

Ideological Polarization and Far-Right Parties in Europe

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1 Introduction

The ideological divisions within European party systems have undergone exceptional change over the past several decades. In the 1980s, Green and New Left parties injected the new issues of environmental protection, women's rights, and cultural diversity into the political debate. These demands forced established social democratic and conservative parties to respond, often with mixed strategies and mixed success. In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to produce a new democratic consensus as communist and Eurocommunist parties faded or transformed their political positions. This was the decade of the Third Way in Britain and the *Neue Mitte* in Germany, as the major parties often converged on neo-liberal economic programs. Party convergence on these policies fostered discontent by those left behind by globalization, and the 2008 recession reinforced these economic fears (T. Hellwig 2016; Vowles and Xezonakis 2016).

The 2015 refugee crisis stimulated on-going cultural tensions over national identity, immigration policy, and social order. Radical-right parties became vocal advocates of conservative positions on a range of cultural issues (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; M. Golder 2016). Responding to changes in public opinion, the list of parties competing in contemporary elections and their political positions often differ dramatically from the party systems of the 1980s and before.

In the context of this book's examination of radical-right parties in Germany and other democratic party systems, this essay provides a broad European context to these discussions. First, we describe the basic framework of party competition over recent decades. The traditional economic cleavage that initially structured many of these systems is still important, and economic issues continue to define voters' interests and needs. In addition, a cultural cleavage has emerged that consists of new issue concerns and new party representatives. This produces a multidimensional framework that is essential to understand the nature of political competition today.

Second, we locate parties from fourteen West European democracies in this two-dimensional space using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) from 2006 until 2019.¹ A group of scholars

¹ See appendix at the end of our book chapter for a detailed measurement description.

linked to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has systematically polled party experts across Europe to collect data on party issue positions and other party characteristics. Research on the Left-Right scale shows that the CHES estimates of party positions are very strongly related to party positions derived from party elites and citizens' locations of parties from national election surveys (Dalton and McAllister 2015). We use CHES as a valuable tool for tracking party positions over time.

Third, we describe the national levels of party polarization on these two dimensions, and changes over time. There is a widespread sense that partisan politics has become more polarized in many contemporary democracies. However, there are also debates on whether convergence on one set of issues has been counterbalanced by heightened polarization on other issues. The CHES data enable us to track economic and cultural polarization over the 2006 - 2019 timespan.

Combining multiple countries and multiple time points, our analyses show that the two dimensions of cleavage – economic and cultural issues – provide a robust framework for describing contemporary party positions. Moreover, the structure of this framework is relatively stable over the 2006 - 2019 time period. By locating parties in this space, we can track the overall political location of European far-right parties over time. Unsurprisingly, these analyses show that far-right parties almost uniformly represent strong conservative views on cultural issues. But with increasing clarity over time, far-right parties are generally locating themselves near the center on the economic cleavage. This centrist position allows them to attract economically-oriented voters who feel unrepresented by the established parties on cultural issues, such as the working-class members who vote for the far-right.

In short, each nation looks to its own unique circumstances to explain partisan change in their nation. But larger social forces are at work that transcend national boundaries. Social modernization and globalization have produced a realignment in citizen policy positions and a corresponding realignment in party choices. These forces are affecting party systems in Germany, Europe, and beyond.

2 A Multidimensional Political Space

The most common approach to describing party alignments begins with a Downsian model of voters and political parties arrayed along a Left-Right dimension. This framework is widely used in the electoral behavior literature to predict voting choice and to link a voter's self-location on the Left-Right dimension to the ideological supply of political parties (A. Downs 1957; R. Dalton et al. 2011; I. Budge et al. 2012; G. B. Powell 2019). Ronald Inglehart, for example, described the Left-Right dimension as a sort of super-issue that summarizes the "major conflicts that are present in the political system" (R. Inglehart 1990, p. 273). Researchers argue that the Left-Right scale is valuable because of its inclusiveness, even if the specific definitions of Left and Right vary across individuals and even nations. Left-Right terminology is used as a common shorthand for describing citizens' issue positions, party positions, or election results.

However, research increasingly describes contemporary party systems as structured within a policy space of two (or more) dimensions (H. Kitschelt 1994; Benoit and Laver 2006; H. Kriesi et al. 2008; R. Bakker et al. 2012; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012; J. Thomassen 2012; Häuserman and Kriesi 2015; R. Dalton 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; R. Bakker et al. 2020). The traditional economic cleavage was a formative force in the creation of many contemporary party systems and remains an important basis for differentiating parties (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Economic issues include debates about the state's appropriate role in managing the economy, taxation levels, the provision of basic social welfare benefits, and topics related to income inequality. The specific issues of economic competition may vary from election to election reflecting immediate conditions – tax policy, social services, unemployment benefits, or other economic issues –, but they are connected to an underlying economic cleavage. On the one side are parties and voters who advocate an activist state that promotes the social welfare of the citizenry, regulates the economy, and supports social equality. On the other side are those who favor a limited role for the government, a relatively unfettered market economy, and individualism. Both perspectives reflect legitimate political positions in democratic societies.²

² Despite the continuing relevance of the economic cleavage, the nature of the cleavage has changed in significant ways. The shifting composition of the labor force has produced new class alignments, and many parties have shifted their policy positions accordingly (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Evans and Tilley 2017; R. Dalton 2018).

The cultural cleavage is now the major second dimension of party competition. Part of its origins can be traced to the traditional religious divisions within European societies (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). But as the forces of social modernization have reshaped European societies over the past decades, this has stimulated new progressive political views and a post-material political agenda (R. Inglehart 1990; 2018). Environmental quality, gender equality, a broader sense of social freedom became forces for social change. These liberal trends evoked reactions by those who favor the status quo or question some of the changes occurring around them (J. Gest 2012; Evans and Tilley 2017; R. Dalton 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Radical-right or populist-right parties emerged as representatives of these views. New issues such as same-sex marriage or accommodating diverse immigrant communities were integrated into the cultural cleavage. Historically, cultural conservatism has been tied to religious attachments, but this cultural backlash is broader than just religious topics. Different issues come together as a rebuke of the changes wrought by social modernization, and these views become crystallized and mobilized by political parties.

As a consequence of these trends, there is a growing recognition that political competition in contemporary party systems can no longer be adequately described as a unidimensional economic competition between Left and Right. Instead, in most party systems there is a (at least) two-dimensional framework of party competition defined by the economic and cultural cleavages.³ This realignment has occurred on both the citizen and elite levels, creating a new multidimensional framework for political choice. Many voters remain primarily concerned with traditional economic issues, and a cleavage defined by social democrats/reformed communists on the Left, to conservatives and liberals on the right. In Germany, this cleavage would primarily be framed by the Die Linke and SPD versus the CDU/CSU and FDP. At the same time, the new cultural cleavage pits the Green party at one pole versus the AfD. In short, contemporary party competition has gone beyond the Left-Right framework to a pattern of political competition and choice based on multiple dimensions.

³ Hooghe and Marks (2018) make a strong case that European integration forms a significant third dimension, especially in European Parliament elections.

The literature on radical right parties frequently discusses the multi-dimensionality of political issues. Kitschelt and McGann (1996) argued that under some conditions the combination of culturally right and economically left positions is the winning formula for radical right parties. Since then, the programmatic position of the radical right has changed substantially. After the millennium, the radical right has adapted more economically centrist positions (de Lange 2007). Some parties even moved to the economic left, in support of protectionism. The most prominent example is the Rassemblement National (formerly Front National) in France (G. Ivaldi 2015). The combination of economically left positions with culturally conservative stances seems especially appealing for the non-unionized working class, a core electorate of the radical right. While economic positions of the radical right are still subject to debate, more recent evidence shows that the economic position appears irrelevant (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; E. Ivarsflaten 2005; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In fact, there is evidence that the radical right tends to avoid a clear placement on the economic dimension altogether, by using a strategy of issue blurring (Rovny and Polk 2020).

Nonetheless, the political polarization in a two-dimensional space is essential for our understanding of the radical right's success. In Finland, for example, the radical right True Finns leveraged upon a supply gap of culturally right and economically left parties and nearly quintupled their electoral support from 2007 in 2011 (Hillen and Steiner 2020). Thus, the signs of partisan change are increasingly evident across Europe.

3 Identifying the European Political Space

Our goal is to describe the two cleavage dimensions now structuring contemporary European party systems, track their evolution over the past two decades, and place the German party system in a broader comparative context.

Several methods are frequently used to estimate party positions. The Comparative Manifesto Project codes the content of party manifestos; other studies use party elites or voter perceptions to locate party positions. Each has some benefits and limitations (G. Marks et al. 2007; Dinas and

Gemenis 2010; Dalton and McAllister 2015). Because of our research interests, we use the Chapell Hill Expert Surveys (CHES). The CHES project assembles a panel of academic experts on political parties in each nation (R. Bakker et al. 2012; J. Polk et al. 2017).⁴ The panel members then score the parties on a variety of policy measures. Starting with the 2006 survey, we examine the same set of issues that tap important economic and cultural interests. The salience of specific issues might change over time, but we focus on broad issue dimensions rather than single issues. And the dimensional analyses determine whether the issue structure is broadly comparable over time. The CHES project also covers a more comprehensive list of parties in each nation than normally available from surveys of party elites or the mass public.⁵ We compare party positions for 14 West European party systems.⁶

The timespan of the CHES data (2006, 2010, 2014, 2019) enables us to track party positions over one of the most turbulent political periods in recent European history. The 2006 baseline comes after most nations had adjusted to the 2001 financial downturn and the realignment of politics after the demise of the Soviet Union. By the next wave in 2010, the 2008 financial crisis had shaken the foundations of many European economies and voters, with ongoing conflict over EU policies and government fiscal problems. By 2014, the rise of populist parties on the left and right were challenging the political status quo. Many governing parties at the onset of the financial crisis had been turned out of office, and many had faced large-scale defeats. Then in 2015, the refugee crisis accelerated conflict over immigration and related cultural issues. Over the decade of the 2010s, party polarization seemed to increase in both economic and cultural terms, and new populist parties

⁴ Using the 2014 CHES as an example, the number of experts per country ranged from 6 to 22, with an average of 10.5 expert ratings per party. For further information on the survey see <https://www.chesdata.eu/>. We appreciate the principal investigators' sharing of these data with the international research community, especially the assistance of Ryan and Winifred Bakker

⁵ There is a potential bias of academic expert surveys, especially involving radical-right parties. Academics who are predominately liberal may tend to see these parties as more extreme than appears to the average voter or the parties' actual policies. There also might be a bias to less extreme views of liberal parties. However, by comparing the same measures over time may lessen this problem by making comparative judgements of how radical-right parties have changed.

⁶ Some of these patterns are applicable to the post-communist democracies of Eastern Europe, but these nations are still institutionalizing their party systems and face other issues that are not well-represented in the CHES surveys, such as foreign direct investment, establishing democratic institutions, legal reforms, etc. (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). We therefore decided to focus on only established West European democracies.

formed on both the liberal and conservative ends of the political spectrum.⁷ Thus, this data series provides a valuable tool to track these potential changes.

Since 2006 CHES has consistently asked a set of eight issue questions that are the basis of our analysis. The chapter appendix provides the alternatives on each of these scales. Three items deal with basic economic issues: taxes versus social spending, deregulation of the economy, and redistribution of wealth. Five other issues tap various aspects of the cultural cleavage: civil liberties versus law and order, tolerance for lifestyle choices, adherence to religious principles, support for immigration, and support for multiculturalism.

The first empirical step verifies that these eight issues tap two distinct issue dimensions. Table 1 presents the results of a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) for the pooled set of 14 nations at each CHES timepoint.⁸ The left half of the table displays the loadings on the cultural dimension in each year, which is always the first PCA dimension. All five cultural issues have very strong loadings on this dimension (>.80). Some issues show a modest change in their loadings over time. In 2014, the loadings for the two immigration issues peaked as these issues became more salient, and became more distinct from the economic dimension. But the cultural coefficients for these two issues decreased in 2019. In overall terms, the general stability of the overall cultural dimensions is apparent in these results.

Table 1 The Ideological Dimensions of West European Party Systems, 2006 - 2019

Issue	Cultural Dimension				Economic Dimension			
	2006	2010	2014	2019	2006	2010	2014	2019
Social spending versus taxes	.35	.41	.34	.38	.91	.90	.92	.91

⁷ There is a terminological issue in how to describe the end points of the economic and cultural issue dimensions. The Left/Right labels (“Links/Rechts”) are typically used for the economic dimension, or in some nations this is labeled “liberal/conservative”. Researchers describe the ends of the cultural dimension with varying terms including liberal/conservative. To standardize our terminology, we use the same liberal/conservative terms for the ends of both issue dimensions, without partisan, theoretical, or philosophical meaning beyond these issue dimensions (Dalton 2018).

⁸ This is essentially the EU15 except for Luxembourg that was not included in all the CHES surveys.

Deregulate markets	.22	.24	.19	.29	.95	.95	.96	.94
Redistribute wealth	.33	.36	.39	.35	.91	.92	.90	.92
Civil liberties vs fighting crime	.86	.86	.85	.86	.41	.41	.43	.41
Social lifestyles (e.g. homosexuality)	.94	.94	.93	.93	.12	.22	.18	.21
Religious principles in politics	.84	.82	.80	.83	.25	.24	.33	.26
Restrict immigration	.82	.85	.90	.83	.41	.43	.31	.46
Integrate immigrants & asylum seekers	.86	.88	.89	.85	.36	.36	.25	.42
Eigenvalue	4.03	4.14	4.16	4.06	3.10	3.13	2.92	3.23
Variance percent	50.13	51.7	52.0	50.7	38.8	39.2	36.4	40.4

Source: CHES surveys; (2006=112 parties; 2010=125; 2014=134; 2019=127)

Note: table entries are principal components analysis loadings, varimax rotation.

The right half of the table shows the comparable results for the three economic issues. The economic issues are even more strongly linked to the underlying dimension (>.90 loadings). However, there is some issue crossover between the two dimensions. For example, the issues of social spending and redistribution of wealth also have modest loadings on the cultural dimension. Similarly, the cultural issues of civil liberties and restricting immigration have substantial loadings on the economic dimension. This is evidence that liberal/conservative party positions across both dimensions tend to overlap.⁹ The loadings, at least the relative weights, are practically stable over time, with the possible exception of immigration-related issues in 2014.

Thus, the measures available through CHES identify two distinct issue dimensions in contemporary West European party systems. As Kitschelt (1994) initially described, there is a general pattern of economically left/libertarian parties versus economically right/authoritarian parties across these democracies. For ideological and strategic reasons, many parties have consistent liberal/conservative positions on both dimensions. But this is not a perfect match and there are parties (and

⁹ Supporting this conclusion, oblimin rotations of the principal components found a more distinct definition of the two issue dimensions and a relatively strong correlation between both dimension (.55 to .61).

voters) who do not fit this bi-polar model. Hence the need to describe contemporary politics in multidimensional terms.

4 Placing Parties in the Political Space

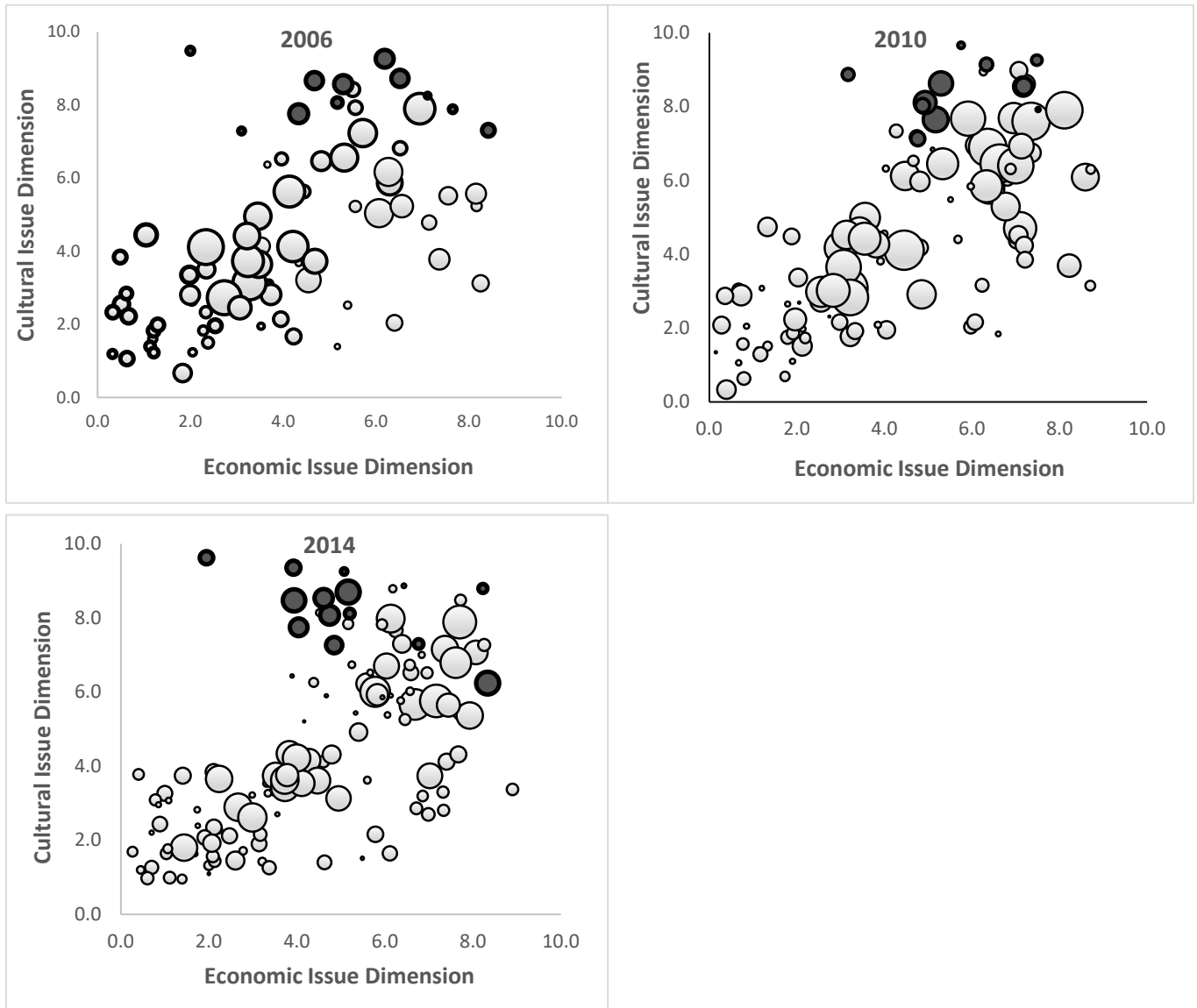
Where are political parties located in the two-dimensional space defined by the economic and cultural issue dimensions, and have party positions changed significantly over time? At each time point, we constructed an additive index of the five cultural issues and an index of the three economic issues in the CHES data. Simple additive indices have two advantages.¹⁰ First, the indices do not constrain the relationship between both dimensions as orthogonal PCA scores would. Second, the indices produce a metric to track the absolute change in party positions, which would not be possible using standardized PCA scores. The CHES data also coded party family for each party primarily based on the Hix and Lord (1997) classifications that identify radical-right parties in our analyses.

Figure 1 shows the positions of all the parties in the two-dimensional space for fourteen nations across the first three CHES time points (2006 - 2014). The horizontal dimension locates parties by their economic positions; the vertical dimension locates the parties on the cultural index. The size of each bubble is proportionate to the party's vote share in the prior national election. Several broad patterns are apparent in these four party spaces. Parties' liberal/conservative positions tend to overlap between the two dimensions. This relationship has been fairly constant across the CHES waves.¹¹ The number of parties does increase over time. The 2006 CHES included 112 parties with sufficient data to place them in this space; this grew to 127 parties by 2019. Even more significant, the new political parties often appear at the edges of the political space. Between 2006 and 2014 the number of radical-right parties increased from 11 to 14; radical-left parties (typically reformed communists) grew from 16 to 20, and Green parties increased from 11 to 14.

¹⁰ The original scales are scored 0 - 10. We added the relevant issues and divided by the number of issues, so both indices also have a 0 - 10 range.

¹¹ The Pearson's r correlations are based on parties weighted by their vote total in the previous election to reflect the overall balance in the party system (2006 = .70, 2010 = .71, 2014 = .61, 2019 = .73).

Figure 1 Parties and the Political Space in West Europe, 2006 - 2014



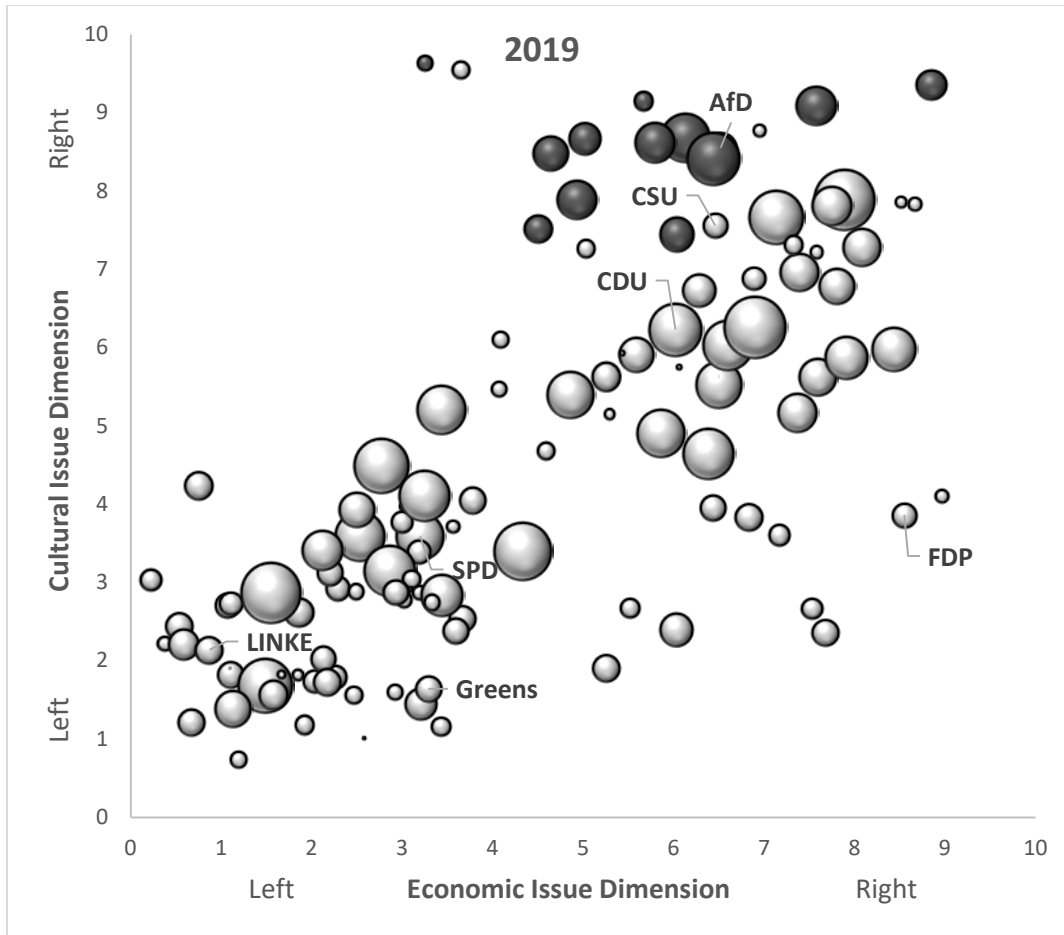
Source: Issue indices from CHES, 2006 - 2014.

Note: Figure entries are each party's location of the economic issue dimension (horizontal axis) and on the cultural issue dimension (vertical axis). The size of each bubble is proportional to the party's vote share. The darker bubbles are far-right parties.

To highlight the evolution of radical-right parties, they are marked with darker bubbles in the figure. In 2006, the radical-right parties averaged a position slightly right of center on the economic dimension (mean = 5.49) and near the extreme conservative pole of the cultural dimension (mean = 8.26). The center of gravity for these parties shifts slightly over time (Rovny and Polk 2020).

Figure 2 presents results from the 2019 CHES. The German parties are labeled in the figure. By 2019, the average position of radical-right parties across Europe is still near the center of the economic dimension (mean = 5.88) and slightly more extreme on the cultural dimension (mean = 8.56). This position allows radical-right parties to emphasize their conservative cultural views, without alienating potential supporters on the economic left or right because of the parties' centrist position on this issue. They can appeal to working-class voters who are concerned about immigration or changing gender norms, as well as middle-class voters who are concerned about liberal policies on crime or the erosion of religious values. This is a common pattern across the West European democracies.

Figure 2 Parties and the Political Space in West Europe, 2019



Source: Issue indices from CHES, 2019.

Note: Figure entries are each party's location of the economic issue dimension (horizontal axis) and on the cultural issue dimension (vertical axis). The size of each bubble is proportional to the party's vote share. The darker bubbles are far-right parties. The German parties are labeled in the figure.

The new German radical right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), made its first appearance in 2013 and mostly focused on the Euro issue. However, the party and their electorate transformed into a typical example of the radical right in Western Europe. In the 2017 general elections, immigration attitudes were the most important motivation to vote for the AfD, while economic positions were not systematically linked to AfD support (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The 2019 CHES gave the AfD a score of 6.52 on the 0 - 10 economic dimension and a more extreme 8.55 score on

the cultural dimension. This sets it apart nation-wide from other German parties in its appeal to cultural conservatives who once may have voted for the CDU or CSU.¹²

In summary, the heterogenic set of radical right parties in Western Europe initially held diverse positions on economic and cultural matters. Some began as economically and culturally conservative, such as the PVV in the Netherlands or UKIP in Britain. Others were moderates that became more extreme over time. Gradually, however, most of these parties have congregated at a distinct position in the European political space as economic moderates and cultural conservatives. This provides a common identity and a political philosophy separate from other party families.

And since some voters share this mix of economic/cultural positions, democratic elections allow these parties to draw upon this electoral base. For example, the UKIP/BREXIT parties in England drew support from economically moderate working-class and middle-class voters who were attracted by the parties' clear cultural conservatism (Evans and Tilley 2017). In the 2016 U.S. elections, Trump also pursued distinctly conservative cultural positions while advocating policies that put him near the center of the economic dimension (J. Sides et al. 2019; R. Dalton 2018, ch. 8). And as Merkel moved the CDU toward the center on cultural issues, this opened the same potential in the German party system.¹³ As right-center parties have generally moderated their position on cultural issues across Europe, this creates a consistency seeking electoral representation (J. Gest 2017; R. Dalton 2018).

¹² The CHES scores for the German parties in 2019:

<u>Party</u>	<u>Culture</u>	<u>Economic</u>
CDU	6.23	6.02
SPD	3.59	3.20
FDP	3.86	8.55
GRUNEN	1.64	3.29
LINKE	2.14	0.87
CSU	7.56	6.46
AfD	8.55	6.52

¹³ The CDU's perceived cultural position changed from a 7.23 score in 2006 to 6.23 in 2019.

5 The Pattern of Party System Polarization

Aggregate patterns for 14 party systems show the broad outlines of party competition in West European democracies. But each election takes place in a single nation with a unique set of political parties. The supply of issue options by parties is as important in voting choice, or perhaps more important, than the distribution of voters along both issue dimensions. If parties offer little choice on cultural issues, then the cultural positions of voters typically would have little impact on voting decisions and hence policy outcomes. Moreover, this book is a testament to the growing evidence that European societies and their publics are becoming more polarized over time. Therefore, we want to track the polarization levels party systems in each nation on both issue dimensions.

The research literature is divided on how party systems may respond to the social and political forces that have buffeted them over the past several decades. On the economic dimension, for example, there are two alternative scenarios (T. Hellwig 2015, 2016; Vowles and Xezonakis 2016). One approach argues that economic forces such as globalization lead to a *convergence* of party positions as neo-liberal economic policies prompted social democratic parties to move toward the center on these issues (and conservative parties sometimes move further right). The centrist moves of Tony Blair in Britain, agenda politics of Gerhard Schroder in Germany, and Bill Clinton in the United States are often cited as archetypical examples of this pattern. Another approach posits that neo-liberal policies could stimulate a *compensation* process in which economically liberal parties advocate actions to mitigate the negative economic effects on their supporters. The reemergence of far-left parties and left-populist parties across Europe in reaction to globalization and the 2008 economic recession may reflect such a compensation process.

Expectations for the cultural cleavage generally focus on a process of *divergence* (H. Kriesi et al. 2008; Evans and Tilley 2017; R. Dalton 2018). As Green and New Left parties advocated a new liberal cultural agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s, many established parties gradually responded to these issue demands. The process was most evident among large center-left parties that shifted their political image to appeal to the growing number of culturally-liberal, middle-class voters (Kitschelt 1994). The same forces drew some large center-right parties to accept moderate cultural issue positions. If center-right parties accepted environmental reform – which most did – and the

expansion of gender rights – which most did – this creates a party void for citizens who did not support these reforms. The cultural impact of globalization on immigration and social diversity also increased public opposition. In many European party systems, the solution was the emergence of far-right parties to articulate these policy demands. Thus social modernization and globalization are generally seen as increasing party systems polarization in affluent democracies.

We use the CHES data to describe the degree of party system polarization on each issue dimension. We calculate a party polarization statistic that is analogous to a standard deviation. The position of each party on a dimension is weighted by party size to create a Polarization Index (PI).¹⁴ Each party in a nation contributes to the overall PI as a function of its position along each issue dimension and its size (vote share in the last election). Party systems with large parties near the political extremes will have large PI values, while systems with parties converging around the center will have low polarization statistics. The PI as a value of 0 when all parties occupy the same position on the issue dimension, and 10 when all the parties are located at the opposite end of the dimension. This Polarization Index has been extensively used in describing the distribution of parties along the unidimensional Left-Right scale. We extend this to the two issue dimensions that should better represent the complexities of the contemporary party systems (R. Dalton 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; R. Bakker et al. 2020).

Table 2 summarizes the level of economic and cultural polarization in each national party system over the four CHES time points. The last row of the table shows that party polarization on economic issues is roughly the same as polarization on cultural issues. This symmetry in party differences is somewhat surprising. Another general pattern is the modest increase in both economic (+0.43) and cultural (+0.33) polarization between 2006 and 2019. Given the magnitude of the economic shocks that accompanied the 2008 and subsequent financial difficulties, and the impressions from popular accounts of these party systems, the limited increase in party polarization over economic issues is surprising. Analysts' attention naturally focuses on the exceptional case, as

¹⁴ The Polarization Index measures the dispersion of parties along each dimension, analogous to a standard deviation of the distribution of party positions (R. Dalton 2008). The formula is:

$$PI = \sum (\text{party vote share}_i * (\text{party issue score}_i - \text{party system average issue score})^2)$$

(i represents individual parties).

when a new populist party wins votes or the rare case of a party dramatically shifting its policy stances. In contrast, the evidence from CHES suggests that party system polarization has not dramatically changed across Western Europe as a whole. The differences across nations are greater than the differences over time. The common narrative of widening polarization across Europe overlooks the fact that the party system polarization is not equatable to a single issue that might be salient at the time. Party programs are broader and change on one issue is often tempered by constancy on other issues on the policy dimension. In addition, the emergence of a small extreme party is often counterbalanced by the centrist movement of the larger party that loses its more extreme voters; so the overall change in polarization may be modest.

Table 2 Economic and Cultural Polarization over Time

Country	Economic Polarization					Cultural Polarization				
	2006	2010	2014	2019	diff.	2006	2010	2014	2019	diff.
Austria	4.26	3.74	3.89	3.27	-0.99	5.53	4.09	3.95	4.23	-1.30
Belgium	4.31	4.51	5.16	4.54	+0.23	4.34	4.11	3.73	3.91	-0.43
Denmark	3.05	3.53	4.34	3.78	+0.73	3.47	3.52	3.78	3.26	-0.21
Spain	3.88	4.32	4.86	5.50	+1.62	4.60	4.44	4.76	5.07	+0.47
Finland	2.77	2.94	3.29	4.16	+1.39	2.77	2.95	4.45	4.61	+1.84
France	4.12	3.74	3.79	3.87	-0.25	3.84	4.04	4.10	5.31	+1.47
Germany	3.81	4.25	3.55	4.05	+0.24	4.13	3.38	3.70	4.28	+0.15
Greece	3.93	3.34	4.02	5.97	+2.04	3.66	4.72	6.01	6.02	+2.36
Ireland	2.96	3.23	3.11	2.42	-0.54	2.07	1.99	1.70	1.52	-0.55
Italy	4.74	4.66	4.07	4.17	-0.57	5.09	4.43	3.51	4.35	-0.74
Netherlands	4.67	4.36	4.11	4.96	+0.29	4.94	3.44	5.00	3.98	-0.96
Portugal	3.87	4.58	4.38	3.97	+0.10	3.51	4.61	3.34	3.21	-0.30
Sweden	4.28	4.30	4.13	4.58	+0.30	2.28	3.27	4.32	4.25	+1.97
UK	2.40	3.11	3.33	3.96	+1.56	2.77	3.20	3.33	3.56	+0.75
Average	3.79	3.90	4.00	4.22	+0.43	3.78	3.72	3.98	4.11	+0.33

Source: CHES surveys, 2006 – 2019.

Note: Table entries are party system polarization indices calculated by the authors.

For individual nations, however, there is more evidence of electoral change. Between 2006 and 2019 *economic polarization* increased in ten of the fourteen nations, with especially large increases in Greece (+2.04) and Spain (+1.62) that struggled with the post-2008 financial difficulties. In contrast, in other nations – such as Austria (-0.99), Italy (-0.67), and Ireland (-0.54) – party system differences on the economic dimension actually declined.

A closer inspection of these statistics shows varied patterns across nations, that reflect both the economic context and the party's strategic policy choices. Notably, the average polarization does not portray a systematic trend in all countries. Any combination overlooks the individual stories and heterogeneous reactions to change and the crises. In Ireland, for example, the post-2008 financial difficulties hit the nation extremely hard and modestly increased polarization between 2006 and 2010, which then decreased over subsequent time points. The British case is noteworthy. The end of the centrist Blair government led to a steady increase in polarization over subsequent time points. By the end of the series, both major parties chose leaders who produced a spike in economic polarization in the 2019 election. In other nations, party turnover contributed to these patterns as incumbent parties struggled after 2008 and new party challengers emerged. In short, there is no single pattern that describes changes in economic polarization over this period.

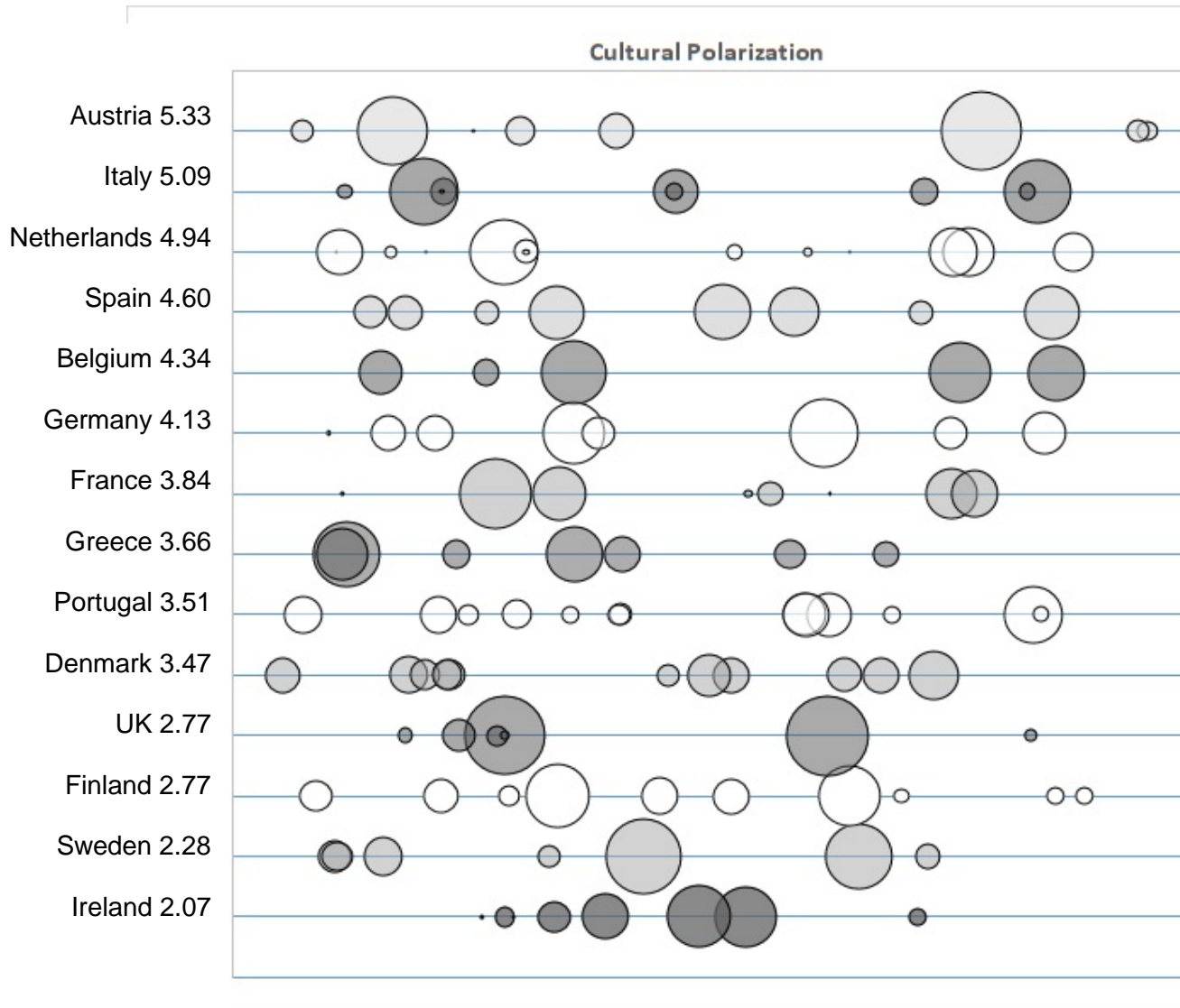
The right half of Table 2 tracks the Polarization Index for the *cultural dimension*. Even in 2006, there was a substantial polarization of most party systems along the cultural dimension. Then cultural polarization increased from 2006 to 2019 (+0.33), but by a lesser amount than economic polarization. One possible source of increased polarization is the heightened attention to immigration issues as a result of far-right party activism, increased migration, and then the 2015 refugee crisis. Immigration may have disproportionately contributed to the increase, but it was not the sole source. We recomputed the polarization indices excluding the two immigration issues, and polarization for the other three cultural issues increased, albeit by a smaller amount.¹⁵

¹⁵ The European average for the three-issue cultural polarization index was 3.95 in 2006 and 4.06 in 2019. These statistics also show that cultural polarization in 2006 was already high even without the two immigration items. Germany appears to be a case where the immigration issue played a major, albeit still moderate, role in increasing cultural polarization.

Cultural polarization shows a very mixed pattern of convergence and divergence across nations. The party systems in Greece (+2.36), Sweden (+1.97), Finland (+1.84), and France (+1.47) became substantially more polarized between 2006 and 2019. In several of these examples, a new party challenger on the right (or left) stimulated polarization. Conversely, polarization decreased in Austria (-1.30), the Netherlands (-0.96), and Italy (-0.74); all three nations began with very high polarization in 2006 which abated over time.

Figure 3 yields a better sense of the political space in Europe by aligning political parties along the cultural issue dimension in 2019. This gives a graphic image of the cultural polarization that is often linked to the rise of far-right parties. The Greek party system is the most highly polarized (PI=6.02), with the two largest parties – Syriza and New Democracy – tending to the extremes of the dimension. The French party system is also highly polarized with the Rassemblement National on the right persistently tapping far-right support. The rightward shift of the Partido Popular in Spain, joined with the growth of the far-right Vox Party, gives strong representation to the cultural right in Spain – countered by the cultural liberalism of Podemos. The growth in cultural polarization in Sweden and Finland is partially linked to the growing electoral appeal of radical-right parties (the Swedish Democrats and the True Finns respectively) that forced conservative cultural issues onto the political agenda. Cultural polarization in the UK is more clearly seen in European Parliament elections which use a proportional representation electoral system. Polarization shoots up between the 2017 general election (3.56) and the 2019 European Parliament election (5.31).

Figure 3 Cultural Polarization Across Party Systems, 2019



Source: CHES 2019.

Note: Parties are located by their position on cultural cleavage, the party's vote share determines the size of the bubble.

In contrast, the Austrian, Italian, and the Dutch party systems experienced a sharp decline in cultural polarization: In Austria, the 2006 election marked the end of the polarizing governments that included the Freedom Party or the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ) to Grand Coalition governments of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich (SPÖ) and Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP). In Italy, the polarization decline seems to follow the fortunes of Silvio Berlusconi and his various

parties. The fragmentation of the Italian party system and new parties, such as the culturally-centrist Five Star Movement, also moderated cultural polarization. And despite the visibility of Gert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV), cultural polarization has declined in the Netherlands over this timespan.

Germany is part of another diverse group of nations that show a relatively small trend in polarization on either issue dimension. On both dimensions, Germany displays moderate party polarization compared to other West European democracies. Between 2006 and 2014, polarization on the economic dimension increased modestly as Germany fared relatively well through Europe's financial crisis. Similarly, polarization on the cultural dimension increased over this same period, but by an even smaller margin. The Grand Coalitions after the 2005 and 2013 Bundestagswahlen were a likely factor. A trend reversal occurred on both dimensions in 2019, however. The rise in cultural polarization seems directly tied to the emergence of the AfD after the 2017 elections (see Figure 3 above), while the leftist parties took stronger liberal cultural views.

6 Conclusion

Over the past two decades, West European party systems have been buffeted by the 2008 Great recession and the subsequent financial crises in the European Union. Increased migration within the EU and from outside the EU contributed to rising tensions over cultural issues, peaking with the refugee crisis in 2015. In overall terms, these events and national conditions led many parties to take more distinct positions on economic issues while far-right parties emerged as advocates for cultural conservatism.

Yet, a closer examination of the national-level patterns based on the CHES shows great diversity in the patterns of change. Several nations have experienced large increases in polarization, especially those devastated by the financial crisis such as Greece and Spain. Another substantial group of party systems, including Germany, exhibit only marginal increases in party system polarization over the past fifteen years, even though, they also witnessed the rise of new radical right parties.

In contrast, some of the nations where the patterns of hyper-polarization first emerged – Austria and Italy – have experienced a decline in polarization over the 2006 - 2014 period. This suggests that polarization is not a linear process, but it can vary with public preferences and party strategies. The diverse patterns of polarization across issue dimensions, nations, and time suggests there has been a complex interaction between the degree of policy challenges in a nation and how political parties strategically responded to these challenges.

The one commonality is the role of far-right parties in this process of party system change. Nearly every West European party system has experienced the emergence of a significant far-right party. These parties generally hold moderate or ambiguous economic policies but sharply conservative views on cultural issues according to the CHES party experts (Rovny and Polk 2020). This creates a distinct new party family across Europe including the German AfD. Party system polarization on the cultural dimension would substantially decrease if these far-right parties were not included in our statistics. But these parties exist for a reason.

In spatial terms, far-right parties could only emerge and endure if there is a potential voter base for their positions. These parties are part of a longer-term realignment of party systems in affluent democracies (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; R. Dalton 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; R. Bakker, et al. 2020). The social modernization of these societies created the voter base for new Green and culturally progressive parties in the 1980s. These parties shifted the policy agenda of European nations, and many conservative parties modified their positions. The German CDU, for example, moved a full point closer to the center on cultural issues between 2006 and 2019. Such a pattern decreases the party representation for those who hold conservative cultural views and opens the door for new parties to emerge.

Far-right parties claim to represent these voters. But we should temper this conclusion. Other research shows that the voters for extreme parties – on both issue dimensions – tend to be more moderate than the party they support on Election Day. For example, a comparison of party voters and party candidates in the 2009 European Parliament elections found that far-right party leaders were more distant from their own voters on cultural issues than any other party family (R. Dalton 2018, p. 167). Most of the voters for far-right parties prefer more moderate cultural policies than

their party, but they see the far-right party as their best choice for political representation. Other research suggests that disaffection with the established parties has prompted some voters to turn to more extreme parties (R. Bakker et al. 2020). The emergence of new far-right parties also attracted a lot of public and media attention, which in turn overemphasized their relevance, and – inevitably – contributed to their success (C. Berning et al. 2019). In either case, the rise of far-right parties implies a deficit in the representation provided by the established parties – independent of our views of these parties. This interaction of far-right parties and voters is a focus of several of the articles that follow.

Before we conclude, we want to acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of the CHES data we have analyzed. We have written about party positions, but the data show how a modest number of academic experts perceive the parties in their respective nations. Other empirical evidence tends to validate the CHES measures (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012; Dalton and McAllister 2015), but inevitably there are some random and systematic errors in any measure. Some of the changes described here may be a function of methodology, especially if one focuses on the pattern in one election or one nation. But the strength of CHES is that it provides a common metric that can be applied across a large set of democratic party systems to understand the broad patterns of change.

The perceived shift of the European political landscape of the last decades has driven critical political and public debates. Some analysts called it a *Rechtsruck* and some even worry about the state of our democracy. Our research shows that the rise of radical right parties is only part of the comparative story. In fact, there is not a single European story and the differences of polarization are much larger across countries than across time. In comparison with other European countries, Germany shows rather moderate levels of polarization. The success of the AfD did change the German political landscape and restrictive immigration positions became more visible – but nothing like Greece or France, where two strong forces are pulling from two sides of the spectrum. Potentially, the success of radical right parties is not a sole tale of representation, but of mobilization.

Appendix. CHES Policy Dimension Scales

CHES experts were asked to “place the position of party leadership” on the following scales:

SPENDVTAX: Position on improving public services vs. reducing taxes. 0=Strongly favors improving public services; 10=Strongly favors reducing taxes.

DEREGULATION: Position on deregulation. 0=Strongly opposes deregulation of markets; 10=Strongly supports deregulation of markets.

REDISTRIBUTION: Position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. 0=Strongly favors redistribution; 10 =Strongly opposes redistribution.

CIVLIB_LAWORDER: Position on civil liberties vs. law and order. 0=Strongly promotes civil liberties; 10=Strongly supports tough measures to fight crime

SOCIALLIFESTYLE: Position on social lifestyle (e.g. homosexuality). 0=Strongly supports liberal policies;10 =Strongly opposes liberal policies.

RELIGIOUS_PRINCIPLE: Position on role of religious principles in politics. 0=Strongly opposes religious principles in politics; 10=Strongly supports religious principles in politics.

IMMIGRATE_POLICY: Position on immigration policy. 0=Strongly opposes tough policy; 10=Strongly favors tough policy.

MULTICULTURALISM. Position on integration of immigrants and asylum seekers (multiculturalism vs. assimilation). 0=Strongly favors multiculturalism; 10=Strongly favors assimilation.

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