



THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT

In light of significant demographic and societal shifts in Western Europe over recent decades, the political landscape has undergone a profound transformation. While analyses often centre on the decline of social democracy and the ascendance of the populist radical right, there has been a notable oversight regarding the status of the mainstream right. Yet, examining the mainstream right is imperative, given its historical role in bolstering liberal democracy in the region since World War II – a role no longer assured. While the empirical evidence presented here reveals that mainstream right parties across Western Europe generally uphold support for liberal democracy, there is a concerning trend emerging: an increasing willingness to align with the populist radical right, either directly or indirectly, to gain power. The formation of such coalitions poses significant challenges, as they risk normalising the rhetoric and policies of the populist radical right. It is incumbent upon social democratic forces not to remain passive observers of this trend but to actively confront it. This entails not only scrutinising the actions of mainstream right forces and condemning any attempts to undermine liberal democracy but also crafting new narratives and alliances. This policy brief summarises the main findings of a larger project on the transformation of the mainstream right in Western Europe and aims to demonstrate 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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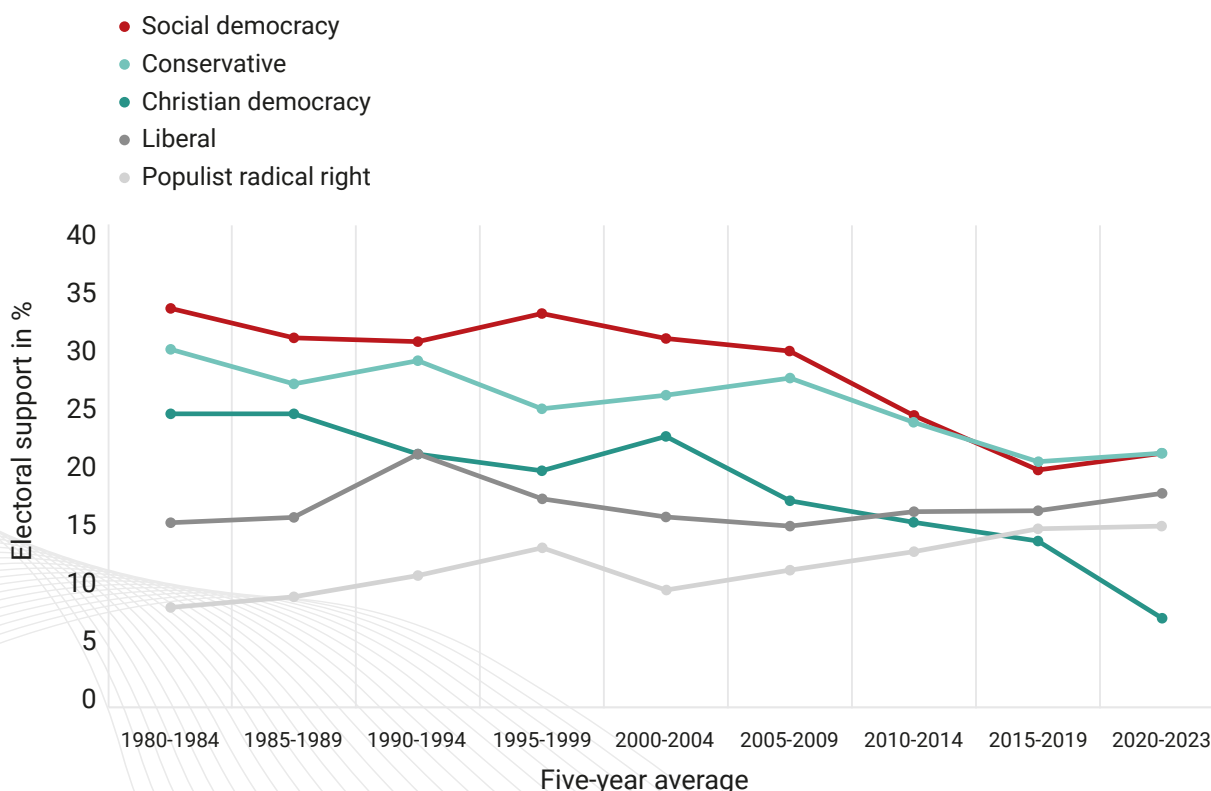
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1. Introduction

There is widespread consensus among academics and pundits that Western European politics has undergone significant transformations in recent decades. The prevailing narrative often highlights the electoral decline of social democracy and the gradual consolidation of the populist radical right. These trends are represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the average election results every five years in national elections across Western European countries since 1980. Figure 1 also encompasses political parties typically associated with the mainstream right, namely, conservatives, Christian democrats and liberals. A comprehensive analysis incorporating these parties provides a more nuanced understanding of the Western European political landscape, revealing that the mainstream right is facing challenges in maintaining its competitive electoral standing. This struggle is particularly pronounced within Christian democracy.

Understanding that mainstream right-wing forces have traditionally been pivotal in solidifying liberal democracy in Western Europe, their electoral decline and programmatic transformation carries significant political implications. As demonstrated by the current landscape in the USA, the shift of the mainstream right towards resembling a surrogate version of the populist radical right poses a serious threat to the liberal democratic framework. Hence, it is crucial to assess the degree to which the mainstream right in Western Europe is radicalising its policy stances, and whether it remains loyal in its support for the liberal democratic system. This policy brief summarises why the situation of the mainstream right in Western Europe should concern progressive forces and proposes ideas for how social democracy should face this challenge.

Figure 1: Electoral results in national elections for social democracy and right-wing parties in Western Europe since 1980.



2. The threat of normalising the populist radical right

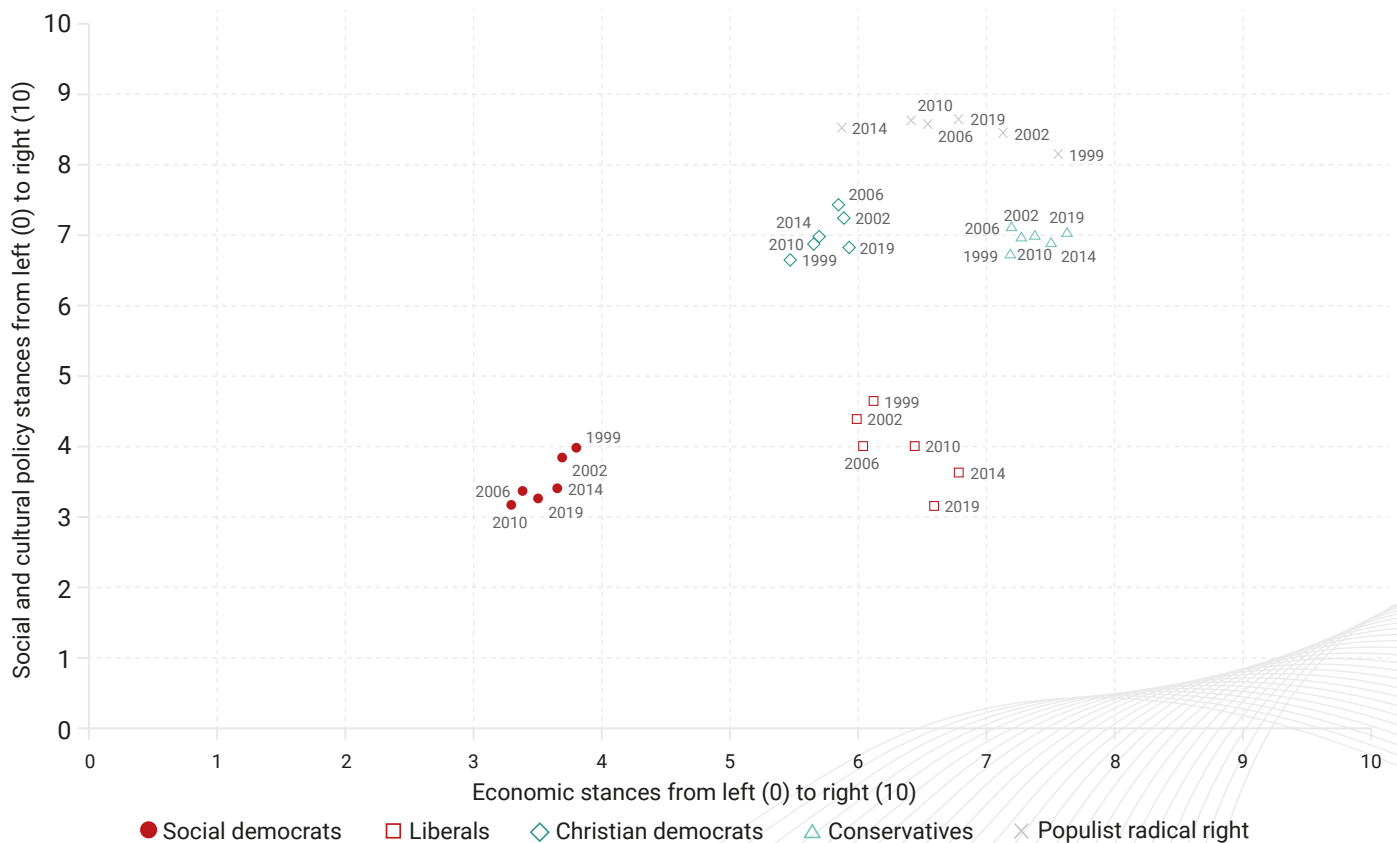
To address this issue, we use empirical evidence from expert surveys on the evolution of ideological stances on economic and social/cultural matters for social democrats, the populist radical right, and the three forces within the mainstream right (conservatives, Christian democrats and liberals) from 1999 to 2019.¹ This analysis is depicted in Figure 2, revealing four notable trends.

1. Each party family tends to maintain remarkably stable political positions over time. For instance, social democratic forces show almost no changes over time and continuously support progressive positions both in economic terms and in social/cultural terms.
2. Despite the populist radical right's increasing electoral support, there are no indications of

programmatic moderation within this party family. This is a worrying sign, as comparative evidence reveals that the ideas and policies advocated by the populist radical right are at odds with the liberal democratic regime.

3. The scores for conservatives and Christian democrats closely align with those of the populist radical right, suggesting the feasibility of potential coalitions between them. Not by chance, such governmental alliances have gained popularity across Western Europe in recent years. Although the evidence presented here does not suggest that conservatives and Christian democrats are adopting more radical positions, they are increasingly relying on indirect or direct support from the populist radical right to form governments, and this can certainly pave the way for the normalisation of the ideas defended by the latter.

Figure 2. Party positions, ideological stance on economic and social/cultural issues.



4. The liberal party family occupies a distinctive position, advocating for conservative economic policies while simultaneously embracing progressive stances on social/cultural issues. Therefore, liberal parties have, at least in theory, some leeway when it comes to building coalitions: while they can rely on the mainstream right to support more market and less state, they can count on social democracy and other left-wing actors to promote progressive policies on social/cultural issues.

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 the region. Consequently, policymakers and scholars must remain vigilant in monitoring the extent to which mainstream right forces demonstrate a commitment to the principles of liberal democracy. Unfortunately, this commitment can no longer be taken for granted. 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, 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, something that not only affects the rights of historically marginalised groups but also key institutions, such as constitutional courts, regulatory agencies and supranational bodies that bolster multilateralism.

Seen in this light, the success of the populist radical right hinges not only on its electoral performance, but largely on its ability to reshape both political discourse and practices. 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

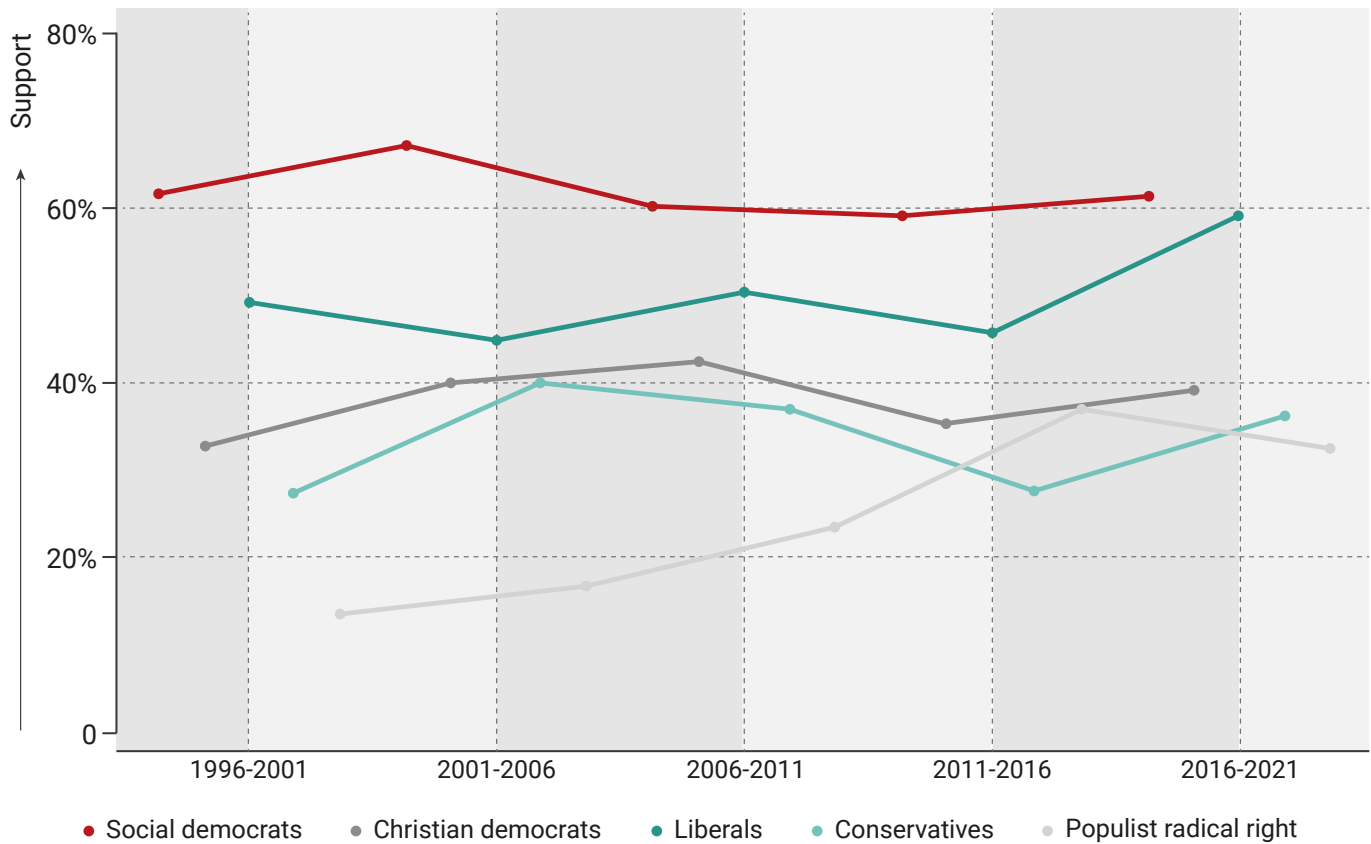
the gradual social acceptance of far right ideas and behaviours. Furthermore, this normalisation process may have enduring repercussions on public attitudes towards the populist radical right. As its proposals become increasingly normalised, there is a greater likelihood of individuals shifting their allegiance from the mainstream right to the far right. This phenomenon underscores the importance of recognising the broader societal implications of the collaboration between the mainstream right and the populist radical right.

3. Dislike of the populist radical right despite growing electoral support

To complement the picture, we think that it is also relevant to present public opinion data to provide a sense of how citizens have been changing their evaluation of the different political parties that compete in the electoral arena in Western Europe. Based on comparative evidence, we show in Figures 3 and 4 the levels of support for and rejection of conservatives, Christian democrats, liberals, the populist radical right and social democracy.² This approach has the advantage of providing information about how many people have both positive and negative views towards different party families. In effect, as we discuss below, very different levels of public favourability towards the portrayed party families suggest different ways to broaden electoral appeal.

An important takeaway from Figure 3 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 1), this means there is considerable untapped potential for these parties. In other words, although the number of people who 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. What equally stands out from Figure 3 is the stability

Figure 3. Support for different party families across Western Europe.



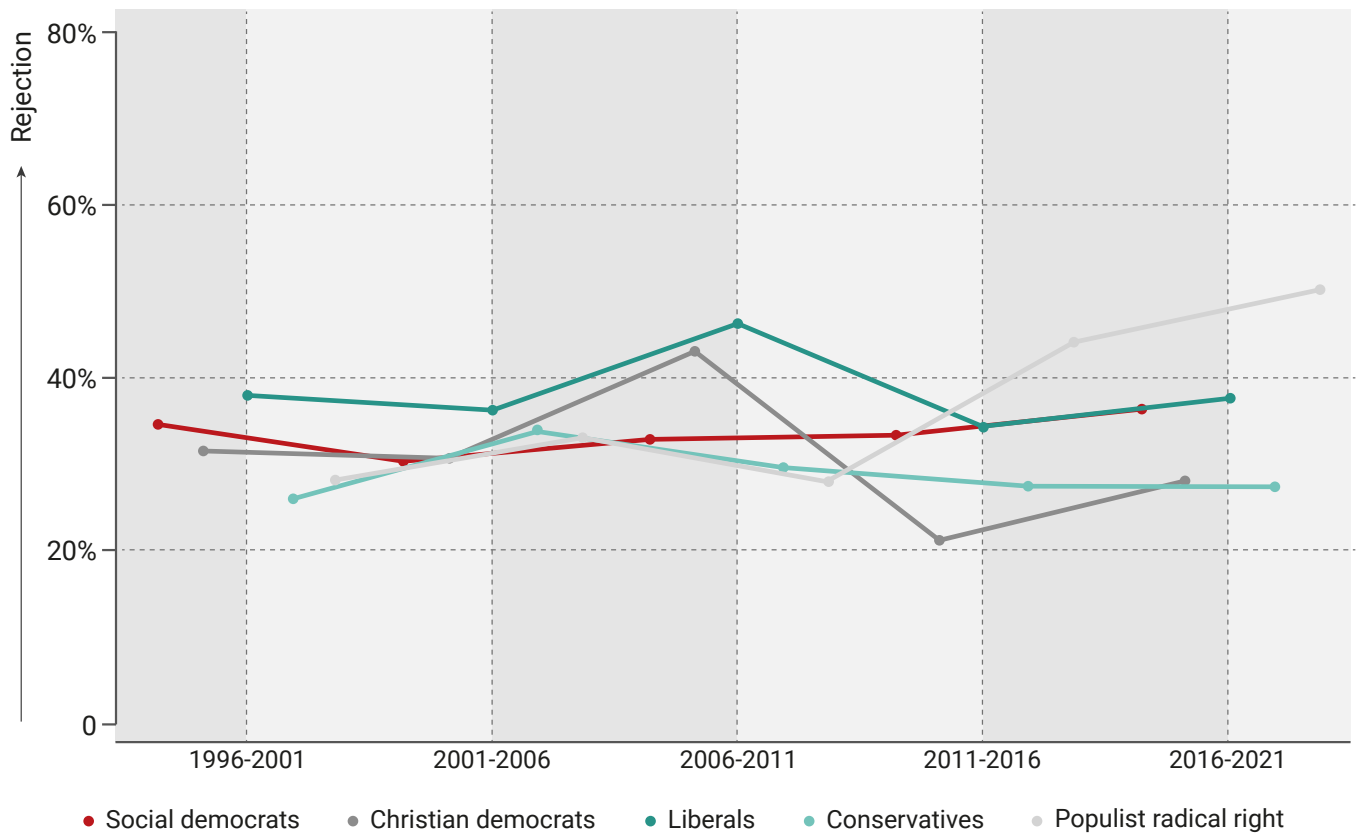
in the level of support for different party families. Even though most party families experience relatively minor fluctuations, this might very well be attributed to the electoral cycles of each country. As an exception, we observe a relatively linear increase in support for populist radical right parties, doubling from about 15% to more than 30% in about two decades. This is indicative of the growing electoral success and normalisation of populist radical right parties.

And what about the other side of the coin? Figure 4 shows the levels of rejection of the same five party families across Western Europe. Whereas the overarching observation regarding support for different political parties is one of stability, Figure 4 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. Moreover, we observe a 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. This shows that, even with the success and normalisation of this party family, the number of people who reject the populist radical right still systematically increases to levels that outweigh those of any other party family today.

By taking both Figures 3 and 4 into account, it becomes clear that, even though the populist radical right is becoming more attractive to voters across Western Europe, there is also an increasing number of people who reject this party family. 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

Figure 4. Rejection of different party families in Western Europe.



genuine polarisation of the electorate when it comes to citizens' emotional affinity toward the populist radical right.

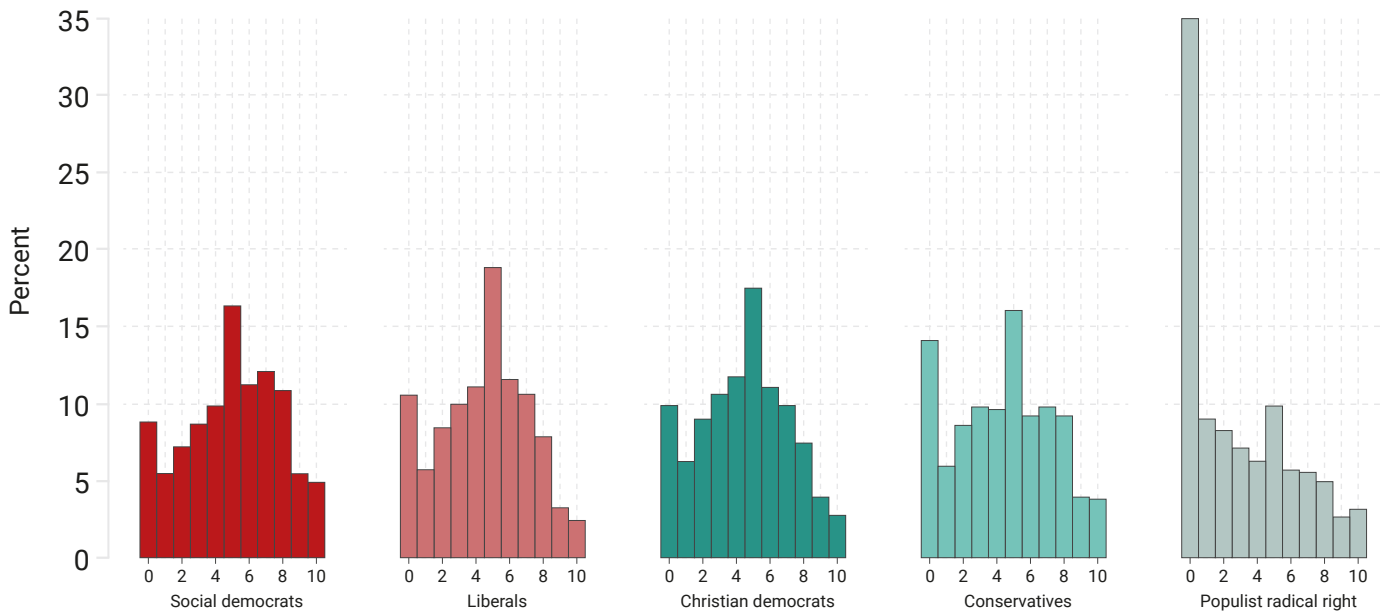
To further substantiate this point, Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of our 0-10 likeability scale for each party family for the entire period under consideration and across Western Europe. The results in Figure 5 support the populist radical right having a very polarising profile: on average, approximately 35% of the electorate shows the highest possible score (0) of absolute dislike towards the populist radical right. By contrast, on average, fewer than 10% of the electorate gives the maximum score (0) of absolute dislike to the social democratic party family, representing the lowest value of the five party families under consideration. This is in line with previous research,³ which shows that such a strong rejection of the populist radical right is directly linked to people's support of liberal democracy and progressive values. Additionally, this observation

substantiates a clear electoral ceiling for this party family in Western Europe.

4. The way ahead for social democracy

An important lesson one can draw from the different pieces of evidence presented in this policy brief 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 proportion of the electorate across Western Europe strongly supports both democracy itself and the liberal democratic regime, 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

Figure 5. Dislike-like (0-10) scale for different party families in Western Europe (average between 1996 and 2021).



a need to confront those who oppose it, overcoming collective-action problems is vital to build a broad front. To achieve this, it is not sufficient to merely defend progressive values. It is essential to move beyond nostalgic rhetoric and articulate forward-thinking ideas about constructing a better political order for the future.

In fact, the success of the far right, either independently or in alliance with the mainstream right, can create conditions that are 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 is 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. Social democracy must prioritise a re-evaluation 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 marginalized groups, which have gained increasing influence in recent decades.

While media consistently highlights the formidable electoral standing of the populist radical right across Europe, this narrative often overlooks the evidence presented here that an increasing number of individuals oppose this political force. Simultaneously, ongoing discussions about the challenging situation of social democracy fail to recognize 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 is 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. Take, for instance, the shortage of affordable housing across most European countries. This is a problem that affects large sections of the population, and social democrats should try to own this issue by

developing bold proposals. The same is true when it comes to thinking about policies to combat climate change in a way that is fair and leaves no one behind.

Another relevant implication arising from the analysis presented here 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 present 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 been 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. 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. At the same time, most citizens in Western Europe are in favour of the welfare state and, therefore, social democracy should continue to defend its existence, expansion and improvement. Take, for instance, the whole debate about shortened working weeks; this should be a policy proposal that social democracy should try to own and push for its implementation in a gradual and responsible manner.

Endnotes

1 We employ six waves (1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019) of the Chapel Hill expert surveys for Western Europe.

2 We rely on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and use the average numbers for national surveys conducted between 1996 and 2021, focusing on a question that prompts respondents to rate parties on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates strong dislike and 10 indicates strong like. We add values 6 to 10 to obtain the support for a political party, and we add values 0 to 4 to get the rejection of 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.

3 See, for example: C. Meléndez and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2021): “Negative Partisanship Towards the Populist Radical Right and Democratic Resilience in Western Europe”, *Democratization* 28(5): 949-969; C. Wegscheider, C. Rovira Kaltwasser and Steven M. Van Hauwaert (2023): “How Citizens’ Conceptions of Democracy relate to Positive and Negative Partisanship towards Populist Parties”, *West European Politics* 46(7): 1235-1263.

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