

1 Introduction

The past thirty years have seen dramatic changes in the electoral politics of Western democracies. Among the most important is a substantial decline in the share of votes secured by mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right. Its mirror image has been rising electoral support for challengers, including Green parties and parties on the radical-right and radical-left (see Figure 1). A familiar postwar politics built on cleavages of social class and religion has given way to something new and consequential for the types of policies governments are likely to be able to pursue (Evans 1999; Knutsen 2006; Mudde 2007; Kriesi et al. 2008; Hobolt and De Vries 2020).

Scholars are still grappling with questions about whether these developments represent dealignment or realignment around new cleavages and what they imply for the long-term fortunes of mainstream parties (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019; Gidron and Ziblatt 2019; Marks et al. 2021). However, the answers to such questions about the future turn on important questions about the past, namely: In what ways has the electoral landscape changed and what renders the electoral situation of mainstream parties more precarious? An impressive body of scholarship addresses those questions, albeit with competing contentions, and our objective is not to add to them. But most of the evidence adduced for these explanations is cross-sectional or based on data for relatively short periods of time. We lack clear portraits of how the positions of social groups within the electoral space have changed over the past thirty years and corresponding accounts of how the potential for various types of electoral coalitions has shifted in that period.¹

Our objectives are to fill this gap and use the resulting evidence to consider how the viability of different types of electoral coalitions has shifted over this period with a view to assessing competing explanations for the decline of mainstream parties and the rise of their challengers. For these purposes, we examine the movements of people in seven occupational groups across a two-dimensional electoral space in eight Western democracies over the three decades from 1990 to 2018. Based on shifts in the attitudes of these groups to economic and cultural issues and the salience of those issues, we calculate the relative viability of four types of electoral coalitions corresponding to those often assembled by mainstream and challenger parties. We find evidence for many, but not all, explanations for the shifting electoral fortunes of these parties and for the contention that electoral competition now takes place along a new

¹ For parallel studies with different analytical ambitions, see Caughey et al. 2019, Gethin et al. 2022, and Kitschelt and Rehm 2022.

European Politics

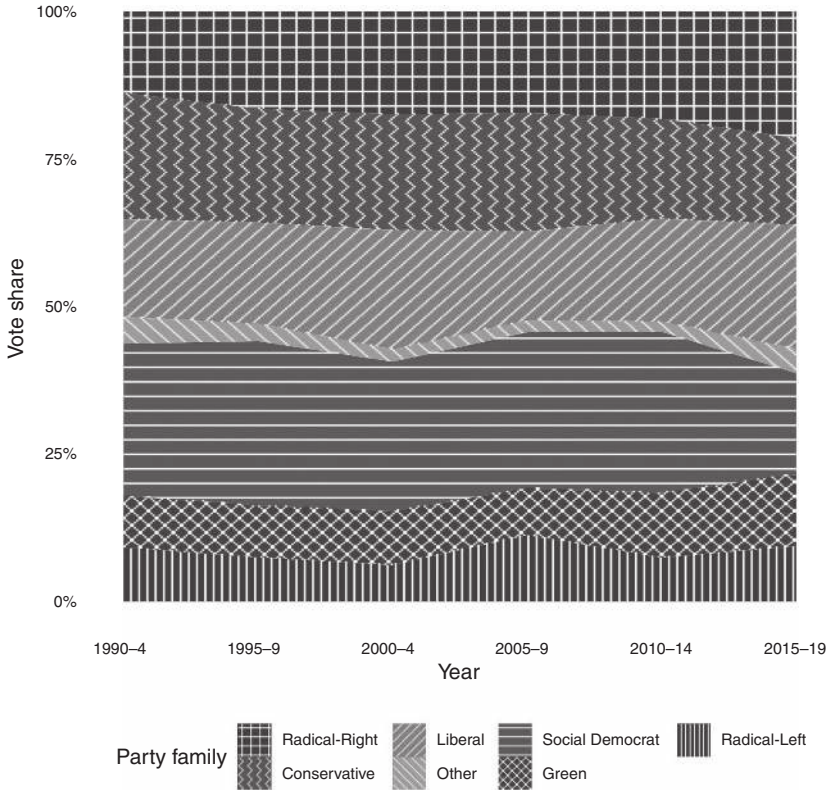


Figure 1 Share of votes for major party families in parliamentary elections 1990–2019.

Source: Data from Gethin et al. (2022) for the eight countries in this study smoothed over five years.

axis running from Green parties to radical-right parties which some scholars have associated with the rise of a new “transnational” cleavage.

1.1 Contemporary Contentions about Electoral Change

The contemporary literature contains a variety of propositions about how the shape of the electoral space has changed over the past thirty years and why support for mainstream parties has been declining. Some works advance several of these propositions, while others emphasize only one or two of them, but broadly speaking these contentions fall into three groups.

The first group emphasize the impact of secular economic and social changes on the attitudes and related policy preferences of voters. These developments can be said to affect the “demand side” of electoral politics. At their center is the decline of employment in the manufacturing sector, which once offered decent

jobs to many blue-collar workers, and a corresponding increase in employment in services (Iversen and Cusack 2000). That long-term development gathered pace with globalization during the 1980s and 1990s, as many firms moved manufacturing jobs offshore to emerging economies (Baily and Lawrence 2004). At the same time, growing demand for services from both companies and consumers created many new jobs of various kinds in services. Oesch (2013a) calculates that the share of professionals and managers in the occupational structure of many advanced capitalist economies has increased by about 20 percent since the early 1990s. A new technological revolution in information technology is also shifting the occupational structure. By increasing the demand for highly skilled workers at the expense of those with medium levels of skill, it has eliminated many types of positions and polarized the occupational structures of some countries (Goos et al. 2009; Autor and Dorn 2013).

Over the same period of time, shifting social attitudes have created the potential for more intense conflict over cultural issues. This development also has long-term roots going back to the postmaterialist revolt of the late 1960s, which saw younger generations rebel against the materialist outlooks of their parents, embrace a more diverse set of lifestyles, and attach increasing importance to issues of social equality (Inglehart 1977). Those concerns found expression in the new social movements of the 1980s focused on nuclear disarmament, racial or gender equality, and environmental issues, which ultimately gave rise to Green parties and further social movements during the 1990s and 2000s, such as those seeking gay rights and access to abortion (Dalton and Kuechler 1990; Kriesi et al. 1995).

Four propositions about how the contemporary electoral space has changed are grounded in these observations.

- H1. The most prominent of these is that economic developments associated with the decline of manufacturing, the growth of service-sector employment, and the transition to a knowledge economy have fragmented the occupational structure, thereby eroding the cleavage between a blue-collar working class and a white-collar middle class that was once central to European politics (Oesch 2008a; Beramendi et al. 2015; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). That cleavage is said to have given way to a wider array of occupational groups with more heterogenous political preferences than those once held by blue- or white-collar workers, rooted in differences in occupational tasks, employment security, education, and income (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Gethin et al. 2022).
- H2. Based on the cultural changes of recent years, most analyses of the electoral space also claim that, alongside the economic issues once central to electoral

competition, a new set of cultural issues have become increasingly important to voters and salient to electoral competition. These are issues associated with gender equality, gay rights, abortion, and immigration.² As a result, new gaps on cultural issues have appeared between citizens, scattering them more widely across an electoral space that is now two-dimensional (Inglehart 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006; De Vries et al. 2013; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015).

- H3. Among these accounts about the prevalence of cultural conflict, some stress the particular importance of a growing gap on cultural issues between blue-collar and white-collar workers, often ascribed to the reaction of blue-collar workers against the extent to which more educated employees have embraced cosmopolitan (or postmaterial/universalist) values (Norris and Inglehart 2019).
- H4. Others postulate a new divergence in economic preferences between various segments of the working class, generally based on variations in employment security, although scholars disagree about the primary basis for this divergence. Some locate the division between secure labor market “insiders” and more precarious “outsiders” (Rueda 2005), some between workers with high levels of specific skills and low-skilled workers (Iversen and Soskice 2015), while others find a division between people in occupations facing higher versus lower levels of labor market risk (Häusermann et al. 2015; Schwander 2020).

A second set of propositions prominent in the literature about electoral change focuses on the contribution that the strategies of political parties have made to declining support for mainstream parties and rising support for their populist competitors. We can think of these as arguments about developments on the “supply side” of electoral politics.

- H5. Some efforts to explain rising support for populist right parties attribute it to a reaction against the extent to which mainstream party platforms converged on neoliberal approaches to economic problems during the 1990s. These works cite two causal paths. One argument is that party platforms failed to represent the views of working-class voters on such issues, thereby inspiring political alienation and a protest vote for anti-establishment parties (Spruyt et al. 2016; Berger 2017; Berman and

² Although some analysts treat attitudes to immigration as a separate factor (Caughey et al. 2019; Lancaster 2022), and there are some grounds for doing so, in our factor analysis attitudes to immigration load in a congruent way with the other views we associate with cultural attitudes, and we treat it as a component of those attitudes in the interest of identifying a two-dimensional issue space (see Appendix C).

Snegovaya 2019; Hopkin and Blyth 2019; Hopkin 2020; Grant and Tilley 2022). Others argue that the convergence in party platforms on economic issues leads parties, seeking a distinctive basis for their appeals, to put more emphasis on cultural issues and that voters, seeking distinctive grounds on which to choose among parties, do so as well (Spies 2013; Ward et al. 2015). Since the attractiveness of most populist right parties turns heavily on their stance toward cultural issues, these dynamics should have worked to their advantage.

- H6. A related but alternative argument suggests that rising support for populist right parties, especially among working-class voters, has been driven by the extent to which center-left parties, which were once their natural political home, have moved to embrace cosmopolitan (or postmaterialist) cultural values, often with a view to securing more votes from the middle class (Evans and Tilley 2017; Häusermann 2018; Gethin et al. 2022). The premises here are that many working-class voters hold more traditional values, were discouraged from voting for center-left parties by this move, and hence have become a promising reservoir of support for populist right parties that promote traditional values.

Finally, a third set of propositions prominent in the contemporary literature focuses on changes in the overall terms of electoral competition in the wake of these developments, and their consequences for the fate of mainstream and challenger parties.

- H7. Some analysts posit that cultural issues have become much more salient to electoral competition in recent years relative to economic concerns, and ascribe rising support for right populist parties to the increasing salience of those issues, on the grounds that these parties appeal to voters primarily on cultural issues, such as the cultural threats putatively posed by immigrants, while mainstream parties are in decline because they rely more heavily for support on economic appeals, such as policies of income redistribution (Ivarsflaten 2005; Bornschier 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Magistro and Wittstock 2021; Danieli et al. 2022).
- H8. Putting these developments together, some scholars also argue that, in the wake of eroding class and religious alignments, electoral competition now turns on a new transnational (or universalist–particularist) cleavage that pits parties promoting cosmopolitan values and left-wing economic positions, including Green parties and some center-left parties, against populist right parties defending traditional values and more conservative economic positions. One implication is that the principal axis of political competition no longer runs horizontally along a standard left–right axis reflecting economic

issues, but along a diagonal cutting across the new two-dimensional political space. Another implication is that Green parties and radical-right parties have become more important contenders for power, increasingly crucial to governing coalitions of the political left or right (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; Bornschier 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Rovny and Polk 2019a; Marks et al. 2021).

These are important contentions that, in one version or another, go some distance toward explaining why mainstream center-left and center-right parties have found it difficult to hold together the electoral coalitions that once kept them in office and why support for Green parties and parties of the populist right or left has increased. As such, they deserve careful scrutiny.

Of course, there are multiple ways in which some of these propositions can be tested, and we do not attempt anything like complete assessments here. But these contentions embody claims about: (1) how voters have moved in the electoral space over the past three decades; (2) how the salience of different types of issues has changed; (3) how party positions have shifted; and, ultimately, (4) how the viability of the electoral coalitions formed by different types of political parties has changed over these years. Those are the empirical issues addressed in this Element and, by examining them, we bring some evidence to bear on the plausibility of these eight contentions.

1.2 The Approach

Our first objective is to assess how the political attitudes of voters concerning economic and cultural issues, on which many political parties base their appeals, have changed over the past thirty years; and our second objective is to assess how the viability of the electoral coalitions that these parties might form from various groups of voters has shifted over recent decades. For these purposes, we consider groups of voters classified according to their position within the occupational structure and examine the movement of those groups within a two-dimensional issue space encompassing the positions taken by their members on economic and cultural issues. This approach to understanding how the viability of electoral coalitions changes has both limitations and advantages.

In our view, there is value in thinking in terms of electoral coalitions. The electoral success of political parties ultimately turns on how many votes they can secure and, except for the smallest of parties, securing those votes generally entails appealing to groups of people with diverse views. Accordingly, we focus on the process of coalition formation within the electorate. Our conception of how electoral coalitions are formed may be more controversial, because there are several different grounds on which people might vote for a party and hence different ways in which parties can

form coalitions. Partisan appeals can be based on a party's reputation for competent governance or on its stance toward a valence issue such as corruption (Green and Jennings 2017; Hobolt and De Vries 2020). Alternatively, parties can appeal to the social identities of voters or attract them by disbursing goods in clientelist fashion (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Bornschieer et al. 2021; Mierke-Zatwarnicki 2022). Coalition formation is inevitably a multifaceted process.

We focus, however, on the appeals that parties make to the political attitudes of voters, understood as the positions those voters take on a range of economic and cultural issues germane to electoral competition. Although appeals to political attitudes may not be the only basis for partisan support, it is difficult to imagine parties forming viable electoral coalitions without speaking to the political preferences of the voters who compose those coalitions (Goren 2013). In corresponding terms, we assess the viability of a given electoral coalition by reference to how well it aggregates the preferences of the groups of which it is composed. The results are inevitably somewhat stylized for the reasons we have noted, but we think that this is as likely as any other approach to capture the viability of alternative coalitions.

Parallel issues arise with respect to how the groups that make up electoral coalitions should be construed. In principle, these groups could be understood in any number of ways, including in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, age, or region of residence. For effective cross-national comparison, however, we need a schema delineating groups whose members tend to have similar political preferences and preferences that vary in parallel ways across multiple countries. For these reasons, it makes sense to group voters based on their occupational class. Across countries, occupational class is systematically related to political preferences over the types of broad economic and cultural issues on which we concentrate (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Marks et al. 2022). Occupation is also frequently used to delineate the groups forming electoral coalitions: hence, using this schema speaks to an important literature on class politics (Rydgren 2013; Beramendi et al. 2015). Accordingly, we chart the movement of occupational groups within a two-dimensional electoral space, reflecting the positions of those groups on economic and cultural issues, at three points in time over the period from 1990 to 2018. We then use this analysis to assess how and why the viability of alternative electoral coalitions changes over these decades.

2 The Movement of Citizens in the Electoral Space

For the purposes of this analysis, we need cross-national data from which comparable measures of citizens' attitudes concerning economic and cultural issues can be constructed, spanning the longest possible time period. The most

comprehensive data sets we have been able to find with those features are in the World Values Surveys (WVS) and European Values Surveys (EVS) with which we can compare citizens' attitudes in 1990 (WVS wave 2, with about 13,000 respondents), 2006 (WVS wave 5, with about 19,000 respondents), and 2018 (EVS wave 5, with about 16,000 respondents) in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. In the following analyses, we use demographic weights for each survey to secure representative samples of the national population.

2.1 Measuring Occupational Groups

Based on self-reported occupation, we assign respondents to occupational groups designed to conform to the influential categories of Oesch (2006) which capture features of the workplace situation said to condition people's views on economic and cultural issues. Because of limitations in the WVS data, we can only approximate those categories, but we do so by grouping people into seven occupational groups according to the types of tasks associated with their employment. These groups are: managers; professionals; high-skill white-collar workers; lower-level service workers; manual workers in crafts and trades; manual production workers; and employers with a small number of employees. The average levels of income and education in each of these occupational groups correspond to our expectations, increasing our confidence in this classification (for details, see Appendix A, Table AA1). Where respondents do not list a present occupation, we use the past occupation they report to assign them to an occupational class; and we drop from the sample those who do not report an occupation.

2.2 Assessing Attitudes

One advantage of the WVS is that attitudes can be measured using the same questions in every wave. We measure citizens' views about economic issues with questions about their attitudes to income inequality; private versus state ownership of business; the responsibility of government to provide for all; whether the unemployed should be forced to take any job; and whether competition is good or harmful. We assess views about cultural issues with questions about whether homosexuality and abortion are justifiable; how respondents feel about having immigrants, Muslims, and people of a different race as neighbors; whether men have more right to a job than women; and whether respect for authority is good or bad. The questions used are in Appendix B.

Using these questions, based on the entire pooled sample, we construct indices for people's views on economic and cultural issues by estimating a confirmatory model for multidimensional item response parameters, based

on Samejima's (1969) multidimensional ordinal response model because the data are ordinal (Chalmers 2012). Given our premise that these questions tap two distinct factors, we constrain the variables to load onto one dimension. Our economic index reflects attitudes to redistribution and governmental activism, which we describe as left versus right, while the cultural index reflects a set of values we describe as cosmopolitan versus traditional.³ Details of the factor analysis are in Appendix C. The cross-national and over-time patterns observed with our measures correspond broadly to those found by Caughey et al. (2019), which enhances our confidence in the results.

2.3 Movements within a Two-Dimensional Electoral Space

Using the average position on economic and cultural issues taken by members of each occupational group, we place these groups within a two-dimensional issue space at three points in time around 1990, 2006, and 2018. The results are reported in Figure 2, which documents the movement of occupational groups across this electoral space over the past three decades within the eight countries examined here. The metric on the axes is based on factor scores calculated over the entire sample and hence comparable across waves. Results for individual countries are reported in Appendix D. Several general features of the movement of these groups are notable.

The first is an important secular development. Over the course of these decades, views about cultural issues across all occupational groups became consistently more cosmopolitan. That movement was especially pronounced between 1990 and 2006 but it continued through 2018; and it is also visible, albeit at different rates, within each of the countries in this study (see Appendix D). At a time when public attention is often fixed on the resistance that populist right politicians have mounted to cosmopolitan cultural views in the name of traditional values, it is worth underlining that the broader and more durable trend within these democracies has been rising support for more cosmopolitan values associated with gender equality, abortion rights, and cultural tolerance.⁴

The movement of people's views on economic issues is equally interesting. Between 1990 and 2006, the views of all occupational groups shifted quite dramatically to the left on economic issues, toward more support for redistribution and state intervention. In the following twelve years between 2006 and

³ Other terms used for a roughly similar cultural spectrum are left-libertarian versus right-authoritarian (cf. Kitschelt 2004) and universalism versus particularism (cf. Häusermann and Kriesi 2015).

⁴ It should be noted that cultural views on issues of gender rights, abortion, and the like have been more fluid than those on immigration, which fluctuate to some extent over time but show greater stability (see Caughey et al. 2019).

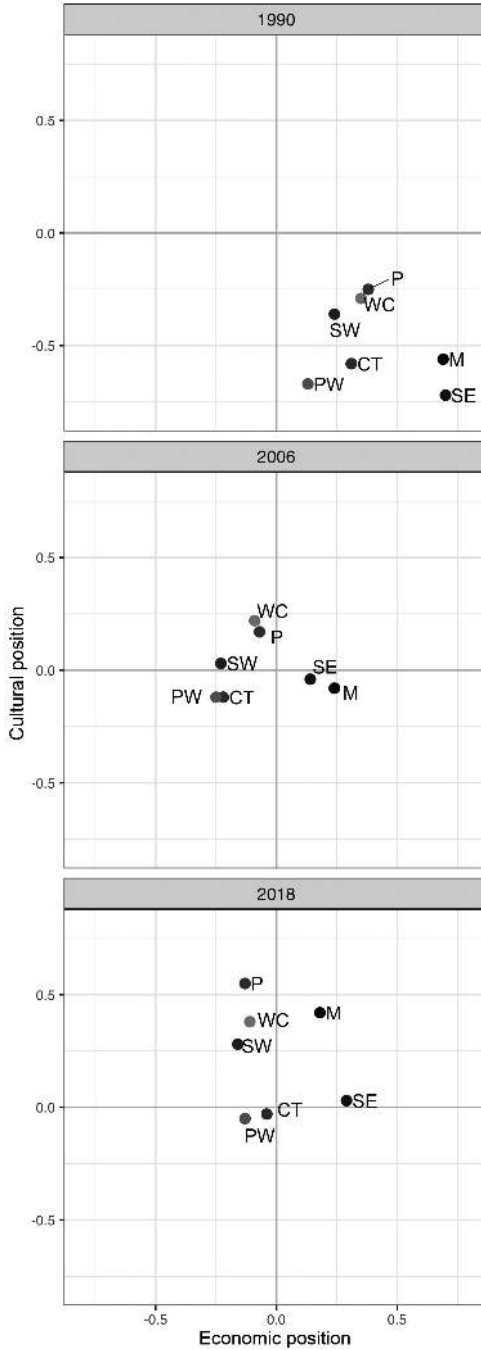


Figure 2 The location of occupational groups in the electoral space in 1990, 2006, and 2018 across all eight countries (average).

Note: M – managers; P – professionals; WC – high-skill white-collar workers; SW – lower-level service workers; SE – small employers; CT – manual crafts and trades workers; PW – manual production workers. For point estimates, see Appendix D.

Source: Authors’ calculations from WVS/EVS.