

Annual Review of Political Science

Populism, Democracy, and Party System Change in Europe

Milada Anna Vachudova

Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill,
North Carolina 27599, USA; email: vachudov@email.unc.edu

Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 2021. 24:471–98

First published as a Review in Advance on
March 1, 2021

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at
polisci.annualreviews.org

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102711>

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Keywords

populism, party systems, ethnopopulism, democratic backsliding, polarization, European politics

Abstract

How has populism transformed party systems in Europe? I survey the varieties of populism, the sources of their support and the different ways that they appeal to voters. I use data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey to explore whether populist parties are intensifying competition on the cultural dimension, accelerating the decline of mainstream parties, and increasing polarization. I argue that while left and center populist parties have upended existing structures of competition, it is longstanding conservative parties, remodeled using ethnopopulism, that have been the most consequential for the substance of political competition and the trajectory of domestic politics. I consider the behavior of incumbents and argue that varieties of populism should shape our expectations of what happens when populists rule: While left populist parties in power over the last decade have tended to become more ordinary, sometimes even shedding antiestablishment and anti-EU positions, ethnopopulist parties in power have used harsh “us-versus-them” appeals, misinformation, and democratic backsliding in their pursuit of more power.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, scholars have chronicled how competition among political parties in Europe's democracies has moved away from traditional left–right debates about how to govern the economy. Competition has expanded to identity and cultural values and now directly engages questions about who belongs to the polity and “the people.” Parties today are often identifiable less by their positions on redistribution and the regulation of the economy than by their positions on cultural issues. This change has played out most vividly in contestation over immigration and European integration and in the rise in support for far right parties and positions. More recently, party competition in Europe has been shaken up by different varieties of populist parties, especially those on the economic left, reigniting debates on inequality and redistribution, and those on the cultural right, broadening and amplifying exclusionary appeals.

In this article, I consider the consequences of this shake up. How has populism changed party systems in Europe? How much of the variation is a consequence of different varieties of populism? Populist parties on the right stand out as drivers of competition on identity and cultural values: I argue that ethnopopulist parties, more flexible political entrepreneurs than traditional far right parties, have helped define and intensify competition on the new cultural dimension (Vachudova 2020). While new populist parties on the left and in the center have upended the structure of competition in party systems across Europe, it is longstanding conservative and far right parties, remodeled using ethnopopulism, that have fundamentally altered the substance of competition. Yet, what accounts for variation in whether and how populist parties have changed the structure and substance of political competition? In what follows, I draw on recent scholarship to lay out the changing topography of political competition in Europe and the varieties of populism that have animated this competition in recent years. I sketch the causes: the factors whose confluence has led to a rise in support among voters for populist parties. These factors include cultural and economic changes in daily life, failures of representation on the part of mainstream parties, the flexible and innovative playbooks of populist leaders, and the twin shocks of the financial and refugee crises. And I survey the consequences: I set out the expectations in the literature that rising support for populist parties has intensified competition on the cultural dimension, accelerated the decline of mainstream parties, increased polarization in party systems, and impacted the quality of democracy. I use data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to identify populist parties and to illustrate change on the cultural and economic dimensions of political competition in eight European party systems over the last decade.

I also consider the behavior of populist incumbents: How should different varieties of populism shape our expectations of what happens when populists rule? Around the globe, party systems have been buffeted by attacks on the democratic institutions that safeguard a level political playing field. In Europe, the last decade suggests a striking difference: While time in government has transformed new left populist parties into more ordinary democratic parties, it does not appear to have had a similar tempering effect on established parties that have been revamped using ethnopopulism. Divisions in society may help populists of different varieties win votes, but for ethnopopulist incumbents, deepening polarization and dismantling democratic institutions have been part of a playbook to amplify power and prevent turnover. This playbook is legitimized by the core ethnopopulist message that the party defends the interests of the “real” people from opposition parties who represent the interests of culturally harmful outsiders. This message can create intense partisanship that is permissive of democratic backsliding and rent-seeking. For all of their differences, Brexit and authoritarian rule in Hungary stand as the greatest consequences of populist rule so far in Europe in this century.

THE CHANGING TOPOGRAPHY OF PARTY COMPETITION IN EUROPE

One way to conceptualize competition in a party system is to map the positions of parties on two fundamental dimensions: the economic left–right dimension of governing the economy, and the social-cultural dimension of identity and values. This second dimension puts universalistic and socially liberal values in competition with traditional and communitarian ones. In the longstanding CHES¹ project, we call this dimension GAL–TAN. GAL stands for green, alternative, and libertarian; TAN stands for traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist. We know that, overall, party competition has shifted from the economic left–right dimension to the GAL–TAN cultural dimension (Polk et al. 2017).² We also know that, for all parties, the salience of immigration and European integration has increased over time (De Vries 2018). Data plots in the section titled Identifying Populist Parties and Party System Change show how extensively parties differentiated themselves on the GAL–TAN cultural dimension in both 2010 and 2019. With regard to the substance of competition, these data plots also show that there is great variation among just the eight party systems depicted here. In Hungary, for example, parties compete exclusively on the GAL–TAN cultural dimension and are all but indistinguishable on the left–right economic dimension. In Spain, parties differentiate themselves as much on the left–right economic dimension as on GAL–TAN.

Scholars have long puzzled over how party systems change over time. The literature takes as its starting point the stable party landscapes of postwar West European democracies, where parties competed across cleavages grounded in longstanding structural conflicts that scholars mostly organized along a left–right dimension (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). In response to rising immigration, trade, and integration, Hooghe & Marks (2018) have conceptualized a new “transnational cleavage”: On one side are the more affluent, educated, and cosmopolitan citizens who benefit from transnational trade, mobility, and governance; on the other side, their fellow citizens who instead see these developments as a cultural and economic threat. Parties, mostly on the far right, push back against people, institutions, and rules coming from outside the nation-state. While some cleavages are receding, the new transnational cleavage representing contestation along the GAL–TAN dimension is intensifying (Hooghe & Marks 2018, Marks et al. 2020, Rovny 2015, see also Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012).

Yet the positions of established parties tend to change only slowly, if at all. Instead, De Vries & Hobolt (2020) argue that in Western Europe, it is the rise of challenger parties along the new cleavage that has gradually transformed party systems and shifted the axis of competition (see also De Vries & Hobolt 2012, Hooghe & Marks 2018, Hutter & Kriesi 2019, Rovny 2012). The stability of postwar party systems has been disrupted by the rise of challenger parties with GAL positions. Urban, educated, and professional voters have tended to leave mainstream parties and embrace the postmaterialist values of strongly GAL parties. Stability has also been disrupted by the rise of far right parties with TAN positions. Rural, less educated, and working-class voters have tended to leave mainstream social democratic and Christian democratic parties for the

¹The figures in this article use CHES data for the positions of national political parties. The data set is built using expert surveys: A team of researchers asks experts—usually academics specializing in political parties—to evaluate the positions of parties on different ideological dimensions and policy issues. All CHES data are publicly available at <https://www.chesdata.eu>.

²Scholars have used a variety of terms to describe the cultural dimension of competition that we call GAL–TAN, including the postmaterialist (Inglehart 1990), libertarian–authoritarian (Kitschelt 1994), and integration–demarcation dimension (Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012).

anti-immigration positions and authoritarian values of strongly TAN parties (Hooghe & Marks 2018, Oesch 2008; for an insightful overview, see Ford & Jennings 2020). Some far right parties have also used antiestablishment appeals rooted in opposition to the clientelism of established parties to attract middle-class professional voters (Katz & Mair 1995, Kitschelt 2002). In Eastern Europe, among the postcommunist members of the European Union, party systems have been more fluid, with the frequent birth and death of parties claiming to have “clean hands” (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2018, Hanley & Sikk 2014, Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020, Pop-Eleches 2010). Also in Eastern Europe, the structure of competition crystallized in a distinct way after 1989 as left-TAN parties reflecting communist-era positions competed with right-GAL parties supporting market liberalism and European cultural values (Vachudova & Hooghe 2009). Three decades later, it is still uncommon for a postcommunist party to combine economic right and TAN positions—or indeed for a West European party to combine economic right and GAL positions.

Over the last two decades, party systems across Europe have been shaken up by populism—a broader and more electorally successful challenge that subsumes the far right but goes well beyond it. Populist parties are not necessarily new; some are a populist reincarnation of a long-established party. Many do not fit neatly into existing party families owing to an eclectic mix of positions. The scholarship on populism in Europe today is in many ways a continuation of the literature on the far right that investigates what motivates voters to support antiestablishment appeals, how antiestablishment parties have calibrated these appeals, and how mainstream parties have reacted to them, for example by toughening their positions on immigration (Art 2011; Bustikova 2019; de Lange 2007; Kitschelt 1995; Meguid 2008; Mudde 2007, 2019; Pirro 2015). However, to understand the structure and substance of political competition in contemporary Europe, it is important to differentiate among different kinds of populist parties—how they conceptualize “the people” and how they govern.

VARIETIES OF POPULISM: INEQUALITY ON THE LEFT, IMMIGRATION ON THE RIGHT

Populism itself is a common, loosely defined political tool for appealing to voters. Politicians promise to defend the people against establishment elites by arguing that these elites are protecting and expanding their own privileges at the expense of ordinary citizens (Mudde 2007). They argue that dominant parties are corrupt and unaccountable—and that the people deserve to be represented directly, without intermediaries. They also tend to adopt a Manichean “good versus evil” approach to politics (Taggart 2000). What distinguishes different kinds of populist parties is how they define the people, and this in turn determines whether they challenge mainstream parties mainly from the left, on the left–right economic dimension, or from the right, on the GAL–TAN cultural dimension. What also distinguishes populist party types is how they define the elite, although a common position for populists on the economic left and the cultural far right is skepticism of elites and institutions associated with the international financial institutions and European integration. Hix et al. (2019) show that as populists have gained more seats in the European Parliament, the division between those supporting and opposing the deepening of European integration has become as important as the traditional economic left–right dimension. The intensity of Euroskepticism, however, varies greatly among populist parties—and with the spectacular exception of the revamped British Conservative Party, those in power calibrate their anti-EU positions to accommodate receiving structural funds and other benefits of EU membership.

Populism has tended to come from the economic left in Southern Europe and Latin America, taking on a class dimension as politicians pledge to improve the lives of the powerless and the poor (Roberts 2019). Populist appeals have centered on promises to promote the rights and

wellbeing of the people in the face of the misery and unfairness caused by austerity (Hobolt & Tilley 2016) and, more broadly, by neoliberal economic policies and rising inequality. The people are not defined as part of a particular class, but instead “defined by their nonelite economic status and their generalized political disempowerment” (Roberts 2019, p. 646). Populist parties competing from the left such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain take on more universalistic GAL values and include ethnic minorities, refugees, and migrants in an inclusionary view of society (Font et al. 2021, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). For left-wing populists, financial elites that are connected to globalized trade and integrated capital markets are the enemy—and, in Europe, this has often included the European Union.

Populism has tended to come from the cultural right in Western and East Central Europe, as politicians cast the people as part of an ethnicity, culture, nation, religion, race, or even civilization that is under threat. They take TAN positions and adopt an exclusionary view of who belongs to the people, the group that deserves better representation (Canovan 1999, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). These parties are called right-wing populist parties (Mudde 2007), exclusionary populist parties (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013), nativist parties (Art 2020), paternalist populist parties (Enyedi 2020), ethnonationalist populist parties (Bonikowski 2017) and ethnopopulist parties (Jenne 2018). I call them ethnopopulist parties because ethnopopulism helps us conceptualize how strategic party leaders define the people based on categories of identity that are broader than nationalism, how they adjust the intensity of their exclusionary appeals with greater agility than the far right, and how they choose a flexible cast of friends and enemies to achieve their political goals (Jenne 2018, Vachudova 2020). Appeals by ethnopopulist parties such as Fidesz in Hungary and the League in Italy are centered on defending traditional values (Taggart 2000) against the threat of immigration (Hobolt & Tilley 2016) and against a civilizational threat from Islam (Brubaker 2017), with growing overtures to pan-European Christianity and white supremacy. It is important to underscore that the immigrant threat is often racialized: Most ethnopopulist parties single out dark-skinned migrants and refugees, especially Muslims, as a threat but do not necessarily politicize other migrants (Vachudova 2020). In the discourse of ethnopopulist parties, domestic and transnational elites that are seen as promoting immigration, integration, multiculturalism, LGBTQ rights, and progressive social values are the enemy, especially elites associated with the European Union (Pirro & van Kessel 2017).

What about populism in the center? Parties may stand against the political establishment but take moderate or undetectable positions on the economic left–right dimension and also on the cultural GAL–TAN dimension. Such parties are rare and their credentials as populists are contested. One example is La République En Marche! (LREM) in France, which rejects traditional party labels and promises to work directly for the people. Scholars have identified a kind of “technocratic populism” that offers to replace clientelism and patronage with higher-caliber policy making by experts or businessmen (Bustikova & Guasti 2019)—in other words, to replace one set of establishment elites with another. Populist discourse can, paradoxically, be detected as a strategy for state capture by parties with no special policy agenda except rent-seeking for the benefit of the office holders (Zankina 2016). Owing to this flexibility, scholars have termed populism a “thin-centered” ideology or a discursive frame that parties combine with other ideologies and positions (Bonikowski 2017, Mudde 2007, Stanley 2008).

WHY THE “HOUR OF POPULISM”?

Populism as a political tool has been around for centuries, so what is it about the last decade that has made populism a winning strategy for political parties and catapulted it to the forefront of scholarship (Noury & Roland 2020) in political science? Here I sketch three interconnected ways

that scholars explain the rise of populism and how it has shaped party competition in Europe: the changing attitudes of voters, failures of representation by mainstream parties, and strategies of political entrepreneurs. I also look at how the financial and refugee crises have amplified the populist wave.

Bottom-Up and Top-Down Reasons for Rising Support for Populist Parties Among Voters

The first explanation focuses on how the attitudes of voters have gradually shifted to reflect feelings of injustice and resentment owing to economic and cultural changes in their daily lives (see Noury & Roland 2020). Voters became unmoored from the strong partisanship that anchored previous generations to parties that were intertwined with their profession, class, church, and local community (Marks et al. 2020). They felt angry about patronage politics among dominant moderate parties and increasingly perceived mainstream parties as corrupt (Engler 2020). They became resentful of the rise in immigration and the impact of globalization on the quality of low-skilled jobs, both of which are linked to lower wages and higher unemployment. They felt left behind by rising inequality and neoliberal reforms (Appel & Orenstein 2018, Huber & Stephens 2014) and by disparities in economic power (Epstein 2020). Economic anxiety and resentment were interlinked with a cultural and racial backlash on the part of voters alienated by immigration, the spread of cosmopolitan values, and the empowerment of women and minorities (Gidron & Hall 2017, Norris & Inglehart 2019; on Eastern Europe, Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020; Pop-Eleches & Tucker 2017). Voters also became resentful of the expanding powers of the European Union, which was seen as elitist and out of touch and was blamed for immigration, unemployment, and income inequality (Whitefield & Rohrschneider 2015). European integration and globalization became linked with immigration, trade, and the reallocation of authority to the European Union—“political choices that affect the life chances of identifiable groups” (Marks et al. 2020, p. 25; see also De Vries 2018). Scholars have connected the rise of different kinds of populism with different varieties of capitalism, including distinct labor market and welfare state institutions (Roberts 2019; on varieties of capitalism, see Hall & Soskice 2001).

The second explanation builds on the first, arguing that a failure of representation has pushed voters away from the center: Mainstream political parties, especially social democrats, have not represented the interests of unmoored and disaffected voters effectively (Berman 2019, Lynch 2019). This has led to a steep decline in participation, the hollowing out of parties and democracies, and the shift to competition on identity and values (Greskovits 2015, Hooghe & Marks 2018, Mair 2013). Voters have felt unrepresented by the convergence of policy positions among mainstream parties (Grzymala-Busse 2019a, Spoon & Klüver 2019), and by the support of social democratic parties for immigration, neoliberal economic policies, and European integration—a stance that caters to the preferences of educated groups. Bakker et al. (2020) find that the incongruence between the positions of parties and the preferences of their voters on these critical issues helps explain support for antielite parties at the ballot box. Working-class and other voters have therefore drifted away from mainstream parties in search of parties that represent their attitudes and are responsive to their concerns (Berman 2019, Snegovaya 2021, Stanley 2019). For Western Europe, Rooduijn (2018) cautions, however, against the widely imagined concept of a “populist voter” with a consistent set of attributes across all populist parties; his study shows instead that voters supporting different populist parties vary a great deal in their positions on issues such as globalization and European integration.

The third explanation accepts that popular attitudes have changed but attributes those changes also to agency: the strategies of political entrepreneurs about what positions to take and how to

challenge other parties. Charismatic leadership is embedded in the logic of populism. While leaders may call for greater citizen participation in referenda or on the internet, they present themselves as the embodiment of the grievances and resentments of the people (Urbinati 2019; see also Pappas 2019). The causal arrows are therefore reversed. They are top down, from party leaders to voters: It is cueing and manipulation by well-positioned elites that have pushed voters to change their attitudes and reject mainstream parties as corrupt (Engler 2020, Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020) and culturally harmful (Vachudova 2020). Over time, voters react to the rhetoric of party leaders by forming and changing their preferences (Stroschein 2019). This has been especially evident in cases where incumbent ethnopopulists have captured the state administration, taken over independent media outlets, cultivated “uncivil” society (Ekiert 2020, Greskovits 2020), and exploited online social media to create an exaggerated sense of threat by broadcasting an unrelenting narrative of xenophobia and resentment (Moffitt 2016, Surowiec & Štětka 2019). Politicians who use ethnopopulist strategies are often playing outside the bounds of the liberal democratic playing field, spreading fake news and demonizing their domestic opponents in extreme ways (Noury & Roland 2020, Štětka et al. 2020, Vachudova 2019, Wodak 2019). The standout example in Europe is the spread of misinformation portraying Muslims and Islam as a threat to cultural and civilizational survival (Brubaker 2017). In the United States, it is the lies about rigged elections that led to an insurrection at the Capitol and alternate realities threatening democratic institutions. Politicians who use ethnopopulist strategies boost their success by elevating otherwise illegitimate actors to positions of epistemic authority in government and in the public sphere (Bonikowski 2017).

The Financial and Refugee Crises

The populist wave in Europe was strongly amplified by the twin shocks of the financial crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015, which intensified party competition on the transnational cleavage in Europe. Hooghe & Marks (2018) argue that durable party system change comes when external shocks create purchase for new parties to challenge the established ones. Europe’s twin shocks solidified competition on the GAL–TAN dimension along the new transnational cleavage and created durable support for the parties that contest it—both new parties and established ones that adapted their appeals. For populist parties, these crises were a catalyst for showcasing unwanted interference by elites and institutions associated with European integration and international financial markets (Bohle & Greskovits 2019, Johnson & Barnes 2015, Pirro & Van Kessel 2017).

The financial and refugee crises illustrate vividly how populist support is shaped by domestic factors that mediate the impact of external shocks. In Southern Europe, as a consequence of the financial crisis, transnational elites imposed fiscal orthodoxy and austerity that caused intense economic misery and deep resentment, creating a political opening for antiestablishment, left-wing populist parties (della Porta et al. 2017; see also Casal Bértoa & Rama 2020, Kriesi & Pappas 2015). Syriza in Greece, the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain have subsequently intensified competition on the economic dimension, gained substantial vote share, and become parties of government. In Eastern Europe, as the refugee crisis unfolded, it raised the prospect that unwanted immigrants and cosmopolitan values would be imposed by transnational elites; this was accompanied by a growing fear of cultural destruction even though there are virtually no Muslim refugees or migrants in the region. Whereas economic misery brought on by the financial crisis was grounded in the lived experiences of voters in Southern Europe, the fear of Muslim immigrants in Eastern Europe was largely a product of strategically curated misinformation (Brubaker 2017, Jenne 2018, Štětka et al. 2020, Vachudova 2020). Elections since 2014 have been fought on the cultural dimension, and ethnopopulist parties have won a plurality or a majority of the vote

on intensely anti-Muslim platforms in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. In Southern Europe, where voters have coexisted with large numbers of actual refugees and migrants, support for far right and ethnopopulist parties has been substantially lower.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF POPULISM?

How do populist parties change political competition—and do different varieties of populist parties shape party systems differently? In addition to intensifying competition on the economic and cultural dimensions, political changes that are widely associated with populism in the literature are the decline of mainstream parties, rising polarization, and attacks on liberal democratic institutions (for a careful study of European cases, see Wolinetz & Zaslove 2018).

All populist parties promise to turn the tide against establishment parties whose hold on power has led to policies that privilege the elite. This suggests that we should observe a decline in the electoral strength of long-established, mainstream parties in favor of populist challenger parties. We do observe this in many European party systems but not in all (de Vries & Hobolt 2020). And while many populist parties can be termed challenger parties, we see below that among the most powerful and consequential populist parties are longstanding conservative mainstream parties such as the British Conservative Party in the United Kingdom and Fidesz in Hungary that have been remodeled using ethnopopulism (Vachudova 2020).

All populist parties also adopt a Manichean “good versus evil” approach to politics, though with very different degrees of intensity. This suggests that we should observe greater polarization of party systems, defined as centrist parties losing ground to parties at the extremes—or indeed centrist parties choosing to move toward the extremes. Over the last decade, the polarization shaping political competition in Europe and also in the United States has been primarily on the cultural dimension. Scholars identify rising polarization and decreasing trust among parties and citizens as both a cause and a consequence of ethnopopulist rule (Haggard & Kaufman 2021, Hetherington & Rudolph 2018, McCoy et al. 2018, Vachudova 2020). Bustikova (2019) shows that political power in the hands of socially liberal GAL parties can mobilize voters in support of far right TAN parties—and recent European social movements and election results suggest that the inverse is true as well. Partisanship itself appears to be both decreasing and increasing: Partisan attachments to old mainstream parties of the center left and center right have indeed decreased, yet populist parties, especially dominant ruling ethnopopulist parties, benefit from intense partisanship on the part of their core voters (Svolik 2019) that is associated with polarization in the party system. Dominant ruling ethnopopulist parties are, in turn, strongly associated with democratic backsliding and rent-seeking that they legitimize with the Manichean view of political competition, as I explore below.

IDENTIFYING POPULIST PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEM CHANGE

The 2019 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) helps identify the varieties of populist parties and how they shape the substance and structure of political competition. It asks experts to score all parties on the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric that can serve as a proxy for populism at the party level (as in Norris & Inglehart 2019; for other measures, see Meijers & Zaslove 2021). **Figures 1–4** show the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric for each party, helping illustrate that most populist parties clearly differentiate themselves from other parties on this measure. These four figures also show the salience of immigration for each party, helping us distinguish ethnopopulist parties from leftist and centrist populist parties. For an exclusionary ethnopopulist party, such as the League in Italy, antiestablishment rhetoric and rhetoric related to immigration are both strongly salient. In contrast, for inclusionary left-wing populist parties, such as Podemos

Hungarian and Polish parliamentary party positions in 2019

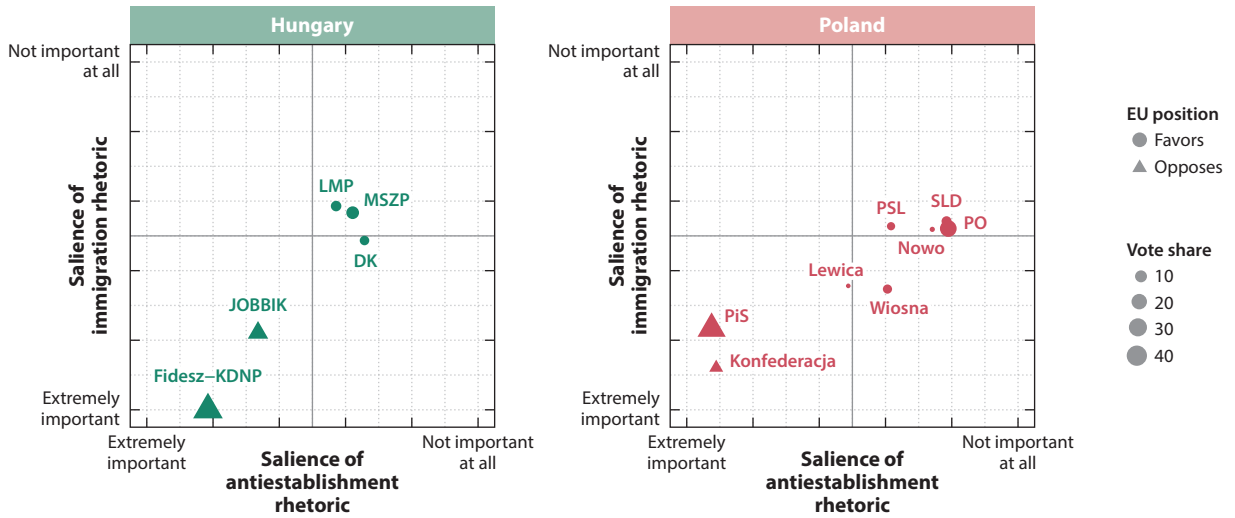


Figure 1

Parliamentary party positions in 2019 in Hungary and Poland. For each party, the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric is plotted against the salience of immigration rhetoric. Data are from the 2019 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020). Abbreviations in Hungary: DK, Democratic Coalition; Fidesz-KDNP, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union Christian Democratic People's Party; JOBBIK, Jobbik-Movement for a Better Hungary; LMP, Politics Can Be Different; MSZP, Hungarian Socialist Party. Abbreviations/translations in Poland: Konfederacja, Confederation Liberty and Independence; Lewica, Left Together; Nowo, Modern; PiS, Law and Justice Party; PO, Civic Platform; PSL, Polish People's Party; SLD, Democratic Left Alliance; Wiosna, Spring.

Austrian and Italian parliamentary party positions in 2019

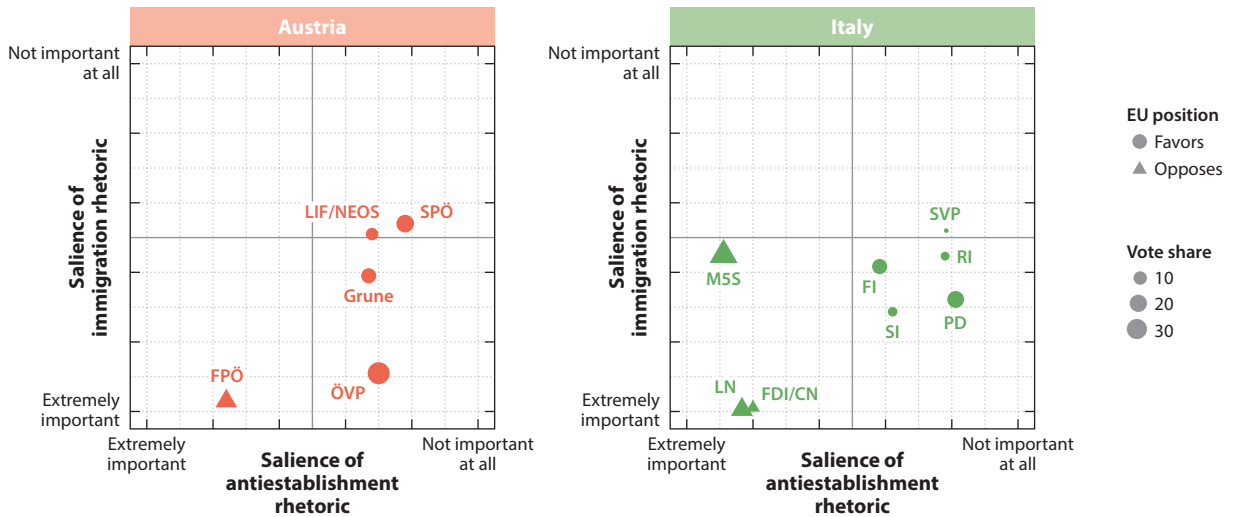


Figure 2

Parliamentary party positions in 2019 in Austria and Italy. For each party, the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric is plotted against the salience of immigration rhetoric. Data are from the 2019 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020). Abbreviations in Austria: FPÖ, Freedom Party; Grüne, Greens; LIF/NEOS, New Austria and Liberal Forum; ÖVP, People's Party; SPÖ, Social Democratic Party. Abbreviations in Italy: FDI/CN, Brothers of Italy; FI, Forza Italia; LN, League (formerly Northern League); M5S, Five Star Movement; PD, Democratic Party; RI, Italian Radicals; SI, Italian Left; SVP, South Tyrolean People's Party.

Greek and Spanish parliamentary party positions in 2019

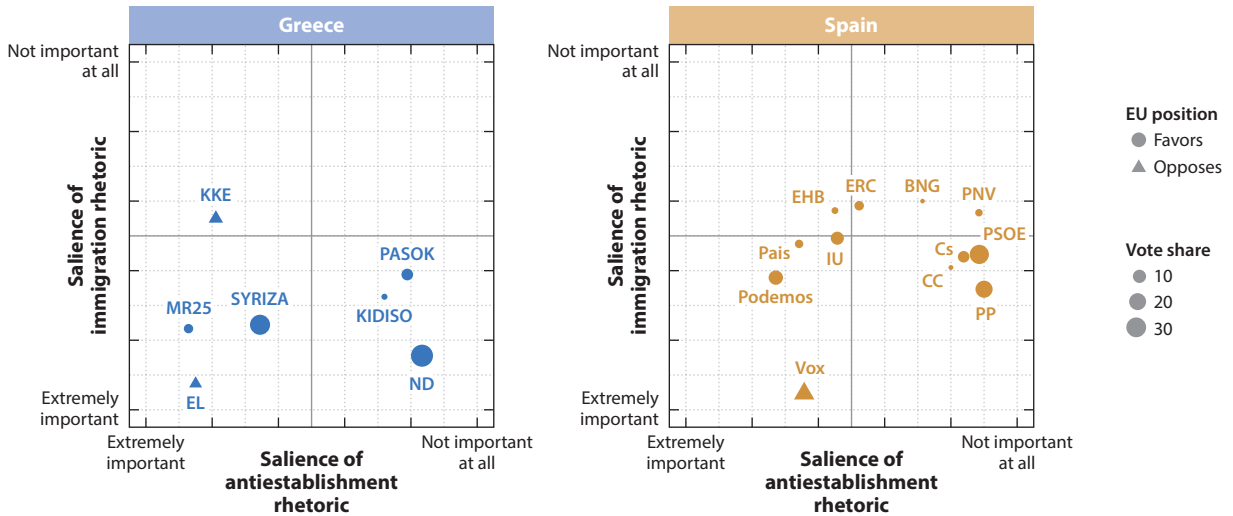


Figure 3

Parliamentary party positions in 2019 in Greece and Spain. For each party, the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric is plotted against the salience of immigration rhetoric. Data are from the 2019 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020). Abbreviations in Greece: EL, Greek Solution; KIDISO, Movement of Democratic Socialists; KKE, Communist Party of Greece; MR25, European Realistic Disobedience Front; ND, New Democracy; PASOK, Panhellenic Socialist Movement; SYRIZA, Coalition of the Radical Left. Abbreviations in Spain: BNG, Galician Nationalist Bloc; CC, Canarian Coalition; Cs, Citizens; EHB, Basque Country Unite; ERC, Republican Left of Catalonia; IU, United Left; Pais, More Country; PNV, Basque Nationalist Party; Podemos, We Can; PP, People's Party; PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; Vox, Voice.

and Syriza, only antiestablishment appeals are extremely important for how the party presents itself to the voters. The 2019 CHES data also show that, for most ethnopopulist parties (the British Conservatives are the exception), the high salience of rhetoric related to immigration is strongly correlated with the high salience of anti-Muslim rhetoric (Blackington & Vachudova 2020).

I turn now to a sketch of how populist parties that have taken part in government, albeit briefly in some cases, have reshaped their respective party systems over the last decade. The eight party systems shown in the remaining figures help illustrate the variation at hand, spanning different varieties of populist parties that have held varying amounts of political power. They suggest that while incumbent ethnopopulist parties have been the most consequential for the substance of political competition, it is left and center populist parties that have upended existing structures of competition, playing a part in the most party system turbulence and change. They also suggest that time in government has made left and center populist parties into more ordinary democratic parties but it has not had a similar moderating effect on ethnopopulist parties.

Hungary and the United Kingdom: Dominant Conservative Parties Transformed Into Ethnopopulist Parties

In Hungary and the United Kingdom, what had been dominant, mainstream conservative parties have been transformed into ethnopopulist parties by ambitious political leaders in a similar way as the Republican Party in the United States. **Figures 5** and **6** depict how the party systems are polarized on the cultural dimension between the dominant ethnopopulist incumbent and a fragmented, socially progressive opposition. Fidesz and the British Conservative Party both took up remarkably successful antiestablishment appeals that resonated with working-class voters,

French parliamentary and British party positions in 2019

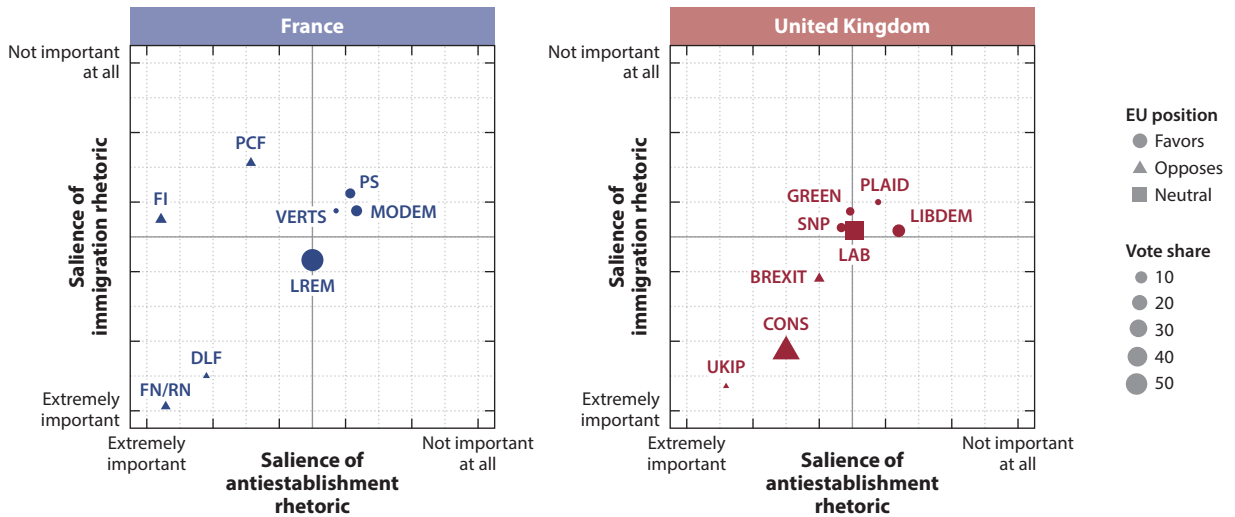


Figure 4

Parliamentary positions France and party positions in the United Kingdom in 2019. For each party, the salience of antiestablishment rhetoric is plotted against the salience of immigration rhetoric. For the United Kingdom, anti-EU parties not in parliament are included. Data are from the 2019 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020). Abbreviations in France: DLF, France Arise; FI, France Unbowed; LREM, La République en Marche; PCF, Communist Party; PS, Socialist Party; RN, National Rally (formerly FN, National Front); MODEM, Democratic Movement (formerly UDF); VERTS, Greens. Abbreviations in the United Kingdom: CONS, British Conservative Party; BREXIT, Brexit Party; GREEN, Green Party; LAB, Labour Party; LIBDEM, Liberal Democratic Party; PLAID, Party of Wales; SNP, Scottish National Party; UKIP, United Kingdom Independence Party.

claiming to fight transnational elites intent on diminishing the country through immigration and European integration. In power since 2010, they both achieved incredible change: Hungary became an authoritarian regime, and the United Kingdom left the European Union. Fidesz and the Conservative Party both displaced far right parties: Fidesz by appropriating far right positions and the Conservatives by “getting Brexit done.” But while the Conservative Party has used an “us-versus-them” narrative mainly to attack European elites and not marginalized groups, Fidesz has been far more extreme in its appeals (Enyedi 2016); **Figure 5** shows that it has become intensely TAN since 2010. As part of their transformation, both parties purged moderate members and quieted internal party debate. In the United Kingdom, deep divisions inside the Conservative Party in a plurality electoral system created the opportunity for an ethnopopulist takeover similar to the takeover of the Republican Party in the United States (Hobolt 2016). In neither case does the incumbent’s large parliamentary majority reflect voter preferences: In the United Kingdom, the first-past-the-post system twinned with opposition fragmentation caused by the pro-Brexit position of the Labour Party leadership amplified the results for the Conservative Party; in Hungary, the fixing of the playing field in conditions of democratic backsliding boosted the results for Fidesz.

Poland and Austria: Far Right Parties That Also Become Ethnopopulist Parties

In Poland and Austria, longstanding far right parties that embrace ethnopopulist appeals have benefited from a rise in support over the last decade, boosted especially by the 2015 refugee crisis. **Figures 7** and **8** show that the structure of party competition has been fairly stable in both countries since 2010 but with growing polarization on the cultural dimension.

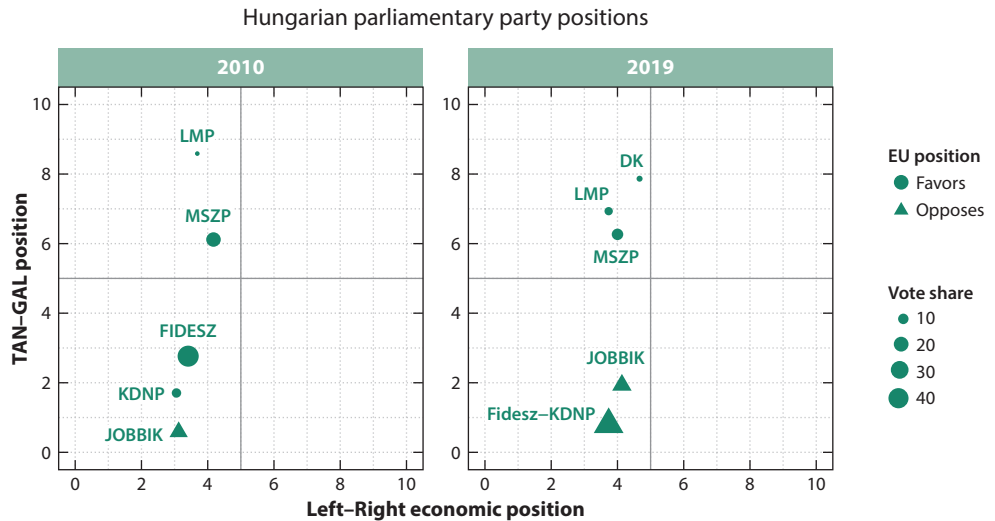


Figure 5

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Hungary. For each party, the TAN–GAL cultural position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: DK, Democratic Coalition; Fidesz-KDNP, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union Christian Democratic People’s Party; JOBBIK, Jobbik-Movement for a Better Hungary; LMP, Politics Can Be Different; MSZP, Hungarian Socialist Party; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the elections in both 2015 and 2019. Similar to Fidesz in Hungary, PiS’s time in government has made it more exclusionary—more nativist, racist, sexist, and homophobic—in its ethnopopulist conception of the true and deserving Polish people (Fomina & Kucharczyk 2016). Like Fidesz, PiS has deepened polarization in society (Tworzecki 2019) and vilified opposition parties, civic groups, minorities, journalists, and many others as “enemies of the people.” It has delivered policies on the cultural right in support of traditional values but also on the economic left in the form of nativist welfare policies that are consistent with the preferences of its voters (Stanley 2019). While PiS is sometimes classified as a conservative party, **Figure 7** shows that it takes positions that are as intensely TAN as the Austrian Freedom Party and the League in Italy. In contrast to the Hungarian party system, the Polish party system includes several opposition parties with heterogeneous positions on both the economic left–right and the cultural GAL–TAN dimensions. These opposition parties have cooperated against the ruling ethnopopulist party more effectively than opposition parties in Hungary or the United Kingdom—and they have challenged more robustly the power of PiS, despite the severe erosion of liberal democratic institutions by PiS governments (Blackington & Vachudova 2020).

In Austria, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) stands out as a long-established far right party that was swept into government, briefly, during the recent populist wave. **Figure 8** shows that the party system in Austria is polarized on the cultural GAL–TAN dimension in a durable way. The dominant conservative party in Austria, the People’s Party (ÖVP), has long been torn between moderation and pro-EU positions, on the one hand, and traditional values and strong anti-immigration positions, on the other. In terms of party strategy, the ÖVP has been pulled between governing across the center with pro-European and GAL parties, on the one hand, and competing for votes and governing with the more intensely TAN and Euroskeptic FPÖ, on the other. The FPÖ gained prominence as an antistatist party protesting the “grand coalition government and

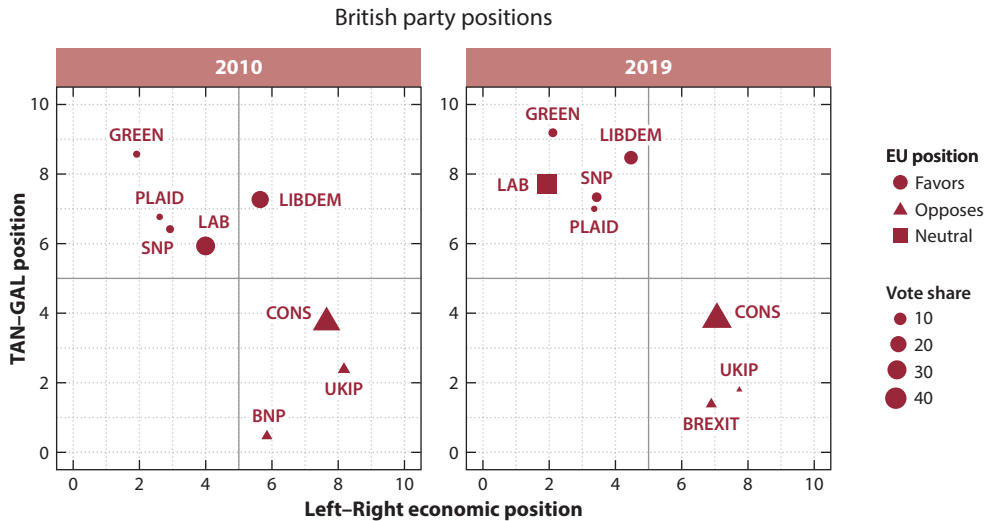


Figure 6

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in the United Kingdom. For each party, the TAN–GAL cultural position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Anti-EU parties not in parliament are included. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: BNP, British National Party; BREXIT, Brexit Party; CONS, British Conservative Party; GREEN, Green Party; LAB, Labour Party; LIBDEM, Liberal Democratic Party; PLAID, Party of Wales; SNP, Scottish National Party; UKIP, United Kingdom Independence Party; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

its clientelist practices” and later added strong xenophobic and anti-immigrant appeals (Kitschelt 2002, p. 185). In 2018, the ÖVP formed a coalition with the FPÖ, as it had done previously in 2000. But unlike in 2000, the ÖVP–FPÖ coalition was not condemned by Austria’s EU partners—a sign of Europe’s changing political landscape (Mudde 2019, p. 138). In power, the FPÖ put a strong stamp on policy making with aggressive anti-immigrant and anti-Islam policies that fit well with the ÖVP’s own agenda. But the coalition was short-lived, as two of the peculiarities of today’s far right—criminal dealings for personal and party gain and strong affinity to Russia—came on full display in the so-called Ibiza affair, along with the more longstanding problems of professional incompetence (Art 2011).

Italy: A New Left Populist Party and an Ethnopolulist Party

In contrast to Austria, the differences between Italy’s party system in 2010 and in 2019 are striking. **Figure 9** shows the birth of a powerful, left populist party, the Five Star Movement, and a jump in contestation and polarization on the cultural dimension. The Five Star Movement is a new anti-establishment political force calling for internet-based democratic participation by the people. It is difficult to categorize: scholars argue that it falls somewhere between an inclusionary and an exclusionary conception of the people (Font et al. 2021). Since 2015, the longstanding far right and strongly TAN party called the League (formerly Northern League) has gained prominence and electoral strength under a charismatic new leader, Matteo Salvini. While differing on inclusion and on immigration, the League and the Five Star Movement both take strong antiestablishment positions that include opposition to the European Union (Ivaldi et al. 2017, Verbeek et al. 2018). Following the 2018 elections, the victorious Five Star Movement formed a government with the League, whose electoral share had jumped to 17%. But like the ethnopolulist FPÖ in Austria,

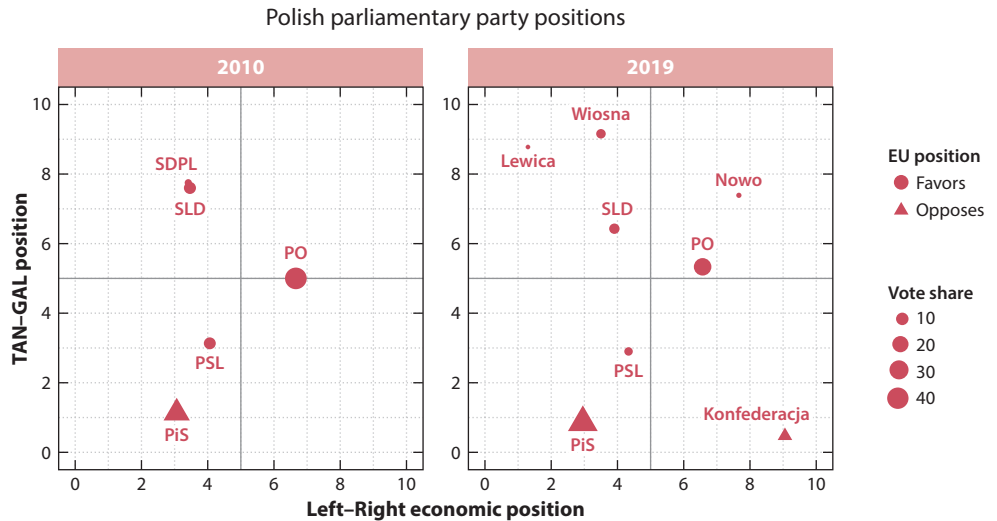


Figure 7

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Poland. For each party, the TAN–GAL cultural position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: Konfederacja, Confederation Liberty and Independence; Lewica, Left Together; Nowo, Modern; PiS, Law and Justice Party; PO, Civic Platform; PSL, Polish People’s Party; SDPL, Social Democracy of Poland; SLD, Democratic Left Alliance; Wiosna, Spring; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

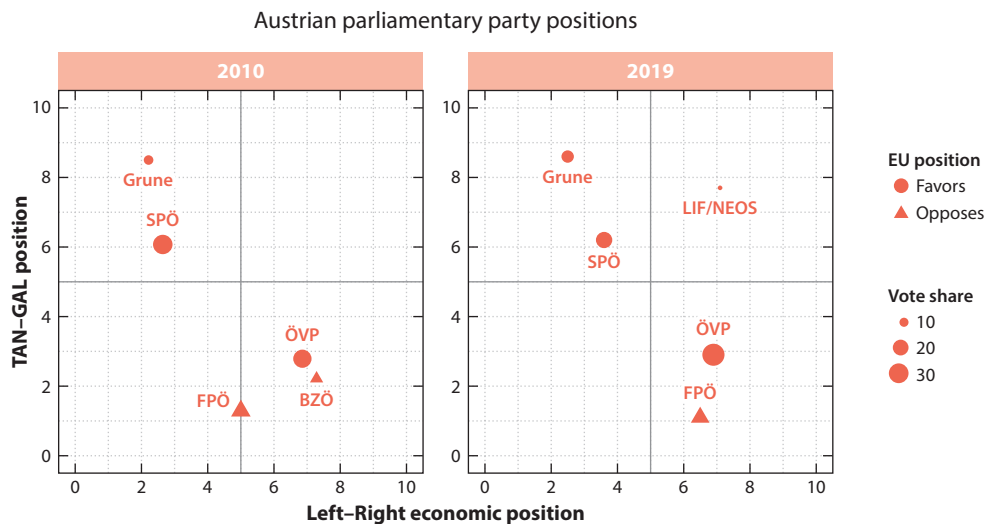


Figure 8

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Austria. For each party, the TAN–GAL cultural position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: BZÖ, Alliance for the Future of Austria; FPÖ, Freedom Party; Grune, Greens; LIF/NEOS, New Austria and Liberal Forum; ÖVP, People’s Party; SPÖ, Social Democratic Party; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

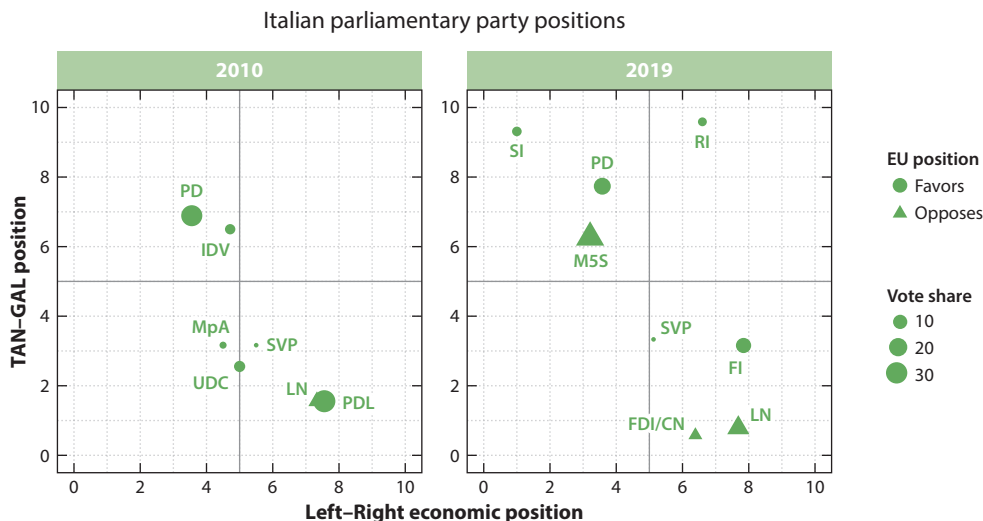


Figure 9

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Italy. For each party, the TAN–GAL position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: FDI/CN, Brothers of Italy; FI, Forza Italia; IDV, Italy of Values; LN, League (formerly Northern League); M5S, Five Star Movement; MpA, Movement for Autonomies; PD, Democratic Party; PDL (People of Freedom, temporary name for Forza Italia); RI, Italian Radicals; SI, Italian Left; SVP, South Tyrolean People's Party; UDC, Union of the Center; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

the League overplayed its hand. A year later, the Five Star Movement formed a government instead with the left-GAL Democratic Party and adopted more mainstream positions (Moschella & Rhodes 2020). For its part, the League left a stamp on policy making with vicious policies against dark-skinned migrants, and the party continues to broadcast racist and anti-immigration appeals that resonate with a stable group of supporters that it shares with the small but rising, ideologically similar, Brothers of Italy (FdI/CN) party. Ethnopolulist and antiestablishment parties are likely to benefit from ongoing fragmentation and instability in Italy's governing coalitions.

France: A New Centrist Populist Party Challenged from Many Sides

In France, as in Italy, the changes between 2010 and 2019 are impressive. **Figure 10** shows the fading of mainstream parties and the emergence of La République en Marche! (LREM), the cosmopolitan, pro-European, technocratic party of President Emmanuel Macron. LREM is a genuinely new political entity that was heralded as a lightly populist counterstrike to the far right in France and across Europe. LREM faces populist challengers that take far left positions on the economic dimension and those that take intensely TAN positions on the cultural dimension (**Figure 10**). The vote share of the longtime far right party National Rally (formerly the National Front) jumped to 8% in the 2017 elections, and its leader, Marine Le Pen, won 34% of the vote in the second round of the presidential elections that year. While LREM won the 2017 legislative elections in a landslide, it has struggled to sustain popular support. Among many reasons, Macron's establishment background in combination with his strong cosmopolitan, pro-EU positions may put him at a disadvantage; successful populists with similar backgrounds such as Boris Johnson and Viktor Orbán have created antiestablishment credentials by pushing

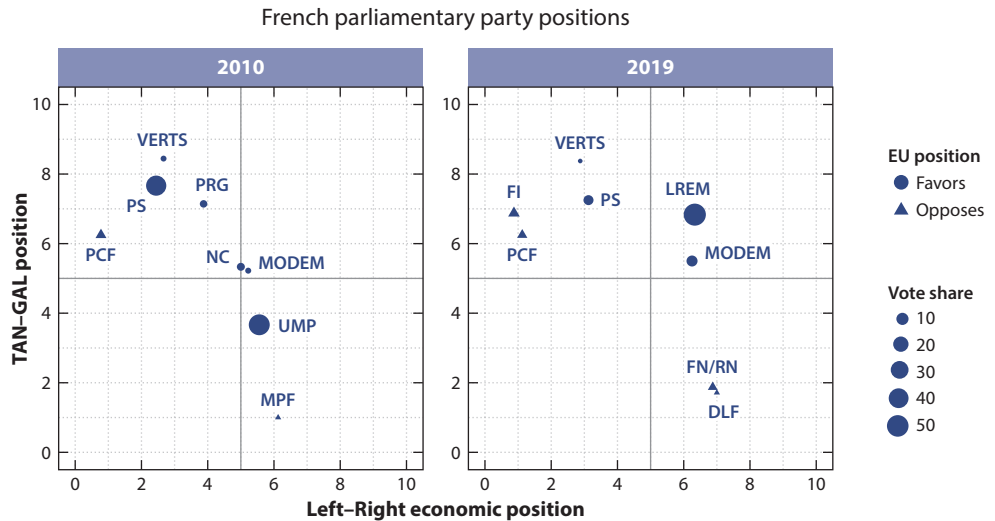


Figure 10

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in France. For each party, the TAN–GAL cultural position is plotted against the left–right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: DLF, France Arise; FI, France Unbowed; LREM, La République en Marche!; MODEM, Democratic Movement; MPF, Movement for France; NC, New Center; PCF, Communist Party; PRG, Left Radical Party; PS, Socialist Party; RN, National Rally (formerly FN, National Front); VERTS, Greens; UMP, Union for a Popular Movement; TAN–GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist–green, alternative, libertarian.

the Manichean us-versus-them narrative to the European and civilizational stage. Margulies (2020) argues that LREM may be eclipsed by other socially liberal, cosmopolitan parties at the next elections; the old socialist and green parties may even stage a comeback. Whether LREM survives or not, competition on the cultural dimension as well as the economic dimension look set to continue in the French party system (Gougou & Persico 2017).

Spain and Greece: New Left Populist Parties Tempered by Governing

In Spain and Greece, the financial crisis created a political opening for left populist parties to challenge mainstream parties on the economic dimension. **Figures 11** and **12** illustrate how parties taking left positions on the economic dimension and inclusive GAL positions on the cultural dimension have strengthened in both party systems between 2010 and 2019. Among the left-GAL parties, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece foreground antiestablishment rhetoric along populist lines. While both rose to prominence as far left populist parties that were imagined by some as a leftist revolution of representation in European politics, and by others as a threat to public order and democracy, they have become fairly ordinary parties, in and out of government, with strongly inclusive views (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014); unlike the Five Star Movement, they explicitly emphasize the inclusion of outgroups such as refugees, migrants, and minorities (Font et al. 2021).

In Spain, Podemos has always supported European integration. After the 2019 elections, it joined a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party. Far right, anti-immigrant, and anti-EU parties were virtually absent from the Spanish parliament until Vox broke

Spanish parliamentary party positions

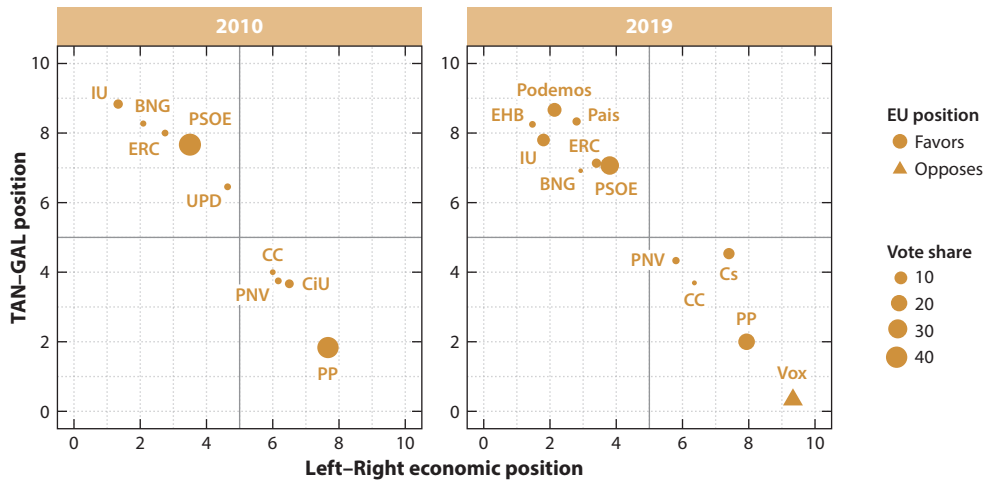


Figure 11

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Spain. For each party, the TAN-GAL cultural position is plotted against the left-right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: BNG, Galician Nationalist Bloc; CC, Canarian Coalition; CiU, Convergence and Unity; Cs, Citizens; EHB, Basque Country Unite; ERC, Republican Left of Catalonia; IU, United Left; Pais, More Country; PNV, Basque Nationalist Party; Podemos, We Can; PP, People's Party; PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; UPD, Union, Progress and Democracy; Vox, Voice; TAN-GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist-green, alternative, libertarian.

Greek parliamentary party positions

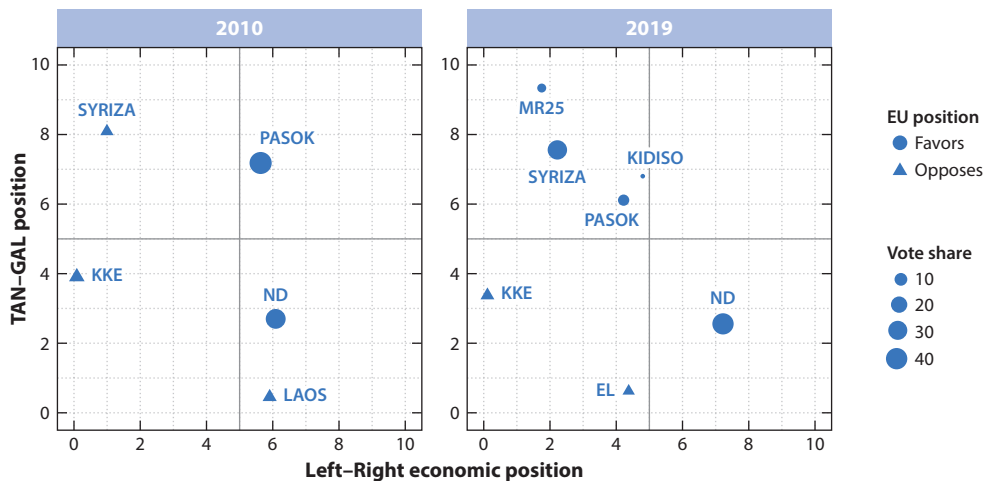


Figure 12

Parliamentary party positions in 2010 and 2019 in Greece. For each party, the TAN-GAL cultural position is plotted against the left-right economic position. Data are from the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020). Abbreviations: EL, Greek Solution; KIDISO, Movement of Democratic Socialists; KKE, Communist Party of Greece; MR25, European Realistic Disobedience Front; LAOS, Popular Orthodox Rally; ND, New Democracy; PASOK, Panhellenic Socialist Movement; SYRIZA, Coalition of the Radical Left; TAN-GAL, traditional, authoritarian, nationalist-green, alternative, libertarian.

through in the 2019 elections with 15% of the vote, trading on opposition to the Catalan secessionist movement.

In Greece, Syriza won power in the elections in 2015 and governed with a small coalition partner until 2019. Syriza's time in office was defined by its transformation from an antiestablishment party to a pro-European governing party forced to implement difficult austerity measures orthogonal to its left populist platform as part of the third EU bailout of Greece (Katsanidou & Otjes 2015). While Syriza lost to the conservative New Democracy party, the 2019 elections confirmed Syriza as a durable player in the Greek party system and also demonstrated a seamless transfer of power from left populist rule (Kyriazi 2019). Unlike Italy, Greece has no strong ethnopopulist party, even though it continues to face the challenge of caring for large numbers of migrants arriving by sea; the combined vote share of far right parties has hovered around only 7% over the last decade. While in office, Syriza did transform regional politics by negotiating the Prespa Agreement with neighboring North Macedonia, which appeared to cost it votes in the 2019 elections (Kyriazi 2019). Previous Greek governments had used a dispute over the name for domestic political gain for more than two decades at great harm to the prospects for democracy and EU membership for North Macedonia.

POPULISM AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY: VERTICAL REPRESENTATION, YES; HORIZONTAL CHECKS, NO

We have surveyed evidence that the rise of populist parties has shaped political competition in a variety of ways. What about the relationship between populism and the quality of democracy? Scholars have hypothesized that populist parties can both improve and degrade democracy and that the impact depends on the position and the ideology of the parties. On the one hand, populist parties may boost participation and representation by invoking the direct, vertical representation of the people. They may rally citizens to mobilize for causes that they care about, such as fighting corruption, and inspire more individuals to participate in the political arena. They may also provide an important voice for ordinary people in times of economic and political crisis (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014). The data suggest that populist parties do boost participation and improve vertical representation, especially if they contest elections but remain in the opposition and if they belong to the political left wing (Juon & Bochsler 2020). Left-wing populist parties with an inclusive conception of the people may also have a positive impact on minority rights (Huber & Schimpf 2017).

On the other hand, populist parties may have a negative impact on horizontal checks and balances and on the fairness of political competition. While parties that use populist appeals are not all led by aspiring authoritarians (Bonikowski 2017), on the global level the data suggest a propensity for undermining democratic institutions. Scholars argue that government by populists across the ideological spectrum is associated with weakening institutional safeguards such as the rule of law and state transparency (Juon & Bochsler 2020; see also Haggard & Kaufman 2021, Huber & Schimpf 2017). Populist parties across the board question the competence and the integrity of mainstream parties and conceptualize the elite as a separate "caste" whose interests are at odds with those of the people (Ivaldi et al. 2017). By presenting themselves as the only legitimate and trustworthy representatives of the people, populist parties signal a tension with one of the anchors of liberal democracy—competition among political parties on a level political playing field. At the European level, however, the data suggest a striking difference: While time in government has transformed left populist parties Syriza, Podemos, and the Five Star Movement into more ordinary democratic parties, it does not appear to have had a similar tempering effect on ethnopopulist

parties. Indeed, it is specifically ethnopopulist parties in power that have undermined democratic institutions over the last decade in Europe.

ETHNOPOPULISM AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN EUROPE

The greatest impact of populism on party systems in Europe may not be the rise of new parties, new issues, and new divisions; it may be changes to the playing field where political competition takes place (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Focusing on the choices of political leaders in power, one of the fastest-growing literatures in comparative politics today is on democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust 2018) at the hands of incumbents who erode liberal democratic institutions in order to amplify their power. Democratic backsliding is defined by Bermeo (2016, p. 5; emphasis original) as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of *any* of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” and by Waldner & Lust (2018, p. 95) as a “deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance.” Around the globe, “authoritarian populism” (Norris & Inglehart 2019) has been associated with democratic backsliding and constitutional engineering (Stoyan 2020) by incumbents that position themselves on the economic left (Venezuela, Ecuador) and, more often, on the cultural right (Turkey, India, Brazil, Israel, the United States) (see also Pappas 2019). Art (2020) argues, however, that populism is not the defining feature of parties engaging in authoritarian practices, and that studies attributing backsliding to the rise of global populism are therefore misleading.

In Europe, democratic backsliding over the past decade has been the work of incumbent parties in postcommunist Europe that take antiestablishment and TAN positions and use strong ethnopopulist appeals (Vachudova 2020). As a consequence of Fidesz rule since 2010, Hungary is now an authoritarian regime. In Poland, PiS has been in power since 2015 and has dramatically eroded liberal democracy. In the Czech Republic, coalition governments led by the ANO party, which presents itself as an anticorruption, technocratic, liberal party, have captured state administration and policy making for oligarchic and criminal interests (Bustikova & Guasti 2019, Hanley & Vachudova 2018, Havlík 2019). Scholars point to variations on ethnopopulism and democratic erosion in other postcommunist EU states as well (among many, Barton Hronešová 2021, Džankić & Keil 2017, Lorenz & Anders 2021, Zankina 2016). This raises many new puzzles that I group into four broad areas of inquiry: How do incumbents justify backsliding? What methods do they use to amass power? What do they deliver for their voters? And how do we measure whether and how much backsliding has taken place? In this section, I briefly look at each in turn.

Justification

Ethnopopulist parties argue for a majoritarian conception of democracy that reflects the will of the people. The logic of majoritarian democracy, also embraced by the radical right, helps justify democratic backsliding in two critical ways. First, it privileges the will of the deserving people over the rights of minorities (Canovan 1999)—and therefore tends to be accompanied by the vilification of groups that challenge traditional values, including women and members of the LGBTQ community.³ Second, it portrays the ethnopopulist incumbents as the sole protectors of the interests of the real people against the predatory elite. Partisanship elicited by ethnopopulist and

³Some opposition parties who use ethnopopulist appeals in Western Europe, however, vow to defend the rights of women and members of the LGBTQ community in the face of purported threats from Muslim immigrants (see Lancaster 2020).

authoritarian parties can be so intense that the rule of rival parties is understood as devastating—a threat that justifies democratic backsliding even for citizens who otherwise support democratic institutions (Svolik 2019). The use of Manichean language helps legitimize policy decisions (Bartha et al. 2020) as well as maneuvers to keep allegedly dangerous opposition elites out of power at all costs (Grzymala-Busse 2019b, Müller 2017). Ethnopolitists in Poland and Hungary have amplified this point in quite an extraordinary way, claiming that in 1989, opposition forces betrayed the nation by colluding with the communists. Therefore, it is not enough to keep the opposition out of office; incumbents must be given extraordinary power in order to undo this historic mistake and finally rid the country of communism (Kubik & Bernhard 2014). This is accepted by the base even though, ironically, the Fidesz and PiS governments use many of the same methods to control the polity—and to fuse the party with the state—that the communist regimes used before 1989 (Ekiert 2020, Enyedi 2020, Sadurski 2019, Scheppele 2013). Indeed, as they use the control of information to construct alternate realities for their followers, ethnopolitists more broadly appear to share remarkable resilience in the face of hypocrisy (Vachudova 2020).

Methods

Incumbents intent on amplifying and extending their power through democratic backsliding have used a broad array of similar methods. Vachudova (2020) shows that in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, parties that won power using a playbook of ethnopolitist appeals have drawn on a companion playbook for eroding democratic institutions. Incumbents use the logic of majoritarian democracy to justify moves to control the policy-making process; to exclude experts and civil society actors (Bartha et al. 2020); to eliminate independent media; and to control the cultural, academic, artistic, and economic life of the country. They use state-funded media, domestic groups, and institutions—ministries, museums, historical institutes, universities, and cultural institutions—to spread illiberal narratives throughout society (Enyedi 2020, Greskovits 2020, Grzymala-Busse 2019b, Sadurski 2019). They set about dismantling liberal democracy because, at its heart, ethnopolitism is a strategy to end political turnover and expand opportunities for rent-seeking. As Waldner & Lust (2018, p. 110) argue, incumbents are “no longer satisfied playing strictly by the rules, losing gracefully, and competing again in the next round.”

Incumbents also abolish constraints on rent-seeking and capture parts of the economy to amplify their political power (Magyar 2016, Ádám 2019), even though, ironically, they win elections by using strong anticorruption appeals. What merits more study is how ethnopolitist parties purposefully conflate neoliberal economic policies with liberal democracy. They argue against liberalism as such while signaling that moving away from neoliberal economic policies also necessitates dismantling liberal democracy. Meanwhile, they continue many neoliberal policies (Bohle & Greskovits 2019) and enrich themselves by adjusting taxes, eliminating environmental safeguards, rejecting climate science, and cutting or changing regulations to benefit their own businesses.

An additional source of power has been the learning and mutual aid that have taken place among ethnopolitist regimes on the European and world stages. For years, the positions of political parties in the EU East were “tempered” by the leverage of the EU (Vachudova 2005, 2008), but now the tables have turned: Ethnopolitist incumbents protect one another from sanctions for violating EU rules and values and trade favors with authoritarian regimes intent on scuttling EU policy making (Kelemen 2020, Meunier & Vachudova 2018). Whereas far right parties focused historically on hatreds of adjoining nations, today’s ethnopolitists have identified a flexible cast of common enemies centered on Islam, international institutions, the LGBTQ community and cosmopolitan elites—and a common set of friends, such as the Trump administration and the

Putin regime, that have supported ethnopopulist and far right parties across Europe (Enyedi 2020, Orenstein 2019).

Benefits

What have incumbents been able to deliver to their voters? Fidesz and PiS have combined ethnopopulist appeals on the cultural right with positions in favor of redistribution and welfare chauvinism on the economic left. Like the FPÖ and the League, in power they have delivered on intense rhetoric and policies opposing immigration by people of color and also, more variably, supporting what they call traditional values. They have also joined far right parties across Europe in embracing nativist welfare policies that cater to working-class voters angered by inequality and opposed to immigration (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015, Magni 2020, Rovny & Polk 2020). In power, Fidesz and PiS have offered targeted, demography-oriented social policies to support traditional families and strengthen those whom they identify as the people. The PiS and Fidesz governments can afford to buy votes with generous child payments (Grzebalska & Kováts 2018), but only in Poland have they reduced poverty and inequality, while in Hungary such payments are “welfare for the wealthy” (Szikra 2018).

Measurement

A challenge for scholars is how to measure whether and how intensively democratic backsliding is taking place. The quest for more power is perhaps universal among incumbents, so where do normal political behaviors end and backsliding maneuvers begin? Waldner & Lust (2018) explore existing indicators of regime type and explain why they are ill suited for measuring regime change. Scheppele (2013) shows, for example, how Fidesz managed for years to implement many reforms that appeared acceptable in isolation—and hardly moved various indices—but together added up to the elimination of liberal democracy. Haggard & Kaufman (2021) compare and graph backsliding using different indices and highlight the strengths of the Varieties of Democracy data set (Coppedge et al. 2020). Some scholars argue for a dichotomous measure of backsliding based on the presence or absence of formal institutional changes in order to prevent conceptual stretching (Bakke & Sitter 2020). Others argue for a continuous measure of democratic backsliding that takes into account a broader set of changes to the polity (Haggard & Kaufman 2021, Vachudova 2020). These changes may include the erasures of informal norms—for example, the end of transparency and representation for opposition parties in state or state-funded bodies (Dimitrova 2018, Grzymala-Busse 2019b). They may also include more clandestine measures such as the cooptation of the civil service, the judiciary, the police, the media, and regulatory bodies for the benefit of oligarchic and criminal interests (Hanley & Vachudova 2018). They may even stem from speech—from the statements of elected or appointed officials that brand opposition politicians as enemies or that demonize groups of citizens based on their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion in ways that are likely to undermine the fundamental liberal democratic principle of equal protection under the law (Vachudova 2020).

CONCLUSION

Party systems in many European states have changed substantially over the last decade as populist parties on the economic left, in the center, and on the cultural right have animated political competition on the economic and the cultural dimensions. Mainstream parties have declined, polarization has increased, and competition on the cultural dimension has intensified or even

become dominant. New left and center populist parties have upended existing structures of competition in some of the eight cases I have surveyed. However it is not political outsiders but longstanding conservative and far right parties, remodeled using ethnopopulism, that have been the most fateful for the substance of political competition and the trajectory of domestic politics.

The positions that populist parties on the cultural right and the economic left have taken over the last decade in Europe are profoundly different in many respects—especially in whether they adopt an inclusionary conception of the people or an exclusionary one that trades on scapegoating marginalized groups. What is even more striking is how differently they have governed, indicating that varieties of populism should shape our expectations of what happens when populists rule. In power, left populist parties have drifted to the ordinary, sometimes even shedding antisystem and anti-EU positions. In contrast, ethnopopulist parties have dismantled democratic institutions in order to concentrate power and prevent turnover. Hungary is now an authoritarian regime, keen to help likeminded incumbents follow a similar path. Orbán challenges the legitimacy of the European Union by seeking to decouple it from liberal democracy and to disrupt internal and foreign policy decisions in exchange for favors from other authoritarian regimes (Meunier & Vachudova 2018). It remains to be seen whether 2021 will bring a change of international fortune as ethnopopulist incumbents lose the support of Washington and face a greater determination by EU leaders to sanction democratic backsliding.

Across Europe, ethnopopulist parties with similar electoral campaigns have seen a rise in popularity, indicating that the substance of political contestation in the east and the west is converging in some ways. However, while Brexit must be acknowledged as a form of backsliding in its own right (McEwan 2020), backsliding has otherwise taken place almost entirely in the east. Postcommunism has been theorized as a “background vulnerability” (Waldner & Lust 2018) associated with democratic backsliding. Can we attribute this to different attitudes among postcommunist citizens or to other legacies flowing from the communist or precommunist past? Once aspiring authoritarians take power, they work to fix the political playing field in their favor if they have the opportunity (Bakke & Sitter 2020). Are postcommunist incumbents better versed at capturing the state, or are postcommunist democratic institutions simply weak and easy to dismantle? While we might expect that if the FPÖ in Austria or the League in Italy won a parliamentary majority, they would wish to follow the same playbook as Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, we might ask what keeps them from obtaining such a majority and also whether, if they did, domestic institutions would fare better in repelling the attack.

Europe’s third shock in two decades, the coronavirus crisis, is now shaping party systems across Europe. In states where backsliding is already taking place, early evidence indicates that the pandemic is strengthening the hand of the incumbents who are dismantling democracy (Ádám 2020, Bustikova & Baboš 2020). Across Europe, however, a severe economic downturn, lower immigration, and greater demand for competent government may push party competition away from the cultural dimension and back to issues on the economic dimension. When economies recover, better welfare states, investment in education, more market regulation, ambitious policies to fight climate change, and increasing international coordination may yet strengthen the advanced capitalist democracies that, Iversen & Soskice (2020) argue, have historically been very resilient and continue to show great promise.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Courtney Blackington, Lenka Bustikova, Catherine de Vries, Seth Jolly, Tim Haughton, Hanna Kleider, Gary Marks, and Martin Naunov, as well as anonymous reviewers, for very helpful comments on earlier versions. I also thank Courtney Blackington for excellent research assistance. I am grateful for the insights of participants at conferences and seminars at the European University Institute, King's College London and Princeton University and to members of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) team.

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