (own translation)

Finally, in 2022, the party takes a largely similar stance, advocating for a stricter immigration policy. Additionally, its specific goals regarding immigration policy partly become more radical than in 2018. For instance, while in 2018 the Moderates proposed to take in fewer refugees than in previous years,[382] by 2022 the party proposed to reduce the number of refugees accepted in Sweden to the minimum number required by EU law.[383]

The 2022 Tidö Agreement stipulating the terms of the collaboration between the governing parties and the Sweden Democrats constitutes a continuation of these changes. The document states that asylum should only be granted temporarily and for those fleeing from Sweden's neighbourhood, and Sweden should not accept more refugees than required by the EU and international treaties.[384] The document further states that only 900 refugees from the UN quota system shall be accepted per year[385] – while Sweden has previously

taken in 6000 quota refugees per year.[386] It further proposes constitutional amendments to extend the legal grounds for border security activities to gather data on migrants, including DNA samples, and checking their private belongings and social media accounts, amongst others.[387] The Tidö Agreement's proposal that public service workers shall be required to inform the police and migration agency about any contacts with illegal immigrants was developed into a controversial bill called the Reporting Act (Swedish: "Angiverilagen") in summer 2023 and sparked much debate, criticism and demonstrations. The Tidö Agreement further proposes to investigate the possibilities for deportation of foreign citizens due to "asocial behavior" (Swedish: "*bristande vandal*"),[388] even if no laws were broken. The requirements for citizenship shall become stricter, and the government will investigate possibilities for withdrawing Swedish citizenship of people with dual citizenship who have committed specific kinds of crime.

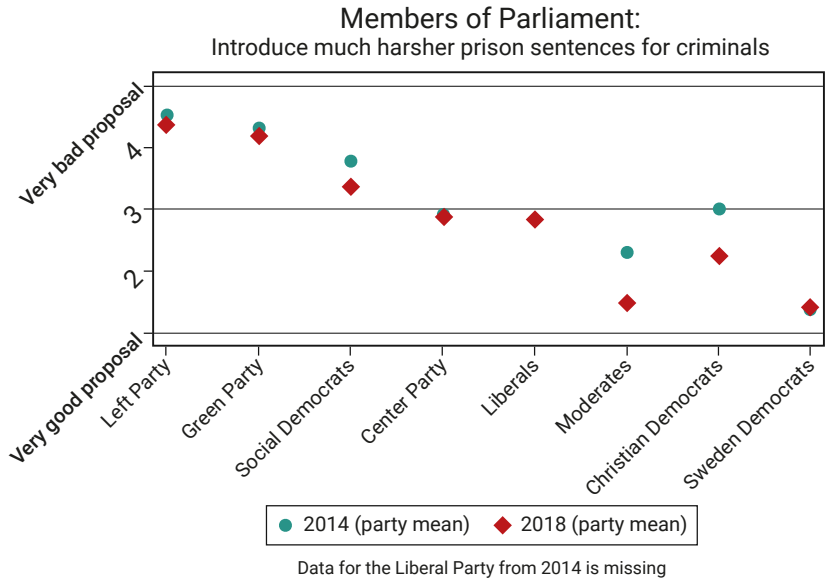
In many ways, the mainstream (centre-)right-wing governing parties and particularly the Moderate Party have changed their stances on immigration towards the stances of the Sweden Democrats. As shown by the above examples from party manifestos since 2014 and the Tidö Agreement, mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties now largely coincide with the Sweden Democrats on many aspects related to immigration.

9.3.2 Law and order

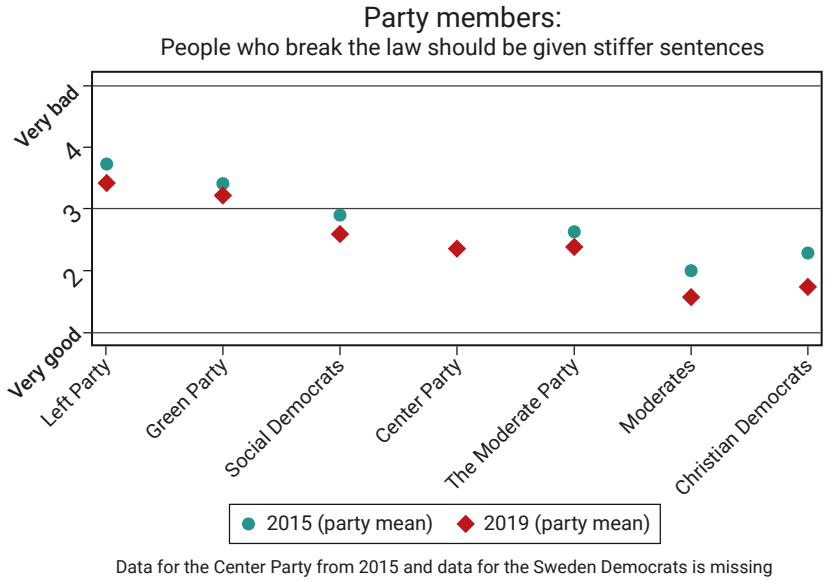
As regards law and order, Figure 53a-c shows that the trends are similar, particularly among the parties' MPs and in parties' manifestos but less so among party members.[389] Between 2015 and 2019, all parties' members shift slightly towards more agreement with the proposal that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences (Figure 53b). Party members of the Moderates and Christian Democrats were already most in favour of this proposal in 2015. In contrast to the party members, the MPs reveal more striking between-party differences (Figure 53a).[390] Between 2014 and 2018, MPs of the Left, Green and Centre Parties barely changed in their positions towards harsher prison sentences for criminals. In contrast, MPs of the Moderates, Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats shifted more significantly towards endorsing harsher prison sentences. By 2018, MPs of the Moderates held similarly positive positions towards harsher prison sentences for criminals as MPs of the Sweden Democrats, on average (Figure 53a).

Figure 53. MPs' and party members' stances on law and order, 2014-2018 and 2015-2019.

(a)

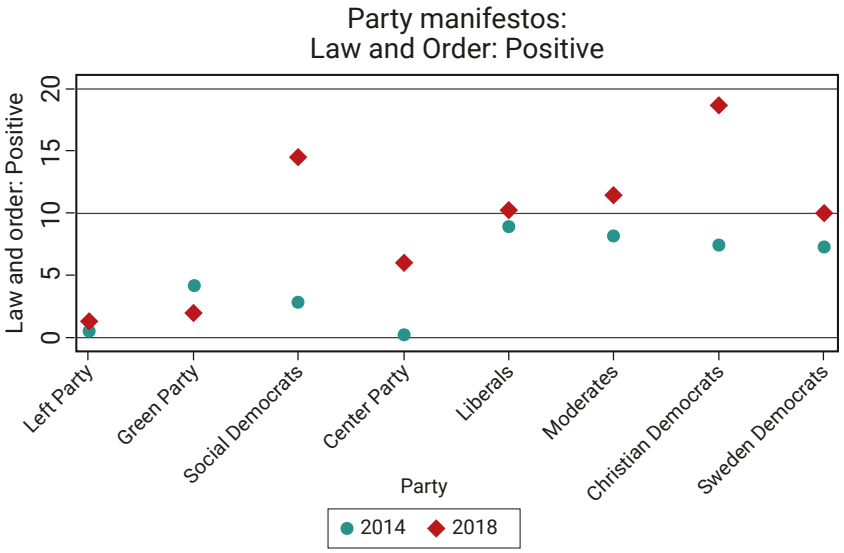


(b)



Data for the Center Party from 2015 and data for the Sweden Democrats is missing

(c)



The 2014 and 2018 party manifestos show shifts towards a greater share of the party manifestos devoted to positive mentions of law and order, particularly for the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats and the Center Party, and to a smaller extent for the Moderates and Sweden Democrats (Figure 53c).[391] By 2018, the Christian Democrats devoted the largest share of their manifesto, namely, 18.6%, to positive mentions of law and order. The Social Democrats devoted 15% of their manifesto to positive mentions of law and order, compared to 10% of the Sweden Democrats' and 11.4% of the Moderates' manifestos.[392]

In the 2014 manifesto of the Moderates, crime features rather late in the party manifesto, following issues related to the economy, social inequality, immigration, education, health care and elderly care. Already in 2014, the party advocates for stricter sentences on particularly serious offences and stricter classifications of criminal offenses. By 2018, law and order is the second theme addressed in the party manifesto, after the economy. While the 2014 manifesto does not explicitly mention gang crime or shootings, the 2018 manifesto refers to gang crime and shootings early on. As a response to gang crime, the Moderates propose

"the largest investment in the police and justice system in 20 years".[393] Among its more radical stances, the 2018 manifesto proposes to immediately arrest people based on the mere suspicion of an offence related to gang crime, and to deport criminals more often. Making direct reference to Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, the 2018 manifesto further advocates to forbid begging.[394]

By 2022, the Moderates' electoral campaign had the slogan "Let's get Sweden in order" (own translation) – making (law and) order its main theme. Shootings, gang violence, criminal clans and the police are among the first issues mentioned in the manifesto. The 2022 manifesto lists various measures for crime prevention, harsher punishment, and an expansion of the police and judiciary. The expansion of the police regards both its size and rights: The party advocates for extended police rights to search people in specific geographic areas and to use long-term monitoring using ankle bracelets.[395] The 2022 manifesto further advocates to deport gang members without Swedish citizenship *independent* of whether they have been convicted of a criminal offense.

The 2022 manifesto's proposals are reflected in the Tidö Agreement, presenting the basis for today's governing parties' work and collaboration with the Sweden Democrats. As Rothstein puts it, because of the proposed measures expanding the rights of the police and judiciary, "safeguards for citizens' rights will be weakened".[396] The data on MPs, party members and the party manifestos show that the Moderates have taken a harsher stance on crime, and this shift occurred among party elites more than party members. As observed by international human rights expert commissions[397] and scholars,[398] this change can have implications for key institutions of liberal democracy, including respect for minority rights and certain principles of the rule of law.

9.3.3 A new collaboration: The Sweden Democrats and the mainstream (centre-)right

In addition to changing their stances on immigration and law and order, mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties have begun to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats for the first time. Until recently, all Swedish parties treated the Sweden Democrats as a "party *non grata*".[399] During the 2018 election campaigns, Ulf Kristersson, party leader of the mainstream right-wing Moderate Party and now prime minister, publicly promised a well-known Holocaust survivor to never collaborate with the Sweden Democrats.[400]

Four years later, in November 2021, the Moderate Party, Christian Democrats *and* Sweden Democrats together presented a budget proposal to "reduce crime, increase employment and improve welfare [services]".[401] In August 2022, a month before the 2022 national elections, the Moderate Party launched its electoral campaign, explicitly claiming to emphasise political issues that the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party *and* the Sweden Democrats agreed upon.[402] The campaign focused on the stricter punishment of criminals, lower taxes and petrol prices, nuclear power and stricter immigration laws, amongst others.

After the 2022 national elections, the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals formed a minority government under Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson. While the Sweden Democrats are not formally part of the government and do not hold any ministerial posts, the government relies on its votes to form a political majority. The collaboration between the government and the Sweden Democrats was officialised as follows: the radical-right party was granted officials in government offices ("Regeringskansliet"); "special advisors" to various ministries;[403] and got to appoint the chairs to four out of 15 parliamentary standing committees, including the one on justice and foreign affairs.[404] The document presenting the new government's budget proposal, the Tidö Agreement, explicitly states that all collaborating parties, including

the Sweden Democrats, shall have "full and equal influence over issues in the collaboration in the same way as the governing parties".[405] The degree to which the government collaboration with a non-governing party is specified has been described as "undoubtedly unique" by Swedish standards.[406]

Crucial from the perspective of electoral accountability, the agreement between the governing parties and the Sweden Democrats has been criticised for giving the Sweden Democrats "the strongest possible influence without the accountability of sitting in the new government".[407] Essentially, the Sweden Democrats have the power to veto a measure but cannot be held accountable for their actions through the same checks and balances that apply to the government.

9.4 Implications for democracy

In addition to concerns about electoral accountability, we can ask about the implications of the above-outlined developments for the quality of democracy in terms of the core institutions of (liberal) democracy, as well as the normalisation of undemocratic discourse in politics and society.

9.4.1 Democratic institutions

The above-outlined potential risks for attacks on minority rights and certain principles of the rule of law, as well as the described normalisation of anti-immigration and harsher law-and-order stances, may come to affect the quality of democracy in Sweden. However, at least three points indicate that several core democratic institutions remain protected. Firstly, to date, no political actors have doubted the legitimacy of the Swedish elections.[408] Secondly, the Swedish judiciary is nonpartisan,[409] and thirdly, the Sweden Democrats' above-mentioned proposal to reform and partly defund public broadcasting is not reflected in the Tidö Agreement, which explicitly mentions the aim to maintain the independence and long-term funding of public broadcasting.[410]

In terms of other minority rights than the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers mentioned above, the Tidö Agreement proposes to ban begging,[411] which can harm certain minority rights, such as those of immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria.[412] In contrast, the Tidö Agreement proposes investigations into the possibilities to strengthen abortion rights.[413] LGBTQI+ people are only mentioned in the context of immigration, in which the government prioritises taking in LGBTQI+ people, women and girls.[414] This is in line with Sweden's general political consensus on relatively progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ policy, and even the Sweden Democrats' fairly progressive stances on gender equality and LGBTQI+ issues. The party aims at safeguarding hitherto achieved gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, which it, however, particularly emphasises in the context of an alleged threat of immigration to women's and LGBTQI+ rights.[415] More in line with radical right ideology however, they also criticise identity politics and institutional measures allegedly leading children and adolescents to question their sexuality and identity.[416]

Implications for democracy will also depend on societal developments. For instance, the 2023 Quran burnings and consequent diplomatic conflicts and rising terror threat levels made the government implement stricter and expanded border security measures.[417] Furthermore, Sweden has continued to witness incidences of gang crime, and even people without ties to criminal gangs were shot. As a response, the government accelerated the implementation of previously proposed measures. These measures include geographic areas in which the police has extended rights to check on people without concrete suspicions of crime, the doubling of sentences for certain kinds of crime and banning people who "knowingly promote"

criminal networks from staying in particular public spaces.[418] Additionally, the Sweden Democrats, the Social Democrats and later the government proposed using the military to support the police in fighting gang crime.[419] Developments related to crime and terrorism may affect the pace and rigor with which the Swedish government implements measures extending the rights of the police, military and judiciary, and restricting certain citizen's rights.

9.4.2 Normalising xenophobic discourse

In addition to potential implications for certain minority rights, mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties arguably increasingly tolerate the Sweden Democrats' partly xenophobic discourse, potentially contributing to the normalisation of such discourse.

One much debated example from August 2022 is Tobias Andersson, who is a member of the Sweden Democrats' party board, former spokesperson for legal policy and now chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Industry and Trade. During the 2022 electoral campaign, he tweeted a picture of a metro in Stockholm that the party had paid to have covered in the party logo and commented on the picture as follows: "Welcome to the return-migration train. You have a one-way ticket. Next stop: Kabul!".[420] The tweet was heavily debated and condemned as racist by leading politicians of the left and centre,[421] but also criticised by members of the Liberals and Christian Democrats, who expressed strong doubts about the Sweden Democrats' qualification as a governing party.[422] Members of the Moderate Party stayed mostly quiet.[423]

A more recent example is a tweet by Richard Jomshof, who served as secretary general of the Sweden Democrats between 2015 and 2022 and is now chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Justice. In summer 2023, public Quran burnings in Sweden led to a debate on whether to allow such burnings. Based on the principle of freedom of speech, the burnings were allowed, which resulted in a diplomatic conflict with several Muslim-majority countries and eventually in raised terror threat levels in Sweden. In this context, Richard Jomshof tweeted that Muhammed was a warlord, mass murderer, slave trader and bandit.[424] As a reaction to the much-debated tweet, the opposition parties jointly called for Richard Jomshof to resign from his post as chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Justice,[425] given the increasing escalation in diplomatic conflicts and terror threat levels and Jomshof's demonstrated inability to de-escalate. However, all governing parties, including the Liberals, decided not to deselect Richard Jomshof from his office.[426]

The mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties' toleration of xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse by leading politicians of the Sweden Democrats may indicate a normalisation of such political discourse. While such discourse can contribute to normalising racism in society,[427] it does not explicitly attack minority rights stipulated in the law. It may, however, pave the way towards such attacks, as outlined in the Tidö Agreement.

9.5 Implications for the Social Democratic Party

The above-described developments may come with implications for the Social Democratic Party. While its positions are less conservative and authoritarian than the positions of Sweden's mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties, as shown in Figures 51 and 52, and exemplified by the above-described statements by party leader Magdalena Andersson, the Social Democratic Party has taken more conservative and authoritarian stances on immigration and crime since 2015.

On one hand, voters of the Social Democrats who have traditionally been rather supportive of immigration might punish the party for adapting more restrictive positions towards immigration. This would result in voters of the Social Democrats switching to the Left or Green Parties. However, the evidence points against this scenario. In the 2018 elections, the Social Democrats lost only 7% of their previous voters to the Left Party and only 2% to the Green Party. In comparison, 11% of the 2014 voters of the Social Democrats voted for the Sweden Democrats in 2018.[428] In 2022, the Social Democrats lost only 3 and 4% of their previous voters to the Left and Green Parties, respectively, while 6% of previous Social Democrats' voters switched to the Sweden Democrats.[429] Overall, the Social Democrats' voters do not seem to be seeking more immigration-friendly parties.

On the other hand, former voters of the Moderates might punish them for their radicalisation and switch to the Social Democrats. Again, there is little evidence of such a scenario in 2018, when only 5% of 2014 Moderate voters switched to the Social Democrats.[430] In 2022, the Social Democrats attracted the votes of 8% of previous Moderate voters.[431] Possibly, some previous Moderate voters rejected the Moderates' collaboration with the Sweden Democrats and voted for the Social Democrats instead. Furthermore, the popularity of the Social Democrats' party leader, Magdalena Andersson, likely played a role in attracting these voters.[432]

Overall, exit poll data shows that voters' movement from and towards the Social Democrats barely happened in the 2022 elections.[433] Besides the Sweden Democrats, the Social Democrats were most successful at retaining their voters, with 75% of its 2018 voters voting for the party in 2022 again. 6% of the 2022 Social Democrat voters previously voted for the Left Party, 6% were previous Center Party voters, while 5% had voted for the Moderates, 5% were first-time voters and 4% had voted for the Green Party in 2018. Overall, vote switching was rather limited and balanced among the Social Democrats' voters between 2018 and 2022.

According to opinion polls,[434] the Social Democrats' popularity increased throughout 2023 to a level of 36.7% in November 2023, while all mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties lost some support since the 2022 elections. This may be explained by the fact that leading opposition parties in Sweden usually fare well in opinion polls after the elections and the governing parties have not (yet) fulfilled many of their promises, as highlighted by the media.[435]

Furthermore, mainstream (centre-)right-wing parties' and the Social Democrats' changes towards more conservative stances on immigration and law and order may have implications for coalition building. On the immigration issue, the data shows that the Social Democrats particularly diverge in their positions from their usual collaborators, namely, the Left and Green Parties. In contrast, the Social Democrats' positions on immigration and crime resemble those of the Center and Liberal Parties, which, in turn, disagree with the Left Party on socioeconomic policy. Depending on whether immigration and crime or socioeconomic issues dominate the next elections, different collaborations may emerge. The Social Democrats may more likely collaborate with the Left and Green Parties on socioeconomic issues, while a prioritisation of immigration and crime may drive them closer to the Center Party.

The Social Democrats' ability to form a political majority will depend, amongst others, on the Left, Green and Center Parties' ability to compromise. It will further depend on whether the Liberal Party continues collaborating with the right-wing government or returns to more liberal stances on immigration. Magdalena Andersson, party leader of the Social Democrats, had already opened up the possibility of governing with the Liberals and Center Party during the 2022 campaigns; however, the Liberals rejected this.[436] Finally, such a

scenario depends on whether the Liberals will reach the electoral threshold for parliamentary representation, which opinion polls from November 2023 suggest may not be the case.[437]

Overall, the data suggests that the Social Democrats have neither particularly lost voters to more immigration-friendly parties, nor strongly gained voters of the mainstream (centre-)right. Rather, the Social Democrats seem to hold a relatively stable position as the strongest party in Sweden; however, they are unable to gain a majority without collaborating with other parties. Recent years point to a potential need for coalition building across the two blocs that were originally mostly defined by their socioeconomic policy. Whether and how such coalition building occurs may depend on the extent to which immigration and crime continue to dominate the public debate, fuelling the radical right and facilitating the collaboration between the mainstream (centre-)right and the radical right.

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND LESSONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND LESSONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER

European societies have undergone substantial transformations in recent decades, with political parties actively responding to these changes. There is indeed a widely acknowledged consensus that the political landscape across Europe is characterised by escalating fragmentation and rising difficulties to form stable government coalitions. Despite the mounting scholarly and public interest in these political shifts, mainstream right-wing parties have been relatively overlooked. The predominant focus of the debate has revolved around the electoral decline of social democratic forces and/or increasing public support for the populist radical right. However, in this policy study, we contend that it is crucial to redirect attention toward mainstream right-wing parties, emphasising three compelling reasons for doing so.

The first reason is rooted in comparative evidence demonstrating a decline not only in electoral support for social democracy but also for Christian democracy and the Conservatives (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). Therefore, it is crucial to underscore that a diminishing number of people in Europe are casting their votes for mainstream parties overall, extending beyond social democratic forces. Secondly, while the ascent of the populist radical right challenges the entire political system, the mainstream right faces the most significant pressure. Given that both mainstream right-wing parties and populist radical right parties share certain programmatic affinities, the latter is skilful at attracting voters from the former, amplifying the pressure on the mainstream right. In fact, comparative evidence reveals that social democrats in Western Europe have lost only a small share of their voters to the populist radical right.[438] Thirdly, the electoral surge of the far right, coupled with the decline of the mainstream right, compels the latter to confront a challenging decision: whether to maintain moderate programmatic positions or to adopt radical ones.[439] Handling this dilemma is far from straightforward and forms the core focus of this policy study. The analysis centres on scrutinising whether a process of radicalisation is underway within mainstream right parties along two dimensions: whether they are adopting increasingly conservative stances on issues politicised by the far right; and whether they are forsaking respect for the rules that are characteristic of the liberal democratic regime.

In this concise conclusion, our aim is to summarise the primary findings presented throughout the policy study. Initially, we offer a brief overview of the key insights derived from the comparative chapters, drawing on data pertaining to the positions of various party families and the characteristics of individuals supporting or rejecting these families. Subsequently, we undertake a comparative analysis of the status of the mainstream right in the six countries analysed in the policy study (Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden). Finally, we offer reflections on how this information can assist social democratic forces in reevaluating not only their programmatic positions but also their strategies for coalition building.

10.1 Comparative evidence

Based on the empirical evidence presented in this policy study, there is no definitive indication that the mainstream right in Western Europe has evolved into a surrogate version of the populist radical right. In other words, overall mainstream right parties across Western Europe continue to defend their ideas and interests within the boundaries of the liberal democracy system. They respect the rules of the game that are inherent to the latter. Separation of powers, respect of the rule of law and allegiance to a multilateral order are issues for which the mainstream right, in general, is in favour. Moreover, the data discussed in Chapter 2 shows that conservative, Christian democratic and liberal parties in Western Europe exhibit a consistent profile, characterised by a commitment to right-wing positions, particularly in the socioeconomic sphere. In terms of the sociocultural dimension, nuances emerge within the mainstream right: conservative and Christian democratic forces tend to embrace distinct right-wing stances (particularly on issues related to migration), whereas liberal parties are inclined toward advocating progressive views. Conversely, social democracy maintains steadfast left-wing positions across both the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions. In a nutshell, the answer to the main question of this policy study – the alleged radicalisation of the mainstream right – is negative.

And what about citizens' evaluations of different party families? Have there been significant shifts over time in the Western European population's perceptions of various political parties? To understand this dynamic, it is crucial to consider the data compiled in Chapter 3, which systematically analyses the favourability and unfavourability of political parties among Western European voters. This analysis relies on a survey question that prompts respondents to rate parties on a scale from zero to ten, where zero indicates strong dislike and ten indicates strong like. This approach has the advantage of providing information about how many people have both positive and negative views towards different party families. Interestingly, the evidence suggests a remarkable stability in both the number of individuals and their demographic characteristics regarding their favourability and unfavourability toward most party families under scrutiny in this policy study. However, the data also reveals that certain parties demonstrate more or less ability to broaden their electoral appeal, indicating that shifts in public sentiment are not uniform across all political entities.

Indeed, a close examination of the data underscores the significant trend surrounding the populist radical right: even though the latter is becoming more attractive to voters across Western Europe, there is also an increasing number of people who reject this party family. In effect, the data presented in this policy study reveals near-linear growth in people's dislike for populist radical right parties, which was just shy of 30% in the late 1990s and has increased to about 50% three decades later. Moreover, on average, approximately 35% of the electorate shows the highest possible score (0) of absolute dislike towards the populist radical right. This is in line with previous research, which confirms that such a strong rejection of the populist radical right is directly linked to people's support of liberal democracy and progressive values.[440] Seen in this light, there seems to be a clear electoral ceiling for this party family in Western Europe, since the more popular the populist radical right becomes, the more citizens seem to be at odds with this party family.

Simultaneously, the data reveals a paradox concerning the social democratic party family: despite garnering the highest level of favourability (approximately 60%) and relatively modest levels of unfavourability (approximately 35%), there has been a recent decline in the number of people voting for social democratic parties across Western Europe. This inconsistency unveils not only a relatively high electoral ceiling for social democratic parties but also a significant untapped potential that remains within their reach. As we discuss below, by capitalising on widespread discontent toward the populist radical right and leveraging its own comparatively favourable public perception, social democratic forces have the potential to effectively mobilise progressive voters.

Before delving into the discussion of the various case studies, it is essential to reflect on how to interpret the empirical analyses presented in Chapters 2 and 3. In fact, it would be misleading to interpret the various signs of stability as evidence that nothing significant is impacting the political systems of Western European societies. While the absence of a scenario akin to the radicalisation observed within the mainstream right in the USA is undoubtedly positive news for democracy in the Western European context, it would be erroneous to assume that such a scenario is entirely implausible anywhere in Europe. Consequently, policymakers and scholars must remain vigilant in monitoring the extent to which mainstream right forces throughout Europe demonstrate a commitment to the principles of liberal democracy. Unfortunately, this commitment cannot be taken for granted anymore. Over the past few decades, the mainstream right in Europe has experienced a decline in voter support and is grappling with the challenge posed by the ascendance of the populist radical right. Given that the former is characterised by its allegiance to the liberal democratic system, while the latter exhibits an ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy, a coalition between these two factions – cases of which we discuss below – raise concern. It is imperative to recognise the evolving dynamics and potential shifts within the European political landscape to ensure the continued resilience of liberal democratic values. This issue is especially urgent in the contemporary context, as populist radical right parties are increasingly viewed by the mainstream right not as outcasts but as potential partners with whom forming a government both at the subnational and national levels is deemed feasible.

In pursuit of a more nuanced comprehension of the purported process of radicalisation within the mainstream right, this policy study has systematically gathered diverse pieces of evidence. One important finding is that the populist radical right consistently adheres to uncompromising positions over time. Despite its increasing electoral support, there is a notable absence of moderation in the populist radical right's policy agenda. Consequently, the increasing willingness to forge alliances between this actor and the mainstream right wing raises important concerns. The reluctance to temper its programmatic proposals is particularly disquieting for liberal democracy, as it suggests a lack of willingness to moderate positions that may pose challenges to democratic principles.

Indeed, with the backing of mainstream right parties, the populist radical right has made significant inroads into government positions across Western Europe over the past few decades, as evidenced by examples in countries such as Austria, Italy, Finland, Norway and Sweden. While it remains true that these coalitions have not outright dismantled democratic systems, they do establish a troubling precedent, whereby far-right ideas gradually gain normalisation. This pattern allows the populist radical right to assert its influence on the public agenda, thereby permeating the political landscape with its preferred policies and illiberal rhetoric, particularly to attack historically marginalised groups that have been gaining visibility (e.g., migrant communities in Western Europe). Seen in this light, the success of the populist radical right hinges not solely on its electoral performance but largely on its ability to reshape both political discourse and practices. Comparative evidence reveals that this party family indeed mounts a subtle yet significant challenge to fundamental institutions and norms inherent in post-war Europe's liberal democratic regime. In essence, the populist radical right typically opposes the protection of minority rights, the independence of the judiciary and the delegation of power to supranational institutions responsible for overseeing the rule of law's proper functioning.

Herein lies the critical role played by the mainstream right: whether through forming coalitions with the populist radical right or governing with its support, the mainstream right facilitates the gradual social acceptance of far-right ideas and behaviours. Furthermore, this normalisation process may have enduring repercussions on public attitudes towards the populist radical right. As its proposals become increasingly normalised, there is a greater likelihood of individuals shifting their allegiance from the mainstream right to the far right. This phenomenon underscores the importance of recognising the broader societal implications

of mainstream right collaboration with the populist radical right and the potential long-term consequences on political preferences and democratic norms.

10.2 The mainstream right in Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden

Using aggregate data enables us to sketch a broad portrait of the purported process of mainstream right radicalisation across Europe. However, this approach comes with a significant drawback, namely, the potential to overlook specific trends at the national level and more recent developments. In response to this challenge, our policy study incorporates meticulous analyses that delve into the nuanced transformations of the mainstream right and their implications for (social) democracy in Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden. As emphasised in Chapter 1, our primary focus lies in Western Europe. Nevertheless, we have included a case study from Eastern Europe (Poland) to offer a more comprehensive panorama. This inclusion allows us to contemplate potential scenarios in the Western European context that may presently appear improbable but could materialise in the near future.

The Austrian case study holds significant symbolic importance in Western Europe, as the first country in the region to experience a government coalition between the populist radical right and the mainstream right. The authors analyse various pieces of evidence detailing the evolution of the programmatic positions of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and offer insights into the demographics of its supporters. The evidence suggests a noticeable shift towards conservatism on the cultural dimension within the Austrian mainstream right, albeit without overtly challenging liberal democratic institutions. Notably, the authors suggest that this shift is closely linked to internal conflicts within the party. Seen in this light, whether the ÖVP might follow the radicalisation path adopted by the mainstream right in Hungary under Orban or in the USA under Trump is highly dependent on the resolution of these internal tensions.

The chapter on France investigates the degree to which the mainstream right has experienced a process of radicalisation, examining the driving forces behind this transformation, and evaluating its repercussions on the political left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy. According to the author, although the radicalisation of the mainstream right in France is a clear trend, it unfolds as a complex and protracted phenomenon influenced by factors such as party competition and electoral incentives, which, in turn, are moulded by fluctuations in public opinion and the electoral performance of the populist radical right. At the same time, the French case study is peculiar because of the rapid ascendancy of a new liberal party (Macron's Renaissance Party), which, for the moment, offers a viable alternative for moderate right-wing voters. Without doubt, the forthcoming national election is going to be crucial to test the level of radicalisation of the mainstream right, since there are clear signs of the willingness of the Conservative party to form government and/or support a government led by populist radical right.

Another interesting case study is the one on Germany, which is marked by the recent and strong ascent of the populist radical right (AfD). Although the authors indicate that, at present, the mainstream right has not undergone radicalisation in response to the populist radical right, it does identify some worrisome indications. In fact, the analysis highlights the inclination of collaboration between mainstream right parties and the populist radical right at the subnational levels, shifts in policy stances of Christian democratic and liberal parties towards the far right (especially regarding immigration issues), and the adoption of policy proposals by the mainstream right that challenge core tenets of liberal democracy, such as minority protection and freedom of expression. At the same time, this chapter and current developments in Germany – massive demonstrations across the country to signal rejection towards the far right – reinforce an aspect

discussed in this policy study, namely, the fact that, despite increasing support towards the populist radical right, an important number of people are at odds with the latter.

When it comes to Poland, the departure from liberal democracy came as a surprise to many observers, who had regarded this country as a relatively successful case in the post-communist transition to democracy. However, the effective mobilisation of pro-democratic forces in the 2023 election suggests a division rather than a regression. As the author of this case study reveals, the country has experienced a dual shift: (1), the transformation of the "Law and Justice" party (PiS) between 2001 and 2015 from a relatively conventional mainstream right party into a populist radical right entity; and (2) the response of moderate parties across the political spectrum to PiS's dominance post-2015. This response has been instrumental in the "re-mainstreaming" of Polish politics, and helps us comprehend why a diverse coalition emerged victorious in the 2023 elections, with the aim of reversing many of the illiberal institutional changes implemented over the past eight years.

The case of Spain is, to a certain extent, unique because the emergence of the far right (VOX) came comparatively later. The author examines the radicalisation of the mainstream right, specifically the *Partido Popular* (PP), and assesses its implications for the broader democratic landscape. The analysis shows that, although it is true that the Conservative Party (PP) has not transformed itself into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right, several of their leaders are adopting some of the ideas and policies of VOX. In essence, the chapter presents an argument about a process termed "double contagion", wherein the influence of the populist radical right partly contributes to the gradual radicalisation of the mainstream right, subsequently leading to heightened levels of division along left versus right sympathisers. This polarisation is particularly evident in affective/identitarian dimensions and territorial matters.

Finally, the report includes a chapter on Sweden, with the author offering a concise introduction to the Sweden Democrats and outlining key aspects of the political and societal context essential for comprehending the party's growing influence. Transitioning from a political outsider to the second-largest party in the 2022 national elections, the Sweden Democrats have become increasingly significant. Furthermore, the chapter highlights how recent collaborations between Swedish mainstream right-wing parties and the Sweden Democrats could potentially normalise ideas and practices detrimental to liberal democracy. Similar to what can be observed in the other case studies, Sweden's mainstream right parties continue to behave as loyal supporters of liberal democracy, but by collaborating with the populist radical right, they are helping to give more visibility to the latter's agenda.

Table 8 provides a concise overview of the dynamics surrounding the scrutinised political forces (social democrats, conservatives, Christian democrats, liberals and the populist radical right) in Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden based on the following three aspects: (1) electoral performance, understood as the voting results in the recent past; (2) political relevance, defined as the general influence of the respective parties in shaping national politics and public agenda these days; and (3) coalition bargaining power, conceived as the realistic options of becoming part of a government coalition that each of the parties have. It is worth noting that the values of the scales should be seen as an exploratory assessment based on the comparative analyses, and as a consequence, they do not represent quantitative estimations.[441]

Table 8. Concise overview of the dynamics of the political forces studied with respect to electoral performance, political relevance and coalition bargaining power.

			Electoral performance	Political relevance	Coalition bargaining power
Austria	Social democracy	Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	***	****	***
	Mainstream right	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	****	*****	*****
	Populist radical right	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	***	****	***
France	Social democracy	Socialist Party	*	*	*
	Mainstream right	Renaissance (FE)	***	****	****
	Mainstream right	The Republican Party	*	*	**
	Populist radical right	National Rally	***	***	***
Germany	Social democracy	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	**	****	***
	Mainstream right	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)	***	****	*****
	Mainstream right	Free Democratic Party (FDP)	*	**	**
	Populist radical right	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	**	**	*
Poland	Social democracy	The Left (Lewica)	*	*	*
	Mainstream right	Civic Platform (PO)	***	****	****
	Populist radical right	Law and Justice (PiS)	***	****	****
Spain	Social democracy	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	****	****	*****
	Mainstream right	Popular Party (PP)	****	****	*****
	Populist radical right	VOX	**	**	*
Sweden	Social democracy	Swedish Social Democratic Party	****	****	****
	Mainstream right	Moderate Party	***	***	****
	Populist radical right	Sweden Democrats	***	**	***

Notably, considerable variation exists among the countries examined. For instance, social democracy appears remarkably feeble in places like France and Poland, whereas in Germany and Spain, it not only retains political relevant but holds the influential capability to determine the prime minister. Furthermore, the state of the mainstream right exhibits marked disparities across these cases. On one hand, the French scenario is characterised by the decline of conservatives and the swift but uncertain ascent of liberals, as exemplified by Macron. On the other hand, in countries like Austria and Germany, the Christian democrats experience a decline in electoral support but remain robust enough to forge alliances with various political actors. Lastly, while the populist radical right garners substantial electoral appeal across all cases, its level of maturity varies. For instance, it is a relatively new player in Germany and Spain, whereas it has entrenched itself as a long-term actor in Austria and France.

After this brief overview of the most important findings from our case studies, our objective is to draw overarching conclusions derived from their analysis, shedding light on the alleged process of radicalisation within the mainstream right in contemporary Europe and its implications for (social) democracy. One significant observation is that, while there isn't a clear indication of a sweeping transformation within the mainstream right, which is also consistent with the findings of the empirical chapters included at the beginning of this report, the evidence presented in the country case study chapters of this policy study raises valid concerns. This is especially pronounced for Conservative parties rather than for Christian democratic and liberal parties. Indeed, both Spain and Sweden have witnessed the rapid emergence of the populist radical right, and the conservative parties in each country (the PP and the Moderate Party, respectively) appear to be facilitating the normalisation of far right ideas. This phenomenon can, to a certain extent, be attributed to the populist radical right's ability to politicise issues that resonate strongly with the electorate, such as the territorial debate in Spain and law and order in Sweden. Put simply, when conservative parties are willing to address the same issues as the populist radical right, the potential for agreement between the two significantly increases. It's no surprise, then, that in Sweden, the current right-wing government relies on the support of the populist radical right, and in Spain, various subnational coalitions between the mainstream right and the populist radical right are taking shape.

Another significant insight from the different case studies is the acknowledgment that mainstream right parties are not uniform entities; they comprise diverse factions, with some showing a willingness to adopt ideas propagated by the populist radical right. Consequently, it is plausible to argue that an internal struggle is unfolding within the European mainstream right, the resolution of which remains uncertain. For example, the chapters on France, Germany and Spain highlight that key figures within the mainstream right appear inclined to align with the populist radical right. The trajectory of this internal conflict holds the potential for a gradual radicalisation of the mainstream right. The contemporary British political landscape serves as a pertinent illustration that such a scenario is not beyond the realm of possibility.[442] Hence, it is imperative for scholars and policymakers to prioritise the examination of ideological homogeneity within mainstream right parties and to identify which factions are more inclined to collaborate with and emulate the populist radical right. From a progressive standpoint, it is essential to foster alliances with moderate factions while denouncing the extreme ones.

A further noteworthy discovery underscores the significance of examining the subnational dimension. The aforementioned internal struggle within the mainstream right often unfolds at the subnational level, determining whether radical or moderate factions ultimately exert control. This dynamic significantly influences the configuration of various coalitions at the subnational level, subsequently shaping the groundwork for potential future national governments. For instance, the French chapter illustrates that, despite the existence of a *cordon sanitaire* against the populist radical right at the national level, there have been notable attempts to form alliances with them at the subnational level. Such agreements serve as

governance laboratories, allowing political actors involved to glean insights into and prepare the terrain for the formation of future coalitions at the national level.

10.3 Implications for social democracy

As highlighted in this policy study, the reassuring reality that the mainstream right is not evolving into a radical actor is a positive development for Western European democracy. However, this should not lead to complacency; on the contrary, it underscores the need to remain vigilant, as various indicators suggest the potential for a future radicalisation of the mainstream right across the region. The cases of Poland and Hungary in Eastern Europe reveal that the process of radicalisation of the mainstream right has already happened within the boundaries of the EU. At the same time, as already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, whether through forming coalitions with the populist radical right or governing with its support, the mainstream right facilitates the gradual social acceptance of far right ideas and behaviours. Understanding this backdrop holds significant implications for social democracy.

The initial significant insight gleaned from this policy study pertains to the levels of aversion directed toward the populist radical right in comparison to social democracy. While media consistently highlights the formidable electoral standing of the populist radical right across Europe, this narrative often overlooks the evidence presented here, revealing an increasing number of individuals in opposition to this political force. Simultaneously, ongoing discussions about the challenging situation of social democracy fail to recognise that only a minority of the voting public rejects this party family. Scholars and policymakers ought to delve more deeply into this paradox: why is it that social democracy, despite garnering fewer votes, faces relatively lower levels of public dislike? Our interpretation posits that there exists untapped potential for social democratic forces to broaden their support base. This endeavour can only succeed by developing new and improved narratives that effectively resonate with the ideas and interests of the voting public who share progressive values.

Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that the rise of the populist radical right is, in part, a reaction to the success of progressive forces in Western Europe in the last decades. By championing policies that have granted historically marginalised groups both material and symbolic recognition, progressive forces have unintentionally fostered conditions ripe for a backlash led by the populist radical right. As Lenka Bustikova aptly points out,[443] the far right is capitalising on resentment towards minority groups, who have gained increased visibility. Thus, social democracy must continue to defend these groups, while also strategising how to attract other constituencies and forge broader coalitions within the left-wing bloc.[444] Previous research has demonstrated that adopting anti-immigrant stances or less progressive positions not only fortifies the populist radical right but also fails to help social democrats regain working-class voters.[445] Therefore, the path forward involves crafting new narratives that appeal to diverse segments of the population sharing progressive values. Issues such as defending liberal democracy, promoting affordable housing, advocating for shorter workweeks and ensuring that climate change mitigation does not disproportionately affect vulnerable populations are domains where social democracy should proffer bold proposals. It is imperative for social democracy to take ownership of these proposals and advocate for their gradual and responsible implementation.

The second pertinent implication arising from the analysis presented in this policy study concerns the fragmentation of the political landscape. A significant aspect of the diminishing support for social democracy is intricately connected to the emergence of new political actors that not only pose challenges to social democratic parties but also impact mainstream right parties. The commonly asserted argument

about the populist radical right's ability to siphon votes from social democracy is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, there has consistently existed a segment of the working class with conservative leanings, traditionally aligning with right-wing parties; it is this electoral faction that the far right – as well as previously non-voters – can easily attract.[446] Secondly, contemporary transformations in the job market have rendered the working class highly diverse. Consequently, to align with the ideas and interests of this evolving demographic, social democratic forces must recalibrate their discourse and policy proposals. A growing proportion of the working class is now comprised of females and individuals with a migration background, while a significant segment holds progressive stances on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and immigration.[447] At the same time, a significant majority of citizens in Western Europe express support for the welfare state. Consequently, social democracy must avoid the pitfall of adopting chauvinistic positions and instead persist in championing the preservation, enlargement and enhancement of the welfare state.[448]

Another important lesson one can draw from the different chapters of this policy study is that the persistence of the mainstream right in Europe as a distinct entity, rather than evolving into a surrogate version of the populist radical right, does not signal the end of this challenge. Social democratic forces must remain vigilant, closely monitoring the behaviour of the mainstream right. It is crucial to denounce any attempts within its ranks to deviate from the liberal democratic system. Given that a significant majority of the electorate across Western Europe strongly supports both democracy itself and the liberal democratic regime,[449] defending the latter becomes not only a normative imperative but also a prudent strategy for mobilising voters. However, when democracy is at stake, and there is a need to confront those who oppose it, overcoming collective action problems is vital to build a broad front. The recent election in Poland shows that it is possible to unite pro-democratic forces, even with different political leanings. To achieve this, it is not sufficient to merely defend progressive values. It is equally essential to move beyond nostalgic rhetoric and articulate forward-thinking ideas about constructing a better political order for the future.

In fact, the case studies of this policy study demonstrate that the success of the far right, either independently or in alliance with the mainstream right, can create conditions conducive to the emergence of a broad coalition of political forces divergent from the entire right-wing bloc. If the latter is perceived by the public as a collection of actors sharing a uniform ideological profile characterised by radical ideas, there arises the potential to construct a narrative centred around the defence of liberal democracy and progressive values. Under such circumstances, social democratic parties play a pivotal role, as they can endeavour to establish connections with other political parties and civil society organisations, aiming to safeguard crucial advancements, such as the European project, the rule of law and a multilateral political order. To some extent, this scenario played out in the recent elections in Spain, where the success of the social democrats (PSOE) is intricately linked to widespread voter aversion toward the populist radical right (VOX). Social democracy must prioritise a reevaluation of its distinctive brand. It is imperative to reconsider how to effectively blend socialist principles with democratic governance and a market economy, aiming not only to attain social justice and equality but also to advance historically marginalised groups, which have gained increasing influence in recent decades. As mentioned before, supporting liberal democracy, protecting minorities and confronting the far right is not only a moral imperative, but also an electorally promising strategy, which should be developed in coalition with other progressive forces and civil society actors operating at the subnational, national and supranational levels.

Upon reviewing the country cases, two distinct scenarios for social democracy emerge. On one hand, in places like France and Poland, social democratic forces face considerable electoral weakness, while the populist radical right holds significant sway. In such situations, social democratic actors must earnestly consider the stakes in the electoral process. As demonstrated in the recent Polish election, when democracy is in jeopardy, social democracy should contemplate forming a diverse electoral coalition with all democratic

forces, including the mainstream right – particularly the moderate factions of the latter. Although entering such a coalition presents formidable programmatic challenges, it may well be the only viable path for safeguarding democracy. On the other hand, in countries like Spain and Sweden, social democracy maintains its appeal and continues to attract a substantial number of votes. The crucial question then becomes how to construct an electoral coalition conducive to effective governance in a political landscape marked by the decline of catch-all parties and increasing political fragmentation. Identifying common ground with other political actors becomes paramount, necessitating a delicate balance between honouring the most significant electoral promises while, simultaneously, relinquishing others that pose lesser harm to the social democratic brand. Experimenting with various alliances at the local, subnational and supranational levels serves as a practical means of acquiring knowledge for successfully building coalitions at the national level in the near future.

Finally, considering this landscape marked by the increasing normalisation of the far right, growing electoral fragmentation and the corresponding difficulties to build stable governments, the prospect of forging coalitions between social democracy and various right-wing actors is notably intricate. As a result, it is imperative to contemplate the challenges that social democracy faces when considering the formation of coalitions with right-wing forces. While in some countries this kind of scenario is quite implausible, due to existing animosities between mainstream right-wing parties and social democracy (e.g., Spain and Sweden), in others we have already seen the formation of this type of agreement (e.g., Austria and Germany). Even though offering a universal response applicable to all European countries remains elusive, it is pertinent to delve into potential considerations.

The less viable and more problematic avenue for social democracy involves attempting to forge alliances with populist radical right forces. Given their ambiguous stance toward liberal democracy and staunchly conservative positions, particularly in the cultural realm, aligning with them could prove detrimental and even jeopardise the core principles of social democracy. Alternatively, social democrats might explore the possibility of forming a government with conservatives or Christian democrats. However, this path is laden with complications due to significant disparities in both the sociocultural and socioeconomic dimensions. Additionally, in numerous countries, these factions harbour considerable animosity towards social democratic forces, further complicating the feasibility of co-governance. Finally, social democrats could consider building an alliance with liberal parties. While finding common ground on cultural issues is not insurmountable, achieving consensus on economic matters proves to be more intricate. This holds particular significance, as compromising on the role of the welfare state – a fundamental aspect of social democracy – could have severe repercussions on trust of its core constituencies. The welfare state not only constitutes an integral part of the social democratic DNA but also enjoys high regard among the European population.

11. ANNEX

11. ANNEX

11.1 Parties included in Figure 2

It is worth highlighting that we include only those parties that have obtained at least 4% of the vote in national elections. Given the peculiarities of the Irish political system, which make it hard to slot both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail convincingly into party families, we do not include Irish parties in this graph. The collected data comes from the database ParlGov (http://www.parlgov.org/), and we classify the parties into the different party families according to our own knowledge, secondary literature and feedback from some scholars.

11.1.1 Christian democratic parties

Austria: Austrian People's Party (ÖVP); **Belgium**: Christian Democrats and Flemish (CVP/CD&V), Humanistic Democratic Centre; **Finland**: Christian Democrats (KD); **Germany**: Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU); **Italy**: Unione/Centro, Democrazia Cristiana; **Luxembourg**: Christian Social People's Party (CSV); **Netherlands**: Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA); **Norway**: Christian Democratic Party (KrF); **Sweden**: Christian Democrats (KD); **Switzerland**: Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP).

11.1.2 Conservative parties

Belgium: New Flemish Alliance; **Denmark**: Conservatives (KF); **France**: Rally for the Republic (RPR), Union for a Popular Movement (UMP); **Finland**: National Coalition Party (KOK); **Greece**: New Democracy (ND); **Iceland**: Independence Party (Sj); **Italy**: Forza Italia; **Luxembourg**: Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR); **Norway**: Conservative (H); **Portugal**: Centro Democratico y Social/Partido Popular, Partido Social Democrata (PPD/PSD); **Spain**: Partido Popular (PP); **Sweden**: Moderate Party (MSP); **Switzerland**: Conservative Democratic Party (BDP); **UK**: Conservative Party.

11.1.3 Liberal parties

Austria: The New Austria (NEOS), Liberal Forum (LIF); **Belgium**: Reformist Movement (MR), Flemish Liberals and Democrats (PVV/VLD), Liberal Reformist Party (PRL); **Denmark**: Liberal Party (V), New-Liberal Alliance (NLA), Radikal Venstre (RV); **Finland**: Centre Party (KESK), Swedish People's Party of Finland; **France**: Union for French Democracy (UDF), En Marche; **Germany**: Free Democratic Party (FDP); **Greece**: The River (TP); **Iceland**: Progressive Party (F), Bright Future (Bf), Revival (V), Liberal Party (Ff); **Italy**: Italia dei Valori, Republican Party (PRI), Scelta Civica; **Luxembourg**: Democratic Party (DP); **Netherlands**: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Democrats 66; **Norway**: Liberal Party of Norway (V); **Spain**: Ciudadanos; **Sweden**: People's Party (FP); **Switzerland**: Radical Democratic Party (FDP-PRD); UK: Liberal Democrats.

11.1.4 Populist radical right parties

Austria: Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ); **Belgium**: Flemish Block, People's Union (VU); **Denmark**: Danish People's Party (DF), The New Right (NB); **Finland**: Finnish Party/True Finns; **France**: National Front (FN), Rassemblement National (RN); **Germany**: Alternative for Germany (AfD); **Greece**: Independent Greeks (ANEL), Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS); **Italy**: Fratelli d'Italia, Northern League (LN); **Netherlands**: Party for Freedom (PVV), Pim Fortuyn List; **Norway**: Progress Party (FrP); **Spain**: VOX; **Sweden**: Sweden Democrats; **Switzerland**: Swiss People's Party; **UK**: United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

11.1.5 Social democracy

Austria: Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ); **Belgium**: Socialist Party [Francophone] (PS), Socialist Party – Different (SPa); **Denmark**: Social Democrats (SD); **Finland**: Social Democratic Party of Finland (SSDP); **France**: Socialist Party (PS), New Union Popular Ecologist; **Germany**: Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); **Greece**: Democratic Left (DIMAR), Democratic Social Movement (DIKKI), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK); **Iceland**: Social Democratic Party (A), Alliance of Social Democrats (BJ), Social Democratic Alliance (SAM), People's Movement (TH-FF); **Italy**: Democratic Party (PD), Italian Democratic Socialist Party (PSDI), Italian Socialist Party (PSI), Centre Left (Centro-sinistra) (CeS), Democrats of the Left (DS); **Luxemburg**: Socialist Party (SP); **Netherlands**: Labour Party (PVDA); **Norway**: Norwegian Labour Party (DNA); **Portugal**: Socialist Party (PS); **Spain**: Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE); **Sweden**: Social Democrats (SAP); **Switzerland**: Independents Alliance (LDU-ADI), Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP-PS); **UK**: Labour (LAB), Scottish National Party (SNP).

11.1.6 Green/ecologist

Austria: The Greens – The Green Alternative (Grüne), JETZT – Pilz List (PILZ); **Belgium**: Agalev – Groen (AGL-GR), Confederated Ecologists for the Organisation of Original Struggles (ECOLO); **Denmark**: The Alternative (A); **Finland**: Green League (VIHR); **France**: Europe Ecology – The Greens (Europe Écologie – Les Verts), Ecologist Party; **Germany**: Greens (B90/Gru); **Iceland**: Women's Alliance (KL), Left-Green Movement (GRAEN); **Luxemburg**: The Greens (GRENG), Green and Liberal Alliance (GLA/GLEI); **Netherlands**: GreenLeft (GL); **Sweden**: Greens (MP); **Switzerland**: Greens (GRUE), Green Liberal Party (GLP-PVL).

11.1.7 Radical left

Belgium: Workers' Party of Belgium (PA-PTB); **Denmark**: Red-Green Alliance (EN-O), Socialist People's Party (SF); **Finland**: Democratic Union|Left Alliance (DL|VAS), Democratic Alternative (DEVA); **France**: Unbowed France (FI), French Communist Party (PCF); **Germany**: PDS – Die Linke/The Left (PDS|LI); **Greece**: Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), Coalition of the Left (SYN); **Iceland**: People's Alliance (AB), People's Party (FlF); **Italy**: Communist Party (PCI), Communist Refoundation Party (PRC); **Luxemburg**: The Left (DL), Communist Party of Luxembourg (KPL); **Netherlands**: Socialist Party (SP); **Norway**: Socialist Left Party (SV); **Portugal**: United People Alliance (APU), Bloc of the Left (BE), Unified Democratic Coalition (CDU); **Spain**: Communist Party|United Left (PCE|IU), We Can (P), Sumar (P); Sweden: Left Party (Vänsterpartiet) (VP).

11.2 Additional information related to the countries and years under analysis

Table A1. Years under analysis within each CSES module, by country.

	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5
	(1996-2001)	(2001-2006)	(2006-2011)	(2011-2016)	(2016-2021)
Austria			2008	2013	2017
Belgium	1999	2003			2019
Denmark	1998	2001	2007		2019
Finland		2003	2007, 2011	2015	2019
France		2002	2007	2012	2017
Germany	1998	2002	2005, 2009	2013	2017, 2021
Great Britain	1997	2005		2015	2017, 2019
Greece			2009	2012, 2015	2015, 2019
Iceland	1999	2003	2007, 2009	2013	2016, 2017
Italy		2006			2018
Netherlands	1998	2002	2006, 2010		2017, 2021
Norway	1997	2001	2005, 2009	2013	2017
Portugal	2002	2002, 2005	2009	2015	2019
Spain	1996, 2000	2004	2008		
Sweden	1998	2002	2006	2014	2018
Switzerland	1999	2003	2007	2011	2019

11.3 Party family classification scheme

11.3.1 Social democratic parties:

Austria: Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ); **Belgium**: Socialist Party (PS), Socialist Party – Different (SPa); **Denmark**: Social Democrats (SD), Centre Democrats (CD); **Estonia**: Social Democratic Party (SDE); **Finland**: Social Democratic Party of Finland (SSDP); **France**: Socialist Party (PS), Radical Party of the Left (RPG); **Germany**: Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); **Greece**: Democratic Left (DIMAR), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK); **Iceland**: Social Democratic Alliance (SAM); **Italy**: Democrats of the Left (DS), Daisy – Democracy is Freedom (DL), Free and Equal (LEU); **Latvia**: Harmony Centre (SC); **Lithuania**: Social Democratic Party (LSDP); **Netherlands**: Labour Party (PvdA); **Norway**: Norwegian Labor Party (AP), Socialist Left Party (SV); **Portugal**: Socialist Party (PS), Free (L); **Spain**: Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC); **Sweden**: Social Democrats (SAP); **Switzerland**: Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP–PS); **UK**: Labour Party (LAB), Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru.

11.3.2 Liberal parties

Austria: The New Austria (NEOS), Liberal Forum (LIF); **Belgium**: Reformist Movement (MR), Flemish Liberals and Democrats (PVV/ VLD), Liberal Reformist Party (PRL), Democratic Federalist Independent (DeFI); **Denmark**: Liberal Party (V), New-Liberal Alliance (NA), Radikal Venstre (RV); **Estonia**: Estonian Reform Party (ERe); **Finland**: Centre Party (KESK), Swedish People's Party of Finland (RKP-SFP); **France**: Democratic Movement (MoDem); La Republique En Marche! (LaREM); **Germany**: Free Democratic Party (FDP); **Greece**: The River (TP); **Iceland**: Progressive Party (F), Bright Future (Bf), Liberal Party (Ff), Left-Green Movement (V), **Latvia**: Development/For! (AP); **Lithuania**: Center Union (LCS), Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (LRLS), Freedom Party (LP); **Netherlands**: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Democrats 66 (D66); **Norway**: Liberal Party of Norway (V); **Portugal**: Liberal Initiative (IL); **Spain**: Convergence and Union (CiU); **Sweden**: People's Party (FP), Centre Party (C); **Switzerland**: Radical Democratic Party (FDP-PRD), Liberal Party (LPS/PLS); Green Liberal Party (GLP/PVL); **UK**: Liberal Democrats (LD).

11.3.3 Christian democratic parties

Austria: Austrian People's Party (ÖVP); **Belgium**: Christian Democrats and Flemish (CVP/CD&V), Humanistic Democratic Centre (CDH); **Estonia**: Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL); **Finland**: Christian Democrats (KD); **Germany**: Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU); **Italy**: Union of Christian and Centre Democrats (UDC); **Latvia**: Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way (LPP/LC); **Lithuania**: Christian Democratic Party (CDP), Lithuanian Poles Electoral Action - Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KSS); **Netherlands**: Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Christian Union (CU); **Norway**: Christian Democratic Party (KrF), Center Party (Sp); **Spain**: Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), **Sweden**: Christian Democrats (KD); **Switzerland**: Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP); Evangelical People's Party (EVP/ PEP) .

11.3.4 Conservative parties

Belgium: New Flemish Alliance (NVA); **Denmark**: Conservatives (KF); **Estonia**: Estonian People's Union (ERa); **Finland**: National Coalition Party (KOK); **France**: Rally for the Republic (RPR), Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), The republicans (LR), New Centre (NC); **Greece**: New Democracy (ND); **Iceland**: Independence Party (Sj); **Italy**: Forza Italia; **Latvia**: For a Good Latvia (PLL), Reform Party (RP), New Conservative Party (JKP), Unity (V), New Unity (JV); **Lithuania**: Homeland Union-Conservatives (TS - LK), Lithuania Union of Farmers and Greens (LVZS); **Netherlands**: Reformed Political Party (SGP); **Norway**: Conservative (H); **Portugal**: Democratic and Social Centre – People's Party (CDS-PP), Social Democratic Party (PSD); **Spain**: Partido Popular (PP); **Sweden**: Moderate Party (M); **Switzerland**: Conservative Democratic Party (BDP); **UK**: Conservative Party.

11.3.5 Populist radical right parties

Austria: Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ); **Belgium**: Flemish Interest (VB), Belgian National Front (FNb); **Denmark**: Danish People's Party (DF); **Estonia**: Estonian Centre Party (EK); **Finland**: True Finns (TF); **France**: National Front (FN); **Germany**: The Republicans (REP), Alternative for Germany (AfD); **Greece**: Independent Greeks (ANEL), Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS), Greek Solution (EL); **Iceland**: Centre Party (M); **Italy**: Northern League/Lega (LN); **Latvia**: National Union All for Latvia For Fatherland and Freedom (LNNK), For Latvia from the Heart (NsL), Who Owns the State? (KPV), National Alliance (NA); **Lithuania**: Nationalist Party - "Young Lithuania" (JL), Party Order and Justice (PTT); **Netherlands**: Party for

Freedom (PVV), Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), Forum for Democracy (FvD); **Norway**: Progress Party (FrP); **Portugal**: Chega; **Sweden**: Sweden Democrats (SD); **Switzerland**: Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC), Ticino League (Lega); **UK**: United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

11.4 Additional information about variables

Our main variables of interest are positive and negative partisanship. We include average values of these two variables by CSES wave and distinguish between party families in Figure A1. We include some more detailed descriptive statistics in Table A2.

Figure A1. Histograms of partisanship variables, by wave and party family.

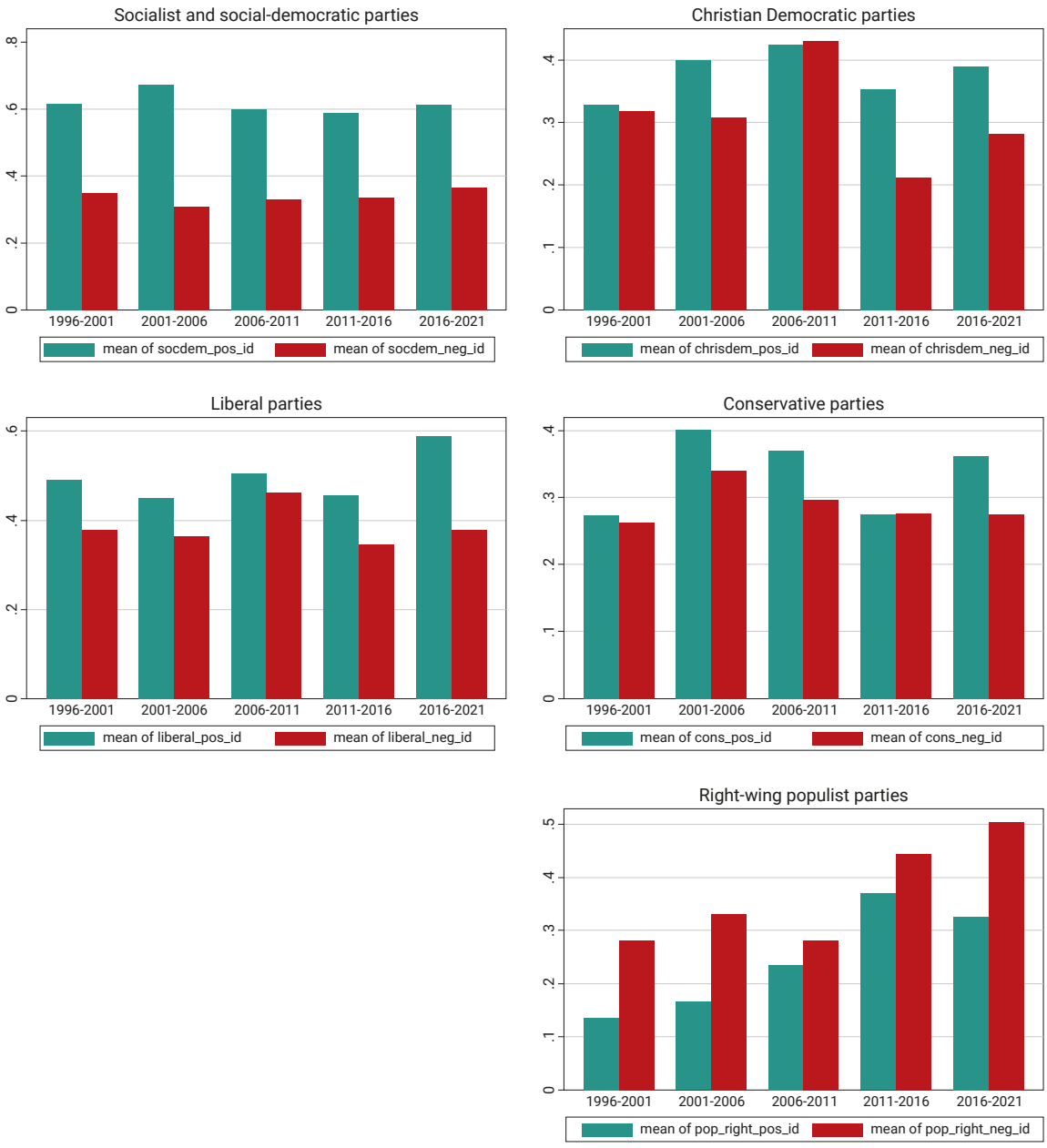


Table A2. Descriptive statistics, partisanship variables by party family.

		Social democrats	Liberals	Christian democrats	Conservatives	Populist radical right
1996-2001	N	22,468	22,468	22,468	22,468	22,468
	Mean	0.6154086	0.4923002	0.327399	0.2736781	0.1346804
	Standard deviation	0.4865094	0.4999518	0.4692746	0.4458556	0.3413895
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	0	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1
2001-2006	N	24,635	24,635	24,635	24,635	24,635
	Mean	0.6712807	0.4487924	0.3982545	0.4010554	0.1652933
	Standard deviation	0.4697573	0.497381	0.4895483	0.4901221	0.3714526
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	0	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1
2006-2011	N	30,840	30,840	30,840	30,840	30,840
	Mean	0.6014267	0.5042802	0.4238975	0.3694553	0.234144
	Standard deviation	0.4896125	0.4999898	0.4941825	0.4826651	0.4234695
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	1	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1
2011-2016	N	20,021	20,021	20,021	20,021	20,021
	Mean	0.5896309	0.4547225	0.3520803	0.2745617	0.3691624
	Standard deviation	0.491913	0.4979582	0.4776308	0.4463043	0.48259
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	0	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1
2016-2021	N	41,448	41,448	41,448	41,448	41,448
	Mean	0.6130573	0.5899199	0.3893071	0.3613685	0.3243824
	Standard deviation	0.4870562	0.4918539	0.487599	0.4804028	0.4681493
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	1	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1
Total	N	139,412	139,412	139,412	139,412	139,412
	Mean	0.6177876	0.5108886	0.3832167	0.3435716	0.2521662
	Standard deviation	0.4859298	0.4998832	0.4861721	0.4749018	0.4342577
	Min. value	0	0	0	0	0
	Median	1	1	0	0	0
	Max. value	1	1	1	1	1

We correlate support for and rejection of different party families with education, age, gender, household income, urban-rural residence, socio-economic status and ideological self-identification. For education, we recode the available data in four categories: (1) less than higher secondary education; (2) higher secondary education; (3) post-secondary education; and (4) university education. We regroup the original age variable in six categories: under 24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; and over 65 years old. Gender refers to (1) male or (2) female. We recode income in five quintiles, with the lower quintiles referring to lower household incomes. Urban-rural residence distinguishes between (1) rural area or village, (2) small or mid-sized town, (3) suburbs and (4) large town or city. Socio-economic status differentiates between white collar, blue collar and self-employed. Finally, we recode the original 11-point ideological self-identification variable into three categories: left (0-4); centre (5); and right (6-10). We include descriptive statistics of these recoded variables (including the original age variable) in Table A3.

Table A3. Descriptive statistics, independent variables.

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Min. value	Median	Max. value
Education	135,661	2.379837	1.148172	1	2	4
Age (original)	138,766	49.13081	17.45988	16	49	120
Age (recoded)	138,766	3.870069	1.629736	1	4	6
Gender	139,063	1.508561	0.4999285	1	2	2
Household income	113,807	2.926744	1.3768	1	3	5
Residence	122,333	2.500135	1.139113	1	2	4
Socio-economic status	63,946	1.539346	0.7294344	1	1	3
Self-identification (original)	125,843	5.058446	2.315562	0	5	10

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

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266 We use "formations" to refer to the organisations that contested the election on discrete electoral lists, as none of the main political parties ran entirely independently of others. We reserve the word "party" to refer to individually registered political parties and "coalition" to refer to registered coalitions.

267 KO was set up in 2018 as a vehicle for PO and the economic liberal party Modern (*Nowoczesna*) to contest local elections, and expanded thereafter to incorporate a number of parties and movements of largely centrist provenance. PO remains, by far, the largest party within this coalition.

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parties and coalitions identified with this current under the umbrella term "Lewica". Given their role in the articulation of populist discourses, we also include SRP and LPR as points of reference.

The economic dimension is operationalised using V-Party's economic left-right variable. We derive a latent socio-cultural dimension from V-Party's variables on support for LGBTQ+ social equality, equal participation of women in the labour market, assertion of the cultural superiority of one's own nation and the invocation of religious principles.

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This policy study addresses the evolving landscape of Western European politics, focusing on the trajectory of mainstream right parties amid the rise of populist radical-right forces. While the decline of social democracy and the ascent of the populist radical right have garnered significant attention, there has been less scrutiny of the mainstream right. Nevertheless, examining the latter is imperative, given its historical role in bolstering liberal democracy in Europe since World War II – a role no longer assured.

Through comparative analysis and case studies of Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden, this study investigates the extent to which mainstream right parties have adopted more extreme positions and the potential implications for the political landscape. While mainstream right parties have largely remained loyal to liberal democratic principles, there's a looming risk of them becoming conduits for illiberal agendas. Coalition-building or governance arrangements between the mainstream right and the populist radical right may inadvertently normalise far-right ideas and practices within society, leading to significant challenges for the democratic fabric. This study not only recognises these challenges, but also shows that, by capitalising on widespread discontent toward the populist radical right and leveraging its own comparatively favourable public perception, social democratic forces have the potential to effectively counter this troubling development.

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