

Party choice in Europe: Social cleavages and the rise of populist parties

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq**James L Guth**  and **Brent F Nelsen** 

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Abstract

Does the rise of populist parties of the right and left indicate the fading of the traditional left–right cleavage and the rise of a new transnational cleavage? Our analysis finds evidence of a continued left–right cleavage that divides European parties by religion and class. Our analysis also finds strong evidence for an additional transnational cleavage that pits the populists of right and left against the traditional parties of the “frozen” center. Right-Wing Populist parties attract young, working-class, and less educated voters, more often male, who are disconnected from religious institutions, perceive the national economy and their own economic status in a negative vein, and do not like immigrants. They distrust their own national government and the European Union. The Populist Left trends even younger, lower in status and education, more pessimistic about economic concerns, and just as hostile to political elites. The populists—left and right—may be divided over some aspects of modern culture, but they are united in their opposition to European elites.

Keywords

Europe, political parties, populism, religion, social cleavages

European party politics is shifting dramatically. Recent elections in Britain, the Netherlands, Austria, France, Germany, and Italy add further evidence to the growing realization among politicians and scholars that the political ground is moving in Europe. The most obvious change is the rise in electoral support for populist parties of the far right and left at the expense of the traditional parties of the center (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 9). On the far right, the Austrian Freedom Party, French National Rally (formerly Front), Alternative for Germany, Danish People’s Party, Sweden Democrats, Dutch Freedom Party, Hungarian Jobbik—and several other parties across Europe—have solidified their positions as major parliamentary actors, while populist parties of the left, such as Greece’s Syriza, Spain’s Podemos, and Italy’s Five Star Movement, have also attracted significant support—with electorates in Greece and Italy even handing their Populist Left parties the reins of government. This slow-moving political earthquake has now touched nearly every European democracy.

How do we describe and explain these changes? Beginning in the 1960s, a number of scholars have demonstrated that European countries are experiencing simultaneously a period of dealignment characterized by the weakening of confessional and class voting and a process of realignment as new parties of the libertarian and populist left and the

populist right have emerged and gained support (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). This article explores the economic, ideological, and cultural factors contributing to party support across the European continent, paying particular attention to support for populist parties of right and left. In doing so, we contribute to a growing literature on the sources of populist support and the nature of the new underlying social cleavage.

The decline of traditional party cleavages

In the 1960s, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) explained the post-war European party system as the political manifestation of several key social cleavages that emerged directly from historical “revolutions.” The national revolution, for instance, divided European society between the central state and the peripheral communities and between the secular state and a supranational church, while the industrial

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revolution pitted city against countryside and employer against worker (Hooghe and Marks, 2017). These cleavages created the political divisions and multiparty systems characteristic of 20th-century European democracies. And while it was generally easy to see all three cleavages at work in most countries, the economic division between the interventionist working class left and the market-supporting middle-class right emerged as most significant in the postwar period. Religion still mattered to vote choice, but social class was most important—people voted their economic interests (Dalton, 2016).

Not long after Lipset and Rokkan published their seminal work, these “frozen” party systems began to melt. A “silent revolution” weakened the old cleavages and opened a new one (Inglehart, 1977). Postwar baby boomers who knew nothing of the Great Depression and World War II abandoned the materialist values of their parents in favor of new quality of life values, looking beyond physical security to personal freedom. These new “post-materialist” citizens were less concerned with wages, housing, worker safety, job security, and pensions and more preoccupied with freedom of expression, sexual freedom, minority rights, women’s liberation, and environmental protection. New parties emerged reflecting those concerns in the last quarter of the 20th century, including new Green parties and more radical parties of the left (as opposed to traditional socialist or social democratic parties). Paralleling these developments, however, was the rise of new right-wing movements in France, Denmark, Norway, Austria, and elsewhere, balanced more recently by the appearance of parties on the far left in France, Greece, Spain, Italy, and other countries. Commentators have often labeled all these parties “populist” and dismissed them as radical fringe elements. Their continued growth in the first two decades of the present century, however, has forced the traditional political class to take them seriously, especially as several have now shared responsibility for national government in a number of countries (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Greece, Italy, and Norway).

The rise of populist parties

The emergence of populist parties, first on the right and now increasingly on the left,¹ characterizes the party systems of most European countries. The rise of right-wing populists has attracted the attention of many students of political parties (e.g. Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2015; Betz, 1994; Camus and Lebourg, 2017; Kitschelt, 1995; Minkenberg, 2000; Oesch, 2008; Williams, 2006); attention to the populist left has begun to grow only recently (Hooghe and Marks, 2008; March and Rommerskirchen, 2015; Visser et al., 2014). Who are these populists?

Definitions of populism converge around a small set of characteristics (Moffitt, 2016; Muller, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel,

2018). Populists, first and foremost, are anti-establishment: they are intent on overthrowing a corrupt, insulated, privileged elite. Second, populists are anti-pluralists: they perceive the world in us–them terms, believing that they alone speak the mind of the people. And third, populists display authoritarian tendencies: they promise to simplify and make more efficient the exercise of power. By definition, populists stand opposed to traditional parties which value diversity, encourage pluralism, and endorse an openness to the world. And they do not fit neatly into the late 20th-century European party cleavage structure.

Who supports these populist parties? Most scholars have focused on the “right wing,” “far right,” or “radical right” populist parties, but recent studies treat populist parties—left and right—as a single phenomenon (Inglehart and Norris, 2016, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Marks et al., 2017; Rooduijn et al., 2017). Do these parties represent a new economic underclass of people who have suffered the deleterious consequences of globalization and technological change? Do they represent a cultural backlash against an oppressive post-materialist elite (Inglehart and Norris, 2016)? Or perhaps both, reflecting a deep sense of being “left behind” (Gidron and Hall, 2017).

Scholars agree (mostly) on the traits and attitudes of supporters of populist parties (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002; Montgomery and Winter, 2015). Men are more likely to support far-right parties, as are younger people. Less educated and lower status citizens are also more likely to vote for the populist right. The effect of religiosity on far-right support is somewhat complicated. Some scholars see religiosity encouraging right-wing populism by producing “radical right attitudes” (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009; Molle, 2018) and “authoritarian and populist values” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), while others see a more direct—if weak—negative effect on right-wing vote (Montgomery and Winter, 2015). In any case, most find right-wing populists more religious than the general population, but the gap is never wide. Moreover, Arzheimer and Carter (2009) and Montgomery and Winter (2015) show that Christian voters are far less likely to support right-wing parties when a “mainstream rightist” party (e.g. a Christian Democratic party) is present to provide a “vaccine effect” for religious voters. The same general demographic profile holds for populist left-wing parties—just less so (Marks et al., 2017). In other words, the populist left is also more male, younger, less educated,² and lower class than the general population, but not as extreme on these dimensions as the populist right. The exception is religiosity: left-wing populists are dramatically more secular than the general population (Marks et al., 2017).

As for attitudes, populists of all stripes are dissatisfied with democracy, mistrust their national governments, loath global governance and the European Union (EU),³ and dislike immigrants (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Marks et al., 2017). This characterization, however, misses key

differences between left and right (Rooduijn et al., 2017). Left populists distrust the establishment because it supports a capitalist economy that has led to a winner-take-all system, rewarding only the top 1% (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Right-wing populists agree that the economic system is rigged against the middle and lower classes, but they also reject mainstream politics on cultural grounds (Bornschieer, 2010; Oesch, 2008), abhorring immigration and multiculturalism, globalism, feminism, environmentalism, and preoccupation with LGBT rights. In short, left-wing populists reject the capitalist social order, while right-wing populists reject the liberal post-material society. Thus, an analysis of the backgrounds and attitudes of populist party voters from left and right lends credence to both major theories of populist support: these voters are economically disgruntled *and* culturally alienated from the elite establishment.

The rise of the populists presents political scientists with a puzzle (Marks et al., 2017): Is the growing support for these parties evidence of a realignment of the European electorate around a new cleavage? Deepening secularization, unsettling economic changes and higher educational attainment have eroded the social bases of support for confessional and class-based parties of the center-left and center-right (Dalton, 2016). But has this severely weakened the traditional left–right orientation of European party systems, making way for a powerful new social cleavage?

Caramani (2006, 2011), in an analysis of 264 national legislative elections, demonstrates the continued strength of the left–right dimension, despite the rise of populist parties, finding little evidence for a Europe-wide transnationalist–nationalist cleavage. Caramani’s first claim finds widespread support in the literature: the traditional left–right split persists in European society (Kriesi, 2010; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018; Stoll, 2010; Tóka and Gosselin, 2010). But the second—that there is little evidence for a new cleavage—is contradicted by numerous studies that describe the new divide using a variety of terms: post-materialist/materialist (Inglehart, 1977), libertarian/authoritarian (Kitschelt, 1995), Green-alternative-libertarian versus traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (GAL/TAN, Hooghe et al., 2002), educated/less educated (Stubager, 2010), libertarian-universalistic/traditionalist-communitarian (Bornschieer, 2010), and left libertarian/right populist (Hutter, 2014). Common to these cleavages is a focus on values over economic interests (Kriesi, 2010). Hooghe and Marks (2017), however, posit a new “transnational” cleavage—roughly pitting those favoring more open borders and greater transnational cooperation against those desiring a more protected national environment—that combines values concerns with economic discontent caused by globalization and integration (cf. Marks et al., 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

In our analysis of Europe-wide opinion data,⁴ we expect to find traditional class- and religion-based social cleavages

that underlie support for established European party families. We also expect to find evidence of the new cleavage described by others emerging in the form of support for new populist parties of the right and left. As Hooghe and Marks (2017) have argued, the crisis facing Europe caused by the process of globalization has created new divisions in European countries that cannot be expressed through the old “frozen” party systems of the mid-20th century but must result in the creation of new political parties. If they are correct, we should see new social bases of support for populist parties of the left and right that differ in fundamental ways from the traditional parties of the center.

Data and methods

The analysis in this study proceeds in three steps. First, we use the 2014 European Parliamentary Election Study (EPES) to measure the impact of the traditional sources of party alignment: religious and social class divisions. We then assess the impact of economic insecurity and cultural and political discontent to test whether a new cleavage has emerged. Finally, we create a comprehensive multifactor model to assess the strength of each group of factors when controlling for the others. We find evidence that the traditional religious and class cleavages (the left–right dimension) remain strong predictors of party vote, but that economic assessments and cultural divisions (the new transnationalist–nationalist dimension) are also significant factors.

The EPES has the advantage of administration in all EU countries with a very large sample ($n = 30,064$), which we have weighted by size of country population. Thus, the sample represents the putative “European public” envisioned by avid integrationists.⁵ For our choice of measures tapping party preference, we had a number of options. Respondents were asked to report several “party” items: (1) their vote in the 2014 EU elections, (2) their vote in the previous national election, (3) their intended vote in the next national election, and (4) whether or not they felt close to any political party and, if so, how close. Each measure has advantages and disadvantages: turnout for the EU parliamentary vote was relatively low; European Parliamentary votes are often “second-order” contests where many citizens desert their usual party choice in national elections in favor of a protest vote (Marsh and Franklin, 1996); past elections are less relevant than recent ones; and the party closeness measure leaves out many respondents. We chose the *intended vote in future national elections* as our dependent variable, as it includes the largest number of respondents and, we think, is most relevant to assessment of party alignments. Experimentation using the other measures, or a combination of them, reveals a few differences but produces essentially similar results.

The next task was to assign respondents to party groups based on their intended vote choice response. This is a

complex and not entirely straightforward task. The EPES recorded preferences for scores of different parties across Europe, which we assigned to major contemporary party families: *right-wing populists*; *Conservative* parties on the right without origins in the Christian Democratic movement (such as the British Tories); the historic *Christian Democratic* parties; the classic *Liberal* parties; the *Socialists* (including Social Democrats); the *Greens*; and finally, *Populist Left* parties (see Online Appendix). These assignments are sometimes complicated, especially in Eastern Europe, as parties have undergone considerable changes in identity, often over short histories. We have relied on several sources for our placement: the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017), the European Council on Foreign Relations (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016), party membership in the European Parliamentary groups, and, finally, our own reading of recent press reports of party activity. For the vast majority of parties, these sources are in agreement; where they were not, we used our own judgment. A few small parties were left out: old-style Communist parties were excluded, as were small regional parties that could not be classified in one of the categories. In addition, a few others, such as the German Pirate Party, also defied classification. And the minority of respondents who refused to name a party preference for the next national election were obviously not included.

Any analysis of the factors influencing contemporary party alignments raises important questions of methodology. Given our special interest in the constituencies of the new left and right populist parties in Europe, we might have followed the example of previous researchers and simply used logistic regression or other similar statistical procedures for analyzing the differences between the Right-Wing Populists and the rest of the electorate (cf. Inglehart and Norris, 2016) or between partisans of the Populist Left and other citizens. But such analysis runs the risk of distorting assessments of the factors giving rise to these parties. To cite one example, Inglehart and Norris (2016, 2019) find that Right-Wing Populists are more religious than the rest of the European public; our analysis below casts doubts on that finding, but more importantly, shows that Right-Wing Populists are much less religious than members of other conservative parties, suggesting quite a different conclusion regarding the role of religion in the rise of these parties. To allow for more detailed and nuanced comparisons, then, we use discriminant analysis to identify factors underlying contemporary European party alignments, thereby putting populist right and left parties in a larger and more appropriate comparative context.

Discriminant analysis allows us to study the differences between several groups (such as party adherents), using a large number of “discriminating variables” simultaneously, producing two or more canonical discriminant functions, which are linear combinations of those variables (Klecka, 1980). In the tables below, we report the structure

coefficients for each discriminating function, which represent the correlation between each variable and that function; thus, the largest coefficient(s) on each function identifies its “meaning.” We have also reported each functions’ percentage of the total discriminating power of the analysis: in some cases, two or more functions may make substantial contributions to differentiating groups; in other instances, one function clearly dominates. In the second section of each table, we report the score of each party group (at its mean or centroid) on each function. Large coefficients represent greater influence; positive and negative signs indicate the direction of that influence. Finally, we report the number of cases classified correctly by each discriminant analysis, as one measure of its analytic power.

Traditional cleavages in the European electorate

Religious divisions as a source of European party alignments

We begin our analysis with consideration of two historic lines of cleavage identified in the literature on European parties: (1) religion and confessional differences and (2) social class and demographic divisions (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 225–266). As Table 1 shows, religious factors are still a major constituent of European party alignments. The analysis produces one major, one minor, and three very small factors. The major discriminating variables constitute what might be called “Catholic religiosity,” which understandably characterizes Christian Democratic voters above all, and to a lesser extent, Conservatives. All other parties fall on the negative side of this function, with the Greens far to the other side, followed at a distance by the Liberals. These findings are certainly consistent with the history of these parties and with other academic studies (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009). Note, however, that both “protest” party groups, the Right-Wing Populists and Populist Left, fall solidly on the more “secular” side. In the case of the Right, this would seem to contradict the findings of Inglehart and Norris (2016, 2017) and Norris and Inglehart (2019) that Right-Wing Populist voters are more religious;⁶ in fact, the populist Right fits more comfortably religiously with the parties of the Left than with traditional “conservative” parties. In any event, when we compare the Right-Wing Populists to other parties on the right, they are solidly on the less religious side, suggesting that religion still has a “vaccine effect” against protest party affiliation (cf. Arzheimer and Carter, 2009). Not only that, but in looking at the 2014 data, at least, the Right-Wing Populists were indeed *less* observant than the entire European public (only 19% attended religious services at least every couple of months, compared to 28% of the entire public, 33% of Conservatives, and 46% of Christian Democrats). Even the Socialists and Liberals are modestly more observant

Table 1. Discriminant analysis of the influence of religious variables on European party groups.

	Function 1 Catholic and religiosity 72.1%	Function 2 Not protestant 18.2%	Function 3 Protestant affiliation 5.4%	Function 4 Minority faiths 3.4%	Function 5 Not orthodox .8%
Religious variables ^{PWGC}					
Religiosity	0.944*	-0.136	0.066	0.291	-0.029
Catholic	0.671*	0.419	-0.192	-0.272	0.513
Protestant	0.042	-0.813*	0.577*	-0.063	-0.038
Minority faiths	-0.149	-0.026	-0.039	0.905*	0.396
Eastern orthodox	0.102	0.466	0.424	0.307	-0.707*
Party group functions					
Right-Wing Populist	-0.138	-0.008	0.188	-0.109	-0.002
Conservative	0.140	-0.100	-0.022	-0.053	-0.033
Christian Democrat	0.507	-0.068	-0.050	-0.014	0.005
Socialist	-0.031	0.015	0.041	0.075	0.025
Liberal	-0.211	0.066	-0.007	0.077	-0.085
Green	-0.612	-0.230	-0.123	-0.038	0.022
Populist Left	-0.109	0.436	-0.096	-0.070	0.015

PWGC: pooled within-group correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions.

Note: Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function; 32.8% correctly classified.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function. The defining variables on each function are in bold and indicated by the asterisk.

(27 and 24%, respectively). Indeed, only the Greens at 13% are less religious than the Right-Wing Populists, as even the Populist Left includes 22% semi-regular attenders.

The second, smaller factor identifies what might be called the “not Protestant” dimension, which mildly characterizes the Populist Left, suggesting that this group does not draw strongly from Protestants either. The Greens’ negative loading on this dimension suggests that although they have a disproportionate number of self-identified atheists and agnostics, their residual religious draw is from nominal Protestants, rather than Catholics or other religious groups. The fourth small function identifies the catchall Minority Religions category, showing that these voters have a bias toward the Socialists and Liberals, while avoiding the Right-Wing Populists and Populist Left parties, a not surprising choice given the populists’ posture on immigration and related issues. Finally, the very small “Not Orthodox” function primarily reveals an Orthodox aversion to Liberal parties.

Thus, some old and new features of European parties are confirmed. The Christian Democrats still draw their strongest support from observant Christians, especially Catholics, while Conservative parties also benefit from such backing. The Socialists are less Catholic and less religious but are exceeded on both counts by the Liberals, the Populist Left, and especially, the Greens. Even Right-Wing Populist parties are less religious and Catholic than the Socialists. Indeed, the lack of religious appeal of the Right-Wing Populists is striking, given their (perhaps half-hearted) efforts to attract religious voters (Molle, 2018). Despite the inroads of secularization (or perhaps

because of them), religious factors still characterize European party divisions. Indeed, religious factors alone allow us to classify correctly a third of the voters, a solid result when we are considering seven party groups with overlapping constituencies.

Social class divisions as a source of European party alignments

Now we turn to another of the classic factors producing party alignments: social class divisions. Has the traditional affiliation of working class voters with Socialist parties persisted with the decline of manual jobs and the reduction of union power? Or have the Right-Wing Populists and Populist Left parties drawn these voters away? Do middle and upper-middle classes still gravitate toward Conservative, Christian Democratic, and Liberal parties? Or have young, highly educated voters deserted to the Greens or other “postmaterialist” movements? Table 2 provides some answers.

In assessing the impact of social class and occupational status on party system, the EPES offers a cornucopia of measures, including self-identified social class, self-chosen position on a 10-point social ladder, occupational status, and several others. To produce the most economical analysis, we used a stepwise procedure to identify the best predictors, eliminating those adding nothing to the information contained in the early entrants, while maximizing explanatory power. As it turns out, a very few measures of demographic status capture most of the explainable variation in party

Table 2. Discriminant analysis of the influence of class variables on European party groups.

	Function 1 Age 50.1%	Function 2 High status 34.7%	Function 3 Union member 7.9%	Function 4 4.1%	Function 5 Male 3.1%
Class variables ^{PWGC}					
Age	-0.863*	0.147	0.406	0.249	0.081
Working class	-0.018	-0.829*	0.244	0.413	-0.287
Higher education	0.574	0.657*	0.060	0.473	-0.104
Union member	0.365	0.075	0.846*	-0.380	0.043
Male	0.209	-0.173	0.052	0.279	0.920*
Party group functions					
Right-Wing Populist	0.081	-0.264	0.021	-0.083	0.086
Conservative	-0.140	0.129	-0.026	0.115	0.005
Christian Democrat	-0.292	0.073	-0.102	-0.054	0.000
Socialist	-0.075	-0.060	0.109	0.010	-0.025
Liberal	0.289	0.240	0.000	0.038	0.111
Green	0.371	0.255	-0.005	-0.078	-0.086
Populist Left	0.284	-0.356	-0.150	0.070	-0.049

PWGC: pooled within-group correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions.

Note: Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function; 30.6% correctly classified.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function. The defining variables on each function are in bold and indicated by the asterisk.

choice. Perhaps surprisingly, the most powerful dimension, accounting for half the explanatory success, is dominated by “youth,” with an assist from higher education. This function shows the “traditional” parties, especially the Christian Democrats, drawing from older, less educated voters, while the Liberals, the Populist Left, and, not surprisingly, the Greens, attract younger, better educated ones. Note that the Right-Wing Populists also fall on the positive side of this function, although just barely: examination of the bivariate data shows that their voters are younger but not as well educated as those in parties toward the left.

The second substantial function is characterized by a large negative coefficient for working class (hence, middle- and upper-middle class), combined with higher education levels. This produces an interesting pattern with the Liberals and Greens benefitting most from these voters, followed at a distance by Conservatives. The Christian Democrats and Socialists appear on the expected sides of this dimension but do not differ dramatically. Here the Right-Wing Populists and the Populist Left look much alike, both drawing from working-class and less educated constituencies. The minor functions give us a little more information: the third shows that union members favor the Socialists, not surprisingly, but are less prevalent further left and among Right-Wing Populist voters. The fourth function captures educated, working-class folks who favor Conservatives or the Populist Left but avoid Right-Wing Populists and the Greens. Finally, male voters have a slight tendency to favor Liberals or Right-Wing Populists, but shun the Greens and Populist Left, who have a

Table 3. Economic insecurity and European party alignments.

	Function 1 Assessment of economy 95.2%	Function 2 Personal economic distress 4.8%
Economic variable ^{PWGC}		
Positive assessment of national economy	0.852*	0.524
Personal economic distress	-0.684	0.729*
Party group functions		
Right-Wing Populist	-0.462	-0.122
Conservative	0.223	0.020
Christian Democrat	0.168	-0.074
Socialist	0.076	0.008
Liberal	0.166	0.126
Green	0.211	0.017
Populist Left	-0.809	0.097

PWGC: pooled within-group correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions.

Note: Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function; 31.1% correctly classified.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function. The defining variables on each function are in bold and indicated by the asterisk.

stronger appeal to women. All in all, these findings reveal both the traditional class alignments among the major parties, albeit in weakened form, and the “new constituencies” for parties such as the Greens and Right-Wing Populists. Interestingly, class and demographic variables predict slightly less of the party alignment than religious variables do (see Lijphart, 1979; Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

New cleavages in the European electorate?

Economic insecurity

Much of the literature on the new Right-Wing Populist and Populist Left parties has stressed the role of economic insecurity in producing their constituencies (Hooghe and Marks, 2017). In Table 3, we consider both “sociotropic assessments” and “personal distress” as explanations for party preferences (Mudde, 2007: 223). To simplify the procedure, we produced two factor scores: the first is a combination of respondents’ assessment of (1) the state of their national economy in the past year and (2) what they expected for the coming year. The second factor combined three indicators of “personal distress”: whether anyone in the family had lost a job, whether the family’s income had decreased, and whether they had trouble paying their bills at the end of the month.

As Table 3 shows, the “sociotropic” assessment is far more powerful than personal distress in producing party choices—although it should be noted that the two measures are fairly highly correlated. Negative assessments of the national economy—what may be termed a sense of “declinism”—produce substantially more Right-Wing Populist and Populist Left choices, while Conservatives, Liberals, Greens, and Christian Democrats benefit from positive assessments, as do Socialists (barely). The small residual personal distress dimension seems to match best Liberals and the Populist Left. These findings, especially the sociotropic assessments, are surprisingly strong. Past studies have generally found weak or nonexistent relationships between “distress” factors, whether national or personal, and populist party support (Mudde, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Oesch, 2008). Some studies go further. Knigge (1998) and Arzheimer and Carter (2006), in fact, find a counterintuitive *inverse* relationship between national unemployment rates and Right-Wing Populist support. Our findings, based on personal assessments, point in the opposite direction by demonstrating a robust relationship between a pessimistic economic assessment and support for the populist right.⁷ Economic assessments, in fact, produce roughly the same explanatory power as religious and class variables do in the previous analyses. Economic insecurity may ebb and flow as a factor explaining populist support, but this result points to it currently being an important factor, at least as a sociotropic assessment.

Cultural and political discontent

Another set of theories sees cultural and political discontent reshaping European party alignments. Some scholars argue that the growth of new parties reflects existing ideological cleavages, with the Right-Wing Populists further to the right than conventional conservatives, and the Populist Left extending the other side. Another frequent theme is that Right-Wing Populist and Populist Left parties (and some

others) channel discontent with globalization and with the political elites who have fostered it, producing distrust of the EU, with its supranational authority, and disgust with national regimes. In addition, others have seen cultural traditionalism motivating dissenters from the mainstream parties on the populist right and cultural liberalism elevating the prospects of Greens and, perhaps, the Populist Left (for a summary of new cleavage perspectives, see Bornschier, 2010; Kriesi, 2010; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). To test these propositions, we included several measures tapping each theory: self-placement on a left-right scale, attitudes toward the EU (based on a 10-item factor score), approval of the national government, opposition to gay marriage, a preference for economic priorities over environmental ones, support for economic redistribution, a desire to restrict immigration, and finally, willingness to restrict personal privacy to preserve public safety. (These last five items might well be thought to tap Inglehart’s “materialist/postmaterialist” value distinctions.) We report the results in Table 4.

Not surprisingly, ideological self-placement still has a powerful effect in structuring party divisions. Although some scholars argue that this old “economics-based” indicator does not capture new value conflicts, it seems likely that the meaning of right and left has shifted to accommodate these new issues (De Vries et al., 2013). Indeed, a regression analysis shows that ideas about income redistribution, a classic economic issue, has no more influence on ideological placement than does gay marriage or immigration, “new” values issues (data not shown). In any case, ideology does not work in monotonic fashion: Conservatives are the furthest right, followed by the Christian Democrats, the Right-Wing Populists, and then the Liberals. The Greens hold down the leftmost position, followed closely by the Populist Left, and at a distance by the Socialists. Thus, although the Populist Left comes close to being on an ideological pole, Right-Wing Populists fall far short of being the most conservative.

The second substantial factor aligns the parties in a more expected pattern, based on citizens’ assessments of the EU and their own national government, evaluations that are highly correlated. Here the extremes join: the Right-Wing Populists’ negative assessments of the EU and their own national regimes are almost matched by the Populist Left. All the other parties fall on the positive side, led by the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, and then the Greens.

The third and last substantial function taps Inglehart’s “materialist” value dimension, captured by opposition to gay marriage and a priority for economic issues over environmental matters. While Right-Wing Populists and Conservatives fall on the positive side of this function, it serves primarily to differentiate Socialists from Liberals, Greens, and the Populist Left. The remaining three functions have very little influence over the party spectrum, although the redistribution item puts Liberals clearly on the negative

Table 4. Discriminant analysis of political/cultural influences on European party groups.

	Function 1 Ideology	Function 2 Favor governments	Function 3 Materialist values	Function 4 Redistribution	Function 5 Misc.	Function 6 Stop immigration
	68.2%	22.7%	7.4%	0.8%	0.7%	0.1%
Cultural variable ^{PWGC}						
Right placement	0.919*	-0.091	-0.306	0.128	0.101	0.043
Europhilic	-0.011	0.902*	-0.168	-0.106	0.203	0.241
Approve national government	0.167	0.623*	0.340	0.128	-0.593	-0.139
Oppose gay marriage	0.334	-0.040	0.563*	0.401	0.274	-0.121
Economy over environ	0.247	-0.011	0.508*	-0.504	0.255	0.135
Favor redistribution	-0.341	-0.098	0.095	0.652*	0.261	0.366
Restrict immigration	0.207	-0.418	0.293	-0.163	-0.293	0.606*
Restrict privacy	0.161	-0.097	0.314	-0.275	0.381	-0.431*
Party group functions						
Right-Wing Populist	0.584	-1.017	0.060	-0.016	-0.083	0.041
Conservative	1.045	0.113	0.042	-0.025	-0.079	-0.070
Christian Democrat	0.773	0.302	0.004	0.112	0.060	0.022
Socialist	-0.650	0.220	0.263	-0.033	-0.014	0.007
Liberal	0.431	0.156	-0.366	-0.191	0.103	0.017
Green	-0.987	0.200	-0.560	0.065	-0.117	0.004
Populist Left	-0.943	-0.768	-0.061	0.062	0.150	-0.051

PWGC: pooled within-group correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions.

Note: Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function. Unstandardized canonical discriminant functions evaluated at group means; 43.4% of cases correctly classified.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function. The defining variables on each function are in bold and indicated by the asterisk.

side. Surprisingly, the immigration question has very little residual impact, despite party differences at the bivariate level, where Right-Wing Populists and Conservatives favor strict limits on entry. The failure of immigration to appear in the discriminant analysis, which contradicts the findings of De Vries et al. (2013) using different data and methodology, may reflect the broad public support for restrictions across party lines. But it also indicates that such preferences are captured by attitudes toward the EU and more general ideological choices. Finally, as we might expect, these ideational variables do somewhat better in differentiating party supporters than the religious, class, or economic assessment factors: 43.4% of the cases are correctly classified. Thus, we find support for findings that culture weighs more heavily than material assessments when explaining support for populist parties (Oesch, 2008; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018).

Full model: Religious, class, economic insecurity, and political/cultural factors

Of course, voters' party choices are not determined by any one characteristic; their religious traits, class location, economic status, and ideological preferences occur in many combinations, some more common than others. To provide a full model of party structuring, we combine our partial models in a final analysis reported in Table 5.

With everything in the analysis, ideology remains by far the strongest predictor of party structuring in 2014, accounting for three-fifths of the total explanatory power. Not surprisingly, opposition to redistributive governmental policies adds a little to the right-wing self-placement measure. The first function is strongest in predicting Conservative membership on the positive side, and Populist Left membership on the negative side, almost matched there by the Greens. The Christian Democrats and Socialists are indeed "center-right" and "center-left," respectively, with the Liberals falling more gently on the right side of the spectrum.

The second function, accounting for about one-quarter of the discriminating power, consists of "positive" evaluations: approval of the EU and national governments, favorable assessment of the economy, friendlier attitudes toward immigration, and rosier personal economic situations. Large negative scores on this function characterizes both Right-Wing Populist and Populist Left partisans, while Christian Democrats and Socialists have solid positive scores. The third, smaller function constitutes a combination of religiosity, Catholic identification, lower education, working-class status, traditionalism, and older age. Both Socialists and Christian Democrats have positive scores on this function, as does the Populist Left, while Liberals and Greens hold down the other end of the continuum. The small "Protestant" fourth factor predicts Right-Wing Populist, Socialist, and Conservative tendencies but is negative for the Populist Left. The remaining two functions are

Table 5. Comprehensive discriminant analysis of influences on European party groups.

	Function 1 Ideology	Function 2 Positive assessment	Function 3 Religion and culture	Function 4 Protestant	Function 5 Orthodox	Function 6 Union member
	59.6%	23.6%	10.1%	3.7%	2.3	.7
Variable ^{PWGC}						
Right self-placement	0.900*	-0.163	-0.208	-0.211	-0.014	0.098
Support redistribution	-0.337*	-0.051	0.158	-0.180	-0.231	0.050
Europhilic	0.005	0.798*	-0.219	-0.141	0.262	0.188
Approve national government	0.183	0.559*	0.131	0.273	-0.063	-0.313
Positive econ. assessment	0.078	0.484*	-0.265	0.277	0.120	-0.071
Restrict immigration	0.191	-0.377*	0.224	0.302	-0.088	0.131
Personal distress	-0.107	-0.365*	0.127	-0.293	0.315	-0.196
Religiosity	0.234	0.204	0.550*	-0.378	-0.094	0.236
Higher education	-0.048	0.067	-0.516*	0.003	0.320	-0.267
Oppose gay marriage	0.330	-0.040	0.454*	0.090	-0.031	-0.132
Age	0.125	0.221	0.360*	0.225	-0.141	-0.110
Working class	-0.073	-0.186	0.356*	0.068	0.040	-0.198
Economy over environ	0.245	-0.020	0.348*	0.294	0.333	0.103
Catholic	0.128	0.038	0.475*	-0.542*	0.042	-0.062
Protestant	0.075	0.094	-0.085	0.408*	-0.455*	0.244
Eastern Orthodox	0.013	-0.065	0.162	-0.044	0.409*	0.219
Male	-0.003	-0.115	-0.036	0.083	0.283*	0.153
Restrict privacy	0.159	-0.087	0.237	0.105	0.276*	-0.092
Union member	-0.077	-0.020	-0.187	0.297	0.047	0.365*
Religious minorities	-0.068	0.063	-0.030	0.145	0.153	0.169*
Party group functions						
Right-Wing Populist	0.521	-1.103	0.026	0.226	-0.141	0.079
Conservative	1.085	0.074	-0.078	0.127	0.040	-0.186
Christian Democrat	0.827	0.353	0.173	-0.244	-0.111	0.055
Socialist	-0.642	0.300	0.250	0.148	0.034	0.013
Liberal	0.407	0.027	-0.517	-0.020	0.356	0.101
Greens	-0.980	0.218	-0.732	-0.038	-0.246	-0.024
Populist Left	-1.035	-0.851	0.194	-0.395	0.118	-0.088

PWGC: pooled within-group correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions. Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function; 46.6% correctly classified.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function. The defining variables on each function are in bold and indicated by the asterisk.

somewhat opaque in meaning and, in any event, add very little explanatory power to the analysis. The full model predicts almost one-half of the party choices, a very respectable showing.

The overall picture in the full model fits the “persistence-of-the-old/rise-of-the-new” cleavages narrative most prevalent in the literature. The Populist Left and Right-Wing Populists fit comfortably on the expected sides of the political center, with the Populist Left setting the most radical left-wing boundary and the Right-Wing Populists proving conservative, but by no means “far right” on traditional measures of conservatism. Crosscutting this left-right cleavage, however, is a strong political/economic/cultural divide that sets the populists apart from mainstream parties. Populists of left and right are the left-behind, less educated, lower class economic pessimists who see government elites at home and in Brussels as disconnected and untrustworthy. The model clearly

demonstrates that class still matters in European party politics, but it not only (weakly) divides the traditional center along familiar lines but also unites the populists of the left and right against the nonpopulist traditional parties (confirming Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). We also see from our model that culture matters. Counterintuitively, the Populist Left and Right-Wing Populists are much closer to the Christian Democrats and Socialists on cultural issues—religion, same-sex marriage, the environment—than they are to the libertarian Liberals and Greens. The Populist Left, in fact, looks somewhat more “traditional” than the Right-Wing Populists when looking at Europe as a whole and controlling for all available factors. In sum, our full model makes clear that the old left-right cleavage with its class and religious dimensions still helps explain voter preferences, but this cleavage is overlaid by a transnational divide that pits the left-behind populists against the winning establishment.

Summary and conclusions

Contemporary European party alignments are an artifact of both historical influences and new forces: the old confessional and social class alignments are still visible, especially in the historic center–right and center–left parties, while a new alignment pitting winners against losers in a more integrated world is also evident.

The great center–right and center–left parties (the Christian Democrats and Socialists) usually find themselves in their historical milieu. The Christian Democrats still draw strongly from religious Europeans, especially Catholics, while the Social Democrats attract more working class voters, with fewer religious connections. Their partisans are mildly optimistic about the economy and their own status and generally approve of the EU and their own national regimes. But their constituencies are both aging and diminishing in numbers, as secularization saps the “natural” market for the former, and disappearing manual jobs and union strength threaten the latter. Conservative parties share many traits of the Christian Democrats, differing primarily in attracting fewer Catholics and other religious voters and enjoying great support from those a little higher on the social class ladder. Taken together, these trends narrow the center of the European party space.

The Liberals and Greens ride the wave of several modern trends. Both attract secular, highly educated, and younger voters, although the Liberals trend male, and the Greens, female. They have a remarkably similar occupational profile, drawing from middle- and upper-middle class managers and professionals, but they differ fairly dramatically in ideological preferences and disagree on economic and environmental issues.

Finally, Right-Wing Populist parties have attracted young, working-class, and less educated voters, more often male, who are disconnected from religious institutions, perceive the national economy and their own economic status in a negative vein, and do not like immigrants. They are mildly to the “right” but are characterized above all by their supporters’ harsh negative assessment of their own national government and the EU. In short, they represent anti-elite populists who perceive few personal benefits from an integrating world. The Populist Left in some ways resembles the Right-Wing Populists but trends even younger, lower in status and education, more pessimistic about economic concerns, and just as hostile to political elites. Like the Right-Wing Populists, they are disconnected from religious institutions (and from other traditional institutions such as unions). They differ primarily in ideology, being much more to the left, sympathetic to economic redistribution, and less hostile to immigration. Thus, supporters of these parties are also anti-elite populists who view the integrated world as harmful to their interests. But they differ from the Right-Wing Populists in their willingness to support other

“oppressed” or “left-behind” people—the poor, immigrants, and LGBT minorities.

In sum, our analysis finds evidence of a continued left–right cleavage that divides the great parties of the European center by religion and class: the Conservatives, Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Socialists. Populists of the left and right, of course, also fit, if somewhat less comfortably, in their broad ideological families. But our analysis also finds strong evidence for an additional transnational cleavage that pits the populists of right and left against the traditional parties of the “frozen” center. The populists—left and right—differ on some aspects of modern culture, but they are united, however, in their opposition to the ruling elites at home and in Brussels, and the deep cultural changes tearing at their sense of security, identity, and community.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The “reverse new politics” school argues that the populist right rose in response to the left libertarianism of the 1960s (Bornschiefer, 2010; Hutter, 2014). Early left libertarianism displayed some populist characteristics, but in our view did not meet the full definition of populism.
2. Rooduijn et al. (2017) find radical left voters more educated than mainstream voters.
3. As Vasilopoulou (2009, 2018) points out, not all “extreme right” parties view the European Union (EU) in exactly the same way. She identifies three “types” of far-right Euroscepticism ranging from “rejection” to “compromise.” What remains true, however, is that these parties all view the EU negatively.
4. Caramani (2006, 2011) has empirically demonstrated the existence of a Europe-wide electorate. In this article, we assume it exists.
5. We are well aware that there may be some significant differences between the parties of Western and Eastern member states. Additional analysis would be needed to explore possible differences.

6. The Norris and Inglehart (2019) finding may result from an analysis comparing the Right-Wing Populist voters with the entire electorate.
7. Close observers will note the Right-Wing Populist coefficient for Function 2, Personal Economic Distress, is negative, indicating that supporters of the populist right are *less* personally distressed (see Table 3). We believe the best explanation of our negative finding for Right-Wing Populists is to see it in conjunction with the sociotropic assessment function: whatever personal distress they experience is captured by their assessments of the national economy.

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