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Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies

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Abstract

This review proposes a comparative research agenda on center-right parties in advanced democracies, bringing together research in American and comparative politics. Political scientists have recently closely examined the decline of the center-left and the rise of the radical right but have paid less attention to the weakening of center-right parties. Yet cohesive center-right parties have facilitated political stability and compromises, while their disintegration has empowered radical challengers. After presenting an overview of right-wing politics in Western democracies and weighing different definitions of the electoral right, we discuss two factors that shape variations in center-right cohesion: organizational robustness of center-right partisan institutions and the (un)bundling of conservative mass attitudes on different policy dimensions. Last, we argue that a full account of the rise of the radical right cannot focus solely on the strategies of the center-left but must incorporate also the choices, opportunities, and constraints of center-right parties.

INTRODUCTION

Even in stable democracies, party systems never stand still. In democracies with multiple parties, in the past 30 years, traditionally dominant parties' grip on voters has come undone as insurgent parties have made inroads on both right and left, gaining ever greater voter support. Consider postwar West Germany. Between 1949 and 1980, three parties—the liberal Free Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and the Social Democratic Party—held a nearly complete lock on Bundestag seats. Since the early 1980s, this equilibrium has eroded. First, the Greens entered Parliament in 1983, followed by the postcommunist Party of Democratic Socialism in 1990, and most recently, in 2017, the right-wing nativist Alternative for Germany. The German party system has been transformed.

In two-party systems, at first glance, there has been more apparent stability; traditional mainstream parties have remained mostly hegemonic. The Conservative and Labor Parties still govern British politics, and the Democratic and Republican Parties still dominate the American political system. But a highly consequential change has been unleashed: Internal battles within traditional parties have begun to alter politics in fundamental ways. Put simply, the great post–World War frozen party systems of advanced democracies have been undergoing a slow, long unfreezing for the past 30 years, the consequences of which we continue to live with today.

To understand this slow erosion of historically stable party systems, most analysts have focused on the transformation and decline of one major pillar of postwar party systems: social democratic or labor parties. Indeed, most research on mainstream parties has focused on the left end of the political spectrum (Lipset 1961, p. 17; Kitschelt 1994, p. 1; Jensen 2014, p. 1; Kalyvas 1996, p. 6; Skowronek 2009, p. 249).[1] Analysts have attributed the electoral left's decline to a variety of factors, including globalization, declining labor union density, shrinking working-class support for the traditional left, and the rise of neoliberal economic ideology. Analysts have also carefully spelled out the political and policy consequences of social democratic decay (Cronin et al. 2011, Gingrich & Häusermann 2015).

Less fully appreciated, but now coming into ever sharper focus, are the consequences of the weakening of the other major pillar of postwar party systems: the diverse mix of center-right parties that typically include Conservatives and Christian Democrats. While always ideologically heterogeneous, center-right parties have in recent years become a battleground for competing policy agendas, alternative visions of national identity, and conflicting collective conceptions of a "just" society.

While these ideological fights are visible in nearly all the advanced democracies, they have manifested themselves perhaps most prominently in the United States following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 elections. Trump's rise to power has exacerbated internal schisms within the Republican Party (Dionne 2016) and may be reshaping what it means to be conservative in America (Hopkins & Noel 2017). "Trump is remodelling the right," noted one news outlet (Economist 2017), echoing earlier discussions over the crisis of American conservatism (Aberbach & Peele 2011).

This ideological reconfiguring has developed in tandem with an altering of the electoral landscape facing center-right parties. Using data from 21 Western democracies between 1960 and 2015, **Figure 1** traces the average share of votes of center-right Conservative and Christian Democratic parties. Cross-national variations notwithstanding, the trend is clear: Center-right parties have, like their center-left social democratic traditional rivals, experienced a decline in their share

[1] One exception is the literature on Christian Democracy; see Kalyvas & van Kersbergen (2010) for an authoritative review. As we discuss below, we expand the scope of these analyses by examining more broadly patterns of electoral competition right of the center, including in countries with no Christian Democratic parties.

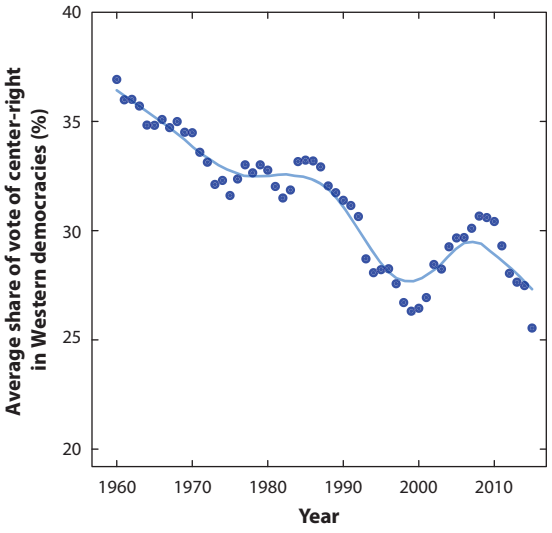

Figure 1

Average share of vote for center-right parties in the following Western democracies: Austria (OVP), Australia (Liberal Party), Belgium (Catholic Party, CD&V, CDH), Canada (Conservatives), Denmark (Conservatives), Finland (KOK), France (PMP, UMP), Germany (CDU, CSU), Greece (ND), Italy (DC, CDU, Forza Italia, People of Freedom), Ireland (Fianna Fail), Luxembourg (PCS/CSV), Netherlands (ARP, KVP, CHU, CDA), New Zealand (National Party), Norway (Conservatives), Portugal (CDS-PP), Spain (PP), Sweden (Conservatives), Switzerland (PDC/CVP), the United Kingdom (Conservatives), United States (Republicans). Data are from the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al. 2017).

of the vote over the last few decades. After they recovered from their low point in the late 1990s following the rise of Third Way Social Democracy, center-right parties have again seen their share of the vote decline in the aftermath of the Great Recession. And while a center-right group, the European People's Party, remains the largest in the European Parliament, its performance belies the continuing decline of its more moderate members (Bale & Krouwel 2013).

This remaking of the center-right has begun to reshape advanced democracies themselves. Historically, in the postwar period, cohesive center-right parties facilitated major historical political compromises, playing a significant role in the consolidation of democracy and welfare states. Furthermore, the contemporary fracturing of the historical center-right has begun to empower radical challengers to these important political compromises. Therefore, the success of the populist radical right—and, arguably, the stability of democracy itself—cannot be understood without taking into account the choices and strategies of mainstream center-right parties.[2]

Our goal in this review is to highlight an emerging comparative research agenda on center-right parties. In contrast to accounts that emphasize the historical unity of diverse right-wing thinkers, movements, and parties (Robin 2011), we focus on the causes and consequences of organizational and ideological empirical variations in the cohesion of the electoral center-right. And in light of evidence that a significant share of party switching takes place within, rather than across, the blocs of left and right (van der Meer et al. 2015), we pay close attention to patterns of competition and cooperation between center-right parties and other parties located right of the center. We

[2]Bale (2018, p. 274) makes this point within the British context, demonstrating that "UKIP's achievement cannot be understood without taking into account both the populist interventions and the internal politics of its mainstream center-right competitor."

begin our discussion with a comparative overview of right-wing politics in Western democracies, weighing the benefits of different conceptualizations of the right and center-right and making the case for an explicitly comparative approach. We then elaborate the consequences of changes in postwar center-right parties for politics more generally, including for the rise of right-leaning populist nativist parties.

Two comments on scope conditions are in order. First, we focus on parties in Western democracies because of the shared historical experiences underpinning their evolution, although we draw also on research on the Latin American right (Gibson 1996, Luna & Kaltwasser 2014). We specifically make the case for bringing the extensive body of research on the right in the United States into a cross-national comparative perspective. Second, we are mostly interested in electoral politics (rather than political ideas and social movements),[3] although we also contend that the interactions of center-right parties with organized interests, such as business organizations (Hertel-Fernandez 2014, Mizruchi 2013, Hacker & Pierson 2005, Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez 2016), are a critical part of the transformation of the center-right. The networks connecting the center-right with such organized interests are a major determinant of democracy and the shape of advanced capitalism, and thus deserve careful scrutiny.

WHAT IS RIGHT?

There is no consensus in the literature regarding a minimal definition of the electoral right. Indeed, it has been said that the differences are so significant that no generalizations hold (cf. Robin 2011, p. 37), since the right "resembles a Rorschach ink-blot whose edges have no particular shape and whose center appears as a trackless region containing no detailed image of what is there" (Ricci 2009, p. 159).

Instead of deductively constructing a singular ideal type of the right as the starting point, we begin by examining how voters define themselves, and what parties are considered by voters as located on the right. Such an approach does not mean that all possible definitions of the right are equally valid, but rather that observing specific instances of right-wing parties is useful in assessing the validity of existing available definitions (Paxton 2004, pp. 21–23).

Figure 2 is based on data from Wave 4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (2011–2016) from the following countries: Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Respondents—adult citizens in each country—were asked to locate themselves, and locate parties in their countries, on a scale that ranges from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right). We aggregate parties into party families based on coding taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project and Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

Similar parties are located right of the center in both panels of the figure—reflecting broad shared understandings within the electorate of what counts as "right." Party families clearly fall into two groups: radical left, greens, and social democrats are left of the center; Christian democrats, agrarians, conservatives, the radical right, and liberals are right of the center. The location of Christian democrats within the (moderate) right is noteworthy, since these parties are not always considered part of the right-wing bloc (e.g., Iversen & Soskice 2015, p. 202). And while it may seem redundant to note that radical right parties are on the right, it is still important to empirically validate this point, since radical right parties have often claimed to be "neither left

[3] For research on conservatism and the right from the perspective of political theory and the history of political ideas, see Müller (2006), Muller (1997), and Ricci (2009). For a review of the literature on right-wing social movements, see Blee & Creasap (2010). For research on transnational right-wing movements and networks, see Bob (2012).

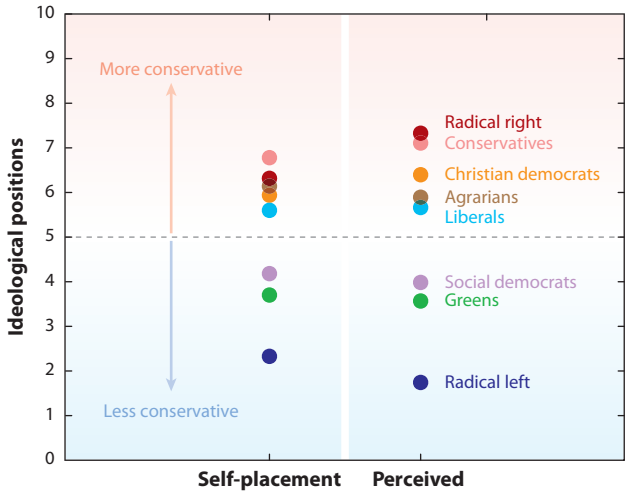

Figure 2

Average left–right placements of party families in Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (2011–2016). The figure shows averages based on party supporters' self-placement on the left–right dimension and averages based on mass perceptions of parties' ideological location on the left–right dimension. Higher values on the y-axis stand for more conservative positions. Data are from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Wave 4 (2011–2016).

nor right" (Arzheimer 2015, p. 544). Lastly, liberal parties are also located on the right, although this aggregation masks strong cross-national differences in these parties' location on the ideological continuum: While liberal parties in Canada and the United Kingdom are located close to the center, some of their European counterparts more clearly belong to the right-wing bloc.

Next, in **Figure 3**, we examine the average ideological positions of these party families on three prominent dimensions of Western contemporary electoral competition: state intervention in the economy, cultural lifestyles, and multiculturalism (Kitschelt & Rehm 2014). We rely on data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, which limits us to the following European polities: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Higher values on the y-axis stand for more conservative positions on each issue.

While party families on the left are progressive on all three dimensions, there is much more variation in ideological positions among party families on the right, especially on the noneconomic dimensions. While Christian democrats and conservatives hold conservative positions across the board (albeit the Christian democrats are less conservative on all three issues), liberal parties combine economic conservatism with a rather centrist position on immigration and a more progressive stand on cultural values. Agrarian parties are moderately conservative on economic issues and more centrist on the two other dimensions. Radical right parties are strongly conservative on multiculturalism, as expected, but are also rather centrist on state intervention in the economy. Thus, an ideological asymmetry emerges across the left–right divide: progressive positions on different issues are strongly bundled among party families on the left—but conservative positions are *not* always bundled among party families on the right (Cochrane 2013).

Our survey of party families' left–right locations and ideological positioning conforms with previous work that underscored the ideological diversity of right-leaning parties across Western

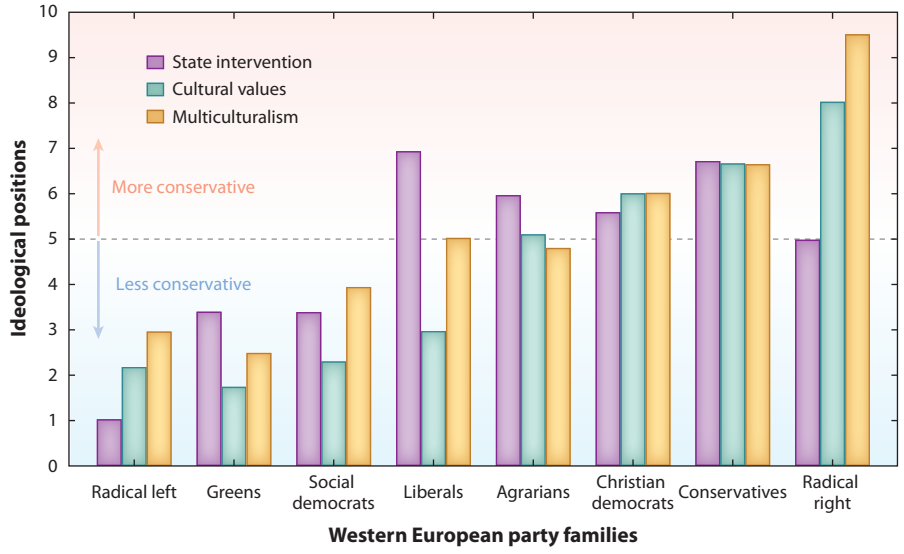

Figure 3

Average party family positions. Higher values on the y-axis stand for more conservative party positions. Positions on state intervention in the economy capture parties' economic stands. Positions on cultural values capture parties' stands on gender norms and social lifestyles. Positions on multiculturalism capture parties' stands regarding the integration of immigrants and asylum seekers. Data are from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey of 2014.

party systems (Lipset & Rokkan 1967, Rokkan 1970). At the same time, it also challenges theoretical approaches that define the right exclusively as (*a*) a situational ideology dedicated to preserving the status quo, (*b*) a set of shared policy positions, or (*c*) a political vehicle of the well-off.

Lipset & Raab (1970, p. 19), in their classic overview of the history of the right in America, note that the "[r]ight wing has been defined basically in terms of *preservatism*; left wing in terms of *innovation*" (emphasis in the original). This resonates with a definition of the right as motivated by resistance to political change (Michels 1930, pp. 230–32; Jost 2009, p. 130).[4] The right is thus a situational ideology: It reflects "a distinct but recurring type of historical situation in which a fundamental challenge is directed at established institutions and in which the supporters of those institutions employ the conservative ideology in their defense" (Huntington 1957, p. 455).

While there is much to this conceptualization, if the right is defined simply in terms of preservation, one is likely to underappreciate the full scope of the right's impact on political developments over the last three decades. The notion that right-leaning parties mostly aim to preserve does not accord with populist radical right parties' stated goal to radically upend the status quo, which they describe as serving the corrupt elites instead of the people (Mudde 2007, Müller 2016). Center-right parties have also often pursued transformative policies, from reshaping immigration regimes (Bale 2008) to restructuring the welfare state (Hacker & Pierson 2010, Jensen 2014). Indeed, it was for a good reason that Milton Friedman rejected the view of his right-leaning economic agenda as

[4]In a highly influential paper, Jost et al. (2003, p. 343) introduce an important nuance to this definition of the right (see also Jost 2017). They note that "liberals can be rigid defenders of the status quo or that conservatives can support change," yet this would be the case only in "dramatic exceptions." In response, it is relevant to note that following the expansion of the welfare state in the immediate postwar period, the defense by left-wing parties of existing egalitarian institutions in response to right-wing calls for spending cuts does not stand out as a dramatic exception.

"defense of the status quo" and "urged his colleagues to rely instead on rhetoric that was 'dynamic and progressive'" (Burgin 2012, p. 108).[5]

Another prominent approach defines the right based on a shared set of policy positions: opposition to state intervention in the economy, support for traditional cultural values, and an emphasis on law and order. This definition of the right is reflected in the right–left scale of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2006) and is thus indirectly adopted by the extensive literature that relies on this data set.

Yet defining the electoral right based on a set of policy positions excludes some parties that we demonstrate above to be part of the right-leaning bloc. Some radical right parties, for example, hold blurred positions on issues of state intervention in the economy (Rovny 2013), while liberals hold rather progressive positions on cultural issues such as gender norms (as shown in **Figure 3**)—and both party families are located on the right (as shown in **Figure 2**). A minimal definition of electoral right parties based on a shared package of policy positions has almost as many exceptions as cases that follow the rule.

The last approach we discuss defines parties sociologically—by whom they represent. Gibson (1996, p. 7) contends, "Conservative parties are parties that draw their core constituencies from the upper strata of society" (see also Luna & Kaltwasser 2014, p. 7). Ziblatt's (2017) historical study refines this to argue that conservative parties can be defined by whom they represented at their founding. While conservative parties were certainly often founded in the defense of the rich and powerful, it is also true that their constituencies evolve over time. For example, today, radical right parties often rely on the support of blue-collar workers (Bornschier & Kriesi 2012), who perceive themselves as located toward the bottom of the social status hierarchy (Gidron & Hall 2017). But as shown above, these parties are often perceived as located squarely on the right.

Given the dynamic and evolutionary nature of political parties, it is self-limiting to try to construct a single ideal type of the right. One useful alternative conceptualization borrows from Rémond's (1969, p. 341) classic analysis of the French right to argue that the right is a coalition of political actors, often "negatively united" in opposition to the left.[6] In his historical study of French right-wing politics, Rémond suggested that there are in fact three rights: social traditionalists, liberals, and national conservatives. And thus, "the history of the Right wing is made up of the transformations and vicissitudes of these three Rightists factions" (Rémond 1969, p. 30).

From this perspective, even if founded by upper strata in a society, the right, as it evolves over time, is by its very nature a coalition of heterogeneous political currents with distinct, and at times clashing, ideological visions and social bases of support. In holding together this uneasy coalition, party leaders of the electoral right typically rely on arguments that warn against ignoring the "deep structures of society," asserting that progressive policies will be futile or destructive, or will lead to

[5]Defining the right by its adherence to the status quo is closely associated with a definition of the right as a defense of inequality (Bobbio 1996, Jost 2009, Luna & Kaltwasser 2014). As noted by Jost (2009), within the context of Western political development, opposition to change is often synonymous with support for inequality. Notwithstanding its prominence in the literature, we are hesitant to adopt this definition of the right since it requires the researcher to interpret ideological claims according to an abstract understanding of equality. For instance, Noel & Therien (2008) argue that right-wing opposition to affirmative action speaks in the name of equality and rejects positive discrimination based on demographic factors. From this perspective, the right is not inegalitarian but is "differently egalitarian" (Noel & Therien 2008, p. 18).

[6]Similar arguments have been made regarding the postwar evolution of the American right. Glenn & Teles (2009a, p. 328) note that "antistatist conservatism that emerged in the wake of the New Deal was fundamentally about being *against* liberalism, far more than being *for* something" (emphasis in the original). And examining networks of neoliberal intellectuals, Burgin (2012, p. 121) observes that once Hayek managed to bring together a group of right-wing economists, "he discovered that he had assembled colleagues who were largely united in what they opposed but shared little agreement in their attempts to construct an alternative vision."

negative and unintended consequences (Hirschman 1991, p. 43). Yet while different groups within the right respond to the same set of discursive appeals, this does not reflect unity of thought or policy agendas on the right (cf. Robin 2011, p. 34), since different currents within the right are drawn to different visions of societal structures. For example, market liberals see social relations as stratified by natural economic inequalities. Others on the right emphasize societal structures that are rooted in perceived gender differences or racial hierarchies. Different viewpoints on the right all perceive left-wing policies as threatening to a basic notion of social hierarchy while interpreting these hierarchies in very different ways.

THE CENTER-RIGHT

We consider center-right parties as those that construct big-tent coalitions,[7] drawing support from all different right-wing currents simultaneously—while other parties right of the center specialize in mobilizing voters based on narrower agendas. The center-right is an organizational form that emerged in a particular historical context, in the midst of the recasting of Western democracies and party systems in the aftermath of World War II. As a result of this specific historical context, our definition of the center-right most directly applies to conservative and Christian democratic parties.[8] Kitschelt & McGann (1995, p. 214) note that the German CDU consisted of "a social Christian, a market liberal, and a national-conservative pillar." In Italy, by the 2000s, the conservative House of Freedoms included Berlusconi's probusiness *Forza Italia*, the culturally conservative *Alleanza Nazionale*, and the anti-immigration populist *Lega Nord* (Geddes 2008). A similar threefold typology of factions has been applied to the British Conservative Party throughout the postwar period; the emphasis on nationalist sentiments has been especially relevant in the context of opposition to European integration (Cowley & Garry 1998). And in the American case, this three-sided image of the Republican Party features prominently in research on the intellectual history of the American conservative movement (Nash 1996; Phillips-Fein 2011, p. 729).

By referring to both Christian democrats and conservatives as center-right, we make the case for considering these party families as functionally equivalent (Bale & Krouwel 2013, p. 19) for the stabilization of democracy and modern welfare systems. As shown in **Figure 2**, both these party families are perceived as located on the right and their voters self-identify with the right. And as shown in **Figure 3**, they both hold conservative positions on all three dimensions of electoral competition (economic policy making, cultural lifestyles, and multiculturalism), with Christian democrats being more moderate on all three dimensions yet still clearly conservative. The tight cooperation between Christian democrats and European conservatives within the European People's Party group at the European Parliament has probably contributed to these party families moving closer together (Wagner 2011).[9]

Nonetheless, the differences between Christian democrats and conservatives are also worth noting. Historically, conservatives have been more committed to free-market economics while

[7]The word coalition here refers to within-party continuous cooperation across groups of voters rather than a formal coalition agreement signed across parties in order to form a government following an election.

[8]Note, however, that in certain instances, our definition of center-right may apply to parties that are not necessarily Conservative or Christian Democratic. For instance, there is some evidence that the Dutch Liberal VVD party has refashioned itself to appeal simultaneously to all three right-wing currents (van Kersbergen & Krouwel 2008), in which case it should also be considered a center-right party.

[9]The European Parliament in general, and the European People's Party in particular, is also an arena in which mainstream center-right parties cooperate with parties that are often considered as located further to the right, such as the Hungarian *Fidesz*. These interactions across center-right parties and more radical right-wing parties are an important subject of new research with decisive consequences for democracy (see, e.g., Keleman 2017).

Christian democrats' centrist stances on state intervention in the economy reflected their cross-class base of support (van Kersbergen 1995). Emphasizing this distinction, however, risks overlooking the substantial degree to which conservative parties, such as the British Tories, have presented an image of themselves as drawing on support from working-class voters (Beer 1965). In addition, since the 1980s, most Christian democrats have moved "closer to their [conservative] right-wing colleagues on economic issues" (Gingrich 2011, p. 57)—which is reflected in their rather similar positions on economic issues in 2014, as shown in **Figure 3**. As noted by Bale & Krouwel (2013, p. 34), Christian democrats have increasingly shifted away from the center and "have thrown in their lot with the conservative right" on economic (as well as cultural) issues.

Second, while conservatives have traditionally appealed to nationalist sentiments, Christian democrats were characterized by a strong commitment to internationalism (Invernizzi-Accetti 2018), as reflected in their support for European integration. Yet again, there is reason to believe this difference has blurred over the years. Several Christian democratic parties have responded to the rise of the populist radical right by adopting a conservative critique of multiculturalism and more directly appealing to nationalist sentiments (van Kersbergen 2008)—again moving closer to their conservative counterparts.

PUTTING THE CENTER-RIGHT AT THE CENTER OF ANALYSIS

Traditionally, political scientists have spent more time studying the electoral left in general, and center-left parties in particular (Lipset 1961, p. 17; Kitschelt 1994, p. 1; Jensen 2014, p. 1; Kalyvas 1996, p. 6; Skowronek 2009, p. 349). Left-leaning parties, organizations, and social movements are often—for good reason—theorized as the prime drivers of political change. After all, much of the political and social innovation in advanced democracies over the past 200 years has come from the left (see, e.g., Eley 2002). Right-leaning and conservative collective political actors, in contrast, are mostly seen as merely reactive opponents of progressive demands.

This perspective is clearly evident, for example, in the power resource theory of welfare state origins, which serves as "the dominant approach to the study of welfare state development" (Iversen & Stephens 2008, p. 600). Power resource theory considers social democratic, labor, and socialist parties and unions as the key actors in setting the pace and direction of welfare reforms. In this view, welfare state expansion is a reflection of left-wing actors' strength (Huber & Stephens 2001, Korpi 2006). If conservatives or the electoral right feature in this literature at all, the emphasis is mostly on the implications of right-wing fragmentation for the ability of left-socialist, social democratic, or labor-based parties to push forward their reforms (Borg & Castles 1981)—and much less on the ways in which the right has worked to construct political institutions, mobilize supporters, and shape ideological compromises across conflicting interests within its coalition.

Yet center-right parties do not simply passively respond to demands of others but rather are active political entities who seek to shape political outcomes in accordance with, and within the constraints of, their own ideological commitments and organizational resources. Critics of the power resource approach have, it should be noted, emphasized the role of conservative parties and the electoral right more generally, and their allied business groups, in shaping the early stages of welfare state formation and expansion (Mares 2003, Swenson 1991). Indeed, a growing body of literature makes clear that since the 1980s, center-right parties and the business groups allied with them have become more disruptive and have pursued welfare policies that are far from passive in their effort to cut welfare spending and erode the organizational foundations of unions (Jensen 2014; Glenn & Teles 2009b; Hacker & Pierson 2005, 2010; Pierson 1995).

Yet historically, cohesive center-right parties have played a crucial role—at key moments—in facilitating democratic stabilization and the institutionalization of modern welfare states. During

the late nineteenth century, some conservative elites proved capable of moderating the demands of religious organizations that responded more radically to the rise of socialism (Kalyvas 1996, p. 99). Ziblatt (2017) demonstrates that some European center-right parties were consequential in setting their countries on settled paths of democratization. With strong center-right parties, as evident in the British case, old-regime elites—who had the most to lose from democratization—organized themselves so their interests would remain secure following democratic transition. Furthermore, radical elements within their own ranks could be sidelined, helping consolidate democracy. In contrast, where political right-wing factions were deeply divided, as was the case in Germany, they turned to state-sponsored electoral fraud and manipulation to survive, and at a later point in time experienced a more unhinged right-wing radicalism, which tilted their countries toward an unsettled path of democratization (Ziblatt 2017).

Moving from the early- to the mid-twentieth century, reformed center-right parties helped facilitate the recasting of democratic states in the aftermath of World War II, containing the radical nationalist sentiments on the right that had proved so destructive in the interwar years (Müller 2014). These same center-right parties then also laid the foundation for European integration (Kaiser 2007), envisioning increased European integration as a check against dangerous nationalist populist sentiments (Müller 2011, pp. 141–42).

Not only center-right parties but also well-organized and encompassing interest groups allied with the right have proved consequential in shaping policy outcomes. Mizruchi (2013, p. 2) argues that from the New Deal until the 1980s, American business leaders were interconnected through overlapping networks, which allowed them to act collectively toward "pragmatic solutions to pressing economic and social problems." This organizational cohesion pushed the corporate elite, and with it the Republican Party, briefly toward relative moderation and a commitment to societal goals, from public housing for the poor to tax increases intended to lower the deficit (see also Kabaservice 2012, p. 6).

There is thus strong evidence that across different political outcomes of interest—democratization, economic policy making, and European integration—center-right parties have played a crucial role in actively shaping political developments. These examples also point at the conditional ability of cohesive center-right parties to contain their most radical elements, while demonstrating that fractures on the center-right can shift the ideological balance from pragmatism toward right-wing radicalism. We now turn to investigate factors that are likely to shape variations in the cohesion of the center-right.

EXPLAINING VARIATIONS IN CENTER-RIGHT COHESION

Under what circumstances can moderate center-right elites hold together their diverse base of support, and when are they more likely to lose control to radical challengers? As noted above, some previous work perceives the right as strongly united around shared ideological commitments (Robin 2011); from this perspective, there is a natural resonance between the worldviews of market liberals, social conservatives, and populist nationalists. Yet historically oriented research on the development of contemporary center-right parties emphasizes the great efforts invested in constructing and sustaining coalitions across different currents to produce a coherent center-right. Lowndes (2008), for instance, traces the discursive shifts that facilitated the construction of the American New Right, bringing Southern racial conservatives into the Republican Party. And from a transnational perspective, Burgin (2012, p. 122) notes that right-wing intellectuals "were engaged in intensive and urgent inquiries into the structure and coherence of the social philosophies," investing in a concerted attempt "to identify theoretical connections between capitalism and social traditions."

The core dilemma that many center-right parties face is that while their core founding constituencies in the pre–World War II era were anchored in an upper-class stratum, they needed to compete in an environment of full suffrage, thus requiring a broader coalition of support to be electorally viable (Gibson 1996, Ziblatt 2017). To sustain this coalition, historically, center-right parties became masters of a style of politics focused on religious and national issues (often referred to as second-dimension issues) (Riker 1986, Shepsle 2003). Center-right parties could not survive as merely the political front-men of economically powerful employer associations, so they included cross-class appeals to national identity, religion, and other issues that reached beyond their founding core. This perspective suggests that center-right coalitions are not naturally bound together by right-wing ideas but are instead carefully built and managed by political elites; they are therefore likely to vary in their cohesion across countries and over time.

We contend that there are two sources of variation in the ability of center-right parties to hold together their diverse voters and appeals. One major factor is the degree to which center-right elites can rely on robust, well-institutionalized organizational infrastructure; another is whether conservative mass attitudes on different policy dimensions reinforce or cut across one another.

Organizational Infrastructure

The first factor, the robustness of partisan organizations, plays a key role in holding together a diverse center-right electoral coalition. Parties with well-structured hierarchical organizations rely on geographically spread-out local associations that possess the institutional capacity to subordinate nonparliamentary interest groups, rather than being controlled by them. Center-right partisan organizations allow conservative elites to benefit from cooperation with associated interest groups, such as business associations, cultural and church organizations, while staying in control of their parties. During the nineteenth century, strong partisan organizations allowed European old-regime elites to viably compete following the expansion of the franchise, thus ameliorating concerns of traditional power holders and setting their countries on a stable path to democratization (Ziblatt 2017).

The center-right's need for a robust organizational infrastructure may be especially pronounced in times of high economic inequality. Research has demonstrated that across the advanced democracies, rising inequality has led center-right parties to emphasize cultural or values-based (second-dimension) issues to maximize voters (Tavits & Potter 2015). In the context of an increasingly distant economic elite, nationalism, religion, and other social identity issues became indispensable to hold increasingly economically fractured constituencies together. Yet, such cultural issues are potentially explosive. Without the organizational apparatus to channel and contain voters' views on these issues, center-right parties are prone to ideological radicalization.

The historic shift in power balance within the Republican Party since the 2000s, epitomized most clearly in Donald Trump's rise to power—against the wishes of the a very weak party establishment—is a case in point (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). American right-wing interest groups have invested heavily since the late 1970s, and especially since the early 2000s, in organizational vehicles of mobilization that operate independently of the Republican Party (Teles 2008; Hertel-Fernandez 2014; Skocpol & Williamson 2012, p. 9). Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez (2016) argue that these investments in outside organizations have transformed the Republican Party into an empty organizational shell, vulnerable to fracture.

One clear example of this organizational weakness is the outsized role of the conservative media, and especially Fox News, within the Republican Party (Skocpol & Williamson 2012). While Fox News serves the Republican Party in instilling a strong sense of partisan identity among its viewers, it also poses grave challenges for Republican Party elites' efforts to maintain control over

their own party (Grossmann & Hopkins 2016). As observed by Grossmann & Hopkins (2018, p. 17), Republican "politicians and traditional movement leaders have empowered a new set of powerful [media] actors who are often followed more readily and trusted more by the Republican base," leading to loss of control over nomination processes. This depletion of the organizational capacity of conservative party elites is likely to be one factor explaining Trump's victory in the Republican primaries in the face of opposition from traditional power holders.

The lack of comparative research on center-right parties severely limits the ability to examine cross-nationally the relationship between organizational robustness and political elites' ability to hold together a diverse center-right coalition (but for a historical perspective, see Ziblatt 2017). The German case provides a potential counterexample, with a center-right party—the German CDU and its Bavarian partner party—in which elites have successfully held control over their own party apparatus in the postwar period. Much longer than in Italy, France, or even the United Kingdom, Germany's CDU has retained control over the center-right end of the political spectrum, in large part through robust local organizations, with an impressive degree of continuity over a long time period (Turner 2013, p. 129). While Germany, like all Western European democracies, faces a right-wing insurgency today, Germany's robustly organized center-right has to date been remarkably enduring. There is thus strong reason to believe that variations in organizational capacity might explain variations in the trajectories of center-right parties, and we hope future comparative research will provide further theoretical and empirical insights on this important topic.

The (Un)Bundling of Conservative Mass Attitudes

The second major factor shaping trajectories of the center-right is variation in the overlap of mass attitudes across groups of voters on the right, which also likely shapes the ability of center-right elites to hold together a diverse base of support. As discussed above, center-right parties have historically, in the postwar period, aimed to construct broad coalitions of different currents within the right: market liberals, social conservatives, and populist nationalists. Stronger overlap in mass attitudes across these groups could be expected to translate into a more cohesive center-right; and greater dissonance in their worldviews would make it harder for center-right elites to simultaneously satisfy all of their supporters.

In her historical discussion of the American right, Phillips-Fein (2011) reflects on how economic and cultural conservatives, groups of voters with seemingly diverse worldviews and priorities, have come to cooperate within the Republican Party. While many see this center-right coalition as peculiar,[10] Phillips-Fein (2011, p. 735) notes that

> if many Christian conservatives, for example, were always committed to small government and the free market, why should it have been difficult for them to find common cause with libertarians or business conservatives? On the other hand, the same suburbanites who wanted lower taxes also believed in the maintenance of traditional family roles.

Put differently, she suggests that if those voters who hold conservative attitudes on a certain issue are also receptive to conservative messages on other issues, then a cohesive center-right coalition could be mobilized on the basis of a broad conservative agenda.

[10] For instance, Medvetz (2006, p. 344) points at the "peculiar combination of internal *heterogeneity* and *cohesion* that marks the conservative movement, both in its current guise and over its recent history. The movement consists of a highly diverse coalition of interest and identity groups, including evangelical Christians, business elites, and neoconservative intellectuals, whose mutual affinity cannot be taken for granted. Yet, despite this structural heterogeneity, conservatives maintain a considerable level of institutional association and ideological affinity" (emphasis in the original).

Müller (2011, pp. 138–43) proposes a closely related explanation for the cohesiveness of European center-right parties in the immediate postwar period. Center-right parties, and especially European Christian Democrats, were able to broker moderating bargains between economic liberals and cultural conservatives because, within this particular historical setting, economic liberals were receptive to cultural conservative appeals and vice versa. Postwar European center-right parties appealed especially strongly to small-business owners and farmers, who were characterized by their combination of economic and cultural conservative attitudes (Ignazi & Wellhofer 2013).

Yet the overlap of mass attitudes across different currents within the right is likely to vary, both across countries and over time. Malka et al. (2017) show that conservative economic and cultural attitudes are in fact *negatively* correlated in many countries. It is likely that, all else held constant, cooperation across different groups within the center-right would be harder to achieve where there is less overlap between conservative attitudes on different issues. Shifting from cross-national to over-time variations, there is some evidence for a decline in the bundling of conservative attitudes in European public opinion since the 1980s (Bartels 2013; Kriesi et al. 2008, p. 242). This unbundling of conservative attitudes is likely to destabilize center-right parties.

And indeed, Pardos-Prado (2015) finds that center-right parties lose votes to populist radical right parties when economic, cultural, and nationalist positions are not strongly bundled. Webb & Bale (2014) find that those members of the British Conservative Party who are most likely to defect to the radical right UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) are those who are cross-pressured between conservative cultural attitudes and more centrist or progressive economic attitudes. This implies that variations in the structure of mass attitudes, and specifically the unbundling of conservative attitudes on different issues, present serious challenges for the center-right.

THE RISE OF RADICAL CHALLENGERS: BEYOND THE CENTER-LEFT

Several prominent scholars explain the rise of the populist radical right over the last three decades as an outcome of center-left moderation since the 1990s. Streeck (2017) argues, "The rise of the Trumpists was made possible by the decline of the center-left in the United States, Italy, France, the UK, Austria, the Netherlands, and even Germany." He suggests that the adoption of economic neoliberalism by center-left parties since the 1990s diminished the role of class in shaping voting behavior and alienated working-class voters from the left, making these voters more susceptible to the allure of right-wing populists. Fraser (2017) contends that the centrist policies adopted by the center-left "degraded the living conditions of all working people, but especially those employed in industrial production," opening the road to populist right-wing politicians in areas hit by the decline of manufacturing. Similarly, Sandel (2018) attributes the rise of right-wing populism to the center-left's shift toward the center.

There is a sound empirical basis for the argument that ideological convergence between the center-left and center-right could affect political worldviews and voting preferences, for instance by influencing the weight voters attach to different issues (Evans & Tilley 2011). But several important questions remain unaddressed by an account that explains the rise of the radical right purely based on the choices of center-left parties.

First, the key assumption behind this argument is that because center-left parties have adopted centrist (or neoliberal) economic positions, there is no longer a meaningful distinction between center-left and center-right, and thus working-class voters switched from the center-left to radical right-wing challengers. Yet right-wing radical challengers have attracted support in countries where center-left and center-right parties have converged, as in Germany—as well as in countries characterized by high levels of asymmetric elite ideological polarization, as in the United States.

While we accept the fact that the Democratic Party shifted to the economic center during the 1990s, the Republican Party shifted even further to the right during this time period (McCarty et al. 2006). The argument that there is no significant ideological difference in economic policy making between the two parties in the United States seems to challenge a vast body of literature on American elite ideological polarization, raising questions about whether it is indeed ideological convergence driven by the center-left more generally that explains the rise of right-wing radical challengers. Indeed, there is currently no conclusive evidence to support this argument, as "different empirical setups yield either confirmation or rejection of the general hypothesis that 'convergence' of established parties facilitated the rise of radical right parties" (Kitschelt 2018, p. 172).

Second, and more directly related to our discussion above, this perspective of placing the blame for the rise of the radical right on the moderation of Social Democracy in the 1990s ignores the strategic choices, resources, and constraints of center-right parties. Most importantly, it overlooks the ways in which center-right ideological choices themselves shape the political opportunity structure not only of the center-left but also of radical right challengers.

As noted by Bale (2018), it was the shift of the British Conservative Party toward the fusion of populism and euroskepticism in the early 2000s that opened the door for the rise of a radical right challenger in the 2010s (and see also Ignazi 1992). Bale's argument resonates with the more general claim that as mainstream parties shift toward radical challengers, they increase the salience of the issues on which the challengers appeal to voters (Meguid 2005). In our particular case, as center-right parties shift toward a more anti-immigration position, they may serve their radical competitors by increasing the salience and dominance of immigration debates within the political system (Dahlström & Sundell 2012). And indeed, Arzheimer & Carter (2006) find that when mainstream right-wing parties become more ideologically radicalized, support for radical right parties increases.

Explaining the rise of radical right-wing challengers by the moderation of center-left parties in the 1990s has become almost a conventional wisdom among academics and media observers. We do not intend to suggest that the strategic decisions of the center-left are irrelevant for the rise of radical challengers, but we do believe that this explanation is at best partial. A full account of the rise of right-wing challengers must directly incorporate the choices of center-right parties and, in turn, theorize and test how these choices reflect the opportunities and constraints of mainstream conservative elites.

CONCLUSIONS

Although most research on recent electoral developments has focused on the decline of the center-left or the rise of the radical right, center-right parties have historically played, and continue to play today, a consequential role in shaping the politics of advanced democracies. At key political junctures, cohesive center-right parties have proved consequential in facilitating the historical compromises at the heart of postwar democratic stability. We have made the case for comparative research on center-right parties and focused on understanding variations in their cohesion. As the center-right, like all mainstream parties, loses its share of voters, the consequences are potentially far-reaching.

As one direction of future research, we see much promise in bringing scholarship on the American right into a broad comparative framework. We have aimed to practice what we preach and to situate research by scholars of American politics next to works that focus on other Western democracies. More could be done to normalize the American case within the comparative literature on electoral politics. The rising support for radical populist right-wing parties and

candidates—not only in Europe but also in the United States—has increased the urgency of studying the electoral right by drawing on a shared conceptual and theoretical apparatus. What the radical populist right looks like ideologically, whether it succeeds electorally, and its impact on politics more generally, all hinge to a great degree on the role and strategic stances taken by the center-right.

There is one potential point of tension between accounts of the American right and analyses of the European right that is worth spelling out. Scholars of American party politics have emphasized the degree to which Republican voters are more ideologically coherent than Democrats (Lelkes & Sniderman 2016, p. 840) and more strongly motivated by a shared ideological identity (Grossmann & Hopkins 2016).[11] In contrast, we emphasize—building on historically oriented research (Rémond 1969, Rokkan 1970)—the degree to which the European right is more ideologically diverse than the left. Is the American right exceptional in this regard? This seeming contradiction may be more apparent than real, as the two claims may in fact complement one another. The increased diversity of belief systems within the American center-right coalition may motivate conservative elites and right-wing media outlets to rely on strong appeals beyond traditional policy preferences: an emotionally laden right-wing social identity, which in turn generates greater ideological awareness among center-right voters (Mason 2018). Thus, a deeper sense of social identity may go hand in hand with, and paradoxically help contain, greater diversity of mass attitudes on specific policy issues within the right. More comparative research could help shed light on this issue.

While research in American politics emphasizes the greater coherence of the center-right and research on European politics stresses its diversity, both perspectives point at potential asymmetries across the ideological divide. Center-right parties are not mirror images of their center-left competitors, nor do they passively react to political moves by progressive elites. By theorizing and empirically investigating the unique resources and constraints that are facing center-right parties, we can gain a richer understanding of our tumultuous political times.

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[11] But from a different perspective, "In the electorate as well as in Congress, then, there appear to be greater internal stresses within the Republican Party between the ideological center and right. It remains to be seen if and how these stresses will be resolved" (Hare & Poole 2014, p. 428). Lupton et al. (2017) demonstrate that Republican elites demonstrate greater ideological inconsistency than Democratic elites, building on research that documents a similar asymmetry in American mass public opinion (Elis & Stimson 2012).

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Errata

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