1 *The Mainstream Right in Western Europe: Caught between the Silent Revolution and Silent Counter-Revolution*

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1. Introduction

Academic and media portrayals of the political situation in Western Europe point without fail to the dire situation in which the continent's centre-left finds itself. Social democratic parties almost everywhere – even those that previously dominated their country's political scene – are struggling to hold on to their old voters and finding it hard to attract new ones. As a result, they are far less likely than they used to be to win office, particularly at the national level. By way of illustration, the once powerful Labour Party in the Netherlands (PvdA) performed appallingly at the country's 2017 general election, getting just under 6 per cent of the vote. The situation in France is not much better. In the 2017 presidential elections the candidate of the French Socialist Party (PS) obtained 6 per cent of the vote, and the party's financial situation was so critical that it sold its headquarters on the chic Rue de Solférino in Paris. And to add one more example to the list, Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) won just 20 per cent of the vote at the 2017 general election, representing its worst electoral result in the post-war period thus far.

However, the political debate in Western Europe is not marked only by discussions of the decline of social democracy. The other topic receiving increasing public attention is the rise of populist radical right parties, particularly after the refugee crisis that garnered so many headlines in 2015 and 2016. Indeed, hardly a day goes by without the media across Europe making at least some mention of the actions and ideas of the leaders of these parties. Most countries have at

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least one reasonably well-established populist radical right party that normally wins between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of the vote (Mudde 2013). Moreover, these parties are not necessarily treated as pariahs. In fact, they have been in office in Austria, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland, and have provided regular and reliable parliamentary support to minority governments in Denmark – and all this in spite of the fact that they have not, as many expected them to, become somehow more moderate over time (see Akkerman 2015a; Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2017; Twist 2019).

One might have assumed that the corollary of both the increasing political relevance of the populist radical right and the electoral decline of social democracy would be the success of the mainstream right – in other words, the conservative, Christian democratic and (market) liberal parties that have sold themselves as strong supporters of capitalist economies and, certainly in the first two cases, of 'traditional' values. Yet in reality many of those parties are also in trouble electorally, even if the rate at which they run into trouble can vary considerably (see, e.g., Bale and Krouwel 2013). True, partly because that trouble has not generally been quite as serious as that faced by their centre-left counterparts and partly because they often have more coalition options, they seem – for the moment anyway – to be better able to hang on to office. But that should not blind us to the problems they face. As Jan-Werner Müller (2018) has recently suggested, mainstream right parties have become so pragmatic over the years that it is often unclear what, other than their desire to cling to power, animates them in the first place. Moreover, the electoral results of mainstream right parties are very uneven across Western Europe, and some of the once electorally strongest cases are facing tougher times today. To demonstrate this, we have collected data on the electoral results of all mainstream right parties in Western Europe in national elections from 1980 until 2019.[1] The following graph (Figure 1.1) presents the average per decade in percentages for each of the three party families of the mainstream right that we discuss below (Christian democrats, conservatives and liberals), as well as for the populist radical right. Looking at this graph, the picture is very clear: while the populist

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[1] At the end of the chapter we provide information about all the parties included in the analysis and their classification in the different party families. We include only those parties that have obtained at least 4 per cent of the vote in national elections.
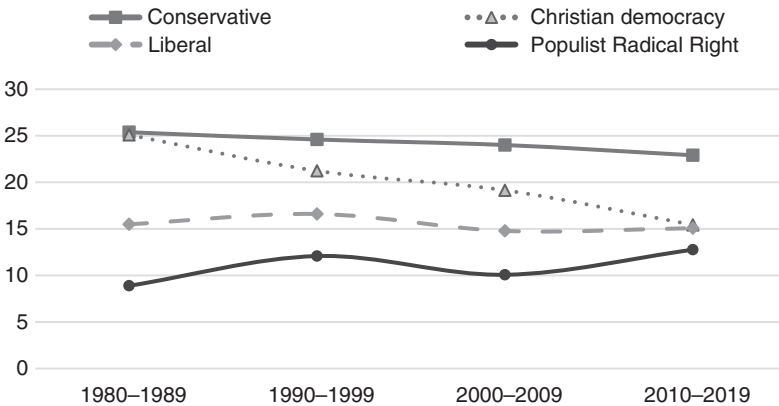
Figure 1.1 Electoral results in national elections of right-wing parties in Western Europe (average per decade in percentage)

radical right party family has been able to establish itself and expand its electoral appeal, the conservative and Christian democratic party families have experienced declining support. This leaves the liberals as the only mainstream right party family which seems to have maintained a degree of stability over time.

Although the focus of our book is on the mainstream right, it is also important to note the electoral situation of left-wing parties in Western Europe, the better to understand the situation in which mainstream right parties find themselves today. Accordingly, we present data on the electoral results of left-wing parties in Western Europe in national elections from 1980 until 2019.[2] Figure 1.2 gives the average per decade in percentages for each of the three main party families of the left that are normally identified in the academic literature on Western Europe: social democratic, green/ecologist and radical left parties. At least three issues stand out. First, the decline of the social democratic party family is a relatively recent phenomenon, albeit one that becomes acute in the last decade (2010–2019) and is probably related to disillusion with the so-called Third Way politics pursued by social democratic leaders such as Tony Blair in the United Kingdom and Gerhard

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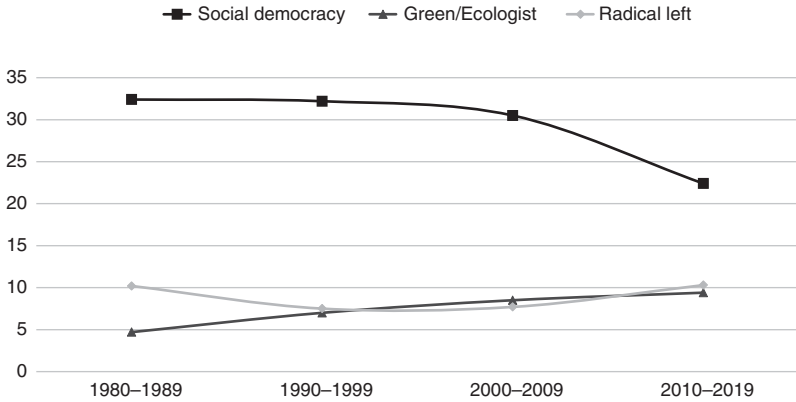
Figure 1.2 Electoral results in national elections of left-wing parties in Western Europe (average per decade in percentage)

Schröder in Germany. Second, the green/ecologist party family has almost doubled its electoral strength, but on average gathers a lower proportion of the vote than the populist radical right. Third, by comparing Figures 1.1 and 1.2 it becomes clear that both social democratic and Christian democratic parties are losing electoral ground in dramatic fashion. The decay of the former may be more abrupt, but both party families have suffered significant electoral losses since the 1980s.

One of the main ideas behind this book is that scholars have in recent years devoted so much attention to the decline of social democracy and the rise of the populist radical right that they have paid less attention than they should have done to the mainstream right – a range of parties which continue to play a part (in some places the major part) in the representative governments of contemporary Western Europe. Of course, there are single-case studies of the evolution of specific mainstream right parties such as the Conservatives in the United Kingdom (e.g., Bale 2010) or the Christian Democratic Party in Germany (e.g., Wiliarty 2010; Green and Turner 2014). However, there is a relative and noticeable lack of *comparative* research on the mainstream right in Western Europe.[3] Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, the last

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[3] Partial exceptions of this absence of comparative research on the mainstream right in Western Europe are Jensen (2014) on the right and the welfare state, and the special issue on the centre-right and immigration edited by Bale (2008), as well as some studies on the evolution of Christian democratic parties (e.g., Frey 2009; Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010; Wagner 2014; Invernizzi-Accetti 2020).

comparative collection on this subject was published in the late 1990s (Wilson 1998).

There are two main reasons why scholars may have (at least relatively speaking) ignored this topic. First, if it is the case that most political scientists feel more of an affinity with the centre-left and progressive causes, then it was always likely that they would devote more attention to the analysis of the parties with which they tend to identify (such as the social democrats) and the parties that they strongly reject (like the populist radical right) than to the situation of the mainstream right (conservative and Christian democratic parties). Second, as Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show, the decay in support experienced by Christian democrats and conservatives has been much more gradual than the one experienced by social democrats, while the liberal party family, by maintaining its position, seems even less newsworthy. As a result, mainstream right parties are often – in our view mistakenly – seen as both dependably dull and dependably stable. In fact, as we aim to show in this book, mainstream right parties are undergoing significant and, in our opinion, fascinating transformations, not least as they confront an ever more serious challenge from the populist radical right.

This relative lack of attention should be a cause for concern given how big a role the mainstream right has played and continues to play in governments throughout the continent. As such, its role in preserving the liberal order in a continent struggling with the changes brought about by the gradual erosion (and subsequent demand for re-imposition) of national borders is a vital one. Moreover, as Daniel Ziblatt (2017) has shown, the birth and endurance of democracy in Western Europe is directly related to the extent to which right-wing political parties were able to recast themselves and deal with the emergence of their more radical counterparts. Given that mainstream right parties '… represent wealthy establishments that can squelch the democratic aspirations of the poor and politically weak, it is especially vital that such parties accept their democratic responsibility' (Grzymala-Busse 2019: 41). One only has to look at the other side of the Atlantic, where Donald Trump's rise to the presidency, and the apparently unquestioning support given to him in Congress by his co-partisans, casts doubt on whether the Republican Party can be considered a mainstream right party anymore – something that has consequences for the current state and future of democracy in the United States (Liebermann et al. 2019; Roberts 2019a).

The central aim of this book, however, is to bring the mainstream right back into our analysis of contemporary Western European politics. In order to undertake this task properly it is also crucial, we will argue, to take into account the interaction between the mainstream right and the populist radical right – an interaction that, it should be noted, is sometimes more reciprocal, even symbiotic, than many imagine (Bale 2018). That said, our main focus is firmly on the former rather than the latter. This is partly in order to redress the imbalance in coverage already referred to, but partly, too, because analysing how mainstream right parties in different countries in Western Europe have been changing over time and adapting (or struggling to adapt) to the current context might contribute not just to us getting a clearer picture of the continent's politics but also to the efforts made by those parties to think things through. If the mainstream right continues, as some allege it has begun to, to hollow out ideologically and become little more than a pragmatic problem-solver, the agenda will be set by other political forces, meaning – presuming it survives electorally at all – that it will end up importing their ideas and policies rather than bringing to bear its own.

The rest of this introductory chapter is divided into three parts. We begin by trying to bring some conceptual clarity and offering working definitions of both the mainstream right and the far right in Western Europe. After this, we argue that mainstream right parties in Western Europe experience a tension between, on the one hand, adapting to segments of the electorate that express the liberal and progressive values of the so-called 'silent revolution' (Inglehart 1977, 1990) and, on the other hand, representing voters who sympathize with the arguably authoritarian and nativist ideas associated with the so-called 'silent counter-revolution' (Ignazi 1992, 2003) pursued by the populist radical right. As we will argue in this section, this tension presents mainstream right parties with four policy and political challenges in particular – namely, European integration, immigration, moral issues and welfare. Finally, we conclude by presenting a short summary of each of the contributions included in the book.

2. Concepts: The Mainstream Right and the Far Right

Contested concepts are hardly uncommon in the social sciences. Scholars often disagree about the best way to define key notions that

we employ to make sense of the political world. The distinction between 'left' and 'right' is itself an example. Although most scholars agree that the German Christian Democratic Party (CDU) is a mainstream right party and that the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) is a mainstream left party, they often debate the criteria one should employ in order to make this distinction (e.g., Jahn 2011, 2014; Franzmann 2015). Similar discussions arise when classifying (populist) radical right parties and (populist) radical left parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and We Can (*Podemos*) in Spain, respectively. Given this, it is incumbent upon us to offer some conceptual clarification.

We cannot pretend to have the final word on this complex and much-debated issue, but we nevertheless hope to present clear and concise definitions that can be used to undertake comparative research (Sartori 1970). Minimal concepts are characterized by the identification of a reduced set of attributes that need to be used to define said concept: they are based, if you like, on finding 'the lowest common denominator'. For instance, Sartori (1976) argues that a political party should be thought of as 'any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office'. Of course, one could argue that this definition is in some ways *too* minimal since it does not say anything about the organizational features of political parties. This is why Sartori claims that minimal definitions should be seen as a starting point in distinguishing phenomena (e.g., political parties from, let us say, social movements or interest groups), after which it is often necessary to go one step down the 'ladder of abstraction' in order to include additional criteria to identify subtypes of the phenomenon under analysis. For example, Panebianco's (1988) book on political parties deliberately distinguishes subtypes of political parties depending on their degree of institutionalization and links with other organizations.

When it comes to distinguishing between 'left' and 'right', it is common knowledge that the origins of this distinction can be traced back to the French Revolution (Laponce 1981), after which this spatial notion of politics rapidly took root all over Europe because of its direct connection with the struggle between the defence of the *ancien régime* and the push for democratization (Ziblatt 2017). Seen in this light, one can argue that those on the right 'are primarily invested in the

importance of hierarchical relationships or some more or less natural-
ized conception of inequality. They do not simply emphasize the par-
ticular and the potential importance of its preservation; they attribute
differential value to a particular set of human beings, and they empha-
size that certain social arrangements distributing power unequally are
unalterable' (Müller 2006: 363). However, this does not mean that the
right always and necessarily defends the status quo by all means,
because it usually recognizes that staying in power requires adaptation.

This notwithstanding, the left–right divide is perhaps best thought of
'as a permanent cleavage about equality, which is sufficiently open to
be redefined with time and allow shifting alliances' (Noël and Thérien
2008: 16) – an argument that recalls the work of Norberto Bobbio
(1996), whose succinct definition of the left–right divide we use as the
yardstick for our own work. According to Bobbio, 'left' and 'right'
refer to opposing political ideologies that are structured around the
idea of equality. Whereas the right conceives most inequalities as
natural and as difficult (and probably unwise) to eradicate, the left
considers most inequalities as socially constructed and therefore amen-
able to progressive governmental action. Thus, our minimal definition
of the right is a political ideology characterized by the belief that the
main inequalities within society are natural and largely outside the
purview of the state. One way of operationalizing this ideology is to
observe the extent to which political actors and parties promote state
involvement in the economy in order to counter inequality.
Nevertheless, as we will argue in more detail later on, it is also possible
to examine whether political forces posit the existence of natural
inequalities (the right) as opposed to socially constructed inequalities
(the left) when it comes to sociocultural issues such as gender, national
identity and morality.

Following Sartori's (1970) dictum, this minimal definition is useful
for distinguishing between 'left' and 'right'; but to differentiate sub-
types one has to look at additional criteria. In fact, the literature on the
right in Western Europe normally recognizes two important subtypes:
on the one hand, the mainstream right, and on the other hand, the far
right. At the same time, it is possible to distinguish specific party
families within each of these two subtypes. While the Christian demo-
crats, the conservatives and the liberals are normally seen as examples
of the mainstream right, the populist radical right and the extreme right
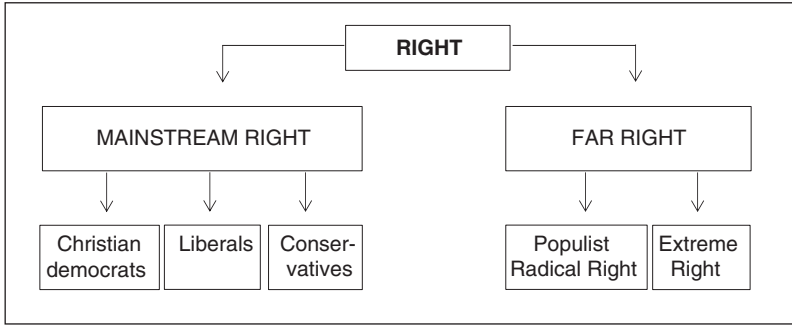are usually depicted as examples of the far right. In the following

Figure 1.3 Typology of right-wing parties in Western Europe

paragraphs we provide working definitions of each of these party families and outline their main characteristics.

As per Figure 1.3, the right – understood as a political ideology characterized by the belief that the main inequalities within society are natural and largely outside the purview of the state – can be divided into two subtypes: the mainstream right and the far right. Although this is a common distinction in the political science literature, it has not received much conceptual attention. One of the few exceptions is the recent study by Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn (2016: 6–7), who aptly note two complementary meanings of the term 'mainstream'. First of all, it alludes to parties that tend to adopt centrist and moderate programmatic positions. This means that when they defend a left or a right ideology, they normally do not advocate extreme solutions. Second, the term also refers to parties that are not only long-established, but also – and more importantly – loyal to the political system. This means that when they defend a left or a right ideology, they normally support existing norms and values as well as refrain from calling for an overthrow of the political system.

By contrast, far right (or left) parties are characterized by the opposite. These are parties that take radical positions and show little commitment to the formal and informal rules of the game that are intrinsic to (liberal) democratic regimes (Mudde 2007: 49). To paraphrase Linz (1978), far right parties behave as semi-loyal or disloyal political actors, while mainstream right parties behave as loyal political actors. In summary, our distinction between the mainstream right and the extreme right relies on two features that are commonly employed in

the academic literature: spatial attributes (moderate versus hard-core positions) and attitudes towards the (liberal) democratic system (acceptance versus rejection) (e.g., Ignazi 1992, 2003; Mudde 2007, 2013; Rydgren 2007).

Of course, nothing is immutable in the long term, and there is considerable debate in the academic literature about the extent to which mainstream right parties and far right parties move and morph over time. Recent work on the populist radical right shows that, in spite of some adaptation and modification of its programmatic profile (Rovny 2013; Eger and Valdez 2015), it continues to be located at the far end of the political spectrum and shows limited commitment to *liberal* democracy (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016). At the same time, there is research on the transformation of mainstream right parties in response to the populist radical right: depending on the countries included, parties studied, methods employed and time frame considered in the analysis, some scholars find that mainstream right parties have been radicalizing (e.g., van Spanje 2010; Han 2015; Wagner and Meyer 2017; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020), others do not detect huge changes (e.g., Alonso and da Fonseca 2012; Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug 2012; Mudde 2013; Akkerman 2015b), and some claim that there is significant variance across cases (e.g., Bale 2003; Odmalm and Bale 2015; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). Moreover, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of assuming that each and every shift in that respect is down to established parties reacting to new challen*gers* rather than new challen*ges*. After all, it is possible to argue that '[r]ather than the populist radical right, it has been the mainstream right-wing that has pushed West European politics to the right, in part in response to media and popular responses to relatively recent developments (such as multi-ethnic societies, the Maastricht Treaty and 9/11)' (Mudde 2013: 13). All these are clearly open questions and ones which our contributors will analyse in detail, along, of course, with the possibility that the challenged and the challengers, notwithstanding their electoral rivalry, may be able, in the wake of elections, to cooperate in order to form a tacit or explicit right-wing bloc in the legislature that will help keep more liberal, progressive and left-wing rivals out of office (Bale 2003).